Chapter 8
“Sovereign Democracy” Discourse in the Russian Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT

Many important changes occurred in the Russian Federation’s foreign policy since 2000s with Putin’s coming to power. Although the foreign policy is defined as pragmatic during this period, it is in fact ideologically constructed on the basis of the concept of “sovereign democracy.” The concept constitutes in the same time the source of loyalty of the Russian reelpolitik towards the West, especially the USA and of the Russian anti-globalist policies. The aim of this chapter is to analyze the intellectual, normative, and conceptual dimensions of the “sovereign democracy” concept that could serve to conceive the foreign policy practice of the Russian Federation, on the one hand, and on the other hand its dialectical relationships with the West in the era of globalization.

INTRODUCTION

The foreign policy of the Russian Federation as the successor of the collapsing Soviet Union is generally based on the purpose of repositioning itself as a significant international power within the international system. Russia’s foreign policy, as a regional and global international actor, towards restoring its status as a superpower is followed with huge interest by the international community, and especially by Western states.

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Despite the radical political changes occurring in the international system of post-Cold War era, the negative perception and image of Russia referring to the Cold War contains common ideological contradictions: it is no more an enemy of the West as it was during the Cold War but for some conjectural cooperation cases, it is seen neither as a reliable new era Western-ally nor as a strategic partner. Despite emphasizing pragmatism consistently in its foreign policy definition, Moscow cannot erase the negative legacy of its imperial history. In addition to its immediate vicinity of strategic/geo-political sensitivity towards its post-Soviet space and due to its interventionist policies towards the newly independent states in this region, Russia habitually faces conflict with the West. Likewise, due to the problems met in the process of restoration and reformation of its inner environment, the Russian government experiences problems in its relations with the West and particularly with the United States. Besides, depending on the international conjuncture, Russia’s relations with the West fluctuate between conflict and cooperation.

In the International Relations discipline, power-centric approaches dominating in the Cold War are inadequate to analyze the evolution of Russia’s relations with the West in the post-Cold War era. As it is known, the era where the governments rate the national interest in the policies they pursue only with the concrete power parameters is about to end up (Keyman, 1997, p. 227). As Malinova (2009) affirmed “After the Cold War ended, not identities and ideologies but the images about mutual-states and perceptions of strategic nuclear balance became axis concepts promising a better understanding in international politics”. Although power centric theoretical approaches have not been abandoned, identity has become a unit of analysis, which is widely used in examining the foreign policies of states.

Russia’s general problems regarding the new Russian identity not only include the questions about Russian Federation’s place and role in the world politics but also include the responses concerning what the future of Russia is, and where it should be. In this respect, post-Soviet Russia has not been able to put any other effective new ideology in the place of the Soviet Union’s foreign policy implemented by the communist political elites. It has not even refrained from building its foreign policy on a monolithic bloc state ideology. The elements used in the restructuring of the deprived Russian political identity in this way have sometimes been completely unique to Russia. At other times they have been transferred from the West in their original forms, and sometimes they have been created as mixed identities by blending both identities. The overall construction process of the Russian identity was carried out between Westernizers and Slavophilia in the intellectual struggle axis continued for centuries. Atlanticism and New-Eurasianism approaches have been the normative concepts relatively feeding Gorbachev’s, Yeltsin’s, and in turn Putin’s foreign policy.

The “sovereign democracy” concept was developed during Putin’s rule when the 2004-2005 color revolutions occurred in the post-Soviet “near abroad” and
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