

Russia's New National Security Strategy

written by Shahin Jafarli Şahin Cəfərli

On July 2, 2021, President Vladimir Putin approved Russia's new [National Security Strategy](#). A similar [document](#) was approved on December 31, 2015. According to the legislation, this document must be updated and corrected at least once every 6 years. Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev said that they had been working on this Strategy for about a year, and the last [discussion](#) on the issue, chaired by Putin, was held on May 28 of this year. The National Security Strategy is a foundational document for other state strategies of Russia and it defines Russia's national interests, priorities, and strategic planning in all areas. Russia is one of Azerbaijan's neighbors and important partners, as well as the most powerful state in the region; its defense, security, and foreign policies, as well as its regional and global vision more generally, influence the development and decisions of Azerbaijan and other countries in the region. After the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in the autumn of 2020, the Russian Armed Forces launched a peacekeeping operation in Karabakh, which further strengthened Russia's role in regional geopolitics. In this article, I examine the main points of the new National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation, its differences from the previous ones, and Russia's understanding of *friend*, *enemy*, and *threat*.

The Enemies of Russia

Article 1 of Section I, *General Provisions*, which is the introductory part of the document approved in 2015, dealt with the definition and objectives of the National Security Strategy; as the name of the section suggests, it was general and technical in nature. In the new document, however, this part is included as Article 2, and a new Article 1 is added.

The new article characterizes the conduct of an independent domestic and foreign policy, the protection and strengthening of sovereign statehood and the values on which it is based as the foundation of the national security of the Russian Federation. Thus, Article 1 can be considered a summary of the new strategy.

Unlike the 2015 Strategy, the threat assessment of the 2021 Strategy addresses a new threat: *transnational corporations*. Russia expects threats from these entities in many areas, and they are stated in separate provisions of the document. Section II, *Russia in the Modern World: Trends and Opportunities*, states that the attempts of the Western countries to maintain their hegemony, the crisis of modern models and tools of economic development, rising social inequality, and the *attempts of the transnational corporations to limit the role of states* are accompanied by the escalation of domestic political problems, the intensification of interstate conflicts, the weakening influence of international organizations and the ineffectiveness of the global security system. Section IV, *Ensuring National Security*, states that the efforts of transnational corporations to strengthen their monopolistic position on the Internet and control all information resources are accompanied by their imposed censorship and their blocking alternative platforms in violation of international law. A subsection of Section IV, titled *Protection of Russia's Traditional Moral Values, Culture and Historical Memory*, states that these values "are under attack by transnational corporations. Section IV also includes the related title *Information Security*, which was not mentioned as a separate part in the previous Strategy document. It states that there is an increasing use of information and communication technologies to interfere in the internal affairs of states, to undermine their sovereignty, and to violate their territorial integrity, which poses a threat to international peace and security. It is noted that the use of foreign information technologies and

telecommunications equipment in Russia increases the vulnerability of the country's information resources to external influences, as a result of which, the number of cyber-attacks on information resources is increasing, and intelligence and other operational activities of foreign special services are becoming more active in the Russian information space. (In fact, Russia took a number of other steps regarding information security before the publication of this document. From November 1, 2019, some [amendments](#) were made to the laws *On Communications* and *On Information, Information Technology, and Information Protection*. These are briefly and collectively referred to as the *Sovereign Internet Act*. The aim is to create a national internet traffic system and protect the national segment of the internet from possible external threats, such as ensuring that the local system continues to operate autonomously if Russia is removed from the global network. According to the [law](#), all communication operators in Russia must install special equipment in their networks provided by *Roskomnadzor* (Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media). This equipment allows authorities to filter traffic and restrict access to resources banned in Russia. In the event of a threat of isolation from the global network, operators will divert traffic through this national technology.)

Section II of the Strategy provides an analysis of existing international relations and discusses the main threats to Russia. It states that the activities of some states are aimed at promoting disintegration processes within the CIS and weakening the relations of Russia with its traditional allies; unfriendly countries use Russia's socio-economic problems to undermine its internal unity and divide society; there is a policy of isolating Russia and restricting the use of the Russian language. As a result, against the background of this policy aimed at containing (*sderzhivanie*) Russia, it becomes a vital task to protect the sovereignty, independence, state and

territorial integrity, and traditional moral foundations of Russian society, preventing foreign interferences in Russian internal affairs.

One noteworthy detail is that those in power in Russia believe that the “problem of moral leadership and the creation of an attractive idea for a future world order” is becoming increasingly important. They believe that the current Western liberal model is in crisis and that a new ideological leadership is needed to fill the gap. It is worth mentioning that in the bipolar international system formed after the Second World War, the USSR, as the leader of one of the poles, carried out ideological expansionism and spread its values on a global scale. The modern Russian Federation, the legal successor of the USSR, has no such global mission and does not offer the world a single, common system of values. Russia takes a conservative approach to the traditional values of states and societies, emphasizes the need to protect moral norms, the institution of marriage, the family, and national sovereignty, and sees Western liberalism as a threat to all of them. It should be noted that this approach is supported by all authoritarian leaders and governments and is gaining support all over the world, including in Western societies.

The subsection of Section IV titled *Defense of the Country* states that the military-political situation in the world is characterized by the formation of new global and regional centers of power and the intensification of the struggle for spheres of influence among them. As a result, the importance of military power as a tool for the subjects of international relations to achieve their geopolitical goals is increasing. Attempts to put military pressure on Russia, its allies, and its partners, the deployment of NATO military infrastructure near Russia's borders, the intensification of foreign intelligence activities, and testing the use of nuclear weapons and large military units against Russia (NATO exercises) are military threats to the Russian Federation. In this regard, the Russian state will provide strategic

deterrence (nuclear potential and sufficient support for it), detect and prevent existing and future military threats and dangers, take into account the changing nature of modern warfare and military conflicts, improve mobilization training, prepare the economy, and take other measures.

Demographic crisis and economic sovereignty

One of the innovations in the Strategy is to emphasize the duty of protecting (*sberezhenie*) the Russian people as one of the national interests. It is not a question of protecting the population from armed or other attacks, but of preventing the demographic crisis – the trend of rapid population decline. The fact that this point is written in Article 1 of Section III titled *National interests and strategic national priorities of the Russian Federation* and further discussed under the title *Protection of the Russian people and development of human capital* in Section IV (which is called *Ensuring national security*) shows that the state is very concerned over the demographic crisis. This concern is warranted, as the demographic [results](#) of 2020 in Russia were the worst in the last 15 years. In 2020, Russia's permanent population decreased by about 582.2 thousand people. (The previous largest decline was in 2003 – about 603,000 people.) Last year, the death toll was about 2,124,000. Compared to 2019, approximately 324,000 more deaths were registered, of which only about 162,000 died of [coronavirus](#). This negative trend is expected to continue in the following years. Demographic decline means the further shrinking of Russia's already scarce labor resources, declining consumption and social investment, which are also weakening the country's economic development prospects. The Strategy document states that the state policy in this area is aimed at ensuring the sustainable natural growth and welfare of the population, strengthening healthcare, reducing poverty, and raising the level of education.

Section IV, *Economic Security*, emphasizes that the way of

achieving this goal – economic security – lies in *economic sovereignty*. In the 2015 document, this title was *Economic Development* and it did not use the term *economic sovereignty*. Strengthening the Russian financial system and its sovereignty, developing the infrastructure of national financial markets (including payment systems), and eliminating dependence on third countries, expanding the practice of settlements with foreign partners in national currencies, reducing the use of the US dollar in foreign economic activity, improving state control over economic activity, strengthening state control over foreign investment in strategic sectors of the economy, and reducing critical dependence on imports (especially in the field of technology) are listed as key areas for achieving economic sovereignty. The new strategy includes goals such as institutional and structural reconstruction of the national economy based on modern technologies, diversification and development using low-carbon technologies, transition from export of primary raw materials and agricultural products to their deep processing, technological renewal of fundamental sectors of the economy, and modernization and digitalization of industrial enterprises and infrastructure. There are also ambitious goals, such as the use of artificial intelligence and the creation of high-tech jobs. It is believed that the implementation of these tasks will lead to a change in the structure of the Russian economy and increase its competitiveness and sustainability. In other words, it means abandoning the model of an oil and gas-based raw materials economy.

Reducing the use of the US dollar in foreign economic activity, improving state control over economic activity, strengthening control over foreign investment in strategic sectors of the economy are new points and were not mentioned in the previous document. These are tasks in line with the general spirit of the new Strategy: Russia expects a foreign threat and is building resistance mechanisms in all areas. Issues such as the raw material export model of economic

development and the low competitiveness of the economy, technological backwardness, and the vulnerability of the national financial system to non-residents and speculative foreign capital were also identified in the 2015 document as major threats to national security. In the past, some progress was made in solving these problems, which were (and are) considered threats. For example, Russia introduced the practice of using national currencies in import-export operations with some countries. The National Welfare Fund [announced](#) on July 5, 2021 that it completely withdrew the US dollar from its structure. In addition, Russia is working on alternatives to counter the risk of its withdrawal from the SWIFT international interbank exchange system.

Threats to Russia's (Russian) moral values

A subsection of Section IV titled *Protection of Russia's Traditional Moral Values, Culture and Historical Memory* is also new. (In fact, what is referred to here is *ethnic Russian* culture and values, but in order not to make other ethnic and religious groups angry, the country's name – *Russia* – is preferred.) In the previous document, this topic was discussed simply under the name *Culture*. The new Strategy states that in the modern world, moral and cultural norms, religious foundations, the institution of marriage, and family values are becoming increasingly vulnerable to destructive influences; the infiltration of foreign ideals and values destroys the foundations of cultural sovereignty, undermining the foundations of statehood and political stability. Where do these dangers come from? The document answers this question: the United States and its allies, transnational corporations, foreign NGOs, and foreign religious, extremist, and terrorist organizations. It is believed that the information and psychological provocations carried out by the above-mentioned entities and the westernization of Russia's culture have increased the possibility for the Russian Federation to lose its cultural sovereignty; there are also increasing attempts to falsify historical truths and destroy historical memory, to

weaken the state-forming nation (*gosudarstvoobrazuyushchii narod*); also, the Russian language is being discredited.

What measures will the Russian state take to protect its spiritual heritage? The state will create a demand for the creation of works of literature and art, cinematography, theater, television, video and internet products, and the provision of services in this field, aimed at preserving Russia's moral and cultural values, protecting its historical truths, and preserving its historical memory. The protection and support of the official language and state control over the observance of the norms of the modern Russian literary language will be strengthened; the spread and open use of words and expressions (including unacceptable vocabulary) in the media that do not comply with these norms will be prevented. Russian society will be protected from the destructive expansion of foreign ideas and values, as well as informational and psychological influences.

Peacekeeping and Greater Eurasian Partnership

As in the previous document titled *Strategic Stability and Mutually Beneficial International Cooperation*, cooperation with the CIS countries, Abkhazia and South Ossetia on a bilateral basis and as part of integrative unions, primarily within the Eurasian Union, the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Union State (Russia-Belarus), is displayed as a primary goal. (Abkhazia and South Ossetia are singled out because they are not represented in the CIS and other multilateral structures since they are internationally recognized territories of Georgia, which have been occupied and are only recognized by Russia.) Comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation with the People's Republic of China as well as development of special privileged strategic partnership with India are considered important in terms of establishing regional stability and security mechanisms on a block-free basis in the Asia-Pacific region. This was in the previous strategy and is emphasized again. The new strategy

does not include the provision in the 2015 document that the Russian Federation is “interested in building a partnership with the United States, given the overlapping interests and the serious impact of bilateral relations on the international situation.” Russia now sees the United States as trying to dictate its rules to other members of the international community, unilaterally imposing restrictive measures (sanctions), openly interfering in the internal affairs of sovereign states, and at the same time losing its decisive leadership. In addition, the phrase “the Russian Federation is ready to develop its relations with NATO on the basis of equality in order to strengthen common security in the Euro-Atlantic region” from the previous strategy is omitted in the new document.

New views were added on increasing Russia’s role in peacekeeping operations, supporting allies and partners in ensuring defense and security, and neutralizing attempts at foreign interference in their internal affairs. Undoubtedly, this refers to the fact that Russia launched a peacekeeping operation in Karabakh after the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia last year and supported Lukashenko, who faced popular protests and Western sanctions after the presidential election in Belarus, and Russia implies that this policy will continue. Ensuring the integration of economic systems and the development of multilateral cooperation within the framework of the Greater Eurasian Partnership (a concept put forward by President Putin in late 2015), strengthening the role of the Russian language as a means of international communication, the position of the Russian media in the international media, and strengthening fraternal ties between Ukrainians are among the foreign policy tasks. By the way, on July 12, the government website published an [article](#) by President Putin titled *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians* (in Russian, Ukrainian, and English). Putin names these three Slavic peoples the heirs of the Ancient Rus state. He claims that there has never been a separate Ukrainian state and

people in history. The word *okraina*, he continues, means the periphery of the Empire, and the word *Ukrainian* “originally referred to frontier guards who protected the external borders.” He emphasizes that the modern Republic of Ukraine was founded by the Bolsheviks in the historical territories of Russia and was a product of the Soviet Union, and that the policy of Ukrainianization was also carried out by the Bolsheviks, and as a result of their national policy, the great Russian nation was divided into Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. In the article, Putin reiterates the traditional propaganda of the Russian media about the existence of foreign rule in Ukraine, saying that the West has turned Ukraine into an “anti-Russia” project. Putin warns that he will never allow Russia’s historical territories and their people to be used against Russia. This perspective in the Russian government helps us to see and understand once again how vital the post-Soviet space is for Russia’s interests.

Conclusion

A key point in Russia’s new National Security Strategy is the increasing emphasis on sovereignty. In this document, we see that concepts such as sovereign statehood, economic sovereignty, sovereignty of the financial system, and cultural sovereignty are widely used, at the same time the document emphasizes the importance of independent domestic and foreign policy. In the official language there is also an increasing emphasis on the protection of traditional moral values. Because Russia is a multiethnic and a multi-religious country, those who prepare such documents are politically correct, the name of the dominant ethnic group (Russian) is used as little as possible, and the name of the state is highlighted. In fact, it is clear that traditional moral values mean the values of ethnic Russian culture and its integral part, the Orthodox Church. The Russian government thinks that the West is trying to undermine Russia’s sovereignty and independence by trying to discredit these values and implement its own values.

As a way of ensuring economic security, the Russian government intends to improve state control over economic activity and strengthen control over foreign investment in strategic sectors of the economy, which suggests that Russia has an administratively managed economic system rather than a free market. The policy of de-dollarization and attempts to give preference to national currencies in bilateral foreign trade operations are aimed at reducing the impact of US sanctions. However, while the weight of the US dollar decreases in both Russia's strategic reserves and foreign trade settlements, the weight of the Euro, the currency of another important part of the Western world, increases and the role of the Russian ruble in mutual settlements decreases. For example, in 2020, the share of the euro in [foreign trade revenues](#) increased from 20.6% to 27.4%, while the amount of settlements in rubles fell from 15% to 14.7%. The share of the ruble in trade with the People's Republic of China, one of Russia's largest foreign trade partners, fell from 8.7% to 5.7%. Reducing critical dependence on imports in high technology and abandoning the economy's raw material export model are also cited as key areas for achieving economic sovereignty, but it is doubtful that this will be achieved in the near future due to the lack of a short-term process to radically change the structure of the economy.

The negative demographic trend – the decline in the population (although not explicitly said, the declining section of the population is mostly ethnic Russians and the adherents of Russian culture) is also on the agenda as a serious problem. The state understands that in order to solve this problem, it is necessary to ensure the welfare of the population, strengthen healthcare, reduce poverty and raise the level of education. However, these are not easy tasks in the near future; the [decline](#) in real incomes of the Russian population since 2014 does not warrant such positive thinking.

Finally, it should be noted that the current National Security Strategy was announced in an election year. Elections to the

Russian State Duma will be held in the fall, and in this regard, the document can be considered as a program and platform of the ruling party. It would be wrong to say that there is a full consensus in Russia on the views and assessments reflected in the strategy.