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SELF-INFLICTED MARGINALIZATION? Illiberal Russia in search for its own reality

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The ongoing crisis in Russia-Ukraine relations is more often than not discussed in regional security context, with some tendency of either diminishing or even denying its profound reverberations for the entire EU and the whole Euro-Atlantic community. The starting point for my analysis is different: I stem from the momentous implications of this crisis for the entire international society, since its ensuing repercussions are likely to determine the underlying rules and norms shaping international relations in a long run. That is why we need a wider picture of EU-Russia-Ukraine relations that encompass an ample array of issues of global scale.

The puzzle I am going to tackle boils down to Russia's reversal of its earlier voluntary acceptance of the Western hegemonic order, largely based on liberal principles of governance. Nowadays, late Putin's Russia, being sympathetic with *Realpolitik* strategies, wants structural changes in Europe and beyond, aimed at challenging EU's liberal policies of democracy and widely spread post-modernist conceptions

of post-sovereignty, post-nationalism, etc. A question deserving attention at this juncture is what explains Russia's U-turn from the integration into the liberal international order to its contestation? Perhaps, the easiest answer would be that the latter disappointed Russia, but why is it so, and where are the roots of the current conflict between Russia and the West? Does it have to be explicated by irreconcilable divergences,

mutual misunderstanding and misperceptions, or a failure to strike a pragmatic deal?

This paper will, first, question one of key arguments of Kremlin's political philosophy claiming that the post-1991 system of international relations was discriminatory and disadvantageous to Russia. I will sketch the contours of an alternative international order Russia longs for, and then argue that this drastic alteration in Russia's foreign policy can be explained within the framework of deep changes in the structure of Russian political discourse, and in particular the role of performative elements appealing to emotions, as opposed to rational calculus.

After the disintegration of the USSR and the loss of empire, a second trauma was the gradual comprehension of Russia's inability to meet the high normative and institutional standards of the West.

With all its undeniable imperfections, it is the international society established after 1991 that provided Russia with multiple chances to augment its international influence, and boost its status and role in the world.

A newborn conservative consensus, built on a combination of parochial Orthodoxy, spiritual mythology and retrograde nostalgia about the "old good times" of Russian grandeur, is a good example of using normative rhetoric for detaching and isolating Russia from the West.

Putin proved to be able to take advantages of the multiple controversies emanated from the post-modernization of the EU, including the lack of "strong" (i.e. unified and acting more politically than institutionally) leadership and own military capabilities.

Putin's realism is deficient in its core aspect - it puts divisive emotions above rational calculations, and its concept of interests leads to confrontation with a stronger group of countries, instead of expanding terrain for pragmatic solutions.

A Myth of Russia's Marginalization

The nodal point of Russia's revisionist discourse is the idea of its intentional marginalization by the West, which has to be analyzed as a socio-linguistic construct and put in a specific political context. It is the marginalization argument that justifies Putin's detour from the policy of integrating into the dominating normative order to challenging it. As seen from Putin's perspective, Russia claims to have invested in building cooperative relations with the West much more than it received in response, which justifies Kremlin's contestation of the previous policy of normative compliance.

Russia's revolt against the post-1991 international society as allegedly being discriminatively demanding towards Russia has its structural explanation. It is only within the hegemonic Western-led liberal order that equality is not granted to states automatically, by "natural" rights: equality -as another socio-linguistic construct- presupposes acceptance of -and compliance with- certain principles and norms. It also implies openness to domestic transformations for the sake of building mutually compatible normative denominators in a community of likeminded partners. Mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion are much more diverse and variegated in the norm-based international societies, as opposed to hard power-based ones where it is physical force that plays the decisive role in accepting and legitimizing someone's interests.

Russia retreats from the liberal model of international society that appears too normatively burdensome for the Kremlin rulers.

As seen from this perspective, Russia retreats from the liberal model of international society that appears too normatively burdensome for the Kremlin rulers. It is only within the framework of this model -nowadays contested by Moscow- that Russia can be challenged in its near abroad policy as unduly imposing and based on imperial legacies. This deepens the conceptual gap between the predominantly normative international society promoted by the EU and its opposite, advocated by the Kremlin.

Yet the rationality of Russia's penchant to *realist* revision of post-1991 international society can be questioned. It was within the framework of the Western-dominated normative order in the 1990s that Russia attained a lot in many policy spheres, which the Kremlin nowadays tends to obliterate from public discourses¹.

First, Russia was consensually recognized as the successor of the Soviet Union, which safeguarded its permanent seat in the UN Security Council. In this capacity Russia enjoyed full equality with four other great powers, and politically used this high

status for a variety of purposes, including blocking many Western policy initiatives.

Second, Russia was accepted as a member of key international institutions, including the Council of Europe, and later the G7 that extended to G8 as a gesture of good will from the West. In particular, it was the Swiss mediation that made possible Russia's WTO membership blocked by Georgia after the August 2008 war.

Third, prospects for Russia's strategic partnership with the EU² -sustained by the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, the Northern Dimension, the Partnership for Modernization, etc.- were quite visible on the horizon. The same goes for Russia-NATO cooperation³.

Fourth, it was due to Gorbachev's facilitation in the reunification of Germany that Berlin has clearly formulated its *Ostpolitik* as a de facto pro-Russian policy after the Soviet Union disintegrated. A type of "Russia first" strategy was often implemented at the expense of relations with other post-Soviet countries whose interests many German policy makers perceived through the prism of Russia's sensitivities. Within the *Ostpolitik* framework Russia enjoyed a status of Germany's most privileged partner, protected and defended in many troublesome situations. In particular, it was Germany that launched the Meseberg initiative on the resolution of conflict in Transnistria as a response to a call for new pan-European security architecture

advocated by then President Dmitry Medvedev. Germany lobbied for the Partnership for Modernization designed as a policy engine to gradually upgrade Russian economy, industry and finances, and established a set of communication platforms known as the Germany-Poland-Russia dialogue. It was Germany that supported the Polish-Russian visa-free border-crossing initiative that became an exception from the Schengen rules made to accommodate Russian interests in visa facilitation regime with the whole EU.

Fifth, in regional institutions -in particular, the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and the Black Sea Economic Cooperation- Russia has gotten equal rights with EU member states and could -perhaps, indirectly- influence EU policies. CBSS was, and remains, in spite of the current EU-Russia crisis, particularly open to accommodate Russian visions of the areas of common interests, including environment, sustainable development, transportation, cross-border management, and so forth.

Sixth, European institutions (in particular, the Organization for Cooperation and Security in Europe, OSCE) since early 1990s were instrumental in promoting Russia-friendly visions of the situation with Russian speakers in the Baltic states. OSCE for years exerted substantial pressure upon Estonian government

1. APPELBAUM, Anne. "The Myth of Russia's Humiliation". *The Washington Post*, October 17, 2014, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/anne-applebaum-nato-pays-a-heavy-price-for-giving-russia-too-much-credits-true-achievement-under-threat/2014/10/17/5b3a6f2a-5617-11e4-809b-8cc0a295c773_story.html

2. See: *EU and Russia: a Strategic Partnership*, available at http://eeas.europa.eu/russia/docs/2011_eu-russia_leaflet_en.pdf

3. NATO Secretary General calls for genuine NATO-Russia strategic partnership, 1 February 2014, NATO web site, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/ic/natohq/news_106790.htm

for convincing it to take a more inclusive and conciliatory stand towards conditions under which Russian minorities could be integrated⁴.

Seventh, Russia has gotten some concessions from NATO, including the refusal to provide Membership Action Plans to Ukraine and Georgia at the Bucharest summit of 2008. This sign of compromise however did not prevent the war between Russia and Georgia and the consequent dismemberment of the latter.

Eighth, Russia profited a lot from a decade-long international funding of Russian education, academia, and a significant part of NGO sector working on the most ardent social issues - environmental protection, urban planning, gender equality, domestic violence, anti-corruption projects, etc. Almost all the so called "exchange programs" throughout 1990s were in fact Western-funded charity initiatives aimed at materially sustaining Russian scholars, educators, journalists, public servants, policy experts, etc., and preventing them from migrating from Russia westwards.

Ninth, it was within the post-1991 international society that Russia got a chance to drastically upgrade its urban and transportation infrastructure by means of multiple mega-events - the Universiade-2013 in Kazan, the winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014, and the forthcoming 2018 World FIFA Cup in eleven Russian cities, to name just the most important of them. Each of them was a chance to open up provincial cities to the world and reshape Russia's reputation as a hospitable and peaceful country with its own soft power potential.

With all its undeniable setbacks and imperfections, it is the international society established after 1991 that provided Russia with multiple chances to augment its international influence, and boost its status and role in the world. Yet Russia opted for a *Realpolitik*-based international order grounded in a different vocabulary - containment, deterrence, balance of powers, and (possibly) arms race - which only two and a half decades ago was deadly detrimental for its predecessor, the Soviet Union.

Explaining Russia's revisionism

Many European policy and opinion makers, even after Russia's resolve to challenge the existing normative order came to the surface, continued to treat Putin's regime as by and large compatible with the West. This explains a number of deeply rooted stereotypes about Putinism - that the Kremlin is still interested in modernization and thus is open to striking deals with the West, that Putin's policy doesn't reflect the needs of the society, or that the latter simply lacks correct information and thus falls easy victim of sophisticated

propaganda. Yet these arguments in many respects idealize the situation and tend to ignore the fact that the Kremlin voluntarily derailed its policies from the modernization track, and that majority of Russians do support the anti-Western policies of the ruling elite. And besides, the current blend of nationalism and imperialism matured when the country was relatively free - at least, in terms of political pluralism and freedom of speech. Anti-Western attitudes affected spheres that, logically speaking, should have been relatively immune to primitive conspiracy theories - for example, the head of the "Russian Railways" Vladimir Yakunin is known as one of the most vociferous proponents of rejection of "alien values" and "the Western model of the economy" all together.

Putin's current revisionist strategy consists of several key elements. The Kremlin aims to take full advantage of its status of the successor of the USSR, converting it into a special role in the post-Soviet area. It wishes to reconsider the results of the end of the Cold War, including the dissolution of USSR and even the reunification of Germany. The Kremlin also seeks to legitimate the Soviet rule, fuelling pro-Stalinist public sympathies and justifying the most controversial foreign policy moves of the Soviet regime - the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the suppression of the "Prague spring" and the intervention in Afghanistan. Another component of Kremlin's strategy is to delegitimize all supranational institutions (mainly NATO and the EU, but also the G7 and the Council of Europe) by demonstrating their

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ineffectiveness and weakness. This is a crucial component of Kremlin's penchant for detaching countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus from the EU and NATO, and reinstalling spheres of influence based on a model known as great power management (concert of great powers) in Europe. It is noteworthy that this anti-Western agenda does have an audience in EU and NATO member states: far-right and far-left parties, parties competing for votes of Russian-speakers, mostly in the Baltic states, as well as pragmatic lobbies (advocates for 'business as usual', 'Wandel durch Handel' (change through trade), or even 'Russia first' policies).

There are more than one explanation of the roots of the current Russian revisionism. One of them can be found in an intricate combination of the *double trauma* that is generative of a feeling of *existential insecurity*. The first traumatic experience was the disintegration of the USSR and the loss of empire. What comes easily to mind is famous Putin's characterization of the fall of the Soviet Union as a major geopolitical disaster of the 20 century; but even in the liberal discourse references to "cultural imperialism" and "the liberal empire" (Anatoly Chubais) were not rare. A second trauma was the gradual comprehension of Russia's inability to meet the high normative and institutional standards of the West. Again, even among Russian liberals there were always many voices claiming that 'Russia is not Europe' and thus can't be treated as equal.

4. HOGAN-BRUN, Gabrielle and WRIGHT Sue. "Language, nation and citizenship: contrast, conflict and convergence in Estonia's debate with the international community". *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 41, n° 2 (2013), pp. 240-252.

Yet there is another explication as well, which deduces Moscow's irritation with and contestation of the current international society from the limitations it imposes upon Russia's actorship, to which the Kremlin appears to be hyper-sensitive. The hegemonic West, with its policy of normative institutionalization of relations with its partners, leaves little room for what the Russian sociologist Alexandr Bikbov dubbed "direct action", or non-mediated type of communication with other world leaders, skipping institutional intermediaries⁵. It is through direct touch with the heads of other great powers that Putin would like to build a new security landscape, and this is what might explain Russia's policy in Ukraine as a search for recognition based not on institutional or normative commitments, but on direct application of force against its skillfully constructed "enemies". One of possible explanations of the current success of the Kremlin's manipulative propaganda in consolidating Russian identity on the basis of confrontation with Ukraine and -in a more general sense- the West is that these "enemies" were symbolically delinked from the sphere of "normalcy", and their behavior was described as being allegedly deviant from certain norms, if not de-humanized. The portrayal of the government in Kyiv as "murderers" of Russian people in Donbas, or the depiction of the West as a sinful civilization digressed from human designation are examples of enemy imagery that swamped Russian official and semi-official discourses.

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What Does Russia Want Instead?

As for the ideal model of international society, Russia would like to see it grounded in nation states rather than supra-national or trans-national regulatory institutions. This model accepts norms in a very instrumental and limited fashion, as a tool for constructing the unfriendly otherness and thus distinguishing Russia's civilizational identity from the Euro-Atlantic West. A newborn conservative consensus, built on a combination of parochial Orthodoxy, spiritual mythology and retrograde nostalgia about the "old good times" of Russian grandeur⁶, is a good example of using normative rhetoric for detaching and isolating Russia from the West.

Another important characteristic of Russia's vision of the optimal international society is its political kernel, as opposed to largely depoliticized normative power projection practiced by the EU. The political momentum embedded in Russia's revisionism is two-fold. *First*, Russia longs for an international society based on a series of legitimized exceptions, which from the liberal perspective seem unsustainable. This exceptionalization is grounded in the logic of naturalizing certain policies

by presenting them not as effects of choices made, but rather as something self-evident and necessitating no political debates. For instance, Russia clearly exceptionalizes Ukraine among all its post-Soviet neighbors, using for this purpose references to "blood-based" and thus "family-type" relations between the two countries that, in Moscow's view, justifies Russia's right to play a special role in Ukraine. In result, Russia can't accept Ukraine as a "normal" country, which is strikingly different from the policies of the EU that tries to inscribe Ukraine into the existing normative frameworks, be it aid policy, arms sales or norms of the Association Agreement.

Second, the political gist of Russia's protest against the dominant international society is epitomized by Kremlin's claims to play a role of a bearer of universal trends that stretch beyond national boundaries. Russia thinks of itself as a global power not due to its economic potential, but mainly because it tends to portray its anti-Western "moral crusade" (with anti-Americanism at its core) as constitutive part of the global decline of the Western civilization. Yet it is exactly at this point that Russia fails due to its inability to present "its own emancipation as the criterion of general emancipation", i.e. to form a broad coalition of countries able to challenge the hegemonic Western-centric regime. The fact is that the Kremlin has started implementing its counter-hegemonic project under the conditions of obviously declining sympathies to Russia worldwide⁸.

There is one more problematic point in Russia's revisionism. Advocating for a nation state-centric type of international society, Russia itself is very uncertain about its own model of nation state. Within

Russia there are multiple proponents of imperial (a second edition of the Soviet Union), civilizational (Eurasianist), religious (Orthodox-based) or ethno-linguistic (the "Russian world") models of Russia's subjectivity, all of them conceptually clashing with the idea of nation state. Paradoxically, Russian patriotic and imperial discourses may be nation- or civilization-based, but they are not state-centric in a strict sense, which suggests that the idea of nation state, key for the Westphalian system, is relatively weakly articulated within Russia, and thus can hardly be used as a solid conceptual basis for Russian foreign policy philosophy.

Contested rationality

The major paradox is that the roots of Putin's revisionist turn, with its seemingly strong emphasis on an interest-based, and thus apparently realist, rhetoric, is implemented within a framework of post-modernist transmutations in the very structure of domestic and international politics. This trend is epitomized by the growing appeal of performative acts and affective investments, and Russia is no exception to this global trend. Arguably,

5. BIKBOV, Alexandr. *Organizatsionnaya ideologiya Vladimira Putina i etika proigravshikh*, Gefter. 4 February 2015, available at <http://gefter.ru/archive/14191>

6. SOBCHAK, Ksenia and KRASOVSKY Anton. „Doroga k khramu“. Snob, 8 June 2015, available at <http://snob.ru/selected/entry/93638/page/4>

7. BALIBAR, Etienne. *Politics and the Other Scene*. London and New York: Verso, 2002. p.6.

8. *Russia's Global Image Negative amid Crisis in Ukraine*. Pew Research Center, July 9, 2014, available at <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/09/russias-global-image-negative-amid-crisis-in-ukraine/>

the importance of emotions and the so called “wow effects” increases with the growing accents on soft power technologies and the consequent demand for discursive resignification(s) of key political concepts, which might contradict purely rational calculations. Seen through this prism, Putin, with all his pathos of a forceful comeback to modern -if not pre-modern in some respects- traditionalism, can be seen as a product of the post-modern society, with its fuzzy identities, aversion to well established ideologies, constant revisions of key political concepts, uncertain boundaries, manipulative performativity, seemingly illogical yet emotionally appealing moves, and simulative technologies that work mostly as virtual constructs. Thus, Putin’s realism is deficient in its core aspect - it puts divisive emotions above rational calculations, and its -concept of interests with a very high likelihood leads to confrontation with a stronger group of countries, instead of expanding terrain for pragmatic solutions.

The deficit of rationality in the Kremlin U-turn from a relatively established model of the international society to something less certain and potentially more menacing can be explained from a wider perspective of the cognitive crisis of political discourses and the search for new groundings of politics - not in rational calculus, but rather in imageries, myths and PR technologies. Major arenas for Russia’s identity-making are sportive and cultural events, performative actions (such as the provocative ride of the Kremlin-patronized “Night Wolves” bikers from Russia to Berlin in commemoration of the 9th of May Victory Day), celebrations and festivities, rallies, as well as actions of public protest (of which the ‘Pussy Riot’ case is one of the most visible). Rational discourses are sidelined, marginalized and substituted by the performative language of imageries that are more easily manipulated than rational arguments. In Gleb Pavlovsky’s words, Ukraine “gave an ardent and dense picture for the majority”⁹ that could be easily and uncritically digested. Other commentators go even further claiming that Putin’s rule is based on a series of media-crafted illusions, and turns Russian politics into a lengthy one-man reality show¹⁰.

Indeed, the entire Russian political discourse became colonized by competing images that might be delinked from reality. The U-turn from Europe to Asia, instead of being a matter of rational calculus, turns into a rhetorical demarche staged basically for the West. Without having any chances to withstand full-fledged military confrontation with NATO Russia demonstratively launches multiple military jet flights in immediate proximity to NATO member states borders. What Russia gets in response is NATO military infrastructure approaching Russian borders - not as a result of the Western hegemony, but rather as a logical response to Russia’s intentional destabilization of the existing structures of the international society.

These policy moves are meant to raise Russia’s visibility in the West, but also may contribute to domestic consolidation of the regime, which translates into exorbitant approval ratings of the President. Yet all this comes at a high price. In the economy, 20 regions of Russia are economically insolvent, and the sanctions hit badly many Russian industries. In domestic politics, Chechnya takes high political rent for practically supporting Putin’s policy in Ukraine, in exchange directly questioning federal authorities’ control over this de-facto self-governed region. It is exactly at these pints that realism in properly assessing Russia’s weakness and vulnerabilities, as opposed to illusionary and mostly performative superiority over the West, might help a lot.

Concluding remarks

The critical deterioration of relations between Russia and the West poses challenges to both parties. For the West one of key problems is that countering Moscow with a similar type of geopolitical discourse leads to the de-facto reproduction of Kremlin’s malign logic of rivalry and enmity, which the EU definitely wishes to avoid. Another problem is that Putin proved to be able to take advantages of the multiple controversies emanated from the post-modernization of the EU, including the lack of “strong” (i.e. unified and acting more politically than institutionally) leadership and own military capabilities. Russian

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strategists also shrewdly exploit deep cleavages within the EU over the very concept of Europe, including the principle of solidarity within it.

As far as Russia is concerned, the most misfortunate element of Putin’s agenda is its construction on the shaky basis of concepts that are highly questionable, at least in the sense they are (mis) understood in the Kremlin. *Sovereignty* is constantly perforated by Russia’s dependence upon external milieu, from the SWIFT system in the banking sector to FIFA in sports industry. *Equality*, which is understood in Russia not in legal but rather in social, political and symbolic terms, is questioned by unequal distribution of economic and other resources across the globe.

Yet the good news is that Russia’s strategy of negative othering of the West is totally grounded in concepts with obvious Western legacy - soft power, multipolarity, balance of power, spheres of influence, etc. This means that Russia can’t propose a conceptual alternative to the Western world and is much stronger bound to it than proponents of Russian self-sufficiency falsely deem. It is at this point that a glimpse of hope can be found: for Europe Russia is simply a temporal Other, a country that is stuck in the controversies of its path to modernization and thus eagerly reproduces models of international behavior that Europe has already and decisively left behind, and considers dangerously outdated. Yet if Russia reminds Europe of its own -perhaps forgotten- past (as opposed to presenting a conceptually new picture of the future), this opens a perspective of

9. PAVLOVSKY, Gleb., „Kreml: ot konservativnoj politiki - k revoliutsii“. *Russkiy Zhurnal*, 30 May 2014, available at <http://russ.ru/Mirovaya-povestka/Kreml-ot-konservativnoj-politiki-k-revoljucii>

10. BARBASHIN, Anton., „Putin kak illiuzia“. Intersection web portal, 10 June 2015, available at <http://intersectionproject.eu/ru/article/politics/путин-как-иллюзия>

applying to Russia a whole set of policies that earlier worked for Europeans themselves, including the idea of a 'Marshall plan' for Russia advocated by the economist Sergey Guriev, the successful practices of the French - German post-war reconciliation, transition from authoritarianism to democracy, etc. In a long run these experiences can turn the boundaries Russia constructs to distinguish itself from Europe into fuzzy "lines in the sand" rather than barricades.