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Status conflicts between Russia and the West: Perceptions and emotional biases

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the status conflicts between Russia and the West and asks: why do these conflicts exist despite attempts to avoid them? If status conflicts refer to merely a symbolic recognition, then they should arguably be easier to solve than conflicts stemming from competition for power and resources. Yet, status conflicts can be difficult to solve even when they were not conceived as zero-sum games. The article argues that status conflicts cannot be understood without the interplay of perceptions and emotions. First, what really matters is not objective status but perceptions thereof and there seems to be a gap how Russia and the West perceive status in general. Secondly, the perceptions of when status is gained or lost seem to be emotionally loaded. Russia is more willing to understand its relative status when military or economic issues are at stake, but if the dispute deals with international norms and questions of justice Russia is more likely to interpret Western action as violating its status and conversely, it is more likely to interpret its own action as enhancing its status when it is defending such values differently from the West.

1. Introduction

When, for example, looking at Russia's behavior in the ongoing Ukrainian crisis, it is easy to claim that status concerns are extremely important for the Russian leaders in the Kremlin. Other examples of the Kremlin's recent actions that seem to make sense, in terms of status, range from significant issues of international diplomacy to smaller events of celebrity politics. Indeed, the quest for status can be seen as being typical for Russia and its foreign policy for a much longer time. The idea of greatpowerness is understood as forming the core of Russia's state identity throughout centuries, including what we can observe today (Clunan, 2009; Hopf, 2002; Oldberg, 2007; Omelicheva, 2013; Smith, 2012; Trenin, 2011). As it was famously proclaimed by the Russian foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov (1996): "Russia always was, is and will be a great power; " or as more recently was stated by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (2012): "I am convinced that Russia simply cannot exist as a subordinate country". In particular, status concerns play a key role in Russia's relations with the West that is considered historically as the primary "other" to Russia (Neumann, 1996). Status and honor have often been regarded as motivations for Russia either to go to war, or to cooperate with the Western partners and also explain why their relationships were difficult (Tsygankov, 2012; Wohlforth, 1998). Prominent scholars claim that the key problem in the mutual relationships is not about security, but rather about how Russia receives the status and respect from the West that she expects (Monaghan, 2008; Neumann, 2008; Sakwa, 2008; Stent, 2014; Tsygankov, 2012).

Status can be seen as a factor that sometimes helps avoid conflict because it tells who should have priority. More often though it is seen as causing conflicts and impeding cooperation, especially when material interests are at stake, in this case it adds an intangible, emotionally loaded dimension. In relations between Russia and the key Western states and their political institutions, "the West" (Bavaj, 2011), a status conflict emerges when Russia perceives that she deserves a status recognition

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from the West and the West fails to deliver it. This propels Russia to take angry action that forces the West to take Russia into account but this situation, again, does not increase the level of trust in the relationships.

Many researchers have argued that if the importance of recognizing status and showing respect to Russia were correctly understood by the West, such conflicts, or overreactions at the minimum, would be avoided. Deborah Welch Larson and Andrei Shevchenko (2010, p. 93) have contended that Russia and China 'have been more likely to contribute to global governance when they believed that doing so would enhance their prestige'. Vincent Pouliot (2010, p. 239) suggests that 'if NATO wants Russia to play by the rules of the security-from-the-inside-out game, it should provide with enough cultural-symbolic resources to have a minimally successful hand in the game'. In view of Jeffrey Mankoff (2007, p. 133), 'Russia that is sure of itself and its standing in the world is likely to make a more stable, predictable partner for the West'. Stephen Cohen (2012) argues that 'the guiding diplomatic tenet must be recognition of Russia's parity with the United States as a sovereign nation and legitimate great power'. In most cases, these authors at least implicitly suggest, recognizing Russia's status as a great power would not be too demanding since showing respect is symbolic politics and does not require giving up any essential material interests.

There is, of course, another group of scholars who also see that many problems in Russia's relations with the West stem from status concerns, but they believe that the policy of the West, in so far as it would acknowledge Russia's status concerns, would not satisfy Russia's identity needs. Instead, such status moves would lead to endless clashes, because no reasonable balance could be found. It is Russia's responsibility to accommodate its status aspirations to the new circumstances. For example, Hannes Adomeit (1995, p. 65) contended that self-assured and self-confident states would behave rationally, whereas Russia that is obsessed with its lost great power identity possesses many irrational, unpredictable, contradictory traits in its foreign policy. For Donald Jensen (2014), the United States' approach to Russia in 2013 'was too Russia-centered, thereby encouraging the Kremlin's delusion that Moscow is a global power with comparable status to Washington'. The key solution to the status conflict in the view of this more hard-liner group of scholars is that Russia should give up its futile aspiration to be a great power. In fact, status politics may lead to a self-reinforcing cycle. When the West tries to compensate policies that Russia claims have undermined its status by showing Russia more respect and awarding higher status, it sends mixed signals. When Russia believes that the West really thinks that it deserves a higher status, behavior that violates Russia's status appears even more intentional and directed against Russia.

This article argues that status politics is more complicated than about withholding or granting status according to some real or imagined criteria. Moreover, neither granting nor withholding status automatically resolves status conflicts. This is because status conflicts do not emerge merely from a gap between perception and objective reality but between two perceptions. Russia perceives that it has not received the status recognition it deserves and the West believes it has already respected Russia. The basic problem is not that the West purposefully ignores Russia or undermine her status when it is able to do so, in other words, that it shows disrespect independently of material or other interest at stake. Rather, Russia and the West have diverging conceptions and perceptions of status.

How these mechanisms function depends on many cognitive and emotional elements that will be explored in this article. I will look first at the role the perception of status play from theoretical standpoint; and then examine the role the status perception play in Russia's relations with the West in reality. I will make two broad points in support of my analysis. First, the key Western leaders have most of the time, at least from their own perspective, wanted to pay attention to Russia in order to minimize problems related to status. Yet, from the perspective of the Russian leaders, their experience has been opposite. Second, there are divergent perceptions between Russian and Western leaders and political commentators of whether Russia in key international contexts has gained or lost her status. Both of these gaps in perception contribute to the 'status dilemma' between Russia and the West.

I will base my analysis on statements and comments that can be found in memoirs, research literature and newspaper sources. Such an analysis can be objected on the ground that it is not clear when the perceptions stated are the real perceptions or they are just politically motivated statements of the situation. Yet, memoirs and official statements are directly indicative of status granting. Although such a gap between private and public thinking may exist, it should not be exaggerated a priori: on the contrary, in practice public statements often seem to reflect genuine perceptions (Mastny, 1996, p. 9). A number of anonymous background conversations with policy-makers and analysts both in Russia and in the West support this view. Moreover, the cases discussed here will not constitute any systematic final test of the claims above, but they serve as an illustrative or tentative plausibility probe of the existence of the psychological mechanisms in perceiving status in the relations between Russia and the West.

2. Status, perceptions and foreign policy

The representatives of the realist theory in IR have an ambivalent view of the role of status in international politics. On the one hand, it is seen as important and often driving politics more than mere material concerns. But on the other hand, many realists seem to think that status just reflects more fundamental material concerns of national interests. Classical realists said many things about status – or related concepts such as prestige, respect, honor, standing, or reputation – but did not have any proper theory of it. Hans Morgenthau (1978, p. 85) talked a lot of the importance of prestige, but then concluded that it is rarely the primary objective of foreign policy and it should not be. From Raymond Aron (1962, pp. 76–77) we can learn that 'glory' leads to extremes but a man full of glory should be unaware of his fortune or indifferent to it in order to be entirely worthy of it.