

Russia's Concept for a 'Humanitarian' Policy Abroad

Martin Kragh

9 September 2022

On 5 September, President Vladimir Putin signed into law a decree on “a humanitarian policy of the Russian Federation abroad”. The document does not represent a new foreign policy doctrine, although this was implied by several international media outlets. It should thus be assumed that the official foreign policy doctrine, adopted in 2016, remains in force. Nor does the document have anything to do with “humanitarian law”, although this could be implied by its ambiguous title.

The document, which runs over 35 pages, outlines the principles of a policy for promoting Russian culture – broadly defined – abroad. Its key points can be summarized as follows.

Russian cultural policy abroad will continue to describe Russia as a separate civilization, distinct from other regions and countries. Western states are described as the main threat to Russian culture and therefore Russian statehood. One implication of this line of reasoning is that cooperation between Russian and Western cultural and educational institutions will be inevitably limited.

A key task is to promote and defend the foundations of Russian “traditional values”, in particular Russian family values, deemed to be threatened by “neo-liberal governments” (i.e., the West). Russia presents itself as the defender of “morality”, “humanism” and “spirituality”.

The document also promotes Russia's so called “constitutional identity”, popularized by the head of Russia's Constitutional Court, Valery Zorkin. This constitutional identity characterizes Russia as a country legally steeped in “traditional spiritual-moral values”, dedicated to the principles of “non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states”.

However, the Russian doctrine of “non-interference” is immediately contradicted by the stated goal of promoting Russian culture and influence in the CIS region, including the occupied areas of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the so-called republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. The document also singles out the Baltic states, Moldova and Georgia as places where Russian culture can protect the rights of Russian-speaking groups. The broader Slavic region is also

mentioned as one of strategic significance. Engaging with diaspora groups in Europe and elsewhere remains a priority.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine will have strong implications for the Kremlin's policy goals. On the one hand, the people of Ukraine are increasingly abandoning all aspects of Russian culture (language, literature, bilateral ties, etc). On the other hand, Russia is waging a genocidal war in the occupied territories, involving the active destruction of Ukrainian culture there. It is hardly surprising that this feature of Russian "humanitarian" policy abroad is not mentioned anywhere in the document.

The document describes Russian history and civilization as uniquely "peaceful". Over the centuries, Russia was home to various ethnic and religious groups who co-existed in "harmony". The document even lists the values shared by all people in Russia: patriotism, service of the Fatherland, family, labor, humanism, social justice, mutual support and collectivism. It is probably assumed that these values will exert a strong attraction on target groups abroad.

Accordingly, contemporary Russian society is seen as united by a mutual "cultural (civilizational) code", founded on the preservation of Russian culture and language, and the historical and cultural legacy of the Russian people. The strained language – and the obvious tautology in defining Russian culture with reference to Russia's culture – is preserved here for the sake of authenticity.

Notably, the document makes no reference to Russian culture as a bridge to promote Russian business or investments. The document makes only passing mention of the need to promote Russian "information-communication technologies" and tourism. However, the document regards this as useful solely for the spread of Russia's "humanitarian influence in the world". In contrast to the public diplomacy of most Western states, culture plays no role as a vehicle of promoting economic interests.

In addition, Russia will seek to counter "historical falsification", with particular reference to the Second World War and the "Great Patriotic War". Russian humanitarian policy is thus part of a larger diplomatic and political agenda of legitimizing Russian foreign policy claims, grounded in the victory over Nazi Germany in 1945.

The document describes the Russian language as one of the most "developed, rich and in-demand languages of the world". An illustration of this fact is apparently the official standing of the Russian language in several multilateral organizations, such as the UN, OSCE, and so on. Promoting the Russian language abroad is therefore an "inherent element of the enlightenment mission of the Russian Federation abroad" and an "important instrument" to increase the standing of Russia.

Notably, although the document repeatedly describes Russia as a "multinational" and "multi-religious" country, it focuses solely on the promotion of culture understood in terms of the titular nation. It mentions explicitly and repeatedly the importance of the Russian language, Russian culture, and so forth. The document has no specific agenda for the promotion of Russian minority cultures.

More significantly, Russian culture is here described as an "instrument of soft power". Its goal is the strengthening of Russia's international standing, and "neutralizing anti-Russian tendencies of a political-cultural nature" (sic). Russian media sources – TV, radio, internet –

are mentioned as particularly useful instruments in this regard.

Russia's return to the topic of traditional values and the "Russian World" needs to be seen in its current geopolitical context: the ongoing invasion of Ukraine, and the confrontation with the Western states over the future European security order. Paradoxically, nothing has hurt Russia's standing in its "near abroad" more than Putin's actions in the last few years. The document should first and foremost be seen as part of the Kremlin's attempts to frame its internal domestic problems and weakening international standing in terms of a cultural war with the outside world.

In conclusion, Russia has produced a document on a narrow domain of foreign policy, or public diplomacy. It is long, repetitive and tedious, written in the style of thinking usually associated with Russia's Minister of Culture, [Vladimir Medinsky](#). In many ways the document also repeats – albeit in different words – core tenets of Soviet ideology: the idea of Russia as a unique civilization, a permanent conflict between Russia and the West, and the need for Russia to push back against hostile forces abroad. In this regard, the document confirms a profound continuity in Russian foreign policy thinking.



Martin Kragh

Deputy Director of the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS) and Senior Research Fellow at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.

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