

# The idea of Moscow as the 'Third Rome' and contemporary Russian politics

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All roads of Russian thinking on the nature and tasks of Russia lead to Rome, more particularly—to the idea of Moscow as a the Third Rome. There was few ideas which had so grave and so various consequences in history of mankind. Since five hundred years this particular religious image determines in one way or another the theopolitical imagination of all Russian nation and his leaders. In what follow I attempt to show that the founding idea of Moscow as the Third Rome might be—and actually was—understood in a quite different ways.

This concept inspired both apocalyptical Russian Old Believers waiting for the end of the earth, as well as Orthodox tsars building Christian empires, and even some West-oriented modernizers. These different interpretations of the idea of the Third Rome roughly correspond to the different contemporary Russian geopolitical ideologies. Many of them are somehow related to this ancient religious idea.

The study of the history of ideas might help in understanding the contemporary state of Russian soul. Russia for a large part of her history developed almost exclusively only one particular expansive and imperial interpretation of the idea of Third Rome. Perhaps nowadays we are witnessing a significant shift of her self-interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. THE IDEA OF MOSCOW AS THE THIRD ROME

On a threshold of modern times a group of Orthodox clerics formulated an idea according to which after the betrayal of Roman Empire, that is the First Rome, and after the collapse of Byzantine Empire, that is the Second Rome, Russia was to be a new universal Christian empire, that is the Third Rome.

Bishops Zosima (1490–1494) and Simon (1495–1511), and most of all monk Philotheus of Pskov (1450-1525), re-defined the identity of parochial Moscow Duchy, which subsequently became a successor of ancient Rome and Constantinople. In result, Moscow prince became the only legitimate leader of the whole Christian community, that is the proper ruler of the whole world.

## THE THIRD ROME

The full formulation of the idea of Moscow as a Third Rome might be found in the letter of monk Philotheus to Great Prince Vasily III of Russia, father of Ivan the Terrible. First of all, Philotheus indicated that after the Schism of Rome in 1054 and the collapse of Constantinople in 1453 Moscow became the capital of the only true Christian domain in the world. Moscow Duchy become thus the heir of the First and the Second Rome in virtue of its role as defender of pure Christian orthodoxy. The mission of Byzantine emperors was therefore transferred to Moscow princes.

Philotheus went forward and claimed that Moscow is not only a New, but also the Last Rome. There would be no other successor of Moscow, except the Kingdom of God. Moscow rulers have therefore a special mission in preparing the world for Second Coming of Christ. This idea was at the same time a promise and a threat. The Russian state, if will save Christianity, would last to the end of the world, but if will abandon it, the world would be over. The existence of Moscow Duchy was therefore thought as a necessary condition of the existence of Christianity and the world itself.

## TWO DILEMMAS

The idea of the Moscow as the Third Rome underlies probably all historical and contemporary conceptions of the Russian state. The influence of this image might be found among extremely different ideas: catastrophic visions of Old Believers, Christian ideas of Orthodox tsars, secular imperial projects and even atheistic communist totalitarianism. It is so since the idea of the Third Rome contains different elements—religious and secular, isolationistic and imperialistic—and therefore allows various interpretations.

I would like to point at two fundamental dilemmas of Russian idea, which correspond to two different ways of understanding the idea of Moscow as the Third Rome. Both dilemmas manifested themselves in struggles in Russian society in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Russian Raskol (schism among Orthodox Christianity) and the reforms of tsar Peter I the Great might be interpreted as a long-drawn and all-embracing discussion on the true meaning of the Third Rome.

The first debate concerned the question whether the task of Russia is to preserve and conserve the heritage of Orthodox faith or rather to expand it and transmit to other nations. This dilemma led to struggle between conservative and isolationist Old Believers with Orthodox modernizers and expansionists of seventeenth century. Tsar Alexei (1629-1676) and patriarch Nikon (1605-1681) headed the expansionists party since they wanted to incorporate Ukraine into Russian territory and finally start the religious war against Turkey.

The second discussion concerned the very religious character of Russian mission. The imperial project of Peter the Great was an attempt of secularization of Russian idea, and the resistance against it might be seen as a defense of the religious character of the state. The peak of secularization of the idea of the Third Rome was definitely the communist idea of the Third Communist International.

It seems that these two historical discussions: between isolationism and expansionism on the one hand, and between religious and secular foundation of the state on the other, are most fundamental dilemmas of Russian identity.

## **THE MAP OF RUSSIAN SOUL**

Now I would like to propose a simple classification of the interpretations of the idea of Moscow as the Third Rome. The basis for this classification will be the indicated fundamental dilemmas of Russian idea.

The complex idea of the Third Rome virtually consist of the three particular ideas: (1) ancient and pagan idea of the First Rome, (2) ancient and Christian idea of the Second Rome and medieval and (3) Christian idea of the proper Third Rome.<sup>2</sup> The first imperial and secular constituent might be called simple the idea of the New Rome. That was the idea characteristic for emperor Peter the Great. The second aspect of that idea is tsar Alexei's idea of Christian empire, in short—a New Constantinople. Finally, the most proper Russian idea would be the pure religious idea of the New Jerusalem, held by opponents of reforms of Alexei and Peter the Great.

Now, it is easy to see that these three images belong to a more general structure. As I indicated, there are two fundamental dilemmas of Russian identity: expansion vs. isolation and religion vs. secularity. The combination of these two dimensions gives the following table of four possibilities. (2)

	Religious	Secular
Expansion	New Constantinople	New Rome
No expansion	New Jerusalem	

The integral image of New Constantinople historically corresponds to the ideas of tsar Alexei and patriarch Nikon. It was fully developed by Vladimir Soloviev in his messianistic project of universal Christian empire. The state here was thought to be a servant of the Church.

The first transformation of that idea is the image of New Jerusalem corresponding to ideas of Old Believers. Similar concepts might be found in Slavophiles, such as Alexei Khomyakov or Ivan Kireevsky, and in Konstantin Leontev. Their ideal would not be a universal Christian empire, but rather a closed religious state. This concept has definitely apocalyptic flavor.

The second transformation of the integral idea of New Constantinople is the idea of imperial and secular New Rome. It is the direct opposition of New Jerusalem. Here not the State serves the Church, but conversely, religion is mere an instrument of politics. The idea of Christian empire boils down to the bare secular imperialism. The first historical example of the realization of this idea is the Russian Empire build by Peter the Great and Catherine the Great. The second was obviously Soviet Union.

The lacking position in the logical space of possibilities is the idea of secular and not expansionistic state. That is a concept of simple national state, which emerges only among some Russian Westernizers in nineteenth century, such as Pavel Milukov. It must be stressed however that it is an exceptional position in the history of Russian ideas. Even Westernizers were often influenced by the idea of Moscow as the Third Rome and usually—perhaps unwillingly—inherited its imperial aspect

## 2. CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN GEOPOLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

Russia is located between West and East. This ambiguous situation results in continuing debates on Russian cultural and political identity. Some authors claims that Russia belongs to West, others maintain that it is a part of East, and still others believes that she is a specific and independent formation, neither Western, nor Eastern.

The debate started in nineteenth century as a struggle between Westerners, which believed that Russian is—or rather should be—a natural part of Western world, and Slavophiles, which stressed particular character of Russian culture, rooted in East Orthodox Christianity. In twentieth century new movement of Eurasians appeared, which emphasized Asian character of Russian spirit, neglected both by Westerners and Slavophiles.

These intellectual debates yields three fundamental images of Russia: (1) Russia as West, (2) Russia as Eurasia, and (3) Russia as a distinct cultural Island. As sociological surveys reveal, these three self-images are deeply rooted in Russian society.<sup>3</sup> It seems that these three ideas my serve as a basis for classification of main contemporary Russian geopolitical ideologies.<sup>4</sup> Atlanticism correspond to the image of Russia as West, Eurasianism holds that Russia is a part of Asia, and the idea of specific Russia leads to a theory, which might be called Insularism.

### **ATLANTICISM**

The image of Russia as a part of Western world legitimized the political transformation carried out in late eighties in USSR and in early nineties in Russian Federation. Declared Atlanticists were Mikhail Gorbachev, Eduard Shevardnadze, Boris Yeltsin, Andrei Kozyrev and Egor Gaidar. This is also ideological background of a prominent part of contemporary Russian opposition. Nowadays, though an idea of Russia as a part of Western world is still popular among Russians, geopolitical Atlanticism almost completely lost its importance. The main reason of this was the total failure of the reform program and Russian foreign policy in nineteenth. The economical crisis, which was associated with this politics, leaded to fundamental and apparently permanent shift in Russian thinking about the place of Russia in the world. In 2006, fifteen years after the beginning of the Russian transformation, Dmitri Trenin, one of the Westerners and Atlanticist, observed: “Until recently, Russia saw itself as Pluto in the Western solar system, very far from the centre but still fundamentally a part of it. Now it has left that orbit entirely: Russia’s leaders have given up on becoming part of the West and have started creating their own Moscow-centred system.”<sup>5</sup>

Russia started to revise her fundaments of international politics. The idea of Russia as West was replaced firstly by image of Russia as East, and resulted a rapprochement with China, and afterwards replaced by more moderate vision of Russia as an island, maintaining pragmatic relations with every part of world.

## EURASIANISM

Russia is a predominantly Asian country. Eurasians, contrary to the Westerners, which wanted to change this fact, simply accepted it. According to them, Russia should not imitate the West, but rather proudly continue the Asian path of development and become the successor of Mongol empire. This idea, based on rather geographical and historical than religious and cultural factors, is particularly useful for multinational and multicultural political projects.

Eurasianism is a rather new view on Russian identity. It emerged among exiled Russians as a result of searching for a new ideology which could substitute the communism after the supposed collapse of Soviet Empire. In nineteenth Eurasianism was adopted by Gennadi Zyuganov as an official ideology of Communist Party of Russian Federation. Eurasianism determined the international politics of Evgenyi Primakov, former Russian prime minister and minister of foreign affairs. No doubts, nowadays Russian Eurasianism is one of the most original and most known ideology. Its most celebrated agent is definitely Alexander Dugin, but similar ideas are developed also by Kalamudin Gadzhiev, Nikolai Nartov, or Alexander Panarin. Vladimir Putin was also believed to be implicit Eurasian, but for now Eurasians such as Dugin are in opposition to Putin regime, which—according to them—failed to realize the project of Eurasian empire.

## INSULARISM

The contemporary Russian debate on the cultural and political identity was for long dominated by Atlanticists on the one hand, and Eurasians on the other. Finally it was noticed that it is false alternative. Russia, though connected with both West and East, might be seen as a distinct civilization, separated Russian World, the Russian Island. This view, rooted in classic Slavophilism and modern civilization studies, is probably the most popular among Russian people and very popular among Russian elites.

Geopolitical theory based on this image of Russia as Island was developed by Vadim Tsymbursky, very important, but not widely recognized philosopher. His view were popularized by influential lecturer at MGIMO and editor-in-chief of Polis journal Mikhail Il'in and to some extent inspired Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center. What is important, the recognition of Russia as a separate civilization means that it has—more or less determinate—borders.



It means that Russia-Island cannot be universal empire any more. At most it might postulate the sphere of neutral states around the “Russian World.” Tsymbursky called such territories “the Limitroph.” Insularism does not however entails that no war is possible. Firstly, Russia might try to determine the real borders of Russian World, and secondly she might fight for the neutrality of its surroundings.

Generally, in the sphere of international relations, Insularism leads to moderate isolationists and definitely pragmatic politics. Neither West, nor East is a priori privileged. The idea of Russian civilization is widely propagated by Russian Orthodox Church with Patriarch Kirill of Moscow. Many commentators believe that it is also the idea underlying Vladimir Putin’s politics.<sup>6</sup> Particularly the famous idea of “sovereign democracy,” formulated by Vladislav Surkov, implicitly relied on the image of Russia as a separate world, which should defend himself against external influences. The same idea might be found in currently prevailing ideology of “Russian World,” which legitimizes Crimea annexation and Russian intervention in Eastern Ukraine, which is considered as a part of Russian civilization.

## **RELIGIOUS INSPIRATIONS**

Now I would like to propose a simple twofold classification of Russian geopolitical ideologies. The first issue is an attitude towards Western culture. Atlanticism renounces of Russian cultural distinctiveness, whereas both Eurasianism and Insularism defend it. But the contemporary anti-West thinking has two variants, which should be carefully distinguished. Thus the second question for a proper classification should be an attitude to expansionism. Atlanticism obviously excludes any kind of expansion, though it is not so significant, since it is not popular view among contemporary Russian elites.

On the contrary, Eurasianism, in its most popular species, postulates the extension of Russian domination, initially over the whole post-Soviet space, and afterwards over the whole continent and perhaps the whole world. On the other hand Russian Insularism is much more isolationistic, even though it questions the current state of borders of Russian Federation (as might be seen in the case of Ukraine). The idea of “Russian World” fundamentally bounds the limits of possible Russian expansionism to the area of distribution of Russian culture and language. Combination of these two dimensions yields the following matrix:

	Cultural distinctiveness	No cultural distinctiveness
Expansion	Eurasianism	
No expansion	Insularism	Atlanticism

The empty space on the right upper corner was occupied by Communism, which was both universalistic and expansionistic.

It is easy to see that this classification is mere a new version of the map of Russian soul proposed above. The difference is that nowadays the problem of religion has been replaced by more general and more secular problem of Russian cultural distinctiveness.

Eurasianism is a structural counterpart of the idea of Moscow as the Second Constantinople. It aims in building new universal empire, which organize the whole world according to the principles discovered in Russia. Noteworthy, Eurasians themselves often refer to the idea of Moscow as the Third Rome in this interpretation. Insularism correspond to the idea of Moscow as the New Jerusalem. They are not going to distribute and impose Russian idea to other nations, but instead they aim to develop and deepen their own heritage. Some of Insularists, like Solzhenitsyn or Tsymbursky, see their connections with Old Believers. Finally, Atlanticism appears to be a fundamentally new view, which radically breaks with the heritage of Russian idea.

It seems that the proposed map of Russian soul opens might help in understanding not only of complicated issues of Russian history of ideas, but also contemporary Russian geopolitical debates. The difference is that in seventeenth and eighteen centuries the debates concerned openly the place of Orthodox Religion in public sphere, whereas nowadays usually are focused on more neutral issues of particular cultural values. Since hundreds of years Russian soul faces nevertheless the same dilemmas.



## Footnotes

1. This chapter is based on my book in Polish: *Przekleństwo imperium. Źródła rosyjskiego zachowania* [The Curse of Empire. Sources of Russian Conduct], Kraków: Wydawnictwo M 2014. Czech translation in preparation.
2. See Dymitr Romanowski, *Trzeci Rzym. Rozwój rosyjskiej idei imperialnej* [Third Rome. The Development of Russian Imperial Idea], Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka 2013.
3. Dmitrij N. Zamâtin, *Vlast' prostranstva i prostranstvo vlasti*, Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Rossijskaâ političeskaâ ènciklopediâ.
4. Andrei P. Tsygankov, Finding a Civilisational Idea: "West," Eurasia," and "Euro-East" in Russia's Foreign Policy, „Geopolitics” (2007), no. 12/3.
5. Dmitri Trenin, *Russia Leaves the West*, „Foreign Affairs” (2006), no. 85/4
6. Andrei P. Tsygankov, Finding a Civilisational Idea: "West," Eurasia," and "Euro-East" in Russia's Foreign Policy, „Geopolitics” (2007), no. 12/3, pp. 381–382; Jakub Potulski, *Współczesne kierunki rosyjskiej myśli geopolitycznej* [Currents in Contemporary Russian Geopolitical Thought], Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego 2010, pp. 252–253.