

THE BOUNDARIES OF RUSSIAN IDENTITY: ANALYSIS OF THE *RUSSKIY MIR* CONCEPT IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN ONLINE MEDIA

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Received: 01st August 2017/ Revised: 09th August 2017/ Accepted: 13th September 2017

How to Cite: Kozdra, M. (2018). The boundaries of russian identity: Analysis of the *Russkiy Mir* concept in contemporary Russian online media. *Lingua Cultura*, 12(1), 61-66.
<https://doi.org/10.21512/lc.v12i1.2004>

ABSTRACT

This article set out to present selected outcomes of my research on the concept of “russkiy mir” in contemporary ethnocentric online Russian media. Perspectives for further analysis were also presented. The analytical methodology involved a semantic and cultural analysis of a dataset from a cognitive and anthropological viewpoint including elements of critical discourse analysis. The concept of “russkiy mir” in the ethnocentric discourse investigated in this article was based on an idea of forming a supranational Russian civilization. This community would unite all Russians, the Russian diaspora and all those learning Russia, and declaring the attachment to Russian culture. Proponents of this discourse assume that “russkiy mir” will have a geopolitical dimension, imperial pretenses and will transgress state borders, and claiming for itself a transcontinental realm. A nationality dimension is also supposed to be an important aspect according to the discourse participants. The main ethnos is to be that of the Russian nation, around which other ethnoses will congregate. The Orthodox religion is supposed to be an important co-constituent of “russkiy mir”.

Keywords: Russian identity, *Russkiy Mir* concept, Russian online reader

INTRODUCTION

Przemyśleć geometrię naszych granic znaczy przemyśleć geometrię naszej myśli o ludzkim świecie (Kunce, 2010).

(To rethink the geometry of our boundaries is to rethink the geometry of our thought about the human world).

Boundaries are marked not only by dint of the authority of political decision-makers but also owing to elites of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1989; 1991). It includes opinion writers, literary writers, clergy, scientists, experts, and other intellectuals wielding control over publicly available knowledge and beliefs and establishing the hierarchy of what is important and what is unimportant (Czyżewski, Kowalski, & Piotrowski, 2010; van Dijk, 1983; 1993). Pierre Bourdieu emphasises that within every social macrocosm, a fight goes on between agents to impose one's principles of perceiving and partitioning the world. This fight takes on a symbolic form (Bourdieu 1988; 1989; Dębska 2014: 394). Symbolic power may also present as violence, as pointed out by Aleksandra Kunce.

Powolywanie granic ma swój udział w symbolicznej przemocy ujarzmiającej i kontrolującej terytoria, ludzi, sfery myślenia. Granice to władza, jak powiedziałby Michel Foucault. Granice są w służbie podboju, jak pisał Michel de Certeau, bowiem to silny segreguje, dzieli, a pewność daje mu mapa. A zatem kontrola jest funkcją granicy (Kunce 2010).

(Establishing boundaries contributes to symbolic violence that subdues and controls territories, people, and spheres of thinking. Boundaries are power, as Michel Foucault would say. Boundaries serve conquest, as wrote Michel de Certeau, for it is the strong one that segregates and divides, and his certainty derives from the map. Control is thus a function of a boundary).

Alexander Dugin, a well-known Russian geopolitician, notes that the concept of boundary is the essence of politics and determines the future of a state:

Граница есть квинтэссенция политики. Все войны ведутся за изменение (сохранение) структуры границ. Границы предопределяют успех или поражение, стартовые условия и неизбежный крах в грядущем. Все величие государства и вся бездна его падения заключены в границах. Такова метафизика границ (Dugin, 2014).

(The boundary is the quintessence of politics. All wars are waged to change (preserve) the arrangement of boundaries. Boundaries determine success or failure, define starting conditions, and decide an inevitable defeat in the future. The problem of the greatness of a state and the entire abyss of a state's fall is but part of the question of state boundaries. This is the very metaphysics of boundaries).

However, boundaries are not only real geographic objects, but also mental constructs. For the reality, it is also a space of social awareness and a network of concepts that operates below and above distinct institutions (Alexander, 2010; Dębska, 2014). Boundaries are also closely linked to mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion, marking, as they do, dividing lines between different cultures and speech communities. Representatives of such cultures often create identities by ascribing positive traits to “their own folk” and negative traits to “others”, which, on the one hand, strengthens social links within their own group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), but it also serves to reject others. In turn, thanks to language, identity is narrative and discursive in nature since language allows conceptualization and categorization, and thus fragmentation, of the world in order to enable it to be better understood. It can be stated that identity is shaped via the formation of geographic and mental boundaries, the separation of one world from another and of “us” from “them”. Mental representations of boundaries reproduced in the public discourse by elites are, however, not only fantasies, delusions or, more generally, figments of imagination. They are also a source for shaping agentivity as well as creating contemporary identities and taking real action.

The concept of “*русский мир*” (*russkiy mir*) is an important motif in the narrative on boundaries in their diverse dimensions: geopolitical, cultural, economic, social, religious or educational, in the context of the formation of contemporary Russian identity. This mental construct is often invoked in public discourse by elites of institutional and symbolic power.

This article sets out to present selected outcomes of my research on the concept of *russkiy mir* in contemporary ethnocentric online Russian media. An analysis of patterns of use and perception of the concept of *russkiy mir* constitutes one chapter in author's doctoral thesis on “Axiological concepts in contemporary Russian public discourse about Russian cultural identity”. The author reconstructs the cognitive structure of this concept in online ethnocentric discourse in contemporary Russia using the methodology of cognitive semantics. The author presents a synopsis of selected outcomes of this research and possible perspectives for further analysis of the concept of *russkiy mir*.

METHODS

The dataset for the analysis comprises one hundred online media texts contributing to ethnocentric discourse that are published between 2005 and 2013 on webpages of the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) Foundation (www.russkiymir.ru), president of the Russian Federation (www.kremlin.ru), the Russian Orthodox Church (www.patriarchia.ru), and the information portals “*Russkaya narodnaya linia*” or Russian National Line (www.ruskline.ru), Intelros (www.intelros.ru), Pax Russica (www.paxrussica.ru), Agentstvo politicheskikh novostey or Political news Agency (www.apn.ru). Participants in this type of discourse strongly identify with their own ethnic group and regard it as a fundamental source of their sense of identity and consequently. A variety of criteria are used to provide typologies of discourse. They include the subject matter of utterances forming a discourse, for example, politics (political discourse). The aim of these utterances, for instance, pastoral activity (pastoral discourse); or the venue where a discourse takes place, for example, school, media, institution (school, media, institutional discourse) (Laskowska, 2010).

It believes that loyalty and dedication are to be shown primarily towards one's own group. Thus, “ethnos” is a significant category in this discourse. Ethnos is understood in essentialist terms, i.e., as a self-contained entity that is an agent of history and social interaction (Malakhov, 2004). This perception of ethnos entails at least two consequences; they are the reduction of social differences to ethnic differences and, consequently, the reduction of social interaction to ethnic or ethnocultural interaction; and the equation of cultural and ethnic identity.

The choice of ethnocentric discourse as the subject of research stemmed from the realization that ethnocentric discourse is currently an important locus of animated discussion about Russia's identity, its role on the global arena, new geographic borders, and mental boundaries. Aleksandr Malinkin stresses that this discourse is fundamentalist in nature. Its participants are not content to claim merely that Russia is a self-contained civilization with a unique culture and its own traditional system of values and that it has its distinct historical and ideological mission as they also want the civilizational uniqueness of Russia to be recognized. They also see a special mission for Russia as a nation chosen by God (*богоизбранность – bogoizbrannost'*) and stress the superiority of Russians over other nations (Malinkin, 2001).

The methodology used in the analysis of the dataset draws on semantic and cultural analysis with a cognitive and anthropologic slant (Boldyrev, 2002, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Stepanov, 1997; Tabakowska, 1995; Wierzbicka, 1985) and elements of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Reisigl, 2007; Wodak, 2008). Emphasis is placed on the processes of mental embracement of the world by social actors, as well as processes of categorization and conceptualization of reality. This paper employs concepts typical of this methodology, such as concept, discourse, and identity. In view of their semantic richness and varying perception, it is necessary to present author's understanding in this article and the academic tradition that the author relies on.

The author understands the concepts to be cognitive

structures in the form of strings of mental representations, associations, knowledge, experiences, and emotions. Concepts have their representations, both linguistic (lexical) in the form of signs and extralinguistic, i.e., non-verbal; in the form of other semiotic codes, such as images, sounds or gestures. Juriy Stepanov stresses that concepts are “cultural clusters” (*сгустки культуры – sgustki kul'tury*) in human consciousness that they are culture-specific (Stepanov, 1997). A concept is an element of collective knowledge about the world shared by a given speech community. This knowledge, in turn, is a network of connected ideas that derive from national tradition, religion, folklore, ideology, systems of value, and discourses. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari stress the subject-construed nature of concepts, which are not ready-made formations but need to be invented, or produced, by their creator in real time.

Concepts are not waiting for us ready-made, like heavenly bodies. There is no heaven for concepts. They must be invented, fabricated, or rather created and would be nothing without their creator's signature (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994).

Secondly, discourse is defined here as a written and spoken form of social action, a way of assigning meanings to a particular sphere of social life (Wodak, 2008; Fairclough & Wodak 1997). This assignment of meanings is accomplished via sequences of language acts that are thematically connected at a macro level (Girnth, 1996; Wodak, 2008; Laskowska, 2010). Consequently, the aim of discourse analysis, as Łukasz Kumięga points out, is to reconstruct the peculiar semantic orders (including the rules for their generation) that are characteristic of various specific social spheres (Kumięga, 2013), since the reality around us is constructed by social negotiation of meanings. Thus, discourses do not merely provide historical frameworks that determine thought processes of discourse subjects and the order of objects but are social realities, collective knowledge structures that influence social practice, i.e., actions were taken by participants in the communication and constitute the social order.

Finally, the author regards identity as a sense, enjoyed by an individual, of being distinct from other individuals, shaped by such factors as awareness of one's origin, history, memory, consanguinity, culture, territory, language, and discourse practices. Identity is dynamic and plastic; in other words, it has a defined stable part (containing invariable components) and another part that is more or less changeable, fluid. It crystallizes and becomes fixed by means of the upholding of historical memory, public discourse, social movements, popular culture, and the system of education (Kłoskowska, 2005). At the heart of this understanding of identity lies a sense of continuity and lasting presence of a certain “self” based on the past and memory (Chlebda, 2011). Language is a key factor in the generation of cultural identity as identity reveals itself in a diversity of forms of language behavior and expression (Gajda, 2007).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The concept of *russkiy mir* is a joint concern of the mythology of contemporary Russian elites. It defines

an imagined community (Anderson, 2006) or, rather, one that is being imagined, continuously being formed, but is not imaginary, i.e., it is not only present in thoughts because it acts in the real world. This imagined community under construction is forming as a result of processes of discursive construction of meanings in the sphere of public communication as a space of public debate. Elites of symbolic power are social actors that are capable of creating this community, wielding control over the means of communication, and possessing adequate capital and are capable of ruling over others (influencing their minds), particularly by shaping public opinion (Czyżewski, Kowalski & Piotrowski 2010).

The semantic/cultural and discourse-based analysis of the dataset leads to the conclusion that the concept of *russkiy mir* presents in ethnocentric discourse as an element of collective knowledge about the world shared by a given speech community. It is founded on the idea of building community space as a supranational geopolitical creation, a Russian civilization with a strong political and Orthodox component. This community would unite all Russian people, the Russian diaspora in the former Soviet republics, and even all those who simply learn Russian and feel the attachment to Russian culture. The word “*русский*” (*russkiy*) ‘Russian’ indicates historical roots with historical Russia and the word “*мир*” (*mir*) refers both to the world (planet earth) and to peace.

This wordplay is impossible to reproduce in English, and it is the reason why this concept is referenced here by the transcribed Russian phrase. *Russkiy mir* has a multilayer structure because it is a mental construct in the form of a conglomerate of mental representations, associations, knowledge, experiences, and emotions that discourse participants link to it. It comprises the dimensions of geopolitical, nationality-related, religious, cultural, and psychosocial. These dimensions have been reconstructed via semantic/cultural analysis of the dataset. The dimensions of the concept of *russkiy mir* have been summarized in Table 1, where the left-hand column contains the names of dimensions, perceived as individual meanings of the concept. Each of these names is a generalized nomination that is formed by analysis of discourse content. It is linked to the concept of identity as identity reveals itself in various forms of language behavior and expression. The right-hand column contains concise overviews of the content of the texts in the dataset, the goal being to reconstruct the meanings in the discourse under study.

Table 1 Dimensions of the *Russkiy Mir* concept in Ethnocentric Discourse in Russia

Dimension of the Concept of Russkiy Mir	Overview of Content of Dimensions of Russkiy Mir
Geopolitical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extends over a supranational and transcontinental area • Has imperial pretences
Nationality-Related	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes the Russians and nations of the former USSR • The main ethnos is the Russian nation
Religious	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes Orthodox believers • The Russian orthodox church is an important factor • Subscribes to Orthodox values

Table 1 Dimensions of the *Russkiy Mir* concept in Ethnocentric Discourse in Russia (continued)

Dimension of the Concept of <i>Russkiy Mir</i>	Overview of Content of Dimensions of <i>Russkiy Mir</i>
Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Command of the Russian language and knowledge of Russian literature and culture are determinants of membership of <i>Russkiy Mir</i>
Psychological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Its members are obliged to be loyal towards their mother country, show interest in Russian issues and a bond with Russia A sense of unity is an important component

The geopolitical, psychosocial, nationality-related, and, simultaneously, cultural dimension of *russkiy mir* is reflected, among others, in a text from the website of the *Russkiy mir* Foundation. It is established by President of the Russian Federation with the aim of promoting the Russian language. This text shows that *russkiy mir* has a broad meaning that also includes citizens of the Commonwealth of the Independent States and foreigners provided that they speak Russian and are interested in Russia and its future. In the original, *русские (russkiye)* refers to Russians as the indigenous representatives of the Russian nation while *россияне (rossiyane)* is a broader notion referring to all citizens of the Russian Federation, who include representatives of other nations (e.g., Ukrainian, Belarussian, or Tartar) that live in Russia and bear Russian passports.

Русский мир – это не только русские, не только россияне, не только наши соотечественники в странах ближнего и дальнего зарубежья, эмигранты, выходцы из России и их потомки. Это ещё и иностранные граждане, говорящие на русском языке, изучающие или преподающие его, все те, кто искренне интересуется Россией, кого волнует её будущее (Russkij mir).

(*Russkiy mir* is not only Russian people, not only our compatriots from the Near and Far Abroad, emigrants, refugees from Russia and their descendants but also foreigners who speak Russian, learn or teach Russian, all those who are sincerely interested in Russia and concerned about its future).

The nationality dimension is fortified by emphasizing the uniqueness of the Russian nation, which forms the core of *russkiy mir*.

Русский мир не полиэтничен, но он и не моноэтничен, он – суперэтничен, его основу, стеновой хребет составляет русский народ как суперэтнос, формирующийся на основе восточно-славянского этноса по конфессиональному принципу (RLN, 2009).

(*Russkiy mir* is not multiethnic, but it is not monoethnic, either it is super ethnic. Its core foundation is the Russian nation as a superethnos forming on the basis of Eastern Slavonic ethnos according to confessional identification).

A significant role of the Russian Orthodox Church in unifying *russkiy mir* is stressed by hegumen Euthymius (Moiseyev), the rector of Kazan Seminary, who has stated the following about *russkiy mir* on the portal *Russkaya narodnaya linia* (Russian national line).

Под Русским миром следует понимать общность всех людей, идентифицирующих себя с Русской цивилизацией, основополагающим принципом которой является Православие (RLN, 2009).

(The concept of *russkiy mir* should be understood as the community of all people identifying with Russian civilization, whose fundamental principle is Orthodox faith).

Similar narrations about the role of the Russian Orthodox Church may be found in statements by top politicians of the Russian federation, including President Vladimir Putin.

Сегодня и в России, и в странах канонического присутствия Московского патриархата, среди наших соотечественников на разных континентах Русская православная церковь выполняет особую миссию. Она сближает государства и народы, своим мудрым словом и делом помогает найти взаимопонимание. Помогает сохранить те нити, которые связывали нас веками, по сути, сплачивает многомиллионный русский мир (Kremlin, 2013).

(Today, both in Russia and in the countries where the Moscow Patriarchate is present canonically, among our compatriots on different continents, the Russian Orthodox Church is fulfilling a special mission, bringing closer states and nations and, with its sage word and actions, helping to find mutual understanding. It helps to preserve those bonds that have brought us together for centuries. In actuality, it unifies the multimillion *russkiy mir*).

These results necessitate further analysis. Further research on the concept of *russkiy mir* is substantiated by a few factors that have been present in post-1991 Russia; (1) Institutionalization of efforts in support of the idea of *russkiy mir* in Russia and the world. (2) The emergence of numerous online platforms where this concept is discussed. (3) Numerous statements about the concept of *russkiy mir* by decision-makers, prominent members of the clergy, scholars, and other representatives of political and symbolic power.

The research so far has been confined to one type of discourse, namely ethnocentric discourse. Future research could broaden this perspective to include other types of discourse in order to determine the extent of this concept

in other intellectual circles of contemporary Russia and possibly also beyond Russian borders. Another research postulate is to study earlier (pre-2005) texts. The time limit could be the break-up of the USSR, which leads to changes not only in the geopolitical situation, but also to the active generation of new identity projects; pro-western, imperialist, nationalist, Euro-Asian and, others.

It should be pointed out that further research perspectives on this concept may concern the analysis of other media, including offline. The dataset could include radio and TV broadcasts, online video footage and visual materials, such as photographs and illustrations that are broadly construed multimodal communication. In this case, the research questions that are possible is *russskiy mir* only circulates online, or also offline, for example, in non-official or popular sites such as Facebook, or online gaming community websites?; if it also circulates offline, then is there any medium-specific difference between the two modes of circulation?

Several hypotheses should be verified (1) the concept of *russskiy mir* is a major rhetorical *topos* in contemporary Russian post-1991 public discourse which plays an important role in the auto-identification and the generation of new identity projects in contemporary Russia. (2) The concept of *russskiy mir* serves to (re)construct an ideological bridge over the former USSR republics. (3) The use of this concept as “soft power” has an impact on the marking of new geopolitical, cultural, economic and social boundaries by political and symbolic power elites.

A more extensive, interdisciplinary methodology is also proposed that would include multiplane linguistic discourse analysis or *Ein Diskurslinguistisches Mehrebenenmodell* (Warnke & Spitzmüller, 2008) and politological analysis incorporating the concept of “soft power” (Nye, 1991; 2004). This analytical methodology may help perceive discourse phenomena in contemporary Russia at several levels: (1) intra textual, i.e. the level of broadly construed text as a product of discourse, (2) trans textual, or the level of (politological) context as a determinant of discourse, and (3) interactional, i.e. the plane of the activity of social actors as subjects and the role of their worldviews. The set of proposed methods listed accounts for the complexity of discourse processes that can be observed in public communication in Russia.

CONCLUSIONS

The concept of *russskiy mir* in the ethnocentric discourse investigated in this article is based on the idea of building a space for a supranational Russian civilization. This community would unite all Russians; the Russian diaspora and all those learning Russian, and people who are feeling the attachment to Russian culture. Proponents of this type of discourse assume that *russskiy mir* will have a geopolitical dimension, imperial pretenses and will transcend state borders, encompassing a transcontinental area. A nationality dimension is also to be an important aspect according to participants of the discourse. The most important ethnos, around which other ethnoses will congregate, is the Russian nation. The Orthodox religion is an important co-constituent of *russskiy mir*.

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