


PETR SHAFIROV AND RUSSIAN STRATEGIC CULTURE

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Abstract

This study examines the role of Russia's strategic culture in shaping its foreign policy by analyzing historical, legal, and cultural constructs. Focusing on key concepts such as "kinship," "people," and "just war," this study shows how these elements shape the continuity of Russia's imperial identity and geopolitical goals. It does so through the work of Baron Petr Shafirov, Russia's first international lawyer and statesman. It focuses on "A Discourse Concerning the Just Causes of the War Between Sweden and Russia," written by Shafirov in 1717, as a foundational text in the development of Russia's strategic culture. This is because Shafirov constructs a conceptual framework that articulates Russia's imperial claim under Peter I, bringing together the Russian past and the thinking of the time. At the same time, this text tells us how the Russian bureaucracy perceived and interpreted the concepts of European international law literature. Likewise, Shafirov's construction of the concepts of "kinship," "people," and "just war" on the basis of the concepts of "kinship," "people," and "just war" to legitimize Russia's actions in its foreign and expansionist policy shows how it has been historically constructed and even continues to the present day. Shafirov's work, which is a history of international law and diplomacy, is one of the cornerstones in the construction of strategic culture and requires analysis and interpretation using the interpretivist method. In this study, we will first explain the concept of strategic culture and then discuss its logic and functioning in Russia's foreign policy. Then Shafirov's work will be analyzed in this context.

Keywords: Russia, Eurasia, Russian strategic culture, Russian kinship, Russian war, Russian geopolitics imperialism.



PETR SHAFİROV ve RUS STRATEJİK KÜLTÜRÜ

Öz

Bu çalışma, tarihsel, yasal ve kültürel yapıları analiz ederek Rusya'nın stratejik kültürünün dış politikasını şekillendirmedeki rolünü incelemektedir. "Soydaşlık", 'halk' ve 'adil savaş' gibi anahtar kavramlara odaklanan bu çalışma, bu unsurların Rusya'nın emperyal kimliğinin ve jeopolitik hedeflerinin sürekliliğini nasıl şekillendirdiğini göstermektedir. Bunu da Rusya'nın ilk uluslararası hukukçusu ve devlet adamı olan Baron Petr Shafirov'un çalışmaları üzerinden yapıyor. Rusya'nın stratejik kültürünün gelişiminde temel bir metin olarak Şafirov tarafından 1717'de yazılan "İsveç ve Rusya Arasındaki Savaşın Haklı Sebepleri Üzerine Bir Çalışma" ya

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odaklanmaktadır. Zira Shafirov, Rusya'nın I. Petro dönemindeki imparatorluk iddiasını ifade eden kavramsal bir çerçeve inşa ederek Rus geçmişini ve dönemin düşüncesini bir araya getirmektedir. Bu metin bize Rus bürokrasisinin Avrupa uluslararası hukuk literatüründeki kavramları nasıl algıladığını ve yorumladığını da anlatmaktadır. Aynı şekilde Shafirov'un Rusya'nın dış ve yayılmacı politikasındaki eylemlerini meşrulaştırmak için "soydaşlık", "halk" ve "haklı savaş" kavramlarını temel alarak inşa etmesi, tarihsel olarak nasıl inşa edildiğini ve hatta günümüze kadar nasıl devam ettiğini göstermektedir. Shafirov'un bir uluslararası hukuk ve diplomasi tarihi niteliğinde olan eseri, stratejik kültürün inşasında köşe taşlarından biridir. Bu yüzden yorumsamacı yöntem kullanılarak analiz edilmeyi ve yorumlanmayı gerektirir. Böylelikle bu çalışmada öncelikle stratejik kültür kavramı açıklanacak ve ardından Rusya'nın dış politikasındaki mantığı ve işleyişi tartışılacaktır. Ardından Shafirov'un çalışması bu bağlamda analiz edilecektir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Rusya, Avrasya, Rus stratejik kültürü, Rus soydaşlığı, Rus savaşı, Rus jeopolitiği, emperyalizm.



ПЕТР ШАФИРОВ И РОССИЙСКАЯ СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКАЯ КУЛЬТУРА

Аннотация

В данном исследовании рассматривается роль стратегической культуры России в формировании её внешней политики посредством анализа исторических, правовых и культурных конструкторов. Сосредоточив внимание на таких ключевых понятиях, как «соотечественники», «народ» и «справедливая война», исследование демонстрирует, как эти элементы способствуют преемственности имперской идентичности и геополитических целей России. В качестве примера используется творчество барона Петра Шафирова — первого российского юриста-международника и государственного деятеля. В центре внимания — «Рассуждение о справедливых причинах войны между Швецией и Россией», написанное Шафировым в 1717 году, которое является основополагающим текстом в развитии российской стратегической культуры. Это связано с тем, что Шафиров создал концептуальную схему, формулирующую имперские притязания России при Петре I, объединяя русское прошлое и современное ему политическое мышление. В то же время данная работа демонстрирует, как российская бюрократия воспринимала и интерпретировала концепции европейской литературы по международному праву. Аналогичным образом, использование Шафировым понятий «соотечественники», «народ» и «справедливая война» для легитимации действий России во внешней и экспансионистской политике показывает, как исторически складывалась эта практика и как её риторика продолжает существовать по сей день. Работа Шафирова, представляющая собой выдающийся труд по истории международного права и дипломатии, является одним из краеугольных камней формирования российской стратегической культуры и требует тщательного анализа и интерпретации с применением интерпретативистского подхода. В данном исследовании сначала объясняется понятие стратегической культуры, а затем рассматриваются её логика и функционирование во внешней политике России. В этом контексте проводится анализ работы Шафирова.

Ключевые слова: Россия, Евразия, Российская стратегическая культура, русское родство, русская война, российская геополитика, империализм.



Introduction

This article examines how Russia's strategic culture shapes its foreign policy and legitimizes its military interventions. It seeks to illuminate the mechanisms through which Russia legitimizes its actions on the global stage by drawing on historical narratives and interpretations of international law literature.

The main research question is supported by several sub-questions that allow for a comprehensive examination of the topic: a) How is the concept of strategic culture defined and what concepts contribute to its construction in the Russian context? b) What role do concepts such as "kinship," "people," and "just war" play in shaping Russia's imperial identity and justifying its military interventions? c) How did the construction of the text in Baron Petr Shafirov's *International Law* contribute to the formation of Russia's strategic culture?

The central thesis of this study is that Russia's strategic culture, firmly rooted in its imperial legacy and constructed through concepts such as "kinship," "people," and "just war," serves as a fundamental framework for shaping its foreign policy. This argument is based on three main claims: Russia's strategic culture reflects an enduring imperial identity that has informed its actions from the tsarist era to the present. Shafirov's 1717 book, while a historical law text, illustrates how it adapted norms of international law to legitimize Russian state actions. Strategic culture functions as a repository of knowledge that allows Russian elites to draw on historical narratives and symbols to legitimize their policies and interventions in a changing geopolitical context.

To examine these aspects, the study employs a qualitative research approach based on historical case analysis and interpretive methods. The study uses key texts, including "A Discourse on the Just Causes of the War between Sweden and Russia: 1700-1721" by Baron Petr Shafirov, to understand the key elements of Russian strategic culture. The qualitative approach emphasizes the role of narratives, symbols, and cultural codes in shaping strategic decision-making processes. In particular, Shafirov's book allows for historical case studies to examine how concepts such as "kinship," "people" and "just war" are reinterpreted and integrated into Russia's geopolitical strategy. This methodological framework also incorporates insights from interdisciplinary fields such as sociology, anthropology, and international relations to provide a comprehensive understanding of Russia's strategic culture.

The interpretivist methodology employed in this study is operationalized through qualitative content analysis of primary and secondary texts, particularly Shafirov's 1717 legal treatise. This is complemented by three contemporary case studies—Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), and Ukraine (2022)—to examine how key concepts such as "kinship" and "people" have evolved and been strategically deployed in Russian foreign policy. These cases were selected due to their explicit invocation of ethnic solidarity, historical rights, and cultural proximity, reflecting continuity from early imperial discourse to modern geopolitical strategies.

The first section introduces the concept of strategic culture, exploring its theoretical foundations and relevance to the field of international relations. It draws on definitions from Cold War studies and subsequent interdisciplinary approaches to situate Russia's strategic culture within broader debates on the relationship between culture, power, and foreign policy. The second part examines the historical origins of Russia's strategic culture, focusing on key events such as the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), the Northern Wars (1700-1721), and the expansionist policies of Tsarist Russia. Special emphasis is placed on studies explaining Shafirov's principles of "just war" and the formation of the concept of saturation and the people as key elements of Russian identity.

The penultimate section analyzes the interaction between legal traditions and cultural narratives in shaping Russian strategic culture. An examination of the linguistic and conceptual innovations in Shafirov's text reveals that Russia has historically adapted and localized international legal norms to serve its own geopolitical ambitions. The conclusion provides a synthesis of the findings and an analysis of the broader implications of Russia's strategic culture for global security and international relations. It argues that understanding Russia's strategic culture is essential to predicting its future behavior and addressing the challenges it poses to the international order.

This article contributes to the study of strategic culture that emerged during the Cold War by analysing the first study of Russian international law that played an important role in the formation of Russia's historical strategic culture. Similarly, while most existing studies of Russia's foreign policy focus on its geopolitical ambitions and power dynamics, this study emphasises the role of historical narratives, legal traditions and cultural codes in shaping Russia's strategic choices. By analysing Shafirov's book as a foundational text, this research seeks to offer a different perspective on the emergence and persistence of Russia's strategic culture.

Moreover, the study's emphasis on the concepts of "kinship," "people," and "just war" offers insights into how Russia shapes its identity and justifies its actions. These concepts are not just historical relics; they remain active components of Russia's contemporary geopolitical strategy. By illuminating the cultural and historical underpinnings of Russia's strategic culture, this study provides insights into the fundamental motivations that shape its foreign policy. Such an understanding is important for those engaged in policymaking, analysis, and scholarship as they engage with Russia and address the challenges it poses to global stability.

As a result, this study reveals the enduring influence of strategic culture on the formation of Russian identity and behavior. With its interdisciplinary approach and focus on historical narratives, this study contributes to the field by effectively bridging the gap between theoretical and practical analysis of strategic culture.

Studies on Russia's foreign policy often emphasize the relevance of Russia's strategic culture and national character. Russia constructs its legitimacy out of a blend of imperial culture, a unique representation of Europe and Asia, and seeks legitimacy in times of war and peace based on this identity. Russia's experience in international relations, especially during the tsarist and Soviet periods, serves as a stock of knowledge

that it draws from during the federation period, and this is reflected in the discourse maintained by its leaders. Schutz puts forward the concept of the “stock of knowledge” as a vast storehouse of data that is formed by experience and historical processes.¹ Anthony Giddens who also spoke about the concept of “stock of knowledge”, explains that practical orientations and routinized behavior of actors are based on the stock of knowledge.² In the post-Cold War period, the geopolitical continuity and civilizational (Eurasian) empire theses pursued by the Russian Federation in its foreign policy and the dialogue it established between the past and the present led to the routinization of its behavior. Routinization is seen as a practical orientation within the stock of knowledge and is meant to put the imperial image into practice.

The post-Cold War Russian Federation’s perspective on the reconstruction of the European and Asian security umbrella and its efforts to defend its position as a global power impacted fragile global security. With the Russia-Georgia War in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the Ukrainian War in 2022, Russia has shown that it has not given up on its geopolitical continental empire thesis and has attempted to justify its military interventions as self-defense.³ Such an endeavor poses an ontological problem linked to Russia’s historical mission. By accepting Russia’s imperial culture and national character as its strategic culture, Russia creates a mission-laden identity for itself while positioning its opponents/other civilizations as the “other”. The statement by Vladimir Putin, who has been the ruler of Russia for more than two decades, “Why do we need a world if Russia is not in it?”⁴ is an indication that the Russian state (in the version represented by Putin as a political leader) sees its own existence as indispensable for the world.

The aim of this article is to show what strategic culture of the Russian state is and how it is shaped. First of all, it will look at how the concept of strategic culture is defined and how this concept corresponds to the Russian case. Based on the assumption that oral and written culture are important in the formation of strategic culture, we will look at the first Russian legal text with implications for its foreign policy. This text was written by baron Petr Shafirov in 1717 at the request of Tsar Peter I at the time of the Northern Wars between Russia and Sweden (1700-21) and is titled “A Discourse Concerning the Just Causes of the War Between Sweden and Russia: 1700-1721.”⁵ This book deals with how the concept of kinship was constructed in Russia’s war against Sweden with reliance on the concepts of ‘just war’, ‘civilized people’ and ‘loyalty to covenant’, which are important in shaping Russia’s strategic culture. In the last part of the article, it will be shown that this treatise, which is seen as an important work in the shaping of Russian strategic culture, is

¹ Alfred Schutz *et al.*, “Concept and Theory Formation in the Social Sciences”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 51/9 (1954): 262.

² Giddens, Anthony, *New Rules of Sociological Method* (California: Stanford University Press., 1993), 87.

³ Sten Rynning, “The False Promise of Continental Concert: Russia, the West and the Necessary Balance of Power”, *International Affairs* 91/ 3 (2015): 543.

⁴ “Why Do We Need a World if Russia Is Not In It?,” *The Moscow Times*, February 28, 2022, accessed December 18, 2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/02/28/why-do-we-need-a-world-if-russia-is-not-in-it-state-tv-presenter-opens-show-with-ominous-address-a76653>

⁵ See Petr Pavlovich Shafirov, *Razsuzhdeniye kakiye zakonnyye prichiny Yego Tsarskoye Velichestvo Petr Pervyy tsar i povelitel' vserossiiskii: k nachatiyu voyny protiv Korolya Karla 12, Shvedskogo 1700*. Sankt-Peterburg, 1722.

still relevant in today's Russia and thus the strategic culture has not undergone drastic changes.

1) Strategic Culture and International Relations

The studies on strategic culture as a field of working on directions of the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States, began during the Cold War. This concept was introduced by the US-based RAND research center in a report titled *Soviet Strategic Culture* and defined as follows: "the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and habitual patterns of behavior that members of a national strategic community acquire through education or imitation."⁶ Strategic culture studies, which later found a place within Gramscian and constructivist international relations studies, became interdisciplinary by drawing from sociology and anthropology. Taking the concept of culture as a basis, this concept identifies the common sense of societies through oral and written transmission between generations and aims to predict their behavior. Based on the assumption of being able to read strategic goals through cultural codes, the concept aims to interpret the past and present and to make predictions about the future. As Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba put it, political culture is "a subset of a society's beliefs and values about the political system". Strategic culture can also be seen as an integrated system of symbols (e.g. argumentation structures, languages, analogies, metaphors) that serve to form strategic choices.⁷

In order to strengthen the theoretical basis of strategic culture, this study also incorporates foundational works by Jack Snyder and Colin S. Gray. Snyder's seminal 1977 RAND report defined Soviet strategic culture as a historically informed, ideologically infused framework that influences elite behavior in times of war. Meanwhile, Gray emphasized the symbolic and mythic aspects of strategic behavior, framing strategic culture as a persistent set of national habits in thinking about force. These works help situate the Russian case within a broader comparative literature and clarify the interpretive lens through which this study approaches historical and contemporary discourses in Russian foreign policy.⁸

Viewing strategic culture as a stock of knowledge and assuming it as a set of practical orientations raises two important questions: how is the relationship between power and knowledge shaped, and how are definitions within the stock of knowledge transmitted and reproduced? The more knowledge is related to power, the more it enables power itself to cluster in a place, to construct a legitimate *Self* based on knowledge. Although this reciprocal relationship and the resulting path dependency push social scientists towards a structural trap, what should not be overlooked is that the subject and the group are the main carriers of knowledge.

This relationship between power and the subject also enables the production of knowledge, the construction of culture and the formation of a stock of knowledge. If we

⁶ Jack L. Snyder, "The Soviet strategic culture: Implications for limited nuclear operations", *Rand Cooperation* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1977), 4-8.

⁷ Gabriel A. Almond & Sydney Verba, *Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (1963): 11-14.

⁸ See. Colin Gray, *S. Modern Strategy*. Oxford University Press, (1999).

take it as an assumption that the production of knowledge is based on the agenda of power and is produced in line with its demands and desires within its contexts, the transfer of this knowledge and concepts is also in question in the interactions of communities with each other.⁹ In the process of transferring concepts and meanings from one community to another, additional knowledge is produced. At the same time, we see that these concepts are adopted with the adjustment to the common sense of the recipient community. For that reason, linguistic accuracy in translation is of high importance during the transfer of concepts, differentiation of meanings and its role in solving problems in the new context, especially when it comes to the agenda of power.¹⁰ Therefore, the production of knowledge and concepts throughout three centuries in Russia and its evolution into practical implementation, oral and written narratives in the strategic culture of the empire become a priority. Eventually, the image of *self* and *other* is packed in this stock of knowledge, which, in turn, is preserved through its intergenerational reproduction.

Taking strategic culture as a sole basis to explain today's policies, however, is a structural trap which should be avoided. The assumption that a state or a government are devoid of agency due to path dependency is not laid in the premise of this article. It is more meaningful not to see strategic culture as a stock of ideas interpreted in isolation. Throughout history, the information transmitted by different groups and subjects has been altered and adapted to new context. There is a conscious and unconscious interaction of symbols, discourses, social representations, or images employed by the ruling elites.¹¹ This interaction undergoes change through accidental additions, socialization, and power. In this process of accidental encounter, it is seen that the social interaction of subjects is transformed into practical realization. Therefore, this study argues that the knowledge and ideas within strategic culture are multifaceted, that this culture constantly produces subjects and allows for practical orientations.

2) Historical Roots of Russia's Strategic Culture

The cultural and historical legitimacy of Russia's foreign policy behavior does not date back to the distant past. The establishment of the international relations order with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, the effective position of the Russian Empire in Europe and Asia as a result of its expansionist policies since the eighteenth century, and its control and management of a large geography have played an important role in determining the country's foreign policy. Russia's strategic culture influences its foreign policy decisions. This article focuses on the imperial character of the country's strategic culture, which is one of the foundations of the Russian state.

It can be observed that Russia has five missions that it undertakes through its strategic culture: protector of Orthodox geopolitics¹², protector of the Slavic/Russian

⁹ V. Polsky & V. S. Rjeuchky, *Laboratoriya Ponyatij: Perevod i Yaziki Politiki v Rossii XVIII veka*, Pod red. S. V. Polsky & V. S. Rjeuchky (Moscow: 2022), 29.

¹⁰ Polsky & Rjeuchky, *Laboratoriya ponyatij*, 31.

¹¹ Serge Moscovici, "On social representations. Perspectives on everyday understanding," In J. Forgas (Ed.), *Social Cognition* (London: 1981), 188.

¹² Lucian N. Leustean, "Eastern Orthodoxy, Geopolitics and the 2016 'Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox Church,'" *Geopolitics* 23 /1 (2018): 205-06.

world¹³, protector of Eurasian civilization, protector of the former Soviet space (the Near Abroad doctrine), and protector of global conservative values in world politics (counterrevolutionary). In the post-Cold War era, the Russian Federation is striving to realize these five strategic missions, which are important components of its imperial culture.

The mission of the protector of Orthodox geopolitics, based on the imperial thesis of Russia being the Third Rome, covers a wide area from Moscow to Jerusalem, while the Slavic/Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) extends to Eastern Europe, the Baltics and the Balkans.¹⁴ The protectorate of the post-Soviet space is a mission of a large state responsible for security and stability in the neighborhood, the Near Abroad that encompasses former Soviet republics.¹⁵ The thesis of conservatism or counter-revolutionism originates in the attempt to preserve monarchies in the face of revolutions like the French Revolution (1789), and pursued by the Holy Alliance formed by Tsarist Russia and the Austrian Empire after the Napoleonic Wars. In the Tsarist Russia, the principles of orthodoxy, autocracy and people proposed by Sergey Uvarov, the Minister of Education under Nicholas I, played an important role in the construction of the backbone of the conservative state ideology. It should be emphasized in the form of new right in global politics,¹⁶ however, that the geopolitics of the Russian Federation, which has been revolving around these five missions.

These five geopolitical theses in the strategic culture of the Russian Federation are related to the construction of the imperial image. The crucial question is when and how the construction of Russia's imperial identity took place. Rumer and Sokolsky describe Russia's strategic culture as follows: "Russian strategic culture is a product of several key factors: a long history of wars and adversarial relations with other European powers; an open geographic landscape that puts a premium on strategic depth; and an elite given to embracing a narrative of implacable Western hostility toward Russia".¹⁷ In this determination, the wars Russia has experienced throughout history and the construction of its relations with others are even more striking. In particular, focusing on the role of war and the fiction of the other in the construction of strategic culture and the formation of the stock of knowledge can be seminal. According to Rumer and Sokolsky, the wars won played an important role in determining the relationship of the Russian identity with the "other". For example, the Russian Empire was inserted into European politics through its victorious war against Sweden in 1701-21. Russia's war with the Ottoman Empire in 1768-1774, the war with France in 1812-15 (the Napoleonic Wars) and the Second World War in 1941-45 are historical phenomena that reinforced the imperial angle of Russian strategic culture. On the other hand, traumatizing events for Russian strategic culture

¹³ See. Mikhail Suslov, "Russian World" concept: Post-Soviet geopolitical ideology and the logic of spheres of influence," *Geopolitics* 23/2 (2018): 330-353.

¹⁴ See. Østbø, Jardar, *The new third Rome: Readings of a Russian nationalist myth* (2016):

¹⁵ Babak Rezvani, "Russian foreign policy and geopolitics in the post-Soviet space and the Middle East: Tajikistan, Georgia, Ukraine and Syria," *Middle Eastern Studies* 56/6 (2020): 878-880.

¹⁶ See. D. S. Moiseyev, et al. "Kontseptsiya global'nogo konservatizma. Traditsionnyye tsennosti kak most mezhdru Rossiyei i Zapadom," *Rossiia v global'noy politike* 21/5 (2023): 108-123.

¹⁷ Eugene Rumer & Richard Sokolsky, *Grand Illusions: The Impact of Misperceptions About Russia on US Policy* (2021): 4.

include Russia's territorial losses to Poland-Lithuania and the Kingdom of Sweden, the 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk after the First World War, and the fourteen states that broke away from Russia as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The effects of this last event are also reflected in Vladimir Putin's rhetoric: "What is the collapse of the Soviet Union? the collapse of the Soviet Union spelled the end of historical Russia. It is the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century".¹⁸

The image of the other, the criteria of justified warfare and the stock of knowledge that is used in important situations are the practical orientations that have helped to form and nurture a national character based on imperial culture. These practical orientations show that Russia's strategic culture has geopolitical continuity.

3) The Emergence of the First International Law Studies and the Construction of Strategic Culture in Russia

Although the imperial tradition, from which the Russian Federation inherits its foreign policy trends, is traced back to Ivan III in the official historiography, developments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are much more important in the formation of strategic culture and national character. One of the most important of these developments preceding it was the reshaping of European international relations with the Westphalian order of 1648 and the role of Russia's efforts to adapt to this order and become a part of Western civilization in the construction of the new empire.¹⁹ In this process, Russia's effort to present itself as a legitimate civilized nation against Europe, which it perceived as the "other", was in question. Likewise, in the Westphalian order, the universal empire thesis was abandoned in international relations with the formation of a balance of power between the *Respublica Christiana*.²⁰ In the new international system based on the principle of equality for European powers, the thesis of universality associated with the Holy Roman Empire had to disappear because the state ideology of the late Rurik dynasty in Russia would have no legitimacy in European politics.²¹ During the reign of Peter I, the construction of new forms of legitimacy came to the fore with the epistemological break of the Russian state from the archaic (messianic) state ideology late period of the Rurik dynasty - the legitimacy of autocracy based on God. In Russia, institutions typical of the Roman Republic, such as the Senate and Collegias, were constructed and the belief that the monarchy was legitimized by the approval of God, as in Rome, was established.²² However, in addition to these, a state model that also took into account the consent of the people and the elites began to be built. In order to make Russia a member of the European family, Peter I had Grotius and Puffendorf's books on domestic and international law translated into Russian and recommended that bureaucrats read them.²³ In short, the

¹⁸ "Russia's Vladimir Putin says he drove a taxi after fall of Soviet Union," *France 24*, December 13, 2021, accessed December 02, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20211213-russia-s-vladimir-putin-says-he-drove-a-taxi-after-fall-of-soviet-union>

¹⁹ Maksim Paleolog & Svetlana Chistova, "Sakralnyy aspekt imperskoy ideologii Rossii. Imperskaya ideologiya v epokhu Petra I, i XIX veke," *Nauchno-analiticheskiy zhurnal Obozrevatel - Observer* 9/296 (2014): 64.

²⁰ Franca Filho & Marclio Toscano, "Westphalia: A paradigm? A dialogue between law, art and philosophy of science," *German Law Journal* 8/10 (2007): 960.

²¹ Paleolog & Mikhaylovna, "Sakralnyy aspekt imperskoy ideologii Rossii," 64-65.

²² Nicholas V. Riasanovsky & Mark D. Steinberg, *Rusya Tarihi: Başlangıçtan Günümüze* (İstanbul: 2010): 241.

²³ Paul Bushkovitch, "Peter the Great and the West in Russian Culture and State," *Russian Studies Hu* 4/1 (2022): 3-4.

reason for the interest in the study of international law in Russia was Russia's concern to justify its foreign policy behavior in the eyes of its neighbor – the West. Thus, after his accession to the throne, Peter I endeavored to justify the Northern Wars against the Kingdom of Sweden to Western states in a way that would make sense to the adversary, in the language of the “other”.

Baron Petr Shafirov (1669-1739), who began his tenure in the Russian Foreign Affairs Committee (*Posolsky Prikaz*) as a drafter and translator of international legal treaties and rose to the position of Vice Chancellor, wrote the book entitled *Thesis of the Great Tsar Peter I against King Karl XII on the Causes of the Just War between Russia and Sweden in 1700. Peter I against King Karl XII* (further in the text: Tsar Peter I's Thesis against King Karl XII), which as a contribution to the international law was presented to the world public in 1717. In his work, Shafirov explained the legitimate rights of Russia in Peter I era from the perspective of the other on the basis of the principles of “just bellum”, “civilization” and “pacta de servantes”. Shafirov, the father of Russian international law discipline, who is seen in Russia as an equivalent of Grotius or Pufendorf, made an effort to define civilization in Russia in the eighteenth century and to explain it through the eyes of the other; he provided important information about cultural codes that have remained majorly intact up until today. He tried to convey the transmission of historical knowledge and the reproduction of this history, which is important in shaping the Russian strategic culture and national character, from the perspective of the other, while adding historical interpretations within the particular society.

Shafirov's book consists of three parts. In the first part, the old and new reasons for Russia's war against the Kingdom of Sweden are explained; in the second part, the protracted war is described as a result of the Kingdom of Sweden's refusal to make peace. In the third part, Shafirov aims to show that Russia treated ambassadors and captives morally in accordance with the just in bellum tradition of Christian peoples, whereas the Kingdom of Sweden acted completely against this tradition and was cruel to captives. This last part of the study includes the texts of the treaties concluded between the Kingdom of Sweden and the Grand Moscow Principality in 1564 and in Vyborg in 1609, as well as documents on the non-fulfillment of the promises made by the Kingdom of Sweden to King Louis XIII of France in 1615, the request for aid, and finally the declaration of war against King Karl XII of Sweden in 1700. Shafirov laid those treaties in the basis of his argument about Russia's right.

It is possible to determine that Shafirov's book was influenced by the translations of Grotius and Pufendorf and that the way he uses some concepts and the way he translates them into Russian are original, as we have already emphasized. It is interesting to note that Shafirov's definition of the *Russian people*, which he uses when talking about the universal and particular values that play an important role in the intergenerational transmission of Russia's political culture, includes his compatriots outside the borders of the empire.²⁴ In the construction of the *self* in which universal and particular values are

²⁴ Petr Shafirov, *Razsuzhdeniye kakiye zakonnyye prichiny Yego Tsarskoye Velichestvo Petr Pervyy tsar i povelitel' vserossiiskii*. Sankt-Peterburg: [Yayinevi], 1722.

effective, Shafirov, while making descriptions by focusing on the concepts of just in bellum and pacta de servantes, which are the principles of international law, also talks about Russia's 'old and new rights' by addressing the concepts of average Volks, laymen (*prostoy narod*) and people (*narod*).

Shafirov's text functions as a stock of knowledge that explains the ways of thinking and behavior of the Russian state. As we have already emphasized, Shafirov, in the process of translating concepts and transferring meanings, actually produced new concepts with the words in the Russian language, enriched the definitions he received with Russian cultural codes, and tried to construct a civilizational thesis in which Russia is composed of the Christianic core but different from the Catholic counterpart. For a better understanding of the subject, the concepts of *political people*, *Orthodox Christians* and the *customs of political people* will be analyzed.²⁵

The content of the concept of *people* and *customs* was defined three centuries ago. When analyzing the concepts, it is seen that the meaning of the concept was transferred to the twenty-first century in order to find meaning in Russia's political culture. One may wonder whether *narod* (the Russian equivalent of people), comes from the German word *volk* or the French *nation* or *populaire*. However, the word *narod*, which Shafirov uses in the process of transferring the concepts into Russian, does not have exactly the same meaning as its French and German equivalents. *Narod* appears as a definition that covers all layers of the state. The use of the word *narod* in this way in the eighteenth century and its inclusion in a book on international relations and law written in Russia is important in terms of showing the development of Russian political culture. In 1824, Vzyaemskiy's²⁶ saying on the matter is important for understanding the context: "Everyone knows that there is no word *natsionalnyy* (Russian for 'national') in our language. The word *narod* (people) in our language is the sum of the French words "nation" and "populaire".²⁷ This definition of the word *narod* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can be seen as an attempt to place the triad of society-state-power into a single concept in Russia. Likewise, Shafirov's use of the word *narod* despite knowing the meaning of nation points to the originality of the concept of *narod*.

Shafirov took the original content of the word *narod* to the level of interstate relations and introduced the definition of *obychayi politicheskikh narodov* (Customs of Political Peoples) and tried to describe what a political people is. Aida Volovkova, who studied Shafirov's text during the Soviet era, analyzed the categories of political, peoples and customs and stated that the mentioned customs (*obychayi* in Russian) in the Slavic family of languages meant "the rules or traditions passed down orally through generations".²⁸ William Butler, who examines this issue in more detail, quotes Shafirov's

²⁵ Shafirov, *Razsuzhdeniye kakiye zakonnyye prichiny*, 20.

²⁶ P. A. Vzaemskiy, Pyotr Andreyevich Vyazemsky (Russian: Пётр Андреевич Вяземский), was an important Russian poet, literary critic, translator and statesman who lived between 1792 and 1778. He is a 19th-century intellectual figure in Russian literature, especially associated with the Puskin generation.

²⁷ P. A. Vzaemskiy, "Razbor vtorogo razgovora," *Damskiy Zhurnal* 8 (1824): 76-77.

²⁸ Aida Voloskova, *Diplomaticheskaya leksika nachala XVIII veka (Po materialam traktata P. P. Shafirova "Rassu hdenie, kakie zakonnyye prichiny Petr Velikii k nachatiu voina protiv Karla XII imel Leningrad. Diss. kandidat filologicheskikh nauk (Leningrad: 1966), 313-316.*

view on customs as sources of international law as follows: "(Shafirov) referred to the customs of Russian society, not the international community".²⁹ In other words, these customs are customs specific to Russian society. Likewise, in his book *Tsar Peter I's Thesis against King Karl XII*, Shafirov, while discussing the customs in the territories captured by the Kingdom of Sweden, adopted a narrative style that relates to the Russian administration and people. Despite the territorial losses in Lithuania, Estonia and Finland, Shafirov describes the relationship of these regions with the Russian/Rurik throne since the tenth century, the names given to the cities and the people living there, emphasizing the triangle of throne-land-people, the incompetence of the former rulers and the loss of lands by emphasizing the periods of turmoil in Russia.

If we look at the concept of the Customs of Political Peoples, Volovkova argues, the word *politicheskii* ('political' in Russian), in eighteenth-century Russian corresponds to "governing the state" in the Russian Empire.³⁰ As mentioned earlier, Shafirov assigns the concept of *narod* the meaning of society, state, power, while legitimate grounds for being present in international relations was predicated on belonging to a people governed by a state. In his book, Shafirov uses the word *politichnyi* (political) alongside *politicheskii*. Volovkova points out that these two words have different meanings and gives the word *politichnyi* the meaning of "polite, civilized". It is mentioned that the customs of civilized peoples are specific to the Christian world, and that Tatars, Persians and Turks are not civilized.³¹ Shafirov's distinction between Catholicism and Orthodoxy within the Political Customs of Peoples is an effort to emphasize the differences between the two through the Russian identity and to show this difference to the "other".³² In other words, the effort to recognize Orthodox/Russian culture as authentic and legitimate within the Political Customs of Peoples is a sign of the idea of first among equals (*primus inter pares*) in interstate relations.

While explaining the customs of Christian political peoples, Shafirov conveyed it to his readers as *jus gentium* in Latin, and while translating the definitions of international law into Russian, he deliberately Russified and reproduced them with different meanings. By defining the concept of *jus gentium* as a right derived from nature and explaining what a *narod* is, he has added interpretations that include Russian cultural codes. The three centuries of strategic cultural knowledge production process in which not the law of nations but international law or relations are transmitted today as *mejdunarodnoe otnosheniya* in Russian translated inter peoples law relations shows its influence.

If we continue to examine Shafirov's justifications of war based on customs and traditions, it will be seen that the defense built on the war launched against the Kingdom of Sweden has remarkable points to be considered in the context of international law. Namely, while listing the justifications for the war, Shafirov argues that the right to the lands they want to take back is the ancient inalienable right of the Russians. He

²⁹ Voloskova, *Diploniatcheskaia leksika nachala XVIII veka*, 289.

³⁰ William E. Butler, "On the origins of international legal science in Russia: the role of Petr Pavlovich Shafirov," *Journal of the History of International Law* 7 (2002): 3-4.

³¹ Voloskova, *Diploniatcheskaia leksika nachala XVIII veka*, 289.

³² Shafirov, *Razsuzhdeniye kakiye zakonnyye prichiny*, 39.

emphasized that even if these lands are not taken back, the community living there is still the Russian people. Pursuing this logic, Shafirov tried to construct the perception of kinship through the peoples living in the regions outside the borders.³³ Shafirov cites the natural right as a justification for continuing to be kinsmen with the peoples of the regions that remained beyond Russia's control. According to him, the Russian territories acquired by the Kingdom of Sweden were lost for political, economic and military reasons. He explains that the loss of the territories and the treaties with the Kingdom of Sweden in the past lost their validity by the reign of Peter I on different grounds.

Shafirov looks at international law treaties from a natural law/rights and historicist perspective and argues that the interpretation of treaties can change according to the conditions of the time.³⁴ In his defense of the war against the Kingdom of Sweden, he cites two important reasons. First, these lands were taken from Russia due to coercion imposed by foreign states and economic and military weakness of Russia itself, and second, since the conjuncture has changed today, it is deemed appropriate to question this and take back the lands. The Tsardom of Russia has regained its power and has the right to reclaim the lands it gave away in the treaty. Similarly, the emphasis on Russian identity in many parts of the work shows how the author reads international law. In his comments on religion, it becomes clear that Shafirov is subjective in his approach to international law regarding the principle of covenant faithfulness and that he tends not to comply with universal values. When we carefully examine Shafirov's book, it is seen that under the definition of Christian political peoples, the customs and traditions of the Russian society and Orthodoxy, which is a religious creed, are emphasized separately. In this way, the divergence with Europe over religion is underlined, as Russians belong to the Orthodox Church, while Europeans belong to the Catholic Church. Therefore, in Shafirov's approach to international law, there is a defense based on three important principles: customs and traditions, religious beliefs and the continuity of the heritage of the throne.³⁵ Shafirov's third principle, the continuity of the Russian throne, is based on the idea that the Russian tsars were each other's heirs. Thus, while listing the ancient reasons for the Russia-Sweden war, he stated that Russia's territory was divided into several principalities and then a Moscow-centered structure emerged, emphasizing that these principalities considered their lands as part of their own state and drew legitimacy from both God and history to reclaim them.

Volovkova paid attention to some the foreign words that Shafirov used to justify the Russo-Swedish war, which had entered the Russian language at the time. One such word is "particular" - *osoby* as it entered the Russian language. The equivalent of "particular" at that time was 'original' or 'special', 'separate'. Shafirov used the concept of 'particular' throughout the book, especially when describing peace treaties. We observe Shafirov using the concept in three ways. The first is in the form of particular judgment; at the beginning of the book, he invites the King of Sweden to make a particular judgment on old and new rights. Elsewhere, he mentions that the particular letters were going out, and

³³ Shafirov, *Razsuzhdeniye kakiye zakonnyye prichiny*, 14-16.

³⁴ Shafirov, *Razsuzhdeniye kakiye zakonnyye prichiny*, 17-18

³⁵ Shafirov, *Razsuzhdeniye kakiye zakonnyye prichiny*, 17-18

finally, he mentions the conclusion of particular peace treaties. Thus, he deliberately uses the word ‘particular’ in the text to emphasize the uniqueness of Russian customs and traditions. Shafirov, in his book *Tsar Peter I’s Thesis against King Karl XII*, constructed the perception of kinship in a way to include Russians outside the empire. He argued that the Russian people historically living outside the borders of the empire justify future efforts to reclaim those lands by Russia. So what?

Conclusion

An analysis of Russia’s strategic culture reveals a profound and enduring continuity in the country’s self-perception and its understanding of its global position. This culture is rooted in the country’s imperial past and is characterized by a synthesis of historical narratives, legal traditions, and cultural codes, which collectively inform the country’s distinctive self-image and influence its foreign policy decisions. From the writings of Baron Petr Shafirov to the contemporary rhetoric of Russian leaders, the concepts of “kinship,” “people,” and “just war” remain pivotal to the strategic culture that informs Russia’s geopolitical aspirations.

A principal conclusion of this study is the continued presence of Russia’s imperial identity, which serves as a fundamental element of its strategic culture. This identity, constructed through historical events such as the Northern Wars and the expansion of the Russian Empire, persists in contemporary policies.³⁶ The rhetoric of “protecting the Russian peoples” and defending Orthodox geopolitics serves two distinct purposes: it provides a rationale for intervention and it consolidates both internal and external legitimacy.

A further noteworthy aspect of Russia’s strategic culture is its tendency to rely on historical and legal narratives in order to legitimate its actions. Shafirov’s 1717 treatise, which framed the Northern Wars as a “just war,” exemplifies the enduring tradition of employing legal and moral arguments to justify military campaigns. This approach has been adapted to contemporary contexts, with modern Russian leaders employing similar rhetoric to rationalize interventions. Russia employs historical precedent to construct a narrative of continuity, portraying its actions as both necessary and legitimate within the framework of international relations.

This work, written by Shafirov in his own time, aimed to communicate with the European aristocracy and to legitimize Russia’s actions in the international arena. This book, which is considered a turning point in Russian history, is not only the first text of international law, but also of great importance in showing how the Russian intellectual world articulated itself in European diplomatic discourse. In the text, both Russian cultural codes and familiarity with the legal language of the West are intertwined. This shows that Shafirov was not only engaged in defensive rhetoric, but also in a kind of intellectual diplomacy.

In the centuries that followed, the work became a reference for both Russian legal tradition and historiography. In particular, Nezabitov considers Shafirov’s work as an early

³⁶ Ayşe G. Çalık, *Rusya’nın Arktika Politikası*. (Ankara. AU Yayınları; 2025). 108-15

example of Russia's search for legal rationality, while Graber positions him as a Eurasian actor struggling with the image of the Oriental in the early modern period. Similarly, Wesley analyses Shafirov's text as a legal and symbolic component of Russia's 'civilising' process. In this context, the book is not only a text of diplomatic defense, but also a strategy of identity construction and legitimation.

This narrative of transborder kinship is frequently mobilized in regions such as Eastern Ukraine, Northern Kazakhstan, and parts of the Caucasus, where significant Russian-speaking or ethnically Russian populations reside. By framing interventions or political influence in these areas as acts of protection or cultural reunification, Russia constructs a discourse that blends national security with historical justice. This discourse often draws on the memory of the Soviet Union and even the Russian Empire, selectively invoking periods of perceived unity and strength to justify present-day actions. Scholars such as Marlène Laruelle and Igor Zevelev have noted that such ideologies not only support foreign policy objectives but also function domestically to cultivate a shared sense of belonging and exceptionalism. Ultimately, the invocation of kinship becomes a dual-purpose tool: externally legitimizing geopolitical moves and internally reinforcing a coherent narrative of Russian identity in a fragmented post-Soviet space.³⁷

Nevertheless, this reliance on strategic culture as a framework for policy-making presents certain challenges. The focus on historical narratives and imperial identity can result in a form of path dependency that constrains Russia's capacity to adapt to evolving geopolitical circumstances. While strategic culture offers a valuable analytical framework for understanding Russia's actions, it also carries the risk of perpetuating an outdated worldview that prioritizes confrontation over cooperation. This rigidity is evident in Russia's strained relations with the West, where mutual distrust and conflicting narratives have contributed to the escalation of tensions.

Furthermore, the utilisation of historical and legal arguments to substantiate intervention gives rise to doubts concerning the universality and objectivity of these claims. While Russia presents its actions as consistent with the principles of a "just war" and "kinship", these concepts are frequently interpreted subjectively in a manner that aligns with its interests. This selective interpretation calls into question the credibility of its arguments and underscores the tension between universal norms and localized understandings of justice and identity.

Notwithstanding these constraints, an investigation into Russia's strategic culture offers significant insights into its foreign policy conduct. By examining the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of this culture, we can gain a deeper comprehension of the underlying motivations behind Russia's actions and the narratives it employs to justify them. This understanding is of paramount importance for the development of strategies to engage with Russia in a manner that is cognizant of its cultural and historical context while concurrently addressing the challenges it poses to global security. In the future, the role of strategic culture in influencing Russia's foreign policy is likely to remain significant.

³⁷ See. Marlène Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism: Imaginaries, Doctrines, and Political Battlefields.*, (New York: Routledge 2018). and Igor Zevelev, "The Russian World in Moscow's Strategy." *CSIS Report* (2016).

As the global order continues to evolve, Russia's leaders will draw on this stock of knowledge to navigate new challenges and opportunities. As Russia navigates this tension, it must contend with the contradictions inherent in asserting a civilizational distinctiveness while seeking legitimacy within global governance structures. Efforts to assert a unique geopolitical trajectory — often termed the “Russian world” (Russkiy mir) — may alienate potential partners and reinforce perceptions of revisionism. Moreover, the invocation of historical grievances and exceptionalist narratives can undermine trust in multilateral frameworks, particularly when paired with actions that violate international norms. At the same time, Russia's engagement with rising non-Western powers, such as China and India, indicates a potential reconfiguration of alliances that challenges the Western-centric order. The outcome of this balancing act will shape not only Russia's external posture but also the domestic construction of identity in a rapidly evolving international system.

While this study focuses on the Russian case, a brief comparative note is warranted. Unlike the institutionalized and techno-strategic orientation of U.S. strategic culture or China's Confucian-legalist hybrid rooted in dynastic continuity, Russia's strategic culture remains anchored in civilizational narratives and an enduring imperial identity. This comparative reflection highlights the uniqueness of Russia's reliance on concepts such as kinship and spiritual-moral responsibility to legitimize geopolitical interventions.

In conclusion, this study highlights the significance of strategic culture as a conceptual framework for interpreting Russia's foreign policy. By tracing its historical roots and analyzing its modern implications, we gain a deeper appreciation of the factors that drive Russia's actions and the narratives that sustain its self-image. This interdisciplinary approach facilitates the integration of theoretical and practical perspectives, offering a comprehensive examination of the role of culture, history, and identity in international relations. As scholars and policymakers grapple with the complexities of engaging with Russia, the insights provided by this study serve as a valuable foundation for informed analysis and decision-making.



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