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Toward a Cultural Framework of Internet Governance: Russia's Great Power Identity and the Quest for a Multipolar Digital Order

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Description

CARGC Paper 13, "Toward a Cultural Framework of Internet Governance: Russia's Great Power Identity and the Quest for a Multipolar Digital Order," by CARGC Postdoctoral Fellow Stanislav Budnitsky was initially delivered as a CARGC Colloquium in 2018. As part of Budnitsky's larger research project on the relationship between nationalism and global internet governance, CARGC Paper 13 considers the cultural logics underlying Russia's global internet governance agenda. It argues that to understand Russia's digital vision in the early twenty-first century and, by extension, the dynamics of global internet politics writ large, scholars must incorporate Russia's historic self-identification as a great power into their analyses.

Keywords

Russia, internet policy, internet governance, global internet, multipolar, multipolarity

Disciplines

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It is with great pleasure that I share CARGC Paper 13, "Toward a Cultural Framework of Internet Governance: Russia's Great Power Identity and the Quest for a Multipolar Digital Order" by Stanislav Budnitsky. Stanislav joined CARGC as a 2018-2020 Postdoctoral Fellow from Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada where he received his PhD from the School of Journalism and Communication in 2018. A graduate of Moscow's National Research University, Stanislav has held fellowships with the Summer Media Policy Institute at Oxford University, the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, and the Stanford US-Russia Forum. Prior to graduate studies, he worked as a media producer and writer in Russia.

CARGC Paper 13 makes an important and timely contribution to current debates about Russia's approach to internet governance. It proposes the term of *digital multipolarity* to re-think Russia's global internet governance policies away from the often reductionist equation of Russia's discourse of digital sovereignty with Putin's authoritarian regime. Instead, Stanislav's paper invites us to consider the historical continuities in Russia's strategic pursuit of multipolarity. A close reading and intertextual analysis of Russia's internet discourse starting in the mid-1990s during Boris Yeltsin's first term highlights how multipolarity as a priority in global internet governance pre-dates the recent nationalist turn in Russian politics. As CARGC Paper 13 shows, what is often understood as the Primakov doctrine – a strategic pursuit of multipolar internet governance through the United Nations system – can in fact be traced to Andrey Kozyrev's tenure as Russia's first Foreign Minister in the early 1990s, a time of rapid economic liberalization and market reforms. By making central questions of national sovereignty to our understanding of the digital, CARGC Paper 13 reflects the work of our current research group on Critical Digital Sovereignties (2013 – 2023), a diverse group of global media scholars examining the changing meanings, ethics, and practices of sovereignty in the digital age.

CARGC Paper 13 offers an innovative analytical lens for making sense of Russia's internet governance agenda by foregrounding the cultural logics that underpin its strategic approach. This cultural approach foregrounds the historical trope of Russia as a great power to explain Russian elites' rejection of US-led unipolarity. It complicates dominant narratives by tracing Russia's vision of multipolarity to the early eighteenth century and anxieties about global recognition under Peter the Great's reign. Methodologically, CARGC Paper 13 shows how analytically centering cultural factors such as Russia's great power identity generates more nuanced understandings of the logics and rhetoric at play in states' internet governance normative visions. This provides an interesting blueprint for

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future internet governance research more attuned to cultural and socio-historical dimensions of digital policy.

This past year, our research group on Critical Digital Sovereignties has been in full swing. On October 3, 2019, we held a daylong workshop at our headquarters in Philadelphia to explore the question "What is Digital Sovereignty?" We invited scholars from Europe, Africa, and the US to reimagine sovereignty in and with the digital. Topics ranged from biometric data rights in India, the symbolism of satellite dishes for the Islamic State, Grindr and military surveillance in China, alternative internet infrastructures in Indigenous communities in the US, Mexico, and the Gaza Strip. Participants submitted images, videos, or sound files along with their papers. This helped foreground the aural and visual dimensions of how digital sovereignty is felt, experienced, circulated, and contested across various contexts. As an output of the workshop, CARGC Press published a collaborative digital publication using the open-source platform Scalar. This reflects the group's focus on producing exciting research on the digital and desire to mobilize innovative digital methodologies and tools for doing so. The Scalar publication can be viewed at https://os.pennds.org/digitaldominion/critical-digital-sovereignties-/index or accessed from our website. I encourage you to check it out and explore sovereignty in the digital age from multiple angles, scales, locations, and perspectives. A perfect companion to CARGC Paper 13!

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INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1990s, Russia has promoted the primacy of national governments and intergovernmental organizations in managing the global internet.[1] On May 1, 2019, in a recent move toward Russia's state-based internet governance vision, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed amendments to two federal laws, entitled *On Communication* and *On Information, Information Technologies, and Information Security*, establishing an autonomous internet infrastructure within Russia's territory. The Sovereign Internet Law, as the initiative came to be known, prescribes duplicating some of the global internet's critical infrastructures, vastly expanding the state's authorities over the internet, and ultimately allowing the Russian government to operate a national internet segment independent of the global network (Epifanova 2020). Russian supporters of the Sovereign Internet Law have framed it expressly in terms of challenging the Western-dominated global digital order. The bill's sponsors in the State Duma cited the "aggressive" 2018 US Cybersecurity Strategy, which identified Russia as one of the US' key adversaries (alongside North Korea and Iran), as evidence of the need for technological self-sufficiency in a global digital system (Klishas, Bokova and Lugovoy 2018). In late December, nearly two months after the law went into effect, the Russian president at his annual meeting with the press defended the law against widespread domestic and international criticism that claimed it encroached on users' human rights and sought to isolate Russia from the world. Putin argued, "[a] free internet and a sovereign internet are two concepts that are not mutually exclusive," asserting that the law's only goal was "to prevent the negative consequences of Russia's possible disconnection from the global network, *which is largely governed from abroad*" (Putin 2019b; added emphasis).[2]

This CARGC Paper considers the cultural logics underlying Russia's global internet governance agenda. It argues that to understand Russia's digital vision in the early twenty-first century and, by extension, the dynamics of global internet politics writ large, scholars must incorporate Russia's historic self-identification as a great power into their analyses. In the post-Cold War era, Russian political elites across the ideological spectrum have drawn on the cultural repertoire of Russia as a great power to construct the state's overarching geopolitical interest in reestablishing Russia's full participation in global governance. Russia's geopolitical desire to secure recognition as a great power with an inherent right to co-manage the international system hinges on the country's belief that the unipolar

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1   I would like to thank Clovis Bergere, Marina Krikorian, Fernanda Rosa, Britt Tevis, and Melissa Aronczyk for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

2   I rely on official translations of Russian-language statements into English where such documents are available; in all other cases, translations are mine.

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US-led liberal order, which emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War, must be replaced with a multipolar order, in which multiple world powers negotiate the course of global developments. The framework of multipolarity has dominated Russia's diplomatic discourse since the mid-1990s, promoting the notion of state sovereignty as full dominion of national governments in domestic affairs, respect for the diversity of the world's cultural and political systems, and global governance conducted through international law and multilateral intergovernmental organizations, primarily the UN Security Council. Russia views these pillars of multipolarity as challenging US-led liberal internationalism, which violates principles of national sovereignty and neglects global cultural and political diversity by imposing its will upon other societies.

The framework of multipolarity came to the fore of Russia's worldview concurrently with the emergence of the Russian internet governance agenda in the second half the 1990s. Since then, the quest for multipolarity has underlain the normative principles and rhetoric of Russia's pursuit for a multipolar digital order. For this reason, I use *digital multipolarity* to refer to the condition of a multipolar digital order that Russia works to instill and *digital multipolarism* to indicate Russia's concerted agenda of advancing this vision that encompasses rhetoric, institutions, and initiatives meant to challenge the US-led digital unipolarity. As in other realms, a digital multipolarism narrative promotes the normative tropes of the primacy of state sovereignty over national internet segments, the need to diversify global digital governance and markets monopolized by the United States, and of the primacy of state-based intergovernmental venues in managing the global internet.

This paper illuminates how Russia's self-understanding as a great power and its multipolar vision have shaped its internet governance discourse by examining Russia's early internet initiatives in the 1990s. By focusing on Russia's internet governance policymaking predating Vladimir Putin's presidency in 2000, this paper offers a corrective to the dominant understanding of Russia's internet agenda solely as the function of Putin-era political authoritarianism and cultural illiberalism. Additionally, focusing on the cultural logics of the nation's approach to the global internet expands scholars' analytical toolbox for understanding the workings of global internet governance, since scholarship on the subject has privileged materialist, legal, and science and technology studies (STS) approaches. By contrast, this paper contributes to a nascent literature that takes ideational and cultural factors seriously in the study of internet governance.

By focusing on Russia's internet governance policymaking predating Vladimir Putin's presidency in 2000, this paper offers a corrective to the dominant understanding of Russia's internet agenda solely as the function of Putin-era political authoritarianism and cultural illiberalism.

METHODOLOGY AND ORGANIZATION

This CARGC Paper is part of a larger research project on the relationship between nationalism and global internet governance. Using a socio-historical lens, the project examines Russia's approach to domestic and global internet governance in the context of its official national identity trajectory across the three post-Soviet decades. The larger study draws from intertextual analysis of Russia's official identity and internet discourses;

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interviews with Russian media and internet experts and practitioners; and participant observation conducted at high-profile foreign policy and internet-related gatherings in Russia and four other countries. Its methods and findings underlie the following discussion, even as the present study does not explicitly incorporate ethnographic methods. To illustrate this paper's main proposition regarding cultural continuities of Russia's digital multipolarism rooted in its great power self-image, I analyze the text and the socio-political context surrounding one of Russia's earliest internet governance initiatives: the UN Resolution proposed in 1998, entitled *Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security* (United Nations General Assembly 1999). I then show how the logics and language of this resolution have underlain Russia's internet governance agenda to this day.

This CARGC Paper proceeds in three steps. Part I contextualizes digital multipolarism within the global internet governance debate between proponents and opponents of the US-led digital order and reviews existing scholarly understandings of Russia's internet governance agenda. Part II situates Russia's digital multipolarism in relation to its historic great power identity, offering a cultural analysis of Russia's internet governance agenda. Part III illustrates how Russian officials have drawn on the ideational and discursive framework of multipolarity in constructing Russia's digital multipolarism through an examination of Russia's early internet governance initiatives in the 1990s. The conclusion discusses the limitations of the prevailing non-cultural explanations of Russia's internet governance agenda.

RUSSIA IN THE GLOBAL POLITICS OF THE INTERNET

Russia's pursuit of a multipolar digital order is one of the structuring forces of global internet politics and thus must be understood in the context of geopolitical debates about the global internet. Accordingly, this section introduces the emergence of internet governance as a geopolitical domain and explains its central debate over which state or non-state organizations should hold the ultimate authority to govern the global internet. Further, the section situates Russia's internet governance agenda within the clashing visions for the global internet advanced by national governments. Lastly, it reviews prevalent scholarly approaches to understanding Russia's digital multipolarism.

Internet Governance: Emergence of a Geopolitical Domain

Global internet governance refers to the domain of global politics concerned with the design and administration of the norms and rules governing the global internet (DeNardis 2014). Over the past two decades, internet governance ascended to the fore of global communication policymaking and global affairs (Radu 2019). From the internet's invention in the 1970s under the auspices of the US government through its rapid popularization and commercialization in the mid-1990s, governance of the internet's critical infrastructure

The US government's initiative introduced the central question of global internet politics: should management of the global internet's critical resources continue to be controlled by unelected US-based bodies or should it be administered under the ambit of an intergovernmental organization such as the United Nations?

was performed by several US-based non-profit organizations. In 1997-98, as the internet's political-economic and security potential came to the fore, the Clinton White House moved to secure the United States' historic privilege over the internet. The US administration fostered a governance model that preserved management of the internet's critical resources within existing and newly established US-based non-governmental organizations, while precluding from its management intergovernmental bodies (Mueller 2002). The US government's initiative introduced the central question of global internet politics: should management of the global internet's critical resources continue to be controlled by unelected US-based bodies or should it be administered under the ambit of an intergovernmental organization such as the United Nations? Put another way, what governing arrangement would allow states other than the US to share power over the global internet's techno-political configurations? While the central debate of internet governance emerged at the close of the twentieth century, it was not until the first decade of the twenty-first century that the central actors and institutions involved in this debate emerged on the global stage.

In the 2000s, national governments became increasingly involved in managing their domestic internet segments and advancing their foreign policies of the internet (Giacomello 2005; Goldsmith and Wu 2006, Chap. 5; Mueller 2010). The UN World Summit on Information Society (WSIS), held in two phases in 2003 and 2005, brought together highest-level officials in discussions over how and who ought to govern the global internet for the first time, thereby elevating internet governance to unprecedented geopolitical heights (Mueller 2010, Chap. 3). The summit cemented the issue of state versus non-state-based governance of the internet as the core problematic of global internet politics, exposing cleavages among varying national visions. The terms of this debate persist largely unchanged to this day and are reviewed next.

National Agendas for the Global Internet

The United States as the digital hegemon works to preserve the existing internet governance model, which critically relies upon US-based non-governmental organizations (Powers and Jablonski 2015). A number of traditional and new US allies support this agenda (e.g., Canada, Estonia, and Ukraine). Most European states have traditionally argued for a greater role in internet governance decision-making for national governments vis-à-vis non-governmental institutions, while reaffirming the shared Euro-Atlantic values in order to distance themselves from illiberal challengers to the US' digital hegemony such as China and Russia (Buttarelli 2014). Particularly after the revelations of Edward Snowden in 2013 regarding the US unlawful global surveillance programs, European powers such as France and Germany have been increasingly vocal in promoting the rhetoric of national and European digital sovereignty and have been more assertive in challenging the digital status

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quo (e.g., French National Cybersecurity Agency 2016). At the UN Internet Governance Forum in Paris in 2018, the French President Emmanuel Macron criticized what he called the false binary structuring contemporary internet governance discourse: a choice between the "Californian" model of undemocratic regulation by unelected private bodies and the "Chinese" model of complete state control without meaningful participation of non-state actors (Macron 2018). Macron proposed instead "a new multilateralism" that would bring together state and non-state actors in establishing new rules for the global internet.

Russia and China are the most prominent opponents of the US-led system and proponents of a multipolar digital order. Their counter-hegemonic narrative stresses the primacy of Westphalian state sovereignty as the normative underlying principle for global internet governance. This position holds that, as with preceding communication systems from the telegraph to television, national governments and national laws should guide domestic internet governance, while intergovernmental organizations and binding international laws should regulate the global internet.

Since the late 2000s, advocates of state-based governance have developed collective and individual institutions and initiatives that explicitly challenge the current digital order. One early example of such a collective initiative is the *Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of International Information Security*, signed in 2009 by members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO; then consisting of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), and expressing commitment to the "internationalization of global internet governance." The *Agreement* alludes to the United States and other technologically developed states when it names the "[u]se of dominant position[s] in the information space to the detriment of the interests and security of other countries" as one of the key threats to international informational security (Shanghai Cooperation Organization 2009, 12). In a sign of the recent institutionalization of the Russia-led digital multipolarism, since 2015, BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) communication ministers have gathered annually, sometimes in conjunction with SCO members, to promote the internationalization of internet governance and the global ICT market. At the 8th International IT Forum held in Russia, which brought together BRICS and SCO members and their national digital champions, the Russian Minister of Communication Nikolay Nikiforov (2012-2018) lamented that the global IT market is "unfortunately, dominated essentially by one country and a few companies." As an alternative, he proposed, "in all spheres we should have balance and diversification. Monopoly is bad. Monopoly in the information technologies is a real threat to the digital sovereignty of our countries" (Nikiforov 2016).

Russia's increasingly assertive global advancement of a multipolar digital order has received ample attention from experts, who have generated several explanations of Russia's position and attendant policy initiatives. The next section reviews these explanations and then offers a cultural framework for understanding Russia's approach to the global internet.

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Scholarly Approaches to Russia's Internet Governance Agenda

The dominant view of Russia's global push for a state-based internet governance model deems it an extension of domestic authoritarian politics and variously conceptualizes it as "networked authoritarianism," "digital authoritarianism," and "Moscow's spoiler model" (Franke and Pallin 2012, 62-64; Kennedy 2013; Maréchal 2017; Morgus 2018a; Mueller 2019, 8-10; O'Hara and Hall 2018; Polatin-Reuben and Wright 2014; Soldatov and Borogan 2015, Chap. 11; Stadnik 2019). This school of thought views Russia's policy proposals as an effort to export its domestic authoritarian model in order to normalize the Russian ruling elite's political repressions and personal enrichment at home. By contrast, Julian Nocetti, a leading observer of Russia's internet politics, argues against viewing internet governance debates and Russia's approach to them specifically through the binary lens of democratic versus authoritarian regimes. While acknowledging Russia's opposition to the US internet hegemony, Nocetti suggests that the conflict instead is taking place "between long-established, cosmopolitan states and newer states that do not yet feel safe in their sovereignty" (2015, 129). Nocetti places Russia's origins in the moment of its formal independence from the Soviet Union in December 1991, thereby determining Russia to be a new state. As a newer nation-state not yet confident in its sovereignty, according to Nocetti's framework, Russia seeks to erect digital borders out of a sense of ontological insecurity. Another common scholarly approach to conceptualizing Russia's current advocacy of state-based internet governance situates Russia's internet agenda within the political-economic rise of a cohort of states around the world, including but not limited to BRICS, and their ensuing challenge to the US-led digital status quo (Ebert and Maurer 2013; Freedman and Wilkinson 2013; Rebello 2017; Winseck 2017; Zhao 2015). As middle and major powers not aligned with the United States gain geopolitical weight, these writers suggest, they seek to reshape the norms and infrastructures of the global internet: from laying new submarine internet cables to putting forth collective internet policy initiatives.

Generally, existing analytical approaches to Russia's internet governance vision do not consider Russian national identity as a legible explanatory factor of its normative stance. This neglect of the cultural lens in understanding the logics of Russian internet philosophy is symptomatic of a broader omission in internet governance scholarship. In thinking about the structuring dynamics of internet governance as a global domain, to date, scholars have privileged the lenses of law, political economy, international relations, and science and technology studies (e.g., Brousseau et al. 2012; Carr 2015; Kohl 2017; Musiani et al. 2016). Socio-cultural approaches to global internet governance have remained marginal, particularly those employing a national identity lens (but see Kiggins 2012). To fill this analytical gap, scholars must take into account cultural factors when conceptualizing Russia's approach to global internet politics.

How national decision-making elites conceptualize the nation's identity, drawing in this process from the cultural reservoir available to their society at a given historical moment, informs the state's construction of its foreign policy interest and performance on the world stage.

How national decision-making elites conceptualize the nation's identity, drawing in this process from the cultural reservoir available to their society at a given historical moment, informs the state's construction of its foreign policy interest and performance on the world stage. As Erik Ringmar notes in his study of the relationship between national identity and geopolitical action, "in order to answer a question regarding an interest we must first be able to answer a question regarding who or what we are" (Ringmar 1996, 13). Russian ruling elite's answer to the question of who Russia is—a great power—has not fundamentally changed since the early eighteenth century, despite dramatic changes to the country's political regime. The analytical approach I adopt to the relationship between Russia's great power identity and pursuit of digital multipolarity seeks to establish what has been referred to as "constitutive causality" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 52). The lens of constitutive causality "engages how humans conceive of their worlds, the language they use to describe them, and other elements constituting that social world, which make possible or impossible the interactions they pursue" rather than trying to establish the relationship between cultural context and action "in terms of a more mechanistic causality" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 52). The next section thereby situates Russia's digital multipolarity narrative in relation to its historic great power identity in order to illuminate the cultural context informing Russia's construction of its interest in the area of global internet governance.

DIGITAL MULTIPOLARISM AND GREAT POWER IDENTITY

Russia's historic national identity as a great power, this paper contends, underlies its digital multipolarism – a geopolitical agenda to replace the US-led internet governance system with a state-based intergovernmental arrangement. This section unpacks what great power identity means in contemporary Russian political imaginary. I first historicize Russia's claims to great power status over the past three centuries to illuminate why this cultural repertoire was so readily available for the Russian post-Soviet policymaking elites to embrace as the crux of independent Russia's national project. I then explain why the concept of multipolarity, in turn, is central to Russia's self-understanding as a great power. Lastly, I detail the tropes that form the ideational and discursive framework of multipolarism and by extension of digital multipolarism.

Russia's great power identity has informed the logics and discourse of Russian official nationalism and foreign policy since the early eighteenth century.

Russia's great power identity has informed the logics and discourse of Russian official nationalism and foreign policy since the early eighteenth century. Identity is an intersubjective category and social actors, individuals and states alike, seek recognition of their self-understanding from significant others (Bartelson 2016). Countries of Western Europe and, since the twentieth century, the Euro-Atlantic world led by the United States have historically played the role of Russia's significant other, from whom Russian elites sought recognition (Neumann 2016a; Tolz 2001, Chap. 3). Beginning in the late fifteenth century and throughout the seventeenth century, Russian elites strove for recognition of Russia as an equal European power (Neumann 2008a). Western royals, however, deemed

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Russia's Eastern Orthodoxy and despotic governance to be culturally alien, leaving Russia on the symbolic periphery of Europe until Peter the Great's (1682-1725) full-fledged campaign to attain great power status. Domestically, Peter attempted to Europeanize the country's cultural norms and administrative practices. Abroad, he asserted Russia's place in Europe through diplomacy and war. Following Russia's defeat of Sweden, then a top-rated power, in the Great Northern War (1700-1721), the newly created Russian Empire received recognition as a key actor in the international system. Three decades later, during the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), the world's major powers finally awarded Russia long-sought recognition as an undisputed great power.

Russia affirmed its great power status during the so-called long nineteenth century, a period between the French (1789) and Russian (1917) revolutions (Neumann 2008b). During this time, Russia participated in the creation of the modern global telecommunication order. It was one of the twenty founding states of the International Telegraph Union in 1865 and one of the twenty-nine founders of the International Radiotelegraph Union in 1906 (the two organizations ultimately merged to become in 1947 the International Telecommunication Union under the auspices of the UN). During the Soviet period (1922-1991), despite the ideological break with the Orthodox monarchy of the Russian Empire, Russian rulers continued to seek Western recognition of its great power status (Ringmar 2002).

After the USSR's dissolution, Russian political elites across the ideological spectrum were primed to view great power status as Russia's *raison d'être* (Clunan 2014; Lo 2002, 19-20). Representatives of political factions, however, have held different visions of the sources of Russia's greatness. A leading scholar of Russian foreign policy Andrei Tsygankov (2016) identifies three ideational strands among Russian foreign policymakers since at least the sixteenth century: Westernizers, Statists, and Civilizationists. In the post-Soviet period, Westernizers saw the source of Russia's greatness in shared liberal-democratic values and sought integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions. Westernizers' influence on Russia's foreign policy was particularly strong during Boris Yeltsin's first presidential term (1991-1996), although during this time Russia's official stance increasingly slid toward centrist statism. Statists, who range from liberal to conservative wings, equate greatness with a strong state that can maintain domestic economic and political order and ensure security from external threats. Statists are not inherently anti-Western but seek recognition of Russia's sovereignty as a prerequisite to pragmatic cooperation. The statist period began with the term of Yevgeny Primakov as the Foreign Minister (1996-98) and Prime Minister (1998-99) and continued throughout much of Vladimir Putin's rule until the early 2010s. Lastly, Civilizationists emphasize Russia's cultural distinctiveness and most assertively challenge Western liberalism. Civilizational tropes began appearing in Russia's official discourse toward the late 2000s and became overt following the regime's conservative turn of 2012-14.

As in the previous epochs, in the post-Soviet period elite debates have been not so much about *whether* Russia is a great power but, rather, what *kind* of great power it is or ought to be in terms of its geopolitical orientation and sources of greatness. Acknowledging the plurality of competing elite understandings of the essence of Russia's great power identity, Director of Moscow's Carnegie Center Dmitri Trenin points out the ambiguities of Russia's great power identity discourse (Trenin 2011, 411-417; see also Morozov 2015, 59). Nevertheless, Trenin suggests that Russian elites of varying ideological persuasions concur upon the view that "strategic independence" is fundamental to Russia's greatness (see also Lo 2002, 57-61). According to Trenin, strategic independence for Russian elites implies that Russia inherently enjoys the right to domestic sovereignty, free pursuit of interests abroad, and full participation in global governance. Russia's pursuit of strategic independence in the post-bipolar international environment led to the emergence of multipolarity as the central ideational and discursive framework of Russia's foreign policy (Ambrosio 2005; Chebankova 2017; Miskimmon and O'Loughlin 2017; Silvius 2017). The notion of polarity in international affairs originates in the US realist school of international relations theory and refers to the relative distribution of material capacities, most crucially economic and military, among one (unipolarity), two (bipolarity), or multiple (multipolarity) great powers at any given historic moment (Keersmaeker 2017). Having borrowed the terminology of polarity from the realist Western academic discourse, Russian officials employ multipolarity as a normative proposition about the nature of Russian identity as a great power and the post-Cold War international system, which, they argue, should be governed by several centers of power, including Russia.

The foundational principles and tropes of Russia's official multipolarity discourse have remained virtually unchanged since the early-to-mid 1990s. The basis of multipolarity, as used in Russian official discourse, is the sanctity of Westphalian state sovereignty.

The foundational principles and tropes of Russia's official multipolarity discourse have remained virtually unchanged since the early-to-mid 1990s. The basis of multipolarity, as used in Russian official discourse, is the sanctity of Westphalian state sovereignty. The sovereign has full authority over domestic conduct within its territory and full independence from foreign interference. The tropes of "sovereignty" and "independence" refer to the inalienable right of governments to pursue domestic and foreign policy they see fit. Putin highlighted the existential significance of sovereignty for Russia at the Valdai Club meeting in 2007: "[s]overeignty is […] something very precious today, something exclusive, you could even say. Russia cannot exist without defending its sovereignty. Russia will either be independent and sovereign or will most likely not exist at all" (Putin 2007). The principle of sovereignty is then applied globally to suggest that the world is or ought to be comprised of sovereign states free to conduct themselves domestically and internationally in accordance with their respective cultural, social, and political beliefs and identities. The notion that the world consists of multiple distinct sovereigns is conveyed with the trope of "diversity." Diversity is juxtaposed against the "hegemony" or "monopoly" of the US-led order, even when the United States are not explicitly mentioned by name and referred to via euphemisms like "one country" and "sole power."

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Russia offers a two-pronged argument in favor of multipolarity. The first argument appeals to moral categories by framing a multipolar world as more "democratic," "equitable," and "just," since it allegedly gives every sovereign people the right to live according to their cultural beliefs and political ideologies. The second argument appeals to the purported greater efficiency of a multipolar world in which the powerful unipole does not skew the rules of the global economic competition and political deliberations. "International law" and state-based "multilateral governance," foremost the United Nations and its Security Council, are proposed as the mechanisms through which the multipolar world should function.

Russia's multipolarity discourse has continuously relied on the same set of tropes but has acquired an increasingly confrontational tone with the gradual shift in Russia's identity discourse toward greater illiberalism over the course of three post-Soviet decades (Neumann 2016b). Illustrative of the Kremlin's ideational and rhetorical pivot toward anti-Westernism in the 2010s, in his annual address to the upper house of the Russian parliament in December 2017, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (2004 – present) harshly blamed Western powers for the ongoing crisis in Russia-West relations and chastised them for their opposition to the emergence of the multipolar world:

> We are convinced that the main reason for the current tension is the persistently egocentric and cynical line taken by a number of countries, led by the United States. Having come to believe in its own supremacy and infallibility, and having become accustomed to thinking its opinions should be perceived as the ultimate truth, the so-called "historical West" is trying to obstruct the natural process of the development of a more just and democratic polycentric world order. Those who dissent are subjected to a broad range of reprisals, unilateral coercive measures and direct interference in their internal affairs (Lavrov 2017).

Russian officials have drawn on the ideational and discursive framework of multipolarity, a core pillar of Russia's great power identity, in constructing Russia's counter-hegemonic narrative of global internet governance. The next section examines the emergence of this discourse in the 1990s.

THE ORIGINS OF DIGITAL MULTIPOLARISM

Yevgeny Primakov is widely considered to have made the pursuit of multipolarity the central tenet of Russia's foreign policy during his tenure as the second Foreign Minister in 1996-98 and Prime Minister in 1998-99 (Ambrosio 2005, 166; Lo 2015, 43-44; Makarychev and Morozov 2011, 355; Silvius 2017, 82). During Primakov's final years, but especially after his passing in 2015 at the age of eighty-five, official Russian discourse mythologized the figure of Primakov as the founding father of post-Soviet Russia's foreign policy. In late October 2019, on the anniversary of Primakov's ninetieth birthday, the unveiling of his life-

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size monument outside of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs definitively propelled Primakov to the status of the progenitor of modern Russia's foreign policy with multipolarism at its core. In his remarks at the ceremony, Putin commended Primakov for having revived respect for Russia in international diplomacy, suggesting that Primakov "had a strategic vision and worked hard to promote the idea of multipolarity. In fact, it was Yevgeny Primakov who clearly formulated the key principles of the modern world development. We see that multipolarity is no longer a trend but a reality today" (Putin 2019a).

While it was Primakov who first promoted multipolarism as a foreign policy doctrine, he drew upon ideational and discursive foundations found in Boris Yeltsin's first term as president (1991-1996) and Andrey Kozyrev's tenure as Russia's first Foreign Minister (1990-1996).[3] To illuminate continuity between administrations, I trace Russia's digital multipolarity discourse through the first half of the 1990s, even as the internet reached less than one percent of the population and internet geopolitics were nascent. By making evident the degree of ideational continuity between twinned discourses of great power and multipolarity from Kozyrev's liberal Atlanticism to Primakov's centrist statism, I challenge analytical couplings of Russia's rejection of the US digital hegemony with authoritarian politics and purported anti-Western phobias of Putin's regime.

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Russia as a Normal Great Power: 1991–1996

Examining the essentially pre-internet years of the early 1990s is critical for understanding the cultural logics of Russia's approach to the global internet. The Russian government in the first years after the demise of the Soviet Union enthusiastically pursued Euro-Atlantic orientation toward cultural and institutional integration into the liberal West (Tsygankov 2016, Chap. 3). Russian leaders insisted, however, that the Euro-Atlantic integration would not diminish the country's great power status but enhance it by returning Russia to the common civilizational path characterized by a liberal-democratic political system and market economy. Andrey Kozyrev, writing in the US magazine *Foreign Affairs* a few months after the Soviet Union's demise, asserted that "Russia will not cease to be a great power. But it will be a normal great power" (Kozyrev 1992). The trope of a nation's return to normality of the civilized Western world from the alleged abnormality of state socialism is one of the central propositions of the so-called transition, a liberal teleological narrative suggesting that societies necessarily move toward market liberalism, while any deviation from this path is a temporary accident of history (Kennedy 2002). Kozyrev's emphasis on Russia being a *normal* great power, then, was meant to signal a qualitative shift in Russia's great power self-image toward that of a non-threatening equal partner of the West that was firmly on the way to joining the family of liberal democracies.

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3   Yeltsin was elected President of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic (RSSR, then still part of the USSR) in June 1991 and continued serving as Russian president after the Soviet Union's end and through his reelection for the second term in 1996. Kozyrev was appointed Foreign Minister of the RSSR by the parliament in October 1990 and likewise carried on in this role into Russia's independence.

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Russian elites' belief that as a great power Russia could not be subservient to the emergent US-led unipolarity inspired Russia's vision of multipolarity. Within the first two years of Russia's post-Soviet independence, the early naiveté of the Russian liberal foreign policy decision-makers regarding Russia's place in the West gave way to increasing skepticism about the prospects of seamless integration. Kozyrev, still a convinced Atlanticist, wrote in *Foreign Affairs* two years later to call upon Western audiences for "partnership in a multipolar world" while explicitly denouncing the emerging US hegemony:

> [T]he international order in the 21st century will not be a Pax Americana or any other version of unipolar or bipolar dominance. The United States does not have the capability to rule alone. Russia, while in a period of transitional difficulties, retains the inherent characteristics of a great power (technology, resources, weaponry). And other rising centers of influence strive for a greater role in world affairs. The nature of modern international problems calls for solutions on a multilateral level (Kozyrev 1994).

Russia's great power identity and multipolarity vision was institutionalized in its first Foreign Policy Concept developed during the peak of Russia's Euro-Atlantic orientation throughout 1992 and signed into law by Yeltsin in early 1993. The Concept exhibits fervent commitment to a market economy and liberal democracy yet also asserts Russia's natural great power status and showcases multipolarism's foundational normative tropes: independence in foreign policy, opposition to unipolarity, and primacy of international law and multilateral institutions in global governance. The Concept argues, "it is necessary to firmly resist the USA's possible relapses into a policy of imperial ambitions, or any attempt to embark on a policy of turning the USA into a 'sole superpower'" (Yeltsin 2005 [1993]). At the same time, the Concept reaffirms Russia's commitment to transition and portrays the United States as Russia's most favored significant other by suggesting, for instance, that in US-Russia relations "[t]he top priority is to have America acknowledge Russia's leading role as the engine for market reform and guarantor of democratic transition within the post-Soviet space." The coexistence within a single discourse of the argument against US hegemony and yearning for recognition of Russia's liberal credentials by the US suggests that Russia's multipolarism is not inherently culturally illiberal and politically authoritarian, as is often assumed from today's analytical vantage point. Rather, opposition to the US hegemony and advocacy of the UN-based multipolarity stems from Russia's understanding of itself as a great power with an inalienable right to co-manage the international system.

The West did not embrace Russia as an equal partner in global affairs during what was, by far, Russia's most pro-Western period in history. Consequently, by the end of Yeltsin's first term in 1996, official discourse of open-armed Atlanticism of the first post-Soviet years graduated toward a more statist self-image and an understanding of Russia's international interests as laying in pragmatic cooperation with the West rather than attempts at ideational

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alignment. A few months before the presidential elections in the summer of 1996, Yeltsin appointed then head of the Foreign Intelligence Service Yevgeny Primakov as Foreign Minister.

Primakov Doctrine and the Emergence of Global Internet Politics: 1996–1999

Primakov during his terms as Foreign Minister and Prime Minister placed the notion of multipolarity at the center of Russia's foreign policy, what came to be known as the Primakov Doctrine. In the second half of the 1990s, promotion of the idea of a multipolar world became a central task of Russia's foreign policy in its quest toward global recognition of its great power status. While the Kremlin did not update the 1993 Foreign Policy Concept during Primakov's tenure, the framework of multipolarism was anchored throughout political and policy discourse. For example, the 1997 National Security Concept suggested that Russia's interests "require active foreign policy aimed at strengthening Russia's positions as a great power – one of the influential centers in the emerging multipolar world" (Yeltsin 2002 [1997], 55). On the global stage, Russia inaugurated multipolarism with the Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order (Yeltsin and Zemin 1997).

Concurrent with the institutionalization of Russia's multipolarism discourse, the global politics of the internet were forming as a geopolitical domain with a distinct set of actors, issues, and institutions (Braman 2004). The framework of multipolarity had underpinned Russia's approach to the global internet from the beginning of its participation in early global internet governance politics. In 1998, Russia inaugurated the UN discussion on security in the global informational space by submitting a two-page resolution, entitled *Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security*, to the General Assembly (United Nations General Assembly, 1999). The document draws attention to the potential use of emerging scientific-technological innovations toward improper ends and calls on UN member states to collectively respond to this inherent challenge of the digital age. Since 1998, Russia has put forth the resolution nearly every year.

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The resolution has contributed to institutionalization of internet governance as a domain of global affairs and, in line with Russia's digital multipolarism agenda, to the symbolic legitimization of intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations as venues for internet governance deliberations. Since its introduction, the UN has published annual collections of states' replies to the resolution, which became a regular platform for states to express their normative positions on international information security. Most significantly, the resolution produced the UN Group of Governmental Experts (GGE), a preeminent intergovernmental forum for discussing international information security. GGE processes are yearlong consultations among representatives of roughly one to two dozen states on the norms of international information security. The overarching purpose of these face-to-face

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discussions is to enhance mutual understanding among policymakers and ultimately come to an agreement on norms of state behavior in cyberspace that would be acceptable to all governments involved in this process. The first four GGE processes (2004/05, 2009/10, 2012/13, 2014/15) produced three consensus reports (2010, 2013, 2015) that contributed to building understanding among policymakers with contrasting normative stances, even if they otherwise didn't produce major tangible results. After a decade of gradual progress, however, GGE imploded.

Against the backdrop of the ongoing crisis in Russia-West relations, the fifth GGE in 2016/17 exposed irreconcilable differences in countries' normative approaches to the foundational principles of internet governance. For example, in the 2017 annual collection of states' replies published by the UN Secretary-General, US ally Canada argued that "[e]xisting international law is applicable to the use of information and communications technology by States" (United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs 2017, 7-9). Canada's proposition was counter to Russia's long-standing insistence that new binding laws be developed through intergovernmental organizations to regulate states' use of ICT (an approach that Russia's digital multipolarism frames as a more democratic mechanism of regulating global informational space since it would presumably involve all states). In contrast with Canada, Cuba echoed Russia's stance by arguing for the need "to establish a legally binding international regulatory framework which is complementary to existing international law but applies to information and communications technologies" (United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs 2017, 7-9). The 2016/17 GGE not only failed to produce a new consensus report but led to a split into two parallel cybersecurity discussion processes under the UN auspices: one initiated by the United States, another by Russia.

Since the resolution's introduction in the late 1990s, it has come to play a major symbolic role in Russian internet governance discourse. Russian officials have viewed the resolution as one of the country's most successful internet governance initiatives and have rhetorically employed it to promote the image of Russia as an internet governance pioneer. The status of a pioneer is meant to confer upon Russia a sense of historical credibility to spearhead the reshaping of the global digital order. Russian representatives regularly invoke the resolution as evidence of widespread international support for the Kremlin's internet governance agenda. In 2015, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev (2012-2020) referenced it in his address to the World Internet Conference in China. Medvedev sought to bolster the multilateral internet governance model and criticize the US internet hegemony by noting that "support for the resolution has become truly global" with "more than 80 states from all regions of the world" acting as its "coauthors" (Medvedev 2015). In 2018, on the twentieth anniversary of the original resolution, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a press release to celebrate the adoption of the 2018 version of the resolution. The press release was used on this occasion to bolster Russia's internet governance stance by serving as a reminder that the "issue of international security was placed on the UN's agenda in 1998 at Russia's initiative" and boasting that again in 2018 the resolution was "supported by an overwhelming majority

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of states and co-authored by over 30 countries from different parts of the world" (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018). The press release framed Russia's resolution as advancing an inherently more just multipolar order that would incorporate all countries into global internet governance on an equal footing, not only those aligned with the liberal hegemon:

> We are convinced that the era of "club" arrangements is over and that all countries, regardless of their level of technological development, have a right to take a direct part in talks on [international information security] at the UN and to influence the decision-making process. Every vote counts and must be taken into consideration. Only in this way can we create the basis for a fair and equal world order in the digital sphere (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018).

Having situated the resolution in the history of global internet governance and in Russia's political imaginary, I now return to the discussion of the original resolution put forth in 1998. I analyze it as an early example of Russia's digital multipolarism – a geopolitical agenda aimed at challenging the purported US digital hegemony and establishing in its place a digital order governed by multiple actors through intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations. In the rest of this section, I excavate elements of Russia's digital multipolarism in the resolution's text (normative propositions advanced in the body of the document) and context (socio-political circumstances pertaining to the original resolution's introduction). By locating core pillars of Russia's digital multipolarism in the first post-Soviet decade, I illuminate continuities in Russia's approach to the global internet in order to analytically divorce Russia's internet governance agenda from the logics of authoritarian politics of the Putin-era, which is currently the predominant way of understanding Russia's internet vision among Western scholars and media. By contrast, I demonstrate how the cultural logics of Russian elites' historic understanding of Russia as a great power have underlain Russia's quest to reinstate itself as one of the several geopolitical poles responsible for world governance, including management of the global internet.

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The choice of the United Nations as a venue for advancing the resolution signals Russian digital multipolarism's core view of intergovernmental fora as the main mechanism for global decision-making. While emphasizing the UN's centrality to the management of global affairs, Russia since the early 1990s has advocated reforming the UN to better reflect post-Cold War realities and to attain greater efficiency. It was explicitly in the context of proposing such reforms to the UN that Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov (1998-2004) introduced the resolution on international information security to the UN General Assembly:

> I should like to reaffirm that we support the implementation of reforms and changes in United Nations mechanisms that will promote effective consolidation of the United Nations and improve its activities. Among the steps taken to that end I wish to mention adoption, under United Nations auspices, of the Statute of the International Criminal Court. *Russia's initiative to launch a discussion on ways to achieve international information security serves the same goal*. In essence, our proposal is intended

> to offset threats inherent in the use of the latest advances in science and technology for purposes incompatible with the maintenance of international security (Ivanov 1998, 23; added emphasis).

Aside from Russia's preference for an intergovernmental body as a venue for internet governance policymaking, continuity in its digital multipolarism is exemplified by the resolution's focus on security and, relatedly, the fact that Russia was advancing the document via the UN First Committee on Disarmament and International Security. Russia's discursive and policy emphasis on security in the context of internet governance is often seen as a sign of the government's authoritarian illiberal politics of the past decade (e.g., Pigman 2019). Indeed, beginning in the early 2010s, Russian officials have increasingly narrated internet technology itself as a threat to the political regime and society (Asmolov 2015). In 2014, amid a wave of government-initiated restrictive internet regulations, Putin famously suggested that the internet had been created as "a special CIA project" that was "still developing as such" (Putin 2014). The primacy of security concerns within Russia's foreign policy imaginary, however, is not exclusive to Putin's rule, as security issues dominated Russia's foreign policy agenda throughout Yeltsin's presidency in 1991-99 (Lo 2002, 128-144; Sergunin 2015, 135-153). As a self-identified great power, Russia wanted to be included in the construction of the post-Cold War global security architecture. However, Russian leadership felt that, contrary to its expectations in the early 1990s, the West excluded Russia from this process. The exclusion was manifested most overtly in NATO's plans to expand into Eastern Europe against Russia's vehement opposition. Driven by the intense desire for inclusion into the security process and pursuing restoration of its global prestige, Russia supported and initiated security arrangements outside of the US-led structures (Lo 2002, 132-134). Russia's concern with international information security and its advancement through the UN, then, illuminates how Russia's great power imaginary has continuously informed the logics of digital multipolarism.

The timing of the original resolution's introduction provides further insight into continuities of Russian digital multipolarism. Russia introduced the resolution to the UN General Assembly in late September 1998, one month after the financial collapse of the Russian economy. The cabinet of ministers that presided over the economic default resigned in August 1998 and Primakov was promoted from foreign minister to prime minister just over a week before the UN gathering. Remarks delivered to the UN General Assembly by Primakov's successor as foreign minister, Igor Ivanov pursued two goals. The first was to assuage Western fears about Russia's illiberal turn following the popular and political backlash against the country's authorities after the financial crisis. The second was to promote the principle of multipolarity in global affairs. Ivanov bridged the two imperatives in his speech:

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From this rostrum I pledge that Russia will not deviate from the path of reform and will do its best to pass with dignity this most difficult test, so as not only to preserve the democratic progress that has been made but also to augment it. Likewise, Russia's foreign policy will remain consistent and constructive. It is firmly geared towards building a democratic multipolar world (Ivanov 1998, 20).

Russia rationalizes multipolarity as a more democratic form of global order as compared to unipolarity, a system in which the US hegemon imposes its will upon others. Russia draws on the legitimacy of democracy as a universal value in *domestic* governance to challenge the *global* liberal order spearheaded by the West and, in Russia's view, to the diminishment of Russia's role in global governance. In this case, Ivanov employs this rhetorical equation to allege that Russia's domestic progress toward Western liberal democracy and the nature of multipolarity that Russia advances are "democratic" in the same way. The adverb "likewise" connects these two propositions, further emphasizing that multipolarity in global affairs is equivalent to liberal democracy in domestic governance in terms of its inclusive representative nature. What Ivanov's remarks reveal about Russia's quest for a multipolar order is that not only does this program precede what is generally viewed as Russia's authoritarian turn in the 2000s and especially 2010s, but that it coincides with Russia's strong commitment to liberalism professed from the main international podium. Further, the fact that Ivanov was promoting multipolarity immediately following one of the worst economic blows in Russia's Post-Soviet history suggests that Russia's advancement of multipolarity cannot be tied solely to its growing geopolitical ambitions over the course of the 2000s. To sum up, today's commonplace equation of Russia's advancement of a multipolar digital order exclusively with the Kremlin's authoritarianism or its growing political-economic weight are equally ahistorical and reductive.

In addition to contextual factors outlined above, the resolution's short text promotes digital multipolarism through its advancement of a state-based intergovernmental vision of global informational governance. The document frames information and telecommunication sphere as a global public good by suggesting that it furthers the "development of civilization," creates opportunities for the "common good of all States," enhances the "creative potential of mankind," and improves the "circulation of information in the global community." All of these terms – civilization, common good, all states, mankind, global community – appeal to the sense of shared destiny that should be steered by a wide range of actors representative of global diversity. Accordingly, since the late 1990s, Russia's narration of the global network has appealed to the internet's communal origin myth to advance the core proposition of digital mutlipolarism, i.e. that the digital status quo under the US ambit monopolizes the technology that was meant to benefit all, and that its management needs to be diversified. Igor Shchegolev, Minister of Communication (2008-2012) and Aide to President (2012-2018), lamented in 2015 at the VI Safe Internet Forum held in Moscow:

> [D]e facto and de jure the global internet infrastructure and its governance are currently monopolized and are outside of the international law.
>
> [...] A turning point, however, is approaching. More and more people are starting to realize that the internet in its current state doesn't reflect the objectives, for which it was created. It is upon us to return to the forefront the objective of mankind's humanitarian development (Shchegolev 2015).

Lastly, the resolution calls on the international community to employ state-based "multilateral levels" of governance and develop legally binding "international principles" to protect humanity's digital progress and security. In the following two decades, Russia has continued to promote these two governance instruments as critical to challenging the US internet hegemony and restoring the internet to its purported original purpose. In his address to the 2009 Russian Internet Forum, President Medvedev (2008-2012) proposed, "the Internet should not be an environment dominated by rules set by one country alone, even the strongest and most advanced country. There should be international rules drawn up through collective effort, and the worldwide web should continue to develop as it has done so far – as a common environment" (Medvedev 2009).

Russian officials' uninterrupted framing of the internet as that of a common good and of state-based governance mechanisms as best fitting the internet's shared nature – as opposed to unilateral decision-making by the US digital hegemon – illuminate continuity in Russia's digital multipolarism rooted in its great power self-image.

CONCLUSION

This CARGC Paper explored the cultural logics underpinning the Russian state's agenda to move the global internet's governance away from the present model, which is dominated by the US-based non-governmental organizations, toward a state-based intergovernmental model under the auspices of the United Nations. I have argued that Russia's approach can be productively understood by employing Russia's historic great power identity as the central analytical lens. In constructing independent Russia's identity and interests, Russian ruling elites have drawn on the cultural repertoire of Russia as a great power. Through this understanding, Russia sees full participation in global governance as its natural right and seeks to restore its place among the world's leading powers following partial loss of its status in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution. The emerging US-led unipolar liberal order of the 1990s was incongruent with Russia's understanding of the international system and its place in it because it limited Russia's domestic sovereignty and its role in shaping the global order. Consequently, Russia has advanced the normative framework of multipolarism, centered around notions of state sovereignty and global governance via

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intergovernmental organizations and bodies, foremost the United Nations and its Security Council. This framework has informed the logics and language of Russia's global internet governance agenda, which I proposed to conceptualize as digital multipolarism.

Using an identity-based analytical approach to Russia's internet governance agenda, this paper focused on Russia's internet policymaking in the first post-Soviet decade prior to Vladimir Putin's rise to power. This analytically delimited timeline allowed me to illuminate continuities in Russia's digital vision over the past two decades and to offer a corrective to dominant expert understandings of Russia's challenge to the US-led digital order. By far the most common scholarly explanation attributes Russia's internet governance philosophy and policy to the country's authoritarian political system and imperialist foreign policy. Scholars advancing this argument tend to focus on Russian politics in the 2010s, during Russia's illiberal turn and severe crisis in the Russia-West relations. They purport that Russia challenges the US-led digital governance in order to bolster domestic repressions and enrich the elites. However, my examination of Russia's advancement of digital multipolarity in the late 1990s, when Russia was still proclaiming its commitment to the liberal-democratic path and was considered a democracy by the Western community, shows this common understanding to be ahistorical. This paper's cultural lens does not deny the corrupt and increasingly authoritarian nature of Russia's political system. Rather, it illuminates how long-standing cultural self-identification and attendant tropes necessarily inform this regime's understanding of the national self, the global order, and digital politics.

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Another common analytical framing ties Russia's advancement of the multipolar digital order to its relative economic resurgence since the early 2000s and its ensuing geopolitical challenge to the US-led unipolarity. Yet, as I have shown, the multipolarity framework emerged in the first post-Soviet decade during Russia's prolonged socio-economic crisis that accompanied its liberalizing market reforms. Specifically, I analyzed Russia's policy proposal on international information security rooted in the ethos of multipolarity, which it submitted to the United Nations immediately after the August 1998 financial collapse. While economic growth in the 2000s certainly afforded Russia with material capabilities to pose a greater challenge to the liberal order, including in the arena of digital politics, digital multipolarism clearly predates Russia's political-economic rise.

Russia's counter-hegemonic critique of the existing internet governance system became increasingly pronounced precisely as Russia gained greater ontological security with the resurgence of its geopolitical weight in recent years.

Scholars have also recently proposed that Russia's emphasis on sovereignty in the digital space stems from its ontological insecurity rooted in its relative youth as a nation-state. The implication of this approach is that the more mature and economically stable Russia became over the post-Soviet years, the closer its stance would approximate that of the long-established cosmopolitan states that feel safe in their sovereignty and do not feel the need to challenge the digital status quo. Yet, the opposite has been the case: Russia's counter-hegemonic critique of the existing internet governance system became increasingly pronounced precisely as Russia gained greater ontological security with the resurgence of

its geopolitical weight in recent years. Moreover, established Western states like France and Germany have increasingly embraced the framework of digital sovereignty and challenged the US-led internet governance model.

Beyond the investigation into the cultural logics of Russia's internet governance agenda, this paper's analytical lens points to a broader theoretical opening in approaching the question of why states advance different visions for the global internet. Using the case of Russia's challenge to the US-led digital order stemming from its great power identity, this essay has shown how analytically centering cultural factors such as a nation's historic identity as expressed in political and policy discourse generates more nuanced understandings of the logics and rhetoric behind states' internet governance normative visions. Future research ideally will develop a comprehensive cultural framework of internet governance to employ for global comparative research of national internet governance agendas.

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