



Obsession with status and *ressentiment*: Historical backgrounds of the Russian discursive identity construction



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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the role of *ressentiment* in the long-term historical process of Russia's collective self-identification vis-à-vis "the West". It argues that *ressentiment* was persistently generated by the structure of this relationship as long as Russia's aspiration for an equal status continually proved to be unrealistic. This induced different discursive strategies that are described by social identity theory (SIT) as social mobility, social creativity and social competition. As a motivating factor for the development of these strategies, on the one hand, and a recurrent consequence of their invalidity on the other, *ressentiment* became a considerable driving force of discourse about Russian identity.

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Since the 1990s there is an ever growing number of publications considering national identity to be a significant factor in international relations, with the case of post-Soviet Russia taking a prominent place (Clunan, 2009; English, 2000; Godzimerski, 2008; Herman, 1996; Hopf, 2002; Larson and Shevchenko, 2003, 2010; Morozov, 2009; Neumann, 1999; Casula, 2010, and others). This is hardly surprising: the case of the country (re)defining its national identity in the context of large-scale political and social transformation is, as Anne Clunan has it, "as close to a natural experiment" for the study of identity formation and national interests "as history ever offers" (Clunan, 2009, p. 1).

Most of the above mentioned authors focus on the relationship between the changes of Russian identity and the definition of national interests and/or foreign policy after the collapse of the USSR.¹ Russian identity is portrayed in the process of transformation, so the emphasis is on the construction of its new versions that are often considered a result of a rational choice of elites. Some authors also point out to traits of continuity that derive from more or less remote times, most often to the widely shared notion that Russia is "naturally" destined for the role of a great power and its obsession with status in the international arena (Larson and Shevchenko, 2003; Smith, 2012b; Tsygankov, 2012). Identity is predominantly considered a matter of the rational choice of elites (political leaders and parties, foreign policy experts, "agents of intellectual change" and others), though some authors confirm that "offered identity ... must address popular concerns" (Godzimerski, 2008, p. 19).

But the question about mechanisms producing these new identities, rationally chosen by elites and acceptable for the majority, is rarely discussed in this literature.² The authors of recent works about Russian identity understand it as a socially

¹ The most interesting case here is Gorbachev's "the new thinking" – the concept that had dramatically changed the official representations of collective identity and caused decisive shifts of the foreign policy of the USSR (English, 2000; Herman, 1996; Larson and Shevchenko, 2003).

² Anne Clunan tries to solve this problem by arguing that competing national self-images proposed by elites are assessed "in light of historical aspirations – dominant memories of the high and low points in their country's past" as well as in terms of their effectiveness as "practical guides for the state, given the prevailing international and domestic conditions" (Clunan, 2009, pp. 10–11). So, elites justify their ideas by appealing to "dominant memories" and the common sense of their fellow citizens, which seems rather plausible.

constructed cognitive phenomenon that has developed under the impact of material/structural factors (Clunan, 2009; Larson and Shevchenko, 2003, 2010) as well as changing norms (Herman, 1996); some authors also take into consideration the available semantic repertoire/discourses that provide meanings for interpretation (Morozov, 2009; Neumann, 1999; Casula, 2010). Emotions are usually not considered a distinctive part of this picture, though when describing the change of identities scholars often talk about “(un)satisfaction”, “self-esteem”, “aspiration”, “frustration” and other psychological states that include emotional components.

Meanwhile, the emotional aspects could be actually indispensable for understanding how identities are constructed or how they work in different political contexts. Socially shared notions about “us” and the “others” obviously include an emotional dimension. And as soon as political scientists are more and more inclined to acknowledge that “emotion is important to what and how people think” (Mercer, 2010, p. 6; cf. Sasley, 2011, p. 453), the task of integrating the emotional dimension into existing theories of identity becomes urgent. Unfortunately, it hinges on the problem of firm record: the effects of emotions on political behaviour are not easily observable. However, the analysis of discourses could be one possible option for the integration of emotions into studies of identity in political science and international relations. It seems plausible that long-term emotional attitudes are “condensed” in identity-related public discourses, in particular in discursive practices of collective self-identification towards significant “others”, and could be detected in the texts. If so, discourse analysis can reveal not only purposeful strategies rationally pursued by various actors but also emotional beliefs that imbue and inform one’s relationship with “others”.

This assumption is supported by the work of Donileen R. Loseke who studied an *emotion discourse* which is considered a talk that seems to have “some affective content or effect” (Loseke, 2009, p. 497). Analyzing the “Story of September 11”, crafted by President George W. Bush in his nationally televised speeches, she tried to reveal the emotional codes – that is, cultural ways of feeling, correlating them to symbolic codes – that is, cultural ways of thinking, that could be associated with the key elements of the rising narrative of the “war on terror” – victim, villain and hero. Loseke demonstrates how the skilful manipulation of symbolic codes calls for emotions that correspond to particular *emotional codes*, that is, “cognitive models about what emotions are expected when, where, and towards whom or what, as well as about how emotion should be inwardly experienced, outwardly expressed, and morally evaluated” (Loseke, 2009, p. 500). Also there is a paper by Reinhard Wolf providing a useful conceptualization of resentment in international relations that ends with an explication of indicators of this emotional state that could be revealed in the discourse (Wolf, 2012). Thus there are solid reasons to look in this direction, even if there are no readymade theories about “emotion discourse” yet.

The Russian case provides a good opportunity to explore the role of emotions in identity construction in a long-term perspective as far as there is a well-documented intellectual tradition of co(re)lation with the “other”, commonly described as “the West”,³ which was constitutive for national identity. Proceeding from the conception of the historian of nationalism Liah Greenfeld, who has demonstrated the role of psychological state called *ressentiment* in the development of Russian national identity in the eighteenth – mid-nineteenth centuries (Greenfeld, 1993), I seek to reveal how this emotion contributed to subsequent transformations of the discourse about Russian identity in a changing context. Doing so, I consider the relationships between Russia and the West in broader terms, without reducing them to foreign policy issues, and try to demonstrate how an interplay of political, cultural and social aspects of international status contributed to the construction of the Russian identity.

According to Greenfeld’s conception, the import of “the foreign idea of nation” to Russia in the eighteenth–nineteenth centuries was accompanied by “a certain psychological factor which both necessitated a reinterpretation of the imported ideas and determined the direction of such reinterpretation” (Greenfeld, 1993, p. 15). She called this factor “*ressentiment*”, bearing on the conception elaborated by Max Scheler (who in his turn had adopted the term coined by Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche).⁴ *Ressentiment* refers to a psychological state resulting from suppressed feelings of envy and hatred (existential envy) and the impossibility of satisfying these feelings. In our context, *ressentiment* could be considered a reaction to the object of imitation that is perceived as being superior. This reaction is determined by the structure of relationship that implies both comparability between the subject and object of envy (feeling that “they” are not fundamentally different from “us”) and actual inequality that permanently emphasizes an “our” inferiority. Greenfeld argues, that “the presence of these conditions renders a situation *ressentiment*-prone irrespective of the temperaments and psychological makeup of the individuals who compose the relevant population” (Greenfeld, 1993, p. 16). According to her conception, *ressentiment* was “the most important factor” of the crystallization of the matrix of Russian nationalism, and “the values which were to constitute the Russian national consciousness and later be embodied in the Russian national character were a result of the transvaluation born out of this *ressentiment*” (Greenfeld, 1993, p. 250).

Later the idea of *ressentiment* (or resentment) as a factor of national identity was applied to some other cases (Munson, 2003; Weber, 1994); it was also used as a tool of analysis of Russia’s foreign policy, though in a less sophisticated way (Smith, 2012a,b).

Some authors use “*ressentiment*” as a synonym to the English word “resentment”. The others, however, insist on their distinction. According to Meltzer and Musolf, “resentment” should be used for a short-term form of emotion that arises in

³ The term might have different meanings being used along with another cultural and geopolitical concept – “Europe”. The content of both terms depended on particular context and evolved over time. But there is one important distinction: Russia is usually seen as a part of Europe (though in varying senses), but it hardly could be considered an actual part of “the West”.

⁴ As a widely recognized convention, the French spelling of this term retained, pointing to its broad philosophical sense.

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