

Scientific Meeting

Center for
Central Eurasia Studies
(University of Tehran)
in Cooperation with
Iranian Regional Studies
Association

February 8, 2022

Final Report



Scientific Meeting

Putin's Discourse about State-Civilization



Speaker

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Final Report¹

The scientific meeting on “Putin’s Discourse about State-Civilization” was held as a webinar by the Center for Central Eurasia Studies of the University of Tehran in cooperation with the Iranian Regional Studies Association on Tuesday, February 8, 2022, 12:30-14:00 GMT / Tehran Time Zone 16-17:30. In this session, Dr. Neil Robinson, Professor of Comparative Politics at the University of Limerick, Ireland, presented his views. The meeting was moderated by Dr. Elaheh Koolaee, Director of the Center for Central Eurasia Studies, University of Tehran.

Dr. Elaheh Koolaee welcomed Dr. Neil Robinson and introduced him to the audience at the beginning of the session: "Dr. Robinson has focused on Russian issues both before and after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He has published many books and scientific articles on different subjects related to Russia’s system and sovereign republics that emerged from the collapse of the USSR". Dr. Koolaee invited Dr. Robinson to deliver his speech on the subject “Putin’s Discourse about State-civilization.”

Dr. Robinson noted that he is willing to talk about Putin’s ideas on the notion of state-civilization. These ideas have been critical over the past decade but have not received a vast amount of attention in the field of Russian studies. The following paragraphs are extracted directly from Dr. Robinson’s speech:

There has been more discussion of the issue of state-civilization and civilizational state — the two terms seemed to be used interchangeably. There have been some discussions regarding this term in international relations; however, the idea of

¹ This report has been extracted from the recorded voice of the meeting “War in Ukraine: Background, Roots and Consequences”.

civilizational state / state-civilization is problematic. Firstly, I would like to examine these questions: What is state-civilization and what is this idea in international relations theory and the problems with it? What is Putin's idea about state-civilization, where it comes from, and its nature? It is not the most tremendously philosophically sophisticated idea in political discourse. There are other thinkers in Russian politics that have more depth on Putin's pronouncements on the issue of civilizational discourse. I go on to talk about ontological traps and the dangers of the discourse (of state-civilization as Putin has used it). Several things are missing at the present point in time that demonstrate the idea articulated by Putin creates problems in dealing with Russia for the rest of the world, in particular for the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. So, what is a civilizational state? The idea has a little deep history in a sort of thinking about international politics. Still, some basic principles can be identified both within Putin's discourse and within the general definition of the concept of state-civilization. State-civilization or civilizational state is a form of state that has different forms of organization and legitimation from the Westphalian or so-called liberal capitalist 'Western' model of a state. Its differences are not the recognition of sovereignty through the international law, but the construction of sovereignty in a state based on cultural values that the people possess under organic development throughout their history. People may not be a single ethnic group; people can be a set of people—this is the important fact about Putin's discourse of state-civilization. It is the possession of these set of values that creates people and creates the basis for their statehood that legitimizes the sovereignty of the state. The basis of state-legitimization is the protection of the values that people possess rather than any other forms of rational-legality that has come to be the principle claim to legitimacy of Western states of the last 200 years. It is not based on market

economic promises and satisfaction based on the market being able to deliver some standards of life. Now, the values that form this state model have emerged from long historical processes. They are not things that are new or nouvelle; it is claimed they have ancient roots, which is why they are civilizational values. They are but some temporarily bounded values that existed within the community. Generally, religion and tradition are rooted in the notion of collectivity rather than individual rods; therefore, said to be organic. They are things that are fundamental to the identity of the people through a long historical process. So, the interaction between the state and people around these values is what gives the state its function and gives a particular character to sovereignty and the recognition of the sovereignty. Who can be sovereign is a condition of protecting a civilizational identity and being a civilizational state. So, the claim of sovereignty is based on the possession of this particular form of civilizational cultural values of having those invested within state structure and state acting to protect these values. Some international relations thinkers have picked up these ideas about civilizational states and you can see here a diagram which comes from a book by an English author called Richard Higgott:

Higgott has been a significant figure in certain areas of international political economy. He wrote a book called *States, Civilization and the Reset of World Order*. There are other books which talk about the development of a civilizational state, and they have been coming to prominence in the field of international relations over the last few years; books such as *The China Wave: Rise of a Civilizational State* by Zhang Weiwei and *The Rise of the Civilizational State* by Christopher Coker. The basis of the state-civilization in Higgott's work is like what I just said. The national identity is formed based on civilizational heritage, and the civilizational heritage is a culture that has an extensive historical legacy. This civilizational

heritage is encapsulated in specific forms of economic, social and organizational activity. They are combined to give you a national identity. And this national identity is different from other forms of national identity that are constructed through the rule of law and market-based economic organizations. They have implications for foreign policy and domestic policy. The implications for domestic politics are political unity, emphasis on national sovereignty, and concentrated and popular power. The implications for foreign policy are the rejection of Western liberal values, independent foreign policy, and a mechanism to reconstruct the world order. This idea in international relations has been articulated by several sets of people over the last few years but it's a problematic one. First of all, when international relations specialists talk about a civilizational state, they tend to focus simply on the foreign policy dimensions and the potential for it. Thus, the construction of a civilizational state is all about what is outlined in red on Higgott's diagram. They do not question or interrogate any other aspects of this construction. They are concerned with what the rise of the civilizational state might mean for the political construction of international order and for the change in the balance of power within the global political system. They do not, therefore, ask what these other boxes (on Higgott's diagram) are and what the direction of causality is. They assume that these things are given. This means accepting discourses about civilizational states without critically interrogating them. What the basis of dialogue should be between different state-actors For some parts of the world that's very problematic. For example, in Russian discourse, Russians don't really acknowledge that there is a European view because the European Union cannot be a civilizational state. It is the amalgam of states that themselves have, according to Putin, undermined the basis of state-civilization within their own countries; therefore, it is to some extent an illegitimate actor that is not reflecting the true

history of its population. There are, I think, there are major questions: What is 'historical legacy? which historical legacy do we mean? and as for Russia, is historical legacy *religious Orthodoxy* or is it something else? Is it imperial nature? What is the relationship between its imperial nature and its religious identity? If we look at the 19th century, there were ideologies and nationality policies that were combined in specific ways. There are different notions about what constituted Russianness for parts of its history. The notion of shared civilizational values and social norms is itself a problematic one. What are they? Are they constant? The claim of people who want to talk about civilizational states is that they are shared and constant and they do constitute social norms; but social norms change over time in many societies. And social norms themselves are not necessarily reflections of social values but rather values that are imported to the people through the organizational practices of politics and economics. So, you do not need to look too far back into Russian history to see that certain forms of collective life were not the product of organic action taken by people themselves but were imposed upon them by the Russian political system to deal with its own organizational needs and demands. Some historians have noted collective present organization is not something that emerged spontaneously out of the big actions of the peasantry in the first instance but was something forced upon them by violence: things like revenue collection to structure landholding in a way to be used by the state to reward the elites. However, these things become signs of the collective nature of the people and theorized concepts which are accepted to be the fundamental features of people's interests. But those interests changed rapidly in the early 20th century. Those interests are changing back again and of course they are undergoing some further changes.

The fundamental question that was not asked in the international relations' literature is a basic Leninist

question of *kto kogo*? Which means who benefits from this and who loses? Who beats whom? How did these things emerge from actual politics rather than from abstract historical processes? Political cultures are organizational cultures as well; they are the reflection of certain needs that a state has. We need to bring these ideas to bear when we look at Putin's idea about state-civilization. He reflected these ideas when he talked about state-civilization increasingly from 2012. When he won the election, Putin published a series of articles and began talking about Russian state-civilization. In these articles, he began to talk about the importance of protecting Russian state-civilizational identity in a very specific format; arguing that Russian civilizational identity such as religion is based on the centrality of the family as a primary unit of social organization: the protection of a heteronormative conception of the family. This identity is organic, a social and historical development, and not generated through abstract intellectualization and codification; but its core nature is a sociological phenomenon rather than an ideological one. So, Orthodox religion is a core expression of Russian civilizational identity but only as a part of a multiethnic and multi-confessional identity. So, there is no fundamental essential religious characteristic to Russian civilizational identity, the core values are traditional values that come together and have religious expression. The key feature of Russian people's unity, as Boris Yeltsin has expressed, is that they exist as *the rossiiskii narod not the Roskii narod*. *Rossiiskii narod* is a part of a broader Russian identity centered around shared traditional values expressed through different religious faiths. This argument was the basis of state unity and Russian statehood, and it always had been. It had emerged as different conventional groups through the Russian empire came into contact with one another, and shared a common political space. Thus, the function of the state is to protect the people's common interest and by doing so, it

reproduces the people and reproduces itself. The State is the center of the civilizational identity because it is the institutional terrain on which different religious understandings of traditional values come into contact with one another and as they are able to generate together policies that reproduce values and by reproducing values they produce a certain self.

Putin claimed that Russia has retained its civilizational identity more so than other states. This quote which is on screen is a part of a series of an article; in fact, Putin's speech in 2013 to Federal Assembly, where he talks about how other states may have let go of the things that made them states in the first place, is as follows:

Today, many nations are revising their moral values and ethical norms, eroding ethnic traditions and differences between peoples and cultures. Society is now required not only to recognize everyone's right to the freedom of consciousness, political views and privacy, but also to accept without question the equality of good and evil, strange as it seems, concepts that are opposite in meaning. This destruction of traditional values from above not only leads to negative consequences for society, but is also essentially anti-democratic, since it is carried out on the basis of abstract, speculative ideas, contrary to the will of the majority, which does not accept the changes occurring or the proposed revision of values (Putin, 2013).

By protecting its civilizational identity, Russia is therefore more democratic than its democratic critics since it has kept faith with the true interests of its people, not divided them sectionally through political parties at top level. The organic unity of people being eroded by abstract values and moral relativism. This moral relativism is based on abstract concepts about quality, practices such as multiculturalism, reconceptualization of what was found to be unity instead of having function, and the rights of different people within society and it could argue this fundamentally antidemocratic. Because it is not based

on the people's essential interests in the same way that the Russian state is, Russia is certainly more democratic. Democracy is not a practice of pluralistic political interaction as a sort of classic political theory, and pluralism would believe of the exchange of social interests which are produced through people's social positions, and their economic and sociological nature. Politics is democratic when it looks beyond those surface features of the individual and group identity to the central ahistorical identity preceding them. Russia does not break social interests down at their highest level; it sees those interests and embodies them in the person of the president himself. Putin has arguments on the following concepts globalization, ideas of cultural homogenization, Americanization. Globalization as a process of the transfer of modals of the socio-political organization from the West threatens state-civilization as it injures the old constructs. Things that are needed to be regarded against Putin are argued as liberalism, multiculturalism, and revolutionary ideas (not organic). All of these come together in the discourse of threat. State-civilization needs to be protected against these threats. Putin, over time, increasingly talked about State-civilization but what he spoke about was a "cultural code", and the cultural code was identified in his early articles as such that a state-civilization needs a personal cultural code. The discussion of these ideas meets the amalgamation of different Russian political thinkers, one of the two main figures being Nikolai Danilevsky. In his famous book, *Russia and Europe* (1869), he talks about Russia's distinct civilization and used cultural-historic type as the basis of statehood. He believes that Russia exists as a distinct civilization, a 'cultural-historic type', that should not mirror the West (Germanic-Roman), and that is the basis of statehood:

'Each nationality that has acquired and not lost the consciousness of its own original national significance must take the form of a state ...' unless they, like the smaller ethnic groups in the Russian empire, have 'neither historical consciousness nor political character'

You must have a state if you have a national sense of consciousness. Danilevsky didn't see and talk about margin ethnic groups of the Russian empire but rather self-sovereignly groups, so they didn't have a state; therefore, they can be a tragedy to Russia.

In the twentieth century, some of these ideas came out in the work of Lev Gumilyov. His ideas are super-ethnos of Russia, where you have ethnic groups on a common geographical and biological conditions which conceive the Soviet Union, and before that Tsar's empire, creating this shared political-biological space, then you get this creation of a super-ethnos. Super-ethnos was the largest ethnic unit, which he defined as 'a group of ethnoses, which appears simultaneously in the same region, and which manifests itself in history as a mosaic-like integrity'. Super-ethnoses were observed directly and were defined exclusively by their degree of interethnic closeness. They were real units, not abstract conceptions of historians. Super-ethnos is the absolute ultimate of human values; there are no universal human values. There is simply the highest level of development values that engage within the super-ethnos. Gumilev never really talked about state-civilization in the same way that Putin talks about Statehood or Danilevsky before him, but what he did talk about was this absence of universal values. The universal values that Putin says are fantasy-creation of various representatives of non-Russianists: liberals, Marxist revolutionaries, and people who believe in a specific ethnic superiority rather than a core-shared space based around traditional values. There has been an attempt to trace these things and useful understanding of certain elements when it comes to Putin's viewpoint. The good news is we can trace these things back and there are certain places where Putin's ideas meet with the ideas of previous thinkers. But what is more important is how these ideas have developed within the Putin's discourse. If we go back to the pre-2012 period, we can see that there are several sets of ideas that float around in Putin's discourse from 2000 through 2008 and 2012. These ideas come together in a civilizational state discourse

in a way that shows what you are doing is a development of these ideas not out of an intellectual scheme that rooted back in a particular writing of someone like Danilevsky — perhaps not rooted in the early 20th Century at all.

From the very first moment of his presidency, Putin talked about cultural conservatism and that they need to protect specific characteristics of Russian society to deal with some kinds of problems that Russia faces. So, traditional values were always a part of Putin's discourse, but it was linked to specific problems which formed the basis of pronatalist policies introduced in the 2000s in order to deal with population decline; it was also based on religion. Putin's display of religiosity used to mark him out as a Russian politician rather than someone who had an earlier career in the anti-religious Soviet Institution of KGB. It is also based on the ideas that became more prominent around 2003 and 2004 about Russia as a sovereign democracy. Putin never picked up these ideas himself particularly but allowed to be articulated a different conception of democracy to that which the West was using increasingly to criticize his regime from 2003 and 2004 and Russia is a great power. On what basis can Russia be a great power if Russia is not a great economic power with one-dimensional economic power, and is not a great military power except one-dimensionally as so far is its nuclear power? These things come together in Putin's great frustration that comes into the security conference in 2008 criticizing the one-side-fits-all policy. He thought that being articulated by Bush's Administration in the United States was the source of all forms of global conflict. The conflict clash is inevitable when you ignore the specific claims of sovereign States. These elements come together in 2012 for a very good reason: in 2012 — after the economic crisis and political uncertainty. After these, you have to redefine political agency and define it in a way that shapes it and centers it on Putin himself. The State civilizational discourse does this because it sets up the political equivalence of opponents and delegitimizes that claim to speak for and to the

Russian people. The two groups that Putin is concerned about are Ethnic nationalists and Liberals. These two groups are transformed in the civilizational discourse into illegitimate political actors because they insist on a higher moral status of ethnic Russianness without seeing it within the context of the community that bears the traditional values, which are all the professional religious groups of Russia; whether it be orthodox Christians and large Muslim population of Russia or Buddhist. They all share the values and cannot be reconfigured into a hierarchy that sees Russians as above them. Putin's appeal is a cross-ethnic one, and any ethnic counterclaim against him is automatically illegitimate. Furthermore, any effort or criticism or placing of individual rights above those are considered to be illegitimate ones that only fit to be classified as foreign agency. The laws on foreign agencies are Putin's target such that the foreign agencies law should be taken seriously. Political agency is fully termed around something which is anti-pluralist. This is concerned with ideological justice and patience for foreign policy changes. Not only is political agency reconfigured domestically but also internationally as well. Only certain kinds of power legitimately have a voice within the international political system. So, the civilizational state discourse justifies great power politics. Super-national bodies do not have legitimate agency except in so far as they are based on a civilizational identity. We can look at the European Union from this point of view. The states of The European Union have undermined the identity of civilization within their own states (except for Poland and Hungary). This power can talk meaningfully about international relations; which limits the statehood of others and other parts of the post-Soviet world. They demand to be a more significant part of the Russian world, as Putin has several times put it. For instance, Kazakhstan never had a notion of statehood before 1991. It needed to realize that it still exists within a greater Russian world. The same thing can be said about Ukraine. European Union has no agency, but the

Eurasian Union does and can do since it is based on Civilizational identity.

Now, what does this do? Thinking about the ideology of Putin, what matters is Putin's creation of regime-supporting discourses. He sets the terms of debate and he sought to step back. He uses the code word (genetically cultural code), but steps back from overcommitting ideologically by creating grandeur intellectualization. And, of course, others are allowed to put their own content into it. You can use these ideas to make claims about policy and criticisms of other countries or groups; Putin will arbitrate between the claims and policies he put forward. He centralizes himself by creating the conditions for the regime supporting discourse — talking about traditional values, introducing legislation, and penalizing the propagation of homosexuality. Putin does not have a role in creating these policies but arbitrates between the people who do and uses that to display his centrality to the political process. These are less ideological rulers than other people are (than in Hungary or Poland). People can use these policies to make claims on behalf of the regime, but they are not the claims that regime itself makes. You can note this kind of action if you look at the articulation of Russophobia and the ways in which Putin has used that term — fear of Russia — and the use of that term by other elite Russian leaders responsible for foreign policy is very targeted. It is used at another level, in the popular cultural-political discourse — on Russian television, for instance, in a far broader standard fashion. Does the regime work for it without committing or putting it to a specific sort of position or any antagonistic relations? The work of legitimation is done ideologically, but leadership is free to act in particular ways.

The discourse of State-civilization does several things and creates some problems instead of being a very abstract-minded intellectual enemy of tradition — what I call the ontological traps of Putin's discourse. The first is the pluralism trap. You are making appeals based on some codes that are supposedly immutable. How can the discourse be true if there are other ways

of being ‘Russian’ – the Ukrainian problem? How can there be a fundamental essential Russianness if Ukrainians can adopt and live in different ways? Putin has a big problem with this as he expressed last year in the essay that was published under his name:

the wall that has emerged in recent years between Russia and Ukraine, between the parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space, to my mind is our great common misfortune and tragedy. These are, first and foremost, the consequences of our own mistakes made at different periods of time. But these are also the result of deliberate efforts by those forces that have always sought to undermine our unity. The formula they apply has been known from time immemorial – divide and rule. There is nothing new here. Hence the attempts to play on the ”national question“ and sow discord among people, the overarching goal being to divide and then to pit the parts of a single people against one another (Putin, 2021).

In that he talked about the ways in which people were trying to force a difference in the historical and spiritual base of Russian world in which Ukraine has been a part of — little Russia. There’s a disequivalence in using the phrase “national question.” The phrase goes back to Bolshevism, but here it is put in a way that there’s a play on liberal ideas of national sovereignty — being something generated through national ethnic particularities rather than some super-ethnos ideas that Putin claims to exist. Others can disprove the first trap; an ontological trap is not a trap if it cannot be proved. When it was demonstrated there was a unity of people in the USSR on the lying regime, people wanted different things — in that sense, it admits the phrase of ontological trap. It is approved by how Soviet regime delegitimized itself by claiming to represent the people but actually created the people as something other than abstraction. It turned out that where people were set, they were all alone (as Ukraine does that for Putin). So, the first trap is the worldview he articulates that it has always been on the threat. Not only externally this should happen, but internally too. This requires control, but it’s not a

sort of control that you can have if another political system is able to articulate a different view of what imparted the Great Russian world is.

The second trap is dissatisfaction. This is a half-discourse for some people. It is not either fully articulated or systemized into a ruling ideology nor does it go far enough for some people. You can see this in the writings of people like Surkov, who originated the idea of sovereign democracy and who is one of the ideologists in forming official political discourse in 2000. He wrote about the desire for Putinism beyond Putin — saying that Putin is not really a Putinist, saying that “making Putin, or a successor, the subject of the ideology they have defined for him”. There needs to be some merging of these ideas into a political system in a way that is not dependent on Putin. In other words, it is a way that takes Putin out of the arbitrary of these ideas and feeds them in a more systematic fashion of political system, so it remains unchallengeable. The very nature of how Putin used discourse of civilization: raising it up and then backgrounding it to create regime-supporting discourse rather than the discourse of the regime. This is a problem for people who think this is the way to stabilize the political system; because there is a danger implicit in what Surkov wrote about Putinism that only elites would try and overthrow this. These are the people who will create the systematic Putin — the system as Putin rather than Putin as a person — obviously, there is no guarantee for that. This could lead to the erosion of the capacity for the people to do so. The next thinker is Alexander Dugin, who states that certain people within Putin’s circle are holding Putin back. He should be fulfilling a historical mission because of ‘civilizational traitors’— notions of specific Russianness. As a whole, this is an incomplete system and it is always subject to criticism. It’s not the one that Putin can regulate in that sense, he has to defeat himself and limit political agency, but this action can be turned back onto himself and create a critique of his move. The third ontological trap is the fact that you are forced to take actions: the traps produced by the other two traps. If

you don't seal off the discourse and create something closed, then you are left with denying the satisfaction of others. You cannot simply declare success in the way that the Soviet Union did. By saying taking action, it is based on threats and not based on dialogue. These threats do exist and create unstable conditions internationally for Putin's regime. It has created an intellectual set of problems for itself that it doesn't want to deal with by closing the discourse and allowing itself to exist in a position of relative isolationist comfort from critiques.

State-civilization is not a natural, historical product that has to be accepted for what it is — something that Putin has articulated. It is a particular reading of Statehood; not necessarily a natural reading of Statehood. It is, in fact, contingent and organizational. State-civilization is not a 'natural' historical product that has to be accepted as its articulators present it; it has historical antecedents but is a particular reading of statehood that is as much contingent and organizational as it is essential; Putin's organizational needs led to the clearest articulation of the state-civilization discourse in Russia, but they also meant that it was 'incomplete'; The discourse itself and its incompleteness are sources of tension.

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تلفن: ۰۲۱۶۶۴۱۹۸۰۴

نمابر: ۰۲۱۶۶۴۱۹۷۰۴-۰۲۱۶۶۹۵۳۹۹۶۰

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