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# Russia – the “True Europe” or a “Unique Civilization”? Towards a Genealogy of two Post-Soviet Ideas<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

“Russia as the true Europe” has become a popular idea in Russian political discourse and ideology production. However, it conflicts with another dominant commonplace idea: “Russia as non-Western” or “Russia as a unique, distinct civilization.” Yet “Russia as the true Europe” is an idea that has circulated frequently, especially since the conservative turn of the Putin regime from 2012 onwards. Here, Russia is represented as the defender of “true Christian values,” whereas the West has gradually abandoned this common ground. One key political thinker who has been instrumental in disseminating such ideas in post-Soviet Russia is Natal’ja Naročnickaja, who has developed this argument referring to classical Slavophile writings of the mid-nineteenth century. Slavophilism is a movement known for postulating a firm antithesis – a civilizational divide – between Russia and the West, but they also understood this conflict as having emerged historically. This article explores the genealogy of the idea of “Russia as the true Europe” by analysing the writings of Ivan Kireevskij and Aleksej Chomjakov. By implication, it makes also a contribution to the history of “Russia as a unique civilization,” since it shows that there exists a tension in classical Slavophilism itself in seeing Russia both as Europe and non-Europe. Moreover, it demonstrates that despite apparent similarities between Slavophile thought and contemporary ideas there are significant discontinuities between them.

**KEYWORDS** Slavophilism; Ivan Kireevskij; Aleksej Chomjakov; Russian Nationalism; Intellectual History; Russia; Europe; The West; Civilizational Discourse

The idea that Russia is the place, country, people, or even civilization that represents the “true Europe” became prominent in Russian political discourse and ideology production in the new millennium. “True Europe” in this context

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means mostly an anti- or illiberal Europe that allegedly upholds so-called Christian “traditional values.” In Russian public discourse, this view gained prominence in the second half of the 2000s, whereas the Kremlin began to appropriate it from Putin’s third presidency onwards (Neumann 2017, 87; see also Engström 2014). In the last decade, several new laws have contributed to Russia’s new, illiberal character through severe restrictions on open homosexuality, antireligious utterances, adoption and so on, thereby fashioning the country as a conservative bastion. This culminated with the constitutional changes in 2020, which inscribed God into the constitution of the Russian Federation. Although these laws as such do not refer directly to some imaginary Europe, there exists a discourse that frames them as a defence of European “traditional values.” An often-cited example in this respect is Putin’s speech at the Valdai Club in 2013, where he accused the West of betraying its own roots. In this discourse, “Europe” is not the “West,” while Russia is represented as an “anti-Western European civilisation” (Laruelle 2016, 293–294). Europe, thus, is larger than the West and includes Russia, whereas the West represents apostasy. By implication, anti-Westernism may go hand in hand with the insistence on Russia’s European identity (Engström 2014, 376). Prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this idea had broad appeal among several right-wing groups in the West, which the Kremlin has actively supported (Shekhovtsov 2018). And after Putin launched the full invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022, the talk about Western decay has intensified even further in Russian press and propaganda. The war is frequently framed as a battle with a secular, de-christianized West, a “metaphysical clash between the forces of good and evil” (McGlynn 2023, 135, see also 50). While this is far from being the only justification for Russia’s current military crusade, its heavy presence demonstrates that ideas that have circulated in Russian public discourse since the early 2000s are now used, in an even more radicalized version, to gather support both at home and abroad for a brutal war. One question that arises in this connection is where this idea of “Russia as the true Europe” might come from?

## Background and Objectives

An earlier account of Russia and the West as once united but later separated through the West’s rejection of a common Christian foundation can be found in a book by the public intellectual, historian, and politician Natal’ja Naročnickaja, *Rossija i russkie v mirovoj istorii* [Russia and Russians in World History]. The book came out in 2003, though she had already published an essay by the same title in 1996. Naročnickaja’s book has multiple agendas. It seeks, among other things, to defend the notion of a Russian nation that is larger than the new Russian Federation, an issue that she has been deeply engaged in from the 1990s onwards. Another objective is to display and criticize Western misconceptions about Russia. By the same token, the

author proposed a narrative in which Russia and the West, up until the Middle Ages, were united through their shared Christian faith (Østbø 2012). As she stated in an interview in 2007, “Europe is the Lord’s Prayer, not liberal democracy” (cited in Østbø 2012, 97). However, the West abandoned this common ground in favour of a secularist and rationalist path. Since the Renaissance, the West ceased being “Europe,” while Russia remained faithful to the “true Europe.” On the other hand, it follows from Naročnickaja’s narrative that this separation was anticipated already around 800 through the West’s “humanizing” *filioque* addition to the Christian creed (2003, 27), which is that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, as the Nicene Creed originally had it, “and from the Son” (*filioque*). According to Naročnickaja and numerous others who have put forth this argument, the original meaning of a key Christian dogma was hereby altered, and *filioque* has come to stand for the West’s general tendency to tamper with tradition.

As already indicated, Naročnickaja is far from the only one who has developed ideas about Russia as a “European” bastion towards the secular West (see also Zvereva 2020, 94–95), as if the atheist Soviet Union had never existed and the encounter with modernity that began in the early eighteenth century never really took place. The importance of Naročnickaja in the post-Soviet context lies among other things in the fact that before the conservative turn of the current regime, she collaborated with key figures of the Russian Orthodox Church in touting “traditional values” and opposing universal and secular human rights. This project may be understood, as Robert Horvath (2016) has suggested, in a broader context of post-Soviet political struggles, the rise of authoritarianism, and the demise of liberal democracy in Russia.

Meanwhile, Naročnickaja’s conception of Russia as a key part of a historical, imaginary Europe differs from the Neo-Eurasianism of Aleksandr Panarin or Aleksandr Dugin, according to which Russia and the West are distinct, separate civilisations, with hardly any historical points of tangency (Laruelle 2004). While there exists a variety of civilizationist notions in post-Soviet Russia, the anti-Western Neo-Eurasianist conception that gained popularity in the late 1990s has arguably been the most influential version of the idea of Russia as a unique civilization. According to the Eurasianist paradigm, Western civilization and Russian/Eurasian civilization are essentially different due to a combination of geographical (continental) and cultural factors. Western civilization is, in Dugin’s conceptualization, the “Atlanticist, Sea civilization,” which stands in an eternal conflict with the “Land civilization” of Eurasia. Continental Europe, including Germany, is a zone of contest and conquest (Neumann 2016, 166–168). By contrast, according to Naročnickaja, Russia and the West are, after all, close to one another when seen from a historical point of view, they have a common European origin and the differences between them grew out of a gradual, historical separation. And as my

introduction suggested, “Russia as the true Europe” gained prominence in the 2000s and was subsequently appropriated by the Kremlin in the 2010s.<sup>2</sup>

This suggests, moreover, that there is an inherent tension in how contemporary Russian patriotic/conservative identity discourses consider the relationship between Russia and the West: whether they originally were united or have been separated from the very “start.” In this article, I will argue that this tension can be traced back to the classical Slavophilism of the mid-nineteenth century, which I will demonstrate through a comparative reading of two key Slavophile texts. Slavophilism was a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon, but it can be provisionally defined as a reaction to Russia’s Westernization. And since the middle of the nineteenth century, it has offered a series of *topoi* that have subsequently recurred in debates and discourses about Russian identity. An example is provided precisely by Naročnickaja’s reference to *filioque* and the West’s gradual defection, which figured prominently in Slavophile writings of the mid-nineteenth century and served as a core argument there. At the same time, Slavophilism is *also* a source of the idea of a primordial difference between Russia and the West.

The suggestion above that current debates might be traced back to ideas originating in the mid-nineteenth century raises in turn questions concerning the continuity and discontinuity in Russian thought or the transformation of historical arguments in new contexts. On the one hand, Naročnickaja’s use of Slavophilism confirms that Slavophile *topoi* still inform Russian patriotic discourses; they are actively appropriated by participants in them. On the other hand, this appropriation means a decontextualization of statements dating back to a completely different era (imperial Russia on the eve of reforms, in the age of cultural nationalism) and a recontextualization in a post-imperial setting.

The main aim of this article is to examine and compare how the relationship between Russia and Europe/the West is depicted and narrated in two central texts of classical Slavophilism: Ivan Kireevskij’s “On the Character of European Civilization and Its Relationship to Russian Civilization (*O charaktere prosvěščenija Evropy i o ego otnošenii k prosvěščeniju Rossii*)” of 1852 (Kireevskij

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<sup>2</sup>To be sure, the reality of post-Soviet nationalist thought is not so clear-cut as my map might suggest. For instance, the civilizationist discourse also figures in Naročnickaja’s work, for instance through her notion of the “post-Byzantine space,” which inevitably creates some tension and inconsistencies in her narrative. Likewise, the claim that the West is apostatic is encountered in Dugin, for him the traditionalist Eurasia is so to speak the “true Europe,” even though his vocabulary is a different one (Neumann 2016, 168). Thus, it is a tendency of several Russian nationalist thinkers to draw on multiple and possibly contradictory conceptions. Both figures – and numerous others in post-Soviet Russia from various camps, including the neo-Eurasianist – have applied the biblical notion of *katechon*, which is reinterpreted as an ideologeme presenting Russia as a Christian “restrainer” vis-à-vis the global chaos inflicted and dispersed by the secular West (compare Naročnickaja 2003, 23 with Engström 2014). In the imperialist-nationalist writings of Egor Cholmogorov, Vardan Bagdasarjan, Vitalij Averjanov and Sergej Kurginjan, likewise, the concept of *katechon* is used as a reference to state and geopolitics rather than church and theology (Šnirel’man 2018–2019). To understand Naročnickaja in a broader context, see Østbø 2017. During the last decade, Naročnickaja has been a member of the patriotic Izborsk club, as has Dugin.

1911, 174–222) and Aleksej Chomjakov's "Some Remarks by an Orthodox Christian Concerning the Western Communions (*Quelques mots par un chrétien orthodoxe sur les communions occidentales à l'occasion d'une brochure de M. Laurentie, 1853*)" (1853). I will focus on significant differences between the two thinkers that I believe have not been sufficiently studied. And while my analysis of these texts was prompted by current tendencies as described above, the article aims to show that within apparent continuities in Russian thought and Russian nationalism, there also exist important discontinuities. My conclusion will sum up and assess the differences within classical Slavophilism as well as between classical Slavophilism and the contemporary conservative ideology in Russia.

## Approaches

The title of this article introduces the concept of *genealogy*. Genealogy as a method in the human and social sciences can be traced back to Friedrich Nietzsche and the foreword to his *Genealogy of Morality* of 1887 (Nietzsche 1955, 763–770). Later, it was reactualized in particular by Michel Foucault, who spelt it out more explicitly in terms of a method (1984). According to Nietzsche and Foucault, genealogy explores "emergence" (*Entstehung*) and, above all, "descent" (*Herkunft*) but not "origins" (*Ursprung*), seeking thereby to avoid a mythical history of origins characterized by linearity and teleology (Foucault 1984, 80–81). The genealogist is interested in development but sees development in terms of discontinuities, transformations, and disruptions, focusing on what has been lost along the way. Contextual readings therefore become essential. However, genealogy does inevitably involve reading history backwards, and the genealogist must therefore be sensitive to what Quentin Skinner (1969, 22–24) has called the "mythology of prolepsis," where the past is seen as anticipating the present – that is a form of presentism, or the erasing of historical differences. In any case, the questions raised by genealogy are indeed informed by the present, in contrast to Skinner and the "Cambridge school" approach, which aims at reconstructing the historical questions in response to which texts were written.

This article uses two individual – and classical – texts rather than a complete corpus of texts that can be labelled "Slavophilism." The Slavophiles, even the first generation with which this article is concerned, included more figures than Chomjakov and Kireevskij, while the two authored several other texts than those discussed here. Thus, a broader selection might have led to other results.<sup>3</sup> However, the objective here is to look for

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<sup>3</sup>Chomjakov's theory of "Kushitism" versus "Iranianism" (the historical blueprint for the West versus Russia), which he began working on in the 1830s, seems to have a more primordial character than the text discussed below. However, the main antithesis of that theory, too, tends to become "blurred" (Walicki 1975, 222).

earlier varieties of current hegemonic models of history rather than a complete version of what Slavophilism was.

### The Varieties of Classical Slavophilism According to Previous Research

Much research on the Slavophiles and their ideas has focused on Slavophilism as a current and mindset that postulates a significant opposition between Russia and the West. A clear example is Nicholas Riasanovsky's classical study of 1952, *Russia and the West in the Teaching of the Slavophiles*. According to Riasanovsky, Slavophile thinking is structured according to the we–they dichotomy (1952, 165), but he hardly examines significant differences between the individual Slavophiles. Another classic study, Andrzej Walicki's *The Slavophile Controversy* (initially published in 1964), focuses less on the relationship to the West (his focus is ideology, utopia, and Weltanschauung) and pays greater attention to the varieties within the current. According to Walicki, dichotomous thinking was more characteristic of Kireevskij (1975, 208), while Chomjakov was more sensitive to historical variation. Walicki did not apply this insight to the two texts under examination here, which is what I will pursue below.

Among more recent studies, Iver B. Neumann has approached the Slavophiles' "othering of Europe" from a constructivist point of view. He makes a note of Chomjakov's view of an earlier peaceful co-existence between Russia and the West, disrupted in the Medieval Age (Neumann 2016, 32), but Neumann's key example of classical Slavophilism is Stepan Ševyrëv and his claim about a "rotten Europe," which Ševyrëv favourably opposed to present Russia (Neumann 2016, 31). Moreover, Neumann contrasts Ševyrëv, who, like Kireevskij and Chomjakov, wrote for *The Muscovite* (the notion of "Rotten Europe" is encountered in its first issue, 1841), with the official nationalism of tsar Nicholas 1, which did distinguish between a "true Europe" – the Europe of the *ancien regimes* – and postrevolutionary Europe (Neumann 2016, 25). Thus, official nationalism also represents a moment in the genealogy drawn up in this article, but it was centred more on the state than Kireevskij and Chomjakov's views were.

Research on Slavophilism – and even participants in Russian debates since the nineteenth century – has emphasized that Slavophilism is a project that has developed within a European framework. Its terminology and language stem from German idealism and romanticism, and its description of the relationship between Europe and Russia often corresponds to Romanticism's critique of the Enlightenment and rationalism. Slavophilism becomes, in this regard, an example of European self-criticism. This approach is most consistently pursued in Susanna Rabow-Edling's study of Slavophilism as cultural nationalism. She argues that "the Slavophiles' anti-Western arguments were

part of a Western critique of European culture and were not intended to separate Russia from Europe" (Rabow-Edling 2006, 42). Rather, Slavophilism belongs to the Herderian tradition of cultural nationalism. While the framework of Slavophile reasoning is undeniably made up of West-European concepts, this interpretation nevertheless raises new questions, whether related to Kireevskij's use of "Europe" as the obvious antithesis to "Russia" or to Chomjakov's suggestion that the "West" gradually deviated from Europe.

In general, none of these approaches explore the question that concerns me here: whether the Slavophiles saw the opposition between Russia and Europe as essential and primordial or historically contingent. The Slavophiles agreed that the opposition was fundamental in the (their) present, but how did they explain its emergence? As I will show, Kireevskij and Chomjakov had not only different but, I would claim, conflicting visions of this relationship. As noted above with reference to Walicki (1975, 208, 222), Chomjakov had a keener eye for historical transformations than Kireevskij (cf. also Neumann 2016, 33), and, as Walicki shows, the fundamental antithesis tended to become unclear in Chomjakov's thinking.

### The Multiple Contexts of Slavophilism

Above I noted that genealogy as a research method contrasts with the contextualism of the Cambridge School (Skinner), since the former has the contemporary situation as its horizon. The questions it raises are not necessarily historical, that is these are not necessarily the same questions as those of the authors of the sources to the genealogy. And yet the genealogist must also simultaneously account for the historical horizon of the texts under scrutiny. It is precisely through contextual readings and comparisons that we become able to discover discontinuities.

Contexts are often multiple (Thorup 2013), and Slavophilism is an illustrative case in point. One context of Slavophilism is made up of political developments in the Russian Empire. The Slavophiles belonged to the nobility, and their ideas have been analysed as responses to a new era with increasing demands for the abolishing of serfdom (Hughes 1993). Another context is ideational and more transnational: Slavophilism forms a variety of European nineteenth-century nationalism, which was transmitted to Russia particularly after the defeat of Napoleon in 1812, a situation that offered the Russian Empire a great power status in the "concert of nations." In 1833, the state launched its "official nationalism," which made the tsar (autocracy) and the Orthodox church, in addition to the vaguer concept of "nationality," the main ideological pillars of the multiethnic Russian Empire. "Russian nationality" in this context is often interpreted to mean loyalty to the church and tsar, that is to the state (Zorin 2001, 362; Miller 2008, 146).



The Slavophiles, despite some obvious parallels in their veneration of both traditional tsardom and Orthodoxy, was closer to the kind of cultural nationalism that had been created by Herder (Rabow-Edling 2006). For the Slavophiles, the carrier of nationality was not the state, but the (common) people. By the same token, the Slavophiles drew extensively on the ideas and vocabularies of German idealism, above all Schelling, but also Hegel, despite their opposition to Hegel's atheism. All of this testifies to the European character of Slavophile thought, despite their criticism of Western culture. Using a concept from modern post-colonial theory, we may say that they wanted to "provincialize Europe" (Chakrabarty 2000), that is to show that Western enlightened rationalism was not some kind of universalist benchmark. And yet they were unable, or did not really intend, as some readings suggest, to liberate themselves from Western hegemonic forms of thinking.

Cultural nationalism *à la russe* had its specificities. The Slavophiles turned above all to religion (Orthodoxy) as the *differentia specifica* of "Russian culture" (Mjøl 2012, 170). Furthermore, their doctrines were developed through the challenge that Pëtr Čaadaev's infamous "First philosophical letter" represented, a text that was put into circulation in 1829. A key claim of Čaadaev was that Russia was marred by backwardness, to the extent that it was situated outside universal history. This became a challenge for all subsequent Russian thinkers concerned with questions about identity. Another idea of Čaadaev that was equally important for the Slavophile movement that began to develop in 1830s was the role of religion as the key driver of historical and cultural development (Michelson 2010, 256). The dynamic religion for Čaadaev was Catholicism, whereas the Slavophiles responded by claiming that it was Orthodoxy that was particularly well-suited for safeguarding the development of personality, the fullness of the human being. They juxtaposed an imaginary Orthodox mind to that of Western rationalism. This confirms, however, that the "true" nature of Orthodoxy according to the Slavophiles was a very modern understanding and something they discovered via Čaadaev and hence Schelling and German idealism more generally (Riasanovsky 1955). In Slavophilism, Christian traditions and intellectual currents were indeed entangled.

## Chomjakov

The titles of the two articles analysed here signal that the authors' approach to the relationship between Russia and the West/Europe differs. Kireevskij examines the "character of European civilisation" and "its relationship to Russian civilization." His terminology indicates a conflict of civilizations involving essential differences. It has been debated in the literature on Kireevskij what is meant by просвещение, as he uses it. I follow Catherine Evtuhov (2003), who sees it as the Russian equivalent to, and translation of, François

Guizot's *civilisation*. In the first half of the nineteenth century, просвещение – in addition to образование – was the most commonly used rendering of “civilization,” as can be seen in the scandal-provoking Russian version of Čaadaev's “First Philosophical Letter,” published in 1836 (Čaadaev 1991, 646, 658–661). However, other readings argue that Kireevskij had a specifically Russian type of enlightenment in mind (Rabow-Edling 2006, 86–93; Coates 2013).

While Kireevskij establishes “Europe” as Russia's antithesis, Chomjakov refers to “Western communions” (*communions occidentales*, западные вероисповедания) in his title. And the opening paragraph of his text (the foreword) reads as follows:

Dear Sir, in the struggle between the religious opinions that separate Europe, the voice of the Eastern Church is not heard at all. Its silence is completely natural since all organs of European thought, writers, or publishers belong either to the Roman or to various Protestant communions. (Chomjakov 1853, 7)<sup>4</sup>

In this passage, “Europe” is established as a shared frame of reference in which the voice of the “Eastern Church” is not heard. “European thought,” furthermore, is currently expressed by Roman and Protestant faith, and the problem seems to be the ignorance of these two currents rather than the East's self-inflicted silence. Europe and European thought are at any rate more than simply the two Western communions or the West more generally.

In the opening of the article, Chomjakov explicitly connects the Eastern Church to Russia by entering an ongoing debate about the relationship between secular and ecclesiastical power in the East. His starting point is that the West has fundamentally failed to understand this relationship. Chomjakov goes on to describe his encounters with Western intellectuals on his journeys throughout Europe, which confirmed to him that the West does not know Russia and, by the same token, does not know what the Church really is or represents (Chomjakov 1853, 10). By implication, Chomjakov applies dichotomies, but his main opposition is Russia/the East versus the West, not Russia versus Europe. Although he used “Eastern Church” in the quotation above, he soon abandoned this geographical designation and simply used “Church” (with a capital letter). Sometimes he writes “Orthodox Church,” “universal Church,” or even “Catholic Church.” The latter does not mean the “Roman communion” but the “real” Church. He sometimes uses the concept “Orthodoxy,” primarily in the meaning “true faith.”

During the rest of the article, however, Chomjakov leaves the question of “Russia” aside and speaks mainly of the Church. Thus, while the article begins

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<sup>4</sup>References are to the original French edition of 1853. To my knowledge, there exists no complete English translation of this text, only a selection of it (Khomiakov 1998). Translations of Chomjakov are my own, except where the reference indicates otherwise. My translation and understanding of the text also rely on the revised Russian translation that was published in 1994 (Chomjakov 1994). The first Russian translation of 1863 has become a classic text of Russian intellectual history, but it is inexact in several places compared to the French original.

by combining theological and culturological arguments, the body makes up a theological discourse. However, the way he frames his theological discourse indicates that this is also a question of the relationship between Russia and the West and the place of both in Europe. He discusses this issue by exploring and explaining what the Church really is and how the West's separation came about.

For Chomjakov, the West represents schism and apostasy, and it has done so, he claims, for "1000 years" (Chomjakov 1853, 16). One thousand years brings us back to the debate about the *filioque* amendment that emerged at the end of the eighth century, when the West allegedly made changes to sacred tradition without the Church's authorization. "Protestantism," as Chomjakov uses it in connection with the *filioque* issue, does not refer to Luther's reformation – a regional and historical variant of Christianity – but to the West in general and its liberal attitude to tradition and hence to the Church. "The Roman schism was already Protestant," he writes (Chomjakov 1853, 40). Chomjakov's text is full of formulations that equate the Roman church with the Lutheran one(s), and his general explanation for the rise of "Protestantism" is that it responded to doubt using reason, thereby privileging the individual mind over the collective (Church), which thus ceases to correct misunderstandings. Protestantism arises with doubt (Chomjakov 1853, 18–20).

However, it is crucial to note that for Chomjakov, "Protestantism" emerges from doubt at a certain point in history. According to a previous text and statement by Chomjakov, "the Church is one" (Hamburg 2008, 127), but regarding Europe, it is also the case that it "was" one but then fractured.

From the time of its foundation by the apostles, the Church was one. This unity, which embraced the whole known world, uniting the British Isles to Spain, to Egypt and to Syria, was never shaken. When a heresy arose, the Christian world sent its representatives, its high functionaries, to those august assemblies that we call councils [...] They were the voice of the Church. Heresies did not destroy this divine unity. Heresies were personal errors, not provincial or diocesan schisms. That was the character of the ecclesiastical life whose intimate meaning has for many centuries been totally misunderstood by the West. (Kholmjakov 1998, 57; Chomjakov 1853, 23–24)

This unity and the role of the councils are what the Western communions long since have ceased to understand, and this has made them provincial. The West renounces what is universal by believing that each of us is free to express opinions on religious matters regardless of the authority of the Church. Chomjakov repeatedly calls the two main Western communions patronizingly "sects." The Church and Europe are, of course, not identical concepts, but as the passage quoted above suggests, they are overlapping notions in the sense that Europe is defined by historically belonging to a

unified Church. The unified Church is what defines Europe and unites the East and West. And since the Church is no longer unified, so is Europe.

Chomjakov refers to the schism represented by the Western communions as “Europe’s religious polemics,” which according to Chomjakov can be “easily solved” in the Church (Chomjakov 1853, 34). On the one hand, he claims that the differences have grown large, and the West has turned away. Unification is difficult. “Some Words” is a very polemical text, and as Nikolaj Berdjaev noted in his book on Chomjakov, it is characterized by a war-like attitude (воинственность, Berdjaev 1912, 48). On the other hand, perhaps in using polemics, he is trying to extend a hand. Because heresy has entered “European thought,” it can also be cured.

### Kireevskij

Both texts analysed in this article are letters or at least addresses. Chomjakov’s text is addressed to Western recipients, even colleagues. Chomjakov is on a mission in the West. Kireevskij, by contrast, writes a letter to a Russian reader and even friend – count Egor Komarovskij – on the topic of “Russia and Europe.” It is shaped as an exchange of viewpoints within the Russian intelligentsia rather than an attempt to be heard internationally, as in the case of Chomjakov. Although styled as a letter, however, the text is not private. It starts with mild polemics towards the Westernizers, who hide behind Kireevskij’s notion of a “general opinion” (общее мнение), which we encounter in the opening paragraphs (Kireevskij 1911, 174).<sup>5</sup> This “opinion” claims the difference between Russia and Europe is one of degrees, not of kind, and that Russia therefore will become European with time. However, Kireevskij objects to this commonly held view in the Russian debate. As Chomjakov, Kireevskij, too, is concerned with misconceptions about Russia, and they both seek to correct and eliminate them, but Kireevskij is first and foremost concerned with misconceptions at home. He has no intention of being a missionary vis-à-vis the West.

As noted earlier, the title of Kireevskij’s text indicates that Russia and Europe are different civilizations. However, a search in a digital edition of the text tells us that “Western” and “the West” figure even more frequently in this text than “European” and “Europe.”<sup>6</sup> Most importantly, it is difficult to see any difference between “Europe” and “the West” in Kireevskij’s text. They overlap and are, as far as I can see, synonymous. Europe is the West and vice versa. And Russia is not Europe, despite the introduction of European civilization into Russia since Peter the Great.

<sup>5</sup>References are made to Kireevskij’s two-volume *Collected Works* (1911). There exists a complete translation of this text in English (Kireevsky 1999), from which I quote, but adjust when necessary. This translation renders просвещение as “culture” not “civilization.”

<sup>6</sup>I have consulted this edition: <https://lib.pravmir.ru/library/readbook/292>.

Kireevskij had already developed a concept of Europe – in a text published in 1832, “The Nineteenth Century.” According to the young Kireevskij, Europe is made up of Christianity, the classical legacy from antiquity, and state-building from the age of migration (Kireevskij 1911, 95–98). This had a positive impact on European development, but it did not extend to Russia. This was Russia’s weakness. Later, Kireevskij maintained this interpretation of Russia, but now he reformulated Russia’s missing European connection as a positive feature. He reinterpreted Christianity in Europe as “Roman Christianity.” This shift came to expression in the 1839 article “Reply to Chomjakov” (Kireevskij 1911, 109–120), and it was developed in full in the article analysed here, where this threefold definition of Europe is maintained but reformulated to Russia’s advantage (Kireevskij 1911, 182).

Kireevskij shares the view of Europe/the West as rationalistic with Chomjakov. For Kireevskij, however, this has characterized Europe since its very beginning, i.e. antiquity. Kireevskij, too, sees the addition of *filioque* as tampering with tradition, and as Walicki (1975, 190) suggests, Kireevskij may have developed this argument before Chomjakov. However, Kireevskij sees *filioque* as an expression of a primordial European tendency already firmly established (see also Uffelmann 1999, 185). Rationalism is essentially European, which is not how Chomjakov sees it.

True, early in Kireevskij’s article, we encounter some formulations that indicate a narrative similar to Chomjakov’s:

Cold analysis over the course of many centuries has destroyed the very foundations on which European civilization rested from the very beginning of its development. As a result, the fundamental principles from which it grew have become irrelevant and alien to it, in conflict with its contemporary conclusions. At the same time, its direct inheritance is now found to be the very analysis that destroyed its roots. (Kireevsky 1998, 191 (adjusted); Kireevskij 1911, 176)

While this passage might indicate that Kireevskij sees European civilization as gradually corrupting from the inside, it is unclear what “foundations” he has in mind—since he otherwise sees Europe as rationalistic “from the very beginning of its development.” The passage is generally quite enigmatic; the final sentence in the quote suggests that Europe, throughout history, has been a stranger to itself. Corruptive forces have since the beginning been active in the form of a destructive rationality (logic), which has become Europe’s characteristic feature, or “direct inheritance” (прямая собственность).

A similar description is offered a few pages later:

What then remains for thinking Europe to do? To go back still further, to the original purity (к той первоначальной чистоте) of those basic convictions before they were influenced by the rationalistic nature of Western Europe?

To return to these principles as they had been before Western development began? This is a well-nigh impossible undertaking for minds surrounded and saturated by all the delusions and prejudices of Western civilization. This is perhaps why most European thinkers have sought an escape, being unable to accept either a narrowly egoistic life in direct contradiction to the fullness of their intellectual consciousness, and being unwilling to be left without any convictions or to devote themselves to obviously false conclusions. (Kireevsky 1998, 194; Kireevskij 1911, 178)

Here, too, it may at first glance seem as if the West, according to Kireevskij, has gradually abandoned what it originally was. However, one must note that the origins of the split are “the rationalistic nature of Western Europe” and “Western development,” that is the very cultural foundations handed down from antiquity. As for (Western) Europe, thus, this “purity” has never existed. Rationalism has been hegemonic from the very beginning, i.e. even “before the Western development began.” As soon as there is a Europe, defined according to the three criteria listed in this article, there is rationality. Whereas Chomjakov referred to a stage where Europe “from The British Islands to Syria” was united, i.e. the first centuries AD, Kireevskij’s “before the Western development” is much older but is actually situated in a mythical darkness. At least he does not explain when or where this was. He draws a consistent conclusion when he states that the “Roman church” already possessed this “legitimate peculiarity” (законная особенность) *before* it separated itself from the “Universal Church” (Kireevsky 1998, 197; Kireevskij 1911, 183).

Kireevskij does mention that early Western theologians confronted “heathen philosophy,” but even there, the rationalist legacy was evident. And he goes on to claim that all Western theology, from Tertullian and Augustine onwards, has been rationalist. Thus, as noted, the *filioque* issue is just one more expression of an essential tendency of Western-European civilization; it was one reformation in a chain of many (Kireevskij 1911, 189–190).

Even though Kireevskij addresses a Russian readership at home, in the passage quoted above, he raises the question of whether there is anything “thinking Europe” can do, i.e. Western Europeans. That is, whether it is possible to return to the “original purity” and the original “foundations.” He concludes that this is a “well-nigh impossible undertaking.” Given the obscurity concerning these foundations, this must be said to be a logical conclusion – there is hardly anything to return to. This is Europe’s tragedy: Europeans realise that their life is one-sided and devoid of meaning, but they really do not have any alternative. Chomjakov, by contrast, was on a mission to prompt Western Europeans to return to the Church.

## Conclusions

In the nineteenth century, the age of historicism, the question of “historical development” became urgent. To borrow a concept from Frank Ankersmit, was the past “one substance,” as enlightenment historiography claimed, or was it necessary to account for the substantial historical change? And how could it be done historiographically? Kireevskij did not see the past, be it Russian or European, as devoid of shifts. The Europeanization of the Russian upper classes was, for him, too, a fact<sup>7</sup> and represented the disruptive replacement of one substance with another. In the case of Europe, however, there exists an embryo of further development in its classical, antique origins, which were fundamentally rationalist. Thus, the history of European civilization is the history of a gradual manifestation of something already contained in its beginnings. His conceptualization is therefore predominantly static. He allows for it to unfold, but what unfolds is a substance with a rationalist essence that was there from the beginning.

Chomjakov, by contrast, is the more historicist thinker of the two; he historicizes the substance, in Ankersmit’s words (2001, 132), and introduces a narrative where at least the West, and hence also Europe, changes substantially. (Quite tellingly and in contrast to Kireevskij, Chomjakov does not discuss the post-Petrine Europeanisation of Russia in the text analysed here.) A substantial change occurs in the West with the rise of individual doubt. Meanwhile, the Church (or Russia) represents the yardstick that offers coherence to this narrative. This also means that while Europe undergoes a substantial change, it is nevertheless reversible. While the two thinkers agree that Catholicism and Protestantism are fundamentally rationalist, they offer different histories and explanations of their emergence. For Kireevskij, they are manifestations of a rationalist substance; for Chomjakov, they are expressions of (reversible) historical change – the emergence of doubt.

A relevant question in the case of Chomjakov is how vital the *filioque* issue is, despite its prominence. Is the main problem the “wrong” dogma, from a theological point of view, or is it rather the “privatization” of speculation? According to Chomjakov’s logic, *filioque* would be perfectly acceptable had it been sanctioned by the Church since the Church is immune to doctrinal error (Hamburg 2008, 127). Boris Groys (1992, 190) has argued that the ultimate truth for Chomjakov was not dogmas but that the collective (Church) accepts and acknowledges these dogmas. In fact, even Kireevskij seems not to be very concerned with dogmas themselves. For him, the main difference between Russia and the West is found in different modes of thought: A rationalist discursive reasoning on the one hand contra a holistic type of

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<sup>7</sup>Somewhat paradoxically, he refers to this as “European-Russian civilization” (Kireevskij 1911, 176). Europeanized Russia was thus closer to Europe than to Russia proper; he also describes it as a “corner of Europe” (Kireevskij 1911, 178).

speculation informed by faith and feelings on the other. The last part of his comprehensive article is devoted to the difference between these two modes of thought, which he spells out in long, intricate sentences where he connects them to essential features of the two civilizations in question.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, I would like to conclude this article by going back to contemporary patriotic conceptualizations of Russia and placing them into the historical perspective that my reading of classical Slavophilism offers: Kireevskij may be considered one of the originators of the idea of Russia being a distinct civilization – a concept that was developed further and more comprehensively in Nikolaj Danilevskij's *Russia and Europe* of 1869. For Danilevskij, Russia and Europe develop as separate civilizations, at separate times in history. Chomjakov's legacy, meanwhile, is the vision of Russia as the true Europe, where the relationship between Russia and the West consists of an entangled history, a unity that was gradually fractured – by the West.

The use of Slavophilism in current Russian debates is widespread, and a genealogy may therefore seem superfluous since the sources are often so evident. A genealogical approach, however, offers to reveal continuities as well as discontinuities. These Slavophile thinkers represent a legacy that is reinterpreted in contemporary Russia for political purposes. More specifically, for Chomjakov, as suggested above, the gradual separation of the West from Russia (and the true Europe) is not primarily about dogmas but rather about unacceptable procedures of dissent. Doctrinal deviations were ultimately expressions of “individual” cognitive misconceptions arising from doubt. This fractured the unity of the Church and the unity of Europe. Contemporary Russian political discourse, by contrast, is highly centred on so-called “traditional values,” particularly related to family and gender issues (Sharafutdinova 2014). The current talk of traditional values is a post-Soviet invention aimed at presenting Russia as an alternative to the Western hegemony within the framework of a “multipolar world.” Thus, despite the use of Slavophile rhetoric and narratives by Naročnickaja and like-minded figures, the genealogical approach shows that for classical Slavophilism, exemplified by Chomjakov and Kireevskij, the difference between Russia and the West, whether historical or primordial, was strictly speaking an issue of

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<sup>8</sup>Examples are long and numerous; I quote from one: “Hence, apart from their different concepts, East and West also differed in the very method of theological and philosophical thinking. For, in seeking to arrive at the truth of speculation, Eastern thinkers were primarily concerned with the proper inner condition of the thinking spirit, while Western thinkers were more interested in the external coherence of concepts. Eastern thinkers, striving for the fullness of truth, sought the inner wholeness of reason – that heart, so to speak, of intellectual powers, where all the separate activities of the spirit merge into a higher and living unity. In contrast, Western philosophers assumed that the complete truth could be discerned by the separated faculties of the mind, acting independently in isolation” (Kireevsky 1998, 213–214; Kireevskij 1911, 201). As this quote suggests, for the Slavophiles, “reason” was not a negative concept, but rather referred to a complex of intellectual capacities, or “integral knowledge” (разум). It corresponded to the German *Vernunft*, whereas *Verstand* (рассудок) stood for the narrower, strictly logical, and formal “Western” use of reason (Kline 1988, 182).



epistemology rather than dogmas and values. For the Slavophiles, the difference springs primarily from culturally inherited ways of attaining knowledge – and truth.

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