



Russian foreign policy in the realm of European security through the lens of neoclassical realism

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ABSTRACT

There are different views on (in-)predictability and on (non-)cooperation in Russian foreign policy towards the West, but also on the question about how - that is, through which theoretical framework - to interpret it. This essay aims at contributing to the debate around these three issues. Its goal is to demonstrate the expediency of using a neoclassical realist theoretical perspective, enhanced by the inclusion of such subjective factors as status/prestige and perceptions. While there are factors in Russian domestic and foreign policy which give it a certain degree of unpredictability, nevertheless, if it is studied in a comprehensive way, it turns out to be more consistent and predictable than it at first seems. Even though Russia is often accused of being anti-Western and non-cooperative, this argument does not hold true: Russian foreign policy is selective and includes both cooperative and non-cooperative tactics.

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1. Introduction

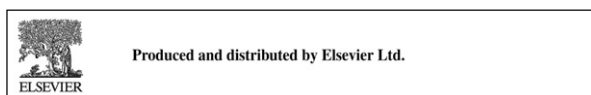
There is much controversy among Western scholars and policy makers about the foreign policy¹ of the Russian Federation (RF). On the one hand, Russian foreign policy is frequently described as volatile with shifts from cooperation to non-cooperation and – until the recent Russian–Western “reset” – even to anti-Westernism and a new Cold

War (Bugajski, 2004; Lucas, 2008; McKinnon, 2007; Scholl-Latour, 2006). According to Legvold, “Russian foreign policy ... has lurched through many different - often radically different - phases... Swings of this magnitude and velocity are not a normal feature of a country’s foreign policy” (Legvold, 2007, 3, 10). Because of these swings some scholars have even diagnosed Russia as a “borderline personality” (Arias-King, de Arias, and de La Canal, 2008). Western policy makers complain about Russia’s unpredictability and irrationality (Miliband, 2008; Truszczyński, 2005; Vika-Freiberga, 2000) and suggest that “Moscow interprets its interests in the wrong way” (Arbatov, 2007).

By contrast, other scholars find both shifts and continuity (Thorun, 2009; Tsygankov, 2010a) or even a preponderance of continuity. For instance, Richard Pipes argues: “Despite its reputation for unpredictability, Russia is a remarkably conservative nation whose mentality and behavior change slowly, if at all...” (Pipes, 2004, 9). Or according to Allen Lynch: “... the prevalent view of contemporary Russian foreign policy as relatively

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¹ In this essay “Russia” or “Russian foreign policy” means the official position of the Russian government. A state can be equated with the main decision-makers; it can be portrayed as a corporate entity which has a stable collective identity; it can be treated as an institutional actor (Barnett, 1993, 274).

incoherent and ineffective and, where coherent, unilateral and anti-Western ... often proved far from being the case..." (Lynch, 2001, 8). Mark Webber finds continuity "in favor of cooperative but conditional engagement with the West," and, in contrast to those who speak of inconsistency in Russian conduct, notices "a degree of hesitancy, uncertainty and inconsistency" in the West's Russia policy (Webber, 2000, 147 and 148). Russian scholars describe Russian conduct towards the West in terms of "a simultaneous partnership and rivalry" (Shevtsova, 2006, 11), a "confrontational-integrationist paradigm" (Entin & Zagorskij, 2008) and "calls for peace combined with active 'hostilities'" (Bordachev, 2008) (author's translations).

In addition to this discussion on the (un-)predictability/ (dis-)continuity and (non-)cooperation in Russian foreign policy, there is the question about how to interpret it. Some scholars argue that Russia acts rationally, in particular, on the basis of realist balance-of-power calculations (Averre, 2009; Lynch, 2001; Sakwa, 2008). Others present it as a role player, behaving in accordance with its identity, norms and self/other perceptions (Feklyunina, 2008; Fischer, 2004; Neumann, 2008; Splidsboel-Hansen, 2002).

The purpose of this essay is to contribute to this discussion around Russian foreign policy, by considering three questions: is Russian foreign policy (in)consistent and (un)predictable; is it predominantly non-cooperative in relation to the West in the realm of European security; and, finally, which theoretical framework can make Russian foreign policy more understandable? The first section explains the expediency of using the neoclassical realist perspective. The second section presents Russia's attitude towards the West as expressed in its main foreign policy and security concepts. The third section deals with the changes in "the context of action" in Russian-Western relations with the focus on the years 2007–2010. In the fourth section the West is "broken up," and the focus is on the patterns of Russia's engagement with Western (-dominated) international governmental organizations (IGOs), relevant in the area of European security: the European Union (EU), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).² The last section draws conclusions about the three questions, raised in this essay.

2. Russian foreign policy through the "Lens" of neoclassical realism

The current popular trend in the studies of international relations (IR) is methodological pluralism, for instance, in the form of "realist constructivism" or "constructivist realism" (Barkin, 2003; Cupchik, 2001). Scholars find "substantial areas of agreement" between rationalism/realism and constructivism, and "where genuine differences exist they are as often complementarities as contradictions" (Fearon & Wendt, 2002, 52).

Neoclassical realism reflects this trend of searching for ways to apply different material/objective but also subjective explanatory categories, both of an external and an internal nature. It is an approach to international politics that stresses that "the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities," but that also acknowledges the importance of the "intervening variables at the unit level" (Rose, 1998, 146). For instance, perceptions, historic memories, culture and other subjective factors play a role "in the selection and implementation of foreign policy responses to the international environment" (Taliaferro, Lobell and Ripsman, 2009a, 280; see also: Kindermann, 2001; Lobell, Ripsman, & Taliaferro, 2009; Meier-Walser, 1994; Siedschlag, 2001a, 2001b).

To remind, one of the main realist assumptions is that states aim at the provision of security, maintenance/maximization of power, influence and sovereignty (Burchill, 2001; Grieco, 1997). However, classical realists have also noted that not only material factors (e.g. availability of natural resources, the state of military-industrial and socio-economic development, quantity and quality of armed forces), but also subjective or socio-psychological ones (e.g. competence of the political elite, national character, morale) matter (Baumann, Rittberger, & Wagner, 2001, 43). Furthermore, they have noted "that not all foreign policies have always followed so rational, objective, and unemotional a course...", but argued: "Yet a theory of foreign policy... must for the time being, as it were, abstract from these irrational elements..." (Morgenthau, 1993, 7).

Neoclassical realists go a step further: while re-claiming the importance of material factors as a driving force for a country's foreign policy in the anarchical international system, they have incorporated into their analysis "traditional" constructivist categories, giving primacy, however, to interests and international imperatives rather than to identities. J. Samuel Barkin argues that it is a normal development. While many realists worked under the conditions of the Cold War, where military threats had special importance, today "in situations in which no imminent military threat exists, as is currently the case among many of the world's major powers," no *a priori* reason exists within realist theory to privilege material/objective factors (Barkin, 2003, 329). Furthermore, subjective factors have become a part of *Realpolitik*: "In the current international system, states need not compete for military power... But states still contend for status, influence, and prestige – international pecking order" (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, 184; see also: Mastanduno & Kapstein, 1999; Wolf, 2008).

Neoclassical realism can offer important insights into the issues of shifts and continuity as well as cooperation and non-cooperation in Russian foreign policy. Realists claim that while the main interests of a state are "more or less permanent" and "tend to show little variation over time," what can and does change, "if the context of action changes, are policy preferences" (Freund & Rittberger, 2001, 71). The changes in the context of action are predetermined by changes in the international power distribution and in

² The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) was institutionalized into the OSCE by a decision of the Budapest Summit in December 1994.

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