

Russia and the West: contesting the domain and content of international politics

Theories of nationalism show us that a fundamental feature of politics is contestation over the borders of political communities, the values that constitute such communities, how 'thick' the norms based on those values should be, and how they should be determined. Addressing the conference theme, this paper argues that such 'meta-politics' is also a feature of the international arena, and that Russian relations with the West can be understood within this framework. First, Russia seeks to be treated as an equal interlocutor in the development of international norms and common positions in relation to events. Second, Russia contests the degree to which 'thick' norms should be developed at the international level. While the first point constitutes a call for the politicization of the international – against the tendency of Western powers, perceiving themselves to be uniquely virtuous, to dictate international norms that are expected to be binding on all members of the international community – the second is an attempt to circumscribe such politicization and preserve the position of the state as the primary space in which politics takes place. In short, international relations should be politicized, but the scope of such politics should be limited.

Introduction

In considering the politics of international relations, a clichéd but useful starting point might be to ask: what is politics? Here are three definitions:

- 'Politics is the activity or process by which groups reach and enforce binding decisions' (Hague and Harrop 2013).
- 'Politics is the process through which power and influence are used in the promotion of certain values and interests' (Danziger 2013).
- 'Politics [as an academic subject] is the study of how power is organised and used, theoretically, nationally and internationally' (Department of Politics website, University of Otago; <http://www.otago.ac.nz/politics/study/index.html>).

These overlapping but diverse definitions capture key elements in considering the politics of international relations, and specifically the politics of Russian-Western relations: decision-making process, exercise of power, promotion of values, and defence of interests.

Politics as exercise of, and competition over, power is perhaps the dominant approach in International Relations theory. On the face of it, it is also what Russia is all about: demonstrating its power (e.g. in Syria), exerting its power (e.g. in the former Soviet space), establishing its great power status (the fundamental principle of Russian foreign policy). Power here does not mean just force: it means the ability to influence international politics (force may be a means to do so, but only one means). And the idea of Russia having power/influence in the world is linked to questions of legitimacy and how politics should operate at the international level; that is, the *process* by which groups reach and enforce binding decisions, as per Hague and Harrop.

Russia might use its power, and want to influence the process, in order to pursue its interests. But as Danziger's definition highlights, it may also promote certain values. International politics is then an arena in which different values compete. At its most fundamental, international politics might be a competition between different ideologies. The Cold War cannot be understood without considering the clash between fundamentally different political, economic and social systems. On the other hand, it is not clear that the 'cold peace' should be considered in this way. Russia under President Putin is more state interventionist than Western states, but it is a long way from being socialist. Russia does not seek to spread an alternative model around the world; in fact, a fundamental tenet in Russian foreign policy is that each state should have the right to pursue its own model. Therefore, Russian-Western relations reflect a feature of politics within states and also within the European Union: contestation over what should be politicised – whether, for example, economic governance is a technical matter, and if it is, by whom, and how, norms should be decided – and the degree to which notions of the 'good life' should enter into collective decisions or should be left to the individual (person or state).

This paper offers reflections on Russian-Western relations in terms of contestations over the political, drawing on my previous research. In the first section, I consider Russia's demand to be an equal participant in international politics. I then turn to the question of the scope rather than the organisation of international politics. Finally, I explore the implications in terms of conceptualising the politics of international relations.

Russia as an equal participant in international politics

In my research on Russia and the conflicts in former Yugoslavia, I argued that a key factor in Russian policy was that Russia wanted to be involved in decision making (Headley 2008). Policy makers often claimed that this was not because Russia proposed different policies in relation to the conflicts, but that including Russia would not only give legitimacy to the decision-making process; it would also serve Russia's interests in ensuring that its great power status was recognised and that it was not pushed out of international decision making in an arena of traditional Russia interests that also had implications for the post-Cold War European and international system. Most of all, Russia tried to keep decision making within the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), on which Russia inherited the Soviet Union's permanent membership and veto power; and if not there, then in another forum in which Russia would have an equal say (eventually, the Contact Group).

The Russian position therefore reflected a concern with the process of international decision making and its legitimacy, but also a determination to be involved as an equal participant (although

actually, as a great power, an unequal one in comparison to lesser powers). This line began in 1992 and continues to the present. One motivation was the apparently circular, but actually instrumental, one, that Russia wanted to be a full participant in decision making on former Yugoslavia in order to establish Russia as a full participant in decision making more generally. But Russia also wanted to have that participation in order to protect its interests and promote its values. This was clear both in terms of the immediate issue (former Yugoslavia), and more widely. If Russia was pushed aside from decision making in the Balkans, then it would not be able to protect its interests there; in addition, NATO would set a precedent as the key security institution in Europe. But the position was also couched in terms of principles: legitimate use of force, self-determination, sovereignty, and so on. So it was not just power for power's sake. Like with other states that seek to 'punch above their weight' (or 'punch at their weight'), policy makers presented this desire as not just serving their state's interests, but as good for the world as a whole, although in practice, it was more about establishing Russia's great power status and identity.

Russian insistence on involvement in international decision making continues. It has been evident in successive Foreign Policy Concepts, speeches by the President and Foreign Minister, and in policy in relation to Syria, for example. In the Ukraine crisis, Putin's (2014) address to the Federal Assembly in December 2014 demonstrated frustration at the lack of concern for the Russian position:

As I mentioned, in the case of the Ukraine-EU Association Agreement, there was no dialogue at all. We were told that it was none of our business or, to put it simply, we were told where to go.

All the arguments that Russia and Ukraine are members of the CIS free-trade zone, that we have deep-rooted cooperation in industry and agriculture, and basically share the same infrastructure – no one wanted to hear these arguments, let alone take them into account.

Our response was to say: fine, if you do not want to have a dialogue with us, we will have to protect our legitimate interests unilaterally and will not pay for what we view as erroneous policy.

And he added:

It is imperative to respect the legitimate interests of all the participants in international dialogue. Only then, not with guns, missiles or combat aircraft, but precisely with the rule of law will we reliably protect the world against bloody conflict.

Here, then, Russian involvement in decision making is primarily to protect Russian interests, but this is still couched as a principle of international relations (including, somewhat ironically, the 'rule of law').

Contesting the scope of international politics

At the same time that Russia wants a say in international politics, it wants to restrict the scope of that politics: to maintain the separation between domestic and international politics based on traditional notions of sovereignty. Especially under Putin, but also before, Russia is resistant to the idea of humanitarian intervention and the 'responsibility to protect', supports 'legitimate' rulers such as Assad in Syria, and opposes 'colour revolutions' and foreign support for domestic NGOs.

Critics would point out, however, that Russia wants a special zone in which it can interfere in the politics of other supposedly sovereign states: within the former Soviet Union as its sphere of influence. This is encapsulated in a Realist outlook of seeking a multipolar world in which each of the world's great powers has exclusive influence in its immediate neighbourhood. Russia then has a right to intervene in other states within its 'near abroad', and should enjoy a *droit de regard* there. This is demonstrated in practice as well as rhetoric. Russia has indeed interfered in the internal affairs of neighbouring states (e.g. the Ukrainian election in 2004 and in the lead up to Euromaidan) and in conflicts in those states (Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, for example). Nevertheless, Russian policy makers are careful to avoid the term 'sphere of influence', talking instead of a space of special Russian interests. They also dress it up in the language of regional integration, portraying the former Soviet space as an interdependent and interconnected area of common interests and civilizational identity, and one in which the role of Western powers should be limited.

So, Russia wants a global system in which Russia is a major participant, equal to other great powers; and a regional system in which Russia is the major actor in the former Soviet Union. But there is also the European space. The official Russian view is that there can be inter-regionalism between an integrating Eurasian Union and the European Union which are two elements in a wider European space. This model encapsulates a long-standing Russian theme: that Russia is a European power, that it should be an equal participant in the international politics of Europe, including the development of European norms, but that those norms should be limited (Headley 2012). Russia wants to be an individual member of a European security structure of individual sovereign states, and an equal norm maker, rather than a norm taker, with the European Union. But Europe as a whole should not be a 'thick' community of highly developed norms (it should be pluralist, rather than solidarist, in English School terms; Browning 2008).

This means that Russia resists the idea that the EU sets European norms; it also means that Russia demands a political process for the development of those norms; but also, these norms should be

limited, taking into account the choice of each state to develop its own understanding of the common European values of democracy, human rights, and so on. This is the well-known concept of ‘sovereign democracy’, and it echoes Gorbachev’s notion of a Common European Home (Headley 2015a). Politics should be kept out of the international domain as much as possible, but where there is politics, Russia should be an equal participant.

A further area of contestation is over the nature of norms, specifically the distinction between technical norms and political/social norms. Russia recognises that common standards are important in a common economic space, and in fact is prepared to adopt technical EU standards. But policy makers resist the idea that certain norms are technical, and object to attempts by the EU to depoliticise in the name of economic efficiency issues that are both a matter of values and also interests. For example, Russia argues that the European Energy Treaty Charter is not a neutral statement of economic ‘best practice’: it suits the interests of EU states as net energy importers, as opposed to the interests of Russia as an energy supplier, and creates rules of business practice that are ideological rather than technical (separation of energy suppliers and pipelines).

Contextualising the politics of Russian-Western relations

We can contextualise the Russian approach by examining the analogies with domestic politics within states, or state-like entities such as the European Union, drawing on Comparative Politics, nationalism theory, and normative political theory.

Firstly, I have argued that Russian policy makers want to be involved in international policy decision making. There are two ways of looking at this: vying for influence within the rules of the game, and vying for influence over the shaping of those rules. Comparing with domestic politics, in an established constitutional democracy, there may be a stable situation in which groups or individuals vie for power within the existing rules without challenging those rules or feeling that those rules exclude them. On the other hand, those states historically underwent contestation over who had access to decision making, and many people/groups may feel in practice excluded today. Furthermore, in postcolonial states, the institutionalisation of power is a political process that continues. To a certain extent, then, we can understand Russia’s policy by analogy to domestic contestation over the rules of the game, as well as within the game, when those rules are being created in the post-Cold War era. Many [Realist] commentators see Russia as a revisionist power, seeking to change the rules of international politics to grant itself more power. Yet, in key respects, Russia is actually a conservative power, seeking to maintain the status quo in terms of international policy process – the UN system centred on the UNSC at the global level, the OSCE at the European

level – as well as the core norms of international relations (sovereignty, non-intervention in internal affairs). Richard Sakwa (2015) uses the term ‘neo-revisionist’ to capture this distinction. While the term feels misleading, the point is the same: that Russia challenges the *de facto* power constellation of international politics, but not its formal structure – with the UNSC as the key decision making body, and five permanent members having a veto – nor the existing fundamental rules of politics between states.

Secondly, apart from the politics of power and decision making within the international arena, the Russian case shows also how international politics is inherently linked to the politics of national identity. Right from the start of the post-Soviet era, Russian domestic debates about its national identity have been linked to debates over its foreign policy (Headley 2008). While Russian claims to great power status reflect a consensus about its state identity, there continue to be debates and tensions over understandings of national identity. In particular, there are alternative ideas of the relationship between Russian national identity and Russia’s place in the wider European and Eurasian spaces. On the one hand, the insistence on state sovereignty suggests that the primary community is the population of the Russian Federation – of all ethnicities. In contrast, increased focus on promoting links with, and protecting the rights of, ethnic Russians in the ‘near abroad’ suggests a more ethnically-focused idea of the nation. At the same time, to underpin their policy priority of developing regional integration in the post-Soviet space, the Russian authorities represent Russia as part of a wider Eurasian civilisation, a region of countries sharing a common history, culture and to a certain extent language. For example, according to the 2013 Russian Foreign Policy Concept (FPC):

Russia intends to actively contribute to the development of interaction among CIS Member States in the humanitarian sphere on the ground of preserving and increasing common cultural and civilisational heritage which is an essential resource for the CIS as a whole and for each of the Commonwealth’s Member States in the context of globalisation. (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013, para 44)

This echoes the EU’s own identity rhetoric. However, there also appears to be some tension evident in the FPC between the idea of Eurasia as a separate civilisation and as part of a wider European cultural space. For example, paragraph 44 claims that the envisaged Eurasian Economic Union ‘is designed to serve as an effective link between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region’, while paragraph 56 asserts that ‘[i]n its relations with the European Union, the main task for Russia as an integral and inseparable part of European civilisation is to promote creating a common economic and humanitarian space from the Atlantic to the Pacific’ (Russian MFA 2013).

The latter quote shows that despite current tensions, Russian policy makers still see Russia as part of Europe. They claim that Russia shares European values, but disagree about how those values translate into specific norms, but also which are the ‘true’ European values.¹ In contrast to the ‘false’ Europe of individualism, gay rights, and so on, there is an argument, common across the conservative right in much of Europe, that Europe is based on Christianity and is associated with conservative notions of marriage, heterosexuality, and so on. However, there is a contradiction between the notion of ‘sovereign democracy’ – a defence of the right of each state to its own ways of doing things – and the notion of ‘true’ European values. This of course is also a feature of contemporary EU politics, with the Hungarian and Polish governments resisting EU criticism in the name of their right to sovereign decision making but also claiming that their values are ‘true’ European values.

Within the European Union, an increasingly detailed or ‘thick’ set of norms has been developed based on a common set of values. These values can therefore be said to constitute the political community. At the other end of the scale, Scottish separatism is founded not just on material arguments (and cultural arguments were kept to a minimum during the referendum debate), but also on the notion that Scotland has a different set of political values from the rest of the UK. Yet, the nation can also be a site for competition between sets of values (Hutchinson 2005). In this case, the nation comes first – there is some form of identification preceding the idea of common values – so politics is in part a competition for which values should be dominant within an existing community, drawing on a common history and set of symbols. This kind of politics is reproduced at the European level, not just within the EU – where we would expect such competition because it is a state-like entity (Cederman 2001) – but also in the wider Europe. Russia’s claim to be part of Europe is a cultural/historical claim, not simply one of geography (Headley 2012), and Russian policy makers see the European space as an existing community within which there is a contest over what values it represents and what they mean in terms of specific norms.

Finally, if we take international society to be analogous to society within a state, then states are individual members of that international society, and the relationship of the individual states to the collectivity of states becomes comparable to the question of the relationship of individual citizens to the collective entity – the state of which they are citizens. Here, normative political theory becomes relevant.

¹ On Russian notions of ‘true’ and ‘false’ Europe, see Neumann (1999).

² For the application of Habermas’s theory of communicative action to International Relations, see also Lose (2001) and Müller (2004).

I have argued that Russian policy makers demand an equal say in deciding international policy on any particular issue (especially those involving Russian interests) but also an equal say in developing common global/European norms, while insisting that any such norms should be ‘thin’. Such Russian rhetoric chimes with Habermas’s notion of Discourse Ethics, which is within the deontological tradition, but rejects the idea that an individual agent can determine ethical norms through pure reason (Habermas 1990). Ethical truth can only be found through dialogue between equals who might have their own interests and own beliefs about ethical truth but enter into discussion with no power inequalities and, through that discussion, reach a consensus – this is what Risse (2000) calls the ‘logic of arguing’.² Now, the EU itself might be seen as a model of this approach (in theory, though, as the Eurozone crisis shows, not always in practice) – whereby EU norms are developed through the discussion of equal member states, making them cosmopolitan norms.³ However, if the EU claims that its norms developed in this way should then apply to all states (or all European states, including those that are not members), then this is not the equal elaboration of norms, and also raises the problem that universal ethics are decided by the EU (Aggestam 2008; Prichard 2013). This is what Russian policy makers object to, and it is interesting that they seek to create fora in which Russia is an equal with Western states rather than a group of states – ‘at 29’ with NATO, for example, rather than ‘28+1’, or ‘at 29’ with the EU in a Russia-EU Council, rather than ‘28+1’ – so that they are not entering into dialogue with a group of states who have already agreed their position.⁴

Russian objections are aimed in particular at the notion of normative superiority of the West, encapsulated in ideas such as Normative Power Europe (NPE) (Manners 2002). It is clear that the NPE idea is antithetical to a Discourse Ethics approach. The very idea that one state or state-like entity is normatively different (superior) to other states rules out discussion as equals. Indeed, any idea that norms/values constitute power (the notion of ‘soft power’ is another example) is contrary to Habermasian Discourse Ethics in which there should be no power differences, normative or otherwise. Similarly, Manners (2008) suggests that Virtue Ethics might shed light on the notion of

² For the application of Habermas’s theory of communicative action to International Relations, see also Lose (2001) and Müller (2004).

³ Parker and Rosamond (2013, p. 233) call the EU’s norms ‘cosmopolitan to the extent that they increasingly trump any specific concerns of sovereign states that may conflict with them and are, in theory at least, increasingly advocated and upheld in transnational and European jurisdictional spaces’; while Whitman (2011) sees Manners as defending the NPE idea against accusations of neo-colonialism on the grounds that the EU’s norms/principles are universal, which rather begs the question.

⁴ When the NATO-Russia Council was created in 2002, on Russian insistence it met ‘at 20’ rather than at ‘19+1’, as had occurred previously in the Permanent Joint Council (PJC). Russian diplomats regarded that format as more commonly ‘19 against 1’ because the NATO members met first and formulated a common policy which was then presented to Russia in the PJC on a take-it-or-leave-it basis; Headley (2008, p. 456).

the EU being an ethical actor, but the idea of a moral exemplar inherent in Virtue Ethics is also contrary to the Habermasian approach and the Russian position (Headley 2015b).

The Russian position can also be considered through the lens of another prominent political theorist: John Rawls. Rawls's (1999) idea of the state being neutral between different conceptions of the good life – a continuation of a strand of liberal thinking that underpins the more individualist types of liberalism found in the United Kingdom and the United States in particular – is echoed in the notion of 'sovereign democracy'. In international society, it is the right of each state/nation to pursue its own notion of the good life. International institutions should not impinge on that freedom, and should only develop those laws/norms that are necessary for the equal protection and flourishing of all. Therefore, any attempt to develop a more detailed set of norms for the wider European space, for example, is problematic not just in terms of the procedure, but also because it is inherently an illiberal exercise as it denies the right of each state to self-determination.

But, of course, at the same time, this is a communitarian argument – the idea that nations can be repositories of values. For example, Michael Walzer (1994) defends a notion of rights that allows for minimal cross-cultural absolute human rights and universal norms, but these are quite limited or 'thin'; he sees 'thicker' rights and norms being generated in each nation or culture. Indeed, the idea of individual human rights transcending national boundaries and limiting the scope of action of individual states is in tension with the notion of the individual rights of states to non-interference and choice of their own path of development. Such tensions are not unique to Russian relations with other European states. We can see them in the EU at the moment, but we can also see them in other contexts. For example, Tomáš Masaryk (2007, p. 11) argued in 1915 that 'each nation must work out its culture alone and independently, and not simply take that of another nation, even if it be called a higher culture. Passive acceptance of this kind may be convenient, but it is dangerous and detrimental.' And David Lange (1985), the New Zealand Prime Minister at the time that it adopted a nuclear-free policy, made a similar argument at his famous speech to the Oxford Union in 1985, deriding the US's claim to be upholding an alliance of democracies by preventing its members from choosing their own means of security:

We have been told that because others in the West – and their advocates are here tonight – carry the fearful burden of a defence which terrorises as much as the threat it counters, we too must carry that burden. We are actually told that New Zealanders cannot decide for themselves how to defend New Zealand, but are obliged to adopt the methods which others use to defend themselves. ... It is self-defeating logic, just as the weapons themselves are self-defeating: to compel an ally to accept nuclear weapons against the wishes of that ally is to

take the moral position of totalitarianism, which allows for no self-determination, and which is exactly the evil that we are supposed to be fighting against.

For Putin, sovereignty means that ‘both large and small nations have equal rights, including the right to choose an independent path of development’ (Putin 2005). This is supposed to be democracy in the international sphere (meaning that efforts to shape another country’s development in a particular direction modelled on one’s own experience is undemocratic). It is also a rejection of the idea of Europe-wide norms, the notion that specific ways of operating should be uniform across the continent (i.e. it signifies opposition to the standardisation inherent in ‘Europeanisation’). So, there is a tension between the idea of democracy between states as individual entities in international society, and democracy as a particular way of arranging power between individuals within states, including the observance of their fundamental rights. The Western states’ foregrounding of what they regard as universal values leads them to give priority to the latter. Christopher Browning (2003, pp. 55-6) goes so far as to argue that, ‘[d]espite proclamations of pluralism, Western liberal democracy ... only tolerates pluralism on its own terms’.⁵ In essence, this is a variation on the liberal dilemma: can liberalism tolerate intolerance (given that Russia’s ‘independent path of development’ has led towards illiberalism and authoritarianism)? It also relates to debates over inalienable, universal individual rights as opposed to group rights to self-determination of developing own forms of government, based on different culture and history; and it has parallels with the debates within poly-ethnic states over the practices of some minority groups, a key feature of contemporary politics within European states.

Conclusion

I have argued that international relations is inherently political in a variety of ways, and we can see not just analogies, but also the same structure of arguments at the international level as at the domestic level in many respects. For Russia, international politics is about the struggle for power, but not just power for its own sake. While power is now seen less now than previously as a means for Russia to promote a particular ideology or set of values, it is the means by which Russia can protect its interests. This understanding of politics as a struggle for power between actors seeking to pursue their interests is, of course, common too in analysing domestic politics. But Russia also couches the issue in terms of principles of how international politics should operate, that is, the rules of the game, including as a direct analogy, the idea of democracy at the international level. Furthermore, there is contestation between Russia and the West over what kind of values should

⁵ Furthermore, the relationship with the EU is one sided. As Barysch (2005, p. 31) writes, ‘[t]hird countries can consult, coordinate, cooperate, but they have no place in EU internal decision-making’.

underpin international relations and also the internal behaviour of states. This is both at the global level and the European level. Russian policy makers view Russia as inherently European, and enter into a contestation over what 'European' means in terms of values and more specific norms deriving from them. This competition can be understood through a comparison with contestations over national identity – what constitutes it, and what is the relationship between culture/history and values. Here, literature on nationalism is relevant, and normative political theory can also shed light.

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