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# The Keeper of the Imperial Body: The Russian Geographical Society as an Entrepreneur of Imperial Nationalism

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## Abstract

The goal of this article is to show Russia's civilizational turn in the broader context of imperial nationalism. The "turn" is a manifestation of imperial nationalism that today feeds not only on political ideas and history but also on geography. In the mass perception, geography is seen as an objective, non-ideologized scientific discipline less prone to political manipulation. Because of this, it can be employed to influence the Russian self-identification process in a much more subtle and efficient way than references to the more abstract notion of civilization. This article presents the Russian Geographical Society (RGS) as an identity entrepreneur managed by the ruling elite with a well-developed regional structure. It functions as a community of imperial practice. With its discursive and material practices, the RGS contributes to reproducing imperial nationalism, including in its civilizational version. The RGS is the keeper of the imperial body. By referring to the imperial body, I mean not just the physical territory but also the ways it is imagined in discourse and made material in numerous practices.

**Keywords:** Russian Geographical Society; civilizational turn; imperial nationalism; practices; Russian identity

## Introduction

The never-ending academic dilemma over whether the Russian Federation is an imperial or post-imperial country was brutally but unambiguously settled on February 24, 2022. The expert community has embarked upon a collective bout of soul searching that could be summed up in a single question: *What did we miss?* When looking for the turning points in post-Soviet Russian politics, some recall the Munich speech (2007) when Putin for the first time so explicitly questioned Western dominance (Pettersson 2022). The disappointment with the West was paralleled by emphasizing the Russian civilizational exceptionalism captured by Putin's much commented-on Valdai Speech in 2013 (Menkiszak 2014). Scholars reacted to this new development by analyzing the civilizational discourse and its main entrepreneurs (Linde 2016; Hale and Laruelle 2020, 2021). They turned to history and memory politics as important sources of the legitimization of Russian exceptionalism (Wijermars 2019; Domańska and Rogoża 2021). The de-Nazification discourse used by the Kremlin's propaganda to justify the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has confirmed the significance of historical references. This conflict, however, has also revealed another aspect of the civilizational discourse that has been overlooked so far – namely, the significance of the identity narratives related to the territory. The rumors about Vladimir Putin thoroughly studying old maps during the pandemic have been commented on by some experts as one of the motifs behind the war (Hill 2022).

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In this article, I follow this trail by demonstrating what role geography plays in promoting the story about Russia as a distinct civilization. The goal is to show the civilizational turn in a broader context of imperial nationalism and the imperial background knowledge (that is, the one formed in the imperial past) shared by Russian society, as it is enacted in social practices. The imperial background knowledge corresponds to the more metaphorical notion of “imperial syndrome” (as defined by Emil Pain), which consists of an *imperial order*, *consciousness*, and *body*. I focus on the last component, which is missing in the analysis of the civilizational turn. By referring to the *imperial body*, I mean not just the physical territory but also ways it is imagined in discourse and materialized in numerous practices. To highlight the material practices that underpin the civilizational/imperial identity narratives, I analyze one of the few institutions that was established in the Russian Empire and has been operating through the present day – the Russian Geographical Society (RGS). The fate of this institution suggests that the return of Russian imperialism is not exclusively about the strategy of the ruling elite. It is also about background knowledge preserved, practiced, and diffused by non-state actors.

As for the main findings, the article demonstrates that the civilizational turn is a manifestation of Russian imperial nationalism, which feeds today not only on political ideas and history but also on geography. The latter is generally perceived as an objective, non-ideologized scientific discipline less prone to political manipulation. Because of this, it can influence the Russian self-identification process in a much more subtle and efficient way than references to the more abstract notion of civilization. During the last two decades, the Russian Geographical Society has been the keeper of the imperial body. It is an identity entrepreneur managed by the ruling elite with a well-developed regional structure. With its discursive and material practices, the RGS contributes to reproducing imperial nationalism, including in its civilizational version. Russia as a *distinct civilization* is one of four identity narratives promoted by the RGS, the others being: *Northern country*, *major power*, *eternal Russia*. All carry the main message of the civilizational turn, that is, Russian uniqueness, unity, and state patriotism. Finally, they all tell the story of Russia’s historical continuity embodied in the glorious tradition of Imperial and Soviet geography.

This article’s contribution is in three areas. Firstly, the analysis of the RGS shows that this thus far neglected institution is very worthy of the attention of scholars in the field. Secondly and crucially, it captures the dynamics of the process of reproducing and stabilizing imperial nationalism – not just in discourse but also in material practices. Turning the spotlight on geography, which historically has been strongly entangled with imperialism, shows a more nuanced picture of the multifaceted ties between the imperial legacy and Russian self-identification process after 1991. Finally, contrary to many analyses that deal with the workings of the imperial legacy in the realm of politics (the imperial order) or culture (consciousness), this article focuses on the imperial body.

To reconstruct the discursive and material practices of the RGS, I analyzed the material published on the official website of the RGS (for example, statements, interviews, reports, articles – both popular and academic ones published in its journals) as well as materials from the websites of the president ([www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru)), prime minister ([www.premier.ru](http://www.premier.ru)), ministry of defense ([www.mil.ru](http://www.mil.ru)), and ministry of foreign affairs ([www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru)) since the beginning of the 2000s until 2022. Since the RGS is not a well-known institution, I have decided to present these practices that, apart from allowing for the reconstruction of the identity narratives, also provide an overview of the activities of society. I wanted to demonstrate how broad the scope of its initiatives is. As a result, I did not analyze in detail particular types of materials such as didactic instructions or documentary films; these could form the topic of another study. At the beginning of my research, following Ted Hopf and Bentley B. Allan, I used the inductive method and looked for the references to the question, “what is Russia?” (Hopf 2016). In this phase, I analyzed statements and documents. I grouped the selected materials into four narrative formations. Next, I analyzed the practices developed by the RGS and how they relate to Russian identity. I cross-checked the narratives constructed in the statements with those signaled by the practices. As a result, I indicated four identity narratives promoted by the RGS.

This article begins with a description of the specifics of the self-identification process of peoples living within an empire, as well as the close connection between imperialism and geography. After introducing the Russian Geographical Society, I reconstruct its identity narratives and material practices with the intention of highlighting the connection between the imperial background knowledge and Russian self-identification process.

## Empires and the Self-identification of Nations

Dominic Lieven describes the fall of the Soviet Union as the end of the last modern empire (Lieven 2002). This British historian felt the event was the final echo of the era of the empires that, with some minor interruptions, had dominated the political landscape since ancient times until World War I. As one of the reasons for their decline, scholars usually mention the attractiveness of nationalism connected to the institutions of a nation-state and the ideas of nations' right to self-determination. Although there is no universally accepted definition of an empire, it is commonly understood as a structure of domination that consists of the center and the peripheries. The center subdues, controls, and exploits the conquered and assimilated peripheries to its own benefit (Geraci 2015). The multiethnic and multifaith population of an empire is integrated partly by force exercised by the center, partly by the prestige of the imperial project, that is, the prospect of prosperity and progress, social advancement, and the splendor of pursuing a civilizational mission (Münkler 2007, 85–86; Collins 2001; Dijkink 1996, 100).

An imperial population that first and foremost identifies with a universalist inclusive empire is juxtaposed with an exclusivist nation-state (Rowley 2000, 32). However, researchers increasingly suggest softening this binary vision of empire *versus* nationalism by including categories that fall somewhere in between, such as “imperial nationalism” (Kolstø 2019; Pain 2016, 59–60; Miller and Rieber 2004; Kumar 2003). According to Krishan Kumar, its key feature is “the attachment of a dominant or core ethnic group to a state entity that conceives itself as dedicated to some *large cause* or purpose, religious, cultural or political” (Kumar 2003, 34). Furthermore, this dominant group which identifies so intimately with the imperial project – the so-called imperial nation is “aware of the need to distance themselves from any ethnicity, to appear at least impartial as between the various peoples that make up the empire” (Kumar 2003, 33). One way to distance oneself from a particular ethnicity or religion is to frame the imperial project as a civilizational enterprise.<sup>1</sup>

The imperial history of Russia started roughly with the conquest of the Tatar Khanates in the Volga basin during the reign of Ivan the Terrible in the mid-16th century and lasted until the last decade of the 20th century. Russians are often mentioned as an exemplary imperial nation whose identity formed in tight relation to the empire (Pain 2016; Rowley 2000). Regardless of the significant differences between the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, the latter did preserve the imperial logic. In both cases, “Russians were not important in themselves, but because they were considered to be the bearers of a [...] universal idea. It was their duty to lead – and perhaps to sacrifice themselves for others” (Rowley 2000, 33).

Since 1991, the post-Soviet elite has been trying to find the right formula for a new national identity for the multinational and multifaith population of the Russian Federation. Ethnic Russians make up over 79% of Boris Yeltsin's team; this team at first promoted the civic concept of the national community of “rossiyanie” (Rus. *россияне*), that is, a community of all citizens regardless of their ethnicity or faith. However, it had little success (Goode 2019). Most of the people found it an artificial construct and opted for the familiar “russkiy” (*русский*), referring to Russianness defined in ethnic terms. Many Russians, even if they supported democracy and the free market, were concerned about their country becoming Westernized and losing its true identity. Since the middle of the 1990s, the number of Russians who thought that Russia should conduct reforms in accordance with its values and national tradition has been gradually growing (Gretskiy 2021).

These concerns were addressed by the discourse emphasizing Russia's distinctiveness, which was eventually endorsed by the ruling elite led by Vladimir Putin in the 2000s. The reference to Russia as

a distinct civilization by the top officials was labelled as a “civilizational turn” (Mjør and Turoma 2020). Matthew Blackburn rightly notes that the civilizational discourse includes more motifs than a direct mention of civilization. Within this broad approach, he names its three main components. Firstly, it advances the conviction about Russia’s uniqueness/exceptionality. Secondly, it promotes a specific type of state patriotism where the people serve the glory of the state, rather than vice versa. Thirdly, it prioritizes a cultural unity that, as Blackburn explains, is provided by the Russian language and culture as well as “traditional values” (Blackburn 2020, 92–93).

Following Blackburn’s findings, I accept that *exceptionality*, *state patriotism*, and *unity* make three components of the “civilizational turn” in Russia’s official discourse. I see this particular “turn” as a manifestation of imperial nationalism. As Viktor Schnirelman argues, “‘civilization’ proves to be a code word, or a substitute, for empire. ‘National state’ is less appropriate because ‘nation’ is commonly viewed in Russia in ethnic terms with exclusivist connotations” (Schnirelman 2020, 73). Presenting Russia as a distinct civilization allows for joining inclusive universalism, which can unite a multiethnic and multifaith population with a sense of exceptionalism so characteristic of empires. The civilizational framework is not about any particular nation (even if the role of ethnic Russians is more prominent) but above all about the glory of the state. Emphasizing cultural uniqueness while downplaying the weaknesses of the economy is also a way to put Russia on a par with other major powers/civilizations such as the West or China. The civilizational discourse elevates Russia’s standing in the international hierarchy, which is a matter of no small importance for imperial nations (Curanović 2015). To sum up, imperial nationalism is a type of nationalism characteristic of imperial nations. It refers to the general features of the self-identification process and identity. The civilizational turn is an analytical category that refers to the ideational shift in the post-Soviet Russian identitarian policy, which took place in the 2000s. The narrative about Russia as a distinct civilization of a multiethnic and multireligious nation provides a sense of unity in accordance with the schemes of imperial nationalism, namely, joining universalism with exceptionalism.

Imperial nationalism, expressed in the civilizational terms, welcomes questions about post-Soviet Russia’s “imperial syndrome.” This notion was coined by Emil Pain who insists that discourse on civilizational distinctiveness reflects the “post-imperial consciousness,” which together with the “imperial order” and “imperial body” make three sociopolitical spheres where we can observe the influence that the imperial past has on contemporary Russian identity. As defined by Emil Pain, the *imperial consciousness* includes the “complex of traditional stereotypes of popular consciousness [...] that preserves stable statist values, hopes for ‘a wise tsar’ and ‘a firm hand’, and also imperial ambitions” (Pain 2016, 60). The *imperial order* is the political regime of the empire, that is, power over many people without their consent. In works dedicated to contemporary Russia, these two components of the imperial syndrome have received considerable attention (Kushnir 2018; Trenin 2011).

In this article, I focus on the *imperial body*. Pain describes it as “the territory of the country, divided into regions that are not culturally integrated with one another and have preserved historic traces of colonial conquest” (Pain 2016, 59–60). By referring to the *imperial body*, I mean not just the physical territory but also the ways it is imagined in discourse and materialized in numerous practices. This understanding demonstrates the connection between imperial nationalism and the civilizational turn, which goes beyond a particular discourse. The imperial body provides the material base for the civilization. As Aleksei Miller notes, for imperial nations such as Russians, the desire to define “national territory” is not expressed as a wish to dismantle the imperial project because the latter is necessary for keeping a stable identity (Miller 2004, 11–12). Pain writes about the obsession of Russians to keep the “imperial body” in one piece (Pain 2016, 60). I would also emphasize the fact that, due to its physicality, the territory seems less abstract than the notion of “civilization” and less ideologically burdened than “empire.” It is thus a safe, non-controversial way to address the three core components of the civilizational turn of Russian exceptionalism, state patriotism, and unity.

The narratives developed about the *imperial body* express the spatial dimension of the national identity. They enable imagining Russia as a unique and at the same time integral space. Mark Bassin demonstrated the significance of ideologically constructed geographical images for shaping Russia's identity as an empire and a distinct, exceptional entity in the international arena (Bassin 1991). Was Russia a part of Europe, an empire with a European core and Asian colonial domains or a distinct but coherent geographical space in Eurasia? These seemingly purely academic discussions, which were held between the 18th and the 19th centuries, formed Russian identity as well as its relations with the external world. Bassin emphasized for instance the importance of charting and mapping, which allowed the grandeur of Russia's territory to be visualized for the first time. Modern geography has captured Russia's exceptionality and distinctiveness (Bassin, 7; Hooson 1994, 134–141).

### Geography and the Self-identification of Imperial Nations

With its focus on territory, geography provides the link between the imperial body and imperial nationalism. Its close ties with imperialism are well-documented (Gollwitzer 1969; Godlewska and Smith 1994; Bell et al. 1995). As Charles W. J. Withers succinctly puts it, “The relationships between geography, the Enlightenment, mapping and imperialism are intimate, pervasive and consequential” (2013, 3). The beginning of geography in its modern form dates to the 1870s, when it emerged in Europe and the US as a distinct academic discipline. Right from the start, its development was closely connected to military training and shaping a sense of patriotism (Hudson 2006, 12–19). Geography was meant to serve modern statecraft – this idea was shared by the leading geographers and explorers of that time. For Halford Mackinder, geography as exercised through expeditions and discoveries had the capacity to shape the virtues necessary for the citizens of an empire. He saw “dangerous expeditions as both training for and an example of the fortitude needed by an imperial people” (Kearns 2010, 190). As Gerry Kearns explains, Mackinder believed that

geography had to be more than science if it was to inculcate values. The traditions and practices of exploration and expedition celebrated competition between nations, the importance of physical bravery and the idea that success awaits those who pursue their interests with forceful determination. Physical trial and force were part of an international competition in which scientific excellence was more alibi than goal. (Kearns 2010, 194)

Perceiving geography in an inextricable connection to values and as a means of forming a brand of patriotism suitable for imperial nations makes an important point of reference for the further analysis of the impact of the imperial past on contemporary Russia.

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Mackinder was one of the leading and most influential members of the Royal Geographical Society (UK). All over Europe, geographical societies, as R. W. Pethybridge accurately noted, “were straight-forward laboratories of imperialism” (Pethybridge 1971, 353–354). From today's perspective, geographical societies were entrepreneurs of imperial discourse. Their role was not limited to shaping and spreading a narrative by publishing academic treatises, school textbooks, or popular literature. Geographical societies developed the whole set of material practices that helped to stabilize and reproduce imperial nationalism, including its civilizational version. As an example, we could name activities such as mapping, charting, ethnological field research, and, last but not least, expeditions and explorations. They all influenced the popular imagination and the self-understanding of imperial nations, as well as the peoples of the peripheries assimilated by the center. Additionally, geographical societies that functioned as the exclusive clubs of scholars, explorers, military men, politicians, businessmen and representatives of the press became institutions that would facilitate networks that often were not obvious, as well as integrate the national elite and form its



intersubjective understanding of imperial patriotism. They were *communities of imperial practice*.

The survival of such communities has strengthened the resilience of the imperial background knowledge that, as Karen Barkey shows, persists long after the fall of the empire (Barkey 1997, 99–114). I agree with John Morrissey who insists that imperialism is not “just an ‘ideology’ reified by hegemonic discourse, but also very much an active ‘practice’” (Morrissey 2013, 3). Practice is not just any behavior. In their seminal article, Adler and Pouliot defined practice as routinised socially meaningful patterns of action (2011, 4). Practice rests on the background knowledge – a deeply internalized, intimate understanding which, as Jorg Kustermans put it, “ensures that we know how to go on, it enables us to handle situations” (Kustermans 2016, 185). Background knowledge precedes practice and at the same time is “bound up” in the execution of practice. Routinized, patterned actions are vital for reproducing and stabilizing identities (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 20). An important part in this process is played by *communities of practice*, that is, a community of people who, due to interactions, share like-mindedness about the social meaning of practice and who create the social fabric of learning (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 18).

Imperialism is a collective practice in which a distinct role is played by communities of practice. They preserve and diffuse imperial background knowledge. The latter is behind the imperial syndrome. It feeds various practices – both discursive and material – which in turn enact, reproduce, and reify imperial nationalism. The elitist Russian Geographical Society is a community of imperial practice that is quite effective in reviving imperial identity and socializing the rest of society into it.

### The Russian Geographical Society: Introducing the Actor

In Russia, the interest in modern geography developed under the direct influence of Europe and in connection to the rivalry of the major powers. As Alfred Rieber explains, “The conquest of exotic and remote regions was increasingly perceived by elites and masses both as an emblem of European status” (Rieber 1994, 333). The first ruler to understand the significance of “exploration, discovery and scientific description of areas unknown to Europeans was, of course, Peter the Great” (333). Rieber writes, “the acquisition and publication of new geographical knowledge through the medium of the Academy of Sciences was for Peter an essential part of the imperial enterprise” (333). The tradition was revived by Nicholas I who in 1845 founded the Imperial Russian Geographical Society.

According to Petr Pyatnov, RGS is “one of the most significant civil institutions in the history of Russia” (Pyatnov 2010, 9). It was established in Saint Petersburg as the fourth institution of this kind in Europe (Pavlov 2010, 4–8). Most of the 51 founder members were army men (for example, Fyodor Litke, Ferdinand Wrangel, Vasily Struve, Mikhail Muravyov-Vilensky), and the RGS was under the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The position of the official chairman was reserved for the royal family, and so the first head of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society was Prince Konstantin I (the son of Nikolai I), who was succeeded in 1892 by Prince Nikolai Mikhailovich. Already in the 1850s, the society took pride in establishing several regional departments. The spectrum of its activity was truly impressive – it organized the first regional museums, prepared a program for teaching geography in schools and universities, charted maps, and published the first geographical lexicons. Importantly, all these initiatives served to achieve the main goal, which was defined as the cultivation of patriotism and love for the Homeland (Pyatnov 2010, 14). This idea also lay behind the most spectacular activities of the society, namely, the expeditions to unknown parts of Kamchatka and Eastern Siberia, exploratory voyages around the world, and the discovery of Antarctica (Pavlov 2010, 4). Like its European counterparts, the society from the very beginning cooperated closely with the army, preparing detailed maps of territories of strategic importance and gathering intelligence and training soldiers in geography. Kirill Pavlov admits that RGS “participated in a most direct way in gathering intelligence as well as in strengthening the strategic and

geopolitical interests of the Russian Empire in the Arctic, South Caucasus, Central Asia, Far East and Oceania” (Pavlov 2010, 4). This bond became stronger still during World War II (Lappo and Agirrechu 2015, 8–18).

The Imperial Russian Geographical Society confounded expectations to survive the revolution of 1917 and the civil war (1917–1923). At first, it functioned as an “independent” institution, only partly financed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and later by the People’s Commissariat of National Education. Since 1938, it became a part of the Soviet Academy of Science (Pavlov 2010, 7). In the meantime, the word “imperial” was dropped from the official name, but the practices and narratives that the society had promoted in the times of the Romanovs were preserved under the Soviets. Francine Hirsch shows, for example, how the legacy of the Russian Empire influenced the Soviet colonial project in Central Asia. As she noticed, “Ethnographers, geographers, and statisticians from the former Russian Empire had key roles in this process as expert consultants to the new Soviet regime” (Hirsch 2000, 204; Oldfield and Shaw 2015; Hooson 1968). Despite carrying a stigma of the *ancien régime*, the society managed to secure a relatively stable position in the USSR. The last months of *perestroika* found the RGS in crisis with several factions fighting each other. Shortly after the fall of the USSR on March 23, 1992, the institution decided to change its name from the “Soviet” to “Russian” (*russkoye*). The choice of the adjective “russkoye” (“related to ethnic Russians”) instead of “rossiyskoe” (“related to Russia”) was motivated by the will to stress historical continuity (Pavlov 2010, 18). In general, the 1990s was a difficult time for the RGS, which was reduced to a shadow of its former glory. In 2002, the chairmanship of admiral Anatoly Komaritsin brought the RGS back under the structures of the Ministry of Defence. The story has come full circle.

The turning point for the society’s activity came in 2009, when Sergei Shoigu, the Minister of Defence, became its head. Furthermore, a year later, the Trustees Committee was established with Vladimir Putin as its president. The top political figures taking up positions in the RGS is an allusion to the Romanovs’ practice when the royal family members and generals led the society together. Furthermore, just as in the 19th century, after 2009 the RGS has turned into an exclusive elitist club that facilitates networking, confers social prestige, and functions as a marker of one’s position in the informal structures of power. The Trustees Committee groups together the most influential and the richest citizens of the Russian Federation – for example: Vagit Alekperov (president of Lukoil), Viktor Vekselberg (Renova), Filaret Galchev (Eurotsement Group), Evgeny Dod (“RusHydro”), Magomed Magomedov (Kardo – Alyans), Vitaly Savelyev (Aeroflot), Vladimir Strzhalkovsky (Nornickel), Gennady Timchenko (Novatek), Alisher Usmanov (Gazprom Investholding), and Sergey Frank (Sovcomflot) (kremlin.ru 2013). The members of the committee are expected to financially support the RGS, which does not officially receive federal funding (kremlin.ru 2021). During every annual assembly, Vladimir Putin expresses his personal gratitude to the businessmen and encourages them to further support the RGS.

Of no lesser importance is the capacity of the society to bring together federal and regional politicians, businessmen, journalists, academics, and local civic activists. In this way, the RGS creates its own social base and broadens the membership of the community of imperial practice. The society pays great attention to developing regional departments and parallel structures for young people (the Youth Clubs). Another important mechanism that facilitates networking is connected to rewards granted by the society. There is the Reward of the RGS, awarded every two years since 2014 in eight categories (for example, the best academic project, the best expedition in Russia, the best media project) and awarded personally by Vladimir Putin during a gala event. There is also “The Guide of Russia” award, “The Crystal Compass” for outstanding achievements in preserving environmental and cultural heritage (since 2012), “The Yury Senkevich Golden Medal” for journalists, and scholarships of 100,000 rubbles for gifted young scholars.

As of 2023, the Russian Geographical Society has approximately 23,700 members. It has three main headquarters – in Saint Petersburg (in the original location of the Imperial RGS), in Moscow (since 2013), and Sevastopol (since 2014) – and 85 regional departments across the Russian Federation. The RGS cooperates with other national organizations, such as the Russian Academic

Fund of Fundamental Research (since 2012) and the Russian Historical Association (since 2015). More importantly, it develops numerous projects with the ministries, for example, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Economic Development, and the Ministry of Natural Resources. Among these, the Ministry of Defence is the most important partner. Since 2017, departments of the RGS have been opened within units of all types of military forces, including Navy and Air Force. Military staff actively participates in the projects (kremlin.ru 2018).

Proud of its imperial origins, after its lean years in the 1990s, the RGS has bounced back due to the direct patronage of the top political officials. The renewal of the historical connection to the Kremlin and the army has made the RGS something more than just another academic institution. It is an influential identity entrepreneur and a community of imperial practices where a shared understanding of imperial glory is created and fed by the old routines.

### Learn Geography, Love Your Country: The Workings of the Imperial Background Knowledge

The RGS makes an intriguing case as an institution that has been operating continuously for 177 years. Its fate provides an insight into the workings of imperial background knowledge. It suggests that the understanding of post-Soviet Russian imperialism is not only the Kremlin's strategy but also a complex process of the resurfacing of practices and discourses of the imperial past where the dynamics of high politics are met by the actions of non-state actors. The RGS joining forces with the Russian Army and becoming the president's pet project might at first seem like the Kremlin cautiously reinstalling the imperial framework. However, the Ministry of Defence taking charge of the RGS was rather a result of the latter's efforts to achieve some financial stability, rather than simply following the old imperial pattern. The same could be said about the RGS recovering its historic headquarters – that it was motivated rather by the prestigious location than the desire to revive the imperial ways. However, once the Putin-Shoigu tandem was in place in the RGS, the imperial discourse began to dominate its agenda. This was a result, on the one hand, of the Kremlin's vision but also, on the other hand, a consequence of the RGS relying on old practices deeply entangled in the Russian imperial project. Finally, the vision of the politicians was, to a certain extent, inspired by the legacy of an institution whose glory was to be restored. The background knowledge preserved through all those decades in the narratives and practices of the RGS has had an impact on how the ruling elite approaches geography and links it to Russian identity.

While analyzing materials published on the official website of the RGS as well as the statements delivered by the top Russian officials in connection to this institution, it is hard to shake the impression that we have returned to the heyday of imperialism. Sergei Shoigu makes this clear: “Today like never before we need a national geography! A geography which contributes to securing national interests” (rgo.ru 2013). Hence, just as in Mackinder's times, geography should first and foremost serve statecraft and cultivate patriotism. Along with history, it contributes to shaping Russian national identity. According to Vladimir Putin, the RGS is “much more than an organization, more than geography [...] the RGS is called upon to preserve the historic, cultural and moral foundation of our existence, to preserve what makes our national identity” (kremlin.ru 2012). On another occasion, Putin firmly stated, “together with national history, the Russian language and literature, geography serves as a foundation of patriotic values, cultural national identity and awareness” (kremlin.ru 2017).

Reflecting on this quotation, it is important to elaborate on the fact that geography is perceived by the Russian elite as an objective, non-ideologized science. For this reason, it is thought to be more suitable than history to provide an objective basis for national identity, which goes beyond the problematic binary *russkiye-rossiyaniye*. Geography seems to be a non-controversial formula, legitimated by the authority of science, for a new Russian state-patriotism. As the case of the



invasion of Ukraine shows, one of the main challenges for post-Soviet Russia when it comes to reestablishing a coherent national identity is determining what relationship it has to its own past. It might be easier to achieve this goal with geography because it can build an arch between the Russian Empire and the USSR without addressing the “hard questions,” which turn history into a minefield. In comparison to history, geography does not appear so hazardous. At least this is how the leading politicians see it. In 2019, Sergei Shoigu said, “There should not be any conflicting views about geography! After all, this is not history! The River Volga flows to the Caspian Sea, Asia starts from the Ural Mountains and on the other side of the Urals is Europe – what other opposing views could be expressed in regard to these issues?” (kp.ru 2019). Geographical projects targeting the imperial body seem ideology-free, which in turn raises their chances of being accepted and internalized by the general public.

Having conducted interviews among ordinary Russians about their reception of the civilizational discourse, Blackburn made an interesting observation. He wrote,

First, more elaborate ideological versions of ‘Russia as a state-civilization’ did not resonate with respondents: there was little interest in concepts that flesh out Russia’s civilizational distinctiveness such as Eurasianism, *russkiy mir*, or Russia as the guardian of traditional values. Interestingly, Russian exceptionalism or uniqueness was articulated in very limited and pragmatic terms. (Blackburn 2020, 103)

Geography is a promising candidate to solve the problem of “selling” ideological projects to Russian citizens. The identity narratives promoted by the RGS are a top-down project launched by the elite that resonates with the masses. The declared goals of the RGS’s activity, such as strengthening knowledge about geography or raising the prestige of this subject to help to achieve the main aim: to socialize Russians, especially young people, into new state patriotism. This new patriotism is centered around the imperial body, and it stresses the need to keep the territory intact, shapes a sense of uniqueness and unity through the spatial consciousness, and addresses the status ambitions.

It is crucial to note that the initiatives of the RGS find their way onto the educational agenda present at schools and other public institutions. The RGS is involved in strengthening the role of geography within the school curriculum (in collaboration with the Ministry of Education) and raising the social prestige of the subject. Vladimir Putin established the official Day of the Geographer on August 18 (the day the Imperial RGS was founded) and an honorable title “Distinguished Geographer of the Russian Federation.” The goal of many other educational projects is to raise the public popularity of geography – for example, by organizing the Grand Geography Test,<sup>2</sup> national geography quizzes for schoolchildren, or the grandiose Festival of the RGS held annually since 2015 in Moscow’s Zaradye Park.

A closer analysis of the official materials reveals that all three components of the civilizational turn, as defined by Blackburn – state patriotism, uniqueness, and unity – occupy the central place in the RGS’s discourse. As articulated by Vladimir Putin in the address to the RGS’s members, patriotism should be understood as “respect for the national history, tradition, moral values which [...] form the foundations of our national identity” (kremlin.ru 2012). According to Shoigu, improving the quality of geography courses is “the cornerstone of the further development and flourishing of our country” (ria.ru 2019a). Putin sees another of the RGS’s missions as shaping a sense of national unity. He said that the RGS “forms the attitude towards the Homeland, towards its history, culture, nature; it awakens the need to become a member of a bigger unity” (kremlin.ru 2015). Therefore, the society should focus on young people and regional elites to integrate them around major projects (kremlin.ru 2014). The last component of the civilizational turn – uniqueness – is associated not only with the exceptional culture but also the natural environment. The RGS presents Russia as a “unique territory with unique fauna and flora” (kremlin.ru 2012). The imperial body provides the material base for Russian civilization, which not only can be taught and talked about but also physically experienced. The ways this is done are revealed in the practices of the RGS.

## Identities of Russia in the Practices of the RGS

The analysis of the practices of the RGS makes it possible to point to four distinct but interrelated narratives about Russian identity. They can be summarized with the following labels: *Northern country*, *distinct civilization*, *major power*, and *eternal Russia*. By emphasizing Russia's uniqueness, strengthening the sense of national unity, and shaping state patriotism, the identities correspond to the main components of the civilizational turn. They convey a message about exceptionalism, great power status, and continuous existence. Finally, they feed the imperial sentiment by praising imperial glory. The overview of practices, which mostly focus either on restoring the old routines or building a sense of identity between all the historical embodiments of Russia, confirms the significance of the background knowledge preserved in the RGS, which it spreads to the general public.

### Northern Country

The first identity does not directly invoke civilization but underlines Russia's uniqueness. *The Northern country* (*severnaya strana*) label stresses the special location of the imperial body. In 2010, Vladimir Putin argued at the "Arctic" International Forum, "the enormous Russian territory lies in the far North. Russia in general is a Northern country – 30% of our country lies in the North" (rgo.ru 2013). The statement seems to refer merely to the fact of the geographical location. But the *Northern country* narrative uses geography to stress Russian uniqueness. As Putin explained,

history and geography granted our nation the task of putting these lands to appropriate use. Russia has played a leading role in marking out the Northern Sea Route; it brought to life an Arctic fleet and aviation; it has created a whole network of stationary and drifting research stations in the Arctic. Last but not least, it was our country which has accumulated a unique experience in building cities and major industrial complexes beyond the polar circle. (rgo.ru 2013)

Practices connected to this particular identity convey the message that not only is the geographical location important, but also a sense of self. The "Arctic factor" makes Russia unique. The RGS's practices are involved with marking Russia's presence in this part of the world. They fix in the public sphere the notion of the "Russian Arctic," which should be internalized by Russian citizens as well as recognized abroad. For the domestic audience, the RGS invests in projects intended at developing arctic tourism, for example, organizing cruises and adrenaline expeditions. This should bring profit to the northern regions and at the same time popularize knowledge about the North, thus helping Russians develop a personal attachment to the region.

Being a *Northern country* is legitimated by Russia acting as a responsible caring host. This is seen in the RGS's initiative of cleaning the Novaya Zemlya and New Siberian Islands. The project has been conducted since 2017 with significant participation from military personnel. In 2017, Putin and Medvedev visited Alexander Island (in Franz Josef Land) to monitor the results of the work (rgo.ru 2022). As a *Northern country*, Russia should excel in arctic expertise. Therefore, the RGS invests in expeditions; for example, in January 2020, it organized the first "Patrons of Coldness" challenge-tour in Yakutia in which participants were registering the lowest temperatures in the region.

### Russian Civilization

In one article, Russia is even called an "Arctic civilization" (ng.ru 2020). However, in most cases when civilization appears, Russia is depicted as a culturally distinct entity. It is associated with the history of the Russian statehood or, more broadly, *ruskiy mir*. The latter was defined in the materials of the RGS as a space that includes

countries and regions where local traditions closely coexist with Russian culture; the Russian language is spoken, a unique sensitivity has developed, Orthodoxy is revered. In these sovereign countries people approach Russian science and literature with great respect. The civilization of the Russian World plays and will play in these countries and region the fundamental role in a diplomatic and intercultural cooperation. (rgo.ru 2018)

Countries such as the Czech Republic, Serbia, Belarus and Georgia were mentioned as examples (but not Ukraine!) (rgo.ru 2018a). In the materials of the RGS, there is one more context in which Russia appears as a distinct civilization. In 2019, Khristofor Konstantinidis argued that the results of archaeological work at the Black Sea Coast “for the first time position Russia in the international arena as one of unique centers of ancient culture and civilizations” (ria.ru 2019b). Konstantinidis is not perturbed by the paradox of a Russia that takes pride in its Greek heritage and uses it to highlight its own civilizational distinctiveness. It is important to emphasize that anti-Western sentiment, so often attributed to the civilizational turn, does not feature in the civilizational narrative of the RGS, which fits the perception of geography as a less ideologized subject.

The identity of *Russian civilization* is underpinned by a set of practices. The least obvious are archaeological excavations that legitimate Russia’s ancient origins and tell the story about a history of Russia that started much earlier than the baptism of Prince Vladimir. Since 2016 the RGS has been involved in the underwater excavations of the ancient city of Akra situated near Kerch (rgo.ru 2019). From materials published by the society, we learn that it was part of the Bosporan Kingdom (6th century BC), the mythical homeland of Achilles. The RGS labelled it as “Crimea’s Atlantis” and plans to turn it into the central attraction of the newly designed tourist trail called “The Golden Ring of the Bosporan Kingdom.” The trail links 35 sites in 12 cities of Crimea, Krasnodar Krai, and Rostov Oblast.<sup>3</sup> Its name evokes associations with the Golden Ring around Moscow, which is considered the civilizational cradle of old Rus’. It hence suggests that the Black Sea coast with Crimea as its center is the second Russian cradle of Russian statehood. Another project (launched in 2015) uses history to emphasize Russia’s ancient origins and envisions Crimea as a part of the Great Silk Route. They all stress the indissoluble historic bond between the annexed peninsula and Russia.

Both projects are connected to tourism and are also addressed to a foreign audience. The international audience can participate in another initiative promoted by the RGS, namely, an international photo competition called simply “Russian Civilization.” It was held for the first time in 2017. The main goal is for participants “to understand and convey what Russian civilization is today.” It is a way to popularize the notion itself and to make people imagine the idea, internalize it, and materialize it in photographs. The winning works are later shown abroad in the Russian Centers of Science and Culture (rgo.ru 2019a).

*Russian civilization* was the leading theme of the interactive project addressed to young Russians organized in 2010 to celebrate the 1,150th anniversary of Russian statehood. The intention was for participants to learn about the memorial complexes and heroes from their region. Then, they would create a “Memory Map” marking all the relevant sites. They took part in expeditions, hiking trips, and a course on how to use satellite navigation. According to the official information provided by the RGS, the project cultivated patriotism among young people and helped them to associate it with heroism. Importantly, heroism was defined by such categories as “civic activism, military courage, labor and moral values” (rgo.ru 2015). It was stated that the participants were inspired to “defend Russia and Russian civilization.”

Using geography instead of history to study the Russian civilizational discourse shows that the story about the country’s uniqueness can be told with other arguments than anti-Westernism or the West-East axis. Geography brings to the complicated picture of Russian identity the Southern regions with their legacy of ancient Greece. As a result, the label of being a distinct civilization is suddenly not merely about *russskiy mir* or “exceptional Russia.” The practices of the RGS aim to make the abstract notion of civilization more familiar to ordinary citizens. At the same time, they bind this notion to patriotism.

### *Russia as a major power*

*Major power* identity joins the aspect of uniqueness with strong state patriotism. Contrary to the previous case, this identity narrative is expressed in practices that juxtapose Russia with the West. The counter-hegemonic edge is well seen in the society's efforts to restore the historical Russian names in global toponymy. The first to draw attention to this problem was Vladimir Putin. At the RGS meeting in 2018, he said:

Toponymy, i.e., the names of geographical objects, needs special attention. Today we face a situation, when Russian names which were given in the previous centuries by our explorers have been gradually squeezed out of the maps of the world. I want to stress that by the same token the memory of Russia's contribution to discovering our planet and developing science has been wiped out. It is especially well seen in the Antarctic where the names given by its first discoverers – Lazarev and Bellinghausen – have been completely forgotten. Only a handful of people today know that the historical original name of Smith Island was Borodino, and Snow Island used to be Little Yaroslavets, and Livingstone was Smolensk. (kremlin.ru 2018)

As one of the reasons for this “appalling” state of affairs, Putin mentioned the absence of updated and easily accessible maps prepared in Russia. As a result, the RGS together with the Ministry of Defence were asked to prepare a new Russian atlas of the world with Russian names.<sup>4</sup> In 2019, after meeting with Shoigu, the owners of Yandex also promised to make sure that their maps will feature the Russian names given by Russian discoverers (rg.ru 2019).

As Putin explained, “We are not enforcing anything on anyone. This is not necessary. But we don't have the right not to react to the falsification of historical and geographical truth that offends the sense of justice” (kremlin.ru 2018). Although Putin did not mention the West, the message that the latter was the problem was clear. Referring to Putin's speech, Oleg Nazarov and Nikita Brusilovsky summed it up by stating that “Russians gave new lands Russian names but they were changed to English” and concluded “obviously, such a situation is unacceptable for a major power” (rgo.ru 2020). Alexander Samsonov was even more explicit: “Now they want to deprive Russians of the status of the first explorers of the Antarctic. It's a result of the West's intention to control the enormous resources of the icy continent.” He added “either we are a part of Europe (her ‘pipeline’) as her economic, political or cultural periphery or we are a distinct Russian civilization sovereignly deciding global issues in the interest of our country and nation” (Samsonov 2019).

Bringing back Russian names on maps is a part of a bigger RGS assignment to popularize the knowledge about Russia's historic contribution to discoveries. The society's mission is to remind the world about the Russian “Columbus and Magellan.” This would be also the way, as Nazarov and Brusilovsky suggested, to give back Russia its rightful place among the leading powers (rgo.ru 2020). A good example of such practices comes with the 200th anniversary of Russians discovering Antarctica (rgo.ru 2020a). A series of events was scheduled for 2019–2020: a voyage around the world following the historical sea route of the ships commanded by Fabian Bellingshausen and Mikhail Lazarev in 1819–1821. One of the voyage's goals was to create a new maritime map of Antarctica. This initiative, along with many others, signals Russia's current capacity to act as a true major power that continues to explore new territories and push back the boundaries of science. Exploration and discoveries are a status marker whose origins go back to imperial times. They also aim at strengthening state patriotism by shaping collective identity based on pride in grandeur state achievements. In recent years, the RGS has launched many projects of this kind that, after a long hiatus, again cast Russians in the role of world pioneers. In 2019, an expedition conducted by the RGS and the Russian North Fleet led by General Alexandr Moisyeev explored Franz Josef Land (rgo.ru 2019b). They announced the discovery of five new islands (rgo.ru 2019c). In the same year. the ship “Altai” succeeded in the longest uninterrupted sailing in Arctic waters of a maritime ship not being an icebreaker. The expedition has also provided the most accurate measurements so far of the maximum depth of the Barents Sea (rgo.ru 2019b).

Finally, the RGS, in accordance with the practices of its historic predecessors, plays an important role in securing Russia current frontiers, especially those that could be undermined by international actors. The RGS legitimates the Russian presence and builds an image of one integral and firm imperial body. Crimea serves as a good example. Immediately after 2015, it became subject to intensive activity from the RGS. Such activity was intended to convey one message: Crimea was always Russian land. Already on April 15, 2014, Sergei Shoigu announced that the RGS would explore the Black Sea coast and waters. One year after the annexation, the RGS launched a project to recover sunken historical battleships of the Russian Empire from the Black Sea. The expedition to the seabed received extensive publicity because Vladimir Putin personally took part in it (kremlin.ru 2015a). In 2016, the RGS decided to open its third headquarters in Sevastopol to strengthen its presence in the region. It also promised to open a museum of the History of Sevastopol, which would provide information about the geography of Crimea and maritime discoveries by Russians (rgo.ru 2014). The society participated in creating new maps of Russia after the annexation of Crimea, thus providing a new spatial image of the enlarged country. In all these cases, the background knowledge shaped by the imperial past guided the actions of the RGS, which aims to restore old practices. They, in turn, should help to restore the former glory of the imperial state.

The invasion of Ukraine has brought the imperial background to the forefront. This is demonstrated by the fact that on the day on which Russia annexed the eastern regions of Ukraine (October 7, 2022), members of the Crimean unit of the society met with the representatives of the Kherson Naval Academy “to hold talks about establishing a RGO unit in Kherson” (rgo.ru 2022a). Six weeks later, a similar sitting took place at the State University of Melitopol (rgo.ru 2022b). These actions of the RGS legitimize the annexation and create the impression of the irreversibility of Russia’s conquest.

### **Eternal Russia**

The *Russia as a major power* and *eternal Russia* labels are closely connected since they both provide a coherent story about Russia’s historical continuity, which is important for strengthening the sense of national unity – one of the core components of the civilizational turn. *Major power* and *eternal Russia* draw their legitimacy from referring to the glorious imperial past. Russia was, is, and will be a major power. The claim to this status is supported by emphasizing its role as a contributor to world civilization in geography. After all, it was Russians who discovered and explored for humankind the North, Siberia, and the Antarctic. The *eternal Russia* label comes to the foreground in the declarations of the RGS about the necessity to preserve the splendid tradition of the Romanovs and the USSR. In the narrative of the RGS, the golden imperial times and the revival of the “Putin years” contrast greatly with the 1990s, which are presented as a period of shameful downfall (kremlin.ru 2013).

The RGS’s efforts to revive the good old traditions can be noticed in many areas of its activity. When discussing necessary changes in school curriculum, members of the society often refer to Soviet textbooks as attractive examples (rg.ru 2019a). The imperial past inspires the society to organize new expeditions and explorations (rgo.ru 2020b). There has been a return of the so-called travelling university (*plavuchiy universitet*), which had been popular in the 1960s and 1970s; due to efforts from the RGS, it is back in Arkhangelsk and Far East (kremlin.ru 2017). Importantly, this mode of learning is praised not for its academic quality but above all for shaping the character of the nation and cultivating patriotism. Looking into these practices reveals the complex dynamics between subconscious workings of background knowledge and deliberate actions taken by the RGS. Even if the RGS aims at restoring traditional ways of learning and not imperialism per se, it draws from the imperial patterns and eventually contributes to reproducing an imperial identity.

The *eternal Russia* label is rooted in the narrative about the historic glory of Russian and Soviet geographers, driven not by individual ambition but by state patriotism (another component of the civilizational discourse). The RGS has invested a lot of energy in popularizing knowledge about



their achievements. It finances the restoration of old documents and maps, which are subsequently made available online. It has also published an impressive 15-volume series for a young audience entitled “Great Russian Explorers” (*Velikiye russkiye puteshestvenniki*), which, according to official information, was donated with the support of Sovcomflot to each school library in Russia.<sup>5</sup> Memory about imperial glory is restored in a more spectacular way – for example, in 2013, Putin was among the crew in a bathyscaphe that submerged in the Gulf of Finland to recover Russian submarines and ships from the late 19th century. The name of the project, “The Maritime Glory of Russia,” emphasized the pride in the imperial past. Historic continuity also comes to the forefront with the celebration of 200 years of discovering the Antarctic. On this occasion, many articles appeared praising the courage of the Imperial and Soviet pioneers in this continent (rgo.ru. 2020a, 2020c; 2020d; 2020e). All these texts underlined the academic excellence of the past generations of geographers, which spans ideological differences. The eternity of the Russian state was well captured in another initiative that led to the placing of the Russian flag at three different locations on Franz Josef Land in the “most Northern point of Eurasia” in 2019. This action was meant to celebrate three different anniversaries: 145 years of the discovery of Franz Josef Land, 105 years of the Russian flag being raised there, and 90 years of the flag of the USSR being raised there. The three anniversaries under one flag depict the perfect historical continuity of the Russian Empire, the USSR, and the Russian Federation.

The variety of practices of the RGS is truly impressive. Its initiatives encompass tourism, ecology, archaeology, military expeditions, ethnographic fieldwork, and education, to mention only a few. And yet the central message remains unchanged – the glory of the great power that ordinary Russians should know, love and, if necessary, sacrifice themselves for. Ambitious explorations and expeditions are intended to provide “the large cause,” which is so important for imperial nations (Kumar 2003, 34). In accordance with the framework created by the civilizational discourse, geography proves Russia’s uniqueness, shapes state patriotism, and strengthens national unity.

## Conclusion

The practices of the Russian Geographical Society enact, reproduce, and reify the imperial syndrome. All three components of the “civilizational turn” – uniqueness, unity, and state patriotism – feature in the RGS’s narrative and actions. In today’s Russia, there are a few institutions that could be considered entrepreneurs of civilizational discourse, for example, the Russian Orthodox Church and the World Russian People’s Council. So far, the RGS has never been mentioned in this context; this article was written with the intention of rectifying such an omission. One of the reasons the RGS has remained under the academic radar for such a long time is because it is specialized in geography – and not history or political ideas – and it is the latter that are typically analyzed first when it comes to identity. Meanwhile, the common perception of geography as an objective, non-ideologized discipline allows it to influence the identity-forming process in a more subtle, and often a more effective, way.

The imperial body as enacted in practices of the RGS consists of three rings. The core ring is the territory of the Russian Federation. This is presented as intact, strong, and safe, even at the distant frontiers of the Arctic and Crimea. The second ring encompasses *russkiy mir*, which goes beyond the national territory, and its range is outlined by the presence of Russian culture (language, art, and science). The third ring does not have a distinct spatial demarcation and refers to Russia’s assertiveness beyond its borders or even *russkiy mir* and is legitimated by its major power status. This dimension is illustrated by the RGS’s actions in connection to the Antarctic.

It is highly symbolic that, since the beginning of the invasion in 2022, the RGS has not released any new materials on Ukraine. Donbas is mentioned once in the context of collecting humanitarian aid by volunteers in Penza (rgo.ru 2022c).<sup>6</sup> This large concealment fits into the domestic policy of the Kremlin. The war has highlighted the change in the role of the RGS. Until the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the society was the keeper of the imperial body or, more broadly, the imperial

legacy. It aimed at restoring the glory of geography and forming state patriotism but not at reviving nostalgia for lost territories. The conservative nature of its initiatives started to change after 2014 and crystalized after 2022 when the RGS changed from being the keeper to the steward of Russian aggression. The society has returned to the role characteristic of geographical societies in the 19th century, that is, legitimating expansion and conquest.

Most of the RGS's practices are inspired by the routines and tradition formed in the time of the Russian Empire and/or the USSR – for example, the “travelling university,” re-enacting historical explorations, or restoring the memory about the imperial and Soviet geographers. The motif of the historical continuity of Russian statehood connects each identity narrative promoted by the RGS – *Northern country, distinct civilization, major power, eternal Russia*. The story about historical continuity rests on the imperial background knowledge and reproduces a national imperialism that moves beyond a particular ethnicity or faith.

The RGS defines the role of geography in strict connection to patriotism and values; this originates in the logic of imperialism. The emphasis on serving statecraft, cultivating patriotism, or toughening up the nation by expeditions and extreme Arctic tourism allude to the ideas of Mackinder. The patronage of “the Army and Throne” envisioned by the leading roles for Putin and Shoigu in the RGS, and even the RGS itself (for example, its elitist character, the return to the historical headquarters in Saint Petersburg) are an example, even if not one initially intended, of reenacting imperial practices. Over the last decade, the RGS has become the pet project of the elite. The oligarchs compete with each other in sponsoring its new initiatives. Membership, especially in the Trustees Committee, signals social position and prestige. The society functions as an influential community of imperial practice, which diffuses its agenda through regional structures.

The case of the Russian Geographical Society and its practices shows that imperial past still constitutes an important source of the background knowledge of the Russian nation. The civilizational turn should be analyzed in the broader context of the former empire, meaning that the Russian Federation is seeking formula for a national identity that will be acceptable for the imperial nation as well as the peoples it assimilated. The present agenda of the RGS is defined by the elite and serves the interests of the state. Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny that it resonates with part of Russian society. Practices do not merely stabilize and reproduce imperial structures. Materialized in the actions of individuals, they have the potential to bring about a change. However, in the current situation where the vulnerability of Russian society stands in stark contrast to the omnipotence of the state apparatus enhanced by the invasion of Ukraine, we should rather expect a further strengthening of the imperial syndrome, which will in turn have consequences for the self-identification process of Russians.

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## Notes

- 1 One should admit that the principal discourse entrepreneur – namely, Vladimir Putin – is not coherent in his vision of the multiethnic Russian civilization and the role of ethnic Russians. On the one hand, the president depicts Russia as a distinct civilization of a multiethnic and multi-religious nation. On the other hand, on some occasions, he emphasizes the special role of the Russian people in creating this civilization. This does not change the fact that the civilizational discourse tends to highlight multiethnicity as one of the roots of the distinctiveness of Russian civilization (Malinova 2020).
- 2 It was Putin's personal initiative. Since 2015, over 900 people have participated in it.
- 3 Azov, Anapa, Gelendzik, Yevpatoria, Kerch, Novorossiysk, Sevastopol, Simferopol, Taman, Fedosiya.

- 4 Later on, a “National Atlas of the Arctic” was also published.
- 5 In 2020, Russian respondents (16%) ranked “great Russian explorers and discoverers” as the ninth highest reason for national pride (levada.ru 2021).
- 6 The careful reader will notice the traces left by the conflict like the drop in the number of RGS members from 27,000 in 2022 to 23,700 a year later, probably caused by it losing members from Ukraine and possibly other countries.

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