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Historical aspirations and the domestic politics of Russia's pursuit of international status

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ABSTRACT

What determined Russia's national interests and grand strategy in the first decade after the Cold War? This article uses aspirational constructivism, which combines social psychology with constructivism, to answer this question. Central to aspirational constructivism are the roles that the past self and in-groups, and their perceived effectiveness play in the selection of a national identity and the definition of national interests. This article explains why Russian political elites settled on a statist national identity that focused on retaining Russia's historical status as a Western great power and hegemon in the former Soviet Union and in engaging the country in bounded status competition with the United States.

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As the Cold War ended and Russia transitioned to post-communist rule, practitioners and scholars feared that this process would not occur peacefully. As early as 1992 and as late as 2005, Russians and Americans feared a “Weimar Russia” scenario, where, similar to the fifteen years of the German Weimar Republic, the weakness of democratic institutions would pave the way for *revanchist* nationalist control of Russia and a descent into war (Cheney, 1992; Kreisler, 1996; Radzikhovskiy, 2005; Yanov, 1995). Concerns over the internal consequences of Russia's “humiliation” and “defeat” in the Cold War led to calls to sustain Russian democracy at all costs, and domestic and international concern over Russia's post-Soviet identity (Perry, 1998). At issue was whether Russia would accept its new, lesser position in the Western international order, a core concern given the centrality of status and satisfaction to theories of great power war, power transition, and the possibility of peaceful transformation of the international system (Wohlforth, 2009). The issue of state status and satisfaction is of ongoing importance today, given concerns about U.S. decline, the rise of China and India, and not least, Russia's revision of its border with Ukraine and support for rebels there.

Status and satisfaction, however, speak to a much broader debate in international relations theory about what states want. Over the course of Russia's long “revolutionary decade”—1991–2004—Russia remained unsatisfied with its new status, but its grand strategy took neither a revanchist nor an accommodating turn. Rather than accept its less powerful position, Russia became more aggressive and assertive as it weakened in the 1990s, even while it kept seeking partnership with the West. Russia swung from competition to cooperation, yielding constant concerns about a new Cold War with the West. So, what determines Russia's national interests and grand strategy during and after shifts in the distribution of material power? Answers to this question have immediate implications in other parts of the world, given power transitions underway in Asia and elsewhere.

¹ The views expressed here are those of the author, and do not reflect the views of the United States Government, the Department of Defense, or the United States Navy.

Rationalist approaches to international politics generally assume Russian interests are pre-determined, not amenable to change via social interaction, and will be pursued in a strategic manner; they are silent on the substance of those interests. Within realism, predictions differ, though there is a general assumption that status is a national interest. Defensive realists argue that Russia's decision to cooperate or compete would depend on whichever strategy maximized its security. Some expect that Russia would be rapidly socialized into the new distribution of power, and accept its second tier status (Waltz, 1979). Offensive realists expect Russia to maximize its power, which usually begets hostile competition (Mearsheimer, 2001). Other realists argue that great power wars are most likely when one side is unsatisfied with its status (Gilpin, 1981; Wohlforth, 2009). Other scholars and policymakers focus on domestic politics and a nationalist backlash as the primary cause for concern in times of power transition (Cheney, 1992). In line with realist predictions about shifting material capabilities, scholars and pundits in the early 1990s suggested that Russia would fight rather than cede its position in Europe and Eurasia (Mearsheimer, 1990).

Much constructivist international relations scholarship suggests that Russia's post-Soviet interests and its status hinge on its identity (Hopf, 2002; Larson and Shevchenko, 2003, 2010; Morozov, 2009; Neumann, 1996, 1999; Tsygankov, 2012). This article uses an approach — aspirational constructivism (Clunan, 2009) — that combines social psychology with constructivism to explain how Russia came to have these interests in bounded status competition. Aspirational constructivism uses social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1979) to argue that political elites are psychologically motivated to create national identities that promote collective self-esteem. These national self-images are psychologically based on political elites' collective historical aspirations and value rationality regarding their country's international status and domestic political purpose. Proponents promote national self-images through identity management strategies. These strategies range from assimilation into a desired ingroup, competition for social recognition from that ingroup, creatively inventing a new dimension on which one's status is superior to that of the desired ingroup (van Knippenberg, 1989). A national identity only becomes dominant if it passes tests of its "fitness": Other political elites evaluate whether competing self-images and the identity management strategies used to fulfill them possess historical validity and can be effectively enacted under current conditions. If a candidate identity passes these elite fitness tests, it will define the country's national interest and shape its behavior with respect to international status.

Central to aspirational constructivism are the roles that the past self and in-groups play in the selection of a national identity and the definition of national interests. At the core of the argument is that the past national "self" forms a historical reference point in elite evaluations of current competing national self-images. Elite collective memories of the high and low points of the country's past create aspirations to replicate the best and avoid the worst in that history. These historical aspirations provide a benchmark of historical validity against which current national self-images are evaluated. Elites also establish certain countries as desired in-groups or as out-groups. These in-group and out-group identifications also serve to winnow the field of contending national self-images. A final test of fitness of a particular national self-image is whether it can be enacted in current conditions. This evaluation is based on the psychological need to verify one's identity in the circumstances one faces, what psychologists refer to as verification of the self in context. As such, elites rely not only on historical memory, but also on the perceived successes and failures of proponents of various national self-images in attempting to carry them out (Clunan, 2009, pp. 36–46).

This article explains why Russian political elites settled on a statist national identity that focused on retaining Russia's historical status as a Western great power and hegemon in the former Soviet Union in the turbulent decade after the Cold War's end. It complements the contribution of Larson and Shevchenko in this issue, as it explains the domestic origins and dominance of Vladimir Putin's status-driven national self-image that they detail. Elite aspirations to retain Russia's historical status led Russian political elites quickly to reject the initially dominant liberal internationalist national self-image and elevate to power a statist self-image advocated by the likes of Yevgenii Primakov and Putin. The majority of Russian elites, including statist, generally identified Russia as being part of the West. Russian foreign policy as a result shifted rapidly from following the West to competing for status with the United States within an overarching cooperative orientation towards the West. This article explains why the radical Westernizer self-image failed, and the statist self-image succeeded in passing elite fitness tests and the impact this had on Russia's post-Soviet foreign policy over the course of Russia's long revolutionary decade, 1991–2004.

The domestic politics of Russia's international status during the critically important period of 1991–1993 is the subject of the first section. The next two sections highlight how these early political struggles yielded a domestic political consensus on Russia's status aspirations. This consensus centered on the domestic legitimacy of Russia's hegemonic position and behavior in the former Soviet republics, and the illegitimacy of a status and of behavior that was subordinate to the West, particularly the United States. The next section turns to how this domestic aspirations regarding Russia's status shaped official definitions of the national interests over 1994–2004, while the penultimate section focuses on how the domestic consensus on Russia's status helped elevate and consolidate the statist national self-images of Yevgeny Primakov and later Vladimir Putin.

1. International status in Russia's domestic identity politics

The 1991–1993 period was a critical one in the domestic battle over of Russian national identity. Post-Soviet Russia began its existence with liberal internationalists dominating the new government. Many of the key politicians who

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