

DECOLONIAL INTERNATIONAL NETWORK

My participation in the Valdai conference 2025

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Introduction

This year I was honored to receive an invitation from The Foundation for Development and Support of the Valdai Discussion Club for her 22nd Annual Meeting on the topic **"Apart but Together: National Sovereignty in an Interconnected World"**. I was invited to speak in session 4 on the theme of "The Will of the People and What Is to Be Done About it? The Fate of Democracy in a World of Manipulation". I dealt with the [topic](#) of Decolonizing Western liberal democracy.

The event was held on September 29–October 2, 2025 in Sochi, Russia. The [Valdai Club](#) was founded in 2004 and named after Lake Valdai, located close to Veliky Novgorod, where the Club's first meeting took place.

Valdai started as an event where Russia's intellectual elite engaged with intellectuals and politicians across the world about important issues confronting humanity. Its website says: *"In 2014 the Club moved away from the format of "telling the world about Russia" to practical work aimed at shaping the global agenda and delivering a qualified and objective assessment of global political and economic issues. One of its main objectives is to promote dialogue among the global intellectual elite in order to find solutions to overcome the crises of the international system. The Club actively collaborates with opinion-makers across various fields such as international relations, global politics, economics, security, energy, sociology, communications, and so on."*

Many participants are recurrent visitors. Some told me that in the early years there was a focus on dialogue with the Western intellectual elite, but since the West is bent on destroying Russia and its intellectual elite just slavishly follow their political elite, this dialogue became less important. The dialogue with the intellectual elite of the Global South has gained more prominence in the past few years.

For intellectuals from the Global South the conversation with the Russian intelligentsia is extremely important, because in the new multipolar world that is arising out of the ashes of the Cold War, Russia plays a crucial role.

My purpose in participating in the event was to get an idea about the thinking of the Russian intelligentsia about current world problems, their theoretical perspectives and how this concurs or differs from thinking in the Global South. It is not about who is right or wrong, but about looking at the world from different perspectives. My perspective is that of Decolonizing The Mind (DTM), a theoretical framework that looks at world history through the prism of civilization. It differs from two major schools of the European Enlightenment: Liberalism that looks at the world from the perspective of individualism and Marxism that uses the concept of class struggle to understand the world. I am curious about the Russian perspectives and Valdai offers an insight to their thinking. The highlight of the event was the speech of and discussion with Vladimir Putin at the end of the conference. I follow his speeches on his [website](#). Putin has attended the Valdai conference every year. This is how he characterizes its work: *"Discussions at Valdai platforms provide a unique opportunity to assess the global situation impartially and comprehensively, to reveal changes, and to comprehend them. Undoubtedly, the Club's unique strength lies in the determination and ability of its participants to look beyond the banal and the obvious. They do not simply follow the agenda imposed by the global information space, where the internet makes its input – both good and bad, often difficult*

*to discern – but pose their own unconventional questions, offer their own vision of ongoing processes, attempting to lift the veil that conceals the future."*¹

I will include his thoughts in this article.

The Annual Report

The conference was based on an annual report written by six staff members of Valdai with Fyodor Lukyanov as the lead author. It was titled *Dr. Chaos or: How to Stop Worrying and Love the Disorder*. The central proposition of the report is as follows: *"There is no doubt that today's shifts are profound and are taking place across virtually all domains. That said, they cannot be viewed as an expression of someone's deliberate will but should rather be regarded as a series of processes which were quite predictable and natural. We can go as far as argue that no power in today's world is willing or has the ability to turn everything upside down."*²

Although we live in an era of change, the report argues that it is not an era of revolutionary change. It says: *"There are no countries capable of putting forward a revolutionary agenda, primarily in terms of domestic policy, which would require truly decisive action. Not a single power is willing to radically change its own society by transitioning to a novel social and economic framework. Therefore, making radical changes on the international stage becomes irrelevant too."*³

Here is a major difference with my view from DTM.

The assessment of Donald Trump and the USA

A big difference between a decolonial view of the world and the view of Valdai report is in the assessment of the current position of the USA in world history. The report says: *"Donald Trump offers a case in point when it comes to discussing the potential for radical change around the world... The 47th President does have a lot of influence on international relations, and the whole situation may appear to be quite prone to a revolution considering the abrupt steps he has made – and especially in view of his declared intentions. But what kind of a revolution could this be if the impulse comes from a person who already de facto rules the world? After all, the United States remains the world's biggest power, even if it may have lost some of its might."*⁴

The biggest adversary of Russia today is the USA. So it is understandable that their thinking is guided by the still ever present might of American power. However, if we take a step back and look at the USA from a world historical perspective we see a rapidly declining power, which is losing its power day by day.

Human history has a record of 7,000 years with the first civilization arising in Mesopotamia (current day Iraq). European colonialism started 500 years ago with the Spanish empire that lasted for 350 years. The British colonial empire lasted for less than 250 years. The US empire gained prominence 70 years ago after World War II and - in my view - it is now already nearing its end. The Valdai report has a different view. It assumes that the USA will remain the most important player in the foreseeable future. Our sense of time can deceive us when we talk about history. The difference between 1918 and 1970 is 52 years. In half a century that world has changed dramatically. There have been two world wars and one pandemic (Spanish Flu). Much of the global south was politically colonized by the global north. By 1970 the majority of the global south was politically independent. The Internet and personal computer, let alone mobile telephones, did not exist in 1970.

The difference between 2022 and 1970 is same as the difference between 1970 and 1918. And this period has also seen dramatic changes in the world. China and India have risen from the ashes of the colonial period to become major economic and political players on the world stage. The Soviet bloc has dissolved and out of those ashes the Russian Federation has risen as a major military power. Iran has become a major geopolitical force. We have experienced a pandemic (COVID-19). The Internet technology

has changed the world in a way nobody could have foreseen. The US was defeated twice militarily, the first in Vietnam and the last in Afghanistan.

Yet, when we compare 1918-1970 with 1970-2022 it feels as if the gap between 1918 and 1970 is far bigger than the gap between 1970 and 2022, probably because we are still in one generation that is living through the current era. We feel as if the period 1918-1970 is closed, while we still seem to be living in the second period.

Let us not imagine how the world will look like in a thousand years. Just imagine how the world will look in fifty years, say in 2072. Can we imagine a change that is so drastic that we regard the period of 1970-2022 as a period that we have closed as humankind?

Here is my imagination of 2072? The US has lost its hegemonic power in economic, political, military and cultural terms. China, India and Russia are the leading powers, but in a different way than the old colonial powers. Our mindset will be changed. The most important question is how to build a pluriversal world civilization in which people live in peace and prosperity. In 2072 an average person might not know the name of the US president, because the US is not the omnipotent power anymore, just like now an average person does not know the name of the Spanish King, because Spain is not an imperial power anymore. In 1650 Spain was an imperial power and everybody knew the name of its king at that time.

Where the Valdai report sees stability, I see monumental changes.

The remnants of Marxism in Russia's intelligentsia

I wondered to what extent Marxism is still an important part of Russian thinking. In the last presidential elections in Russia, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) got 4% of the votes. Putin got 87%. Politically speaking, Marxism is not a major factor anymore. In the discussions at Valdai there were two references to Marxism. The Valdai report uses the Leninist concept of "revolutionary situation" to discuss revolutionary changes in the world. Lenin explains the concept: *"To the Marxist it is indisputable that a revolution is impossible without a revolutionary situation; furthermore, it is not every revolutionary situation that leads to revolution. What, generally speaking, are the symptoms of a revolutionary situation? We shall certainly not be mistaken if we indicate the following three major symptoms: (1) when it is impossible for the ruling classes to maintain their rule without any change; when there is a crisis, in one form or another, among the "upper classes", a crisis in the policy of the ruling class, leading to a fissure through which the discontent and indignation of the oppressed classes burst forth. For a revolution to take place, it is usually insufficient for "the lower classes not to want" to live in the old way; it is also necessary that "the upper classes should be unable" to live in the old way; (2) when the suffering and want of the oppressed classes have grown more acute than usual; (3) when, as a consequence of the above causes, there is a considerable increase in the activity of the masses, who uncomplainingly allow themselves to be robbed in "peace time", but, in turbulent times, are drawn both by all the circumstances of the crisis and by the "upper classes" themselves into independent historical action."*⁵

Lenin speaks of a revolution from below. The Valdai report speaks of a revolution from above. It says: *"Taken in its classical form, the revolutionary theory as defined by Marxism-Leninism makes it abundantly clear that only the exploited groups, those suffering from oppression, have the right to be revolutionary. Under this logic, a hegemon's revolt against international rules it had shaped cannot be designated as a revolution. Marxists use a different language for describing these aspirations by calling it an effort to divide the world against the backdrop of mounting differences between imperialist powers."*⁶

It is not clear if the Valdai report acknowledges the Marxist concept of a revolutionary situation as a valid concept to understand the world.

Another instance where a reference was made to Marxism was at the session on *"Man and Time: the Role of Personality in Political History"*. The session poses the questions: *"What does the politics of strong personalities mean in the 21st century? Have we*

*returned to the "diplomacy of kings" to solve the most pressing problems?" The moderator referred to the essay by the Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov (1856-1918) titled *On the Question of the Individual's role in History*. Plekhanov argues that "individuals can influence the fate of society by virtue of definite traits of their nature. Their influence is sometimes very considerable but the possibility of its being exercised and its extent are determined by society's organization and the alignment of its forces. An individual's character is a 'factor' in social development only where, when, and to the extent that social relations permit it to be. We may be told that the extent of personal influence also depends on the individual's talents. We agree, but the individual can only reveal his talents when he holds an appropriate position in society."*⁷

The discussion in the panel did not further explore the Marxist analysis of Plekhanov. It went into two directions. The first is psychological analysis. What are the features of strong leaders and what can psychology teach us about the role of individuals in world history? The second is the institutional approach that argues that the actions of the individual are limited by institutional constraints. There was no further explorations of a class analysis of the role of the individual like Plekhanov did. My impression is that Russian key thinkers of the modern era have totally abandoned Marxism.

Artificial intelligence (AI)

AI was high on the agenda of Valdai, and rightly so. There were interesting contributions on how AI might change the future. When I listened to the interesting talks of the different speakers, the work of one creative Russian thinker came to my mind: Nikolai Kondratiev (1892-1938). He came up with the idea that that capitalist economies do not grow in a linear fashion but in long, rhythmic waves driven by technological revolutions. A wave lasts for 40-60 years. Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter names these waves the K-waves, after Kondratiev. A swarm of new technologies creates entirely new industries, which disrupt and destroy old ones, leading to a massive reallocation of resources and a long upswing that ends in a depression, that is the fertile ground for new innovations. The first wave was the industrial revolution (1780-1840) that was driven by water power. The second was the age of steams and railways (1840-1890) based on steam engines, steel and railways, the third was the age of electricity and heavy engineering (1890-1940) based on electric power and chemicals). After the death of Kondratiev other economist identified two more long waves: the fourth was the age of oil, automobiles, and mass production (1940-1980) based on petrochemicals and electronics. The fifth was the age of information and telecommunications (1980-2020) based on computers, internet and telecommunications. Now we might argue that we are at the beginning of the sixth Kondratiev wave based on AI. By looking as some technological innovations was foundational in restructuring an economy (eventually it spreads to all sector of the economy) Kondratiev made an important contribution to the study of long term economic impact of technological innovation. It goes beyond the question whether that particular innovation is harmful for society. That discussion was held in every cycles of innovation.

The question of civilization

Western civilization

In an effort to understand the new intellectual thinking in Russia I resort to the concept of civilization. A civilization is collection of societies based on a particular system of knowledge production. In the 7000 years of the history of the world humankind has seen many civilizations lasting for thousands of years. Each civilization was based on a particular system of knowledge production. Knowledge is not only about ideas on how to understand the natural and social world, about true and false. It is also about ethics, about what is right and wrong. The knowledge base provide the guidelines for setting up economic, social, political and cultural institutions of society.

Western civilization was based on colonialism. The colonial world civilization started in 1492 with the occupation of Abya Yala (formerly known as the Americas) by the Spaniards. In the first 150 years the foundation of the economic, social, political and cultural institutions was Christian theology. It provided the rationale for colonialism. Around 1650 colonialism underwent deep going transformations. Spain and Portugal were challenged by new rising colonial powers, mainly Holland, France, England. The European trans-Atlantic enslavement of Africans and the triangular trade led to the rise of a world economic system and the rise of technology. It was accompanied by the rise of science in Europe.

Since 1650 the European Enlightenment became the foundation of the colonial world civilization. By the nineteenth century colonialism has ruled every part of the world. It instituted its particular knowledge production through power as universal knowledge production. It's economic, social, political and cultural institutions were created since 1650 and rationalized with economic, social, political and cultural theories from the European Enlightenment. They are taught in Westernized universities across the Global South as objective scientific knowledge. I distinguish four main characteristics of Western civilization.

First, the separation of ethics from scientific knowledge. In other civilizations scientific knowledge was not in conflict with religion and spirituality, but in Europe the rise of science clashed with Christian theologians. This clash led to the separation of ethics from knowledge and the separation of church and state. Knowledge production became secular.

Second, the claim of universalism. Knowledge produced in Western Europe is regarded as valid knowledge for the whole world. The institutions that has been set up based on this knowledge (economic, social, cultural and political institutions) have universal value. Liberal democracy as developed in Europe is the universal model for the world. The capitalist economic system has universal validity.

Third, the combination of universalism and the separation of ethics from knowledge has led to the amalgamation of the methodology of knowledge production in natural and social sciences. Social sciences are as objective as natural sciences. Mathematics is the basis for research in both branches of science. Social theories from the west should be regarded as universal theories.

Fourth, the introduction of racism in science. Racism is the organization of human relations in inferior and superior human beings. In the history of the colonial world civilization there has been three markers for inferiority and superiority linked to the authority of knowledge production. This authority refers to the class of thinkers that determine what is valid knowledge. In the first 150 years this authority was with Christian theologians, who determined what valid knowledge is. The debate of Valladolid in 1550 between Bartholomé de Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda laid the foundation for the theological justification of Western colonialism. Christian were superior to heathens. This is theological racism.

Between 1650 and 1850 the rise of philosophy and natural sciences in combination with the rise of the European trans-Atlantic enslavement of Africans established biological racism. Philosophers and biologist made a classification of inferior and superior human beings based on biological traits (skin color, hair).

The rise of social sciences since the second half of the nineteenth century coincided with the legal abolition of slavery in Abya Yala. Superiority and inferiority was not based on biology, but on culture. All human being as equal in biological terms. However, culturally there are higher and lower form of human societies. The concept of rationalism - the slogan of the European Enlightenment - reflects this racism. The European Enlightenment was the first school that invented rationalism, thinking with the mind rather than other parts of the body. The idea that only Europeans were thinking with their mind is a thorough racist idea, so rationalism is a thorough racist concept.

What is the Russian civilization?

Now that I have outlined the main characteristics of the European civilization, the question arises: is Russia part of the European civilization and if not, what is the

knowledge base for the Russian civilization? In my book [Decolonizing The Mind](#) I refer to the definition by Alexander Dugin of Eurasianism as the foundation of the Russian civilization. Dugin writes: *"Eurasianism is an ideological and social-political current born within the environment of the first wave of Russian emigration, unified by the concept of Russian culture as a non-European phenomenon, and presenting — among the various cultures of the world — an original combination of Western and Eastern features; as a consequence, Russian culture belongs to both East and West, and at the same time cannot be reduced either to the former nor to the latter."*⁸

Little did I know that [Sergei Karaganov](#) is a very important philosopher of Eurasianism in Russia until I heard him speak at the Valdai conference. It showed my ignorance, and many of my friends, in the knowledge of Russian intellectual thinking. We need to study their works in order to understand their basic concepts.

Putin made some interesting remarks about civilization in his discussion in Valdai in response to questions posed by Arvind Gupta, director of the Vivekananda International Foundation in New Delhi India. Gupta asked Putin: *"What is the role of civilization and culture in contemporary international politics? Do you see civilizations as fostering cooperation among civilizations and bringing stability? Or do you believe that there are possibilities of a clash of civilizations, as has been predicted by some scholars some years ago?"*⁹

Gupta referred to book by Samuel Huntington titled *"The Clash of Civilizations"*.¹⁰ Huntington argues that Western civilization is superior to non-Western civilizations and the latter are challenging the former. He writes: *"The West obviously differs from all other civilizations that have ever existed in that it has had an overwhelming impact on all other civilizations that have existed since 1500. It also inaugurated the processes of modernization and industrialization that have become worldwide, and as a result societies in all other civilizations have been attempting to catch up with the West in wealth and modernity."*

Putin gave interesting answers to the questions of Gupta. He knows about the discussions on the clash of civilizations: *"As for civilizations, the clash of civilizations and the arguments of some researchers regarding this, I am aware of them, by and large."*¹¹ But then he clearly distance himself from the racist elements of the discussion: *"Let me be clear: the era when a select group of the strongest powers could decide for the rest of the world is gone, and it is gone forever. This is a point best remembered by those who feel nostalgia for the colonial era, when it was common to divide peoples into those who were equal and those who were, to use Orwell's famous phrase, 'more equal than others.' We are all familiar with that quote. Russia has never entertained this racist theory, never shared this attitude towards other peoples and cultures, and we never will."*¹²

Putin acknowledges that in the Soviet era there was this tendency of imposing Western ideas on non-Western civilizations: *"The world has already lived through attempts at unification, at imposing so-called universal models that clashed with the cultural and ethical traditions of most peoples. The Soviet Union once made this mistake by imposing its political system — we know this, and, frankly, I do not think anyone would argue. Later the United States took up that baton, and Europe, too, tried. In both cases, it failed."*

Now he outlines the Russian principles in dealing with other civilizations. It starts with mutual respect: *"We have great respect for ancient cultures and civilizations — the Indian civilization, Buddhist, Hindu, the Chinese civilization, the Arab civilization. The Russian civilization is not as ancient as those of China, India or the Arab world, but it is already more than a thousand years old, with its own distinct experience."*

In creating new international relations based on civilizational discourses he argues that *"the modern world needs agreements, not the imposition of anyone's will. Hegemony — of any kind — simply cannot and will not cope with the scale of the challenges."*

Russia has a lot of experience in this regard: *"When Russia absorbed other peoples, representatives of different ethnic and religious groups, it always did so with great respect, treating them as part of something shared and common. Our people — of different faiths and ethnicities — have always lived on their ancestral land, side by side,*

for centuries. This has shaped a distinctive culture, a special civilization of our own. We have learned to live, coexist and develop together, and, moreover, to recognize the advantages of such joint development."

In Putin's view the future of humankind lies in the cooperation of different civilizations on an equal footing: *"Each culture and civilization should make its contribution because, I repeat, no one knows the right answer separately. It may only be generated through a joint constructive search, through combining – not separating – efforts and national experience of various countries."*

This approach offers great perspectives for the future. It abandons the colonial approach to the world and opens up new possibilities for discussing the question of how to build a new pluriversal world civilization. The general atmosphere in Valdai was that of an open dialogue between different viewpoints, and an intellectual ambiance in which can agree to disagree. It was a very stimulating intellectual climate, which is missing in the West.

The organization

Putin's vision was reflected in the organization of the Valdai conference. We were not just participants in a conference. We were treated as guest of honor with dignity and respect. We were housed in a luxury resort. On every level the staff treated us with the utmost respect. The communication was swift and professional. But we were factually in a war zone. Ukraine drones had attacked Sochi several times. My return flight was delayed because of drone threats. Yet, there was no feeling of anxiety. Everybody was calm and relaxed.

The thing that struck me most was the last day. Thursday evening, after the conversation with Putin, we were invited to a gala dinner. Everybody sat at round tables and served by dedicated waiters. At the end of the evening, Andrey Bystritskiy, Chairman of the Board of the Valdai Discussion Club, came to each individual to thank him or her personally for their participation. I found that amazing in courtesy, warmth and generosity. With that spirit I am confident that the Global South will find in the Russian intelligentsia exciting partners in building a new pluriversal world civilization.

¹ Putin, V.: Speech Valdai conference 2025.
<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/78134>.

² Lukyanov, F. a.o. (2025): Dr. Chaos or: How to Stop Worrying and Love the Disorder. Valdai Discussion Club. Moscow, p. 9.

³ Idem, p. 11.

⁴ Idem.

⁵ Lenin, V. (1915): Collected Works, volume 21, August 1914- December 1915. Progress. Moscow, p. 213.

⁶ Lukyanov, F. a.o. (2025), p. 11.

⁷ Plekhanov, G. (1976): On the Question of the Individual's role in History. Progress Publishers. Original 1898. Moscow, p. 13-14.

⁸ Dugin, A. (2014): Eurasian Mission. An Introduction to Neo-Eurasianism. Arktos, p. 13.

⁹ Putin, V. (2025): Speech and discussion at Valdai Club 2025.

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/78134>.

¹⁰ Huntington, S. (1996a): The Clash of Civilizations. Simon & Schuster. New York.

¹¹ Putin, V. (2025).

¹² Idem. This goes for all the other quotes below.