

THE CULTURAL BARRIER IN UNDERSTANDING EACH OTHER:

A CLASH OF THE WESTERN AND RUSSIAN
CIVILIZATIONS IN THE UKRAINIAN WAR

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ABSTRACT

We are living in an infodemic environment, pervaded with the everlasting hostility between Russia and the West, each side being superficially depicted as an enemy to the other.

I am venturing in this topic by considering that this discord is characterised by veiled civilizational differences which have sparked feelings of Westernophobia and Russophobia that taint communication between the two. Moreover, a concrete common ground has never been established, meaning that the bilateral conventions and international regulations are not rooted in an unambiguous and uncontested agreement on political aspects.

By analyzing the cultural and historical heritage of the Western powers and Russia, I have identified certain aspects that could stand as explanations for the divergent views on ardently disputed issues - the existence and role of NATO in the post-Cold War era, the need for buffer zones in an increasingly cooperative world and the sovereignty of the former Soviet republics, especially Ukraine.

Keywords: *Russophobia, Westernophobia, civilizational conflict, cultural differences, intercultural tension.*

*“Every civilization sees itself as the center of the world and writes its history as the central drama of human history.”
(Samuel P. Huntington)*

Introduction

According to Cambridge Dictionary, culture is “the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs of a particular group of people at a particular time” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Culture lies at the heart of any civilization, having played a crucial role in shaping societies, especially the mature ones like Russia and the Western nations. Ideology, the set of beliefs and principles, is encompassed within a specific culture’s boundaries, reflecting the intrinsic values of the respective culture. Intercultural communication refers to a symbolic, interpretive and transactional process in which people from different cultural backgrounds create shared meanings. However, this process is a challenging one, since contrasting cultural values lead to dissimilar, even divergent mentalities and misunderstandings of other cultural contexts and approaches, that can, in extreme situations, instigate conflicts. The war in Ukraine is not just a political and military conflict. In regard to Samuel Huntington’s 1996 *clash of civilizations* thesis, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict could be interpreted as the collision between the Euroatlantic (Western) and Eurasian (Orthodox¹) civilizations.

The Eastern versus Western cultural dichotomy has been captivating scholars for a long time, the interest for this topic having peaked during the Cold War, when the polarity of interests and ideologies was a matter of world domination and life or death by nuclear war. After the fall of the Iron Curtain and the collapse of the USSR, the tension between the new-born Russian Federation and the Western societies decreased, but remained latent and accepted by both parties as a silent immutable truth. Yet, Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and invasion of Ukraine in 2022 are signaling the rebirth of the aggressive foreign policy and the imperialistic ambitions of Russia (Milosevich, 2021) that, on the one hand, are condemned by Western societies, but on the other hand, are a fundamental part of the Russian cultural heritage and the prime reason for the survival of the Russian nation throughout history.

My premise for this article is that the Ukrainian conflict can be interpreted as a present-day resurgence of the long-standing passive tension that has gradually built up between the West and the East throughout the centuries, but especially after the end of the Cold War. I believe that this tension, as well as the difficulty of understanding the logic behind Russian Federation’s invasion of Ukraine, stem from the cultural gap that lies between the Western

and Russian civilizations. Major cultural differences stand out particularly in approaches to NATO's existence and the need for its expansion, the need for buffer zones and the concepts of self-determination and sovereignty.

1. NATO’s Existence, Expansion, and Role in the Post-Cold War Era

NATO is a defensive military alliance that was founded in the aftermath of the Second World War, with the mission to secure peace in Europe, to promote cooperation among its members and to defend their integrity in the context of an expanding Soviet Union (NATO, 2020). The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was part of the policy of double containment, led and funded by the United States and directed towards the resurgent Germany and the Communist power in Eastern Europe (Burr, 2018). In addition, NATO provides a reassuring anchor to the newly independent democracies that have adopted this ideological line after breaking away from the USSR.

However, the configurations of power have changed since the founding of NATO. The Soviet Union has disintegrated, Germany is a united democracy, and several former Warsaw Pact states have joined NATO. Today, NATO’s existence and enlargement are questioned. Some agree that Lord Ismay’s quote, NATO’s first Secretary General, is obsolete: “Keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down” (NATO, 2023). There are two main perspectives on the necessity of NATO today: the Russian and the Western one.

1.1. The Russian Point of View – a Threat

Russia does not concur with the survival of NATO after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the end of the Cold War. The existence and eastward expansion of the organization is considered a great threat to Russia’s national security. In his speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Vladimir Putin stated that NATO’s expansion represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. From the Kremlin’s perspective, NATO is a tool for ensuring US hegemony and domination over European states. Once a symbol for the Western bloc’s military

force, NATO is now a token for the unipolar world that the US is trying to maintain, as it can be inferred from Putin’s phrase that he used over the years to mean the US - “There are those who would like to build a unipolar world, who would themselves like to rule all of humanity” (Baldwin, 2007). Throughout the whole speech, he addressed his concern regarding this one-superpower-world. He also added that NATO’s expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe and that the security guarantees promised to Russia that NATO would not expand past Germany’s borders were broken (Kremlin, 2007).

Russia’s national identity formed around its status as a country on the verge of two continents, Europe and Asia, with persistent references to the “alien nations” (Diligensky & Chugrov, 2000, p. 4), especially the Western ones. Russians have always viewed the West “with hatred and love”, as it was expressed in Alexander Blok’s poem, “The Scythians” (Blok, 1961, pp. 24-25). However, the paradigm of Russia’s opposition to the West emerged only in the 19th century in the wake of the Napoleonic wars (Diligensky & Chugrov, 2000, p. 4). The dual attitude towards the West is a perpetuation of the mixed feelings of fear and admiration towards Western military technology that had terrible effects in the wars Russia took part in, mainly the two world wars. In consequence, the perception of the West started to be marked by distrust and envy, precisely a reflection of own anxieties or hopes. In his 1918 manifesto poem, Blok also describes Russia’s fear of being invaded by Western countries with the scope of winning over the abundant Russian natural resources: “Eastwards you cast your eyes for many hundred years, / Greedy for our precious stones and ore, / And longing for the time when with a leer / You’d yell an order and the guns would roar” (Blok, 1961, pp. 24-25). This distrust and fear continue to influence Russia’s view on the West, especially the US and NATO, making it a must to ensure buffer zones between its borders and the *western alien danger/western threat* (Euronews, 2023). This leads to an expansionist, often regarded as imperialistic, foreign policy.

1.2. The Western Point of View – a Necessity

NATO, on the other hand, justifies its existence and development by highlighting the elements of instability that have emerged or perpetrated in the world after the end of

the Cold War: hybrid transnational threats to the national security like terrorist organizations, the rise of rightwing nationalism, instability in Africa and the Middle East, the coercive policy of China and, the most conspicuous one at the moment, Moscow’s hostility towards NATO that is reminiscent of the Cold War years (NATO, 2022). In NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept, it is repeatedly stated that the Russian Federation poses a threat to its Allies, by violating the norms and principles that contributed to a stable and predictable European security order. At the eighth point of the Concept it is described how Russia uses conventional and hybrid means to establish spheres of influence and control over the buffer zone between Russia and NATO:

“The Russian Federation is the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area. It seeks to establish spheres of influence and direct control through coercion, subversion, aggression and annexation. It uses conventional, cyber and hybrid means against us and our partners. Its coercive military posture, rhetoric and proven willingness to use force to pursue its political goals undermine the rules-based international order (NATO Strategic Concept, 2022, p. 4).”

The Russophobia, which characterized the Western perception during the Cold War years, has actually emerged between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries due to Russia’s Orthodox faith, which has sparked a religious and cultural rivalry with the Catholic nations, its thirst for expansion, as well as the civilizational discrepancies that were noted by western, particularly English explorers. Russia’s religious Orthodox confession has separated it from the western Catholic civilization, which started to paint Russia as an “Evil Empire” and an “Enemy of Christendom” (Paul, 2001, p. 107). In addition to that, Muscovy’s campaigns aimed at Europe, especially against Poland, Lithuania, Swedish-held Finland and German cities in Livonia, all Catholic nations, have not only confirmed western fears of a potential opponent of Christianity, but also played up the threat that Russia, now labeled as an imperialistic and aggressive nation, posed for Europe (Paul, 2001, p. 104). Ever since Europeans started to explore Russia, they have described it as a morally and culturally inferior nation, noting some aspects of Russian society that they deemed negative: superstition, drunkenness, and barbaric practices. The Russians themselves have been depicted as uncivilized, backward, ignorant, and highly obedient people, to the extent that they readily accepted slavery and tyranny. This view of Russia has maintained throughout

¹ In Huntington’s approach, Western Europe and North America are part of the Western civilization, while Eastern Europe and Russia belong to the Orthodox civilization.

the past five hundred years, even in times when Russia and the West were allies (Paul, 2001, p. 109).

To American writer and historian Henry Addams, Russia was "an inhuman, unstoppable force" and "a wall of archaic glacier..., fixed..., ancient..., eternal..., and more likely to advance" (Paul, 2001, p. 110). In 1867, Karl Marx affirmed that "the policy of Russia is changeless. Its methods, its tactics, its maneuvers may change, but the polar star of its policy - world domination - is a fixed star" (Paul, 2001, p. 111). In 1870, the Austrian Minister of War, Franz von Kuhn, made a statement that eerily resembles the core of the Truman Doctrine, also known as the containment policy, adopted by the US during the Cold War: "We must weaken this giant and confine him to Asia, otherwise the earth will sooner or later be divided up among two powers, the North Americans and the Russians" (Paul, 2001).

Having said that, after all these years, Russia continues to be perceived this way by the West, precisely as a strange, dangerous and empire-building nation. The western anxiety regarding Russia has nothing to do with the negative views of the communist Soviet Union, but "with the negative views of Russia and the Russian people stretching back half a millennium" and continuing after the end of the Cold War (Paul, 2001, p. 104). It is no surprise that comments such as political commentator George Will's are a common recurrence in today's references to Russia: "expansionism is in Russia's national DNA: the populace has an expansionist gene" (Paul, 2001).

2. The Need for Buffer Zones in an Increasingly Cooperative World

A buffer state is, according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "a usually neutral state lying between two larger potentially rival powers" (Merriam-Webster, 2023). It is a concept tied to the realist theory of the balance of power and it is intended to prevent the outbreak of conflict between the two powers (Morgenthau, 1939). The need for such states varies between the two political and cultural blocs, NATO considering them unnecessary, while Russia deeply relying its relative security on their existence.

2.1. Buffer Zones for Russia – a Vital Component of its Security Strategy

The disintegration of the Soviet Union, which Vladimir Putin famously called "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century" (Putin: Soviet collapse, 2005), ushered in a period of instability, uncertainty, and chaos for the current Russia which, for the first time in its three-century long imperialist history², has seen its power on the global stage begin to wane. In addition to the social and economic problems felt by the Russian society, the foreign and national security policy has been affected by the loss of dominance over territories that served as buffer zones between the USSR and Western Europe during the Cold War. With the loss of about 3 million square kilometers of sovereign territory, Russia was left partially exposed to the West, leaving only Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine as buffer zones in Europe, the latter two taking an increasingly pro-European stand. As the European Union and NATO fill the post-Soviet power vacuum by pledging eventual membership to Russia's closest neighbors - Georgia and Ukraine³ and establishing close partnerships with Azerbaijan, Armenia (2005) and Moldova (2006) (Toucas, 2017), the challenge to maintain regional influence through nonmilitary means grows significantly for Russia. As Western influence now extends to its borders, the Russian Federation finds itself in the position of applying hard power means to secure its protective shield against perceived Western conquest. Ukraine is an essential piece of this *cordon sanitaire* that Russia desperately tries to keep under its complete control. Even the name "Ukraine" has the meaning of "borderland", as suggested by the old Russian word for "border, frontier" – *oukraina* (Ukrainetrek, 2023). This buffer state strategy is a central component of Russian foreign policy, with a tradition that has its roots in the early defense strategies of the Kievan Rus (World History Encyclopedia, 2018).

Russia is the biggest country in the world in terms of territory, having the same surface area as the planet Pluto. It lies on two continents, stretching from northern Europe to central and north-east Asia. The size of Russia, however, is not serendipitous. It is a defense strategy on which the Russian state was built and secured. The

region from Saint Petersburg to Moscow and the Volga region, the nucleus of the Russian nation, is characterized by vast plains (Britannica, 2023), making it devoid of natural barriers and defensive potential. Historically, expansion was the optimum defense strategy for Russian leaders, the creation of buffer zones becoming a priority in Russia's foreign policy ever since independence was regained from the Mongol rule. Catherine the Great once famously said: "I have no way to defend my borders but to extend them" (The Famous People, n.d.). This logic is also reflected in Mackinder's Heartland theory, excellently summarized through the following axiom: *whoever rules Eastern Europe rules Heartland; whoever rules Heartland rules World Island; whoever rules World Island rules the World*. Mackinder perceived Eastern Europe as the perfect buffer zone for Russia, which he called the heart of Eurasia or the Pivot Area and considered it to be the key to world domination (Scott & Alcenat, 2008, pp. 3-4). After the bloody invasions of Russian territories by Napoleonic France (1812) and Nazi Germany (1941), Mackinder's theory materialized by establishing Soviet domination in Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia, with the scope of securing the state. In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, from the Russian perspective, Ukraine is considered a vital buffer zone that needs to be preserved in the light of NATO's eastward expansion.

2.2. Buffer Zones for NATO – a Futile Trifle

NATO, on the other hand, relies on a different deterrence strategy, following a soft power conduct. The organization highly values the treaties and partnerships it establishes with other states with the common aim of ensuring international security. NATO developed three main cooperation programs based on common values, reciprocity, mutual benefit, and mutual respect (NATO, 2022): the Mediterranean Dialogue which includes seven southern Mediterranean countries, Istanbul Cooperation Initiative with four countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and the Partnership for Peace with 20 partner countries and specific structures for the relationships with Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia, and the Partners across the Globe initiative with a range of countries that are not part of NATO's formal partnerships.

This approach could be rooted in the understanding that Europeans have accumulated over the years of

intra-continental conflicts between states. The 1648 Westphalian Treaty was the first all-European peace after the first all-European war, shaping the European vision of the international system. The Treaty of Westphalia demanded protection of peace by the signatory states by combining the principle of sovereignty with the duty to cooperate (Oxford Bibliographies, 2021).

The establishment and diversification of international organizations for political, economic and military cooperation, such as the League of Nations, the UN, NATO, the EU, and the OSCE, are evidence of repeated attempts to create a new form of maintaining the balance of power between states and to achieve national security by ensuring collective security. This collaborative based view of international affairs allows Westerners, especially the Allies, to appreciate and support Ukraine's aspirations to be part of NATO (NATO, 2023). Consequently, it condemns Russia's attempts to restrict this will on the basis of maintaining Ukraine as a mere buffer state in an increasingly cooperative world.

3. International Law and the Sovereignty of Ukraine

State sovereignty "is a term that refers to the legal authority and responsibility of an independent state to govern and regulate its political affairs without foreign interference" (Ballotpedia, 2023). The concept was first introduced in 20th century France by Jean Bodin to assert the power of the French king over the rebellious feudal lords. The Peace of Westphalia, the cornerstone of modern international relations, reinforced the concept of state's sovereignty over its territory as a key concept of the international system.

However, ambiguity about the extent of sovereignty has allowed different interpretations to emerge, of which the preferred one among heads of state defines sovereignty as the unrestricted power to accomplish national interests in the international political system. This interpretation led to a perpetual state of war, thus, during the 20th century, the freedom of action of states began to be limited by the Hague conventions, the Kellogg-Briand Pact and later by the UN Charter, all condemning the use of force as a solution for international controversies and as an instrument for imposing national interests on other states. Moreover, Woodrow Wilson's 1918 Fourteen Points introduced the concept of self-determination as a cardinal principle in international law, which states that people have the right to freely choose their sovereignty and international political status in the

² The Russian Empire, which was founded in 1721, became in 1917 the Soviet Union, the world's largest multinational state, until 1991, when the Russian Federation began to exist.

³ At the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest.

absence of foreign interference, on the basis of equal rights and equality of opportunity (United Nations, n.d.). Despite international regulations, the issue of sovereignty still seems to be understood differently by political actors, as seen in the dispute over Ukraine's sovereignty by the West and Russia.

3.1. Russkiy Mir and the Ukrainian Slavic Brothers - the Russian Take

Russia's history of respecting human rights and international law is ambiguous and fragile (Lukyanova, n.d.). For one thing, Russia's meddling in European political affairs only began to take on significance after the reforms of Peter the Great (1672 – 1725) and the military success in the Great Nordic War (1700 – 1721). Russia's major influence on politics in Europe was never due to its contribution to optimize the interactions between states, but rather to territorial grandeur, military power and imperialist tendencies. At the same time, the principles on which the Euro-Atlantic political order was established were not developed in Russia, but merely adopted out of a desire to better engage in Western politics. During the 19th century, Russian international law theorists played the role of mere translators of Western European international law theses (Mälksoo, 2008, pp. 211-232). Russia's duality of identity, European versus Asian, gave rise to a dilemma that Russia faced throughout its history, which was whether or not to adopt European innovations and culture, or to follow an individual development, culminating in the moment when Peter the Great tried to emancipate Russian civilization in order to artificially synchronize it with the other states of Europe (Lukin, 2003). The adopted forms without substance⁴ stand out in Russia's repetitive actions to evade or flagrantly violate the rules of international relations.

The Russian tradition of international law suffered two major breaks and discontinuities, one in 1700 and the other in 1917, that allow an understanding of the current international legal theory. In the early 18th century, Russia broke out of its previous self-inflicted isolation, joining the European state system and trying to culturally harmonize with the West, especially under Peter the Great's reign. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Russia followed a distinct line of development of the school of international law, choosing to adopt a forthright anti-Western and anti-liberal stance and assert its

distinctiveness, particularly in the 20th century with the rise of the Bolshevik regime. Then the idea of socialist international law emerged, an expression of the Russian Sonderweg (Mälksoo, 2008, pp. 211-232). Its scope coincided with Moscow's spheres of control and interest. This customized approach prioritized the defense of the achievements of socialism in the context of the struggle between the two opposing systems, socialist and capitalist (Butler, 1971, p. 797). The development of this school of thought is rooted in the idea that international law is not universal, but was built to serve the needs and political interests of powerful Western states, as Soviet theorist Yevgeni Korovin expressed: “theory of universal” and “global” international law is nothing more than a myth [...]. What in our times is called international law, encompasses in reality only a circle of a group of European powers and in particular the Great Powers” (Mälksoo, 2008). In present times, Russia's perception is a combination of the two approaches, as its definition of international law is “narrowly based on the UN Charter and Security Council resolutions, as opposed to a “rules-based order” that Russia defines as expansive and promoting the interests of Western powers” (Rembler, 2020, p. 1). Consequently, this dual vision enables Russia to reject commitments regarding human rights and democratic governance (Rembler, 2020).

At the same time, the concept of sovereignty, debated even in the West, seems to also have a customized meaning in Russia. The Kremlin categorically denounces the unipolar world installed after the fall of the Iron Curtain, promoting the idea of a multipolar one which leads to the Russian concept that true sovereignty is possessed by only a few great powers, while the sovereignty of other states is limited (Rembler, 2020). This limited view of sovereignty is closely related to the Russian habit of perceiving the world as divided into spheres of influence, each with a central pole. This habit is a legacy of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union saw itself as a pole in a bipolar world, the leader of the “socialist camp”. As a result, the former republics of the USSR are still considered annexes with limited sovereignty of the Russian Federation, although they gained their independence under full legal conditions. Observing this Russian tendency, researcher Lauri Mälksoo states that throughout history, Moscow has not been accustomed to taking 'international law' into account in its relations with the former Soviet states (Volkerrechtsblog, 2022).

In addition, the concept of social totality associated with the Russian culture, known as *The Russian World or Russkiy Mir*, holds that Russia is not simply

a state, but in fact the protector of Russian civilization both within Russian Federation's borders and abroad (Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, 2022). This worldview implies that related Slavic states ought to subordinate their sovereignty in favour of maintaining pan-Slavic integrity. This is especially valid for Ukraine and Belarus, historically referred to as “Little Russia” and “White Russia”, in contrast with the center of the Russian Empire that was named the “Great Russia”. In this context, after the lengthy historical possession of Ukraine, Russian policymakers have considered it to be within their “natural sphere of influence” (Transatlantic Policy, 2023). This can be inferred from Kremlin's statements over the years. For instance, in 2008 Vladislav Surkov, Putin's then-spokesman, affirmed that “Ukraine is not a state” (Duben, 2020). More recent claims belong to Vladimir Putin himself. In an article published on the 12th of July 2021 on the Kremlin's official website, Putin affirms that Russians and Ukrainians are “one people – a single whole”, while later referring to the history of “Kyivan Rus” – the medieval federation that included territories of modern-day Ukraine and Russia, centered in Kiev, the current capital of Ukraine (Kremlin, 2021).

Furthermore, in an interview for the national television aired on the 25th of December 2022, Putin openly declared Russia's goal—not only culturally, but also territorially “to unite the Russian people” (VOA, 2022) within a single state: “At the core of it all is the policy of our geopolitical opponents aiming to tear apart Russia, the historical Russia. [...] They have always tried to 'divide and conquer'... Our goal is something else — to unite the Russian people” (VOA, 2022). With these declarations and logic that are rooted in historical and cultural aspects, Russia is trying to justify its offensive in Ukraine, while blatantly undermining Kyiv's sovereignty and defying the international law.

3.2. The Principle of Self-Determination and Freedom of Choice - the Western Take

The traumatic bloody history unfolded between European states over the centuries, which coexisted in a perennial state of war until the second half of the 20th century, led Western political actors to find solutions to establish a framework of rules for inter-state interactions in such a manner

that the national and collective security would no longer be harmed. These rules, commonly referred to as international law, are the guidelines of an international system in which every country is equal in terms of sovereignty in foreign political affairs. The *perpetual peace* imagined by Immanuel Kant in 1795 (Kant, 1795) in the form of an international order governed by liberal principles has now taken the shape of a functional system based on cooperation and self-limitation of the power of each European state. The initiative to create such a regulated framework for international relations through the Peace of Westphalia, as well as the initiative to ensure universal peace and collective security by establishing international organizations belonged to the great Western powers, such as Great Britain, France and the United States of America. Also, following a legacy of serfdom, slavery and prohibition of freedom of choice, contemporary European society is built on the acknowledgement of the importance of human rights and freedoms, with three key milestone documents in this regard: The Magna Charta Libertatum (agreed to by King John of England in 1215), The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (adopted in 1789 by France's National Constituent Assembly, during the French Revolution) and The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948).

The Kremlin's desire to pursue its security interests through a delineation of spheres of influence among the major powers (Encke, 2020) poses enormous risks to the Euro-Atlantic security because it challenges and undermines the concepts underpinning the relatively peaceful regional status quo: sovereignty, territorial integrity, and peace and security for states both great and small (Toucas, 2017). Within this frame of reference, respect for Ukraine's independence and sovereignty is necessary to maintain the order of the international system. Ukraine has operated as an independent state for over 30 years after Russia legitimately ceded all sovereign rights over the country, as stated even in Article 1 of the CIS Charter: “The Commonwealth shall be based on sovereign equality of its members. The member states shall be independent and equal subjects of international law” (Charter of the Commonwealth of Independent States, 1993). Given the European tradition of pursuing liberal approaches for internal and external political affairs, the desire of the Ukrainian people to exist independently and to freely choose their democratic future is more than valid.

⁴In reference to Titu Maiorescu's theory of forms without substance.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to highlight the cultural aspects underlying the well debated Ukrainian war, in *stricto sensu*, and the overall everlasting tension between the Western and Russian civilizations, in *extenso*.

The different cultural backgrounds have to do with the distinct historical and ideological developments in the two cradles of civilization: the European and the Eurasian ones. The only truly common element is the mutual fear of each other. The cultural gap that lies between the two polarized worlds makes it difficult to come to a univocal understanding of middle ground

concepts such as the existence and role of NATO in the post-Cold War era, the need to preserve territorial shields between states of an increasingly cooperative world or the extent of sovereignty and the universality of international law.

Acknowledgment of the cultural implications of the conflict aids in a better apprehension of the unfolding situation, of current actions and future intentions of the combatant political leaders, making it easier to forecast more accurately the course of events and to identify solutions to bridge this gap once and for all.

Now it is important to ask ourselves who the real enemy is: the *other ones* or the legacy of reciprocal fear of the other.

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