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The influence of regime type on Russian foreign policy toward “the West,” 1992–2015



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ABSTRACT

Russia's foreign policy does not follow directly from the nature of its internal political system but rather from the interaction of that political system with other political systems. Russian policy toward the Western world is best understood in terms of the capacity of Russia's post-Soviet rulers to achieve two goals that are in implicit tension with each other. They are: a) maximizing the benefit to the Russian state of the country's multifaceted relations with the Western world; and b) securing Russia's status as the undisputed hegemon throughout the country's historical borderlands. These broad policy objectives—shared by Russian liberals and nationalists alike—have been common to both the Yeltsin and Putin administrations, albeit expressed in different ways over time and with differing expectations of being able to reconcile the two. Building upon authoritarian and interventionist patterns established early in the Yeltsin years and reacting to the West's refusal to acknowledge Russian regional primacy, Putin has consolidated an arbitrary personalist regime at home and waged war along the Russian periphery, even at the cost of relations with the Western world. In this respect, Putin's regime may usefully be seen as a “state-nation” with a strong imperial imprint, building upon powerful legacies of Russian political development. The removal of Putin from power will not *in se* change that regime type or key challenges in Russian–Western relations.

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Thank God for the Russian–Georgian war! Now there won't be a Russian–Ukrainian war. (Senior Russian foreign policy advisor, in the presence of the author, December 2011).

1. Introduction

Between 1992 and 2015, both the Russian political system and foreign policy evolved from initial liberal premises to ones based on raw calculations of material interest. Both tendencies proceeded in tandem: as Russia became more authoritarian at home, it became less sensitive to arguments that its foreign relations should reflect assumptions of common values with the Western world. In the shadow of the Russian subversion of Ukraine and consequent economic sanctions levied by the United States and its liberal European allies, Vladimir Putin's government has openly embraced a “war of values” with the Western world, claiming that Putin's Russia represents a morally superior alternative to Western “post-modernity.”

Does this mean, then, that Russia's external policies flow directly from its internal political regime? It is the burden of this paper to demonstrate that Russian policy toward the Western world cannot be reduced to the simple projection of Russian

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regime type. Rather, Russian–Western relations are the byproduct of the *interaction* of different political units in the international system. Regime type matters but not in isolation from the broader global system of which it is a part. Specifically, while Russian–Western relations had nearly collapsed by summer 2014, Putin's Russia had been pursuing a foreign policy whose general objectives were shared by his initially liberal predecessor Boris Yeltsin: that is, to maximize the benefits of Russia's relations with the Western world while also cementing Russia's primacy along its historical borderlands. The challenge to Russian diplomacy has been to avoid having to choose between these two goals. When forced to choose, as Putin's government arguably had to beginning with the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in fall 2004, it has consistently chosen in favor of regional primacy over relations with the West. The general goal, however, has been shared by Russian national security elites and even many liberals throughout the post-Soviet period. In this respect, it may be useful to think about the regime type of post-Soviet Russia as that of state-nation with an imperial imprint. This is not meant to be an exclusive categorization. Putin's regime is highly personalistic, for instance. But choices that Russian foreign policy elites make, and this means most of all Putin and those whom he admits into his inner circle, will tend to reflect their assessment of how Russia's relations with the West affect the prospects for Russian dominance in the “near abroad.”

In the discussion that follows, we shall analyze (a) general relationships between regime type and foreign policy; (b) specific relationships between Russian regime type and foreign policy in the Imperial, Soviet and post-Soviet periods; (c) the relationship between Yeltsin's evolving political regime in the 1990's and that of his successor Putin; and (d) the extent to which key assumptions undergirding contemporary Russian foreign policy are independent of Putin and his regime. We conclude that the consensus within Russia on the country's right to primacy throughout the post-Soviet space—shared by liberals, statist and nationalists of all stripes—is broad enough to survive Putin's tenure in office. Choices about Russia's relations with the West will continue to be filtered through that prism.

2. Regime type and foreign policy: general considerations

The question of political regime type and foreign policy behavior is one of the central issues in academic theories of international relations and is of major interest to policymakers, as well as to those who seek to influence them. As a major instance, the literature on the “democratic peace” rests on an empirical observation that the absence of war among mature liberal democracies reflects the effects that democratic values *cum* democratic institutions have on bounding conflicts of interest among democracies. Curiously, Lenin himself embraced a comparably unit-based explanation of world politics but instead located the causes of modern world war in the inherent logic of capitalism: once capitalism was abolished and replaced by socialism, a Soviet socialist peace would prevail. Soviet foreign policy should thus be harnessed to bring about the transition from capitalism to socialism. Likewise, American liberals and neoconservative alike, from Woodrow Wilson to Paul Wolfowitz and Robert Kagan, have sought to use American power to encourage liberal regime change in the expectation that a more liberal world order would be a more pacific one, as well as one that would be maximally favorable to American interests and values. The invasion of Iraq in 2003, by overthrowing the brutal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, was intended by its neo-conservative architects to be a major step in this direction (Owen, 1994; Western, 2005, pp. 175–219; Mann, 2004, pp. 332–358; Lenin, 1940 [1916]).

All theories, of course, operate within a range of bounded conditions and potential ambiguity about confirming and disconfirming evidence; this is no less true of the liberal-democratic peace theory or unit-based explanations for foreign policy behavior in general. To take an obvious instance: The liberal peace that has prevailed throughout the Western world since 1945 can hardly be separated from the overwhelming superiority of power of the most important liberal democracy, that is, the United States. Certainly, over time, the absence of war can generate broad societal expectations of continued peace, to the point where they become so deeply rooted in key countries' political cultures that war literally becomes unthinkable, as between France and Germany in recent generations (Duffield, 1999). Yet culture and environment exist in a symbiotic relationship with each other; a crucial change in the latter can affect the former. This is implicitly illustrated by one of the main justifications for the continued existence of NATO: America's overwhelming advantage in power relieves European states from worrying too much about the significant increase in Germany's relative power within Europe since 1989. The postwar liberal peace that has prevailed in Europe thus rests in substantial part on the ways in which the *power* of the leading democracy relieves Europeans, including Germans, from reacting to shifts in relative power that under other conditions could generate real security dilemmas. Relatedly, the more benign the international security environment, the more likely it is—*ceteris paribus*—that liberal democratic institutions and values will take root: lower defense requirements reduce the case for the Leviathan state that, *in extremis*, dominates society in ways incompatible with liberal premises (Lynch, 2005, pp. 18–46).

A second qualification to the premise of the liberal peace has to do with classification. The distinction between a mature liberal democracy and a fledgling democratizing country is as important as that between a mature market capitalist system and a “marketizing” one: the dynamics of long-established systems may be quite different from those of incipient ones (Motyl, 1993, pp. 51–75). The failure of Western efforts to help liberalize Russia in the 1990's is due in part to a failure to recognize this difference. Likewise, as Jack Snyder and Edward Mansfield have argued, the political incentives of a newly democratizing state may well work in the direction of exacerbating conflict with its neighbors, including those that are themselves in early or halting stages of democratization (Mansfield and Snyder, 1995). Moreover, even the most ardent defenders of the thesis of the liberal peace concede that liberal democracies can be quite belligerent toward non-liberal polities. Other complications to the theory include the phenomenon of the “capitalist peace,” based on the distinct

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