

## **Theorizing Sovereignty as ‘Organized Loneliness’: Existential approach to Sovereignty of Russian ‘State-Civilization’**

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Sovereignty (also souverainisme or sovereignism) as political ideology of sovereignty that aims at preserving political independence of a nation or civilization in its direct and indirect forms has been previously explored by several scholars in relation to notions of populism, nationalism, Euroscepticism, isolationism, anti-internationalism and separatism from supranational unions (like the American exceptionalism or ‘obsession with sovereignty’ and ‘taking back control’ under BREXIT). The novelty of approach to sovereignty in this article suggests that in order to reveal the roots of the rise of sovereignty in modern Russia and beyond, sovereignty as a political concept (and a way of political thinking) should be reconsidered itself. More specifically I aim to address the question of how sovereignty can be underpinned, shaped and legitimized through social practices of political management of loneliness in its ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ ways. However, to address the abovementioned issues, we firstly need to theorize ‘loneliness’ as a concept of political theory, and then explore the relationship between other concepts, and above all ‘sovereignty,’ one of the foundational concepts for studies of political ideologies.

‘Sovereignty’ is variously understood as either the basic principle of international relations, an institution, or a social construct. However, in many of these approaches we deal with a statist approach to this concept, whether this is the state-assigned freedom to regulate internal or external challenges, or shared ideas and norms shaping state efficacy in maintaining legitimacy through its monopoly over how ‘to construct societies from the top down’. According to Steven Krasner Westphalian sovereignty, either as an analytic assumption (neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism) or an internalized norm (English school) has been a central concept for the most IR theories ‘with the exception of Marxism,’ even if such sovereignty could be easily represented as ‘organized hypocrisy’.

Hence, sovereignty may seem to be a reified self-evident reality of politics and the ideal framework to address the importance placed on centralized state power in contemporary Russian politics, where the word ‘sovereignty’ has recently become a popular political trope for legitimating the exercise of such power. For example, the words ‘sovereignty’ or ‘sovereign’ in the 1994-2020 Addresses of Russian Presidents to the Federal Parliament were used 62 times, including 5 times in the last speech dating 2020. However, without wishing to disregard the state-

centric approaches to the study of sovereignty and logics of power and survival in modern statecraft, in this article I focus on symbolic representations of sovereignty and their ability to evoke ideological discourse that appeals to notions of identity and loneliness. In the case of contemporary Russia these are also appeals to Russia's 'lonely' civilizational sovereignty, projected both in historical and geopolitical ways.

Today, Critical political theory scholars more and more often point to the constructed nature of sovereignty in relation to nationalism – through the routine practices of sacred and profane; sovereignty in relation to religion – through symbolic representations of (self)-sacrifice; the nexus between sovereignty and national identity – through stressing trauma, the everyday cultivation of wonder and the enchantment of subliminal heroism and masculinity, or even biopolitics and 'bare life'. Mikhail Il'in defined sovereignty as 'everything that makes it possible *to establish order* within a territorial polity and interact with the rulers of other territories.' The theoretical framework of this article suggests that such an *order* can also be set through *symbolic and ideological structures*. This approach uses the conceptual texts by Jens Bartelson, Cynthia Weber, and Charlotte Epstein to bridge discursive practices and symbolic representations of sovereignty with the existential notion of 'loneliness anxiety.' For example, Bertelson views sovereignty as a 'symbolic form' by which Westerners have perceived and organized their political world. According to him 'symbolic form' refers to the specific structures that can be understood as 'a mode of objectivation that structures meaning and experience.' Cynthia Weber sees symbolic representation as a strategy whereby the sovereign authority of the state is 'invented' in a specific form, which serves as the grounding principle of the state. Charlotte Epstein and her colleagues suggest that sovereignty is not just a symbolic attribute of statehood, but even international system's symbolic structure where sovereignty reveals itself 'through the effects that it generates'. However, the question that remains is: if sovereignty is a specific symbolic structure and, also described as 'governmentalization' or the 'fetishism' of sovereignty, then what is it a symbolic structure of? In other words, what stands behind sovereignty as a symbolic structure and sovereigntism as a particular subliminal ideological configuration?

Answering those questions should not disregard that symbolic structures also shape sovereigntism as a mode of political ideology not just through its verbal but also non-verbal transmission. Those include extremely effective dissemination of the ideas of sovereigntism through emotional visual symbols starting from marches, riots, anthems, and uniforms to cartoons, national sports teams and the facial expressions of immigration officers. Taking this into consideration, this article tries to contribute to the critical theory of sovereignty by rethinking its symbolic nature not just in relation to categories like state, identity, or power but also in relation to the existential concepts and performative practices of 'solitude' and 'loneliness,' looking at the

ideological discourse appealing to sovereignty (sovereigntism) as a tool for the management of collective estrangement, 'anxiety' and human objectivation. It suggests that states are able to successfully talk on behalf of their people when state discourse on sovereignty efficiently (directly or implicitly) appeals to a nationally (or civilizationally) defined conception of people's 'loneliness anxiety.' However, to make this idea theoretically credible I will need to address two questions: can 'loneliness' be considered an informative concept in the study of political theory, and how is 'loneliness' politicized in modern empirical reality with respect to ideological narratives of sovereigntism? Considering these two tasks, the first part of the article will explore the theoretical relationship between loneliness, sovereignty and political identity. The second part will focus on a case study of symbolic representations of Russian sovereigntism.