



## Introduction



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 16 October 2014

#### Keywords:

Russia  
West  
Status  
Emotions  
Identity  
Foreign policy

### ABSTRACT

The importance of status concerns on Russia's foreign policy agenda has been increasingly observed. This preoccupation with status is particularly visible in Russia's relations with the West. Although strong claims about status in Russian foreign policy are frequently made in public and private by researchers, journalists, politicians, diplomats and other commentators, such claims often lack any closer theoretical or empirical justification. The aim of this introductory article is, therefore, to outline the basic components that form the research agenda on status. Status, if properly examined, helps us understand not only Russian foreign policy, but also present-day international politics and its transformation in a broader sense.

In a first part, we identify the theoretical voids concerning the study of international status. In a second part we outline the drivers and logic of status concerns, considering in particular identity theories, psychological approaches and existing research regarding emotions. The presented research agenda on status, derived from International Relations and related theories, provides a well-structured tool-box for investigating the link between status, identity and emotions in Russian foreign policy vis-à-vis the West. In a third part we present the key questions raised by the contributors to this Special Issue and summarize their main findings.

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## 1. Introduction: Russia and the quest for status

Perhaps no other perspective has dominated current approaches to post-Cold War Russian foreign policy more than the understanding that Russia's primary goal has been to restore and strengthen its position as a great power in world politics (Kanet, 2007; Neumann, 1815–2007; Trenin, 2011; Tsygankov, 2005). During the Putin presidency Russian foreign policy has turned particularly assertive with Moscow becoming even more sensitive to defend its interests, as well as its status in the international arena. Russia's tough position in the current conflict in and over Ukraine, its determinedness to display political and military power, while risking Ukraine's further destabilization, is a case in point. For some this is simply a sign of the recurring struggle for power and security in the international anarchy, but for others the assertive turn in Russia's foreign policy has more to do with identity and domestic politics. According to this view, Russia's behavior in the crisis is essentially driven by its fear of loss of great power status. Indeed, many scholars have suggested that status concerns have become more important than pure security and economic questions on Russia's foreign policy agenda (Heller, 2013). Others remind us that

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this has been the case for centuries. In view of Richard Sakwa (2008), the historical “Russia Problem” is not about the security dilemma but about how Russia is able to receive the status and respect from the West that it expects. Similarly, Iver Neumann (2005) argues that Russia's main current problem in the European theatre may not be a question of security as such but Russia's status in relation to other European powers.

Status questions have become particularly visible in Russia's relations with the West. The lack of genuine recognition of Russia's great power status and equality with other Western great powers is often seen as a primary reason why Russia has turned away from cooperating with the West on a number of issues (Tsygankov, 2012; Stent, 2014). Typically, status concerns are seen as leading to suboptimal decision-making, because foreign policy becomes driven by emotions rather than rational interests. For some, Russia's capricious and confrontational behavior is based on a psychological complex defined by its obsession to being a great power. For others, Russia's emphasis on status is a rather natural reaction to Western disregard for it after the end of the Cold War.

All this suggests that whether we believe or not that for Russia status has become more important than the alternative foreign policy goals or that status concerns lead to irrational impulses, questions concerning status policies have to be taken seriously both by academics as well as by politicians and diplomats. On the one hand, we need to study what Russia's concern for status means for theories of international relations, while on the other hand, we should examine what kinds of new insights the existing theoretical approaches on status and international relations can bring to the analysis of Russia's foreign policy.

Scholars who want to apply theories, in particular Western theories, to Russian politics and Russian foreign policy, often have to justify this against claims that Russia is *sui generis* and that knowledge of the historical and cultural background as well as the current practical context are far more important to understand Russia than any theoretical sophistication. Yet, the juxtaposition between theories and practical or empirical knowledge is futile. Theoretical and empirical approaches should go hand in hand, and support each other. In fact, historically, many famous theoretical approaches to foreign policy analysis, from operational code to strategic culture, have been developed in the context of Russian or Soviet studies, while empirical analyses of Russian foreign policy have sought inspiration and conceptual tools from a variety of theories (Pursiainen, 2000). Without theoretical reflection research on Russian foreign policy risks to remain a branch of area studies that relies on descriptive approaches but at the same time is full of hidden commitments to dubious theoretical assumptions. Without theoretical foundations, research often lacks either the critical edge or credibility. Strong claims about status and honor and their role in Russian foreign policy are made in public and private by researchers, journalists, politicians, diplomats and other commentators, but such claims often lack any closer theoretical or empirical justification, and they can be inconsistent with each other.

Today, being a great power – and being recognized as one – is a foreign policy goal that appears more attractive than ever to the Russian foreign policy elites. But status is also a dimension that, if properly examined, helps us understand present-day international politics and its transformation in a broader sense. Status is not something that belongs to an archaic social system and would lose its importance with time; it is not an item that applies only to a great power struggling with modernization like contemporary Russia. In fact it is a concern for all states and actors in one way or another (Carvalho and Neumann, 2014). Thus, focusing on status opens up a new research agenda not only in Russian foreign policy but also in the study of International Relations more broadly. In order to be able to assess the role and relevance of status in Russia's – and other states' – foreign policy, we first need to spell out the components that form such a research agenda.

## 2. Theoretical voids in the study of international status

The quest for status has always been seen as being an integral part of states' conduct in world politics, “the everyday currency in international relations” (Gilpin, 1981, p. 31). Yet theoretical insights and implications of this old wisdom have not been articulated with full clarity in International Relations (IR) Theory or Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). A cumulative research agenda has been lacking. Indeed, for classical realists, status questions were key issues in international politics, but they did not present a theory of prestige or status. Often the message about the importance of status was unclear or contradictory. Despite highlighting the importance of prestige, Hans Morgenthau (1978 [1948]) for example, thought that prestige seldom is, and should not be, a primary foreign policy goal.

For decades, status was not a salient research topic in the study of international relations. While structural realist and liberal theoretical approaches focused on material interests of survival and economic gain (seeing status primarily as a function of military and economic capabilities) constructivists emphasized the importance of identity and norms for state behavior. Yet, status did not become one of the key concepts for the constructivist research agenda. Instead, identity was primarily understood as a category defining appropriate roles and norms or as a self-concept which determines whether others are seen as enemies or friends. Thus, constructivists had little to say about the way states would react to either affirmations of or challenges to their social rank.

The focus of constructivists on identity and norms provides, however, a general background for theorizing status in international relations and foreign policy in a more sophisticated way. In so far as status is based on intersubjective understandings and not on objective attributes, it is a perfect example of social constructions in international relations (Onuf, 2013, p. 211). Constructivism today has many brands, but the focus on psychology in constructivist research is particularly apt for capturing status (Shannon and Kowert, 2012). Moreover, many approaches associated with foreign policy analysis, such as

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