

M. V. Zakharova⁵

APPROACHES TO THE DIALOGUE OF CULTURES AND CIVILIZATIONS

As part of our annual meetings, we invariably address the image of the future world order. The debates have the character of serious scientific discussions, in the course of which not just another epitaph to the unipolar world order of the past is voiced, but also specific initiatives for the formation and strengthening of multipolarity are proposed. It is gratifying that the ideas generated on this and similar platforms are not “dissolved in the ether”, but after appropriate expert study are incorporated into the most important doctrinal documents adopted in our country.

Our current conversation about the dialogue among cultures and civilizations in the new emerging reality is largely philosophical in nature. At the same time, the topic is also of great practical importance, since inter-civilizational communication is a reality of the modern world. In addition to states, it involves scientific, religious, entrepreneurial, youth, public and basically cultural associations, etc.

Russian approaches to the problems of inter-civilizational and intercultural dialogue are based on the desire to form “such a system of international relations that would guarantee reliable security, preservation of its cultural and

civilizational identity, and equal opportunities for the development for all states, regardless of their geographical location, size of territory, demographic, resource and military capacity, or political, economic and social structure.”⁶ (a quotation from the Foreign Policy Concept, 2023).

In citing these provisions of the Concept, I cannot refrain from mentioning, in contrast, another document, the authors of which do not hesitate to call their country “a global power with global interests” and declare that it is called upon to ‘lead’ (it must be assumed – the world) “with strength and purposefulness.” I think it’s clear without any explanation who we’re talking about. This is a quotation from the U. S. National Security Strategy adopted in October 2022.

For reference only: In the preamble to the Strategy, this passage reads as follows, “...there is no nation better positioned to lead with strength and purpose than the United States of America.”

Thus, already here, in these basic characteristics I have quoted, we can see the profound differences in approaches to the dialogue of civilizations, to the future world order of Russia (and like-minded people supporting it) and the “collective West”. In scientific terms, we are talking about the confrontation of civilizational approach, on the one hand, and linear-universalist approach, on the other hand. The first one, which is also defended by our country, is based on the awareness of the non-universality of Western culture and civilization, which is no more unique than others (the projection of these views in international relations is precisely the principle of multipolarity). The key characteristic of the second one is the claim for universality of the processes taking place in the world for all countries and peoples, which invariably leads to creation of their hierarchy in terms of ‘performance’ (and, as a consequence, unipolarity in international affairs).

Culture, unique to each individual civilization, plays an increasingly important role in international relations. Pol-

⁵ Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Russian Federation, Ph. D. in History. Author of a number of publications in the press, including: “The World Leader of Black Transplantology”, “In Memory of All Victims of the Holocaust”, “Toys and Holidays” (co-authored), “Chunjie – the Holiday of New Year”, “Temple Fairs in Modern China”, and others. Awarded the Orders of Honor, Friendship, and a Certificate of Honor from the President of the Russian Federation. Recipient of the “Voice of the World”, PROBA, “Charmous” prizes, and others.

⁶ Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации. 31 марта 2023 г. URL: <https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1860586/?lang=ru> (accessed: 26.04.2024).

itics, as if refuting the classics of Marxism-Leninism, in some cases has ceased to be a concentrated expression of economics alone. Meanings, values often become a more significant factor than stock-exchange quotations.

Globalization, launched according to the Western scenario, has received, as a serious counterbalance, the aspiration of the peoples of the world to revive their cultural self-consciousness and self-determination. Many Western intellectuals who foresaw the course of development of global processes wrote about it in detail in their time.

For reference only: S. Huntington in his work *The Clash of Civilizations and the Transformation of the World Order* (1996) assigned a special role to new processes in the world cultural life, “The distribution of cultures in the world reflects the distribution of power. <...> European colonialism is over; American hegemony is receding. The erosion of Western culture follows, as indigenous, historically rooted mores, languages, beliefs, and institutions reassert themselves. The growing power of non-Western societies produced by modernization is generating the revival of non-Western cultures throughout the world.”

Indeed, today non-Western intellectuals actively advocate the revival of ethnic cultures that oppose Western cultural models that claim to be universal.

At the same time, it is important to understand that we see nothing new in the values promoted today by the “collective West” – once again, we see an unexorcized age-old desire to destroy other civilizations and impose their own, at the current historical stage – neo-liberal cultural and moral values. One example is the agenda of the Summits for Democracy organized by the USA. Thus, during the last one, the third in succession (held in Seoul on March 18–20 this year), the traditional set of neo-liberal values – defending democracy and creating the conditions, under which democracies will flourish, minority rights, and the climate agenda – was discussed again.

Genuine dialogue with other civilizations and cultures is deliberately avoided by the West. Decades of soullessness of the postmodern era, as some researchers call it, have led to a decline in the spiritual, moral, and cultural sense in the countries of Europe and North America – hence the ideas of transhumanism have blossomed so rapidly in Western countries. Perhaps, that is why today the leaders of the “collective West” are trying to ‘close the ranks’ as if on a field of battle, on the issue of values, as directed by Washington.

Against the background of the objective decline of its geopolitical influence, the USA descend to instrumentalizing culture, turning its manifestations into a certain commodity, service, and lever to exert influence. Therefore, the typical Western notion of ‘soft power’ has grown, and various concepts emerged describing culture as a kind of supplement, an addition to the traditional, classical hard power – a military-political complex of measures in state hands. This utilitarian approach reflects the very origins, the basis of their thinking and goal-setting.

Russia’s position, on the contrary, is that culture has a completely different dimension and meaning, a different scale: it is a high reflection of the spiritual, historical, civilizational, value-based identity of the people, its non-material and material image, which has become an integral part of all mankind. To reduce it to ‘soft power’, to try to ‘cancel’ it or use it opportunistically is absurd.

It is important to note that the Russian civilizational world view is based on the common values of the traditional confessions represented in the territory of our country – and, above all, Christianity and the Orthodox tradition. In particular, such as mercy and love to fellow beings, justice and respect for the human person. At the same time, a distinctive feature of the Russian culture and art is spirituality, which originates in the depth of the Slavic-Russian heritage. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it is now one of the effective tools for countering the neo-liberal agenda aggressively promoted by the West.

Accordingly, international cultural and humanitarian cooperation, which is certainly one of the important priorities of Russia’s foreign policy, is, first of all, a mutually enriching communication, exchange of experience, and strengthening of relations between people. The key is not to impose and project power, influence, but to share, to complement each other.

Pay attention to the wording in such programme documents as the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, which I have already mentioned, or the Concept of Humanitarian Policy of the Russian Federation Abroad 2022. They give priority attention to “constructive dialogue, partnership and mutual enrichment of different cultures, religions and civilizations”, “promotion of constructive international cooperation to preserve historical and cultural heritage”, “promotion of interreligious, intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding”, mutual enrichment of “cultures of the peoples of the Russian Federation and foreign states”, development of “international humanitarian cooperation on a fair, mutual, open, and non-discriminatory basis”, etc.

If we apply a different approach, we return to the sad examples when some societies tried to turn the cultural heritage, the art of great creators of the past into a kind of instrument of mental correction: they sanitized what did not fit into the procrustean bed of the dominant ideology. This is how the whole chapters of the German philosophers under Hitler’s fascists disappeared, how the names of directors and artists who were suspected of favoring communism and leftist ideas under McCarthyism in the USA were blanked out, etc.

Russia assumes that the dialogue of cultures implies, among other things, the search for common origins that create opportunities for sustainable contact between ethnic groups and states. It requires a common language that will be understood by all, despite the ethnic, religious, and ethical diversity of the world. This is necessary, among other things, to get out of the current dangerous turbulence in international relations, potentially threatening global cataclysms, in which we find ourselves through the fault of the West.

Geographically, if we speak specifically about official relations, our cultural priorities are now directed towards friendly states. The countries of the “collective West” are continuing their unsuccessful attempts to ‘culturally isolate’ Russia by cancelling tours, exhibitions and concerts and severing long-standing partnerships with cultural institutions. But at the same time, there is a growing demand for the Russian culture and art in the states of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East.

In this sense, I would like to note that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs takes an active part in the implementation of various cultural projects, in effective and well-coordinated

ed cooperation with the relevant departments – the Ministry of Culture of Russia, the Ministry of Education of Russia, the Ministry of Education and Science of Russia, the Ministry of Sports of Russia, the Russian Academy of Sciences, and others. Our country traditionally hosts a number of significant international cultural events, in which we help to attract foreign representatives. In this connection, the International Cultural Forum is worthy of special mention, which was held here in St. Petersburg last November for the first time in a new format – as the Forum of United Cultures. The central event of the Forum was the Plenary Session with the participation of the President of the Russian Federation V. V. Putin. The interest of foreign partners was enormous.

This is demonstrated by the international events held in our country last year and this year – in particular, the Russia-Africa Summit (July 27–28, 2023), the Global Forum of Multipolarity (February 27 this year), the Second Congress of the International Russophile Movement (February 28 this year), the World Youth Festival (Sochi, March 1–7 this year), the “Games of the Future” (February 21 – March 3 this year). The representatives of the World Majority countries who visited our country demonstrated that they do not accept the unhealthily liberal, unnatural, and anti-traditional values of the Western world. They realize that a multipolar world implies not only military-political and economic sovereignization, but also cultural independence. Permanent multilateral and bilateral dialogue is necessary for its sustainable existence, above all, for the prevention of military conflicts. A task of extraordinary complexity, requiring the highest political and diplomatic culture, professionalism, and the ability to analyze a huge amount of information.

I would like to make specific mention of the role played by the BRICS in deepening the dialogue of cultures. Speaking of the dialogue, let me remind you that all decisions within the association are taken by consensus. We are ready to hear each other. At the same time, the BRICS has long been an agent of cultural and civilizational diversity in the world. Given the trends in the global economy, this role will only increase.

At the same time, it is characteristic that our countries are in harmony on many issues in cultural and civilizational terms. We note the understanding of our approaches in Beijing, New Delhi, and other world capitals.

The topic of cultural cooperation has a special place in the event programme of Russia’s BRICS Chairmanship this year. A total of 200 events will be held in the fields of politics, economics, and culture. These include film and theatre festivals and cultural forums to be held in dozens of the Russian cities.

The BRICS provides a model different from the liberal world order. We look at each other and other countries as equals. And this is so difficult for the representatives of the Western colonial political culture to understand.

As for the West, now it seems to be entering a phase of worsening political and social crisis, which should reformat Western society, and hence its cultural and civilizational approaches. It is likely enough that in a few electoral cycles, a political alternative may emerge in Western countries that can offer new ideas. We’ll see.

Being a vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power, as noted in the Foreign Policy Concept, Russia is ready for mutually beneficial and non-confrontational cooperation with the West with mutual respect for cultural and civilizational diversity.