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The frustrating partnership: Honor, status, and emotions in Russia's discourses of the West

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Russia's presidential discourses and emotions of the West from March 2008 to December 2012. By studying the languages of inclusiveness and exclusiveness in annual addresses to the Federation Council and public statements, I have identified several distinct stages in the Kremlin's emotional evolution from fear to hope to frustration: the initial fear (March 2008–June 2009), hope (September 2009–the late 2010), and frustration (since the early 2011). The Russia's emotional shifts are shaped by the country's historically established social relations with the West and are not to be reduced to the dynamics of power and prestige/status. Russia's deep emotional connection to the West as well as Russia's own concept of national honor are the two factors that drive the nation's leaders' complex actions, feelings, and rhetoric. Russia displays emotions of hope each time it feels that its honor is being respected and those of frustration, fear and anger when in the eyes of Kremlin its identity/honor as not recognized.

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1. Introduction

Russia and the Western nations continue to feel uneasy about each other's intentions. From the issues of stabilizing Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe to those of strategic stability and human rights, Russian and Western leaders frequently disagree on the main essence of the issues and that disagreement is partly shaped by different beliefs and emotions regarding what they view as a “good” and “virtuous” course of action vis-à-vis each other.¹ What further complicates the picture is that Russia's actions and emotions fluctuate – and not necessarily in response to changes in Russia's material capabilities or structure of the international system, as some scholars would expect. Understanding the formation of Russia's actions and emotions behind them therefore remains an important challenge to scholars and policy-makers.

This paper selects for an investigation discourses and emotions of the West as displayed by Russia's presidents from March 2008 to December 2012. This period is important for both methodological and political reasons. Methodologically, selecting it for a closer investigation assists us in establishing a broader pattern of Russia's emotional shifts as reflected in the country's

¹ For a short sample of scholarship on identity, beliefs and emotions in international politics, see Clunan (2009), Crawford (2000), Fattah and Fierke (2009), Haas (2005), Harkavy (2000), Hopf (2002), Klein (1991), Larson and Shevchenko (2010), Lebow (2003), Löwenheim and Heimann (2008), Mercer (2010), Saurette (2006), Steinberg (1991), Tsygankov (2012b), Wolf (2011). My knowledge on relationships between emotions and Russia's foreign policy has been enhanced by participation in the workshop on “The subjective dimension of Russia's Partnership with the West: Filling Theoretical and Empirical Voids,” organized by Regina Heller, Tuomas Forsberg and Reinhart Wolf, Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy, University of Hamburg, September 15–16, 2011.

Table 1

The emotional cycle of Russia–West relations .

Hope → Frustration → Fear & Anger → Hope
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history – from hope to frustration and fear and back to hope. Politically, the period is also important. Despite some expectations associated with the rise of Dmitri Medvedev, his presidency did not produce a stable emotional or political environment for Russia–West relationships. As the paper shows, despite the common perception of Medvedev as being more pro-Western and liberal than his patron Vladimir Putin, Medvedev's rhetoric reflected largely the same emotional dispositions and therefore need to be understood in terms of historically enduring social patterns in the Russia–West relations. The Medvedev, a putinist and a frustrated critic of the West, may be viewed as a crucial case for establishing a theoretically potent interpretation of Russia's international discourse.

My main basis for studying Russia's official discourses of the West includes annual presidential addresses to the Federation Council and public statements on prominent foreign policy issues. Three of those issues suggest themselves as especially visible and important: European security, Missile Defense System, and, more recently, instability in the Middle East. When studied across time and issues, public speeches and statements are helpful in capturing underlying emotions of the state leaders. By studying the relative prominence of language used for denoting inclusiveness versus exclusiveness in Russia's discourses of the West, I have identified several distinct stages in Russia's presidents' emotional evolution from fear (March 2008–June 2009) to hope (September 2009–the late 2010), to frustration (the early 2011–December 2012). Historical examples, ethical lessons, metaphors, predicates, and adjectives used by Russian presidents show their emotional dispositions.

I argue that these emotions have roots in Russia's historically peculiar relations with Europe or the West as its significant other. Russia's deep emotional connection to the West, as well as Russia's own concept of national honor are the two factors that continue to drive the country's leaders' complex actions, feelings, and rhetoric. Russia displays emotions of hope each time it feels that its honor is being respected and those of frustration, fear and anger when in the eyes of the Kremlin its identity/honor is not recognized.

The following three sections address the formation of Russia's emotions towards the West, the Kremlin's discourses from fear to hope and frustration, and their explanation from perspective of social constructivism. Conclusion summarizes the findings and implications.

2. Honor and emotions in Russia's foreign policy

2.1. Emotional patterns in Russia's Westpolitik

Scholars of Russia's foreign policy often observe the Kremlin's emotional swings and intensity of Russia's public rhetoric regarding its relations with the West. Across history, the Russians initiated multiple projects of cooperation with their western neighbors, starting with Alexander I's Holy Alliance in the early 19th century and up to Mikhail Gorbachev's New Thinking and Boris Yeltsin's Integration in the late 20th century and Vladimir Putin's War on Terror and Dmitri Medvedev's Modernization Alliances in the early 21st century. Emotionally, each of these projects involved hope to engage the West in projects of common significance and build lasting institutions of international peace. However, hope frequently turned into frustration with what Russia saw as the other side's unwillingness to reciprocate and, ultimately, mistrust and fear that the Western nations indeed aim to undermine Russia's sovereignty and security. Sustained fear and mistrust on occasions turned into anger² and anger-shaped policies of abandoning cooperative initiatives and adopting patterns of defensive or assertive behavior (Tsygankov, 2012a). On other occasions fear and mistrust subsided, generating new feelings of hope and new attempts at cooperation (this emotional cycle is presented in Table 1).

Emotions of hope and frustration are identifiable through Russia's public statements. In Gorbachev's missionary language: "We are all passengers aboard one ship, the Earth, and we must not allow it to be wrecked. There will be no second Noah's Ark" (Gorbachev, 1987, p. 12). To Yeltsin, hope was tied to Russia's integration with Western economic and political institutions, which the Russian leader presented in dramatic tones – either there will be a success or the West too will suffer greatly. For instance, in addressing a joint session of the United States Congress in June 1992, Yeltsin expressed hope for a massive external assistance by directly linking it to success of Russia's reforms: "There will be no second try ... If we [that is, you Americans] do not take measures now to support Russia, this will not be a collapse of Russia only, it will be a collapse of the United States, because it will mean new trillions of dollars for the arms race" (cited in Breslauer, 2002, p. 157). To Putin (2002), hope served as the emotional basis for engaging the West in fighting terrorism and preserving global stability, for which, he believed, "Russia and the United States bear a special responsibility." Finally, Medvedev's main hopes were in getting the United States and Europe interested in modernizing Russia's economy and improving Russia–NATO security relations.

² Anger results from a sustained build-up of frustration and fear that produce the perception of mistreatment by others. Lasting perception of threat may further turn anger into hate. As Master Yoda famously put it to Anakin Skywalker, "Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering." (Star Wars, 1977)

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