

National Archetypes of Russia's Foreign Policy

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NATIONAL ARCHETYPES PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE in foreign policies of all countries; in case of Russia it is the historical traditions Muscovy inherited from Byzantium that determined, and still determine, the general development trends of the Russian statehood. The Byzantine heritage manifested in the idea of “Moscow the Third Rome,” determined, to a great extent, Russia’s mission in the world. Realized in foreign policy it produced amazing results: a vast state that gathered Russians and Orthodox Christians together with other ethnic groups and religions under the wing of the Russian and Soviet empires. However every time the Great Russia idea was rejected—in the early and late 20th century — the Russian statehood collapsed resulting in “a major geopolitical disaster of the century.”¹

Byzantine Heritage and Russian Messianism

THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE was a product of many internal and external circumstances, which explains why its cultural and civilizational self-identification, its role and place in the world have never left the political, diplomatic and philosophical agenda. Discussed throughout Russia’s history these questions were never purely rhetorical — at all times they strongly affected the state’s political practices. In the 1830s-1840s, they became part of the historiosophic traditions of Slavophilism and Westernism. Russian philosopher Nikolay Berdyaev had the following to say about Russian national consciousness and all-Slavic consciousness for that matter: it “was born amid discords of Slavophiles and Westerners” and “the Slavic idea should be sought for in Slavophilism — Westernism is absolutely free from it.”²

The Slavophilic tradition lives on the Byzantine heritage planted on the Russian soil in the form of the historiosophic conception of “Moscow the Third Rome” that inspired Patriarch Nikon to formulate his “universal state” theory. The religious and ideological roots of the Russian state’s messianism and imperial mission can be traced down to Muscovite Rus, the first Russian national state.

Russian messianism is closely associated with Russia’s national identity and the antinomies of the Russian soul — nationalism and super-nationalism,

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universalism and imperialism. The clash of the national and messianic, two conflicting lines, repeatedly blows up Russian history. This happened in 1917 and was repeated in 1991.³ An heir to Byzantium Muscovite Rus inherited its cultural, historical and legal traditions that determined, in the final analysis, the historical vector of the Russian State. Konstantin Leontyev, a Russian diplomat and philosopher, described Byzantinism as “education, or culture” of sorts charged with autocracy as a cornerstone of the state order, Orthodoxy in religion, etc.⁴

Muscovy mastered its Byzantine legacy through the Church that moved to Russia its experience of spiritual and political organization it had acquired in Byzantium. “By binding people with the common faith” Christian Orthodoxy “ensured the unity of people’s self-awareness,” an indispensable prerequisite of a single state.⁵

In Russia the Church hierarchy was more than a center of spiritual enlightenment — it was the center of national and political unity. Having assumed at first the role of the gatherer of the Russian lands it gradually developed into the founder of the Russian statehood that it enriched with moral, ethical and autocratic principles.

The borrowed idea of “the Grand Prince as the God-chosen sovereign” was of fundamental importance for the Russian state’s political organization; Ivan the Terrible relied on it to create a model of Russian autocracy.⁶ The sovereign, God’s representative on Earth, follows the covenant of Christ in his policies and concentrates power in his hands. Vladimir Solovyev believed that this Byzantine tradition echoed in the Russians’ Orthodox consciousness as being close to the primordially Russian idea of “master of the house” or “absolute master” that later, under Ivan III was transformed into czarist autocracy.⁷

The “symphony of the clergy and the state,” the relations between the spiritual and secular powers also belong to the Byzantine tradition; this is of fundamental importance for any discussion of the history of autocratic Russia. Any attempt at discussing the problem within Caesaropapism or Papo-Cesarism (domination of secular or spiritual power) smacks of oversimplification.

The Justinian’s principle of the “symphony of kingdom and the Church” means that the state should be a worthy partner and ally of the Church since they have a common aim in view. Only the unity of the Church and autocracy can deal with the domestic and foreign policy problems; this means that the Church is directly involved in state administration strictly within its competence. Having borrowed the Byzantine tradition of symphony the Russian state accepted its interpretation. The Church hierarchy was rich (vast-landed possessions of the monasteries and other sources of income) and therefore independent and highly critical of power. Spiritual power was expected, first and foremost, to provide the moral and ethical yardstick of secular power.

Orthodoxy and the Byzantine traditions of Russia’s state order predetermined its mission in the world; this mission liberated Russia from national egotism. Russia is a very unique country because its nationalism took the form

of super-nationalism, or universalism.

Messianic self-consciousness does not oppose national self-consciousness—the former thrives on the latter. Russia’s messianism is of religious origins and is Christian by nature. In fact, in Russia Orthodoxy, messianism and imperialism became one single whole. Aleksandr Panarin, for example, dated the beginning of Russian identity, which he described as “confessional-civilizational”⁸ to the Muscovite State. The fall of Byzantium left Muscovy with an awareness of being the world’s center of Orthodoxy. Having shouldered the responsibility for the purity of Orthodoxy Russia entered the road of messianism.

A prominent Slavophile Ivan Aksakov identified the component parts of Russian messianism. He wrote that Russian imperialism as a manifestation of Russian messianism is moved not merely by rational reasons; it also had an “internal engine” responsible for the “unity of popular spirit” that Aksakov described as the “spiritual organic force” of the Russian statehood.⁹ With baptism Rus acquired “a universally imperial” and “religious-historical calling” as opposed to its former status of a national state.¹⁰ As an empire Russia is called upon to set up a single state and gather together Russian lands and peoples. It is called upon to head the Orthodox-Slavic civilization opposed first by the Roman-German and later Anglo-Saxon worlds rooted in the Latin spiritual context and, therefore, alien to the Russian people. In the final analysis, world history is moved ahead by the never ending struggle between the East and the West for their free and unhampered historical development.

Ivan Aksakov said in his time that “creation of itself” was Russia’s only aim and that what it wanted of the West was the “recognition of its right as the Russian-Slavic world.”¹¹ The West looks at Russia as an alien civilization with a more or less equal potential and probably superior to it where its spiritual wealth and staunchness are concerned. Russia can be destroyed only together with its religious and civilizational principle. To do this, a negative image of Russia in the world has been created; in fact at all times Russia was and is presented to the world as a threat to the West’s continued existence.

This means that Russian messianism is a product of its Slavic-Orthodox content and spiritual culture of the people. Its religious roots have predetermined Russia’s world-historical mission: creation of an Orthodox-Slavic world as coherent as Western civilization. This global mission could be realized only through an empire.

The Slavophiles in their time were however convinced that bit by bit Russia was moving away from its true mission and neglecting its role. They blamed Peter the Great under whom “life of state power and life of people’s power”¹² parted ways.

Let us have a closer look at two epochs in Russian history associated with the names of Patriarch Nikon and Emperor Peter the Great. A clear idea of what happened is of fundamental importance for a correct understanding of Russia’s later development.

Patriarch Nikon relied on the Byzantine written tradition close to the Russians while Peter the Great planted the Western civilizational tradition to the detriment of the Russian national identity. Russian philosopher Aleksandr Panarin justly pointed out: “Nikon created a spiritual model of polyethnic universalism that Peter the Great realized as an earthly empire.”¹³ This is how historical-logical continuity of the Russian state is realized; this means that we should not set off one historical epoch against the other.

Patriarch Nikon developed the messianic idea of “Moscow the Third Rome” (first formulated by monk Philotheus of Pskov) in his conception of “universal kingdom” and carried out reforms to put it on a firm theoretical basis. Part of Russian society rejected the reforms; the patriarch was deposed yet his ideas lived on to be claimed first by autocratic, then by Soviet power to be consistently realized throughout Russia’s history. Twice, in 1917 and 1991, continuity was disrupted.

Peter the Great realized the messianic idea formulated as “Moscow the Third Rome” in Russia’s imperialism.¹⁴ Throughout his life he followed in the footsteps of his predecessors; he continued building up a huge state and, therefore, had to obey realities. The major result of his domestic and foreign policy was the Russian Empire; in 1721, Peter the Great was crowned as the Emperor of All Russia.¹⁵

The Empire: Russia’s Instrument of Survival and Development

GREAT PHILOSOPHER VLADIMIR SOLOVYEV admitted, within his global humanistic conception that it was permissible to move away from Christian principles in politics for the sake of continued existence of a “historical people.” Survival is possible solely within a state,¹⁶ no politics is possible outside it which means that the Russian people of the pre-Petrine period had to build a strong state capable of independent policies.

Geography itself offered all necessary prerequisites for the Russian Empire; philosopher Nikolay Berdyaev associated with this “the dualist structure of Russian history.”¹⁷ On the one hand, Russia’s size predetermined its imperial destiny; on the other, it burdened the Russians with the task of developing the vast expanses. This process never stops, it goes on in highly negative contexts; in fact, it is far from being completed.

This reveals another *raison d’être* of the Russian Empire — the constant external threat to the Russian statehood. Ivan Ilyin was quite right when he described Russia’s geographic location as being similar to “continental blockade.”¹⁸

Nikolay Danilevsky, the founder of the contemporary civilizational approach described the Orthodox Slavic civilization as a cultural-historical type on its own right. He was convinced that this civilization should preserve and

develop the Russian people's spiritual potential; Peter the Great proved his worth by going outside the national limits to show the imperial road.¹⁹ An attempt to move away from the idea of Slavdom might doom all Slavs.

Konstantin Leontyev looked at the Slavs as a historian, philosopher and diplomat. Unlike other Slavophiles he never idealized the Slavs as a community. Meanwhile he concluded that Russia was the factor capable of binding the Slavic world by religious rather than state bonds.

An heir to Byzantinism Russia embodied its main features in the Russian Empire — an Orthodox autocracy. Byzantinism is the cornerstone of Russian Orthodoxy and autocracy which means that it can be destroyed only together with the foundations of Russian statehood. Russia's historical mission can be described as full realization of the idea of Byzantinism as a “new variety in unity, flourishing of Slavdom with Russia as a separate subject at the head.”²⁰

Aleksandr Panarin's method “challenge — response” can be used to explain the historical logic of the Russian state's development: the Russian Empire was a “response” to the “challenges.” It was called to life by the tasks the Russian statehood had to address: continued existence and external security that demanded that the Russians should complete their unification and expand their state territory; the process started by Peter the Great's predecessors.²¹

This means that the Russian Empire was created under the impact of internal and external factors, the religious factor in the form of Orthodoxy that predetermined Moscow's role of the Third Rome, being the main of them.

Messianism embodied in the idea of Moscow as the Third Rome runs through the entire history of the Russian statehood (from the baptism of Rus to the present). Great humanist Vladimir Solovyev provided the most apt description of Russia's mission: “Wide and generally reconciliatory — imperial and Christian — is the only national policy of Russia. It alone completely corresponds to the best sides that distinguish the Russian national character. Peter the Great who remained Russian through and through despite his admiration for Europe and Catherine the Great that became completely Russian despite its original Europeanism left one behest to our Fatherland. Their images and their historic deeds tell Russia: remain true to itself and your national specifics and be thus universal.” The logic of Russia's historical development is unshakeable.²²

Having inherited imperial traditions from Byzantium and having shouldered the messianic role of the carrier of Orthodox Christianity the Russian state thus accepted the vector of its territorial development.

A clear understanding of Russia's role as an independent state capable of a proactive foreign policy is the Slavophiles' one of the greatest services. They interpreted it through the prism of the Orthodox Christian tradition within the “Moscow the Third Rome” formula. It determined the meaning of the Russian state and created the Russians' mentality. Two retreats from this — in 1917 and 1991 — can be described as catastrophic for the Russian statehood as the core of the Russian Orthodox civilization.

Territorial Expansion and Foreign Policy Tasks of the Russian Empire

ANY ATTEMPTS at setting up an empire and acquiring new territories were inevitably opposed by the alien Roman-German civilization. For centuries all attempts at gaining access to the Black and Baltic seas and ensuring the state's security were accompanied by protracted conflicts. This explains why at all times the problems of the meaning of Russia's existence were regarded through the prism of East-West confrontation. Ivan Aksakov had the following to say about the West's intentions in relation to Russia: "To weaken our national positions at the Western border, contract the sphere of our interests in the Balkans and shift the center of gravity of our policies to Asia."²³ The truth of this can hardly be overestimated: today the West as represented by NATO, EU, etc is actively cutting into the CIS geopolitical expanse and is pushing Russia back from its vitally important zones of influence. Russia has already lost its positions in the Balkans while in Asia the new power centers — America, China, Japan, etc — have already developed an interest in the Russian mineral-rich lands.

The global clash of two civilizations is unfolding within the Eastern Question. Despite the fact that Russian historiography treats the Eastern Question as an international problem born in the 18th-20th centuries by the decline of the Ottoman Empire; the continued existence of the Russian state and its international weight depended, to a great extent on the answer to this question.²⁴ The Russian Slavophilic thinkers treated the Eastern Question as a dispute between the Western and Eastern Rome; the political representation of the latter had been transferred to the Third Rome, Russia, back in the 15th century.²⁵

As distinct from our contemporaries Danilevsky identified three stages of the Eastern Question accompanied by the struggle with the West that served a consolidating factor for all Slavic peoples. When answering his opponents who spoke of the Slavic peoples' disunion he said that they could unite only when fulfilling their mission.

The never-ending civilizational clashes occurred at the western and southern borders of the Russian state. According to Russian historian Vasily Klyuchevskiy throughout its history Russia had to deal with two extremely important tasks that determined, to a great extent, its foreign policy vector: "First, we had to complete political unification of the Russian people nearly half of whom still remained outside the Russian state; second, we should correct the border of the state territory which, in certain parts — southern and western — remained vulnerable."²⁶ The Russian czars and the Bolsheviks had to deal with these tasks; today they remain as topical as ever.

Nikolay Berdyaev described the external task of Russian imperialism as "possession of the Straits and access to the sea" and "liberation of the oppressed peoples." He regarded Constantinople as the key to the seas through the Straits and believed that this could potentially become "one of the centers of unity

between the East and the West.”²⁷

It should be said that Marx and Engels, two inveterate Russophobes, looked more or less soberly at the policies of the Russian czars and were fully aware of the strategic importance of capturing Tsargrad (Constantinople). They wrote in “The Foreign Policy of Russian Czarism” that this would have meant not only spiritual domination over the Eastern Christian world. This would have been a decisive stage leading to domination over Europe. This would have meant unlimited domination over the Black Sea, Asia Minor, and the Balkan Peninsular. They further said that the new south-western border, however, would have remained vulnerable and surmised that Russia should have moved its entire Western border and considerably extended the sphere of its domination.²⁸

This means that in practical terms a clash with the West presupposes solution of the Eastern Question that can be seen as a string of specific problems: first, the future of the Ottoman possessions in Europe; second, the problem of the Black Sea Straits and patronage of the Orthodox subjects. This is related to the Balkan aspect of Russia’s foreign policies. At its western border Russia fought Sweden and Poland for the access to the Baltic and joining the Slavic lands to Russia.

Konstantin Leontyev admitted that states could form an alliance with the closest possible cooperation of local Orthodox churches; a single Slavic state, however, would have been pernicious for them, and Russia in the first place. This means that Russia should build its eastern policy around Orthodoxy, the spiritual linchpin of Slavdom. Tsargrad and the Black Sea Straits were described as two priorities of the Orthodox-Slavic world; the former should have become center of a “Great Eastern-Orthodox Union.”²⁹ This was described as a very remote perspective and the final aim of Russia’s eastern policy.

Nikolay Danilevsky, in his turn, believed that an All-Slavic Federation should be created “under the rule and hegemony of a single and indivisible Russian state” stretching from the Adriatic to the Pacific...³⁰ This makes the question of Constantinople a principled one. He was consistent in his assertion that Constantinople res nulis and for objective reasons should belong to Russia: this would secure Russia’s southern borders, make it possible to control the sea routes from Europe to Asia and from Europe to Africa and would enable Russia to spread the influence and protection of the Orthodox holy places there. He did not mean to say that Constantinople should have been joined to Russia: it should have become the center of the All-Slavic Union under Russian’s hegemony.³¹

In his article “Where are the Limits to the Growth of the Russian State?” Ivan Aksakov outlined the historical borders of the Russian state.³² Peter the Great in his time attached great importance to the access to the Baltic, Black and Caspian seas, while “the southern wall of the Russian state house” should have run along the Straits.³³ Russia could not ensure security of its southern borders without a union with Afghanistan, Persia and India to which it had no territorial

claims and where it ran across its main rival, Great Britain. (Today, this role belongs to the United States.)

Poland held a special place in the Eastern Question; according to Danilevsky this problem, one of the components of the Slavic Union issue, could not be resolved within the Great Eastern Question.

The Polish question for Russia was determined by the constant threat of the “vanguard of the Catholic West” to the Russian western borders.³⁴ At all times Poland was a religious-spiritual entity alien to the Russian people which meant that the far from friendly relations between the two countries were nothing more than an outcrop of the primordial Russia/the West confrontation.

When dealing with the Polish question, wrote Ivan Aksakov, and when pursuing foreign policy “Polish patriotism per se is not as dangerous for Russia as an absence of patriotism among the greater part of Russian ‘intellectuals’” comparable with “national apostasy.”³⁵ This is very true: both in 1917 and 1991 the Russian statehood disintegrated under pressure of the “fifth column” part of which arrived from abroad, the other one being home-grown.

This means that the imperial interpretation of Russia's role and place is rooted in the history of the Russian statehood permeated with the Byzantine traditions which determined Russia's imperial nature. Having become an empire Russia became an active player on the international stage; its Orthodox Slavic nature determined the key trends of its territorial expansion intended to gather together lands and peoples. Today this is described as “imperial ambitions” — in actual fact territorial expansion is part and parcel of any empire. This is the cause of the never ending confrontation between the East and the West within the Great Eastern Question where the interests of two civilizations clash. To produce an adequate and sober assessment of international relations, to bury the illusions of the 1990s and to be able to pursue an independent foreign policy geared to the national interests of the Russian statehood, the core of the Orthodox-Slavic civilization, we should place Russia's foreign policy problems of today into the context of the East-West clash.

NOTES

¹ Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation. 25 April 2005 [<http://www.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2005/04/87049.shtml>].

² N.A. Berdyaev, “Sudba Rossii,” *Sochinenia*, Kharkov, 1999, p. 389.

³ A.S. Panarin, *Pravoslavnaia tsivilizatsia v globalnom mire*, Moscow, 2003, p. 10.

⁴ K.N. Leontyev, “Rossia i slavianstvo: Filosofskaia i politicheskaia publiksistika,” *Dukhovnaia proza (1872-1891)*, Moscow, 1996, p. 94.

⁵ V.S. Solovyev, *Vizantizm i Rossia*, Vol. 2, Moscow, 1989, p. 420.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 589.

⁸ A.S. Panarin, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁹ I.S. Aksakov, *Vsemirno-istoricheskoe prizvanie Rossii*, Vol. 2, Moscow, 1886, p. 798.

- ¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 800, 802.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 804.
- ¹² A.S. Khomiakov, "O starom i novom," *Izbrannye trudy*, Moscow, 2004, p. 422.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 294.
- ¹⁴ N.A. Berdyaev, op. cit., p. 43.
- ¹⁵ *Ocherki istorii Ministerstva inostrannykh del Rossii*, Vol. 1, 1860-1917, Moscow, 2002, p. 158.
- ¹⁶ V.S. Solovyev, op. cit., p. 568.
- ¹⁷ N.A. Berdyaev, "Russkaia ideia," *Sochinenia*, Kharkov, 1999, p. 226.
- ¹⁸ I.A. Ilyin, *Sobranie sochineniy v 10 t.*, Vol. 6, Book 11, Moscow, 1996, p. 477.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 138.
- ²⁰ K.N. Leontyev, "Vizantizm i slavianstvo," *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy i pisem v 12 tomakh*, Vol. 7, Book 1. Publitsistika 1862-1879 godov, St. Petersburg, 2005, p. 438.
- ²¹ A.S. Panarin, op. cit., p. 257.
- ²² V.S. Solovyev, op. cit., p. 603.
- ²³ I.S. Aksakov, op. cit., p. 805.
- ²⁴ See: *Vostochny vopros vo vneshney politike Rossii. Konets XVIII-nachalo XX veka*, Moscow, 1978, p. 4.
- ²⁵ V.S. Solovyev, op. cit., p. 603.
- ²⁶ V.O. Klyuchevskiy, *Kurs russkoy istorii*, Vol. 4, Part 4, Moscow, 1989, p. 46.
- ²⁷ N.A. Berdyaev, "Russkaia ideia," p. 371.
- ²⁸ See: K. Marx, F. Engels, "Vneshniaia politika russkogo tsarizma," *Sobranie sochineniy*. Vol. 22, Moscow, 1962, p. 8.
- ²⁹ K.N. Leontyev, "Khram i tserkov," *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy*, p. 516.
- ³⁰ N.Ia. Danilevskiy, *Rossia i Evropa: vzgliad na kulturnye i politicheskie otnoshenia slavianskogo mira k germano-romanskomu*, Moscow, 2003, p. 396.
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 417.
- ³² I.S. Aksakov, "Gde granitsy gosudartvennomu rostu Rossii?" *Vsemirno-istoricheskoe prizvanie Rossii*, Vol. 2, Moscow, 1886, p. 781-797.
- ³³ Ibid., p. 788.
- ³⁴ V.S. Solovyev, op. cit., p. 71.
- ³⁵ I.S. Aksakov, "O neposledovatelnosti nashego pravitelstvennogo deystvia v Polshe," *Vsemirno-istoricheskoe prizvanie Rossii*, Vol. 3, Moscow, 1886, p. 626.