Putin & Russian Heritage: Russia's Foreign Policy Identity Since Napoleon

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Vladimir Putin and Russian Heritage: Assessing The Development of Russian Foreign Policy Identity Since the Napoleonic Wars

The U.S. and its allies certainly did not expect Russia to transform into such an assertive and forceful state that it is now when they declared their victory over USSR in 1991. The last fifteen years of Eurasian politics saw the Russian state invading Georgia and Ukraine and annexing Crimea which were deemed as highly aggressive actions by Western governments and proved detrimental to their democratic project towards introducing Western institutions to Eastern European states. Trying to come up with a response to this novel challenge that the Russian government pose to this neoliberal agenda had been so far unsuccessful due to a clear misunderstanding of Russian national and foreign policy identity by Western statesmen. It's critical to analyse and comprehend the historical development of one state's policy patterns and the identities and meanings that it constructs through engagement with other actors, in order to understand why a state acts in a certain way. Constructivist foreign policy analysis, that emerged as an alternative to more reductionist foreign policy analyses such as liberalism and realism in the late 1980s, advocates the investigation of a state's culture, history and geopolitical situation for the contemplation of its foreign policy. Pre-eminent constructivist analyst Colin S. Gray maintains that "the distinctive experience of particular security communities find social expression in more or less distinctive patterns of enduring assumptions about strategic matters and those patterns warrant description as cultural."[1] Adopting a constructivist approach, this essay will propose that particular historical developments, such as the development of imperial identity and sense of entitlement for the Eastern European area in 19th Century Tsarist Russia, the construction of "self" and "other" identities in regards to East-West division during Soviet Russia and the disruption of conventional Russian identities in the Yeltsin administration, had substantial impacts in shaping the Russian foreign policy identity and consequently, its assertiveness in the post-Soviet space during Putin administration.

19th Century Russia and The Development of Russian Imperial Identity

One of the distinctive characteristics of Russian foreign policy under Vladimir Putin is the idea of Russian expansion and creation of a sphere of influence in the Eastern European area. For some, these expansionary policies reflect resurgent ideas of imperialism in Russian foreign policy that had been in a hiatus during the Yeltsin administration. Mark Galeotti of the 'Foreign Policy' argues that; "The notion of an empire built on the basis of civilisation is crucial to understanding Putin. There are neighbouring countries, such as those in the South Caucasus, that he believes ought to recognise that they are part of Russia's sphere of influence, its defensive perimeter, and its economic hinterland."[2] From a constructivist foreign policy perspective, these resurfacing ideas and policy choices can be potentially understood by analysing the development of Russian imperial identity during the 19th century.

Once an isolated 'great power-in-making', the beginning of the 19th century saw Russia expanding on an unprecedented scale and meddling with the affairs of other major European powers as a fresh great power in the region. This new identity that the Russian state accepted played a major role in constructing the Russian foreign policy patterns in the following 200 years. According to Valery Tishkov, "pre-revolutionary Russia already invoked, in the minds of its many different countrymen, a clear understanding of national territory, national economy and national

interests."[3]

Although officially an empire since 1721, the Russian empire was consolidated as a major imperial force in Europe in the beginning of the 19th century. In this era, Russia famously defeated Napoleon in Moscow (finishing his reign of terror), entered great power politics as a major player in the Vienna Congress and expanded its territory to three continents. Considering the Russian political and cultural assertiveness in the Eurasian politics since the 19th century, one can argue that through these historical developments, Russian people constructed self-ascribed identities such as 'great powerness' and 'Eurasian empire' that became significant discourses in the Russian foreign policy tradition. This superiority complex brought a sense of entitlement in the Eurasian region that the Russian political scientist Aleksandr Dugin describes as a geopolitical mission. Reflexive of the overall Russian foreign policy identity, he argues that 'If it's understood that the imperialisation process of Russian existential development is sponsored by a geopolitical trajectory, it can be seen that the existence of Russian people is dependent on the continuation, development and intensification of this process'[4] referring to the so-called teleological mission towards unifying the Eurasian mainland and the Slavic people. Russian great power-ness and the idea of responsibility for Slavic people in the East Europe remain as prominent concepts in Russian foreign policy rhetoric of today, continuing a foreign policy identity which inaugurated in the 19th century.

In the second half of the 19th century, Russian imperial identity faced a new dilemma which, in turn, intensified the sense of entitlement to the Eastern European region in the Russian foreign policy tradition. The industrial revolution and the subsequent economic growth of Western Europe pressured the Russian state to make a choice between being a great European power and remaining an isolated Russian empire. Whilst appreciating the European means of conduct such as international law and concert diplomacy, the Russian people still had suspicions and fears against Western countries due to cultural and ideological differences. The geopolitical and cultural in-betweenness of Russia started the infamous Slavophiles /Westernisers debate in Russia in the second half of the 19th century that became a prevalent theme in Russian politics. As the effects of Spring of Nations and German unification swept across Europe, combined with the emergence of Slavophiles, the ideas of Russian nationalism and pan-Slavism became powerful concepts in Russian decision making. 'The cultural and political confluence which being a part of both Western, Byzantium and Islamic worlds brought, resulted in deep insecurities in Russian politics, which in turn, were paradoxically surmounted by embracing a 'Russian' imperial mission and identity'[5]. Promoting state nationalism to prevent imperial destruction, Russian statesmen aspired to integrate Slavic countries to the Russian political centre as a means of securing their Eastern European empire. One can see the ramifications of this pan-Slavist imperial identity in the Russian foreign policy towards the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. The Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878 demonstrated the sense of responsibility and entitlement that Moscow developed towards the Slavic people, entering a war with one of the most powerful empires in history, in order to secure and support the nationalist secession movements of the Balkan people in the Ottoman territory.

One can affirm that the defensive reactions of Putin administration against the Western expansion towards Eastern Europe and Moscow's increasing assertiveness in the region which many call a desire for creating a sphere of influence, is deeply influenced by the Russian imperial identity that was constructed in the 19th century through successful military campaigns, Russian nationalist awakening and an imperialistic foreign policy understanding towards creating a Eurasian-Slavic empire.

Soviet Period and "Self"/"Other" Identities

The formation of the Soviet Union in 1917 and the transformation of the world order into a bipolar one resulted in the formation of some new discourses and the exacerbation of some old ones in Russian foreign policy identity. A constructivist argument would state that this era saw the processes of "self" and "other" identity formations in regards to the newly arisen world order and the generation of the idea of "we" in terms of identifying the Soviet space (or 'the sphere of influence'). In constructivist foreign policy analysis, "self" and "other" identity formations indicate "why there is a sense of obligation to act and why a certain behavior is seen as natural" by a state, through subject positioning where "identities are positioned vis-à-vis other identities."[6] These newly constructed identities of Soviet Russia effectively influenced the actions of the Russian state in the post-Soviet space under Putin's leadership and his confrontational approach to the West.

First of all, the unprecedented geographical expansion of Soviet Union after the WWII, its effects on Europe and United States' response to it further consolidated the division of the world order into "East" and "West" for the Russian people. Aleksandr Dugin conveys this comprehensive idea of 'East' in his book 'The Geopolitical Future of Russia', arguing that "the last imperial organisation of the Russian people was the USSR and the adjacent geopolitical area that is the Warsaw Pact."[7] Coinciding with the Atlantic expansion of the West, the geopolitical and strategic rivalry of these two new superpowers mitigated the construction of self and other identities. The "self' was the ideologically superior and righteous Soviet space and the "other" was the capitalist and expansionist West that wanted to eradicate the world-wide communist movement in a fight for life and death.

These political identities were solidified by the anti-Western propaganda deriving from the Soviet political centre throughout the Cold War. For instance; "the characterization of U.S. policy in Vietnam as aggressive and imperial was a generic charge found in Soviet propaganda throughout the post-World War II period (…) U.S. military strategy was characterised as extremely brutal and thousands of Vietnamese were said to have 'fallen to toxic gases, poisonous chemicals, and phosphorous and napalm bombs"[8] A little inspection of Russian foreign policy of today would reveal the employment of similar tools of propaganda against Western expansionism and Western involvement in the affairs of other countries, particularly of Eastern European states. Russia Today, the Russian television channel funded by the Russian government is known for its anti-Western partisanship and its propaganda-like content on issues such as the invasion of Ukraine and Western expansion. In fact, on March 2015, Russia Today was investigated by media regulator Ofcom over its explicit anti-Western comments.[9] Ergo, the ideas of 'otherness of the West' and the East-West contention as well as the development of propaganda as a strategic tool that became prevalent concepts in Russian foreign policy identity of today can affirmed to be constructed during the Soviet period.

Additionally, the Soviet Period further developed the concept of "Russian sphere of influence" through the creation of Soviet satellite states. During this period, the ideas of nationalism and pan-Slavist protection of Eastern European states gave way to a so-called ideological monolith that changed the meaning of these countries for Russian statesmen. Once a nationalist mission of expansion, the Soviet objective towards Eastern European satellites was transformed into a mission for safeguarding Soviet states against Western capitalism. "The Soviet model – while entrenching new ethnic and cultural divisions – also sought to provide a unifying ideology that would bind all the peoples of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics together. In this way, through narratives of internationalism and friendship among peoples, bolstered and enforced by iron-rule authoritarianism, the Soviet Union fostered an ideology of Soviet patriotism."[10]

Whilst providing protection for Eastern European states, Moscow was also providing protection for itself by using these states as a "buffer zone", in order to isolate itself from the Western world and secure its territory. The Soviet period transformed the relationship between the Russian state and its "sphere of influence" into a mutually dependent symbiosis whose impact had not diminished even after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. When analyzing the Russian wariness against Western expansion and Moscow's determination to retain Russian influence on the post-Soviet space, one must not neglect the significance of identity constructions for the "Soviet Space", "Eastern Europe" and "Western World" throughout the Cold War and should consider the impacts of these identities on the Russian foreign policy making in the 21st century.

Boris Yeltsin Period and "A Nation Under Identity Crisis"

The impact of Boris Yeltsin administration on modern Russian foreign policy patterns is different than those of 19th century or the Soviet era. Yeltsin's rapprochement with the Western countries and his policy of constraint and isolation subverted the conventional dynamics of Russian foreign policy identity and generated a harsh response from the Russian people, paving a way for the aggressive restoration of these dynamics by the election of Vladimir Putin. It is a widely agreed upon argument that the domestic success of the Putin administration is largely due to the vulnerability and incapacity of the Yeltsin administration. Thereupon it is essential to look at the failures of Yeltsin foreign policy and its effects on Russian psyche to scrutinize contemporary Russian foreign policy identity.

"Across the political spectrum, from communists and nationalists to centrists and liberals, there was a general consensus that Russia's international standing had hit rock bottom by the end of the 1990s."[11] After the dissolution

of Soviet Union, the Russian political identity was directed towards Westernism and rejection of the aforementioned ambitious ideas of Russian hegemony in the Eurasian area. The material survival of the Russian people was prioritised over conventional Russian assertiveness in the Eastern European space. According to Boris Yeltsin, the Russian state was supposed to accept defeat and divert its resources to ensure political stability, economic prosperity and national security, in order to become a "normal" country. The Russian foreign minister during Yeltsin era, Andrey Kozryev, in his term, abandoned numerous foreign policy traits that characterised Russian state for centuries in exchange for a reconciliation with the international community. "Kozryev left no doubt that foreign policy (of Russia) would be wholly subordinated to the task of political and economic reconstruction, which, by transforming Russia into a democracy and market economy, would turn the country into a model citizen of the international community."[12]

For the duration of Yeltsin's passive approach to foreign policy, Moscow started to lose its clout over the post-Soviet space. Despite being accepted as a new actor in the international community nominally, the reality showed otherwise, as the Russian state failed to uphold a legitimate presence in international affairs, particularly on Eastern Europe. Russia's lack of foreign policy resulted in further Western assertiveness in the region with NATO's expansion to East Europe and several Western-led interventions to Balkan countries. Even though "the Russian Council on Defence and Foreign Policy warned in 1995 that if NATO enlargement extended only to Central European States, the Baltic States and Ukraine would become a 'zone of bitter strategic rivalry between an expanded NATO and a resentful Russia,"[13] Moscow could not manage to emerge as a powerful opposition to the expansion, demonstrating the deterioration of Russian power in the globe.

Vladimir Putin's election as the successor of Boris Yeltsin and his fresh and more hawkish attitude towards foreign policy symbolised a return to traditional means of conduct for Russian people. In terms of identity, the renunciation of Russian assertiveness and search for power during Yeltsin government was received as a betrayal to Russian national identity by some political figures in Russian domestic politics, cementing the search for a leader whose policies are closer to traditional Russian foreign policy identity. Seen as a period of "national humiliation"[14], acknowledging the backlash that Yeltsin period received and the traditionalist political scene it entailed is imperative to comprehend the high domestic support Vladimir Putin has for his expansionist/aggressive policies in the post-Soviet Space.

Conclusion

It would be foolish to expect the same set of reactions from different states towards certain actions and situations. Consideration of one state's specific cultural and historical development, its geopolitics and "self" and "other" identities they construct vis-à-vis other states is essential to predict and respond to their actions and inactions. A realist interpretation of Russian politics on post-Soviet space based on power or a liberal one, based on its relationship with the international community and democratic states would not suffice in explaining Russia's particular interactions with the post-Soviet countries. The sense of entitlement that Russian state developed towards post-Soviet space, combined with the imperial identity that it entailed can not be overlooked when pursuing policies over Russian expansion. Similarly, understanding how the concepts of East and West is ingrained in Russian cultural tradition and how they were subverted in the Yeltsin period would clarify the approval rates of Putin's nationalist and aggressive rhetoric, facilitating communication with the Russian state. The job of the analyst, then, should be to structure his/her policy recommendations on a set of criteria in consideration of a state's culture, history and identity in order to refrain from a shallow and reductionist proposition. Only after this should we move on and question; "what should we do to contain Russian aggression and re-neutralise post-Soviet space?"

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Endnotes

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