The Power and Politics of Recognition: Status Concerns in Russian Policy toward the United States

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Status concerns, which are particularly visible in Russia’s relations with the United States, have featured prominently in Russian official discourses of the West. For political leaders, status is one of the most sought-after qualities in international politics due to a combination of instrumental benefits and intrinsic rewards. First, higher status confers tangible benefits in security, wealth, and influence, and second, it ‘just feels better’ (Renshon, 2017, pp. 2-3). While efforts to gain status may at times be costly and risky, “if they succeed, they can bring rewards all out of proportion to [those] costs by influencing the psychological environment and policies of other decision-makers” (Jervis, 1989, p. 8 quoted in Renshon, 2017, p. 2).

Status in international politics is defined as a state’s “standing, or rank, in a status community”. This, in turn, is related to “collective beliefs about a given state’s ranking on valued attributes” such as “wealth, coercive capabilities, culture, [or] demographic position” (Renshon, 2017, p. 33; Wohlfirth et al, 2017, p. 2; Paul et al, 2014).

Status is linked to the concept of recognition – there will be no status without recognition (Wohlfirth et al, 2017, p. 3). The repeated escalation of tensions between Russia and the West is frequently attributed to the lack of genuine external recognition of Russia as a legitimate great power and an equal partner whose interests are respected. Russia also seeks to be recognized by its Western counterparts “as a legitimate system of values and institutions” (Tsygankov, 2014, p. 7). In addition to the issues of recognition and equality, mutual respect is a powerful theme which runs through Russia’s foreign policy narrative. For example, in 2017 when outlining his view of US-Russia relations, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey
Lavrov said: “We want relations based on pragmatism, mutual respect, and understanding of our special responsibility for global stability”.

Typically, the inability or unwillingness of the West to accommodate Russia’s status demands instigates Moscow’s frustration, fear or anger. The intensity of these emotions increases when bigger issues are at stake, such as strategic stability, global governance or recognition of Russia’s sphere of influence (Tsygankov, 2014; Troitskiy, 2016). Particularly humiliating for Moscow, as exemplified by the tone of grievance often adopted by Russian officials, is the US failure to accept Russia as an equal. Russia’s strong, at times emotional, reaction to perceived disrespect by the United States goes back to the 1990s and 2000s when, in the view of Russia, its security interests were largely ignored.

Over the past quarter-century, unresolved status dilemmas, i.e. “unwillingness of the sides to confer authority or honor on each other”, have resulted in the growing rivalry between Moscow and Washington. Despite opportunities for virtually cost-free accommodation of mutual status concerns, both sides have usually blocked each other’s status aspirations, at times pushing each other toward risky and costly maneuvers. This, in turn, could lead to a further escalation of tensions and even a military clash (Troitskiy, 2016). Due to the masculine rules associated with the defence of honor, “status conflicts can be more conducive to violence than conflicts over material interests” (Forsberg et al, 2014, p. 265). It is important to note that for Russian political and security elites status considerations are equally or even more important than pure security and economic concerns. Russia’s military campaign in Syria is a case in point. One of the main goals of the campaign has been to confirm Russia’s status as a global great power (Trenin, 2018).

Despite numerous official statements of non-adversarial intentions, neither Moscow, nor Washington has been able to produce a stable political and emotional environment for the bilateral relationship. Nikolai Kosolapov (2008) argues that the US policy vis-à-vis Russia frequently conveys an impression that there is systemic incompatibility between the two countries’ culture and mentality. Some Russian scholars (see, for example, Bogaturov, 2007) suggest that the confrontation between the West (read, the US) and Russia takes on a ‘civilizational’ dimension.

What further complicates the picture is that both sides have fundamental conceptual differences. For example, Russia and the US have different conceptions and perceptions of

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status. This gap in perception, in turn, contributes to the “status dilemma” between the two countries. They have diverging concepts of ‘greatpowerness’, i.e. the shared vision of Russia’s and the United States’ status and role in the world. So far, they have failed to reach a common understanding of the emerging world order. Moreover, Moscow and Washington frequently disagree on the essence of the key global and regional issues. That disagreement partly results from “different beliefs and emotions regarding what they view as a “good” and “virtuous” course of action vis-à-vis each other” (Tsygankov, 2014, p. 1).

A better understanding of Russia’s status concerns and related emotions as well as its great power identity and vision of the new world order is essential to understand Russia’s policy vis-à-vis the US. It may also help to move toward working out a mutually acceptable formula of bilateral cooperation with the ultimate aim of producing a more predictable and sustainable relationship.

1. **Russia in the emerging world order: realist and liberal perspectives**

   Russian IR is a young field of study that is strongly influenced by Western, particularly American, concepts and theories. Yet, Russian scholars have produced a number of theoretical and conceptual innovations deeply rooted in the country’s intellectual traditions and cultural heritage. They have creatively redefined some established concepts – for example, the concepts of great power and multipolarity (Omelicheva and Zubytska, 2016; Shakleina, 2013; Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 2010).

   After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia faced a severe identity crisis. Russia found itself in an awkward position. As a successor to the superpower, it possessed most of the Soviet Union’s formal attributes. Yet, it had to go through a systemic decline while depending on the mercy and assistance of its former adversaries. Post-Soviet Russia could do little in response to NATO and EU enlargement as well as Western intrusions into its ‘backyard’. Absent the constraints of superpower rivalry, the US and NATO seemed to feel emboldened to use military force to pressure countries that resisted the new order (for example, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq). Moscow was particularly concerned about NATO’s transformation from a “purely defensive alliance” into a “fighting group” (Lukyanov, 2016), which asserted the right to carry out military operations outside its traditional area of responsibility.

   Russian realist scholars and policy-makers deplored the US (and its allies) for embarking on a democracy promotion crusade. They condemned the West for imposing its rules on other countries, including the post-Soviet states (for example, Ukraine and Georgia).
They criticized the US for gradually eroding the basic principles of the Westphalian system – sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-intervention, prompting systemic crises and military conflicts (Batalov, 2005; Bogaturov, 1996; Kosolapov, 2004; Primakov, 2005; Shakleina, 2012; Torkunov, 2004).

Russian leaders repeatedly voiced their discontent with the perceived Western arrogance. Washington dismissed such criticism “as little more than a reflexive expression of an outmoded imperial mentality, mostly intended for domestic consumption” (Lukyanov, 2016, p. 32). A growing understanding that a US-dominated world was threatening to Russian national interests was concomitant with Russia’s increasing disillusionment with an unequal partnership with the West. Russia resented being treated by Washington as a weakened country that would forever play a significantly diminished role in international affairs. In the view of Moscow, the West misinterpreted the disintegration of the Soviet Union. As President Putin put it (2005), “many thought or seemed to think at the time that our young democracy was not a continuation of Russian statehood, but its ultimate collapse… But they were mistaken”.

As Russia rejected a subordinate, junior partner position in the US-led post-Cold War international order, it started to look for practical ways to counterbalance the US, regain its influence in the post-Soviet space, and recover its status as a great power. Russian academic and political discourses, drawn together by a common agenda of restoring Russia’s status and providing a theoretical justification for countering the US domination, became closely intertwined (Omelicheva and Zubytska, 2016, pp. 32-33; Tsygankov, 2016).

The discontent with the Washington-led post-Cold War liberal order has prompted Russian scholars to search for alternative models of world order. Russian realists have developed a number of concepts differentiating between different types of unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar/polycentric systems (Dynkin and Ivanova, 2015; Primakov, 2011; Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 2010). For example, Alexei Bogaturov has proposed to view the post-Cold War international order as ‘pluralistic unipolarity’ with the unipolar center comprised of a group of responsible states, rather than just one state (the US). Bogaturov has argued that Russia – as one of the members of the group – should consolidate its position within the global center (Bogaturov, 1996; Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 2010).

Since the late 1990s, the concept of multipolarity has been a formative principle of Russian foreign policy. Russian policy-makers and realist scholars view a multipolar world as inherently more ‘just’ and stable than a world dominated by one power (the US). Russia’s 2000 Foreign Policy Concept states that “Russia shall seek to achieve a multipolar system of international relations that really reflects the diversity of the modern world with its great
variety of interests”. More recently, the terms ‘multipolar’ and ‘polycentric’ have been used interchangeably in Russian academic and political discourses (see, for example, Lavrov, 2013; Putin, 2012; Strategic Global Forecast to 2030, 2013)\(^2\). According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (2013, pp. 4-5), “Russian diplomatic activity is aimed at producing a positive impact on global processes in the interest of forming a stable, ideally self-regulating polycentric system of international relations where Russia by right has the role as one of the key centers. Today, the majority of serious experts and politicians agree that the main purport of the current period of international development lies in the consistent strengthening of a multipolar world order”.

To recapitulate, Russian policy-makers and realist scholars contend that there is no viable alternative to multipolarity/polycentrism. They view Russia as a co-designer of the new world order and “an independent centre of political power [that] will continue to promote a positive international agenda in the interests of global stability” (Lavrov, 2018). There is a broad consensus among Russian political elites and realists that Russia is and will remain a great power state. Russia’s great power identity is derived from its material and immaterial capabilities (the latter include historical traditions, cultural and intellectual potential). Russia’s political culture predisposes it to think and act globally, and pursue a largely independent path in both domestic and international politics (Batalov, 2000; Bogaturov, 2010; Shakleina, 2016; Omelicheva and Zubytska, 2016; see also Dynkin and Baranovsky, 2015).

Russian liberal scholarship on the international system is heavily influenced by Western, particularly American, theoretical developments. Many Russian liberal theorists view the world’s institutional development as predominantly West-centered. This vision is reflected in the concept of ‘democratic unipolarity’ (Kulagin, 2002 and 2008), which implies that Russia should adopt the standards of Western pluralistic democracy in order to be peaceful and ‘civilized’. Similar to their realist colleagues, Russian liberals conceive the international environment as turbulent and complex. However, they see a greater possibility for a more progressive world order (Omelicheva and Zubytska, 2016; Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 2010).

Some Russian liberals suggest that non-state actors, movements, and networks are becoming nearly as powerful as states in shaping the new world order (Barabanov, 2002 and 2008; Lebedeva, 2008). This trend could pose a challenge to the nature of the great power-led

\(^2\) "The terms “multipolarity” and “policentricity”, when used for the analysis of the emerging international political system, are treated as synonyms. A distinction is sometimes made between them: the former emphasizes the idea of mutual competition (opposition) among the poles as centers of power, while the latter underscores the objective potential, and not their positioning in relation to each other. Such differentiation is possible, but in our opinion it is excessive and redundant”. See, Strategic Global Forecast to 2030 / Ed. by Academician A.A. Dynkin / IMEMO RAS. Moscow: Magistr, 2013. P. 215.
international system. Russian liberal scholars with a nationalist streak, while recognizing the spread of democratic norms and international institutions, underscore the importance of local cultures in a globalized world. They challenge the idea that the world is becoming homogeneously liberal and democratic (Kulagin, 2000). They argue for the establishment of a ‘unity in diversity’ regime, thus allowing individual nations to adhere to their own internally developed principles and at the same time comply with international norms (Omelicheva and Zubytska, 2016; Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 2010).

Russian liberal institutionalists highlight the importance of international norms and organizations. Consistent with the Russian foreign policy discourse, they foreground the role of the United Nations and the legal principles enshrined in the UN Charter. They question the ability of the United States to stabilize the international system alone. They argue that the US “can only exercise its global leadership if it acts through the global institutions” and takes other states’ interests into account (Omelicheva and Zubytska, 2016, pp. 40-41; Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 2010).

2. **Status, honor, and emotions in Russia’s Westpolitik**

Russia’s emotions towards the West and the intensity of its foreign policy rhetoric are often observed by prominent Russia watchers. There are at least two approaches to studying Russia’s emotions. The first approach views emotions “as a generally adequate public display of the leaders' objectives and a signal of their intentions”, while the second approach “presents emotional statements as deployed strategically to pressure other nations for concessions” (Tsygankov, 2014, p. 3). Both approaches imply that emotions should be interpreted in the context of international struggle for power, status, and prestige. In this sense, Russia is no different from other powers that seek to improve their standing in the international system. Therefore, it should be expected that Russia’s emotions and behavior will fluctuate in response to changes in the country’s political standing in the world. Russia will display emotions of hope when it feels it improves its political standing, and those of frustration, fear or anger when its political standing fails to improve.

Scholars of status study a given country’s emotions by following its gains and losses in international prestige and deference. Gains are associated with positive emotions, while losses

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may lead to negative feelings – for example, anger, shame, or vengefulness (Larson and Shevchenko, 2014; Tsygankov, 2014). This perspective helps us better understand factors of external recognition and prestige. But it “may not be sufficient for explaining nuances of an individual country's behavior and emotions because each of them has its own set of local values and culturally-specific relations with the outside world” (Tsygankov, 2014, p. 3).

Russia’s emotions and discourses of the West are shaped in large part by the country’s historically established social relations with the West and its own concept of national honor. Tsygankov (2012) uses the concept of honor (chest’) as a crucial moral category related to Russia’s status. Based on the usage of this term by Russian leaders, he sub-classifies the meaning of honor into ‘vernost’ (loyalty), ‘dostoinstvo (dignity) and ‘slava’ (glory).

Russia’s sense of honor includes a distinctive idea of national self and is not limited to protecting the country’s international status. The Kremlin’s recurring emotional shifts from hope (when Russia’s honor is respected) to frustration, fear and anger (when Russia’s identity/honor is not recognized) are not to be reduced to the dynamics of power and status/prestige. Moreover, the identity/honor perspective, which emphasizes two, rather than one, motivating factors – external recognition and internal values/idea of national self – is more helpful for a culturally-specific analysis of a country’s behavior and emotions (Tsygankov, 2014).

**Conclusion**

Russian political elites are remarkably consistent in their view of Russia’s great power identity and its role in the emerging world order. The Kremlin is also consistent (and vocal) in its criticism of some aspects of the US foreign policy that it perceives as a threat to Russia’s national interests, an attempt to sideline Russia and/or weaken its status. These consistent aspects of the Russian foreign policy discourse are not widely recognized in the West, particularly in the United States. A more nuanced analysis of Russian policy-makers’ views, grievances and status-related concerns may help to explain why they make specific foreign policy choices. It may also help to move toward working out a mutually acceptable formula of US-Russia cooperation with the ultimate aim of producing a more predictable and sustainable relationship.
References


