Constructing National Values: The Nationally Distinctive Turn in Russian IR Theory and Foreign Policy

Andrei P. Tsygankov
San Francisco State University, USA

And Pavel A. Tsygankov
Moscow State University, Russia

As the world moves away from the West-centered international system, IR scholars are increasingly turning their attention to substance and formation of national values. Using the case of Russia, we show how distinct schools of IR theory and foreign policy dominant in the country have come to recognize the importance of national values as a lens through which to assess the country’s means and goals of development. Each in its way, these schools—Civilizationists, Statists, and Westernizers—have prioritized “the national” in the country’s future. We explain Russia’s turn to the national by stressing the country’s ontological insecurity, the role of the Russian state, and Western actions that contribute to creating and exacerbating the conditions of ontological insecurity. The case of Russia has important implications for understanding the role of national values in the formation of foreign policy and IR theory.

A medida que el mundo se aparta del sistema internacional centrado en el Occidente, los académicos de Relaciones Internacionales (RR. II.) están prestando cada vez más atención a la esencia y la formación de los valores nacionales. Utilizando el caso de Rusia, mostramos de qué manera las diferentes escuelas de teoría de RR. II. y la política exterior dominante en el país han llegado a reconocer la importancia de los valores nacionales como una perspectiva a través de la cual evaluar los medios y los objetivos de desarrollo del país. Cada una a su manera, estas escuelas (civilizacionistas, estatalistas y occidentalizadoras) han prioritado “lo nacional” en el futuro del país. Explicamos el cambio de Rusia a lo nacional enfatizando la inseguridad ontológica del país, la función del Estado ruso y las medidas occidentales que contribuyen a la creación y la exacerbación de las condiciones de la inseguridad ontológica. El caso de Rusia tiene repercusiones importantes para el entendimiento de la función de los valores nacionales en la formación de la política exterior y la teoría de RR. II.

Tandis que le monde s’éloigne du système international centré sur l’occident, les chercheurs en relations internationales tournent de plus en plus leur attention vers la substance et la formation des valeurs nationales. Nous nous appuyons sur le cas de la Russie et montrons comment des écoles distinctes de théorie des relations internationales et de politique étrangère dominantes dans le pays en sont venues à reconnaître l’importance des valeurs nationales comme prisme par lequel évaluer les moyens et les objectifs de développement du pays. Chacune de ces écoles—civilisationniste, étatiste et occidentaliste—a, à sa manière, donné la priorité au « national » dans l’avenir du pays. Nous expliquons l’orientation de la Russie vers le national en mettant l’accent sur l’insécurité ontologique du pays, le rôle de l’État russe et les actions
Introduction

The unexpected election of Donald Trump as the US President in November 2016 caught many scholars by surprise. Predominantly liberal Western academia was accustomed to theorizing the stability of a liberal world order and assuming a general desire across the globe to be a part of West-centered liberal institutions. The possibility that such an order may be rejected as not meeting broad social expectations was never systematically explored. In the meantime, skepticism toward the West-centered globalization in Europe and other parts of the world has become an important driver of the re-nationalization and regionalization of politics, pushing toward new international divisions and areas of competition. The Trump phenomenon is now studied as “authoritarian populism” in American and European politics. Scholars are beginning to recognize that the risks to liberal democracy are not only political, but also have cultural and nationalist underpinnings (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

This paper studies the turn to distinctive national values by Russia. Russia turned to the national vis-à-vis Western globalization even before Trump. During the 1990s, Russia completed its transition from a communist system, but soon concluded that the West-recommended reforms undermined state sovereignty and weakened the state’s capacity to modernize based on domestic needs. As a result, although initially an admirer of the West, Russia has emerged as a critic that is actively seeking to carve out its own economic and political niche in global markets and political institutions. Vladimir Putin’s increasingly anti-Western and nationalist state aims to protect its path of development by dictating the conditions of domestic and foreign participation in the Russian business and energy sectors. Western economic sanctions imposed on Russia following its annexation of Crimea and support for Ukraine’s eastern separatist provinces further pushed the Kremlin away from Western markets. In political affairs, Russia has embraced anti-Americanism and sought to protect itself against Western democratization pressures by warning outsiders against interference with Russia’s domestic developments and by restricting activities of Western NGOs and pro-Western opposition inside the country.

We argue that developments within Russian international relations (IR) theory have strongly supported these economic and political changes in the country. Since the second half of the 2000s, Russian IR has been searching for nationally distinct values, perhaps as a protective response to political and cultural pressures by an alien Western civilization demanding compliance with its values and interests. Major currents in Russian IR, each in their own fashion, have come to accept the importance of samobytnost’ or the national distinctiveness by providing their own justification for the new discursive turn. All of them now begin with the premise that Russian IR must reflect the country’s distinct values and national sovereignty. The Russian government sensed the opportunity and sought to capitalize on the rise of nationally distinctive discourse in order to gain additional political legitimacy. The fact that the government has sought to exploit and contribute to such discourse implies its social power. Although the state has been an important contributor to the discourse of national distinctiveness, our theory stresses processes of bottom-up, rather than top-down nature.

1For Russia’s foreign policy, see Donaldson and Nadkarny (2013), Kanet (2017), Sakwa (2017), and Stent (2019).
In addition to documenting Russian IR developments over time, we propose an explanation of the nationally distinctive turn by drawing on post-colonial and critical IR approaches. We argue that while dominant Western theories are of limited use in understanding and explaining this shift in Russian thinking, some approaches such as those stressing national identity and ontological security conditions are sufficiently sensitive to the national and therefore appropriate for explaining the new Russian turn.

We define the national as a distinctive vision of the self in relation to the outside world. The national vision is based on a system of historically developed values through which human communities form perceptions and assess interests. The turn to national reflects the need to reconceptualize national identity by finding new ways to interact with foreign countries. The “nation” and “national” are open to various meanings and interpretations. A number of scholars have analyzed national distinctiveness as a reflection of national identity, not necessarily associated with autarchy and isolationism and not necessarily anti-liberal. Rather, they have associated nationalism and the national with search for an appropriate strategy and niche in the world based on a distinctively national idea/set of ideas. For example, scholars of economic globalization have demonstrated that nationalism may be compatible with international openness and policies of international adjustment (Helleiner and Pickel 2005; D’Costa 2012; Berger and Fetzer 2019). In the contemporary post-Western global transition of power, the national distinctiveness translates into an intensive search for a strategy of adapting to the change. Given the transitional nature of the world, the current menu for choice by national actors is broader than before. It is now clearer than ever since the Cold War end that neither a nation nor the world obeys a single rationality standard. With rising challenges to the West-centered globalization, state leaders are increasingly able to draw on historically developed ideas of national self in the world. As the world changes, Western IR scholars need to reengage with the concept of the national.

We propose to study Russia’s turn to national distinctiveness by adopting the schools of thought approach. Ideas serve as markers of identity and their examination is essential in revealing the country’s foreign policy choices. A version of discourse analysis, the schools of thought approach views the intellectual context as layered and heterogeneous allowing identification of both contestation and unity within a particular cultural community (Alker and Biersteker 1984). Within this space, clashes, overlaps, and agreements are formed on diverse issues without forming an ultimate unity.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section documents the turn to national values in Russian IR theory. We focus on three continuous intellectual schools by discussing views of prominent voices within academia and the expert community. The section shows that over the last decade the main Russian IR schools, including one favoring strong relations with the West, have recognized the prominence of national values as a lens through which to assess the country’s means and goals of development. In order to illustrate the schools’ difference and convergence, we further discuss effects of the Ukraine crisis on Russian IR thinking. The following section turns to explaining Russia’s turn to national values by stressing the country’s ontological insecurity and Western actions that fit into creating and exacerbating the conditions of such insecurity. The final section engages with dominant Western IR approaches and explains their shortcomings in dealing with the national,
particular as it applies to Russia. The conclusion summarizes our findings and implications for scholarship.

**Russian IR Theory and National Distinctiveness**

**Russian IR Theory**

Russian IR and foreign policy thinking is distinct from Western IR by developing in a country with a special location in the global political economy and geopolitics. The country is a “semi-peripheral” economy (Babones 2013) and a geopolitical borderland located between European and non-European countries (Tsymbursky 2016). Historical and cultural settings further differentiate Russia from the West by giving Russian thinkers a distinct voice in global conversations. The identified international, geopolitical, and cultural conditions are present in Russian IR discussions broadening them to include issues of theory, foreign policy, and domestic modernization. Not infrequently, the same thinkers address these diverse issues. In reviewing Russian IR currents, it, therefore, makes sense to adopt a broad definition of IR theory defining it as a systematically developed and culturally grounded image of the world (Alker and Biersteker 1984).

In addition to being globally distinctive, Russian IR is internally diverse. The spectrum of Russian IR thinking can be divided into three broad, historically continuous schools, which present continuous markers of Russia’s identity. National identity is not a constant and it is natural for the three schools to constantly debate issues with each other and within each school. In the process of these debates, they also reveal conditions and premises of Russian IR rooted in distinctive culture, political system, and foreign policy interests.

The three schools respectively stress Russia’s cultural/civilizational distinctiveness from the West, great power status, and West-centered global influences in international politics. Historically, the most influential have been Statists or those who prioritize national sovereignty and great power status in world affairs. The Statists are not inherently anti-Western and seek the West’s recognition by putting the emphasis on economic and military capabilities. This diverse group incorporates supporters of both assertive and defensive foreign policy as well as advocates of different structures of alliances in world politics. The second group includes those who position Russia as a distinct civilization with an elaborate and authentic system of values. Some Civilizationists advocate a commitment to the values of Orthodox Christianity, while others view Russia as a synthesis of various religions and an organic “Eurasianist” unity distinctive from both European and Asian cultures. Finally, the Westernizers place emphasis on Russia’s similarity with Western nations, viewing the West as the most viable and progressive civilization in the world. Although Westernizers remain represented in Russia’s elite institutions such as the Moscow Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) and the Higher School of Economics, their influence over the last decade has been declining.

The three identified schools differ in theorizing national values and their importance in the country’s development. While Civilizationists prioritize Russia’s values often presenting them as superior to those of the West, Statists and Westernizers have historically downplayed culturally specific values by stressing “universal” realities of the balance of power and international norms of sovereignty and human rights. We define values as culturally established beliefs about the appropriate organization of human institutions and foreign policy. Our discussion is limited to

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5For various currents within each school, see Bassin, Glebov, and Laruelle (2015) and Neumann (2016).
6For recent surveys of Russian IR currents, see Clunan (2009), Tsygankov and Tsygankov (2010), Neumann (2016), Linde (2016), Lebedeva (2019), Kaczmanska (2020), and Kochtcheeva (2020).
7For definitions and research on values, beliefs, and principles in international politics, see especially Reus-Smit (1999), Lucarelli and Manners (2006), and Lebow (2016).
nationally specific values that act as lenses though which local communities such as Russia form their perception of the world and assess interests.

The Russian historically distinctive system of values is complex and include an authentic concept of spiritual freedom, beliefs about traditional family values, the idea of a strong, socially protective state capable of defending its own subjects from abuses at home and threats from abroad, and the notion of Russia as a sovereign great power.8 Grounded in Orthodox Christianity, Russian values have not been constant but changed over time reflecting global conditions. The Soviet period undermined and transformed some of the old beliefs, while today’s system of values is still in the process of being formed. Influenced by distinct religion, historical experience, and IR, these values tend to be more communal than those of the Western nations that have proceeded from ideas of individual salvation. Remaining a work in progress, the new system combines ideas of internal political and cultural distinctiveness with those of international sovereignty and influence.9

Since the mid-2000s, Russian IR has been moving in the direction of recognizing the importance of national values as a distinct lens through which to assess international and domestic developments. This turn to national values has manifested itself in the rising influence of civilizational thinking among Russian IR scholars. Statists and Westernizers have also increasingly relied upon civilizational and nationally specific discourse in their analysis. The following sections document the rise of national sensitivity over time and across each the identified school of IR and foreign policy thinking.

The Rise of Civilizationist Thinking10

Civilizational or culturally relativist thinking has been rising in Russia since the mid-2000s. Politicians from the relatively marginal to the established regularly speak on issues of Russia’s national interests as tied to its geopolitical and cultural self-sufficiency. Officials, such as Vladimir Putin (2013) and others (Yakunin 2013) advance the notion of Russia civilization in their speeches and public writing. A number of Orthodox priests, including Patriarch Kirill, endorse the idea of Russia’s religion-centered civilizational distinctiveness.11 Like Samuel Huntington (1997), many Russian thinkers and academics view their culture in essentialist and ethnocentric terms (See, e.g., Gumilev 1990; Yerasov 2002; Narochntskaya 2004; Panarin 2006; Dugin 2013). To them, cultures are real ontological entities, with distinctive values-based boundaries between them and a propensity for cross-cultural conflicts.

Scholars have documented the rising influence on Russian IR scholars of culturally essentialist thinkers such as Lev Gumilev (Bassin 2016), Nikolai Danilevsky (Tsygankov 2017), and others (Laruelle 2008; Linde 2016; Robinson 2019). The intellectual prominence of Danilevsky has been especially notable. Danilevsky was the first to advocate for a culturally particularistic alternative and Russia’s ability to progress separately from European civilization. Ideas that he formulated in his main book Russia and Europe (1869) have anticipated those expressed by Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, and Samuel Huntington.

In contemporary Russia, one survey of Russian IR theorists teaching in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Irkutsk, Tomsk, and Vladivistok conducted in 2013 found that Russian academics find particular promise in those thinkers who theorize the nation as a special system of values. In response to a request to

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8For various analyses of Russian historically enduring and evolving values and ideas, see Billington (1970), Duncan (2000), Hopf (2002), Tsygankov (2012), Neumann (2016), Petro (2018), Robinson (2019), and Diesen 2020.
9For research on Russia’s contemporary search for values and great power status, see Kolstø and Blakkisrud (2016), Linde (2016), Chebankova (2014, 2017), Sakwa (2017), Diesen (2018), Chanan (2009, 2018), Krickovic and Weber (2018), March (2018), Istomin (2019), Tsygankov (2019, 2020), Malinova (2020), and Hale and Laruelle (2020).
10Parts of this and following sections draw on Tsygankov (2016, 2017).
11In particular, Kirill endorsed Russkaya doktrina (2007).
identify the three most important Russian thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth century, 35 percent identified Danilevsky, 18 percent Konstantin Leontyev, and 15 percent Alexander Panarin (Tsygankov and Tsygankov 2014). The findings from the survey are further supported by analysis of citations of Danilevsky’s *Russia and Europe* relative to work by prominent Western and Russian thinkers. Figure 1 demonstrates that relative to Western thinkers, Danilevsky’s work is cited considerably more frequently—especially since 2010—than the two works best known in Russia by the contemporary American intellectuals Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington.

### Statists and Distinct Values

Even the Statists, known for their pragmatism and the nonideological emphasis on balance of power as the source of defending national interests, have shifted toward embracing national values as essential for understanding the world.

Throughout the 1990s and a considerable part of 2000s, the Statists shied away from the language of values. They stressed nonideological concepts established in the vocabulary of Western realists such as great power status, sphere of influence, sovereignty, and balance of power. They did not want to be viewed as neo-Soviet and resisted the idea of reviving the Soviet system and communist values. Alongside some Western realists (Layne 1997; Walt 2016), the Statists promoted the idea of a multipolar world (Primakov 1996; Sergei Kortunov 1998). The official discourse sanctioned the idea from the mid-1990s. The Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 warned of a new threat of “a unipolar structure of the world under the economic and military domination of the United States” and referred to Russia as “a great power ... [with a] responsibility for maintaining security in the world both on a global and on a regional level” (Shakleyina 2002, 110–11). At the same time—and on the same nonideological grounds—the Statists rejected the idea of Western “universal” values as merely favoring the establishment of a US-dominant unipolar world, which was not necessarily going to be “liberal” or “democratic” regardless of its prophets’ promises (Karaganov 2008).
Since the second half of the 2000s Russian Statists have become increasingly receptive to the discourse of values. While remaining focused on foreign policy, they have begun to stress the country’s domestic differences from Western nations by insisting on preserving political order and state strength, rather than individual freedom and checks and balances within the political system. Responding in part to the United States’ global democratization and regime change policy, the Statists have advocated a domestic system capable of fighting domestic instability, terrorism, corruption, and foreign interference. They have expected that many non-Western societies including Russia would prioritize order and unity over democracy and that the distinction between West-supported democracies and those aiming to address pressing national issues would persist and deepen over time. Those Statists, who earlier favored the West-centered international system with Russia as a recognized part of the system, have become disillusioned with the West and especially the United States.

One example of such intellectual evolution is the prominent theorist Alexei Bogaturov. During the 1990s and early 2000s, he advocated for the concept of the post-cold war system as “pluralistic unipolarity,” in which the unipolar center is not one state (the United States), but rather a group of responsible states (including Russia) jointly enforcing global norms and rules. However, rather than becoming more pluralist in its international orientation, the United States increasingly relied on unilateral decisions. Responding to this development, the scholar wrote about the “self-destruction” of the “pluralistic unipolarity” as evident in the American war in Iraq, threats to use force against North Korea and Iran, and the political support given to Georgia’s intervention in South Ossetia in August 2008 (Bogaturov 2017, 312). Bogaturov (2009) acknowledged that his model could only work if the “hegemon” or the main pole in the system is motivated by the common good, rather than narrowly defined interests and ambitions. In his research on non-Western societies, he warned against imposing democracy and recommended strengthening the state (Bogaturov 2017, 406). He further questioned the linear and progressive nature of Western modernization theories by stressing the more likely coexistence of “modern” and “traditional” societies in the world (Bogaturov 2017, 161).

Another shift in framing Russia’s values took place following Putin’s return to the presidency in March 2012. Beginning with his election campaign, Putin promoted the vision of Russia as a culturally distinct power, committed to defending its values relative to those of the West and other civilizations (Putin 2013). The discourse of distinctiveness grew stronger in the context of the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea (Putin 2014). Finally, the election of Donald Trump as the United States’ President and the unraveling of the West-centered global liberal order further conditioned recognition of national values in Russian IR theory.

Russian leading Statists now discuss the international system and Russia’s conflict with the West not strictly in terms of competition for power and influence, but for national values as well. Exemplary here are the views of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy’s Honorary Chairman and a leading Russian IR expert Sergei Karaganov. Following Putin’s return to power in 2012 and the exacerbated tensions with the West, Karaganov has become critical of the Western political system, especially in its application outside Western societies. Rather than continuing with the theme of nonideological pragmatism as befitting Russia and other powers, he now praises an authoritarian system of governance and writes about the new ideological confrontation that divides the world based on national values and traditions (Karaganov 2016).

12 Polls show that Russians favor a combination of democracy and strong state. For instance, when asked whether it is possible for Russia to be both democratic and have a strong state, more than 50 percent Russians believe that they can have both (Hale 2012).
Nationally Sensitive Westernizers

Finally, Russian Westernizers have partly adopted the language of culturally and politically specific values. Over the post–Cold War era, they have evolved to become more politically moderate and sensitive to Russia’s national interests and values. Unlike those who followed Fukuyama’s end of history argument and favored American style Westernization throughout the 1990s and the first half of 2000s, contemporary Westernizers are no longer advocates of the United States. Some of them such as Andrei Kortunov (2016) are very critical of the US foreign policy and argue, “American hegemony and the liberal world order go together in reality yet theoretically they are not dependent on each other.”

The change is reflected in writings of Russia’s leading pro-Western intellectuals who include academics at major research universities such as MGIMO and the Higher School of Economics, as well as experts at think tanks including the Russian Council of International Affairs, the Institute of the World Economy and International Relations, Carnegie Moscow Center, and the Center for Strategic Research. One dimension of the change concerns perception of globalization by Russian Westernizers. Following the Soviet breakup, Russian IR liberals were convinced that the new global world was defined by the spread of Western, the values of the free market, and liberal democracy. An example of such thinking is the work of the notable Russian expert and Director of the Moscow Carnegie Center Dmitry Trenin. In one of his books published in 2002, Trenin wrote about Russia’s European identity and the inevitable choice that the country had to make in favor of Europe and “the world of globalization.” Such a choice meant the rejection of “the world of geopolitics,” which the author viewed as entirely natural due to Russia’s weakness and inability to resist the West’s values and material domination (Trenin 2002). In his next book titled “Integration and Identity,” Trenin (2006) further developed the idea of the West as the most globally attractive economic and political system and the importance for Russia to adopt it, while abandoning its “authoritarian” and “Tsarist” rule along with attempts to dominate in the post-Soviet region (Trenin 2006, 105, 147).

However, since the mid-2000s Trenin’s thinking has evolved toward acknowledging Russia’s right to defend its interests when faced with pressures of the West. In a landmark article, he recognized the failure of the country to integrate with Western globalization and argued that Russia has “left the orbit” of the West (Trenin 2006). Trenin acknowledged Russia’s distinctiveness and the importance of preserving great power status, while continuing to stress the value of moving toward the “global West” in foreign and domestic policy. In his book “Russia and the world in the 21st century” (Trenin 2015), he not only outlined the main international challenges for the country, but also proposed a new image of a “positive national globalism” in order to be more successful in a future global integration (Trenin 2015, 380). More recently, the scholar wrote about Russia as a politically and culturally distinct center of power in the world, alongside the United States, China, and the European Union (Trenin 2019a). He further explained: “It would be a mistake to consider this [situation of Russia’s distinctiveness] a temporary situation,” expecting an eventual return to pre-crisis conditions of Russia–West relations (Trenin 2019a).

Recognition of the need to preserve state sovereignty and national distinctiveness under globalization can be found in works by other Westernizers. In theorizing global order, they caution against expectations associated with the imminent decline of the West’s power and liberal values, yet they also recognize the importance for the country to remain a major power and a strong state. Unlike the earlier years, many Russian Westernizers no longer call for a major overhaul of the country’s domestic system or foreign policy, although Russia is expected to reform its economy

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13For an exception to this view, see position of those critical of Putin’s regime, the overall political system, and foreign policy including the annexation of Crimea (See, e.g., Yavlinsky 2017)
and institutions. They favor engagement of the West in meaningful cooperation but not at the expense of recognizing Russia’s right to protect national interests. They share the consensus in the political and expert circles that after the Cold War the West, especially the United States, went too far in ignoring Russia’s interests.¹⁴

Russian IR Currents and Ukraine

The crisis in Ukraine and its international consequences including Western sanctions against Russia have played an important role in pushing the country’s IR toward embracing the idea of national distinctiveness. Each in their way, Civilizationists, Statists, and Westernizers have presented the Ukraine crisis as critically important by stressing Russia’s distinctiveness from European values in terms of culture/religion, the strong state-centered political system, and national interests.

Civilizationists have presented the Ukraine crisis as a decisive moment in establishing Russia’s Slavic and Orthodox Christian differences from the contemporary Europe. For example, Yegor Kholmogorov (2019) have argued that, as a conservative religious power, Russia should do what it can to defeat global liberalism and unite all lands that share the identified Russian values. Other thinkers have been more concerned with protecting such values from foreign interference. Building on an idea of civilizational geopolitics a leading conservative thinker Mezuyev (2019) proposed the concept of “civilizational realism” as the guide for thinking about Russia in Eurasia. In his view, the Russia-influenced Eurasia is strongest within the culturally shared boundaries that include all those gravitating to Russia in eastern Ukraine and elsewhere. As an area of vital interests and values, Eurasia must be protected by all possible means, and by making its external red lines unambiguously clear. Mezuyev proposed that Russia should not annex these territories yet do everything else in its power to protect them from being incorporated by unfriendly governments such as one in Kyiv (Mezuyev 2019).

Statists such as Karaganov have drawn similar lessons from the Ukraine crisis by disparaging European values as no longer guided by Christianity, the traditional family, and national sovereignty (Karaganov 2016). In Karaganov’s assessment, the value divide between “post-modern” Europe and “traditional” Russia and Eurasia will persist with the latter presenting a more viable set of ideas to the world (Karaganov 2016, 2019). In his perspective, Ukraine has served to highlight Russia’s newly discovered identity and difference from the liberal West. Statists tend to exploit the comparison with Ukraine by contrasting its internal weakness and politico-economic dependence on Europe and the United States with those of Russia’s national unity, sovereignty, and great power status.

Finally, Westernizers too have learned from the Ukraine crisis about Russia’s national distinctiveness from the West. Some of them have continued to position Russia as “a part of European civilization” (Tezisy 2017). Others such as Trenin (2018) have discovered that the country is “neither Europe, nor Asia, but simply Russia.” In his recent book, Trenin (2019b) also argues the need to strengthen the Russian state and defend the national interest in the face of Western pressures. Faced with these pressures, most Westernizers have embraced the annexation of Crimea as a strategic necessity. For example, the policy document prepared by the Center for Strategic Research led by the former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin stated that “by interfering in the Ukraine crisis,” Russia “has reunified with Crimea, solved the problem of Black Sea Fleet basing, and blocked Ukrainian membership in NATO for the long-term future” (Tezisy 2017).

¹⁴According to CFDP, the Ukraine crisis made it clear that the West aimed to restore military and political divisions of the Cold War or preserve the global dominance (Strategiya dlya Rossii, thesis 3.7)
Explaining Russia’s Turn to Distinct Values

The National and Ontological Security

In attempting to study the national, we propose to draw on postcolonial, critical, and “non-Western” IR approaches. In particular, we rely on research by those analyzing Western IR as biased and unable to engage with the concerns and interests of those residing outside the West. It is not only “post-Western” and post-colonial scholars who have drawn the attention to various biases and treatment of “non-Western” actors as dependent subjects (“subalterns”) and consumers of already developed knowledge (Inayatullah and Blaney 2004; Jones 2006; Hobson 2012; Tickner and Blaney 2012; Pellerin 2013; Vitalis 2015; Petito 2016; Yu Untalan 2020). Scholars committed to neo-positivist analysis have also found that American dominance in the field tends to create “blind spots” in IR, thereby negatively affecting IR scholarship (Colgan 2019).

In order to explain the Russian IR turn to distinct values, we employ an explanation that stresses how national anxieties and insecurities activate an older perception of the authentic self. Scholars have documented how outside changes challenge distinct national identities creating various dislocations and anxieties in people’s consciousness defined as the condition of ontological insecurity (Kinnvall 2004; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2007; Zarakol 2011; Berenskoetter 2014; Betziza 2014; Steele and Homolar 2019) and “identity crisis” (Guzzini 2012). In response to the condition, a process of identity (re)formulation gets activated, during which people adapt to the outside world by searching for meaningful symbols and behavioral norms. The nation, as one scholar argues, is a bounded community with a biographical narrative, which gives meaning to its collective spatiotemporal situatedness (Berenskoetter 2014).

These approaches combined with some insights from Russian IR theory may assist us in describing and explaining the world’s turn to national values. The language of Russian IR theory is different from the referenced vocabulary of postcolonial and ontological security scholars, yet it also analyzes national values in relation to those of outside cultures/civilizations. In Russia’s case, a historically distinct set of values is mobilized—in part through the Russian state’s efforts—if the West’s actions are widely perceived as disrespectful of Russia’s values. Russia’s identity is not an essentialist entity with once-and-forever formed values, but a continuum of different schools and traditions with their structure and relative influence being dependent on the interactive nature of Russia–West relations. However, Western actions serve to push the nationally diverse school toward their positioning vis-à-vis the Western other. Each school was influenced by a different set of events. However, each in their way, Russian schools become more concerned with perceived pressures by the West and more nationally distinct, thereby forming conditions for a more coherent, consensus-based foreign policy. In particular, they each recommended a tougher defense of Russia’s values and interests with respect to Ukraine.

The Role of the West

Russia cooperates with the Western nations when its fundamental values and interests are not challenged. Each time the Western nations have pressured Russia to revise its values in line with those of the West, Russian society and elites mobilize for a counter-response. Due to Russia’s cultural distinctiveness, such pressures serve to alienate Russia from its significant other (Neumann 2016).

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russian IR produced multiple civilizational theories of Slavophile, Eurasianist, and Communist natures. Each of these theories had roots in earlier historical periods of interaction with the West. Thus, the Slavophile movement emerged from Russia’s growing divergence from Europe.
in the early nineteenth century. Communist theories developed following rise of Marxist ideas in the late nineteenth century, and Eurasianism resulted from the Russian Revolution in October 1917 and the subsequent collapse of the state. In the early post-Soviet years, theories of Westernizers and Statists dominated over those of Civilizationists.

However, external pressure on Russia to comply with the West-centered norms and policies gradually increased since the 1990s, taking the form of the expansion of NATO and global democracy promotion, and reaching their culmination in sanctions against the Russian economy following the Kremlin’s annexation of Crimea and support for eastern Ukrainian separatism. The United States and European countries pursued policies of expanding both NATO and the EU by inviting Ukraine but not Russia to consider joining the organizations. In addition, during the Ukrainian revolutions of 2004 and 2013–2014, the West extended political support to those candidates who favored strengthening ties with Western organizations at the expense of Ukraine’s relations with Russia and the Russia-initiated Eurasian Union.

Western pressures on Russia served to push it to change its trajectory from being wide open to Western influences and IR discourse to a selective openness managed by an increasingly anti-Western state. By the time of the Kremlin’s annexation of Crimea, Russian political and intellectual elites had been convinced that after the Cold War the West acted disrespectfully of Russia’s priorities in Ukraine and, more generally, in Europe. Russia’s bond with Ukraine has been especially strong because of the two’s common historical legacy, as well as shared Orthodox, Slavic, and linguistic roots. In response to actions by the West, Russian IR thinkers have advocated restrained ties with the West while strengthening relations with non-Western countries and those parts of Europe and Ukraine who tend to gravitate to Russia. In the regionally divided Ukraine, the eastern parts and Crimea include the highest concentration of people with traditional pro-Russian views.

The identified foreign pressures strengthened Russia’s civilizational identity and encouraged development of civilizational theories. Figure 1 demonstrates that their rise has been especially notable since the second half of the 2000s. Russian Eurasianist and Slavophile thinkers argued for strengthening Eurasian, Slavic, and Orthodox Christian values under the leadership of Russia. Some of them have advocated global conservative alliances for the purpose of defeating liberalism and unification of all Slavic and Christian lands in Europe.

The same foreign pressures served to strengthen the appeal of distinct values and interests among Russian Statists and Westernizers. The early Westernizers were highly dependent on the West while Western approaches heavily shaped liberal Russian IR theory. Those following American theories enjoyed a position of considerable dominance. Those within Russia’s liberal circles advocating the vitality of national experience and the importance of nationally specific reform historically have been a minority. However, Russia’s domestic weakness combined with growing Western pressures increased national pride and strengthened the appeal of distinct values and great power mentality. Following Western attempts to pressure Russia through sanctions over Ukraine, most Russians have rallied behind Putin and grown more anti-Western and anti-American. As a result, more nationally and politically sensitive ideas among Statists and Westernizers came to be viewed as intellectually promising. Among them, typical lines of argument with respect to Ukraine have been those stressing Russia’s internal

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15Both Yeltsin and Putin raised the possibility of joining NATO, yet it was never serious considered by the alliance (Sarotte 2010; Tsygankov 2019).
16For analyses of Western and Russian policies in Ukraine, see especially Sakwa (2015), Charap and Colton (2017), Toal (2017), and Hahn (2018).
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unity, sovereignty, and independence from Europe and the United States (Miller and Lukyanov 2016; Spasski 2017).

The Role of the Russian State

Russia’s turn to national values is partly shaped by the pressures of governments seeking to obtain an additional legitimation in the eyes of domestic audiences. Supporters of this position point to the tendency of Russian academics to develop theories and concepts reflecting the government’s concerns, such as those with the US dominance in IR. Such scholars also identify ways in which the Russian government exploits social science by relying on the Soviet legacy, cultivating the dependence of academia on state funds, and reducing the level of academic freedom (Omelicheva and Zubytska 2016, 42). This view is consistent with the Kremlin’s propaganda model endorsed by many Western scholars who argue that the Russian state promotes anti-Americanism and is dependent on the image of foreign threat for consolidating its rule (Shlapentokh 2011; Van Herpen 2015).

Still, the government is only one source of the above-identified intellectual developments in Russia and cannot account for their complexity. Other sources have been of a bottom-up, rather than top-down nature and have to do with socially and historically held national perceptions. The government often responds to and engages with these perceptions yet it lacks the power to establish them. As we noted, the emergence of Russian civilizational thinking can be traced to the mid-2000s. Not only does it predate the government’s attempts to introduce the language of state civilization since 2012, but it also builds on historical trends in Russian political thought that sought to stress distinctiveness of the country’s values. Such social values, while in relationships with those of political elites are as autonomous in origins and potential intellectual influence.

Therefore, the government has served as a powerful agent of ideas’ promotion and has not been responsible for their original content. Nationalist ideas have gradually influenced the Russian state, contributing to their further proliferation. During the 1990s, the new Russia’s leaders argued that their country’s identity was Western and during the Soviet era and the Cold War Russia had acted against its own identity and interests (Kozyrev 1995). However, in the late 1990s–early 2000s, Russia moved in a more Statist direction by stressing themes of sovereignty and independence from the West’s global economic, political, and military pressures. Russia’s officials have also been highly critical of Western military interventions after the Cold War beginning with Yugoslavia and Iraq.

Following the series of colored revolutions in Eurasia, Putin’s speeches began to reflect an anti-American and anti-Western tone. The language of civilization and Western threats to Russia’s values shaped Putin’s announced decision to return to power in September 2011 (Tsrygankov 2016). Russia now proceeds from the vision of state-civilization that must resist pressures by the West. Russia’s policies of building the Eurasian Economic Union, improving standing within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and overall turning to Asia include economic, political, as well as civilizational dimension. The Kremlin remains interested in improving relations with the European Union yet without compromising Russia’s newly acquired civilizational identity.

With respect to Ukraine, the Russia–West tensions served to strengthen nationalist voices inside Russia and to push the Kremlin to frame its discourse in civilizational terms. In his Crimea speech following the peninsula’s annexation, Putin (2014) justified it by stressing consolidation of Russia’s centuries-old “civilizational and sacred significance” and protection of not only ethnic Russians who constitute over 60 percent of the peninsula’s population, but of cultural diversity as well. By highlighting Crimea as the place, where Prince Vladimir was baptized before Ukraine and Kyiv had become the center of Russia’s Christianity, Putin positioned...
Russia as independent from European civilization. In addition, he stressed Crimea as a special to Russia’s culture of military power and glory. The Russian IR community had already theorized these civilizational, religious, ethnic, and geopolitical values as critically important.

**Shortcomings of Dominant Western IR**

This section briefly explores how and why main IR theories do not fully engage with the concept of the national in IR. Established IR approaches are inadequate or insufficient in their treatment of the national in world politics. The national needs to be reintroduced to international politics. 17

**Realism: The National as State**

Realists have been especially influential in advocating the notion of national interest and rationally defined action in world politics. In particular, realism draws our attention to considerations of state power, security, and prestige. The problem with realism is not that it focuses on the state, but that in so doing it underestimates the autonomous role of cultural values and ideas behind the national. Even the less reductionist classical realism does not take into consideration important dimensions of the national—its historically formed subjectivity, perception, and values as distinct from those of the state. For example, Niccolo Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes each sought to subjugate the domestic social virtues to the objectives of the state (Doyle 1997, 105; Freyberg-Inan 2004, 51). “Before the names of Just and Unjust can have place, there must be some coercive Power” (Wight 1992, 103). Realists analyze the world in terms of “nation-states,” neglecting potentially important differences between nations’ and states’ values and priorities. For example, in his recent book, John Mearsheimer (2018) criticized liberalism from the position of realism and nationalism by not exploring principal differences between realism and nationalism. Realists therefore tend to miss important opportunities to understand the complexity of social forces and sources of change.

As a nation with a long established tradition of debating its values, Russia is a good case to demonstrate the limitations of realist thinking. In some of its values, Russia’s state reaches back to its pre-modern foundations, such as Orthodox Christianity and Slavic cultural inheritance. These foundations predate the very system of nation-states upon which realists base their analysis. Russia’s own cultural lenses are therefore at least as important in understanding its actions as the incentives coming from the international system. Even when Russia’s actions seem similar to the behavior of other members of the system, such actions originate from a culturally distinct source and can have a meaning that is different from other actors. Moreover, Russia’s values have historically mutated in response to various domestic and external developments, thereby obtaining diverse and complex meanings.

By ignoring the national, realists have focused on continuity in Russia’s foreign policy, defining national interest as stable, enduring, and not open to interpretations. Rather than understanding such interests in terms of national history and ideas, realists tend to view national interests as shaped by the realities of geopolitics and the anarchical international system. Realists have explained Russia’s attempts to cooperate with the West after the Cold War by Russia’s undermined power capabilities and search for great power status (MacFarlane 1999; Brooks and Wohlforth 2001; Sushentsov and Wohlforth 2020), thereby missing the ideational origins of Russian foreign policy. 18 Even when realists add to their analysis variables such as

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17For a somewhat similar critique of the dominant IR theories, see Berenskoetter (2014).

18For these origins, see Hopf (2002), Clunan (2009), and Tsygankov (2019).
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ideology and political culture, they view their role in world affairs as secondary to that of the international system.\(^{19}\)

**Liberalism: The National as Individual and Internal Political**

Liberals too are uncomfortable with the national as defined by historic and cultural values. Instead, they prioritize individual rights and freedoms. These rights and freedoms tend to be viewed as essential, natural, and existing prior to politics and community. As Andrew Moravcsik writes, people have tastes, commitments, and endowments, which they bring to politics (Cited in Simpson 2008). Individual rights and freedoms are presented in recent liberal thinking as rational preferences that tend to result in democratic politics at home and construction of cooperative institutions abroad (Moravcsik 2008). As a result, liberals tend to define the national in terms of the political system and its ability to function as a democracy (Doyle 2016; Freeman 2016). They have assumed that democratic systems are best at embodying and consolidating national values, whereas authoritarian regimes commonly suppress and mimic such values, replacing them with propaganda.

Such perspectives on the national omit from consideration the possibility that some national values may not be compatible with liberal democratic standards or may not concern the political system and its organization. If some countries commit to international cooperation, this may be due to reasons other than those stressed by liberals. Alternatively, a country may be acting in revisionist or aggressive way not because its political system is not democratic.

With respect to Russia, liberal treatments of the national have already caused some erroneous assessment of its international behavior. For example, the Kremlin’s ability to sustain—in defiance of Western economic sanctions—interventionist foreign policies in multiple global directions including Ukraine, Syria, Venezuela, and others have surprised those who have viewed Russia as fundamentally weakened by the domestic competition of rival clans within the political class. Explanations of such policies by Vladimir Putin’s “autocracy” and reliance on anti-Western propaganda have their limits if such explanations are not accompanied by an appreciation of the Russian public’s historical and cultural receptivity to criticisms of the West (Way 2016; Gunitsky and Tsygankov 2018). The Kremlin’s propaganda is partly effective because it stresses historically resilient traditional values in Russia (Gaufman 2017; Keating and Kaczmarska 2017).

**Constructivism and the Low Priority National**

Constructivism is potentially the closest to incorporating the national for answering various questions of world politics. Constructivist theory places notions of “meaning” and social context at the center of understanding a state action. In contrast to realist and liberal stresses on international and domestic power struggles, social constructivists such as Christian Reus-Smit (1999, 2017) have made a call to study historical institutions and moral beliefs about the purpose of the state that vary across different societies. The salience of these institutions and beliefs shape national values and define stakes in international politics. Constructivists have published important research treating the national as central to defining state policy (i.e., Hopf 2002, 2013; Helleiner and Pickel 2005; Clunan 2009; Lebow 2014, 2016; White and Feklyunina 2014; Banerjee 2015; March 2018).

Still, a considerable part of constructivist scholarship has studied the international rather than domestic contexts of state actions, researching the roles of international/Western norms, ideas, and networks in shaping individual states’

\(^{19}\)For criticisms of realist approaches to Russian foreign policy, see Robert English (2002) and Tsygankov (2019).
identities and standards of appropriate behavior (Finnemore 1996; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Tannewald 1999, 2007; Finnemore and Sikkink 2001; Hafner-Burton, Kahler, and Montgomery 2009). An important admission by a prominent constructivist—“it is striking how little empirical research has been done investigating what kind of interests state actors actually have” (Wendt 1999, 133)—remains applicable with respect to research on domestic social contexts and national values.20 More recently, constructivists have been interested in the emergence of meanings in everyday practices, interaction, and relationalism among diverse actors (Kustermans 2016; McCourt 2016). More often than not their focus is on inter and intrastate groups and elites (Jackson 2007; Katzenstein 2009; Pouliot 2010; Adler and Pouliot 2011; Trine 2015), rather than the larger national communities and their values.

Such treatments of the national and cultural are insufficient and potentially misleading. What remained underestimated and understudied is the role of societies and their potential resistance to elite agents. For instance, scholars have long revealed multiple conflicts of expectations between pro-Western “modernizing” elites and the non-Western subjects (“subaltern”) which were expecting to follow the other’s lead (Inayatullah and Blaney 2004; Jones 2006; Vitalis 2015). In cases of Russia–West interaction and the West exerting a powerful influence on the Russian self, Russia has not been a passive learner and has accepted only those Western values that did not undermine its own system of the national (Neumann 2016).

The challenge is to rescue the national from mainstream IR approaches that tend to privilege the subnational and international.22 Local conditions, such as historical memory, religious and political institutions, ethnicity, and others are just as important in shaping national perceptions and formulating ideas of national self. While formed in interaction with the outside world, such local conditions possess a certain autonomy and the power to mobilize national communities around their own meaningful symbols. As acknowledged by the recent generation of constructivists, states’ position in the world “are not just a result of their struggle for a better status vis-à-vis other states ... but also a result of their dealings with their own past and domestic conflicts” (Adler-Nissen 2016, 33). Even though a nation is not a homogeneous entity and rarely speaks with a unified voice, national debates are usually framed in terms of domestically salient issues and concerns. Distinct local concerns serve as cultural and moral lenses through which a nation views the outside world.

### Conclusion

As the world moves away from the West-centered international system, IR scholars are rediscovering the national as a powerful influence on domestic and international policies. Even in the world of states, every nation is different and travels along its own distinct path. The world continues to be in a state of irreducible cultural diversity producing diverse intellectual discourses and IR theories. Such diversity is a product of complex historical, international, and domestic developments. Russia is but one example of how national subjectivity matters and produces consensus regarding main directions of foreign policy. Each in its way, the country’s

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20Several social constructivists have criticized the international norms literature as one-sided and not sensitive to domestic societies’ reaction and potential resistance (Acharya 2004; Zarakol 2014; Adler-Nissen 2016)

21In addition, constructivist have revealed a tendency to be guided by tools and assumptions common in liberalism. Richard Net Lebow noted the trend by characterizing Alexander Wendt’s social theory of international political not as constructivist, but as a structural liberal (Lebow 2014, 3). For development of the argument about the need to differentiate constructivism from liberalism, see especially Steele (2007) and Barkin (2010).

22In addition to the reviewed dominant IR approaches, Marxism too has a tendency of being reductionist by treating the national as derivative of socioeconomic conditions and class consciousness. For important studies of national ideas and nationalism, see Greenfeld (1992), Haas (2000), Hopf (2002), Helleiner and Pickel (2005), and Lebow (2014). For analysis of nationalism as predetermined by international structures, see Goswami (2002) and Heuskamp (2019).
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leading schools of IR theory—Civilizationists, Statists, and Westernizers—have shifted in the nationally distinctive direction since the second half of 2000s. Civilizationists have highlighted Slavic, Orthodox, and Eurasian ties as national values. Statists have stressed national interests, sovereignty, and great power status. Even Westernizers—traditionally pro-Western and cosmopolitan—have recognized the importance of the national as a condition for Russia’s reengagement with the world. Prominent representatives of each IR school have prioritized the country’s sovereignty and distinctiveness in the “post-Western” world.

The world of IR remains global yet increasingly less centered on the West. As the world is becoming more politically and culturally pluralist, each national subjectivity adapts to global change differently. By drawing on ontological security approaches, we have argued that Russia has become more nationally minded as a way of regaining confidence in response to pressures of the West-centered globalization. Because of Russia’s economic and political vulnerabilities, Russian subjectivity has perceived such globalization as a threat to national values. The Russian state then acted to mobilize the national by presenting the West’s policies—global democratization, foreign interventions, and economic sanctions—as aiming for a weak and submissive Russia. State actions resonated with the public opinion in part because they have engaged with Russia’s indigenous values of sovereignty and distinctiveness. These values, as well as the values of other nations, merit additional research as autonomous from political elites. While preserving important insights from conventional and critical approaches in IR theory, scholars need to build a theory focused on analysis of national values. Social memory, emotions, and ideas as formed by distinct national history need to be studied as independent sources of foreign policy and IR theory.

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