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Civilizational Nationalism: Concept, Cases, and Global Implications

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NICHOLAS MORIESON, JUL 28 2025

Is the nation-state losing its centrality in global politics? Since the 1990s, scholars have speculated about its decline: Samuel Huntington famously predicted that states would re-organize into civilizational blocs. Later, after the 9/11 attacks, Islamist movements appeared to challenge national borders with calls for a transnational ummah to unite against the West. Supranational projects like the European Union suggested a post-national future. None of these developments, however, has displaced the nation-state as the central actor in global affairs. On the contrary, nationalism remains the primary framework through which political authority is organized and legitimized to this day.

Why, then, do Huntington's ideas still haunt scholarship on international politics? The answer may be that, while Huntington misunderstood the structural resilience of nation-states, he correctly perceived that civilizational identity matters. This matters in a way that he does not appear to have anticipated. Civilization is not an alternative to nationalism, but rather has become a resource nationalists use to legitimize authoritarianism, territorial boundaries, and to create domestic ingroups and outgroups. Most of all, though, civilization is merged with nationalism, and the resulting 'civilizational nationalism' is a tool used by regimes to defy what they claim are the Western imposed liberal norms and laws that ensure Western supremacy in global affairs. This emerging phenomenon, which a number of scholars have begun to call civilizational nationalism, requires our close attention. First, because it is easy to find civilizational nationalism in the discourse and policies of some of the world's largest and most powerful and populous nations, including China, India, among right-wing populists and lost-liberals in the United States and Europe, and in Türkiye. Second, because this discourse marks a serious challenge to liberal democracy and the liberal norms and laws that have helped to define international politics and state relationships since the end of the Cold War.

The term has so far been most often used in the context of Russia's transformation under Putin, especially since 2012, and used to describe Putin's reconceptualizing of Russia as a "state-civilization". For example, "Civilizational nationalism," Verkhovskii & Pain (2012) write, is "the view that Russia follows a special path that predisposes it to authoritarian government". The term has also been used to describe India's ruling BJP and the ideology of its leader and Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, for example by Dutch sociologist Peter van der Veer, (2021). It has been used to discuss the coming of a multipolar, multi-cultural international political sphere by Loftus (2023), who sees something positive in civilizational nationalism insofar as it demolishes the Western narrative of liberalism and liberal democracy as 'universal values'. "The global rise of civilizational nationalism", she writes (2023), means that "the world is witnessing the rise of a more multi-civilizational, multicultural, and pluri-political future".

Most scholars, however, see little positive in the advent of civilizational nationalism. For example, Fisher-Onar (2021) argues that the "imperial nostalgia" of a number of different regimes and political movements globally "informs what could be called *civilizational nationalism*", or "a form of cultural nationalism which invokes an imagined imperial golden age of religious and racial purity". According to Fisher-Onar (2021) civilizational nationalism in Europe and the United States manifests as opposition to migration from the Global East and South, and is tied to fears of civilizational decline and collapse. At the same time, he correctly observes that civilizational nationalism operates transnationally, facilitating alliances across national borders among like-minded movements. However, this transnationalism does not appear to be intended to weaken state sovereignty. Rather, it is a method of increasing the reach and power of the state through the control and/or mobilization of diaspora communities.

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Based on this brief survey of the literature on civilizational nationalism, we can surmise that the phenomenon is real and important. However, at present there is no cohesive definition of civilizational nationalism, and the number of contexts in which it has been applied remains small. In this short essay, I investigate examples of civilizational nationalism and attempt a definition, while also offering a few words of caution about the term and its application.

What Is Civilizational Nationalism?

Civilizational nationalism is not a distinct form of nationalism, and nor should it be added to the crowded taxonomy of “nationalisms with adjectives” (ethnic, civic, religious). Rather, civilizational nationalism is best understood as a framing strategy: nationalists draw on civilizational narratives to advance familiar nationalist goals, particularly in legitimizing authoritarianism, resisting liberal-democratic norms, and consolidating domestic in-groups.

At its core, civilizational nationalism is a political discourse that does three things: First, it reframes the nation. In civilizational nationalism, the nation is presented not as a political community alone, but as the inheritor and protector of an ancient or at least older civilization. For example, in the Putin regime’s civilizational nationalist discourse, Russia is not merely the Russian nation-state but a “state-civilization” (Blackburn 2021), an entity that is the culmination of the entire history of the Russian people and thus frames Kievan Rus, the Russian Orthodox Church and its History, the Russian Empire under the Tsars, the Soviet Union, and the contemporary Russian state as a single entity. Similarly, China, in Xi Jinping’s civilizational nationalist discourse, is not simply a nation-state but the culmination of “5000 years of Chinese civilization”.

Second, civilizational nationalism helps to justify authoritarianism. Civilizational distinctiveness is invoked by leaders globally to reject liberal-democratic standards as culturally alien. Democracy may be redefined to fit civilizational values, as in Putin’s “sovereign democracy” or China’s ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ discourse. In the West, it may mean the rejection of cosmopolitanism on the basis that it is a threat to Western civilization insofar as it brings civilizational aliens into the West, many of whom come from civilizations with values antithetical to Western values, and who therefore cannot assimilate into the local culture. Third, it legitimizes the redrawing of boundaries: Civilizational framings support territorial claims or policies toward diasporas, treating them as civilizational extensions of the nation itself. This also legitimizes the exclusion of migrants framed as civilizational outsiders. Russia, for example, defends its invasion of Ukraine by claiming that Ukraine is part of Russian civilization (Putin 2021; 2023). Equally, China claims that Taiwan belongs to China because it was previously part of Chinese territory.

Civilizational Nationalism in Practice: Russia, Türkiye and China

Putin has argued that Western liberal democracy is alien to Russia’s unique civilizational path, and claimed that the West has abandoned Christianity for an immoral, anti-religious society. Under his rule, however, Putin says, Russia prioritizes national unity, traditional morality, and spiritual values over Western style pluralism and individual rights (Putin 2023; Blackburn 2021; Marten 2014). Framing Russia as a distinct civilization enables the rejection of liberal democratic standards not merely as politically undesirable, but as civilizationally inappropriate.

For example, in a 2023 speech, Putin asserted that the old nation-state had outlived its usefulness, and that the future belongs to state-civilizations. After all, he said, “each civilization is different, each is culturally self-sufficient,” rejecting universal liberal norms in favor of civilizational autonomy (Putin, 2023). Russia, Putin says, is as “an original civilisation-state”, a term that “reflects how [Russians] understand not only our own development, but also the main principles of international order, which we hope will prevail” (Putin 2023). This framing legitimizes authoritarian rule, external aggression, and Russian (and ultimately all non-Western) resistance to liberal international norms and laws.

Second, civilizational nationalism helps construct clear boundaries between Russia and its perceived enemies. Putin presents the liberal West not only as a geopolitical rival but as a civilizational adversary, engaged in a moral and spiritual assault on Russian identity (Teper 2015). The post-Cold War expansion of NATO, liberal NGO activity, and Western media are all framed as attempts to subvert Russia’s civilizational integrity. Internally, liberal activists, opposition figures, and Western-oriented NGOs are denounced as agents of civilizational infiltration, justifying their repression. In this way, civilizational discourse both externalizes the West as a cultural antagonist and internalizes

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dissenters as civilizational traitors.

Third, this discourse is materially consequential, justifying territorial expansion and diasporic intervention. Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine were both framed as civilizational reclamation and rejuvenation projects. In official speeches, Putin repeatedly described Ukraine not as a sovereign nation, but as an inseparable part of Russian civilization, linked by common Slavic ancestry, Orthodox Christian faith, and shared historical destiny (Putin 2021). By framing Ukraine as an integral component of Russian civilization, the invasion could be presented as defensive: an effort to protect civilizational unity against external manipulation by the West.

Beyond Ukraine, civilizational rhetoric underpins Russia's claims to moral leadership among Orthodox Slavic peoples, and its interventions in former Soviet states. Russian diaspora communities are framed as compatriots and extensions of Russian civilization, entitled to protection and patronage. This framing supports both rhetorical and policy-driven efforts to influence these states' internal politics and justify Russian military and political intervention. Finally, in Russia, civilizational nationalism functions as something more than rhetorical positioning, but as a practical political resource that legitimizes authoritarianism as culturally authentic, defines internal and external enemies through civilizational boundary construction, and that justifies expansionist policies as forms of civilizational rejuvenation.

Under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, civilizational framing has become central to Türkiye's domestic and foreign policy. Initially, Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) framed Türkiye's EU engagement as a "reconciliation of civilizations" (Çınar, 2018). After 2013, however, Erdoğan shifted toward positioning Türkiye as heir to Ottoman-Islamic civilization, distinct from the secular West (Yilmaz and Morieson 2023). Domestically, this narrative legitimizes authoritarian rule. Erdoğan presents Western liberalism as incompatible with Türkiye's Islamic civilizational identity, portraying democracy and minority rights as Western impositions designed to weaken Türkiye. Executive power centralization, media crackdowns, and civil society restrictions are justified as protecting civilizational integrity (Moudouros 2022). Civilizational framing also sets boundaries. Sunni Muslim identity is elevated as Türkiye's core, marginalizing secularists, Alevis, and Kurds. Critics are accused of serving foreign powers undermining Türkiye's civilization (Yilmaz and Morieson 2023). Erdoğan calls for reviving Islamic civilization, portraying the Ottoman Empire as a model of justice and compassion, contrasted with a hostile, morally corrupt West (Hazır 2022).

Externally, Türkiye is cast as leader of the global ummah, defending Islamic civilization against Western aggression. Post-Arab Spring interventions, in particular, were framed by the AKP as restoring Ottoman leadership and protecting Muslims from secular regimes and Western powers (Yilmaz & Morieson 2023). For example, Turkish military operations in Syria, Libya, and the Eastern Mediterranean are framed as protecting Islamic civilization (Yilmaz and Morieson 2024). The Hagia Sophia's reconversion to a mosque symbolizes Ottoman-Islamic identity's restoration. Furthermore, domestically, mosque-centered urban planning, state-sponsored Islamic education, and an expanded Directorate of Religious Affairs embed civilizational identity (Yilmaz and Morieson 2023). Türkiye's civilizational nationalism thus consolidates Erdoğan's domestic control and positions Türkiye's as leader of the Muslim world. The West is framed as both civilizational threat and necessary Other against which Türkiye asserts its Ottoman-Islamic identity.

In Xi Jinping's China, civilizational discourse is a foundational legitimizing tool for one-party rule, ethnic policies, and assertive foreign policy. Xi describes China as possessing "five thousand years of continuous civilization," framing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as custodian of this ancient legacy (Brown & Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018). Domestically, this narrative justifies CCP rule as culturally appropriate, portraying liberal democracy as a Western system unsuited to China's civilizational character. Xi famously claims the CCP has created "socialism with Chinese characteristics" by blending Marxism with Confucianism, framing centralized governance and ideological control as civilizational imperatives, not authoritarianism. Second, civilizational discourse enforces boundaries and constructs ingroups and outgroups. For example, Han identity is positioned as China's civilizational core, while minorities like Tibetans, Uyghurs, and Hui Muslims are redefined as peripheral groups needing assimilation. Policies in Xinjiang and Tibet, including re-education camps and religious repression, are justified as preserving civilizational unity, and separatist movements are framed as threats to civilizational continuity, not efforts towards self-determination.

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Externally, Xi portrays relations with the US and allies as a civilizational conflict. He warns Western leaders that opposing China's rise constitutes a clash of civilizations (The State Council Information Office 2021). We might also consider Chinese digital authoritarianism, including AI-driven censorship and surveillance, as part of Xi's efforts to 'protect' Chinese civilization from foreign influence and imperialism. China positions itself as a development model for the Global South, showing that modernization need not mean Westernization (Yilmaz and Morieson 2024; 2025). Through institutions like the AIIB and BRICS, China offers the developing world an alternative to Western-led globalization, one rooted in Chinese culture and civilization, but which is also intended to encourage developing nations to construct new modernities rooted in their own respective cultures and civilizations. Moreover, Xi frames China's rise as restoring greatness after colonial humiliation—a message appealing to postcolonial states.

Finally, China's treatment of its diaspora reflects civilizational worldview and political strategy. Nathan and Zhang (2021) argue that Xi's CCP constructs a blood-based transnational identity, one demanding supreme loyalty, and transcending simple citizenship. Chinese civilizational belonging thus rests on both "ethno-cultural identity" and "support for the specific projects of the Xi regime". In a speech Xi praised overseas Chinese for contributing to "the Chinese ethnic group ...the peaceful unification of the motherland ...and advancing friendly cooperation" internationally, declaring that "The Chinese Dream is the dream of the Chinese nation, the Chinese ethnic group, and of every son and daughter of Chinese descent" (Nathan and Zhang 2021). This rhetoric serves to conflate the regime's political survival with the global preservation of Chinese ethnic and civilizational identity. Thus, China's civilizational nationalism justifies authoritarian governance, ethnic homogenization, and global assertiveness. Unlike Russia and Türkiye, China's civilizational narrative emphasizes cultural and historical continuity, positioning the CCP as inheritor and protector of an unbroken civilizational tradition.

What can we learn from these examples and the scholarly literature on this subject? First and foremost, we learn that civilizational narratives do not replace nationalism—they strengthen it. They allow authoritarian leaders to justify illiberal governance as culturally authentic, reject liberal norms as uniquely "Western" and not universal, construct ingroups and outgroups based on civilizational categories, and support transnational intervention in regions or diasporas deemed part of the national civilization. It may even be that civilizational nationalism can help regimes legitimize digital authoritarianism and the fragmentation of cyberspace into national realms. At the same time, this discourse is not merely used in non-liberal countries; it is used among non-liberals within the West, especially among right-wing populists, who believe that immigrants from non-Western nations are an existential threat to 'Western civilization' and its "Judeo-Christian values". At the same time, we must recognize conceptual risks when using this term. 'Civilizational nationalism' risks becoming too vague, and a catch-all label that obscures differences between regimes. It is not a new species of nationalism, but a discursive strategy: a civilizational frame deployed for nationalist ends.

Conclusion

Civilizational nationalism is a form of nationalist discourse that frames the nation not merely as a sovereign state, but as the modern embodiment and guardian of an ancient, continuous civilization. It serves to legitimize resistance to liberal universalist norms by grounding national identity in civilizational inheritance. Civilizational nationalism represents a significant challenge to the liberal international order, not by displacing the nation-state, but by reshaping the ideological foundations upon which nationalism is predicated. Regimes embracing civilizational nationalism reject democracy, human rights, and liberal pluralism as culturally specific to the West – perhaps even attempts by the West to impose its values on other civilizations. They assert instead that political systems, values, and governance models must emerge from distinct civilizational traditions. In this sense, civilizational nationalism is a direct assault on the post-Cold War narrative of liberal universalism.

Leaders in Russia, Türkiye, and China – and many nations beyond – frame their authoritarian models as authentic expressions of their civilizational heritage. Liberal democracy, in this narrative, is not a universal good but a foreign imposition—a product of Western civilization, suited only to the West. Civilizational framings allow these regimes to present domestic repression as cultural preservation, territorial claims as historical rectification, and external aggression as defensive action against a hostile liberal world order. This is why Huntington's ideas continue to resonate: while his civilizational blocs did not emerge or erode the centrality of the nation-state, he correctly

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anticipated that civilizational identity would become a political resource, deployed in opposition to Western liberal hegemony – deployed even, at times, by Western right-wing populists. Civilizational nationalism enables nationalists to transform historical and cultural narratives into political legitimacy, not by transcending the nation-state, but by fortifying it against perceived external and internal threats.

At the same time, civilizational nationalism risks analytical overuse. It is not a distinct species of nationalism, but a framing strategy: an ideological lens through which familiar nationalist goals—state consolidation, ingroup formation, territorial claims, authoritarian control—are pursued. What makes civilizational nationalism significant is its normative challenge to the liberal world order. One could be generous and say that it signals a shift toward pluralist internationalism, and a multi-polar world order in which non-Western voices are heard more often, and Western states cease imagining that their own liberal values are universal. However, what is most evident so far is that for authoritarian regimes, civilization-state status has become a justification for legitimizing authoritarianism and for pursuing an alternative, civilizationaly-defined path to modernity. China and India may even be busy exporting these ideas abroad, especially across Africa, where authoritarian regimes may also seek legitimation via claims of civilization-state status (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025). Understanding this phenomenon, then, may be essential if we are to comprehend the future of global politics.

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About the author:

Nicholas Morieson is a Research Fellow at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. He is the author of numerous journal articles and three books, most recently *Weaponizing Civilizationalism for Authoritarianism: How Turkey, India, Russia, and China Challenge Liberal Democracy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025). He is also a non-resident fellow at the European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS).