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# The image of the Russian Federation on the canvas of social research

Wizerunek Federacji Rosyjskiej na kanwie badań społecznych

**Abstract:** The starting point for this article was research conducted from February to April 2017 and in January and February 2020. The purpose of the work is to show the image and position of the Russian Federation in the eyes of respondents who participated (incl. residents of Moscow, Arkhangelsk, Saint Petersburg and Vladivostok) in in-depth interviews conducted by the author. The principal analysis concerns the results obtained in 2017, and the specific changes observed three years after the initial surveys were completed.

**Keywords:** strategic culture, position, and instruments of the Russian Federation, political determinants

**Streszczenie:** Punktem wyjścia do stworzenia niniejszego artykułu były badania prowadzone od lutego do kwietnia 2017 r. oraz od stycznia do lutego 2020 r. Celem pracy pozostaje ukazanie wizerunku i pozycji Federacji Rosyjskiej w oczach respondentów oraz osób biorących udział w przeprowadzonych przez autora wywiadach pogłębionych. Zasadnicza analiza dotyczy wyników uzyskanych w 2017 r. oraz specyficznych zmian zaobserwowanych trzy lata po pierwszym badaniu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kultura strategiczna, pozycja i instrumenty Federacji Rosyjskiej, uwarunkowania polityczne

## Introduction

The unique role of the Russian Federation is of great interest in many areas: Russian political influence, binary European and Asian values, rich historical heritage, geopolitical and economic potential, as well as weaknesses. Some admire the legacy of the Russian Federation, recognizing in the activities of the state the need to implement strate-

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gic goals, while others have entirely different interpretations of social reality and fear imperialist tendencies. Differing views are the result of the representation of various social groups, political and historical discourses, and even generational differences as well as the multiple media impacts on the perception of phenomena. This also applies to the subject of this article: the position and determinants of Russia's political influence.

To examine the image of Russia and the attitude of the respondents to the actions taken by Moscow, a pilot study was conducted with a group of over 500 respondents. However, it should not be assumed that it is free of errors, because the point of view of each person depends on their personal and individual picture of the world, as well as their degree of identification with the Russian Federation. The author is also aware of the lack of representation of respondents from some countries, however, none of the responses about issues are intended to show that specific connotations can be treated as incorrect. Each respondent's thoughts can be extrapolated and analyzed because they signal certain ideas about the Russian Federation. Therefore, social identification of discourses resulted in the adoption here of a constructivist paradigm that recognizes the importance of speech acts and the normativity of preferences of entities and reference objects, as well as of the examined individuals.<sup>1</sup> Due to the fact that culture is socially constructed, the author has adopted a position related to anti-naturalistic ontology and interpretationist epistemology. Naturally, the units of analysis are individuals and social groups. This analysis was carried out using an exploratory, cross-sectional study. In order to explain the processes taking place over time, a cross-section of respondents were observed for several months in 2017 and 2020.

The main goal of the research is a comparative analysis of the factors that help to create the image of the Russian Federation and detecting the similarities and differences between the attitudes of respondents from the "West" and "East." Therefore, the author will verify the research hypothesis, assuming that the starting point in learning about

1 J. Czaputowicz, 'Wprowadzenie. Potencjał konstrukttywizmu w wyjaśnieniu integracji europejskiej', in: *Zastosowanie konstrukttywizmu w studiach europejskich*, ed. J. Czaputowicz, Warszawa 2016, pp. 13-15; T. Hopf, 'The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory', *International Security*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1998, pp. 181-185.

Russia's intentions in the international arena should be that strategic culture is anchored in the mentality of each nation. Cultural determinants include: historical experiences, geopolitical location, military and economic potential, attitude towards power, and religion. Along with the increased activity of the Russian Federation in the international arena and the emphasis on the power aspirations resulting from the aforementioned legacy, the negative image of the state is strengthened and cultural stereotypes are created. Therefore, the sense of threat and negative opinions about the actions of Russian decision-makers and average citizens are most often expressed by those respondents who are closest to its sphere of influence.

To achieve the research goal, answering the following questions was particularly important:

- How do the citizens of the Russian Federation perceive themselves and how are they perceived by the other respondents?
- Do respondents who are not citizens of the Russian Federation separate the effects of politics from the image of the average citizen of the Russian Federation, or is it correlated?
- To what extent do the perceptions of non-Russian citizens correspond to the beliefs of Russian citizens?
- Which cultural factors affect and shape state policy?
- How has the respondents' attitude to the annexation of Crimea and Russia's participation in the conflict in Syria changed after three years?
- What weaknesses and factors determining the potential of the Russian Federation determine the state's image?

## **1. General characteristics of respondents**

The pilot analysis used a questionnaire in Polish, Russian, and English, consisting of 12 questions (metric questions, short answers, multiple choice with the possibility of competing results, single selection grid). This was supplemented with a final short answer question for any additional comments. The survey was directed to a particular environment. As part of the process of acquiring participants, the author established e-mail contact with 14 academic lecturers at Russian universities: Northern (Arctic) Federal University, International University in Moscow IUM, Saint Petersburg State University, and Far

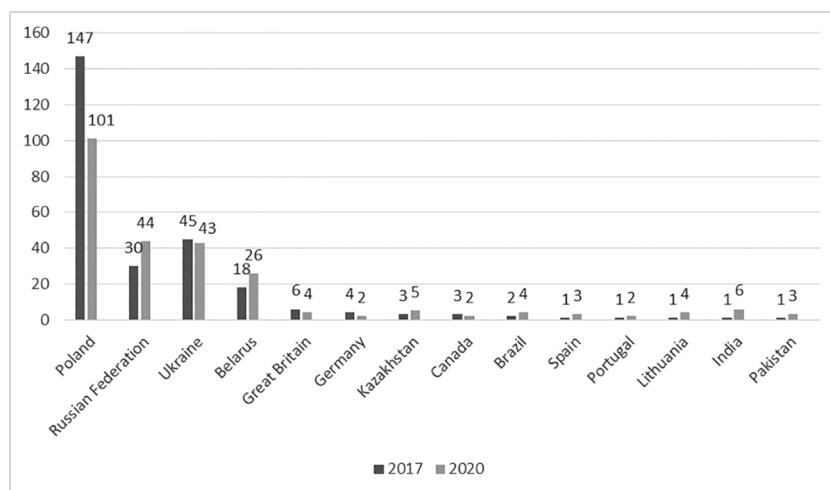
Eastern Federal University who agreed to a conversation in 2017 and, in addition to completing the survey, to provide some additional insights. Of this group, 10 took part in the survey again in 2020. Additional respondents were recruited through various social networking sites and were chosen based on their origin (in particular, Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian citizens). However, it was assumed that the larger the representative sample, the more information the author would be able to obtain.

The study was attended by people who responded to an advertisement posted on Facebook and expressed a desire to share their position on the image of Russia on the international stage. In addition, some respondents provided extensive comments in connection with a scientific interest in the research area. Among them were academic lecturers who responded to the content of the e-mail (sent to the addresses advertised on the university's website) and consented to talk via Skype. The author, therefore, allowed the interlocutor to undertake a digression to verify the personal narrative of the respondent and maintain a positive reception of the conversation. Although the questions asked to respondents three years after the first survey were unchanged and were directed to the same nationalities as in 2017, due to the number of respondents and their anonymity, it was not possible to reach the same people. Therefore, the study was not conducted as a panel study.

In total, 263 people from February to April 2017 and 252 in January and February 2020 took part in the study, including 264 women and 251 men. Most of the respondents (78%) live in cities of over 500,000 residents. A significant number of study participants have a university degree (79%). Most Russian-speaking respondents have a doctoral and postdoctoral degree, and a few have the title of professor. Among the respondents from other countries, in addition to people with a degree or academic title, there were also people with no more than secondary education (17%), as well as with only primary or vocational education (4%). When asked about their current profession, the respondents most often mentioned the position of an academic teacher, teacher, journalist, programmer, financial analyst, manager, accountant, office worker, pharmacist, catering worker, and mechanic. A large percentage of respondents (43%) were also students (primarily master's degree students).

Among the respondents, in addition to citizens of Russia, Ukraine, and Poland, there were residents of Great Britain, Germany, Belarus, Lithuania, Kazakhstan, Spain, Brazil, Canada, India, and Pakistan.

**Chart 1. Respondent's country of origin**



Source: own elaboration.

In 2017 the author allowed all willing persons regardless of their origin to complete the questionnaire. However, in order to include the opinion of all respondents in this article, a significant generalization was made by treating the citizens of Poland (248), Great Britain (10), Germany (6), Brazil (6), Canada (5), Lithuania (5), Spain (4), and Portugal (3), as the “West” (which might seem inappropriate in another perspective) and representatives of Ukraine (88), Belarus (44) and Kazakhstan (8), India (7) and Pakistan (4) as representatives of the “East.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, 287 people (165 in 2017 and 122 in 2020) were

- 2 The author realizes that the above generalization remains debatable for several reasons. Firstly, the countries distinguished in the two groups have different cultural codes. Second, they represent different continents. It seems that in this case, distinguishing “the post-Soviet states” and those that “do not belong to them” could lead to an ‘individualistic error’. It could turn out that the analysis of the responses of Polish or Lithuanian citizens as members of post-Soviet countries currently belonging to the EU and NATO and clearly similar to the Western orientation will distort the results of the research of other countries of the former Soviet Union: Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan. In connection with the above, the author assigned to the ‘West’ countries that did not undergo transformation after 1989, but also Poland and Lithuania, which successfully implemented democratic procedures and are, in accordance with the Human Development In-

among the representatives of the “West” and 151 people (68 in 2017 and 83 in 2020) from the “East.” The purpose of this distinction is related to the search for common points and the desire to compare the perspectives of citizens of the Russian Federation (74 people) subsequently.

## **2. The attitude of Russians to the Russian Federation and “Western” and “Eastern” view of the Russian Federation: analysis of responses**

Question no. 6. Which of the sources of Russian strategic culture, according to you, is most relevant to the image of Russia? Please evaluate the following sources by assigning the ‘most important’ field to only one of the values.

In 2017, Russian respondents attributed the highest value among the sources of Russian strategic culture to a strong ruler and historical experience (80%). In 2020, these two positions received 75% of the votes. There is a shared context here. At some point in Russian history, specific thinking and behavioral patterns emerged regarding the role of power and the ruler in the eyes of society. Historical experience has rooted the need for absolute obedience, which today explains even the consent to a high level of corruption, resulting in “wielding” oligarchs’ vast wealth. Besides, the long-term maintenance of a low standard of social life shifts the need for political commitment into the background. According to the results, religion is the least important for interviewees, which was acknowledged by almost 100% of people in both 2017 and 2020. Although Orthodoxy is recognized as the dominant religion in the Russian Federation, treating faith as insignificant may be associated with not paying particular attention to religious practice.

dex, very highly developed countries. In turn, India and Pakistan were placed in the group of the ‘East’ countries due to their closer location to Russia, and greater affinity with Asian rather than Euro-Atlantic structures. United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Index Ranking 2019*, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/2019-human-development-index-ranking> [2020-07-30].

**Table 1. The importance of the sources of strategic culture, according to Russian respondents in 2017 and 2020 (single selection grid)**

The sources of strategic culture (percentage <sup>3</sup> /quantity)	Most important	Very important	Moderately important	Not very important	Irrelevant		
						2017	2020
Geographical location and climatic conditions	3% / 1	60% / 18	37% / 11	0	0	0	0
	9% / 4	34% / 15	25% / 11	30% / 13	2% / 1	2% / 1	2020
	40% / 12	47% / 14	13% / 4	0	0	0	
Historical experience							
	43% / 19	48% / 21	9% / 4	0	0	0	
	40% / 12	53% / 16	7% / 2	0	0	0	
Strong ruler	31% / 14	61% / 27	6% / 3	2% / 1	0	0	
Participation of the Russian Federation in the world economy	3% / 1	60% / 18	37% / 11	0	0	0	
	18% / 8	39% / 17	32% / 14	11% / 5	0	0	
Military potential	13% / 4	60% / 18	27% / 8	0	0	0	
	11% / 5	30% / 13	32% / 14	27% / 12	0	0	
Religion shaping Russian identity	0	0	0	3% / 1	97% / 29	97% / 29	
	0	0	0	7% / 3	93% / 41	93% / 41	

Source: own elaboration.

3 For a given year.

**Table 2. The importance of the sources of strategic culture according to respondents from the “East” and the “West” in 2017 and 2020 (single selection grid)**

The sources of strategic culture (percentage/ quantity)								
	Most important	Very important	Moderately important	Not very important	Irrelevant			
Geographical location and climatic conditions	4% / 6	47% / 78	36% / 60	7% / 12	6% / 9	W	2017	2020
	2% / 2	26% / 32	58% / 71	12% / 14	2% / 3			
	3% / 2	65% / 44	10% / 7	15% / 10	7% / 5	E		
	13% / 11	26% / 22	46% / 38	10% / 8	5% / 4			
Historical experience	9% / 15	65% / 107	15% / 24	8% / 14	3% / 5			
	6% / 7	20% / 24	42% / 52	23% / 28	9% / 11			
	26% / 18	30% / 20	7% / 5	24% / 16	13% / 9			
	11% / 9	37% / 31	42% / 35	0	10% / 8			
Strong ruler	37% / 61	41% / 67	19% / 32	1% / 2	2% / 3			
	44% / 53	39% / 48	9% / 11	8% / 10	0			
	35% / 24	43% / 29	22% / 15	0	0			
	46% / 38	31% / 26	16% / 13	7% / 6	0			
Participation of the Russian Federation in the world economy	15% / 25	57% / 94	13% / 21	6% / 10	9% / 15			
	12% / 14	42% / 52	20% / 24	26% / 32	0			
	3% / 2	56% / 38	15% / 10	26% / 18	0			
	10% / 8	16% / 13	50% / 42	24% / 20	0			
Military potential	30% / 50	55% / 91	10% / 16	4% / 6	1% / 2			
	25% / 31	47% / 57	25% / 31	3% / 3	0			
	31% / 21	48% / 33	21% / 14	0	0			
	18% / 15	51% / 42	24% / 20	7% / 6	0			
Religion shaping Russian identity	5% / 8	33% / 55	19% / 32	41% / 67	2% / 3			
	12% / 15	26% / 32	35% / 42	0	27% / 33			
	2% / 1	44% / 30	28% / 19	23% / 16	3% / 2			
	2% / 2	21% / 17	65% / 54	8% / 7	4% / 3			

Source: own elaboration.

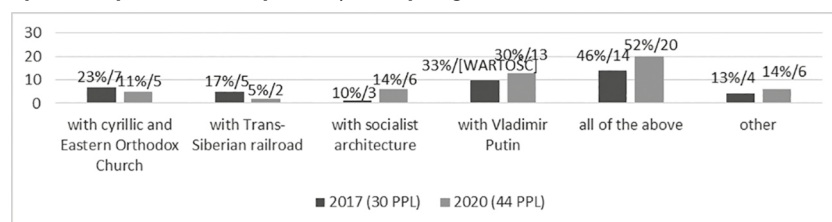
The highest percentage of West and East respondents' votes were for a strong ruler (40% of all votes from the West and 41% of the votes from the East), which was recognized as the most important source of strategic culture. The president of the Russian Federation has become the sole creator of Russian policy in the eyes of the participants. There is no doubt that this position sets the direction of all actions. The Polish or Ukrainian press speaking about “Russia’s hostile actions” have more than once underlined the importance of Vladimir Putin’s presi-



dency. The military potential of the state played smaller importance role as a source of strategic culture. Some respondents emphasized the sense of threat from mobilized and systematically modernized military resources.

Question no. 7. What do you associate with Russian culture?

**Chart 2. The attributes of Russian culture in the eyes of Russian respondents in 2017 and 2020 (multiple choice question with the possibility of competing results)**

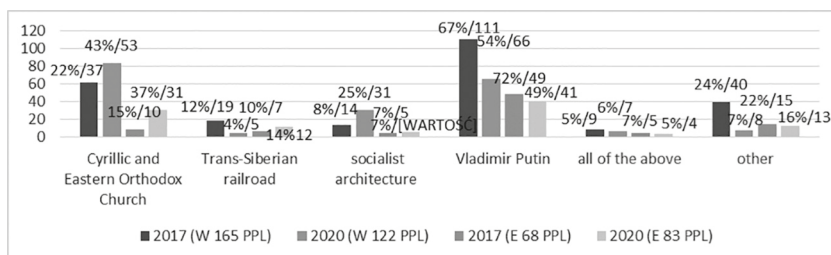


Source: own elaboration.

Most respondents associated Russian strategic culture with the person of Vladimir Putin (46% in 2017 and 52% in 2020). Fewer favored Cyrillic script and Orthodoxy, socialist architecture, or the Trans-Siberian Railway. Both in 2017 and 2020, when asked about Russian culture, the respondents emphasized above all the uniqueness of the country, judging that Russia's power is related to identity, Slavic roots, and multiculturalism in multinational state due to the geographical location between Europe and Asia. However, one of the respondents in 2017 listed other special properties, including: *душевность, простор, космос* [*dushevnost, prostor, kosmos*], which means spirituality, space, cosmos. The first word can be thought of as the "Russian soul," a term created by philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev. However, this is not an expression of excessive religiosity, but the recognition that in Russia there is a kind of mysticism, i.e., an extraordinary spiritual identity of the nation. The conviction about the uniqueness of Russians has been particularly emphasized under Putin, treating Russian values as natural, imperial-creating abilities. The other two terms refer to the material power of the Russian Federation. Recalling space among associations with Russian culture is a recognition of the special role of Russian soil. As well as ruling the world's largest territory, Russia has

recently been active in a completely different space – in the cosmos, trying to keep pace with American exploration.<sup>4</sup>

**Chart 3. The attributes of Russian culture in the eyes of “Western” and “Eastern” respondents in 2017 and 2020 (multiple choice question with the possibility of competing results)**



Source: own elaboration.

At the same time, most respondents consider Vladimir Putin as an attribute of Russian culture (61% of all votes). Moreover, for interviewees, a characteristic feature of the Russian Federation is the Cyrillic alphabet (30% of all votes) which, despite repeated reforms, has become a symbol of Russianness. Orthodoxy, as a religion professed by most Russians, also belongs to such symbols. Respondents representing both “Eastern” and “Western” countries in 2017 and 2020 mentioned among “other” attributes abundant gas and oil reserves, which are an expression of considerable economic potential, but also creates dependence on Russian energy supplies for some countries. The “Eastern” side also paid particular attention to the material achievements of the Russians: great writers, poets (the works of Alexander Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky were mentioned), painters, and composers of previous years, who created a legacy of beautiful poems, literature, and national songs, in which Russians still take pride today. On the “Western” side, respondents’ answers were mainly about music, ballet, skating, and other artistic undertakings, as well as the magnificence and diversity of the Russian cultural heritage. The contribution of Soviet scientific thought during World War II was also appreciated, and contemporary Russia was thought of a pow-

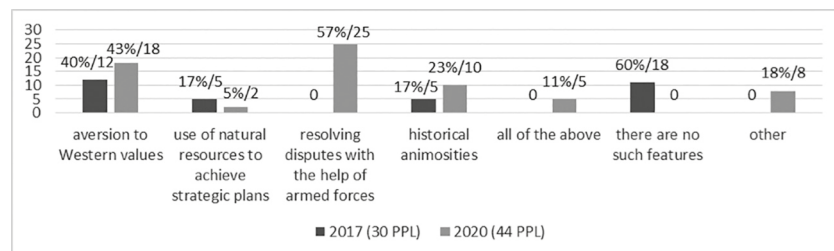
4 B. McClintock, ‘The Russian Space Sector: Adaptation, Retrenchment, and Stagnation’, Eisenhower Center for Space and Defense Studies, *Space & Defense*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2017, pp. 7–8, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/external\\_publications/EP60000/EP67235/RAND\\_EP67235.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/external_publications/EP60000/EP67235/RAND_EP67235.pdf) [2020-03-02].

erful country. One of the respondents in 2017 also mentioned Russian vodka and matryoshka. Most of the responses contained positive connotations, but a small number of them, especially in 2017, focused their attention on “poverty, illiteracy, the poverty of Russian everyday culture, the simplicity of Russian people,” “drunkenness and robbery,” and the “stupidity of the Russians.”

Interestingly, all of the above quotations mainly come from Polish citizens. These types of answers thus exemplify stereotypes that increase prejudices between nations. Ukrainian respondents also alluded to the conflict in Ukraine, where Russia was associated with “green men” and “sowing unrest to lead to war.” These were not referred to as negative characteristics of the Russian people but as the policy of the current government.

Question no. 8. Are there features of the Russian strategic culture that are a barrier to interstate cooperation?

**Chart 4. The features of Russia's strategic culture that constitute a barrier to international cooperation, according to Russian respondents in 2017 and 2020 (multiple choice question with the possibility of competing results)**



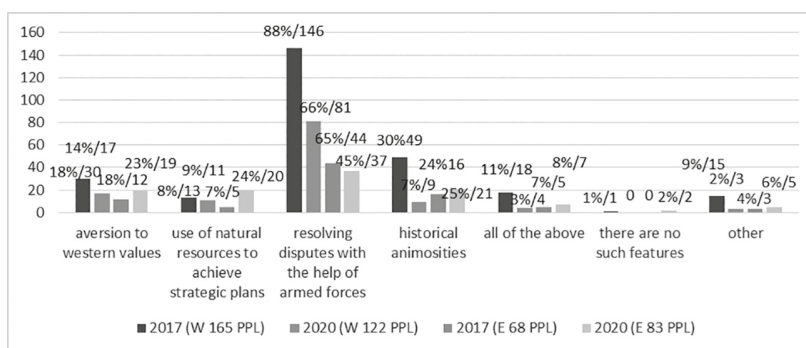
Source: own elaboration.

Interestingly, different answers were given to the question about barriers to international cooperation in 2017 and 2020. On the one hand, three years ago 40% of respondents saw a dislike of Western values as a factor in building positive relationships. On the other, 60% of answerers concluded that none of the features among the author's suggestions could potentially imply difficulties for proper cooperation of states, such as the use of natural resources for strategic purposes, dispute resolution using armed forces, and historical animosities. It seems surprising that none of the respondents saw a problem in the matter of dispute resolution using armed forces. This may mean that for these people, the state of war remains an entirely natural fallout

of the policy pursued, whose implementation in the hierarchy of values is higher than the possible barriers to international cooperation.

In 2020, several respondents added one answer. Concerns were voiced about the harmful activities of Russian politicians, aiming for a more robust division of neighboring nations and cultures, and several respondents stated that a significant problem for Russia is the person of Vladimir Putin (5 people added such an answer). In addition to aversion to Western values (43%), a problem was also noted in resolving disputes using the armed forces (57%) and maintaining historical animosities (23%). According to one respondent, the country is currently in a “period of decline.” In his opinion, the country’s increasing debt is due to, among other things, the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of part of Donbas. In the opinion of the respondent, six years after the appearance of “green people” on the peninsula, the balance of profit and loss speaks in favor of the latter. Economic sanctions and enormous subsidies for the Crimean Peninsula will affect the economy in the longer term. Although it is stressed that “the occupation of Crimea is about more than financial gain,”<sup>5</sup> the respondent concluded that regardless of the promised geopolitical benefits, this was not a “social benefit” for citizens of the Russian Federation.

**Chart 5. The features of Russia’s strategic culture that constitute a barrier to international cooperation, according to “Western” and “Eastern” respondents in 2017 and 2020 (multiple choice question with the possibility of competing results)**



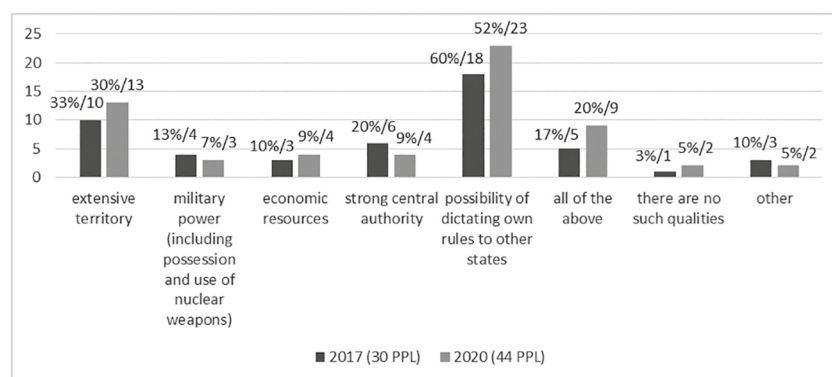
Source: own elaboration.

<sup>5</sup> B. Ballard, ‘Crimea doesn’t pay: Assessing the economic impact of Russia’s annexation’, World-Finance.com, 28 October 2019, <https://www.worldfinance.com/special-reports/crimea-doesnt-pay-assessing-the-economic-impact-of-russias-annexation> [2020-03-03].

In 2017 82% of all respondents considered dispute resolution using the armed forces to be the main barrier in international cooperation, which undoubtedly results, among others, from the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Also, in 2020, 58% supported this perspective, but it seems that events from more than six years ago no longer evoke such vivid emotions. Another feature that creates difficulties for cooperation with Russia are historical animosities, followed by the aversion to Western values. Interesting observations were also raised in the answer “other.” According to opinion from a “Western” respondent, “putting Russia as the main partner in bilateral talks” or the “imperialist impulses” alone prevent finding a shared narrative between Russia and the West. Both in 2017 and 2020, several respondents noted that Russian propaganda also plays a special role, which not only concerns historical events but also today manipulates public opinion and undermines the reputation of opponents.

Question no. 9. Are there qualities that would qualify the Russian Federation as a global power?

**Chart 6. The features that qualify the Russian Federation as a world power, according to Russian respondents in 2017 and 2020 (multiple choice question with the possibility of competing results)**

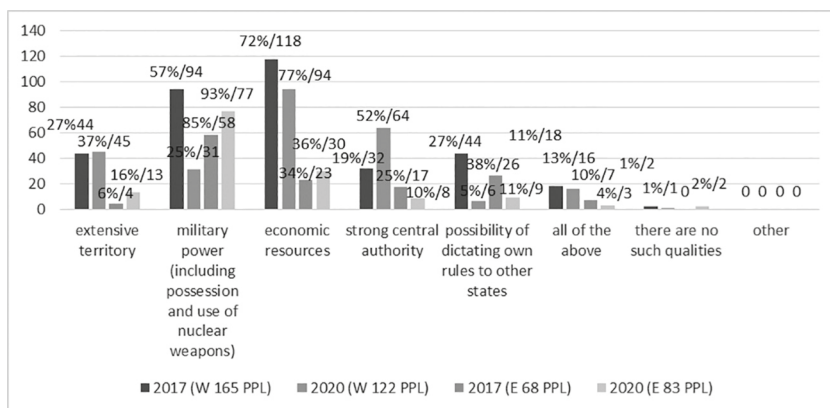


Source: own elaboration.

Undoubtedly, both in 2017 (60%) and 2020 (52%), the essential feature that could qualify Russia as a global power is “the possibility of dictating their own rules to other states.” Votes were also given to extensive territory, economic resources, and military power. Only one person in 2017 and two people in 2020 said that there were no qualities that could qualify Russia as a global power. Most respondents said that Russia had developed a strong enough position that it

could require obedience from other actors. It cannot be denied that some of the post-Soviet countries heavily dependent on the Federation are in this position. On the other hand, it would be wrong to say that there are no forces in the international arena that are not able to curb the country's power.

**Chart 7. The features that qualify the Russian Federation as a world power, according to "Western" and "Eastern" respondents in 2017 and 2020 (multiple choice question with the possibility of competing results)**



Source: own elaboration.

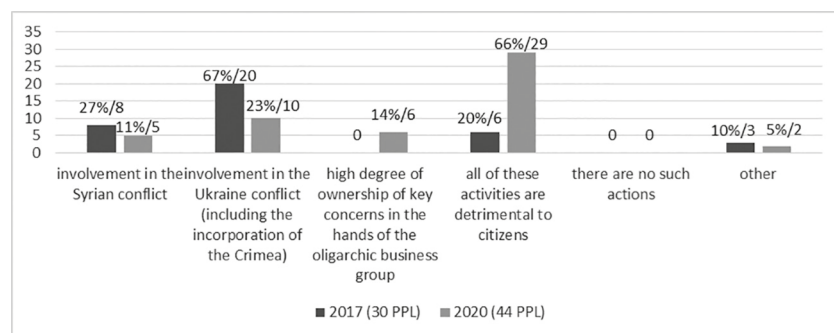
The "Eastern" respondents in 2017 and 2020 (as many as 135 people, that is 90%) believed that military power allows the Russian Federation to qualify as a world power. Even though nuclear weapons have lost some importance today,<sup>6</sup> it is still used, according to interviewees, as a bogey to NATO operations. However, the possibility of dictating their own rules to other states is less important, which may be the result of the conviction that the means of making certain countries dependent on Russia remains insufficient, so it has no real impact on shaping international relations. According to "Western" respondents (in both 2017 and 2020), the very possession of huge deposits of resources makes Russia a world power (74%). Based on the 2017 attack on the St. Petersburg metro and information about two men accused

<sup>6</sup> J. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914*, Ithaca, 1984, pp. 157-198.

of planning a bomb attack, who were killed by the security services,<sup>7</sup> two of the respondents considered that the factor that qualifies Russia as a world power is their skillful fight against terrorists, which gives Russia an advantage over EU countries in the context of protection and security of citizens. While in 2020, the “East” continues to recognize Russian military potential, the strong central authority (52%) remained equally crucial for the “West.” 10% of respondents said that all the factors mentioned by the author, including economic resources and the ability to dictate their own rules, testify to Russia’s strength.

Question no. 10. Which of the following actions of the Russian Federation defends the national interest of Russian citizens?

**Chart 8. The actions that defend the national interest of the Russian Federation, according to Russian respondents in 2017 and 2020 (multiple choice question with the possibility of competing results)**



Source: own elaboration.

The next question contained sensitive issues related to the current activities of the Russian Federation. The answers helped to draw critical conclusions for the study. When asked about actions to defend the national interest in 2017, respondents stated that participation in the conflict in Ukraine, including the incorporation of Crimea (67%) and involvement in the conflict in Syria (27%), was a necessary move by Russian decision-makers. However, none of the respondents chose a high degree of ownership of critical concerns in the hands of the

7 'Rosja: służby zabiły dwóch podejrzanych o terroryzm. Nieudana próba zatrzymania', *Polskie-Radio24*, 19 April 2017, <https://www.polskieradio24.pl/5/3/Artykul/1754527,Rosja-sluzby-zabily-dwoch-podejrzanych-o-terroryzm-Nieudana-proba-zatrzymania> [2020-03-04].

oligarchic business groups. The results correspond to the analysis of the Levada Center carried out in March 2017, which showed a high rate of social support (as much as 83% or even up to 89%) towards the incorporation of Crimea. Before the inclusion of Crimea, a significant percentage of those polled declared the indispensability of historical reintegration into Russian territory. Vladimir Putin therefore fulfilled the wishes of citizens proud of “reviving” Russia.<sup>8</sup>

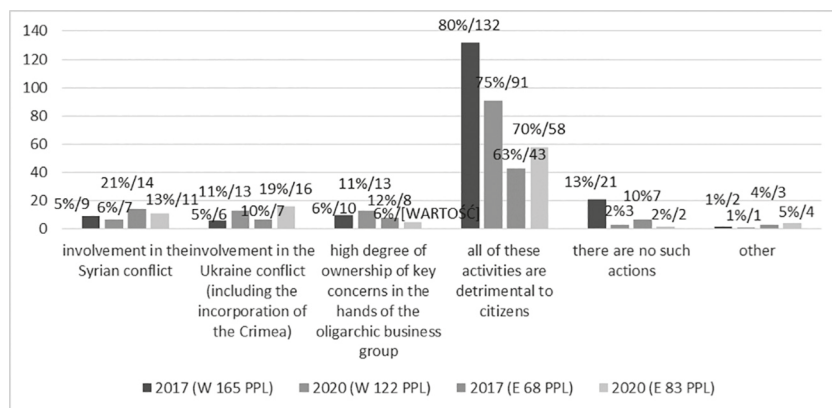
The most controversial was the fact that 10% of respondents chose the “other” answer, in which counteracting NATO aggression was twice recognized as an action defending the national interest of Russian citizens. In addition, one of the respondents considered the fight against terrorism as a necessary condition for the proper protection of Russian citizens. Additional attention was given to the formulated question in which it was suggested that “participation in the conflict in Ukraine (including the incorporation of Crimea)” requires clarification of the historical role that Crimea played when it was part of Russia. According to the respondent, one should refer to history to find the reasons for this incorporation.

Respondents in 2020 gave slightly different answers, viewing the conflict in Ukraine rather skeptically (23%) and Russia’s involvement in Syria (12%). For the most part (65%), they considered that all of the above-mentioned issues should be of concern for Russian citizens in connection with the pursuit of the interests of the authorities: *это никак не защита интересов граждан, это защита интересов бизнес-элит, не более* [*Eto nikak ne zashchita interesov grazhdan, eto zashchita interesov biznes-elit, ne boleye*].

8 ‘Dolgosrochny effekt Kryma’ [Долгосрочный эффект Крыма], levada.ru, 20 March 2017, <http://www.levada.ru/2017/03/20/dolgosrochnyj-effekt-kryma/> [2020-03-03].



**Chart 9. The actions that defend the national interest of the Russian Federation, according to “Western” and “Eastern” respondents in 2017 and 2020 (multiple choice question with the possibility of competing results)**

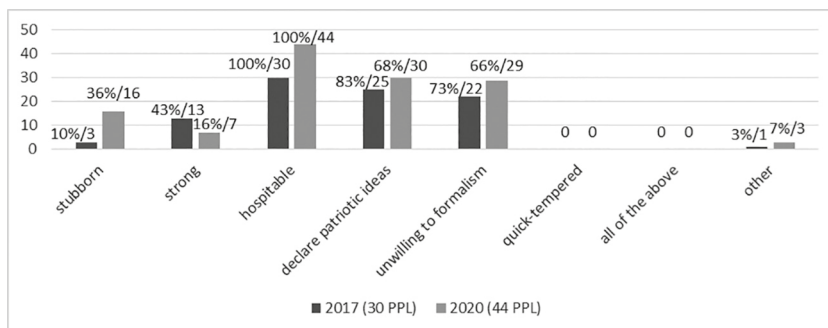


Source: own elaboration.

The divergence of opinion is not visible in the question about government actions to the detriment of Russian citizens. Most of the respondents in 2017 and 2020, as many as 74% (324 ppl) said that involvement in Syria and in the conflict in Ukraine, as well as a high degree of ownership of critical concerns in the hands of the oligarchic business groups has a negative impact on Russian society. There were also concerns voiced in 2020 that the presence of Russian forces in Syria or Ukraine reduces the possibility of economic development and thus reduces the standard of living. Moreover, the high degree of ownership of critical concerns in the hands of the oligarchic business groups excludes the chances of a company being run by a “gray” citizen. Therefore, according to several respondents, between the wealthy oligarchy and the poorest part of society, there is not much of a middle class, which could force the authorities to deal with issues of social justice. Interestingly, the opinion-makers from the “East” and “West” again state that the guarantee of civil security is an effective counter-action against terrorism.

Question no. 11. What is so special about Russian people?

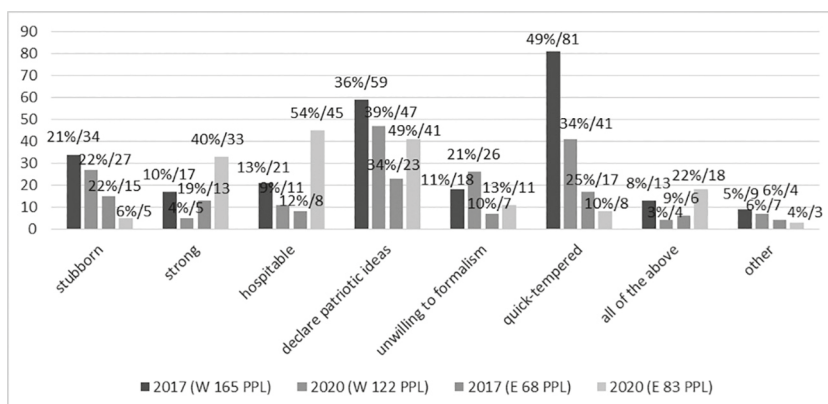
**Chart 10. The characteristics features of the Russian nation, according to Russian respondents in 2017 and 2020 (multiple choice question with the possibility of completing results)**



Source: own elaboration.

All respondents in 2017 and 2020 think that a typical Russian citizen is hospitable. Russians also consider themselves patriots (75%). Out of 74 people, 51 (69%) said that the characteristic features include aversion to formalism, which may indicate a broad group of supporters of the principle of simplicity in matters of both private life and public behavior. Strength and stubbornness, which was supported by a total of 53% of respondents, creates a picture of a typical Russian as a firm, adamant, and assertive person. Respondents also mentioned kindness, openness, and generosity among “other” features. The Russians do not consider themselves an explosive, impetuous nation, and the features that received the most significant number of votes of Russian interviewees have a reasonably positive connotation.

**Chart 11. The characteristic features of the Russian nation, according to “Western” and “Eastern” respondents in 2017 and 2020 (multiple choice question with the possibility of completing results)**



Source: own elaboration.

49% of respondents from the “West” in 2017 and 34% in 2020 concluded that a typical Russian is a short-tempered person. Negative features also included passivity, subordination to power and its glorification, faith in propaganda, or vulgarity. Notably, a large percentage of respondents considered Russian citizens to be patriots, which was also reflected in the answer “other,” where one of the characteristics was a distinct sense of pride in their state. Thus, “Western” respondents see the impact of historical heritage on values rooted in Russia. Besides, interviewees stated that they associate Russians with intelligence. Only one person concluded that he could not clearly define the characteristics, because everyone is completely different and stereotyping supports antagonisms.

The negative image of Russians presented in this way seems to be contrary to the opinion of respondents from the “East.” On the one hand, especially among the citizens of the “Western” countries, it was emphasized several times that Russian citizens are mainly uneducated, non-cultural and lazy people; on the other, the citizens of the “Eastern” countries evoked positive qualities: intelligence, strength, determination, and organization. However, respondents who confirmed personal contact with Russian citizens (including in particular representatives of the “East”) spoke rather positively, distinguishing the policy pursued by Russian decision-makers from the average resident of that country.

Question no. 12. Which of the above features prove the potential of the Russian Federation, which illustrates its weakness?

Chart 12. The features indicative of the potential and weakness of the Russian Federation, according to Russian respondents in 2017 and 2020 (single selection grid)

The sources of strategic culture (percentage/quantity)	Potential	Weakness		
			2017	2020
Social problems (high mortality rates, lack of healthcare access in small villages, alcoholism, poverty)	0	40%/12	60%/18	
	0	84%/37	16%/7	
Share in world economy	53%/16	34%/10	13%/4	
	4%/2	39%/17	57%/25	
Corruption at the highest levels of power	0	0	100%/30	
	0	48%/21	52%/23	
Military activity	83%/25	10%/3	7%/2	
	57%/25	4%/2	39%/17	
Social distrust of institutions and law	3%/ 1	63%/19	34%/10	
	2%/1	39%/17	59%/26	
Geographic and geopolitical location	90%/27	0	10%/3	
	84%/37	0	16%/7	
Lack of modernized economy	10%/3	50%/15	40%/12	
	0	43%/19	57%/25	
Prosperous history	77%/23	10%/3	13%/4	
	48%/21	0	52%/23	
Population	67%/20	0	33%/10	
	30%/13	0	70%/31	
Other	0	0	0	
	0	0	0	

Source: own elaboration.

According to Russian respondents (64 ppl), the exceptional potential of the Russian Federation is a consequence of the geographical and geopolitical location of the country (86%). As previously mentioned, Russian “space” is a reason for citizens to have a high sense of the country’s value on the international stage. The above analysis confirms the answer to previous questions, where geographical location and climatic conditions were considered to be a significant source of strategic culture and that the extensive territory qualifies the Russian Federation as a global power. Other answers included military activity (67%), rich history (59%), population resources (45%), and participation in the global economy (24%). The significant difference between the opinions in 2017 and 2020 is due to the disturbing fact that in 2017 100% of the answers chose the “difficult to tell” option regarding the potential or weakness resulting from corruption at the highest levels of power. There is no doubt that the respondents are aware of this problem. However, out of concern for their position and security, they do not want to take a position on such a sensitive issue, mainly since some of the Russian respondents belong to the group of academic lecturers. Interestingly, this problem was assessed differently in 2020, where almost 50% of respondents stressed the manifestations of political corruption as an expression of instability. Particularly noteworthy is recognition by 37 respondents of social problems (high mortality, lack of access to medical care in small villages, alcoholism, poverty) as a Russian weakness.

**Chart 13. The features indicative of the potential and weakness of the Russian Federation, according to “Western” and “Eastern” respondents in 2017 and 2020 (single selection grid)**

The sources of strategic culture (percentage/quantity)	Potential	Weakness	Hard to say	
Social problems (high mortality rates, lack of healthcare access in small villages, alcoholism, poverty)	2%/4	85%/140	13%/21	W
	0	91%/111	9%/11	
	0	79%/54	21%/14	E
	0	92%/76	8%/7	
Share in world economy	86%/141	4%/7	10%/17	
	49%/60	23%/28	28%/34	
	65%/44	9%/6	26%/18	
	58%/48	16%/13	26%/22	

2017 / 2020

Corruption at the highest levels of power	6%/9	84%/139	10%/17
	0	86%/105	14%/17
	0	97%/66	3%/2
	0	86%/71	14%/12
Military activity	70%/115	18%/30	12%/20
	16%/19	31%/38	53%/65
	31%/21	28%/19	41%/28
	13%/11	57%/47	30%/25
Social distrust of institutions and law	4%/7	70%/115	26%/43
	17%/20	37%/44	46%/56
	19%/13	16%/11	65%/44
	23%/19	17%/14	60%/50
Geographic and geopolitical location	88%/145	2%/4	10%/16
	80%/97	9%/11	11%/14
	69%/47	15%/10	16%/11
	84%/70	3%/2	13%/11
Lack of modernized economy	5%/8	82%/135	13%/22
	14%/17	51%/62	35%/43
	12%/8	51%/35	37%/25
	12%/10	28%/23	60%/50
Prosperous history	72%/119	8%/13	20%/33
	16%/20	26%/31	58%/71
	40%/27	20%/14	40%/27
	11%/9	14%/12	75%/62
Population	59%/98	21%/34	20%/33
	45%/55	21%/26	34%/41
	59%/40	23%/16	18%/12
	69%/57	11%/9	20%/17
Other	0	0	0
	0	0	0
	0	0	0
	0	0	0

Source: own elaboration.

In 2017 and 2020, respondents from both “Western” and “Eastern” countries stated that the potential of the Russian Federation lies in its geographical and geopolitical location (82%), or participation in the global economy including the need for modernization (67%), rich history (40%), and military activity of the Russian Federation (38%).

Respondents are aware of the dangers arising from this, which was emphasized in previous questions. At the same time, they maintained that without the current military potential and the possibility of using the economic base in the implementation of strategic goals, Russia's position would be significantly reduced. The analysis of the answer to the above question also makes it possible to draw a statement about the explicit disharmony of this country. A similar percentage of people who see undeniable potential in some issues also notice weaknesses related to social problems, corruption at the highest levels of government (87%), lack of a modernized economy (58%) or social distrust of institutions and law (42%). Therefore, the Russian Federation appears to be a state full of contradictions, which benefits from its resources, thus covering the remaining deficiencies.

## Conclusions

When analyzing the research results, it can be unequivocally concluded that the observations of both the "East" and "West" respondents are in opposition to the understanding of Russian strategic culture and the very image of the Russian Federation by the Russians. First of all, one can observe the conviction among people from both groups that Russians remain primarily religious and willingly practice their faith, and that their religion is a vital link binding the nation. Such an opinion is contradictory to the analysis of research results of some Russian respondents, who dismissed religion as an irrelevant source of their own strategic culture. Secondly, Russians recognize that their dislike of Western values is a barrier to international cooperation. Such a feature, however, is not exhibited by non-Russian respondents from "East" and "West," for whom the main barriers remain the settlement of the dispute with the help of the armed forces and broadly defined historical animosities.

Another noteworthy issue is the fact that the Russians themselves define the Russian people as having empire-building abilities and a soul that is characterized by mysticism, which gives their civilization an advantage over the rest of the world. It seems that such an understanding of the Russian Federation remains incomprehensible to other respondents who, in trying to define the image of Russian citizens, presented several shortcomings in addition to positives in Russian

values: indifference, incivility, and even “simplicity.” Departing from whether these stereotypes are true or not, it is worth paying attention to another manifestation of the Russian belief in their superiority. Respondents from the “West” and the “East,” when describing features of Russia’s strategic culture, most often referred to great writers, poets, painters, and composers. Among the respondents from Russia, there were associations with the “immensity” of Russian space (land) and control of the cosmos, i.e. the potential exceeds the current borders of the Russian Federation. In connection with this, Russia’s qualities include its vast territory and, above all, the possibility of dictating rules to other countries.

It is also worth emphasizing the reasons for the contrasts observed between respondents from “East” and “West.” One of them is the geographical location itself and possibly belonging to the Russian sphere of influence. Most of the respondents, apart from Russian citizens, are citizens of Poland and Ukraine or Belarus. The first are concerned about the events taking place at their close border. The second and third treat Russia, and, more precisely, the political decisions of the Russian authorities as a real threat, however, the Russians themselves speak rather respectfully.

Interestingly, there is another group of respondents: those who are somewhat “passive observers” of Russian activity. In this study this includes Germans, British, Canadians, Brazilians, Spaniards, Portuguese, Indians, and Pakistanis. Their neutrality is not surprising, nor is their lack of knowledge of historical conditions and international relations from Central and Eastern Europe to Northern Asia. What is surprising is the interviewees’ passivity, especially among Germans and Brits. They openly admit that many issues remain “interesting” for them or that they have “little knowledge” on a specific topic. However, while in 2017 there was great interest in connection with press reports about the ongoing and escalating crisis in Ukraine and the information that has been systematically broadcast since 2014, in 2020, there is more “media silence.” Six years after the annexation of Crimea there is little willingness to comment on these events or to assess the image of the Russian Federation on the international stage.

There were some other difficulties in carrying out this study due to a disturbing attitude among some Russian respondents. There was an apparent reluctance on the Russian side in 2017 to answer the ques-



tionnaire. 15 Russian lecturers who were sent a request to complete the survey via email replied that “there is no opinion on this topic,” “there is nothing to say on this topic,” “there will be no answers.” This attitude may result from inadequate protection of freedom of speech in this country. Participation in the study seems to be undemanding to the author, but potential respondents, fearing for his true intentions, politely refused to participate. Other times, the respondents could not or did not want to provide their real opinions, particularly when asked about corruption at the highest levels of government. While this was recognized by other respondents as a weakness, the Russians unanimously answered “hard to say.”

The author had bolder conversations in 2020. None of the respondents refused to participate in the study, and there were also few negative opinions from Russian citizens regarding the policies of the Russian Federation. However, making a greater generalization of the image of the country in the eyes of its citizens, it is worth quoting the words of one lecturer who said that the advantage of the Russian Federation lies in the ability to “kill two birds with one stone,” as a result of the difficult past of this country, and “without knowing the past, it is impossible to understand the true meaning of the present and the goals of the future” (Maxim Gorky).

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