

THE CONCEPT OF “COLLECTIVE WEST” IN RUSSIAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE AFTER 2022

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Abstract

Relations between various actors inevitably go through ups and downs. In this context, the relationship between the Russian state and Western countries has also evolved in a similar manner. From a cooperative atmosphere that prevailed in the early 2000s, moving toward pronounced rivalry as a result of opposing worldviews regarding Eastern Europe—specifically the post-Soviet region—this relationship reached its lowest point following Russia’s aggression in Ukraine, which practically overturned the European order established after World War II. In addition to repositioning itself politically, economically, and militarily vis-à-vis Western countries and institutions, the Russian state also found space in its official rhetoric for the concept of the “Collective West,” thereby articulating a new Russian perception of Western states. Although this phrase appeared sporadically before 2022, its permanent use by Russian officials after this period emerged as a public discourse and mobilization tool to justify the war in Ukraine and, more broadly, Russia’s extreme rivalry with the West.

This article aims to examine how Russian politics—mainly the presidency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—have framed the rivalry with the West and Western institutions in identity-based and civilizational terms. The way in which Russian political discourse has depicted the West since 2022 reflects a historical continuity in perceiving the West as the significant “Other” in the construction of state identity. The paper employs a qualitative research approach and relies on secondary sources, including state documents, official speeches, memoirs, and other materials.

Keywords: *Collective Identity, The Other, Post-Soviet Region, Multipolarity*

Introduction

This article aims to contribute to the literature on Russian identity issues in relation to the West by employing a qualitative research approach and discourse analysis of the political rhetoric of key Russian political actors, namely, the President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The study is based on official speeches, state documents, and significant sources from the Presidency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with particular focus on the period following 2022. The selection of the President’s speeches and statements is made because, according to the Constitution, he determines the directions of the state’s domestic and foreign policy. On the other hand, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs implements state policy in the sphere of the Russian Federation’s international relations.

From among the official state documents, the Foreign Policy Concept, approved in 2023, has been taken into consideration, as it represents a highly significant political and strategic document that defines the course the Russian Federation should pursue in the international arena.

The article aims to build upon the following hypotheses:

- The “Collective West,” which has held a prominent place in Russian political discourse since 2022, in fact represents Russia’s “other.”

- Given that the post-Soviet region holds strategic importance for the Russian Federation, the rapprochement of this region with the “other” signifies a further deepening of Russia’s divisions with the “Collective West.”
- According to the Russian political elite and various intellectual circles, the United States plays a central role within the framework of the “Collective West”.
- Russia seeks to employ different multilateral platforms and forums as mechanisms to confront the “Collective West.”

Russian Identity and Self-Perception Vis-À-Vis The ‘West’

According to Alberto Melucci’s perspective, identity refers to three fundamental characteristics: the continuity of the subject beyond temporal changes and environmental adaptations; the definition of its boundaries in relation to others; and the ability to recognize oneself and to be recognized by others. (Melucci, 1996).

In this sense, identity is intertwined with the collective memory of a community, which forms a symbolic space whose boundaries are marked by meanings, norms, and emotions. These markers are used to distinguish between “us” and “others.” (Kozlovitseva, 2016).

The strengthening of collective identity is made possible by shared experience, which extends as “historical memory” to younger generations as well, therefore providing continuity and collective awareness that its members, both ancestors and descendants, are bound by a common destiny. (Golubović, 2019). Based on Melucci’s perspective, in the context of Russian statehood, the Foreign Policy Concept adopted in 2023 emphasizes that the Russian Federation is: *“More than a thousand years of independent statehood... its active role in shaping the contemporary system of international relations ... one of the sovereign centers of global development performing a historically unique mission aimed at maintaining the global balance of power and building a multipolar international system.”* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 2023.) This articulation reinforces the Russian self-awareness of historical continuity, despite transformations and changes experienced over time. Meanwhile, both domestic and international audiences are reminded that Russia seeks an international environment characterized by balance of power and multipolarity.

Further on, through its self-description as *“...a unique country-civilization... belonging to the cultural and civilizational community of the Russian world,”* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023) the Russian state positions itself not merely as a political entity, but also as a civilization with a particular cultural and civilizational identity code.

According to President Vladimir Putin, in his address to the Federal Assembly in 2023, one year after the onset of aggression against Ukraine, *“this civilization ... is what matters most. We have inherited it from our ancestors and must preserve it for our descendants.”* (TASS, 2023). Therefore, Russian political leaders conceptualize their state in civilizational dimensions that follow a linear historical trajectory extending from earlier periods to the political realities of the contemporary international system.

Every identity presupposes an “other,” and every relationship implies the definition of the “self” from the “other” or the “other” from the “self”; in this case, the “self” is constituted through differentiation from the other. Yet, in certain types of communities, the “other” becomes “they,” detached from “us,” meaning “the enemy.” (Golubović. 2019.) In recent years, Russo-Western relations have reached a point of antagonism where the “other” has been directly portrayed as the enemy, and this is clearly reflected in the words of Russian President Vladimir Putin: *“They [the West, my note] are our enemies...”* (Interfax. 2023).

It has to be said that the image of the West within Russian political thought is ambivalent, and, as such, situated between two poles. On one hand, the West is perceived as an attractive

source of cultural and technological models and standards; on the other, as an ideologically alien and hostile *pole*. (Gorin, 2020).

Additionally, in the Western worldview, Russia's actions appear to have served as a wake-up call for Europe and the broader West, a fact illustrated in the statement of former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who asserted that: "*If Ukraine falls, it will be a catastrophe for the West; it will be the end of Western hegemony.*" (Geopolitical Economy, 2024) A similar sentiment was expressed by French President Emmanuel Macron, who characterized the developments in Ukraine as "...*existential for our Europe.*" (Le Monde, 2024)

This kind of discourse, stemming from some of the world's most influential statesmen, reflects the concern of the "we-image" toward an "other" whose behavior constitutes an ontological threat to "us", since, as the President of the European Council António Costa remarked, what the continent is currently experiencing is not merely "...*a geopolitical crisis. It is a test of Europe's identity.*" (European Council Press Release, 2025).

Such statements reveal that Russia's actions have contributed to the construction of a collective self-identification narrative among Western leaders. Furthermore, this geopolitical reality mobilized Western partners, leading to deepened cooperation and renewed U.S. attention and engagement toward Europe. The physical threat, therefore, became a unifying factor for the West as a whole. (Jashari, 2024) The United States and Europe together constitute a civilization, as Timofei Bordachev notes, because their foreign policy objectives are dependent on shared internal standards. (Bordachev. 2025).

Russia's distinct cultural and political particularity has resulted in its own understanding and practice of democracy, shaped by its specific circumstances and context. Thus, the concept of "sovereign democracy," beyond representing a model of exercising power, is now perceived by Russian political elites as a response to liberal hegemony and defines democracy in Russia in accordance with its unique culture and traditions, detached from Western values and culture. (Diesen 2021).

This perspective is echoed in President Putin's speech of September 30, 2022, during the ceremony for signing the treaties on the annexation of Ukrainian territories, in which he declared that: "*The West does not have any moral right to weigh in, or even to utter a word about freedom and democracy...*" (President of Russia, 2024) The promotion of this concept underscores a new ideological division: namely, between the Russian-promoted sovereign democracy and the liberal democracy of the "other," supported by the West. (Jashari, 2022).

In this vein we can also read the critique that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov expressed in his address to the State Duma in February 2023, where he rhetorically asked: "*Is this democracy? They [the West, my note] are imposing the 'end of history,' concept when nothing else, except Western liberalism, was supposed to remain.*" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023)

Through these recurring narratives articulated by the Russian leadership, there appears to be an implicit call to reject the Western system of values and to liberate oneself from the hegemonic Western discourse on democracy, and moving towards *another* political and civilizational model.

Reconstituting the "Other" – The "Collective West"

Notwithstanding the distinctions among Western countries in various aspects of the public sphere, the symbolic boundary between the West and the non-West was clearly delineated and that, from this perspective, the role of the "other" for Russia is not played by individual European nation-states, but rather by a generalized image of the West and Europe as a distinct "civilizational" totality. (Barash, Petukhov. 2023).

The West as Russia's "other" is not a new construct within Russian political and public discourse. As Vladimir Branovsky notes, "...*debates about Europe have been part of Russia's history for the past thousand years.*" (Chimiris 2023). Indeed, as Iver Neumann emphasizes, the discourse on Europe - or, more broadly, the West - has always been, for Russian political thought, a discourse about the self. (Neumann, 1996). In this case, the West has historically served as a kind of barometer through which not only Russia's state development but also its position in the world has been measured.

Edward Said rightly observes that every era and every society recreates its own "others." Therefore, identity - whether of the self or of the other - while not being static, is rather a complex historical, social, intellectual, and political process. (Said, 1979) Following Said's definition, the current "other" of the Russian Federation has undergone an evolution even in its semantic use and is now repackaged under the notion of the "Collective West", which has now become the central element that shapes the official state rhetoric and, as Marlène Laruelle notes, "*is now condemned for having a 'cultural code' that is essentially Russophobic.*" (Laruelle, 2024).

The contemporary Russian philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, in his contemplations on the "Collective West," describes it as an entity that is seeking to expand its influence on a planetary scale. Conversely, according to Dugin, "...*Russia fights only for life, for truth, and for the right to be who we are.*" (RIA Novosti, 2022). Thus, in Dugin's view, Russia's confrontation with the "other" is defensive: an effort to safeguard its identity, traditions, and culture.

The Dictionary of the Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs defines the "Collective West" as "*A geopolitical construct ... encompassing the United States and its allies.*" The same source notes that although "*there is no consensus among Russian scholars regarding the term ... the only unifying foundation of the 'Collective West' is the United States' ability to keep each of its allies individually 'under control'.*" (Diplomaticheskii slovar').

In practical terms, the "West" referred to by the Diplomatic Academy seems to be the *Political West* or what Jan Ifversen calls the "*Cold War West*", a configuration that places the United States in a privileged position within the Western camp and that was institutionally embodied in the NATO alliance. (Ifversen, 2008). It is precisely this institutional architecture and the cohesion between NATO and the European Union that today preserve the contemporary institutional dimensions of the West.

According to Mikhaylin Igor Viktorovich of Moscow State Linguistic University's Institute of International Relations and Social and Political Sciences, "*the Collective West is a group of Western states, led by the United States, that coordinate their approaches to key issues on the global agenda in order to counter and weaken Russia.*" He further emphasizes that "*the Collective West consists of the member states of NATO and the European Union.*" (Dymova, Koptaeva, 2024).

What stands out from the abovementioned definitions is the central role ascribed to the United States among Western countries. This interpretation of United States' role within the "Collective West" is also affirmed in Russia's 2023 Foreign Policy Concept, which, while recognizing the U.S. as "...*one of the sovereign centers of global development,*" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 2023), simultaneously portrays it as "...*the main inspirer, organizer, and executor of the Collective West's aggressive anti-Russian policy.*" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. 2023). Throughout this discourse, it becomes evident that European countries are largely insignificant within the "Collective West" camp. As an illustration, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, during the 2023 OSCE summit held in Skopje, referred to European states in a pejorative sense, labeling them as "...*its [the United States', my note] satellites.*" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023).

The depiction of the United States in Russian official documents and by the country's political elite as the torchbearer of Western civilization aligns with the interpretation of American historian William McNeill, who argues that U.S. engagement at the beginning of the twentieth century - namely, during the First World War - marked the emergence of what *"...we now consider Western civilization."* (McNeill. 1996). A similar view is expressed by former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, who asserted that *"without the US leadership, the West cannot survive. Thus, the Western world ... will almost certainly perish before of our eyes."* (Davutoğlu, 2020).

Thus, the rise of Atlanticism and the expansion of American hegemony across Western Europe during the second half of the twentieth century became a central theme in Russian political and intellectual debates about the idea of the West. (Neumann, 1996). Throughout the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, the Western civilization has been identified with the United States.

The "Collective West" In The Discourse Of Russian Highest Officials

Russian President Vladimir Putin mentioned this concept (namely, the "Collective West") for the first time during his address to the Federal Assembly in April 2021, in the context of developments in Belarus. According to him, there had been *"a direct attempt to organize a coup ... and to assassinate the country's President ... yet such outrageous actions are not condemned by the so-called Collective West."* (President of Russia 2021).

In this instance, Putin's political consciousness reflected concern over the potential destabilization of Lukashenko's power, which could entail the loss of a key Russian ally in a region considered vital for reinforcing Russia's position as a sovereign center of global development and civilization. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). The implicit suggestion was that any political change in Belarus would signify a shift to the camp of the "other," namely the "Collective West."

Therefore, it is no coincidence that Putin's reference to the "Collective West" emerged precisely at a moment of heightened anxiety regarding the post-Soviet region, an area representing the cultural and civilizational community of the "self-image" vis-à-vis the "other."

Additionally, the intensification of this narrative by Russian leaders following the onset of aggression against Ukraine, and in the subsequent period, further reinforces the dividing line between Russia and the West. Furthermore, as the Russian president stated during the plenary session of the 21st Valdai Discussion Club - a think tank closely linked to the Kremlin - the "Collective West" is perceived as a force persistently seeking to exclude Russia from global processes and affairs. (Valdai Discussion Club, 2024).

In his address on the day the invasion of Ukraine began, Putin not only highlighted the retrospective of Russia's relations with the West but also accused Western states of having *"immediately tried to put the final squeeze on us, ... and utterly destroy us"*, after the fall of the USSR. (President of Russia 2022). Responsible for this, according to Putin, is *"...the so-called Collective West,"* wherein the United States is attributed a superior role in the Western structure, while its allies *"...enthusiastically accept the rules it is offering them"* (President of Russia 2022).

Putin's approach - not only his, but also that of other Russian officials - when it comes to interpreting Russo-Western relations, reveals yet another significant aspect for our research. In fact, taking the United States as a primary point of strategic reference exposes the *Americocentrism* embedded in Russian political discourse, while at the same time indicating the position the U.S. occupies within Russia's geopolitical consciousness. This tradition of perceiving the United States as "responsible" for the actions of the West seems to have followed

the trajectory of Russian political thought since the Cold War, continuing into present-day affairs.

The same attitude toward the United States and its European allies, or the so-called “Collective West”, has also been reflected in surveys conducted among Russian citizens, as shown by the Levada Analytical Center, - a Russian non-governmental research organization specializing in public opinion measurement. According to its data, in August 2022, 71% of respondents held a negative view of the United States, while 65% viewed the European Union unfavorably. (Levada Center, 2022). Meanwhile, President Putin’s actions and official rhetoric appear to have enjoyed substantial public support, since, according to Levada, from 2022 onward Russian citizens have consistently approved of their president at a rate of around 80%. (Levada Center, 2025). This illustrates how state policy has shaped Russian citizens’ perceptions of the countries with which the Russian Federation expresses rivalry and antagonism.

In the opinion of Russia’s foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, not only is the Collective West led by the United States, but, as he claims, it has “*assumed the role of master of the fate of all humanity.*” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023).

In fact, this reflects the Russian political elite’s concern regarding the United States’ role on the international stage, as it would hinder the emergence of a just multipolar order that would reflect the world’s cultural and civilizational diversity. For this reason, Sergei Lavrov speaks of the need for “*respect of cultural diversity, as well as consistent democratization of international affairs.*” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023).

Nevertheless, by the “democratization of international relations,” in the worldview of Moscow, what is meant is the transfer of centralized power from the former hegemon to a group or *Concert of Great Powers*, including the Russian state itself. (Lo, 2015) For Lavrov, the emergence of a multipolar world “*...emerging after five hundred years of domination of what we call the ‘collective West.’*” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). Thus, he considers the differences with the “other,” namely the “Collective West,” as primordial and deeply rooted in history.

For Russia, such an international environment holds particular significance, as in this way the country would be treated as a power and could balance the strength of Western countries (read: that of the United States).

In this regard, Russia’s participation in various multilateral structures and platforms is viewed as an effort to achieve its intended objectives. This can also be observed in the *Kazan Declaration*, which emerged as a result of the BRICS summit held in Russia in 2024, where, among other things, emphasis was placed on a “*more equitable, just, democratic, and balanced multipolar world order.*” (BRICS, 2024).

In fact, there exists a clear tendency in Russian policy to transform such international forums into “true centers of power” (Gvosdev, Marsh. 2014), meant to resist the “Collective West.”

The organization of the *Multipolar Forum* as well as the second *Congress of the International Russophile Movement*, both held in Moscow in February 2024, in fact mark Russia’s struggle “*...for a just world without the hegemony of the ‘Collective West.’*” (Gasiuk. 2024).

This tendency is also present within Russian academic and research circles, particularly in the report prepared by the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs, published in 2023 with the support of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The authors of that report note that “*the GDP of the World Majority countries has already exceeded that of the collective West,*” and that “*BRICS has already outweighed the seven leading Western economies.*” (Karaganov, Kramarenko, Trenin. 2023).

In this respect, it may be argued that there exists a synchronization between official discourse and various Russian intellectual circles in their understanding of the “Collective West” as a community opposed to Russian state interests, to which narrative an intellectual legitimacy is thereby conferred.

The narrative against the “Collective West” has further served the Kremlin in reinforcing its efforts and appeals to various Asian centers of power to unify their positions and policies within the context of the 21st century. This became evident during the bilateral Russian–Chinese meetings, where the need to coordinate their actions on the international stage was particularly emphasized.

According to Sergei Lavrov, *“the collective West is frantically trying to maintain its hegemony, using utterly unscrupulous methods ... against Russia and China.”* (TASS, 2022) The intention here appears to be to present the West’s antagonism toward Russia as, in essence, equally directed against China; hence, the construction of a unified Russo–Chinese bloc is deemed necessary to counteract military, political, economic, and other threats.

Furthermore, during his 2024 visit to Beijing, at a joint press conference with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, Lavrov underlined that: *“The issues we are addressing... are directly related to the efforts to establish a fair multipolar world order free from the diktat, hegemony and neo-colonial and colonial practices... by the United States and the rest of the collective West.”* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2024).

Lavrov went on to accuse the West that *“...they are beginning to use the same policy with regard to the People’s Republic of China.”* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2024). These statements by Russia’s top diplomat can be understood as calls directed toward the Chinese state and other allies to position themselves clearly on Russia’s side in its anti-hegemonic “struggle” against the United States and the “Collective West.”

President Vladimir Putin expressed his own vision of the international order in an interview for China’s Xinhua News Agency on the eve of the 2025 SCO Summit in Tianjin, where he described the interaction between Russia and China as *“...a vital mechanism for the consolidating the Global South.”* (Xinhua English News, 2025). Moreover, such a structure, with Russia and China at its helm, would, in the Russian perception, serve as the leader of the “global majority,” aiming to challenge the significant “other” that does not share the same values as the non-Western world.

Conclusion

This article reinforces the assertion that the “other” for Russia continues to be the West, while the oppositional discourse toward it has intensified considerably since the onset of the aggression against Ukraine in 2022. Focusing on the discursive analysis and the official language employed by President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, it becomes evident that the concept of the “Collective West” has been transformed into a key element through which Russia has constructed its position on the international stage. This linguistic construct, present in both political and intellectual Russian discourse, represents the portrayal of the “other” - namely, the West - in terms of collective and even civilizational identity. Meanwhile, by self-identifying as a unique civilization, the Russian state, within the framework of the contemporary international reality and in accordance with the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept, considers the preservation of the global balance of power and the opposition to Western hegemony as part of its historical mission.

The article highlighted the fact that official statements show that the United States occupies the central role within the composition of the “Collective West,” while its allies are portrayed in a markedly dismissive manner. This confirms one of the hypotheses formulated within the methodological framework of this actual work. Moreover, this sentiment is reflected

among Russian citizens, who expressed their opposition toward the United States in public opinion surveys. In this regard, Russia's worldview toward the United States carries a distinctly Soviet legacy.

In recent years, the narrative about the "Collective West" has also served Russian policy as a means of invitation extended to powerful Asian states - primarily the People's Republic of China - to align themselves alongside Russia, not only in shaping an international environment where multipolarity constitutes a foundational principle, but also as a counterweight to U.S. hegemony.

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