

**Makarychev, Andrey**

**Multipolarity in Plural:  
Resignification(s), Language Games, and Russia's Multiple  
Identities**

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Andrey Makarychev  
Institute for East European Studies, Freie Universität Berlin

## Introduction

There is a strong temptation to explain Russian foreign policy – with its perpetual accent on state-centrism, national interests, hard security concerns, and ostensible inclination to the spheres of influence politics – as based upon the traditions of *Realpolitik*. The Kremlin's accentuation of the idea of multipolarity, one of the pivotal concepts of the realist thinking, seems to confirm this view. Indeed, it were neorealists who “have predicted a fairly rapid transition to multipolar balancing” (Mastanduno and Kapstein 1999: 12) as a constellation of presumably self-sufficient power centers that either check and balance, or clash with each other.

When the concept of multipolarity was initially introduced in the Russian political vocabulary in mid-1990s, it boiled down to political resistance to the American hegemony by means of redistributing world power in favor of those few actors able to challenge the U.S.-led unilateralism. However, being elevated to the status of dominating policy strategy of Moscow, the idea of multipolarity faces a number of questions raised basically by academic scholars and almost completely ignored by political elites. One of them is the potentially higher volatility and conflictuality of multipolar systems in comparison to unipolar and bipolar ones – an argument which has realist and neorealist pedigree. Thus, some Russian commentators consider that it is the decline of U.S. global power which sharpened a number of regional conflicts across the globe. Arguably, multipolarity may be conducive to further destabilization in the Middle East, strengthening of Iran, military advancement of China and North Korea, etc. (Kulagin 2007: 50) Therefore, “the probability of conflict is high in multipolar systems due to shaky alliances and diffuse power-relations. And it is in multipolar systems that we can historically observe the highest frequency of power-maximizing behaviour” (Toft 2005: 401). In other words, multipolarity presupposes divides and clashes between a number of “poles” which might be stronger than – and possibly inimical to – Russia. “Those Russians who are eager to achieve multipolarity should be ready to face the new rising centers of power”, a Russian author convincingly claims and then continues: “There are absolutely no guarantees that in a world with unbalanced power centers Russia would be able to successfully pursue a policy of balanced equidistance” (Tsymburskiy 1999: 151). Against this background, multipolarity may contain serious obstacles for international institution-building and the concomitant logic of collective action. Besides, the idea of Russia's self-sufficiency which accompanies the realist reading of multipolarity has domestic implications as well: some Russian commentators dub it a “dangerous misconception” conducive to eventual militarization of Russian economy (Aidamirov 2010: 86). Along these lines, multipolarity could be equated with a “conceptual virus” launched by the West for laying foundation for Russia's declining positions in the world (Ananchenko 2001).

The Russian debate on multipolarity reaches far beyond the domain of *Realpolitik*. It is

my thesis in this paper that Russian policy- and opinion-makers, having indeed borrowed the concept of multipolarity from the (neo)realist vocabulary, very often use it in a much broader sense of narratives on Russian identity and subjectivity, and therefore attach to it quite different non-realist meanings, which include issues of identity and non-state actorship. This plurality of interpretations becomes obvious as soon as one unpacks the voluminous layers of Russian literature on international relations which are hardly known to the Western readership and stay beyond the academic analysis of Russian foreign policy which in the West traditionally is based upon quite a limited number of key speakers (president, prime minister, foreign minister, etc.). As I am going to show further, what hides beneath the pretended realist wording of Russian discourse is a much more complicated and variegated – though not always consistent – set of policy imageries. Against this background, the Russian discourse on multipolarity reminds a patchwork of scattered and loosely tied “mental maps” (Kildiushov 2006: 159), based upon – and sustained by – certain visions of the world in the diversity of its actors.

In this paper I am going to trace the discursive trajectories of the multipolarity concept through the prism of the idea of *resignification* as understood by and developed in critical theories where it denotes the transformative practice of deploying terms in previously unexplored or even “unauthorized” contexts. Resignification is mostly used by political agents located at the margins of political structures who wish to change the previous meanings by either expanding the concepts or by including other meanings in them (Schippers 2009: 80-91). This appears to be applicable to Russia which painstakingly makes efforts to avoid marginalization and raise its world profile by promoting and propagating the structural changes in international society to foster greater plurality of power holders and diversification of their resources.

Resignification is closely related to the concept of *language games* that seems to be equally appropriate for my research as well. Following the logic of Wittgenstein, language has neither ontological stability nor unity; consequently, there is no authoritative, determinate collective “we” which would appeal to a mental or metaphysical source of identity or authority, or unveil “literal, uninterpreted truth”. The language games approach claims that each political concept we use under a closer scrutiny decomposes into a series of “pictures” of reality; henceforth, it is “playful and fluid” (Schippers 2009: 49) contexts of political discourses that ought to be studied. It is due to language games that political queries are called to examine particular features of the world which bring into questions the issues of well established identities (Robinson 2009: 12-13). Of course, not all language games translate into strong political voices that explain how to change the world, yet at least some of them provide different “road maps” to the future.

For application of the concept of resignification it is worthwhile to remind that in the West the idea of multipolarity appeared as a key component of academic discourse and developed mainly within the frameworks of (neo)realist discourse. What is peculiar in the Russian interpretations of multipolarity is that it emerged as explicitly political concept, and reached beyond realist discourse by extending to the issues of identity and culture. The time

frames also differ: in the Western world the multipolarity discourse appeared in the midst of the Cold War, while in Russia this concept was reactualized in mid-1990s, and is usually associated with the rise of Evgeniy Primakov to the posts of Russian Foreign Minister and then Prime Minister of Russia.

## 1. Russia's Critique of the Concept of Multipolarity

There are several ways of using the interrelated concepts of resignification and language games for multipolarity studies, all of them illuminating meaningful deviations from the previously dominating *Realpolitik* vision of the world.

*Firstly*, in the realist reading, multipolarity used to be an ostensibly state-centric concept. In its more contemporary and reconsidered visions, it may contain important non-state conceptualizations. One of them is the so called civilization-based approach which, as I will show below, comes to the surface as soon as we unpack the concept of multipolarity. Another example is the idea of Russia as an empire-in-the-making, which – despite its seemingly national-patriotic connotations – represents an attempt to reach beyond purely state-based imageries by adapting the idea of empire to a cosmopolitan milieu (Martyanov 2009: 51-66). For the Russian Left, one of the most important global non-state institutions is World Social Forum (Kagarlitskiy 2006) as an embodiment of the growing plurality of actors within a post-unipolar international society, etc.

*Secondly*, in the traditional realist sense power is mostly material and physical phenomenon (exemplified by nuclear arsenal and energy resources in case of Russia) and does not always need strong social underpinning. Yet some interpretations of multipolarity to be presented in this paper do recognize non-material types of power, since the very concept of the pole, apart from material resources, requires social content that is well addressed in non-realist theories, including social constructivism. It is the multiplicity of social resources that increasingly defines the concept of the pole. In case of Russia, three social factors seem to be of special importance. To be a pole is a matter of recognition by others rather than self-proclamation. Next, to be recognized as a pole, a country is supposed to possess soft power which comes in two versions: as a power of mental attraction of its developmental model, and as a source of normative appeal. Then, to qualify for a role of a pole, a country needs to invest these soft power resources and test them in its neighborhood policies with the view of forming a social milieu that is, on the one hand, existentially comfortable, and, on the other, has to globally manifest the ability to come along with most immediate neighbors.

*Thirdly*, for classical realists multipolarity is a rather pessimistic concept heralding conflicts and instability. In the Russian political parlance, multipolarity, on the contrary, embodies an optimistic worldview, based upon a “just” distribution of power among a variety of poles. In *Realpolitik* terms, multipolarity is basically about maintaining *order*; for a variety of post-realist discourses it is mostly about the *management of diversity* in the world which does not any longer constitute an agglomeration of nation states. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's statement that “the 500-year long domination of the West, based upon universality of its norms, is coming to an end” seems to reveal Russia's eagerness to get adjusted to and even foster the plurality of actors, interests and practices within the emerging international

society (Lavrov 2010). This makes a significant part of Russian discourse quite compatible with those critical theories that make strong emphasis on the issues of “hybridity” and “polivocality” in international relations (Lenz and Dallmann 2007: 5). “The world of singularities” and “the plurality of beginnings as a ‘world-forming’ experience” (to borrow a few words from Jean–Luc Nancy) repudiate the world of states and focus on “human beings, cultures and nations” as bearers of diversity and plurality in international society. Against this background, Moscow’s verbal rejection of the balance-of-power language may testify to Russia’s wish to rhetorically break with the Cold War legacy for the sake of voicing “democratic disagreement” against solidarist versions of a West-based “general will” (Schwartz 1995: 10).

The interpretation of multipolarity as diversity management can be instrumental in unveiling its stark dissimilarity with other discursive strategies employed by the Kremlin, first of all with President Medvedev’s proposal on a new Euro-Atlantic security architecture with its emphasis on a unified institutional space cemented by common rules and joint procedures of collective security building, as opposed to its regional fragmentation and differentiation. In other words, regionalization of security landscape – quite an expectable corollary of multipolarization – is hardly compatible with a liberal-idealistic scenario of normative coherence “from Vancouver to Vladivostok”. This tension between two different approaches not only reflects the conceptual gap between pluralist and solidarist types of international society. It also may shed some light on the nature of Russia’s disagreements and miscommunication with the West which are, of course, not reducible to a simplistic contradistinction between Russian sympathies to a pluralist political milieu, on the one hand, and Euro-American determination to project Western norms on a global scale, on the other. Since both Russia and the West may use both pluralist and solidarist strategies, it is quite imaginable that in some situations (as, for example, in the post-Soviet era) it is the West that prefers a more pluralist international environment, while Russia may sympathize with unitarist / solidarist scenarios.

*Fourthly*, most of the neorealist literature is rather skeptical about the post-Cold War prospects of NATO-based security infrastructure. Should Russia strongly adhere to the realist interpretation of international order, it won’t keep demonizing NATO; on the contrary, it would have joined the chorus of those realist voices that predicted the eventual dissociation of the North Atlantic alliance in the absence of the Soviet Union. It was realists who “expected Western order to crumble in the face of declining American power capabilities” (Deudney and Ikenberry 1999: 124). Yet for many Russian supporters of multipolarity NATO still is the most powerful instrument of the U.S. hegemony which tends to further expand to the detriment of “Russian interest”.

*Fifthly*, Russia consistently attacks one of the key preconditions of the realist mindset – the idea of anarchy which the Kremlin seeks to overcome and substitute with a more institutionalized and inclusive type of relations, as exemplified by Medvedev’s proposal on the new security architecture in Europe. Anarchy appears to be the pivotal structural problem for those Russian authors who make sense of multipolarity as a structural condition laying foundation for a greater coordination of major powers’ policies, either in the form of a new “concert”, or within the framework of global governance.

*Sixthly*, for realism the social world can be divided into false and true dispositions (Chernoff 2002: 192), which seems to inspire its Russian followers to succumb to almost ritualistic references to “real processes”, “objective interests”, and “genuine state of affairs”, as divorced from “ideological” and “politicized” approaches. Therefore, the “correspondence to reality” appears to be the key realist argument (Monteiro and Ruby 2009: 31). Thus, having claimed that the unipolar world ceased to exist right after August 2008, as a result of Russia’s military victory over Georgia, Russia’s Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, declared the “reality” of multipolar world as a *fait accompli*. Being initially conceived as an academic concept, multipolarity thus has gradually transformed to almost a “fact” of the being, if not an axiom that needs neither proofs nor further problematization. This type of simplistic reasoning corresponds to the realist tradition which rests upon “an ontological position that claims that objects exist even if no one is conscious of them or experiences them” (Jeffrey 2008: 55). The basic problem with this approach is that it leaves unanswered the question of how we can know for sure that a certain concept is “true” or “real” (Wendt 1999: 59). The realist approach can only be feasible if based upon the presupposition of the ontological existence of a presumably all-knowledgeable subject potentially able to distinguish “real-life processes” from “virtual” or faked. The Russian state sometimes indeed tends to think of itself as this kind of “super-subject” and, consequently, the source of hegemonic discourse.

Yet some voices in Russian academia argue that multipolarity does not constitute an established reality (Martynov 2009) – perhaps, the same way as unipolarity didn’t do so either. Following the vocabulary of Alexander Wendt, multipolarity can be better seen as an example of “social systems” or “social kinds” (Wendt 1999: 376) which give meaning to ideas. Therefore, one may presume that there might be more than one model of multipolarity that may either correlate or compete with each other – hence the idea of “multipolarity in plural” which gave the name to this paper. Indeed, “reality might not be working according to one logic, (and there is – A.M.) the possibility of the existence of more than one truth simultaneously” (Sarvary 2001: 381). Hence, there may be “simultaneously existing social realities where it might not be possible to claim that one is superior to the other” (Sarvary 2001: 381), and the plurality of interpretations of reality translates in multiplicity of Russia’s foreign policy role identities that are hardly describable in the traditional for realism terms of “status quo” and “imperial” powers (Wolfers 1962: 84). Russia may display both “imperial” and “status quo” characteristics simultaneously, a situation which seems to be consonant with the constructivist understanding of poles as not ‘given’ subjects but constantly constructed in inter-subjective “games of recognition”.

Yet Russia’s critique of unipolarity, in spite of its ubiquity, was never coherent and conclusive, and consists of a collection of arguments loosely tied together. *One* of them is Russia’s deplorable exclusion from the U.S.-led world order. What the West baptized a “new international community” turned – in the Russian eyes – to a club-like “consolidation of well developed democracies” (Bogaturov 1999: 28) that claimed to incarnate an allegedly indisputable perspective for the entire mankind. Consequently, all “non-Western” countries were expected to catch up with the Western core under the guise of the “expansion of democracy” concept. The NATO intervention in the Balkans, in the minds of most Russian analysts and policymakers, gave a perfect example of the imposition of Western rules on neighboring territories.

The *second* argument against unipolarity, as exposed by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, points to its potentially divisive nature ending up with the “bloc-based approaches” (Medvedev 2008a) which Russia attributes to the Cold War nefarious heritage. In result, unipolar domination is conducive to the formation of alternative groups of allied states aimed to resist the domination of the core power(s) – a situation which might be dubbed “contested unipolarity” (Halliday 2009: 39).

A *third* argument points to the ability of the unchecked U.S. global power to manipulate the policies of other countries regardless of their size, from Georgia to Russia. In line with the tenets of conspiracy theory, a Russian author deems that it was due to the United States skillful strategy that Russia was left with no other choice in the Caucasus than to go to war against Georgia and then recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia. According to this reasoning, the most negative effects of the August 2008 war for Russia were envisioned by the U.S., including Moscow’s military involvement in the conflict with Tbilisi and consequent diplomatic isolation due to the recognition of the two break-away territories (Manoilo 2009: 91-112). Thus, in this (mis)interpretation, the alleged unipolarity is equivalential to Russia’s loss of its own subjectivity and its degradation to the role of an object for external manipulations.

Yet there is another argument against unipolarity that does not seem to be in harmony with any of the three critical points introduced above, since it deduces the drawbacks of unipolarity not from the undue strength of the United States but rather from the inability of this country to properly perform its leadership functions due to lack of resources (Maksymychev 2000: 55). Therefore, the main trouble stems not from America’s power, but on the contrary – from its inherent weakness and incapability to achieve its aims in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and other crisis-laden hot points. In line with this argument, unipolarity is blamed for the threats to international security from the part of the U.S. satellites, above all Georgia (Gromyko 2009: 19-34). This argument may signify two different things – both the inability of the United States to control the behaviour of its “junior partners” and the U.S. policy of instigating Russia’s neighbours to dangerous moves. In both cases the logical link between Tbilisi’s policies in South Ossetia and the malign structural effects of unipolarity is not evident. It is equally highly questionable that a multipolar structure might be able to rule out outbursts of violence in the Caucasus and prevent local elites from using force against their immediate neighbours.

However, it was the critique of unipolarity that justified, in one way or another, Russian policymakers’ search for an alternative model of international society, based on the new subjectivities which non-Western countries are keen to acquire. As an alternative to the West-based systemic unity, Russia expresses much more sympathy to what Alexei Bogaturov dubbed “a conglomerate of enclaves”, which cooperate with each other and are disinclined to imitate the policies of the West. This vision very much corresponds to the idea of multipolarity which gains increasing currency in the Kremlin yet by no means seems to be a uniform policy concept. It rather has to be viewed as a contested term, which represents a playground for contention between its realist version (mostly embraced by political elites) and more nuanced and variegated meanings originated from academic milieu.

At first glance, Russia does indeed look like a predominantly realist type of power, which “faces hard yet slightly camouflaged challenge formulated in the categories of political realism” where force and national interests predetermine the policies of other countries (Alexeeva 1997: 59). Russia’s realist approaches are grounded in two conceptual departures – rationalism and pragmatism, which seem to be at the core of the Putin-Medvedev (post) political discourse. The Russian version of rationalism might be understood as a type of power maximization through mostly economic and financial means, and in this sense it has to be distinguished from the imperial model of foreign policy based upon what might be dubbed a “grand design” to be

implemented at any cost. Pragmatism, in its turn, contains two interrelated presuppositions: the high probability and even desirability of unilateral actions in defense of national interests skipping the existing institutional structures (which seems to be very close to the concept known as “opportunistic behavior” in theories of institutionalism), and the appeal to Russia’s partners to build their policies upon the already existing constellation of forces and the political relations stemming from it.

In forging relations with other countries, the Russian state gives priority to security and geopolitics, and doesn’t hide its sympathies to the Westphalian principles of international relations. In a typical realist way of thinking, force is an important argument for Russia (according to the Kremlin logics, in August 2008 Mikhail Saakashvili “and those behind him” ventured to test the Russian power capabilities). The realist arguments have dominated Putin’s famous speech in Munich in February 2007 where he exposed a highly securitized vision of Russian foreign policy, grounded in the resistance to the expansion of the NATO military infrastructure to the Russian western borders. The longing for a realist type of foreign policy is to a large extent predicated on Russia’s description of the United States as a type of actor that relies itself upon *Realpolitik* prescriptions (Soloviev 2003: 50). In particular, NATO was accused – also in line with the realist thinking – of forming a group of small “frontier states” as a justification of the alliance’s necessity. It is the United States that skillfully fuels most of low intensity conflicts in today’s world, a Russian political analyst deems (Shakleina 2008: 5), while another one claims that “pushing Georgia and Ukraine to NATO, the deployment of anti-missile system in countries of Eastern-Central Europe, and the plans for transporting the Caspian oil skipping Russia are all links of one single chain” (Tsygankov 2008: 44). Russian realism, declaring its commitment to focus on “real” facts and “objective” matters, may be seen as a bulwark against re-ideologization of international relations on the basis of the Western democracy discourse that the Kremlin considers detrimental for Russia. Russian realists thus deny the hegemony of liberal – perhaps, as any other ideological – values, and ground their approaches in “a Hobbesian understanding of the world” politics (Lo 2006: 61-62), with multilateral institutions being little more than vehicles by which powerful states establish the rules and norms of action. For them, the participation in international institutions does nothing to mitigate the anarchical nature of world politics, since states are always interested in pursuing either power or survival through self-help (Schneider and Weitsman 1999: 93-110).

Yet the Kremlin’s inclination to a *Realpolitik* type of thinking could be problematic in situations that require a different – and usually more sophisticated – set of worldviews and policy instruments. This is most evident in Russia’s self-positioning within a multipolar type of international society. In the traditions of the *Realpolitik* thinking, Russia mostly applies two kinds of material resources, financial instruments (from credits to gas prices) and force (from stationing troops in the neighboring countries to military operation in Georgia in August 2008), while investing much less efforts and expertise or sometimes even leaving aside what might be called soft power instruments.

## 2. Multipolarity Unpacked

There is an important methodological note that needs to be addressed at this point. One of the research puzzles that the concept of multipolarity brings about lies in its double nature, and this ambiguity is quite noticeable in the Russian discourse. On the one hand, it would be quite legitimate to view multipolarity as a structural phenomenon in a sense that it is destined to come into being and function automatically, as a supposedly natural result of

either “objective” geopolitical dynamics or not less “objective” internal processes within major world powers that diminish the appeal for superpowerness (Radzikhovskiy 2009). Following the English School, multipolarity can be considered as a type of international society (Bull 2002: 31) embodied in certain institutions.

Yet on the other hand, for some Russian IR specialists multipolarity is the name for Russia’s long-term strategy, i.e. something which needs to be promoted and therefore requires political investments and agents’ policies. Thus, some forms of multilateralism (like BRICS, for example) are seen as outcomes of conscious effort of a group of states eager to reify the prospects of a multipolar world.

This double-faced nature of the concept of multipolarity partly explains the proliferation of its different interpretations. I will start the “unpacking” of this concept on a structural level by proposing a menu of at least six patterns of multipolarity presented in the table below. It is formed on the basis of two kinds of distinction that appear to be crucial for my analysis, namely between a) interest-based and normative structures, and b) between state-centric structures and those reaching beyond the state and thus involving a wider gamut of actors. Of course, some authors deem that the concept of multipolarity makes sense only within the context of relations between nation states, while “in a system where the actorship of non-state participants is acknowledged, the notion of multipolarity is devoid of significance” (Agafontsev 2009: 28), yet it is my thesis that non-state actorship is an important element of multipolar arrangements.

It is within the four resulting blocks that different – yet very much imbricated – models of multipolarity can be located.

|                                  | <b><i>Interest-based structures</i></b>            | <b><i>Normative structures</i></b> |
|----------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| <i>State-centered structures</i> | 1A: Balance of power<br>1B: Great power management | 2: “Democratic multipolarity”      |
| « <i>State Plus</i> » structures | 3A: Polycentrism<br>3B: Multi-regionalism          | 4: Multiplicity of civilizations   |
|                                  |  |                                    |

Four important comments to this table need to be furnished. *First*, it is only box 1 – with two variations, 1A and 1B – that neatly corresponds to the realist vision of multipolarity. *Structurally*, both balance of power and great power management are, according to Headley Bull’s vocabulary, institutions of international society. As *political strategies*, both expect to raise Russia’s international role without any serious domestic transformations, and both are grounded in Russia’s hidden imitation of the major Western powers. As a telling linguistic evidence, the metaphor of “chess-board” known for its connotations with Brzezinski’s famous book can be found in Russian realist discourse, to be deciphered as the acceptance of the “American” rules of the game and an attempt to steer a winning strategy (Semedov 2007: 57). The three other table cells are domains of modified (“re-signified”) versions of multipolarity that either contain more explicit normative accents (democracy- or civilization-grounded) or incorporate actors other than states (polycentrism and multi-regionalism), or both.

*Second*, four concepts out of six in this table could be simultaneously applicable to both structures and agents’ policies – namely, balance of power, great power management,

multi-regionalism, and “democratic multipolarity”. This means that the institutional reification of each of these mental/conceptual structures directly depends on (and presupposes as the condition of their operation) policies of major actors. Consequently, only the two remaining concepts may be viewed as structures in Waltzian sense, as “abstractions” “free of the attributes and the interactions of units” (Waltz 1983: 80). Indeed, both polycentrism and plurality of civilizations are regarded by their adherents as immanent (perhaps inevitable) law-like characteristics of the socio-political world in its “natural” – comparable with the physical world – multiplicity, and in this sense do not necessarily require specific actors’ strategies to reify each of them. This is, of course, not to say that Russia does not react to the eventuality of these structural models, but this reaction rather takes the form of adaptation or accommodation than a pro-active strategy.

*Third*, there are at least three concepts which are part of multipolarity debate but are applicable for describing chiefly states’ policies, i.e. are usable on the agent level – namely, unilateralism, multilateralism and multi-vectorness. They do not necessarily correspond to a certain type of multipolarity (thus, multilateralism is one of policies inherent in both multi-regional and polycentric structures of international society) and therefore are not mentioned in the table above. Yet I will often resort to these three concepts while addressing the issues of Russia’s actorship within the framework of some of the structural models of multipolarity.

*Fourth*, some of these ideal type models could be quite compatible with each other, while others certainly are in conflict. The identification of these models and strategies they entail does not necessarily imply the existence of certain groups to promote and stay behind each of them. This typology of scenarios is sustained by different articulations of Russia’s role identities in a multipolar world, yet neither of them “belongs” to any specific political grouping. Neither of scenarios/strategies has its natural “bearers”; the same group may simultaneously adhere to two or more strategies thus demonstrating high volatility of Russia’s role identities.

### **3. Power Balancing: Back to Realpolitik?**

The balance-of-power interpretation of multipolarity, though officially repudiated by Russian diplomacy as dangerously obsolete, is still part of Russian foreign policy and security thinking. The victorious operation against Georgia in August 2008 and the announcement of Russia’s zones of “special interest” strengthened the appeal of balance-of-power approach. As a Russian scholar argues, the multipolar system of international relations can be stable only under the condition of maintenance of some kind of balance of power between great powers (Batiuk 2006) – a statement that for most of his European colleagues would be reminiscent of European diplomacy of 19<sup>th</sup> century.

As I have mentioned earlier, one has to distinguish between two dimensions of balance of power. On the one hand, in accordance with Headley Bull’s logic, as one of institutions of international society, it possesses structural characteristics, and thus focuses rather on institutional results of a process, than on the attainment of goals being pursued by particular state actors. On the other hand, balance of power can be connoted with specific policy strategies of major international actors (Sheehan 1996: 142) that invest their resources in making this structure functional.

From *structural perspective*, the balance-of-power vision reactualizes the practices of the Cold War which, as the Russian proponents of this approach argue, was never finished. This vision recognizes the reality of the West as a U.S.-led collective political subject whose hegemony has to be thwarted, since the United States, according to this logic, are destined to continuously reproduce the relations of enmity with the non-Western world. There were those in Russian elites who in the immediate aftermath of the downfall of the Soviet Union anticipated that the post-Cold War order would evolve to a milder (i.e. less conflictual) version of bipolarity (Bazhanov and Bazhanova 2008: 24), yet as soon as idealism and naivety of these expectations became obvious, the formation of a more equitable, i.e. to be based on several power holders to contain and balance each other, world system turned into the key priority for the Kremlin diplomacy. Yet this blueprint could be operational only under two chief conditions: power has to be conceptualized as a) an instrument that states practically apply for the sake of their interests, and b) as a rather homogeneous resource which presumably can be more or less equally distributed among a group of key holders (Gadzhiev 1998: 359) for the sake of global stability. These presumptions however can be challenged from at least three related perspectives.

One counter-argument is that power is not a resource which has a common denominator, and thus can't be divided or transferred from one unit to another; it always comes in a variety of forms. "What counts as power depends on definitions of the situation" (Wendt 1999: 331), one may say. Thus, the plurality of power holders may not be a result of the concerted distribution of power among a certain number of states but rather a consequence of the immanent plurality of power resources as such. Consequently, centers of power are principally dispersed: economic, financial, political, military, cultural centers may co-exist with each other without merging, each one having its own operational and functional spheres. This is what partly was captured by former Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov's reference to "real multipolarity" as a co-existence of plurality of international systems each one grounded in a particular type of resources and influences, both material and ideational (Ivanov 2004-2005: 11)

Therefore, power is by no means a homogeneous resource, and there are many types of it. For instance, poles of economic growth might not coincide with poles of military power, etc. Thus, North Korea, being deprived of either economic or political might, does possess certain military capabilities; Vatican, having no military resources, is a source of strong spiritual and religious appeal for the world Catholic community; Switzerland, without any military resources, is definitely one of key centers of financial power in the world. The Nordic countries, lacking meaningful military resources, do compensate their absence with a powerful normative appeal.

Against this background, the question of what kind of power is Russia seems to be of particular interest. Even patriotically-minded authors recognize that Russia is short of economic and military components of power, and what rests is its political (membership in Security Council), geopolitical (huge territory) and energy resources (Konopatov 2007: 13-20). In the normative battlefield, however, Russia's credentials are much poorer, which explains a lot in the nature of communicative disconnections between the Kremlin and its Western partners. Even the most pragmatic type of relationship – as between Moscow and Berlin – may be complicated, if not challenged, by the interventions of normative matters, as

nicely epitomized by the revoke of the Quadriga Prize award to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in summer 2011.

Another argument would be more of Foucauldian nature, arguing that power is something that *produces* agents but *does not belong* to them. Power is not agents' possession but rather a web of relations that forms/makes/constructs social subjects. It can mean that different patterns of multipolarity are grounded in the re-activation and instrumentalization of various identity resources which might give different effects. In other words, a Russia of balance-of-power thinking and a Russia committed to the polycentric worldview are two different international identities, with different types of international subjectivity inherent in each of them.

Finally, one more counter-argument points to the nature of the poles and their configuration which is by no means static but rather flexible (Torkunov 2006: 26) and may include cultural, ethnic and religious identities as well. In this light, balance of power can be viewed not as "a fixed reality, but an approach subject to the effects of the evolution of political thought and, indeed, of broader cultural developments" (Sheehan 1996: 142).

From a *policy strategy perspective*, balance of power is presumed upon the ability of sovereign powers to take political decisions of their own, a perspective rather close to the Schmittian concept of pluriverse (Filippov 2004: 90). Thus, the implementation of balance of power as policy strategy is directly conditioned upon the maintenance of sovereignty – a key concept for Russian self-determination in the world. Consequently, the reverse side of power balancing is unilateralism, grounded in the logic of sovereign decisions which Russia favors itself and expects from other most powerful countries as well. President Medvedev's multiple suggestions that the Western governments need to be pragmatic and guided by their own "genuine interests" (Medvedev 2008b) fit, by and large, into the decisionist philosophy. As a "United Russia" party functionary presumed, within the multipolar society "each country is supposed to represent its own interests, instead of delegating them to EU, NATO and other international organizations" (Rossiiskiy konservatizm... 2009: 36). This seemingly anti-institutional and anti-normative utterance is a blunt declaration of mistrust to those forms of international cooperation that entail a dispersal of sovereignty understood by Moscow as a right to control territories rather than as responsibility to population.

Yet, as I have noted earlier, the idea of balancing presupposes a certain degree of conflictuality between different poles (Strategia-2020 2008: 23), which made Dmitri Trenin call the balance-of-power policy "a continuation of the Cold War inertia, which strengthens the arguments of those who would like to see Russia returning to the Soviet policy pathways" (Trenin 2001: 54). Besides, the implementation of this model would ultimately result in Russia's submission to China as its junior partner and thus harm Russia's international subjectivity. It is indicative that in the Russian official discourse China has never featured among the powers that Russia might wish to balance, which reveals a predominantly anti-Western profile of the balance-of-power concept.

It is from here that another serious trouble for this concept emerges. On the one hand, the balancing strategy indeed presupposes Russia's association with anti-Western identities shaped by post-colonial type of discourse that emanates from peripheral or semi-peripheral actors. On the other hand, in addressing the most pressing security issues Russia tends to appeal to – and prefers to deal with – the leaders of the West. These two dispositions may

not easily sit together, since a Russia sympathetic with anti-Western sentiments will most likely be perceived by United States and EU as their external Other rather than recognized as part of Europe.

One may agree that the balance-of-power type of multipolarity “is a direct and unequivocal alternative to globalization” (Fiodorov 1999: 19) since it may foster a more regionalized political and security scenery by forging “regional sub-balances” (in the Mediterranean basin, the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea regions, and so forth). The linkage between balance of power and multi-regionalism is not, of course, straightforward, yet it may have some parallels with Buzan and Waever’s theory of “regional security complexes” whose existence is preconditioned by the locally-based durable patterns of securitization. The prospects of regionalization of the balance of power type of relationship raise at least two critical points. *Structurally*, the fragmentation of the international society into regional power balancing systems contrasts quite sharply with a hypothetically unified Euro-Atlantic “security space”, as imagined in Medvedev’s proposals on “new security architecture”. As seen from the *agency perspective*, balancing approaches give at least two negative effects. On the one hand, the policy of keeping regional sub-balances of power may immobilize Russian diplomacy which is perceived as being aimed not at finding political solutions to regional conflicts but at preserving uncertain status quo. This is very much so in the Caucasus where Russian tactics of balancing between Armenia and Azerbaijan (and, in a wider sense, between the broader coalitions of forces behind each of the two parties) gives no practical results for resolving the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. On the other hand, as soon as Russia more explicitly positions itself as a hegemon surrounded by satellite states, most of its post-Soviet neighbours “opt for the most natural kind of behaviour under the circumstances: they all have become the classical balancers” (Torbakov 2011: 11).

#### 4. The Great Powers Management: an Oligarchic Type of Multipolarity?

Great power management (GPM), along with balance of power, was considered by Headley Bull as an institution based on strongest actors. It is in this sense that it can be considered an oligarchic type of international society. Yet GPM may have different resonance in Russian discourse. One is of geopolitical background: it affirms the utility of various “axes” and “triangles” (or other geometric figures) that ought to link Russia to the strongest international actors. In its most radical version – adduced by Alexander Dugin – the Russian government is urged to make restitution of Kaliningrad and the Kuril Islands in exchange for privileged relations with, respectively, Germany and Japan.

Another – and much more widely spread – approach to GPM denotes a pragmatically de-politicized type of bargaining between the world poles. Against this backdrop, historical models of GPM (like, for instance, the Vienna Congress system) are depicted as a counter-variant to the Bismarck-style Realpolitik (Mayorov 2010: 7-8). Nowadays, perhaps, the NATO-Russia relationship could exemplify this model of multipolarity. Arguably, the Georgia war, despite the seemingly deep cleavages between Russia and major Western governments it provoked, fostered some elements of GPM. The Russia – NATO relations which reached

their peak of securitization in August 2008, have gradually evolved into a more business-as-usual type of bargaining with concessions from both sides. Under the Obama administration the US reconsidered the deployment of anti-missile systems in Poland and Czech Republic and decreased its involvement in countries that Russia includes in the sphere of its interest, NATO has frozen the accession process of Georgia and Ukraine; while Russia increased its involvement in the operation in Afghanistan and pledged to cooperate against Somalia pirates, which corroborates Alexander Astrov's prediction that GPM tends to evolve into a police-type administering of conflicts (Astrov 2011: 1-24). Some of Russian authors are equally sympathetic to the prospects of "dividing and conjugating" Russian and U.S. policies in CIS area, with special emphasis on joint conflict management and anti-narcotic measures (Riurikov 2010: 29-34).

Another prototype of GPM is the partnership between EU and Russia. As a result of the Medvedev – Sarkozy talks of August 2008, Russia has officially recognized EU as a legitimate security actor in its "near abroad" area. As INSOR (Moscow-based Institute for Contemporary Development) argued, the growth of EU influence worldwide seems to be quite in line with the idea of multipolarity, which constitutes a fertile soil for Russia's strategic partnership with EU in such spheres as the formation of common energy space, and joint markets for transportation and technology transfer (Yurgens 2008: 26).

In its most radical version GPM may be close to what a Russian scholar called "a policy of responsible colonialism", meaning by this metaphor a de-facto control from the part of EU, US and Russia over those regions which represent security challenges for them (including terrorism, migration, human trafficking, etc.) (Remizov 2011). Yet GPM does not seem to be a workable institution without purely political agreements between the key "stakeholders". Political momentum is necessarily a condition for more or less successful instances of cooperation between great powers, either in the form of external securitization of threats (piracy, drug trafficking, etc.), or as a political deal (Russia's support of the US in its war on terror after September 11 was implicitly conditioned by American support of Russian policies in North Caucasus) (Khalidov 2007: 6-15). The political dimension of the EU-Russian partnership consists in preventing Russia from pursuing a strategy of balancing the West through aligning with non-Western governments, including China (Vaquer i Fanes 2010: 20). When political momentum is weak and the major actors pretend operating from purely technical positions, the conflict is doomed to prevail over cooperative approaches. The ineffectiveness of the Minsk group is perhaps an illustration of great powers' inability to jointly manage a particular conflict in the absence of political wills.

For the Kremlin the political significance of the GPM model is manifested in the prospect of Russia's acceptance as an equal power by the constitutive members of international society. In the Russian eyes, GPM could serve as a proof for Russia's raising importance for the Western countries with whom Moscow is ready to negotiate the conditions of cooperation. Thus, Russia is not against EU or NATO enlargement in principle – it only dislikes the expansion of these institutions in the immediate proximity to Russia's borders, which makes clear that Russian interests are ostensibly regional, not global. As far as in 1994, after the inception of the Bosnian crisis, one of Russian experts nicely expressed Russia's attitude to the West presuming that Moscow could have supported the Western intervention in the Balkans under two conditions – a) NATO should stop using military force

without prior consultations with Moscow, and b) Russia has to be eventually admitted to NATO. What is hidden between the lines in this utterance is that Moscow is not against applying military force in principle – it wishes to either be consulted with, or even participate in interventions on behalf of international society (Parkhalina 1994). It is very much telling in this regard that in 2011 Russian diplomats did not rule out the co-participation of Russian troops in a hypothetical land operation in Libya, should the UN Security Council authorize such a possibility.

Reaching political agreement between great powers may be thinkable on bilateral level, but much more serious problems arise as soon as it comes to multilateral formats that, ideally, have to – in contrast to the historical connotations of this term – engage non-Western states as well. Another troublesome aspect of the GPM implementation is the reaction from non-great-powers. The orientation of the Russian diplomacy to dealing predominantly with major powers may have its repercussions for Moscow's relations with post-Soviet countries that will inevitably feel either ignored or doomed to play the unfortunate roles of Russia's "junior partners".

Perhaps, an alternative to GPM could be a sort of "regional powers management" concept. In many respects, Turkey and Iran – which are not parts of either BRICS or SCO – are more important for Russia than Brazil or even India. It is with countries like Turkey and Iran that Russia has to find a common language in its regional policies in the Caucasus, Black Sea and Caspian Sea regions.

### ***Comparing the Two Models***

What unites the balance-of-power and great-power-management models of multipolarity is not only their embeddedness in a realist theorizing, but also their potential openness to accepting imperial subjectivities. There is indeed a problem of great power identities evolving in – or gravitating to – imperial ones. Arguably, the concept of empire can be applied for characterization of some aspects of today's Russia foreign policy (Obran 2008), and in the West many believe that Russia is only hiding its allegedly irremovable imperial nature and concomitant ambitions in pseudo-normative rhetoric.

Russia's self-representations through the concept of empire are closely connected to European and American discourses on their presumably imperial identities (Aalto 2004). As Viacheslav Morozov argues, the EU's subjectivity encompasses a strong "imperial moment", which coincided with the appearance of more accentuated transformation in the direction of "sovereign territorial state" model (Morozov 2008). Valery Tishkov adds to this that major European countries "for quite a long time retained their imperial qualities but in the meantime were gradually becoming egalitarian nation states" (Tishkov 2007: 25).

The imperial inclinations of the US and EU may be perceived as challenges to Russia, but nevertheless the Russian role identities are constructed through some kind of reference to the empire-building practices of Russia's alleged competitors. In many cases, Russia ventured to imitate the U.S. international behaviour. As Russian authors put it, the Kremlin "read the American verbal message as a certain semiotic code and then adapted it to its own needs" (Zevelev and Troitskiy 2006: 33). The Moscow political elite, as frankly admitted by a Russian analyst, all throughout 1990s had "looked at the United States with a mixed feeling of indignation and admiration. Even illegitimate actions in defense of the U.S. own interests

were perceived (in Moscow. – A.M.) as examples to be followed and reproduced by Russia itself: if Washington does so, why Russia can't?" (Oznobischev 2008: 125). One may agree that most of the time Russia was – though tacitly – fascinated with the United States as a successful country relying upon force without much of reflections about following the norms and avoiding repercussions. Arguably, Russia's inclination to imitate the American imperial conduct reveals Russia's own proclivity to imperial greatpowerness (Kara-Murza 1996: 32). In particular, Anatoly Chubais' articulation of the liberal empire thesis appears to echo "the Bush administration's grand strategy that may be imperial, but it aims at creating liberal, rather than autocratic or totalitarian, governance" (Rhodes 2003: 137). This is exactly how Russia is perceived by some of its neighbours – as a less successful copy of the United States (Kizima 2009: 58).

This is also true with regard to Europe. One of conservative voices in Russia presumes that the formation of the EU subjectivity in an imperial form is a feasible perspective for the future, since the EU potentially has its own ambitions, interests, and ideology that will push it to take certain actions of its own (Kholmogorov 2002). This trajectory could be beneficial for Russia since it might be instrumental in balancing the U.S. geopolitical preponderance. As a Russian author reports, "should a new, Anglo-Saxon empire take its shape, Russia, instead of resisting, should have busy itself with recreating its own empire" (Lurie 2003-2004: 107). This "oligarchic" type of multipolar international society seems to be in some dissonance with the idea of "democratic multipolarity" to be discussed in the next section.

## 5. "Democratic Multipolarity" and Russia's Normative Offensive

The next perspective of multipolarity imbues some normative flavor to it by linking it with democracy. Normative aspects of multipolarity – in particular, in its balance-of-power version – were noticeable even in realist literature in at least two aspects. *First*, the resort to domestic analogy can draw parallels between the principle of checks and balances as a key institutional tool for democratic government, on the one hand, and the balancing between competing states that has deterring effects. *Second*, for many realists, the goals of democracy, along with justice and equality, can be "stabilized only by balance of power among states" (Cerny 2010: 64).

Yet Russia's "normative offensive" with the issue of "international democracy" at its core is certainly an explicitly ideological move, since it requires the tacit acknowledgement of undemocratic nature of the West, and its dethroning from the global normative pedestal. In his "Munich speech" ex-President Putin lambasted the American concept of unipolar world as presumed upon "one single center of power", a situation that, arguably, "has nothing to do with democracy". Sergei Lavrov went as far as to promote Russia as "a territory of freedom" in international society due to its resolution to openly raise a set of issues that earlier were either ignored or silenced. All this made a group of Russian authors believe that Russia and United States are in a state of normative contest over the concept of democracy (Lebedev and Kireev 2008: 67-72) – a situation that politically reactualizes the legacy of the Cold War

ideological competition, yet academically can be however expressed in a more neutral categories of a conflict between pluralist and solidarist versions of international society.

Experimentally exploring the democratic potential of international pluralism as embodied in the concept of multipolarity, Russian leaders have to project the language traditionally suited for domestic purposes into the domain of international politics. In doing so they imply that it is multipolarity that fosters the development of democratic institutions in international arena; in other words, *all* types of multipolarity are believed to be equivalent to international democracy. In this reading democracy appears to be void of political meanings and reduced to the mere multiplicity of sovereign states, regardless of the internal nature of their political regimes. Not incidentally, Russia recurses to the “democratic multipolarity” rhetoric basically in communication with countries like China, Belarus, Iran, Venezuela, India, Cuba and others, most of them lacking convincing record of domestic democratic rule. “Democratic multipolarity”, understood as a simple redistribution of the alleged “world power” among several poles of force, makes the issues of liberty, free competition and other core elements of democracy either irrelevant or equally acceptable along with authoritarianism, totalitarianism, non-market economy, etc. (Fiodorov 1999: 21)

.Yet the explanation of international democracy through the concept of multipolarity can be questioned by Russia’s employment of democratic rhetoric in quite a different context. Thus, according to the 2008 Foreign Policy Concept of Russia, Russia’s policy goal in Europe is not any type of order but a “genuinely open and democratic system of collective security” (Russian Foreign Ministry 2008). This statement means that not only pluralism, but solidarism as well can, in the Russian eyes, be democratic, provided that it serves Russian interests of being accepted as a power equal to its Western partners. Therefore, Russia tends to utilize the normative conception of international democracy in ostensibly pragmatic way, as an operational tool to increase its normative power.

## **6. Poly-centrism: Learning to Live in a Post-International World**

For many Russian foreign policy speakers poly-centrism is synonymous to multipolarity. This simplistic interchangeability of the two terms seems to miss however a meaningful point: the idea of poly-centrism is grounded in a particular domain of theory located at the intersection of trans-nationalism and a bunch of post-sovereignty/post-national conceptualizations. In a poly-centric world the state is not in a position to preserve its modern/“Westphalian” characteristics; it has to undergo deep domestic transformations in reaction to the growing – perhaps enforced – competition with other actors, sometimes more resourceful and normatively appealing than the states.

A polycentric world embraces such new “configuration of subjectivities” (Kapitsyn 2009: 74-75) as the prevalence of mobile/ad-hoc coalitions based upon soft power resources, growing asymmetry and turbulence, the multiplicity of political and institutional playgrounds for international subjects, and “open” – i.e. inclusive and non-discriminatory – model of regionalism (Gadzhiev 1998: 343) grounded in networks of “centers of growth” and leaving much space for participation of non-state actors (Konovalov 2008). By defying state-centric worldviews, poly-centrism undermines the validity of the “us against them” type of thinking by

questioning and dissolving the essentialized conception of a taken-for-granted “collective We” as opposed to – or encircled by – inimical identities.

Poly-centrism may be in tune with Michel Foucault’s (and Gilles Deleuze’s) theorizing of power as a combination of different spaces which may overlap yet preserve their relative autonomy. Thus, projecting Foucauldian reasoning to the sphere of international society, one may arguably single out domains of *political power* with its key holders possessing of vast military resources and securitization abilities; *managerial power* which manifests itself through the instruments of governmentality, including technical (de-politicized) administration and policing; *disciplinary power* that acts in the forms of regulatory mechanisms of constantly – though slowly – evolving norms; and *bio-power* which trans-nationally takes the forms of “responsibility to protect” and “humanitarian interventions”. The fragmentation of power relations into spaces/segments, which is at the core of the Foucauldian approach, seems to be quite consonant with the poly-centric worldview, since each of the forms of power presupposes its own key subjects that are in principle unable to balance – in a traditional sense – each other due to different mechanisms, institutions and resources they are based on.

For most Russian experts poly-centrism has positive connotations, but in different ways. For some of them, the philosophy of poly-centrism ought to be grounded in the recognition of equal value of each non-state identity. This type of multipolarity is viewed as a compensation for inevitable degradation of nation states and the subsequent global imposition of a new version of “general will” embodied in the U.S.-led neoliberal model of global governance (Ponomariova 2007: 95-110). On a policy level, poly-centrism is one of structural preconditions of the so called “networked diplomacy”, a concept used by the Russian Foreign Ministry basically to denote a more inclusive type of relations between traditional nation states (like Russia), security unions (such as NATO), supranational institutions (for instance, EU), and international organizations (OSCE, SCTO, etc.) for the sake of crisis prevention and conflict management. There are no evidences whatsoever that the Kremlin is likely to consider other global actors – such as international NGOs or trans-national corporations – as possible contributors to the “networking diplomacy”.

Yet skeptical voices also abound, pointing to non-universal character of a new post-sovereignty/post-national world: it is argued that U.S. is by no means going to dissolve or relegate its sovereignty to either supra-, trans-, or sub-national units (Proskurin 2003). Therefore, a post-national/cosmopolitan worldview may be seen as leading to Russia’s further degradation and unfortunate loss of its subjectivity.

## **7. Multi-regionalism: a World without Hegemons?**

The idea of multi-regionalism rests upon the plurality of “regional orders”, or “systems of international order built around regional spheres of responsibility”. Close to this approach is the English school-promoted idea of “regional states-systems or regional international societies”, or “many worlds of different regionalism” (Hurrell 2007: 128). In Russia, too, there are voices supporting the view of “new regionalism” as a form of multipolarity (Tzarikaev 2010).

Multi-regionalism, as understood by Buzan and Waever, may be best realizable in the absence of superpowers which seems to correspond to Russia's vision of the international society. It is symptomatic that multipolarity discourse in Russia includes explicit references to the idea of "regionalization of global politics" (Lavrov 2009). Regionalization has two meanings within this context. On the one hand, it denotes "a search for regional solutions for conflicts and crises", which, more specifically, means the avoidance of possible interventions from the part of external powers, among which NATO in general and US in particular seem to be most menacing for the Kremlin. On the other hand, regionalization, in Sergei Lavrov's eyes, could serve as an insurance mechanism to prevent the possible fragmentation of international society as a result of what might be dubbed "de-globalization", or a reversal of the global moment. It is through the prism of these two arguments that the conceptual linkage between multipolarity and multiregionality might be elucidated.

As far as the "search for regional solutions" is concerned, the Russian stance here appears to be consonant with the idea of Regional Security Complexes (RSCs) introduced by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever. At the center of their theory is a variety of "security regions" as international subsystems where most of security interactions are internal. "Superpowers by definition largely transcend the logic of geography and adjacency in their security relationships" (Buzan and Waever 2006: 46), they claim. Against this background, RSCs are conceptualized as barriers that prevent superpowers from intervening in security situations on regional level; they are defined as groups of units (countries and/or, perhaps, their parts) whose processes of securitization and de-securitization are so interlinked that their security practices cannot be analyzed or resolved apart from one another (Buzan and Waever 2006: 44), and do not necessitate projection of external force(s). Therefore, the differences between the inside and the outside appear to play the key role in the conceptualization of this type of regionalism which, in particular, explains why Russia is quite sympathetic with the prospects of the Caspian regionalism which, in the Kremlin's eyes, ought to be decided among the five "local" states uninterested in allowing foreign influence.

The second argument introduced by Lavrov also might be approached from the theoretical viewpoint grounded in the traditions of the English school which treats regionalization as an "approach to world order" presupposing a reorganization of world politics along regional lines. For Hedley Bull, regionalism is a middle ground between states and global organizations. On the one hand, regional organizations are able to fulfill at least some of the functions envisaged for global bodies; on the other hand, they can avoid some of the accusations addressed to global organizations (domination, power projection, etc.). Bull argues that regional organizations may contribute to a more peaceful world order because they defy the concentration of power in the hands of superpowers, encourage small states to strengthen their potential through pooling resources; contribute to lower the dangers of sovereignty-based system by creating institutions beyond the states; reduce the incentives for wars through webs of interdependence, and tend to insulate regions from global conflicts.

The concept of multiregionalism in both readings – as a possibility for local crisis management and an insurance against a Hobbesian world – seems to be quite ambiguous. Being one of the possible versions / interpretations of multipolarity, it by the same token questions Russia's exclusive sphere of influence in its near abroad. Instead of substantiating a Kremlin-protected "area of vital interest" that serves as one of the proves for Russia's claims

for the status of a major international pole, the multiregionality perspective decomposes the post-Soviet space into several regions that are far from being under Russia's supervision. These regions are rather effects of the EU enlargement and its neighborhood policy. Hence, it is through the prism of multiregionalism that the concept of an allegedly unified post-Soviet space can be deconstructed, and the policy gap between Russia and Europe identified. Indeed, the "mental maps" of Europe's margins are seen quite differently from Moscow and Brussels. EU deliberately invests its resources and efforts in region-building for both pluralizing Europe's regional scene and making it more adaptable and sensitive to Europeanization. Russia finds itself under a strong influence of this type of policy and wishes to take some practical advantage of the EU-sponsored regional projects, yet in the meantime sometimes resorts to discursive othering of – and therefore distancing from – regional groupings which the Kremlin perceives as alien to Russia, i.e. orchestrated by other great powers. Russia sees no much avail for itself in adapting to the experiences of EU-sponsored regionalist initiatives in the Baltic and Black Sea regions, as well as the Mediterranean.

This raises an important question of whether the idea of region-making as a protection against "extra-regional forces" can be universally applicable and productive. Even in those cases – like the Caspian region-building project – where this approach comes into prominence, there are multiple external non-state actors like major oil and gas companies playing their major roles. The RSC-based vision of multiregionalism seems to be consonant with what might be dubbed "closed regionalism", which is "aimed at defending region from the negative effects of globalization" (Deliagin 2001) and spells an "autarkic policy of reliance upon local forces" (Mikheev 1999: 56), a strategy that is directly challenged by the philosophy of Medvedev's proposals on a uniform security arrangements in all Euro-Atlantic region.

In the meantime, debates about new regions-in-the-making, including those with Russia's participation, should not miss one important point: some of them may contribute to mitigating global security concerns. For example, Iran's involvement in the Caspian region-building project may become one of elements of deeper international socialization of this country, with all positive effects of taking institutional and normative commitments.

## 8. Poles as Civilizations

There are different modalities in which the idea of plurality of civilizations is actualized in Russia's political and academic discourses. The most typical *political* articulation can be found in Dmitry Medvedev's reference to EU, US and Russia as three branches of the European civilization destined to closely cooperate with each other (Medvedev 2008c). Therefore, from the structural perspective, both unity of this wider European civilization and compatibility of its different territorial parts (perhaps, as remote as Russia's Far East) are taken almost for granted. As for *Russia's strategy*, it consists in this interpretation neither in developing policies for joining European institutions nor in taking commitments in view of the Europeanization prospects, but rather in making the West to accept Russia's historical belongingness to the presumably common European civilization (Mezhuev 2009).

Yet *academic* discourses offer much more variegated panoply of civilization-based articulations of multipolarity which seem to be in disharmony with the political discourse in two

most significant regards – not all of them depart from state-centric platform, and not all are that West-friendly.

Let us start with those “pictures” of multipolarity that articulate certain mistrust to the state. Thus, for Alexander Neklessa, Russian civilizational identity is not state-bound but rather polyphonic, cross-border and even trans-continental (Neklessa 2008). Plurality of civilizations as a particular case of normative plurality does not any longer make references to states indispensable. The concept of Russia as a “sovereign civilization” (Naumov and Slonov 2007: 21-30) not only makes civilizational discourse compatible with the idea of multipolarity, but also is presumed on the declining role of the nation states (Sokolov 2006: 141-154). Civilizational resource is believed to be relatively independent of political elites and is viewed as a compensation for Russia’s weakness as a nation. In a wider sense, this reasoning sounds quite in tune with the anticipation of gradual transformations in political subjectivity – from nation states to a type of new multi-nodal composite actors based upon durable communications between culturally, religiously and linguistically related communities (Andreev 2011: 98). There are versions of civilizational approach which are not inimical to the prospects of world government as a pathway of merging separate civilizations into one of the global scale. Inter-civilizational communications may take the practical forms of trade promotion, tourist exchanges, inter-urban cultural flows, the activities of NGOs etc (Afanasiev 2008).

By the same token, as I mentioned earlier, not all academic interpretations of civilization-based approach are in agreement with Russia’s role identity as an inalienable part of integral all-European civilization (Isaev 2006). Many Russian scholars argue that multipolarity can be successful only being based upon civilizational background (Martynov 2009: 64) and deem that Russia is in possession of its own distinctive cultural profile in the world, quite distinct from the West. According to their logic, each of the centers of power in the world can be viewed as a peculiar civilization, including United States, China, Russia, and India. Thus, the belongingness to civilization becomes one of the key criteria of sovereignty and a justification for Russia’s expansion of its spheres of interest. A distinctive from Europe civilizational status is regarded as a possibility for Russia to achieve equality with Europe, while the idea of Russia’s belongingness to the common European civilization is believed to be equivalential to the voluntary acceptance of Russia’s backwardness vis-à-vis its more developed western neighbors. In the meantime, what is metaphorically dubbed “civilizational immunity” “prevents from implanting to Russia alien to national organism models of democracy” (Leonova 2010).

The key problem with this approach is that it appears to be a deliberately wide container of the most parochial and extremely mythologized perceptions of Russian historical self (or a mystical “Russian idea”) (Baburin 2011), including “self-sacrifice” for the sake of “saving the world”, “worldwide responsiveness”, the preponderance of chimerical “justice” over “legal rule”, “the search for truth and happiness for all mankind”, and other nativist and indigenous self-representations of “Russianness”. Within the multipolarity discourse this may translate into a moribund and somehow ironic idea of Russia as a sovereign “pole of global justice”, which contains explicit anti-European connotations (Naumov and Slonov 2008: 65-88). It is mostly within the civilization-approach that the old-style dichotomy between the West and Russia is reproduced as based upon highly dysfunctional distinctions between (Western)

“individualism” versus (Russian) “solidarist responsibility”, “society as market” versus “society as family”, moral relativism versus the pursuance of justice, etc. In this respect, identity swaps in the form of Europeanization are considered as dubious and mostly ineffective (Belchuk 2008: 29-42), and the variety of social problems in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (corruption, lack of rule of law, etc.) may be “normalized”, i.e. explained as belonging to the domain of their civilizational identity. Civilizational approach thus becomes the pivotal point in Russia’s ideology of autonomous self-sufficiency as exemplified, inter alia, by the sovereign democracy concept (Novikov 2007: 23), which fits in the multipolarity discourse.

One of the key proponents of civilization-based approaches in Russia, Vladimir Yakunin (the head of the state-controlled “Russian railways” corporation), deduces his appeal to nurture the multiplicity of civilizations from the alleged dangers to the US-led cultural unification which, in his reasoning, may have some historical parallels with the Nazi Germany. By making this dubious comparison, Yakunin clearly unveils the ostensibly anti-Western bias of his reading of civilizational approach which, in his imaginary, is the only alternative to the violent domination of “one sole superpower” (Yakunin 2010: 94-95).

As for practical implications of the civilization-based approach, several of them can be mentioned. *First*, Leonid Ivashov, for example, deems that it is BRICS that became the first political and institutional reification of the century-old ideas of the ability of civilizations to play their roles as worldwide political subjects. BRICS states represent, in his view, the model type of different civilizations that are in dialogue with each other (Ivashov 2011). He proposed the reorganization of the UN Security Council on the civilizational grounds, provided that Europe and United States form two different civilizational units.

*Second*, “Edinaya Rossiya” party gives a different rationale for civilizational approach, arguing that it is only on the basis of common civilizational platform that Russia might incite Belarus and Ukraine to integrate in either “Pax Slavica” or “Pax Orthodoxa” (Baburin 2006). In accordance with this logic, these two Slavic neighbors ought to be included into “Russian civilization” which in this context looks like a cultural version of “spheres of influence” which does not stipulate the acceptance of sovereign status of both neighboring republics (including their own language policies, domestic institutions, freedom of foreign orientations, etc.) (Laktionova 2010). Conceptually, this argument has two drawbacks. What is most important, it contravenes the concept of post-Soviet integration as an inclusive project transcending ethnic or national boundaries of participating states. In fact, the idea of “Slavic unity” sends an unfriendly message to the Central Asian and Caucasian countries which are critically important to Russia in many respects. Yet this concept contains another logical trap: being favorable to the unity of Slavic peoples, it is extremely suspicious to the equivalent idea of a union of Turkic people which is depicted as a trick to boost international profile of Turkey to the detriment of Russia (Isaev 2002).

In a more practical sense, the references to Ukraine and Belarus for proponents of “Slavic unity” are politically self-defeating since neither Kiev nor Minsk seems to reify the dreams about a Moscow-led integration. It is quite indicative that the post-orange revolution Ukraine under Viktor Yushchenko’s presidency is gradually drifting to a more pro-European policy and is keen to keep challenging Russian interests in energy transportation business. The addition of Serbia to the potential members of “Pax Slavica” makes this imaginary community more dubious since Belgrade is consistently moving to the EU and demonstrates

more divergence than conformity to the Russian trajectory in Europe. The cases of Poland and Bulgaria illustrate this trend even better. By the same token, the idea of “Orthodox unity” is politically discredited by Russia’s war with Georgia, as well as tensions with Romania and Moldova in the Transdnestrian conflict.

*Third*, some of the Russian discourse-makers claim that Russia possesses an almost unique capability of bridging gaps between civilizations (“partnership of civilizations”). This hypothetical brokerage appears to be a wishful thinking and is aimed basically for domestic consumption, since it fails to explain why the West and the East can’t get along without Russian mediation.

*Fourth*, another practical project that stems from the civilization-approach is the “Russian world” policy which is grounded in the idea of reincorporating Russian-speaking communities abroad into the sphere of Russian language and culture. It reaches much beyond the idea of “pan-Slavism” which, as most Russian authors admit, is (geo)politically dead (Zadokhin 2004). But the idea of the “Russian world” is not only about diasporal and language-based linkages; it is filled/saturated with a more normative content to include a variety of signifiers referring to Russia’s imperial traditions, its great power status, and such political characteristics of Russian identity as a quasi-sacred respect to power, paternalism, toleration, messianic feelings to others, etc. (Gromyko 2010). Yet the “Russian world” concept lacks uniformity: the Russian Orthodox Church advocates its religious foundations, while the Kremlin views it as a Russian version of soft power.

*Fifth*, the civilization-approach can be instrumental in coining the “*European non-West*” concept, with Russia and Turkey playing the key roles in its political implementation. Yet within Russian academic community there are strong voices of those scholars who think that Turkey – in its capacity as a “regional hegemon” and an “order setter” (Bechev 2011: 9) – is more a competitor of Russia than its potential ally (Ordynskiy 2011).

Apart from these contradictions, it has to be noted that the civilization-based narrative may be politically used for substantiating arguments that are in conflict with the Russian worldview. For instance, it may become a discursive tool justifying skeptical attitudes to the “post-Soviet” integration from the part of non-Slavic countries of which Georgia is a good example. In particular, the Baltic States refer to Huntington’s concept of “clash of civilizations” as a theoretical justification for alienation from Russia (an anti-Russian discursive tool).

## Conclusion

In this paper I have shown that the concept of multipolarity, being originally part of neorealist academic discourse, became one of key political shapers of Russia’s international role identity. Of course, the Kremlin has retained some of realist ideas ingrained in such multipolar models as great power management or balance of power. In the meantime, having borrowed the concept from the Western lexicon, Russia has semantically resignified it. This reformulation of the idea of multipolarity took two forms. Firstly, a variety of non-realist meanings was infused into this concept, including the issues of culture and identity (civilization approach). Second, under the influence of non-realist theories – such as social constructivism and globalism – multipolarity was adjusted to emerging post-international and

post-sovereign milieu that encourages the activities of non-state actors, on the one hand, and the growing appeal of normative regulators, on the other.

My analysis in this paper confirmed that the Russian foreign policy discourse consists of a series of “mental maps” neither of which offers a more or less coherent vision of the idea of multipolarity which, constituting the cornerstone of Russian foreign policy, remains – quite paradoxically – among the least addressed in Russian foreign policy studies. Since multipolarity originates in the sphere of ideas, it would be quite logical to assume that at certain time there might be more than one pattern of multipolar arrangements. Each of them gives a different answer to the question of what is a pole – a nation state, a region, a civilization, or perhaps an integrative construct like EU and CIS.

In the West, too, the concept of multipolarity has also reached far beyond its classical realist frames. In the traditions of Hedley Bull, one may assume that the multipolarity debate contains a great deal of normative potential, since it is always about justice versus order (Zlobin 2008). For Chantal Mouffe, one of the key figures in critical theories, multipolarity is connoted with pluralization of (regional) hegemonies in which agonistic type of conflicts (that one between mutually recognized rivals) would prevail over antagonistic (between enemies) (Mouffe 2009). Politically speaking, multipolarity is a challenge to all world actors: in today’s German foreign policy debate, for example, multipolarity may signify unilateralism (“going global alone”), which only sharpens the key question of “whether the EU can turn multipolar order into one that works through multilateral cooperation rather than spheres of influence” (Krastev and Leonard 2010: 22).

As far as Russia is concerned, it does not appear that any of the various versions of multipolarity described above has capabilities for undermining the Western hegemony. On the contrary, some of the discourse(s) of multipolarity could be quite compatible with the Western hegemonic power. Moscow lacks its own “global project” (Ryabov 2008) and, unsurprisingly, the integration with the Trans-Atlantic institutional structures remains the key priority for Russia. Thus, despite protesting against Ukrainian and Georgian engagement with NATO, Russia itself has restored cooperation with the alliance, particularly in Afghanistan. In spite of expressing some reservations about the Eastern Partnership program, Moscow continues to view strategic partnership with the EU as a top priority for Russia’s modernization. Thus, despite its sympathies to multipolarity, Russia is not keen to reverse the West-dominated structures of international relations, which explains why it so often adheres to a status quo type of policy thinking that ultimately pushes Russia to the margins of global politics (Igritskiy 2006: 45-46). Harsh polemics with the West and sensitive reaction to external criticism of Russia only mask Moscow’s willingness to become part of the core coalition (Martyanov 2008) constitutive of the international society-in-the-making. There are voices arguing that BRICS – as an institution which owes its acronym to the world financial elite – can be well inscribed into the future global strategy crafted by the West for engaging China, Brazil, India and Russia to the world-wide web of both normative and institutional interdependence (Pavlenko 2009: 29-30). Shanghai Cooperation Organization is not an anti-Western alliance either (Shutov 2009: 10-12).

Yet a deeper integration in the normative and institutional order crafted by the West, as my analysis has shown, is complicated by what may be dubbed cognitive dissonances between Russia and the EU. As the balance-of-power version of multipolarity illuminates,

Russia's foreign policy philosophy still tilts to a modernist understanding of sovereignty, while the EU seem to a much greater extent adhere to a "post-modernist" version of governance predicated upon the dispersal of sovereignty as the direct result of trans/cross/supra-national integration. Russia prefers to verbalize its messages addressed to the EU as interest-based speech acts with obvious pragmatic overtones, while European countries are inclined to formulate their worldviews in a more normative (identity- and value-based) language that inevitably contains the mechanisms of othering Russia, i.e. ascribing to her non-European characteristics of an alien power. It is obvious that EU is interested not in any type of strategic order, but in that one grounded in a set of liberal values – democracy, the rule of law and individual freedom. Besides, Russia to a much larger extent than Europe is concerned about hard security problems. The EU focusing of soft security agenda leads to further marginalization of Russia that can't justifiably expect to become a soft security partner of the EU unless it undertakes robust improvements of its democracy record and starts effectively protecting its population against corruption, red tape, environmental decay, etc. While Russia's policies of multipolarity have strong connotations with sovereignty, self-assertiveness and self-sufficiency, the competing EU logic embraces a different chain of meanings, to include integration, dispersal of sovereignty, norm-based identity, soft/human security, democratization through Europeanization as the key policy signifiers. Consequently, the two parties – Russia and Europe – still have different understandings of the nature of diversity and pluralism as constitutive features of international society they are embedded in. Besides, Russia tries to pursue the policies of multipolarity and multilateralism without having reliable friends and allies (Leviash 2010: 45-58), which was proven in August 2008 by the fact that Russia did not consult with Collective Security Treaty Organization members prior to launching its military operation against Georgia.

All this makes Russian efforts to push forward the multipolarity agenda – in the variety of its formats – ineffective. The problems Russia faces lie in the obvious lack of institutional support to what might be dubbed "inter-polarity", or a structure of inter-dependent relationship between the major world powers. Neither bilateral relations with European capitals nor interest-based alliances in which Russia participates – CSTO, SCO, and BRICS – can institutionally match (or win emulation with) norm- and value-based organizations, NATO and EU included. As the demise of the Gaddafi regime in Libya in August 2011 demonstrated, NATO and EU – despite serious intrinsic splits – are still the dominating political forces capable of steering and streamlining the reshaping of crisis-ridden and strategically important regions.

However, even such a harsh conclusion deserves a glimpse of modest optimism. The debates on multipolarity in its multiple forms can be inscribed into a dichotomy of "*politics of being*" and "*politics of becoming*". The "politics of being" refer to existing configurations of power", while the "politics of becoming" denotes "constant process of renewal" and shifts in identities and institutions (Bleiker 2009: 136-138). In this sense, the multipolarity discussions are very much related to the "politics of becoming", since most of policy strategies they entail require not only accommodation to the changing global structures, but Russia's active actorship. Yet, undoubtedly, "there are no free foreign policy pathways" (Kremeniuk 2004), and each of possible Russia's strategies in a multipolar world has its political price to be paid. Domestically, it is indispensable that Russia undertakes deep internal reforms that would

make the current institutional distance with the West less divisive. Internationally, Russia should concede that the policy of keeping status quo in the “frozen conflicts” in its neighborhood not only is economically unsustainable, but also damages the prospects of strategic partnership with the West. In other words, before charting different schemas of multipolarity, Russia needs a frank assessment of its own profile in the international society and a serious discussion on what kind of pole it is willing and capable to be.

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