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

This article studies sovereignty not only in relation to state, identity, or power but also in relation to the distinction between concepts of ‘loneliness’ and ‘solitude.’ Considering this goal, it analyses ‘loneliness’ as a concept with potentially deep explanatory value when posing major questions in political theory. It also explores its relationship with ‘sovereignty’ and ‘political identity.’ Building on the existing literature on the connection between sovereignty and collective identity, the article extends such analysis towards a consideration of the interconnection between sovereignty and different forms of loneliness – alienation, isolation, uprootedness, estrangement, and so on, and relates them to ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ modes of ‘organized loneliness.’ The main aim is to use this framework of political representations of emotions to illustrate how a particular type of ‘loneliness’ – ‘loneliness anxiety’ – is filled with political reason. Finally, the article examines three specific ways in which the ‘management of loneliness anxiety’ may provide legitimacy, including for Russia’s conservative ideological program of ‘state-civilization’ and new 2020 amendments to constitution.

Keywords: sovereignty, loneliness, Russia, ideology, state-civilization

1. Introduction. ‘Sovereignty’ and ‘sovereignty’ as symbolic structures

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)¹. The novelty of approach to sovereigntism in this article suggests that in order to reveal the roots of the rise of sovereigntism 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 sovereigntism 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 challenges², or shared ideas and norms shaping state efficacy in maintaining legitimacy through its monopoly over how ‘to construct societies from the top down’.³ 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,’⁴ even if such sovereignty could be easily represented as ‘organized hypocrisy’.⁵

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 2020.⁶ 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.

By doing this I aim to build on a critical tradition of rethinking the sovereign state system. Critical revision of Westphalian sovereignty goes back at least forty years, when, as Susan Strange once noted it seemed for many that ‘like wool, and sex, there is no substitute for the state.’⁷ 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’⁸. As noted by Richard Devetak, the sovereign state assumes that politics is impossible without enclosure. Therefore, the starting point for critical political theory is ‘to question the legitimacy of those institutions and practices that define identities or communities *against* others and, as a consequence, implicitly devalue outsiders’.⁹

Mikhail Il'in defined sovereignty as ‘everything that makes it possible *to establish order*¹⁰ within a territorial polity and interact with the rulers of other territories.’¹¹ 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.’¹² 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 state¹³. 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’¹⁴. However, the question that remains is: if sovereignty is a specific symbolic structure and, also described as ‘governmentalization’ or the ‘fetishism’ of sovereignty,¹⁵ 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 officers¹⁶. 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. I will conclude with a brief discussion of how different conceptual approaches to ‘loneliness anxiety’ can constitute a basic framework for building a wider existential approach to research on political ideologies of sovereigntism based on civilizational nationalism.

2. ‘Sovereignty’ and ‘collective identity’ as mutually supportive concepts

It is common to view a ‘concept’ as situated in a so-called ‘semantic field’ formed out of links to other concepts, creating a web. According to Felix Berenskoetter, in this web there are three kinds of links that are prevalent: (1) links to *supporting* concepts, which are integral to the meaning of our concept; (2) links to *cognate* concepts with similar meanings, or meanings with ‘family resemblance;’ and (3) links to *contrasting* concepts that are opposite in meaning, sometimes even taking the form of counter-concepts: these links forming a conceptual web ‘*do not need to be grounded in logic* but can be habitual, sentimental or normative, and thus seemingly arbitrary in character.’¹⁷ Berenskoetter gives the example of ‘sovereignty’ as a ‘supporting’ concept for a ‘basic; concept of a ‘state.’ However, let’s take a look at what the supporting concepts for sovereignty itself are.

It is recognized that collective ‘identity’ can be considered a supporting concept for ‘sovereignty.’ For Thomas Biersteker and Cynthia Weber, the state is best regarded as an agent or *an identity* that may have specific roles designated to it in accordance with consensual understandings of sovereignty. Their understanding of sovereignty links the social construction of agency and identity (of the state) through conceptualizing sovereignty as a set of legal and cultural practices of recognition and exclusion, or, for example, justifications of military interventions.¹⁸ Later Cynthia Weber even called such constructions a ‘simulacrum,’ or the ‘imitation of sovereignty.’ Weber draws connections between ‘sovereignty’ and identity through the notion of ‘symbolic representation.’ According to her, states are ‘written’ effects of attempts to exert effective control over representation, both political and symbolic. A citizenry authorizes

the state to serve as its agent so long as the state honours its obligation to stand for the interests of that citizenry. What makes this relationship between the state and its citizenry possible is a 'symbolic representation,' understood as the act of depiction, the act of portraying 'officialised myth.' In this case, what is portrayed is the mystical source of sovereign authority, 'the people'.¹⁹ These performative practices equate sovereignty with the construction of *collective identity*. Kevin Olson illustrates this connection with the image of the fantastic creature, 'the chimera' – 'the assemblage of the unlike elements, *sovereign imaginaries*'.²⁰

Within constructivism scholarship the supporting role that identity plays for the conceptualization of sovereignty was also compellingly depicted by Nicholas Onuf, who noted that for several centuries agents have had a consistent interest in talking about countries as if they are independent of each other. As constructivists, however, 'we should always bear in mind that full independence is a useful fiction, and sovereignty is a matter of degree'.²¹ While Biersteker and Weber pointed to the constructed identity of states, for Onuf a large number of people who have a considerable measure of common identity (including some place identified as theirs) constitute a country.²² Like practices for Biersteker and Weber, for Onuf ideas and beliefs seem to be crucial for the interplay between the status of the society and its identity, understanding the latter as a *set of ideas about the self* and the position of this in society, including the indoctrinated ideas disseminated by political elites²³ in a form of political ideologies.

Other scholars emphasized how the connection between identity and sovereignty is entangled in traditional Westphalian dichotomies and discursive foundations that divide the political world into that which is 'internal' and 'external' to the political community. For Rob Walker the world 'inside' the state since the shift from the medieval system of overlapping authorities towards the hierarchical subordination of modern territorial statehood has been traditionally characterized and constructed in terms of 'order,' 'trust,' and 'loyalty' or 'progress.' Conversely, according to Rob Walker, the world 'outside' the state has, since the onset of modernity, been discursively formed through the concepts of 'conflict' and 'suspicion,' along with ideas of 'anarchy' and 'self-help'.²⁴ Walker draws attention to the dichotomy between national ('inside') and international ('outside') as mutually constituting linguistic opposites, which gradually ceases to reflect the changing nature of sovereignty, at least in modern Europe: 'knowing the other outside, it is possible to affirm the identities inside. Knowing identities inside, it is possible to imagine the absence outside. These routines are too familiar. They affirm the codes of nationalism and patriotism'.²⁵

Richard Ned Lebow, in his perhaps more psychological way, also pointed to the common roots of the concepts of sovereignty and identity, emphasizing that they both are based on

framing ‘we’/‘them’ binaries. According to Lebow, sovereignty is a concept with diverse and even ‘murky origins,’ which was first popularized in the sixteenth century when more importance was placed on its domestic than international implications. Later jurists and historians developed a narrative about sovereignty that legitimized the accumulation of power by central governments. They portrayed the state as the sole focus of a people’s social life: ‘The ideology of sovereignty neatly divided actors from one another, and made the binary of ‘us’ and ‘others’ appear a natural, if not progressive, development, as did rule-based warfare among states’.²⁶

However, sovereignty is not just a narrative and discursive, but also a *performative* practice. The link between ‘collective identity’ and ‘sovereignty’ is related to what Tanja Aalberts calls ‘the performative nature’ of the practices of sovereignty. The latter display their performativity in the fact that sovereignty not only describes, but also constitutes itself as a certain political reality.²⁷ The interconnection between ‘collective identity’ and ‘sovereignty’ has also been traced by Michael Freeden, who concludes that sovereignty in the political sense ‘is endowed with an extraordinary salience as the privileged position of the safeguarding and firming up of collective identity.’²⁸ According to Freeden, the idea of sovereignty acts as a ‘container’ and ‘justification’ for the privatization of social and cultural space, while collective identity is a ‘set of deep-rooted cultural, religious, gender, and ethnic attributes relating to belonging, and thinking in terms of sovereignty is their political incarnation, serving as a legal and formal, as well as mythical, consolidating and protecting framework.’²⁹

To sun up, we can conclude that within the current state of research on sovereignty and collective identity (for example, in the works of Walker, Bartelson, Weber, Biersteker, Aalberts, Lebow and Freeden), sovereignty is often interpreted as a form of discursive and performative practice that strongly appeals to the construction and maintenance of different forms of collective identity. We now need to go further and analyse what stands behind the concept of ‘identity’ itself.

3. ‘Collective Identity’ and ‘Loneliness’ as a Concept of Political Theory

The first question that probably comes to one’s mind is: what does ‘loneliness’ have to do with ‘sovereignty’? My argument suggests that dealing with essentially contested concepts like ‘sovereignty’ naturally makes us search for fundamental philosophical concepts that are useful for their principal (re)interpretations. What do we mean by a ‘*concept*’ in political theory? One has to agree that political concepts ‘never just ‘are’, they are *human* creations and the form they take is not only internally complex but also varies significantly’.³⁰ Moreover, concepts as human

creations fully reflect the nature of their creators. After all, what can be more universal to human nature than human loneliness, with all the successful or failed attempts at coping with it? According to Berenskoetter, most political concepts ('state,' 'anarchy,' 'war,' 'globalization' or 'power') designate broad and complex phenomena whose material manifestations are plural, shifting, and incomplete. This article means to demonstrate that, without considering 'loneliness,' the web of theoretical concepts for generating knowledge about the political world will be incomplete.

From the existing research we know that (like identity and sovereignty) collective identity and loneliness are also interconnected. For example, the crisis of old collective identity can cause feelings of social loneliness as non-belonging, or rather belonging to some other community which existed in the past. Organized forms of loneliness have been explored by Hannah Arendt as one of the preconditions for totalitarianism. She writes: 'What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that *loneliness*, once a borderline experience, usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience in the evergrowing masses of our century'.³¹ We know that since 1960s, power was related to the need to overcome the loneliness of the human condition. For example, Ty Solomon points to how for Hans Morgenthau the lust for power and the longing for love were both rooted in human inability to escape 'existential loneliness'. While 'humans' realization of their need for sociality sets them apart from animals, yet primary *loneliness* is never completely overcome'.³² Solomon clearly points to political studies of different emotions like 'humiliation,' 'trauma,' or 'revenge,' yet he does not theorise differences between concepts of loneliness, solitude, alienation, uprootedness, estrangement, social isolation etc.,³³ as well as different defence mechanisms that accompany 'loneliness anxiety.' If 'loneliness' can be so important, why is it that '(existential) loneliness' still largely remains on the periphery of political theory?

One of the reasons might be that while loneliness is an experience that has accompanied humankind since the dawn of its existence, psychologists suggest that this concept and its phenomenology have only been empirically investigated in the past four decades.³⁴ Among the seminal works on loneliness is Robert Weiss's *Loneliness: The experience of emotional and social isolation*, where Weiss explains how people can be lonely both while in solitude and in the middle of a crowd.³⁵ So, eventually what makes people lonely is not just the fact that they need more social interaction, but also *a particular type* of social interaction that might not be currently available for a variety of social reasons or might be missing due to the limitations of the current ideological agenda.

In this research I base my analysis on the so-called existential school of loneliness studies represented by American psychologist Clark Moustakas, one of the pioneers of the existential psychology of loneliness, who distinguished between so-called ‘existential loneliness’ and ‘loneliness anxiety.’ According to existential school, ‘*existential loneliness*’ is an inevitable part of the human experience, providing an avenue for creativity and self-growth. In contrast, ‘*loneliness anxiety*’ is a negative experience that results from a ‘basic *alienation* between man and man’.³⁶ ‘Existential loneliness’ therefore is more an equivalent of productive ‘solitude,’ while ‘loneliness anxiety’ is closer to ‘loneliness’ *per se* in a more negative sense. ‘Loneliness’ is considered to be a negative state, because it has to do with painful *estrangement* and a rejection of the individual by people around her. Hannah Arendt has explicitly drawn that difference: ‘in *solitude* ... I am ‘by myself’, together with myself, and therefore two-in-one, whereas in *loneliness* I am actually one, deserted by all others.’³⁷

The dialectics between *solitude* and *loneliness anxiety* (or ‘true loneliness’ and ‘negative loneliness anxiety’) should be taken seriously because of its explanatory power. Throughout intellectual history we come across different social and political projects that help us to avoid loneliness and alienation: by playing the role of social animals (Aristotle), committing to solidaristic projects bound by common interests and shared security concerns (Rousseau), ‘love of those far away’ (Nietzsche), and so forth. Naturally, loneliness is a currently well-established philosophical category. That is probably because ‘human life consists in an endless struggle over our sense of loneliness, which only releases its grip over us in death’.³⁸

Again, what is important for the focus of this article is to show how ‘loneliness anxiety’ links to performative practices of sovereignty. Paramount here is the system of *defence mechanisms* that usually accompany ‘loneliness anxiety’ and distract people from dealing with their crucial life questions. Instead ‘loneliness anxiety’ is *based on fear*, so it motivates people to constantly seek activity with others.³⁹ Clark Moustakas describes such ‘loneliness anxiety’ as a feeling of being ‘alone even in the crowd, of talking incessantly with others while not saying anything meaningful or productive.’⁴⁰ According to psychologist such anxiety is created when ‘real desires and interests are abandoned in favour of social, economic and vocational awards’.⁴¹ He contends that ‘loneliness anxiety’ is typical of so-called ‘*other directed people*’ who try to assuage their loneliness in the crowd. Counterintuitively, public gatherings in large crowds may not be the most effective ways of coping with loneliness. Crowds can become lonely as well, and ‘lonely crowd’ societies are usually characterized by high levels of conformity and ‘other-directed people’,⁴² or what Spanish thinker José Ortega y Gasset criticized as the hyperdemocracy of the Masses, the Mass that believes ‘that it has the right to impose and to give force of law to notions born in the café.’⁴³ Robert Putnam has insightfully noted that, while

people are now bowling more than in the 1950s, there are fewer bowling leagues in the USA today than there used to be 50 years ago. So now Americans do more bowling, but they do their *bowling alone*.⁴⁴

Different conditions can lead to the development of the different defence mechanisms against 'loneliness anxiety.' One of such conditions can be *alienation* and *objectivation* of the individual mind due to the effects of urbanization (as opposed to meaningful relationships established within rural life). In 1903 Georg Simmel argued that 'sovereign types of personality' were opposed to typical city life. The passionate hatred of men like Ruskin and Nietzsche for the metropolis was understandable for German sociologist: 'Their natures discovered the value of life alone in the unschematized existence which cannot be defined with precision for all alike.'⁴⁵ In 1943 Simone Weil pointed to another condition of loneliness in respect to destruction of ties with the past and materialism (money) that lead to the dissolution of community or what she described as urban, rural and national 'uprootedness.' She metaphorically suggested that despite the loneliness, distress, disarray, and uprootedness experienced by French citizens, their every loyalty and every attachment 'are to be kept as infinitely precious treasures', and 'watered like sick plants'.⁴⁶

In parallel with Weil, but within the Frankfurt School of critical theory, Erich Fromm has shown how people can seek to escape from freedom for the benefit of authoritarianism and conformity. Describing the process of ideological objectivation and *commodification* of human relations under Hitler, Fromm warns us that the most devastating instance of this spirit of instrumentality and *alienation* is the individual's relationship to his own self. He illustrates this with examples of 'magic influence' of 'mass suggestion' on the lonely individuals who joined political meetings and became adherents of new movements in totalitarian Germany.⁴⁷ Without going into further analysis of late twentieth-century intellectual history I can finish this brief overview of circumstances and 'incarnations' of 'loneliness anxiety' with a mention of the relatively new phenomenon of 'social distancing,' which has evoked a number of insightful contemporary theoretical speculations due to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic in the age of what we can probably characterize as the new 'Zoom-loneliness.'⁴⁸

Psychological and philosophical explorations of loneliness and collective identity in the works of Albert Camus, Karl Jaspers, José Ortega y Gasset and Hannah Arendt may constitute a subject of special research. However, what is important for exploring the specific link between loneliness and sovereignty in this article is to make the following elaboration. Clearly 'loneliness' is too ambiguous a concept to cover all the shades of social interactions. It deals with a whole web of different circumstances and notions like *solitude*, *alienation*, *isolation*, *uprootedness*, *non-belonging*, *estrangement*, and so on. In this article I will investigate *not all*

forms of loneliness but rather how a very specific one – ‘loneliness anxiety’ – can be politicized in modern empirical reality with respect to narratives of sovereignty and more specifically Russian civilizational sovereigntism.

4. ‘Vertically’ and ‘horizontally’ organized ‘politics of loneliness’

In this section I will firstly proceed from the conceptualization of ‘loneliness’ towards an outline of the general contours of what is sometimes called the ‘politics of loneliness.’ I will then describe two specific discursive models of the ‘vertically’ and ‘horizontally’ organized ‘politics of loneliness.’ Following the connection between identity and loneliness established in Hannah Arendt’s theory, I will start by suggesting that societies with similar dominant political identifications can ‘suffer’ from similar psychological ‘defence mechanisms’ and types of social ‘loneliness anxiety,’ and share particular models of the ‘politics of loneliness.’ To the best of my knowledge, the term ‘politics of loneliness’ was coined by social psychologists. For instance, Michael Bader claims that the rise of isolation and loneliness in the USA is ‘making people sick, addicted, and left to fester *alone* in miseries caused by economic stagnation and *anxiety* at home and in conflicts abroad.’⁴⁹ Telling people the truth about the objective causes of the collapse of the American Dream of middle-class mobility and security, states Bader, is no guarantee that people will believe you if you fail to take account of a range of emotional biases and fears that regularly defeat such rational explanations: ‘The pain of loneliness and the need to belong are two such emotions’⁵⁰. Jacqueline Olds and Richard Schwartz describe loneliness as the ‘elephant in the room’ of American politics, even if the room is a psychiatrist’s office⁵¹. Olds and Schwartz developed an original description of positive and negative loneliness. In their view, what stands behind the fears and aspirations of American culture is the ‘myth of an outsider.’ The positive pole of this myth is a version of the ‘self-reliant American, a cherished part of our American identity’. The negative pole is ‘the loser’ who desperately wants to fit in but can’t: ‘When you stand at the positive pole you feel *alone*. When you stand at the negative pole you feel *lonely*’⁵². At the same time, American loneliness today is deeply stigmatized and therefore often stays hidden from different sociological surveys ‘until you start asking the right questions (and ask them tactfully)’.⁵³ According to the authors, social estrangement makes Americans less empathetic and more polarized against outsiders, which has been clearly evidenced during the twenty-first-century presidential campaigns.

Given the current ‘emotional turn’ in political science⁵⁴, the term ‘politics of loneliness’ seems credible, because loneliness is an emotion and ‘the politics of emotion’ is not a novel

term. Emma Hutchinson sees emotions as forces enacted upon the prevailing forms of power, which are ‘central to the constitution of emotional subjectivity.’⁵⁵ Australian scholar concretizes her framework down to the level of what she calls ‘the politics of representing trauma’.⁵⁶ According to her methodology, the representational, narrative and discursive practices associated with trauma not only hold out the possibility for constructing forms of identity, but also for transforming identities and potentially forming communities of responsibility beyond the nation-state.⁵⁷

Since loneliness is also a traumatic emotional experience I find it acceptable to approach the ‘politics of representing loneliness’ in a similar manner to Hutchinson’s ‘politics of representing trauma.’ This is because the discursive practices associated with different forms of loneliness, like trauma, also contain the potential for constructing and transforming identities within and beyond the nation-state. Moreover, I find it feasible to relate the ‘politics of loneliness’ to symbolic representations of sovereignty, since collective identity and sovereignty (as was shown earlier) are inseparable. Besides the USA, we have other cases of symbolic representations of sovereignty through which ‘loneliness anxiety’ is communicated and endowed with ideological meaning. For example, the loneliness and alienation of British citizens was pointed out as one of the emotional appeals of voting for ‘leave’ during BREXIT.⁵⁸ ‘The invisible people’, to use the expression on Michael Freeden, I claim in this article are also indeed ‘invisibly lonely’. And this is another condition that allowed Brexiters to successfully nourish their populist exclusivity experienced as a ‘sense of siege that can be contingently and interchangeably applied to the influx of strangers of all kinds, to the identification of aliens in the midst of a society’.⁵⁹ In the case of Sweden, leaders of populist parties galvanize individuals by offering their followers a fantastical vision of making ‘Sweden great again’.⁶⁰ However, whether it is one of the many secessionist movements in the United States, the UK, Sweden, or, for example, *Le Front Nationale* in France we face a similar mechanism of the ‘politics of loneliness’: political leaders exploit ‘the ‘right’ amount of fear and anxiety in their recipients,’⁶¹ along with the appeal to a ‘common enemy,’ in order to gather support for the policies they propose.

The need for social belonging can also lead to a ‘politics of loneliness’ in countries where loneliness is exploited for purposes of maintaining state control, power and ideological indoctrination masked by the rhetoric of national sovereignty. In authoritarian countries this might be simply because people ‘do not know’ (have not historically learned/were not institutionally accustomed) how to manage their lonely anxieties by other means.

According to Arendt, ‘*organized loneliness* is considerably more dangerous than the unorganized impotence of all those who are ruled by the tyrannical and arbitrary will of a single

man.’⁶² However, the description of the ‘politics of loneliness’ would be incomplete unless we discuss *how* such politics can actually be organized. We need to ask: what models exist? In 1988 Richard Ashley described two different but overlapping images of global governance within his anarchy problematique – ‘vertical’ and ‘lateral.’ The *vertical* image, according to Ashley, closely conforms to the motif of ‘statism’: ‘the world consists first and primarily of the territorial states, each coextensive with the sovereign compass of a state.’⁶³ The American scholar associates the ‘lateral’ image with the motif of the ‘transnational,’ when the world consists of a broad array of actors, each a sovereign presence *of its own*: ‘the territorial state is in the weak bargaining position because nonstate actors with greater mobility can exploit resources, markets and coalition building opportunities available on the global scale’⁶⁴.

I suggest that we can use Ashley’s metaphors to talk about ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ models of the ‘politics of loneliness.’ What do we get from distinguishing these two discursive models in a scholarly sense? Both of these models deal with human ‘loneliness anxiety’ in different ways and relate ‘loneliness’ and ‘sovereignty’ to different models of political identifications – national, civilizational, transnational and cosmopolitan. For each of these political imaginaries, ‘loneliness anxiety,’ I suppose, could be ‘managed’ and ‘organized’ differently. Moreover, I suggest that societies with particular models of ‘loneliness anxiety’ management are more likely to reproduce similar symbolic representations of sovereignty. This suggestion can be methodologically supported by Andrew Linklater’s framework of national and ‘post-national ‘symbolic cultivation’ in the modern society of states.’⁶⁵ What logically follows then from Ashley’s images is that a ‘vertically’ organized politics of loneliness will have more symbolic representations of *national and civilizational identifications*, while a ‘horizontal’⁶⁶ model will be closer associated with *transnational and cosmopolitan identifications*⁶⁷.

It is difficult to say what comes first: whether a particular model of political identification predetermines a type of ‘loneliness avoidance’ practiced by the people, or whether it is the other way around. In a situation of a state-driven, ‘vertically’ organized politics of loneliness, as Artem Magun puts it, we can have a case when ‘the state, which seems to be called upon to lead man into the light of day... on the contrary drives him back into the ‘night of the world’ (Hegel), and digs a Platonic cave under the guise of sunlight.’⁶⁸ So, the question remains open of ‘whether the atomizing, destructive, alienating state drives its individuals into such a cave, or, on the contrary, the state itself is constituted by the collective experience of ‘inner loneliness’.’⁶⁹ Narratives and symbolic representations of ‘vertically organized loneliness’ are rather diverse, but what unites them is that they are all targeted towards the construction of mechanisms that reinforce a more powerful national state. Therefore, they can be broadly defined as *vertical models* of organized loneliness (as opposed to *horizontal* models).

It would be too simple to suggest that only vertical/national ways of ‘organizing loneliness anxiety’ are usually related to ‘lonely crowd’, while horizontal/transnational ones, which often presuppose the possibility of ‘difference without hierarchy,’⁷⁰ only point in the direction of productive, positive and creative *solitude*. As we know, the transnational can also sometimes be productive, and sometimes destructive. Some examples of the latter are transnational terrorism, transnational crime or the transnational spread of pandemics, which all can become carriers for the ‘defence mechanisms’ of the ‘lonely crowd’ and for human anxiety.

5. Politicization of ‘loneliness’ in Russian narratives of sovereigntism

5.1. Sovereigntism of Russian state-civilization: key ideological assumptions

In the previous sections, I traced some theoretical interconnections between ‘sovereignty’ and ‘identity,’ employing ‘loneliness’ as a concept of political theory, providing illustrations from literature on the USA, UK, and Sweden. What about Russia?

Recently a number of studies dedicated to the analysis of ‘frustrated sovereigns’ in world politics have been published.⁷¹ The case of Russia, however, has not been considered in those studies, while scholars emphasize that today Russia’s ‘patriotic sentiments soared and heightened society’s emotional attachment to their leadership’.⁷² While it was sometimes claimed that ‘Russians have not helped outsiders to know more about their country and its ways, and that they steep their affairs in mystery,’⁷³ this section of my article tries to partly fill this gap – to point out that ‘loneliness anxiety’ can also be the ‘elephant in the room’ of Russian politics, including Russia’s fresh 2020 amendments to constitution. I suggest that analysis of the relationship between sovereignty, identity and loneliness anxiety can uncover the nature of ‘patriotic sentiments’ in Russian conservative ideology and at the same time illustrate the theoretical part of this article.

Below I will look at how a particular type of loneliness – ‘loneliness anxiety’ – can be addressed and politicized in Russia’s intellectual and official political discourses, focusing on narratives of sovereigntism that are targeted towards the construction of ‘vertically’ organized models of loneliness (as opposed to ‘horizontal’ ones). These ‘vertical models’ of the organization of loneliness may vary significantly. What brings them together, however, is their connection with the discourse that Seyla Benhabib criticizes as ‘the new sovereigntism’ as based on three key predispositions: legal utopianism, democratic scepticism and statist realism⁷⁴. Speculating about the ‘slippery slope’ of ‘symbolic politics of resentment against the stranger’ that can lead from populism to authoritarianism⁷⁵, Benhabib, in my view, points to key

assumptions that can link populism and sovereigntism: 1) as democratic sovereign ‘the people’ is identified with the electoral majority of a particular electoral cycle; 2) as the embodiment of ‘the people,’ the electorate is given constituent power to change the constitution; 3) only one legitimate interpretation of the common good is said to exist, while all differences are said to be detrimental; 4) the people are viewed as a homogeneous mass.⁷⁶ Outlined by Benhabib ‘new sovereigntism,’ if applied for Russia, seems to be able to facilitate the development of different forms of statist realism and (mild or harsh) nationalism, whether this is the vertical organization of the ‘powerful state’ (*silnoie gosudarstvo*)⁷⁷ or the ‘sacral vertical’ of Russian civilization.⁷⁸

As we remember from the works of Moustakas, Riesman and Putnam, ‘loneliness anxiety’ is typical for so called ‘*other directed people*,’ who try to assuage their loneliness in the crowd. The latter suggests that we should be looking for the ideological narratives that could try to entice such people in different ways. What are these narrative *models* of attraction/seduction of the Russian electorate and what are the narratives capable of achieving the vertical outsourcing of ‘loneliness anxiety’? To answer this question, it is important to go back to our theorizing about how sovereignty and loneliness can be bridged by the notion of collective identity. And this collective identity has in recent times been symbolically represented with a political metaphor of ‘state-civilization.’ This idea was developed in 2019, pointing how Russia, from the beginning was formed as a multinational and multiconfessional country: ‘this is a country-civilization or state-civilization that organically absorbed many traditions and cultures, preserved their originality and uniqueness, and at the same time maintained unity’.⁷⁹ In 2020 similar formula of ‘Russian culture as a unique legacy of its multinational people’ was included into the new amendments to the Russian constitution (article 68), alongside with the ideas of sovereignty, historically grounded state unity, patriotism and Russia’s right to support their compatriots abroad ‘in preservation of all-Russia’s cultural identity’ (article 67 and 69).⁸⁰

To make sense of Russia’s civilizational sovereignty I will follow Cynthia Weber’s advice that political speeches can be analysed ‘as performative enactments of state sovereignty.’ Here, by way of discourse analysis, I suggest a two-step approach that would follow the structure of the theoretical part of this article. The ‘first step’ will distinguish narratives that produce strong links between Russian sovereigntism and its collective identity. A ‘second step’ will explore narratives that provide a connection between Russian collective identity and appeals to ‘loneliness anxiety.’ In order to avoid criticism, I will immediately build in the caveat that in empirical reality there are more than just three discursive models of vertically organized loneliness. However, I outline those dimensions – *historical*, *psychological* and *religious* – for the sake of illustrating the theoretical argument, not to claim that such models are either final or all-encompassing (see Figure 1).

truth' have become subjects of new 2020 amendments to Russian constitution. According the latter 'feat of the people in the defence of their Fatherland should not be depreciated'.⁸²

Let's see now how the narrative of sovereignty is linked to collective identity: 'the voice of Russia... is defined by both our tradition and internal spiritual culture, our identity and, finally, by the *history* of our country as an authentic civilization, a unique one'.⁸³ Of course, 'the voice of Russia' is a performative trope. Mother-Russia doesn't have a voice *per se*. However, this ideological metaphor is meant to construct a discourse by vocalizing Russian society, which makes it possible to publicly appeal to issues of Russia's sovereignty, to master international recognition of Russia's identity in the eyes of Russian people.

Step 2 is to explore how *model A* enacts 'loneliness anxiety.' Here key roles are played by *collective memory* and *nostalgia* for Russia's great past. This discursive model depicts Russia's sovereignty as a consequence of its *historical* 'geopolitical loneliness.' For example, according to Vladislav Surkov, a former First deputy Chief the Russian Presidential Administration, after the 'Crimean spring' and beyond 2014 there lies an indefinitely long period for Russia. Surkov calls it 'Era 14 Plus,' in which Russia is destined to a hundred (or possibly two hundred or three hundred) years of *geopolitical loneliness*: 'Russia is a Western-Eastern *half-breed nation*. With its double-headed statehood, hybrid mentality, intercontinental territory and bipolar history, it is charismatic, talented, beautiful and *lonely*. Just as a half-breed should be'.⁸⁴ Surkov repeats the slogan of Russian Tzar Alexander III: 'Russia has only two allies: its army and navy' – 'the best-worded description of the *geopolitical loneliness* which should have long been accepted as our *fate*'.⁸⁵

To the same model I would attribute the idea and narrative of Russian conservative thinker Mikhail Remizov, who suggests that Russia doesn't fit into the Western idea of a nation-state because it was not historically formed as a 'civic nation,' but rather a local civilization with its own religious identity and cultural and geographical constants. Moreover, Remizov believes that the European idea of a nation-state limits Russia's civilizational sovereignty (similar to how that happens with Iran or China). That is why he suggests that the 'state-civilization' is an organic political model for Russia.⁸⁶ Seven years later Russia's president Putin launched a similar idea: that for centuries Russia developed as a state-civilization bonded by the Russian people, the Russian language and Russian culture, which is 'native for all of us, uniting us and preventing us from dissolving in this diverse world'.⁸⁷

From contemporary research we know how social loneliness and 'virus' of collective nostalgia for past national identity can be rooted in collective memory, old myths and old political vocabulary.⁸⁸ That is because, in my view, like nostalgia, loneliness seeks to overcome itself by what Kinnvall calls 'an important route to go back to an imagined, and desired past,' as

it ‘taps into an established emotional repertoire.’⁸⁹ Yet this is not the past in a ‘real’ sense but fantasies of an imagined past which create a homogenous fantasy space in response to a situation of failed identity by invoking a desire to restore lost pride and greatness. These fantasies confer an emotional appeal on something secure and homogenous that can be performed in the present⁹⁰ very much in accordance with the above-mentioned assumptions of Benhabib. Moreover, it illustrates how sovereigntism as a political ideology becomes an ‘imaginative map’ drawing together disputable historical facts that are collectively produced and nationally consumed.⁹¹

B) The second vertical channel established by the Russian official discourse linking sovereignty, collective identity and loneliness calls upon the *psychological* sense of *national pride and honour*. Both pride and honour have close links to political identity. For example, Richard Lebow described how ‘there is considerable evidence that modern states and their leaders have been motivated as much by the quest for honour and standing as they have for security and material well-being’.⁹² In case of Russia it involves the belief that the voice of Russia should ‘resound with dignity’: ‘If in some European countries *national pride is a long-forgotten concept* and *sovereignty* is too much of a luxury, *true* sovereignty for Russia is absolutely necessary *for survival*... Either we remain a sovereign nation, or we dissolve without a trace and *lose our identity*,’ the Russian president claims.⁹³ That logic can be considered *Step 1* in establishing a connection between sovereignty and collective identity.

Again, *losing identity* is a security metaphor, but it boils the whole discourse of Russia’s sovereignty down to the grounds of ontological security and symbolically turns it into an emotional dilemma: either ‘we keep our sovereignty’ (despite of the price of being sanctioned and staying in relative isolation) or ‘we die’ (this is already a *Step 2*, connecting identity and the existential threat of loneliness). In his narrative the Russian president differentiates between *true* and *false* sovereignties, appealing to everyday collective imagination of home(land)⁹⁴ and nostalgia not only for the great Russian past, but also for ‘*a long-forgotten national pride*’ in a similar way to that which, as we saw above, was shown in the case of Sweden. Unsurprisingly, Russia’s status aspirations and status dissatisfaction have been identified by scholars as the proximate causes catalysing change in the rest of the contemporary international politics.⁹⁵

The juxtaposition between ‘true’ and (immoral and expansionist) ‘sinful’ Europe⁹⁶ also helped to ontologically securitize nostalgia for Russia’s great prowess (‘New Greatness’) – a psychological mechanism of coping with identity crisis in order to make up for Russia’s trauma.⁹⁷ In case of Russia we see that its quest for lost self-esteem started for Russia right after the traumatic dissolution of the USSR⁹⁸, when general Aleksander Lebed, then one of the leaders of The Congress of Russian Communities, began promoting the rights of ethnic Russians on post-Soviet space. Lebed turned in as third runner-up with 14,7% of the vote in the 1996

presidential elections, running on the slogan ‘Honour and Homeland! Truth and Order!’ and with a famous book *I feel a pain for my great country*.⁹⁹ Unsurprisingly, today we still hear appeals to national pride: ‘What will the *forthcoming loneliness* look like? Will it be the loneliness of a middle-aged bachelor at the edge of the dance floor? Or the happy loneliness of the *front-runner*, an *alpha nation* that has made rapid headway to leave all other peoples and states *far behind?*’.¹⁰⁰ The latter allows Russia to further *bowl alone* in its foreign policy in respect to the West (which certainly does not discourage similar mechanisms of capitalization on ‘loneliness anxiety’ from being practiced against Russia in several Western countries).

Expectedly, Russia’s status aspirations led to the new amendment to Russian constitution describing cases of priority of Russian national over international law. Old article 79 proclaimed that Russian Federation could participate in interstate associations and international treaties. This article was supplemented by a provision that decisions of interstate bodies ‘that go against the Constitution of the Russian Federation, shall not be enforced in the Russian Federation’.¹⁰¹ This amendment will again illustrate Banhabib’s above-mentioned criteria of ‘new sovereigntism’. Moreover, it will constitutionalize de facto existing practice since the Russian constitutional court ruling of July 14, 2015 stating that ‘in a situation when the very content of a ruling of the European Court of Human Rights... touches upon the principles and norms of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, by way of exception Russia may derogate from upholding the obligations imposed on it’.¹⁰²

C) Thirdly, discursive model of sovereignty *C* can appeal to Russian identity and loneliness in deeply *religious* and sacral senses. This model builds on the sacred character of sovereignty, emphasized by the Durkheimian tradition of looking at religion as ‘womb’ of the institutions and ideas of all societies. For example, according to Jeremy Larkins, sovereignty at its every historical form (whether personified by the monarch, the people, or the nation) ‘bears out Durkheim’s contention that the *representations collectives* of modern secular societies are unable to divest themselves completely of their religious origins’.¹⁰³ He considers that states are related to nations as the profane is to the sacred, and for her nation can be ‘a surrogate for the deity, with ‘in the name of the nation’ replacing ‘in the name of the God’ as a call for collective action and sacrifice’.¹⁰⁴ Larkins’s arguments go in line with conclusions of renowned American sociologist Edward Tiryakian, who reconsidered the role of ‘religious vitality’ in American national identity and USA exceptionalism.¹⁰⁵

Step 1 of our analysis of Russian case explores discourse that appeals to Russian Orthodox Christianity (ROC) as a powerful spiritual unifying force in the creation not only of a Russian nation, but also of a Russian state. This discourse leads to the conclusion that ‘Crimea, the ancient Korsun or Chersonesus, and Sevastopol have invaluable *civilizational and*

even sacral importance for Russia, like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem for the followers of Islam and Judaism'.¹⁰⁶ The idea of the importance of '*spiritual and historical ties*'¹⁰⁷ taps into the same sacral dimension. This religious dimension of Russian sovereignty develops old medieval doctrine of 'Moscow as the Third Rome'. Mikhail Suslov has shown that the most obvious connection between geopolitics and religion lies in the vision of Russia as *Katechon* (Retainer), which presupposes Russia's role as the force that protects the world from the advent of the Antichrist: 'This entrenches the idea of expansion deep into Russia's geopolitical culture, because the bigger Russia is, the more people it can save from hell'.¹⁰⁸ Suslov's ideas develop research on link between geopolitics and 'civilizational politics'.¹⁰⁹ *Katechon* is viewed by Suslov not as a universal saviour, but as a 'separate, local *civilization-state*, vested with the lofty mission of maintaining balance on the planet, and not allowing other nations to fall into the hands of the Antichrist'.¹¹⁰

Step 2 links identity and loneliness through the idea that loneliness is the price to be paid for securing Russia's role of the (militant) anti-Western vanguard. Russia's 'geopolitical loneliness' comes from the argument that many non-Western countries (including China and India) would like to see the defeat of the West. And contrary to that in the West, they would like to defeat Russia in order to stop China. 'Russia now looks — at least in the eyes of the West — as the avant-garde, the militant vanguard of anti-Westernism. And this is a heavy burden'.¹¹¹ This fits the conservative ideology of 'civilizational realism,' which holds that Russia needs to give up its efforts to become part of the Euro-Atlantic community and should start viewing itself as an '*alien*' civilizational space.¹¹² It also accords with idea that Russia is a separate civilization, because 'the constitutive sign of civilization is by no means resource power, nor is it high demographic indicators, but rather the ability to reflect in thoughts, feelings, words and deeds *the eternal truth*.'¹¹³ Here the idea of loneliness serves a function of symbolic sacrifice, a necessary price to be paid for Russia's ability to reflect 'the eternal truth.'

Such images of 'being lonely but being right' can be appealing to Russian citizens, as they are witnessing Russian elites who refuse to yield to the demands of Western powers. The role of the 'trickster' who subverts international norms to achieve its own objectives can help to bridge 'politics of loneliness', sovereigntism and scholarly literature on Russia's isolationist politics, because the loneliness of Russia that 'does not propose any sustainable alternative to the existing order'¹¹⁴ can lead to its isolationism from the Western world. At the same time, according to Elias Götz, foreign-policy crises can help Russian government to burnish its nationalist credentials, delegitimize the opposition, and create a 'rally around the flag' effect.¹¹⁵

The idea of the sacred imagination of the political community and its proximity to the nature of religion is not new. As Nira Yuval-Davis also observes, 'we can see that most

contemporary nationalist ideologies incorporate, rather than fully replace, religious belonging.¹¹⁶ Both religion and nationalism contain a lot of passion in which there is no actual rational reason or self-interest involved. Referring to Benedict Anderson, Yuval-Davis argues that the strength of contemporary nationalist ideologies comes from being *a substitute construction of 'the sacred'*.¹¹⁷ For her 'the sacred,' constituting the heart of the religious sphere, then, inspires probably the strongest notions of loyalty and sacrifice.¹¹⁸ This is also acknowledged by Adam Lerner for whom 'transcendence of the nation' requires historical representation of its origin and identity as sacred and divine: 'like the wall around the city, which constructs identity in space, the moment of origin constructs identity in time'.¹¹⁹ Predictably, God and religion entered the amendments of new Russian constitution: 'The Russian Federation, united by a thousand-years history, preserving the memory of the ancestors who transmitted to us the ideals and *faith in God*, as well as the continuity in the development of the Russian state, recognizes the historically established state unity'¹²⁰.

While many of the 2020 amendments to Russian constitution predictably follow trends of particularism, multipolarity, and sovereign equality (with all its risks earlier estimated by Andrey Makarychev and Viatcheslav Morozov)¹²¹, 'vertical politics of loneliness' also makes us remember how Jean Bethke Elshtain famously pointed to the link between sovereignty and *the will-to-sacrifice* in its/his (the sovereign's) name. Her approach also emphasizes gender and children/parents dimension because she indicates how historically ('as it shifts from personal liege loyalty to a feudal lord to an abstract, juridical, imagined tie') much of the power of the concept sovereignty 'lay precisely in its encoding of the absolute, perpetual, indivisible power of a masculinized deity'.¹²² While Sovereign may bear a masculinized face, Elshtain points to how but the nation itself is feminized: a sweetheart, a lover. The nation is imagined as home, and home is a mother. 'The child's will-to-sacrifice flows from embodied ties to both parents that project outward into a more generalized relationship to a feminized motherland, a masculinized sovereign state. No wonder most of us most of the time 'obey''.¹²³

To summarize this section, we can say that in Russian political discourse the link between collective identity and the notion of loneliness can establish itself through, for example, three discursive models of sovereignty in distinct domains: *historical* (collective memory), *psychological* (national honour and pride) and *religious* (sacral spiritual unity and spiritual ties). Each of these narratives, in my view, has a particular way it can vertically outsource 'loneliness anxiety' – towards statist institutions. The *historical* narrative of Russian identity and sovereignty is supported by the loneliness of Russia as a *half-breed nation*. The *psychological* narrative is supported by loneliness based on Russia's *revived self-esteem*; and the sacral narrative – by the *missionary zeal of Russia's state civilization as a militant vanguard of anti-*

Westernism. I suggest that the performative enactment of these discursive models helps the Russian state to mobilize, canalize, vertically organize and institutionalize people's 'loneliness anxiety' through the abovementioned narratives of sovereignty. I have illustrated this argument with examples from new 2020 amendments to Russian constitution.

6. Conclusion. The 'politics of loneliness' and the 'existential approach' to sovereignty

Historical, psychological and religious narratives, linking loneliness anxiety with collective identity and sovereignty, reflect the complex and at least three-dimensional nature of loneliness anxiety itself. Firstly, we often relate loneliness anxiety to particular *historical* experiences of *isolation*. Secondly, loneliness anxiety also requires a certain quality of *psychological alienation*. Finally, loneliness obviously has a *sacral* dimension, as long as religion is assumed to be one of the popular *escapes* from our 'loneliness anxiety.' In the article I have shown how narratives of sovereignty can use historical memories, psychological emotions and religious feelings to become *containers* (to use Michael Freeden's metaphor) for both *those* of the populace who seek to avoid their 'loneliness anxiety' through the construction of particular models of collective identity, and those of the elites who redirect 'loneliness anxiety' through the mechanism of scapegoating and sacral symbolic violence in a country's domestic and, predominantly, foreign affairs. By way of conclusion, I will discuss two issues: *who* are these agents of the 'politics of loneliness' and *what* can help to make such narratives of sovereignty so mobilizing and powerful for their recipients.

Regarding the first question, we know that states pursue social actions to serve self-identity needs, creating an anxiety that consumes *all social agents* and motivates them to secure their sense of being¹²⁴. Indirectly, Brent Steele's characterization of ontological security also answers the question about the political agency created through 'the politics of loneliness.' Who are the main actors of such politics? Do these actors determine political discourse (for example, in Russia) or do they only express collective identity? I suggest that *all social actors* – political leaders, policy-makers, political pundits and voters – may become involved in 'the politics of loneliness anxiety.' They all (consciously and unconsciously) 'use politics to secure self-identity commitments'¹²⁵. The fact that 'the politics of loneliness anxiety' covers a lot of very different actors can also be an explanation of its power. These actors search for salvation from their own personal loneliness anxiety, but end up taking very different roles in collective political performances and 'honour-driven' practices. While this is not a hypothesis-testing article, there is empirical evidence that Russia's recent elections and votes for amendments to constitution were heavily dependent on the mobilization of elderly voters (77 % of those who voted 'yes' are

above 55 years old)¹²⁶, and there is also data proving higher level of loneliness among the Russian pensioners and senior citizens¹²⁷. Unsurprisingly, the 2020 amendments to Russian constitution pay a lot of attention to state's responsibility to bring up in children 'patriotism and respect for elders' (article 67) and 'revise pension indexation obligations at least once a year' (article 75)¹²⁸.

In modern Russia the state (state-civilization) is now the main actor steering the organization of the mainstream populace's desire to overcome their loneliness. It is fair to assume that a community aimed at stimulating state-civilizational identity will practice more *vertical*, state-driven mechanisms of the 'politics of loneliness,' organizing its loneliness 'in the name of the nation'¹²⁹ or civilization. In the case of Russia, the latter includes recent national celebrations of victories in mega sport events, initiatives like reconstructions of historical victories by the Russian military-historical society, or participation in new Scout-like youth organizations of a military-patriotic nature (such as 'Yunarmiya').

As was mentioned in relevance to works of Elshtain, there is also a certain gender dimension in the construction of statist vertical politics of loneliness. In case of Russia and 2020 amendments to Russian constitution we witness how statist politics is accompanied with conservative ideological turn to 'traditional family values' with state promising to defend traditional gender roles, in particular, 'the institution of marriage as a union of man and woman'.¹³⁰ Paternalistic politics of loneliness may activate what Cynthia Weber described as a mode of constructing dichotomy of the 'order vs. anarchy' as 'normal vs. perverse'.¹³¹ For Weber the focus on the nonmonolithic genders is important. That is because the way how states answer questions about the normality or perversion of 'the homosexual' and 'the queer' and how these two figures are related to one another currently influences how some states like modern Russia make domestic and foreign policy, including relevant biopolitical practices of disciplinization, normalization, and capitalization.¹³²

Interestingly, what we can observe today is that sometimes even the 'horizontal,' bottom-up mechanisms once initiated by local communities, like the Second World War 'immortal regiment' march,¹³³ can be turned by state actors into the 'vertical' politics of loneliness. Unfortunately, the exploration of 'horizontal' forms of loneliness management goes beyond the aim of this article, but they do exist.¹³⁴ However, as explained above by appeal to Ashley's metaphors, the 'horizontal' politics of loneliness differs from the 'vertical' by being driven more by non-state actors, including transnational scholarly networks, and even separate transnational intellectuals, who often try to resist 'vertical' modes of loneliness objectivation.

The second question explores what makes narratives of sovereignty so frequently used and *so powerful*, for example within Russian official discourse. It has been said about the role of

emotions as ‘conveyers of political power’ and that analysis of political thinking and ideologies discernible through behaviour, routines and practices may often be ‘closer to the pulse of a society’.¹³⁵ Here in my view, closer look at the role that ‘loneliness anxiety’ plays in construction of group-affections can help us to penetrate beyond the ‘tip of the iceberg’, that is to deconstruct in a Foucauldian sense ideologies as blinkers that are themselves the cause of our covert injuries and emotional traumas.

In this article, I tried to show how the discursive practices of sovereigntism can appeal to the fundamental human need to avoid loneliness anxiety. ‘Talking national sovereignty’ appeals to the triple – historical, psychological and religious – nature of human ‘loneliness anxiety’ at the same time, which simultaneously multiplies its effect to the point of reaching a level of existential threat. Such a ‘politics of loneliness’ may contain public promises and performative proclamations (‘either we remain a sovereign nation, or we *dissolve*’). It can also create a dilemma that shapes further geopolitical loneliness: ‘either sovereignty at the expense of sanctions, but *life*’ or ‘concord with the West at the cost of the loss of sovereignty and self-esteem, and, consequently, *death (extinction)*.’ Such an existential dilemma doesn’t leave much choice, but, perhaps, its real social function is very different. In my view, the performative power of the rhetoric of ‘our sovereignty’ can be contained in a public promise and official proclamation of *collective immortality*, which grants the members of the community a sense of purposefulness and belonging.

This promise of immortality appeals to the core human need to have an ontological purpose, to make life meaningful. The ‘politics of loneliness’ can give a sense of such meaningfulness; however, the *existential* approach to politics will doubt its authenticity, because it is only in *solitude* (not through the ‘lonely crowd’) that we can obtain true autonomy and freedom. Symbolic appeal to the human need for conferring meaning on life and, therefore, immortality can be considered a powerful mechanism of ‘loneliness anxiety management’ that allows political actors to construct firm relationships of belonging between themselves and their fellow citizens. On the level of imagination that results in the construction of the *collective body* that unites both Russian elites and the Russian people into a single political entity, seeking ‘salvation’ and ‘purification’ (‘Russia – The Third Rome’) along the single ‘sacral vertical’ of Russian state-civilization. When that fantasized *collective body* – the ‘soft touch national body of Russia,’ to use Sarah Ahmed’s famous expression¹³⁶ – is ‘penetrated’ or ‘invaded’ by negative ‘Others,’ all the actors imagining themselves as part of that political ‘*Leviathan*’ can be easily mobilized to manage their anxiety in the name of their threatened identity and ‘making their country great again’.

In this article I tried to show that the presence of an existential threat, coupled with anxiety and uncertainty about Russia's future, declared multiple times by Russian elites within their talk about sovereigntism, can be such a *substitute construction of 'the sacred.'* Those articulations, in my view, can accumulate and redirect widely spread collective 'loneliness anxiety,' and by no means only in Russia, but also other countries where leaders are willing to 'rally 'round the flag'. Which leads us to answer our research question: 'sovereignty is a symbolic form of what?' We remember that Bartelson approached understanding sovereignty as a 'symbolic form' in terms of cultural philosophy. According to him sovereignty is related to the mode of objectivation that allows us to combine together elements of human experience, but at the same time, also a mode of management of cultural differences and successful homogenization of peoples.¹³⁷ As a result, Swedish scholar himself recognizes that responsibility for maintenance of modern sovereignty has been wrested out of the hands of domestic governments, and 'delegated to a thousand petty emperors acting on behalf of the imagined international community'.¹³⁸ However, what remains unclear is why the rhetoric of these 'petty emperors' became so ontologically convincing to their followers, political pundits and voters. In other words: why these culturally relativistic symbolic representations of 'imagined international community' gain so much domestic recognition and support among the neo-nationalistic populace. From the existential perspective, behind those 'thousand petty emperors' I see multiple experiences of their alienation, estrangement and (as a result) 'loneliness anxiety' in world politics, which are (to a different degree) shared or symbolically imposed on their supporters. That allows me to suggest that, we can add to Jens Bartelson's approach, another, existential dimension of sovereignty, where the latter may be interpreted as a symbolic form of 'vertically' (or 'horizontally') organized individual and collective human *solitude* and *loneliness*.

Finally, along the lines of this article I see theorizing 'loneliness' and 'solitude' as another step in building an existential approach to politics and IR. This is in itself part of a broader line of enquiry into the question 'why is there no existential IR and political theory?'¹³⁹ – a subject of a special research¹⁴⁰. However, by way of conclusion, we can discuss the added value of that (neo)existential method. If we develop Kevin Olson's abovementioned metaphor and envisaged interconnection between the collectivity and sovereignty as '*the chimera*' of modern politics, then who are the victims of this 'fabulous creature?' It is very likely that we all shall become victims, unless we consider discussing what the costs of such a symbolic sacrifice are. What price do we pay when obtaining a sense of transcendent purpose as a result of surrendering our solitude to the sovereign '*chimera*' of a 'vertically organized politics of loneliness,' including in terms of individual political freedom?

Do we solve a *real* problem of human self-fulfilment, or rather (re)create compensational mechanisms of ‘the sacred’ (the mechanisms of ‘state simulacra,’ as Cynthia Weber has called them)? The potential uncertainty here is because we know from Jean Baudrillard¹⁴¹ that in the world of simulacra even loneliness anxiety avoidance can become a simulacrum – a result of the politically charged ‘talks on sovereignty.’ If the latter is the case, then it can explain why articulations of popular sovereignty often merely reinforce the defensive, tabooed mechanisms of the ‘lonely crowd.’ Therefore, the added value of the existential perspective may be that it helps us to remember that what relates all of us as humans is the problem of our solitude in world politics. We can try to mask this fundamental problem under the guises of the ‘lonely crowd,’ camouflage it with nationalisms or sovereigntism, and ‘lean on the crutches’ of different enemy images for a very long time. However, if we want to solve the existential problem of human solitude in the global world, if we want to escape, ‘to seep through the fingers of *the chimera*,’ we must understand how this chimera (and this ‘reified concept’) ‘preys on humans,’ and why sometimes we get the feeling that we are placed somewhere where we are all so much together, but we are all dying of loneliness, as Albert Schweitzer once remarked.

Notes

1. See, for instance, P. Spiro, ‘The New Sovereignists: American Exceptionalism and Its False Prophets,’ *Foreign affairs*, 79(6), (2000), pp. 9-15; M. D. Sørensen, ‘Right-wing Euroscepticism and populism: investigating the concept of ‘the people,’ *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 25 (2), (2020), pp. 162-179; A. Kallis, ‘Populism, Sovereigntism, and the Unlikely Re-Emergence of the Territorial Nation-State’, *Fudan Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. 11, (2018), pp. 285–302; G. Ivaldi and O. Mazzoleni, ‘Economic populism and sovereigntism: the economic supply of European radical right-wing populist parties’, *European Politics and Society*, 21 (2), (2020). pp. 202-218; M. Freeden, ‘After the Brexit referendum: revisiting populism as an ideology’, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 22 (1), (2017), pp. 4-5.
2. W. Kenneth, *Theory of international politics*. (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 79.
3. A. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2003), p. 210.
4. S. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 44.
5. Krasner, *ibid.*, p. 58; 66.
6. S. Akopov. ‘Suverenost’ kak simvolicheskaya struktura’. *Political science (RU)*. 2020, p. 204.
7. S. Strange, ‘Looking Back - But Mostly Forward’, *Millennium* 11(1):3 (1982), p. 48.

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8. J. Edkins and V. Pin-Fat. 'Through the Wire: Relations of Power and Relations of Violence.' *Millennium* 34 (1): (2005), p. 1.
 9. R. Devetak, 'The Project of Modernity and International Relations Theory', *Millennium* 24 (1): (1995), p. 39.
 10. The emphasis in italics here is my addition. The same is true of all quotations to follow unless otherwise indicated.
 11. M. Il'in, 'Suverenitet: razvitie ponyatijnoj kategorii', in Mikhail Il'in and Irina Kudryashova (Eds.) *Suverenitet. Transformaciya ponyatij i praktik*, (Moscow: MGIMO, 2008), p. 33
 12. J. Bartelson, *Sovereignty as Symbolic Form*. (London: Routledge, 2014). p.15
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- 51 J. Olds and R. Schwartz. *The Lonely American. Drifting Apart in the Twenty-first Century*. (Boston: Beacon Press. 2009). p. 5
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