

Why Putin's foreign policy is not rational

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There seems to be an international consensus among analysts: Vladimir Putin's foreign policy is rational. I question this presumption.

In international relations, the concept "rationality" has become ubiquitous. Since 2000, around 50% of scholarly international relations references to foreign policy allude to "rationality" (Abulof 2015 pp. 359-360). But "rationality" is rarely defined in international relations literature.

The concept "rationality" has different meanings across fields. In international relations, use of the term renders rationality-based descriptions largely unfalsifiable. Max Weber (1969 pp. 427-445) defined four types of rationality, of which he considered the first two the most important. The first one, *Zweckrationalität*, instrumental rationality, refers to the means-ends rational behavior. This type of rationality is unfalsifiable in foreign policy analysis, as one can argue that any action is motivated by a specific purpose. The second type of Weberian rationality is *Wertrationalität*, value- or belief-oriented rationality. Rationality defined as behavior motivated by and conforming with beliefs, such as religious or ethical values, enables foreign policy analysis from a though normative, but narrower perspective. The concept "rationality"

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becomes falsifiable and therefore operational. Irrationality in foreign policy, then, is behavior that contradicts values universally accepted, such the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

(Ir)Rationality in Policy

How do we define the rationality of a political leader? Policy and politics have two components – discourse and action. In democracies, rationality can be assessed by matching words with actions and by the approval or opposition of the majority, the accountability. This speaks to the importance of audiences. The reaction of the public has the power to legitimize or dispute policy. Audiences are key to evaluating the authority of speech and action. In the case of autocratic regimes, the lack of accountability makes measuring actions with words and the public opinion’s expression difficult.

History and philosophy aide in distinguishing motivations from outcomes and in evaluating the rationality of policies. If we assume leaders of non-democratic regimes are rational, because they manage to maintain power (until proven otherwise), then all leaders are rational. Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic were considered rational leaders until they lost power. Kim Jong Un can be considered rational because of his firm grip on power. But does a firm grip on power mean rationality? Rather, after the fact, most dictatorial policies can be linked to justifications.

Evaluating a political leader who makes ‘reasonable’ choices, especially after the fact, is not equal to demonstrating his rationality, as it becomes unfalsifiable. If we follow the definition of *Wertrationalität*, then autocratic leaders, such as Hitler and Stalin, adopt an irrational foreign policy, as the policies are in contradiction with internationally accepted values – human rights, the respect for territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty, etc.

There are a series of factors that suggest the irrationality of autocratic leaders. Political leaders generally are associated with paranoia, as their *“interaction with the environment has characteristics of a self-fulfilling prophecy. His [the political leader’s] defensive aggression creates a genuinely hostile environment which he at first only delusively fears (...) the unrecognized paranoid can be highly effective as a leader”* (Robins & Post 1987 p. 1). A feature

of irrational behavior in autocratic leaders is the profound anxiety of losing power. Paranoid anxiety easily transfers into policies that pursue seek legitimation and recognition. Vladimir Putin’s aggressive policies in Eastern Europe – with the aim to gain international recognition as a major power – are examples of anxiety transferal into foreign policy. The effects are visible: according to a recent poll (Avilov 2019), 75% of Russians believe their country is a superpower, compared to only 30% in 2005.

Autocratic leaders are inclined toward risky behavior, due to the unaccountable environment in which they operate. The more rational you are, the less you engage in risky behavior, because the chances increase for your deeds to be held against the values you represent. Autocratic leaders have a continuous and dazzling inconsistency between statements and actions, enabled by their regimes’ unaccountability. This, too, is self-evident in Russia’s case, where its leader makes contradictory statements – see the Little Green Men in Crimea.

Finally, forceful convictions and political ideologies at the left and right fringes of the spectrum are characteristic of autocrats. History has taught us the consequences of bestowing absolute moral authority to political leaders, especially when they emphasize collective interests in the detriment of individualism, pluralism, and tolerance (see Stalin and Hitler). Vladimir Putin’s narrative is inculcated with moral authority exercise. When the Russian President makes statements on foreign policy that are charged with zealotry – such as “*we as martyrs would go to paradise while they will simply perish*” (Kremlin 2018) in the event of a nuclear attack – we ought to ring alarm bells.

Putin’s Strategic Narrative

Russia’s foreign policy is President Vladimir Putin’s foreign policy. It’s a one-man show. This is partially due to the super-presidential system of the country. It is also a one-man show because of Vladimir Putin himself, now in his fourth term, has a firm grip on his country and a strong vision for foreign policy. Hence, when endeavoring to scrutinize Russian foreign policy, we must analyze Putin’s discourse and actions.

Strategic narratives are defined by Miskimmon et al. (2012 p. 3) as “*means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic*

and international actors.” Narratives have a strong temporal dimension and formulate a resolution or a projected outcome. They help construct connections between events. Furthermore, they are a highly effective tool of soft power. Szostek (2017 p. 572), writing on Russian strategic narratives, points out that they *“allow state-led attacks on critical others and the self-promotion via ‘nation-branding’ to be seen as different but related to the same end.”* When highly effective, strategic narratives can structure the identity of actors and the experience of international affairs itself. The utility of strategic narratives is that they help to explain how *“different actors project and contest narratives of the international system, which highlights how existing and emerging powers seek to impose a shared meaning of how the international order does, or should, function”* (Miskimmon & O’Laughlin 2017 p. 113).

During the 2012 election campaign, Vladimir Putin shifted his foreign policy discourse. While the first two terms and Medvedev’s presidency were marked by a discourse of “pragmatism,” Putin has gradually ideologized Russian foreign policy, reaching a peak with his speech on the annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Though ideological, normative, and moralizing elements in foreign policy discourse have been present throughout the Russian Federation’s existence – and can be traced back to century-old Russian strategic culture and collective beliefs–, they have become explicit rhetorical touchstones under Putin and have been built into a strategic narrative only starting with 2012.

The shift from a pragmatic foreign policy to a profoundly ideologized one, marked by normativity, exceptionalism, messianism and spirituality, was triggered by the protests against Putin during the 2012 election campaign. In response, Putin constructed a complex strategic narrative of blaming the West, which targeted initially the domestic, and later the international audience.

His strategic narrative is built on the foundation of national identity. The easiest way to construct narratives around national identities is to establish an oppositional relationship between “us” and “the other”. Vladimir Putin created a national identity narrative focused on the West (with the United States as its leader). Not only that the “West” is crucial for Russian national identity, but the Russian strategic narrative would simply not exist without it. Plotlines in Russia’s strategic narrative which emphasize rivalry with the West have a constitutive effect on

the Russian national identity (Szostek 2017 p. 579). By constructing his opponent as an identitarian threat, Vladimir Putin securitized the West². He points out the West's shortcomings, falsely interprets its intentions, and magnifies the erroneous consequences of its actions. Thus, the Kremlin constructs Russia's image as a better alternative to "the West" – moralizing, value-laden, spiritual and conservative power.

Putin's strategic narrative of Russia's role in the world is a powerful one, but not a rational one. It is irrational to construct Moscow's role as a moralizing defender of exceptional values and its leader as the savior from the decadent and perverted West that operates by "the rule of the gun." To manufacture an enemy by invoking its will to "*deprive Russians of their historical memory*" (Kremlin 2014a) and to uphold its violations of international law that Russia itself defies is sophistic in logic and nationalistic in policy.

The invasion of Ukraine in 2014 is the event around which Putin builds his foreign policy narrative of juxtaposing the West with Russia. The narrative has served to justify his actions and to consolidate Russia's revisionist role in the international realm. Moscow claims privileged rights in the countries of its former empire. Consider if the United Kingdom, for instance, would invade and incorporate parts of Egypt or Somalia into the United Kingdom because these were former colonies.

Analysts have explained Russia's actions with the help of two arguments: either Kremlin authoritarian expansionism or as a response to Western encirclement (Cadier 2015 pp. 156-157). Both explanations assume rational actions and discourse. Thus, both explanations give into the Russian strategic narrative. Both explanations 'make sense' because they justify the Kremlin's aggression in Ukraine and the meddling in internal affairs of NATO member states. Both the authoritarian expansionism and the Western encirclement argument serve to justify illegal actions. Moreover, both explanations reflect the strategic narrative's success. None of these explanations is valid if it assumes the rationality of Russian strategic thinking: authoritarian expansionism is irrational because it goes against international law; Western encirclement, on the other hand, is an irrational explanation by default, as it justifies paranoid thinking.

² For the process of securitization in foreign policy see Buzan et al. (1998).



We need to question the use of “rational” guiding principle when analyzing autocratic regimes, as their leaders are unaccountable to the rationality of their policies. Putin’s actions in Ukraine are far from rational. Generally, the annexation of territory by any power in the current context will have consequences. It is needless to stress that annexations go against international law, an internationally (at least rhetorically) accepted value that plays a key role in Russian foreign policy.

Although arguing for rationality in terms of means-ends is falsifiable, it is important to realize that the consequences of Moscow’s actions in Crimea have been both foreseeable and unfavorable. Almost five years after the annexation, the costs for Russia have been significant. Politically, the invasion forced an undecided population to turn West, determined to become an EU (and NATO) member. Russia has gone from Ukraine’s most important ally to the country’s greatest threat. Furthermore, the consequences are still unfolding (see the Ukrainian Church’s recently gained independence). Militarily, the Russian base in Sevastopol was ensured until 2042 and there was no threat to this military installation; instead, NATO has now beefed up its presence on the entire Eastern flank and has reframed Moscow from “partner” to “challenge” and “threat”. Economically, Crimea doesn’t come with natural resources, but rather with great integration costs. Most importantly, Crimea’s annexation has led to Western sanctions that hurt the Russian economy.

Up until now, we have examined Russian actions and consequences. Let us now turn to Moscow’s motivations, expressed in the country’s foreign policy narrative. Putin’s strategic narrative has complex and powerful implications for the way we understand foreign policy in the Western world. The following part of this paper offers an analysis of Russia’s strategic narrative, structured into three sub-narratives: (1) Russia as the moralizer, (2) Russia as the sovereign, and (3) Russia as the enabler of conservatism. I explain each sub-narrative by highlighting the discursive juxtaposition between “Russia” and “the West”. I focus on the policy implications for Russian (and Western) foreign policy and draw attention to the underlying message intended to justify and explain Russian actions abroad.

1. Russia the moralizer

In the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs insists 19 times on the importance of respecting international law. Moscow also strongly links the lack of respect for international law to the West. The Kremlin not only emphasizes the rule of law in the international realm – typical of discourses such as that of the EU or Canada. Rather, the importance of international law constitutes in itself a sub-narrative on the West's contempt for international law. The juxtaposition of the West with Russia has perhaps the most serious implications for our collective belief towards universally accepted values. The Kremlin's narrative directly entails the classical antagonism of good versus evil: by implying the West's disrespect for universal values, Moscow constructs a self-image as a moral authority. This self-image is further amplified by pointing fingers to the West; Russia becomes a moralizer that holds the West – the creator of universal values – accountable for its own hypocrisy. Thus, Putin's narrative seeks to emphasize a collective belief in the West's double standards.

The irony of Moscow's Western double standards consists in the Kremlin's double talk itself. Russia uses international law to point to the West's misdeeds and thus discursively transforms it into an immoral body. By showcasing the West's double standards, Putin justifies his own brazen violations of international law, such as the disregard for territorial integrity and sovereignty in the case of Ukraine and the sovereignty of Western states by meddling in elections. Putin stated in 2014 (Kremlin 2014b) that “the allegations and statements that Russia is trying to establish some sort of empire, encroaching on the sovereignty of its neighbors, are groundless.”

The Kremlin takes its narrative on morality a step further. In the 2014 Concept of Cultural Policy, Moscow asserts that the state ought to distinguish between good and evil and to ban cultural content that contradicts Russia's established value system. Tolerance and multiculturalism, the document states, are detrimental to the Russian identity. The Russian narrative has serious and irrational implications. First, it belongs to the realm of totalitarianism to assert the state's power and capacity to distinguish between good and evil and to claim the specificity of “the Russian value system” (as opposed to the universal one). Second, reserving

the right to ban cultural content that contradicts specific values belongs to the realm of Orwell's fictional account of dictatorship in 1984.

Fascism constitutes an important element of the Russian narrative held against the West. Putin states that the West supports “a very dubious public ranging from open neo-fascists to Islamic radicals” (Kremlin 2014b). Fascism is defined as “a political system based on a very powerful leader, state control, and being extremely proud of country and race, and in which political opposition is not allowed” (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.). This definition applies politically and legally rather to the Russian state than to any Western democracy. Ideologically, the West has, after the painful experience of WWII, become defined by anti-fascism. Timothy Snyder (2018) highlights the key role of political ideas of fascist thinkers such as Ivan Ilyin play for Vladimir Putin. According to Ilyin, “*Russia as a spiritual organism served not only all the Orthodox nations and not only all of the nations of the Eurasian landmass, but all the nations of the world*” (Ilyin, I cited by Snyder 2018). Accordingly, Putin's vision of the Eurasian Union is a space “*from Lisbon to Vladivostok*” (Snyder 2018). Collective will instead of individualism, distinct spirituality, and messianic elements, these are pillars of fascist political thinking. These concepts have also served as rhetorical touchstones in Vladimir Putin's speeches on the legitimatization of the Crimea annexation and in Russian foreign policy in general.

“Russia's value system” is juxtaposed in the Concept of Cultural Policy (2013) to the “European concepts of multiculturalism and tolerance” that Russia should “reject.” With this discriminatory narrative, Putin proclaims a “distinct spirituality” and “value system”. Thus, he sets a precedent for a self-proclaimed democracy to infringe on human rights and outlaw contrarian cultural content. Speaking to far-right voters worldwide, Putin's strategic narrative is morally authoritative and irrational: he simultaneously condemns and upholds moral exceptionalism; he guts and at the same time endorses universal values; he castigates and yet champions non-universal values.

2. *Russia the sovereign*

Sovereignty is a major topic of the Russian strategic narrative projected into foreign policy. As the very principle of the international system since the Westphalian Peace in 1648, it

also is, in international relations theory, a concept upheld by Realism, which instils a special legitimacy and rationality upon the concept. Without sovereignty, so the logic goes, there are no states, and thus no order in the international system.

Vladimir Putin emphasizes the concept. In the speech on the Crimea annexation, the Russian president mentions the term four times. In the speech at the Valdai club in 2014, eight times, linking the concept to the very existence of the Russian identity and nation: *“Either we remain a sovereign nation, or we dissolve without a trace and lose our identity.”* At the same event a year earlier, he discursively connects sovereignty to Russianism: *“This is because the desire for independence and sovereignty in spiritual, ideological and foreign policy spheres is an integral part of our national character”* (Kremlin 2013). Putin transforms sovereignty from a legal and political term into a spiritual and ideological concept (Makarychev & Yatsyk 2015 p. 144).

As the Russian identity becomes inseparable from the concept of sovereignty, it is also juxtaposed to the Western world. While Russia respects and is defined by its sovereignty – so the strategic narrative goes – the West opposes it. Russia is the backbone for sovereignty, while the West violates it by invading countries. Putin conjugates the West with double standards: *“We see attempts to somehow revive a standardized model of a unipolar world and to blur the institutions of international law and national sovereignty. Such a unipolar, standardized world does not require sovereign states; it requires vassals”* (Kremlin 2013).

In Putin’s strategic narrative Russia becomes a principled power that opposes The West’s hypocrisy. The Kremlin thus assumes a double role: defender of values and victim. Putin discursively creates an emotional image of anxiety by emphasizing hegemonic persecution by the hegemon, characteristic of dictators’ narratives. As Putin formulates it (Kremlin 2014a):

“We have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment, led [by the forerunners of “the West”] in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, continues today. They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position, because we maintain it and because we call things like they are and do not engage in hypocrisy.”

Moscow's role of "sovereignty bearer" in the face of the Western conspiracy becomes paradoxical when it comes to the case of Ukraine's sovereignty. Putin irrationally upholds Ukraine's sovereignty: *"I have never disputed that Ukraine is a modern, full-fledged, sovereign, European country"* (Kremlin 2014b). At the same time, to point to the West's hypocrisy legitimizes Moscow's great power identity: because the Kremlin takes similar actions, and regardless of international protestations, it acts as a great power too (Szostek 2017 p. 579).

3. Russia the conservative

With the shift from a pragmatic strategic narrative to one inculcated with normativity and values, Putin defined the Russian identity and the system of values it adheres to as specific. In order to create an effective juxtaposition, he opposed them to the Western values of multiculturalism and tolerance.

Defending Russian values has been transformed into narrative warfare against Western values:

"A serious challenge to Russia's identity is linked to events taking place in the world. Here there are both foreign policy and moral aspects. We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization. They are denying the moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief I Satan" (Vladimir Putin as cited by Zevelev 2018 p. 10).

The implications of Putin's strategic narrative are complex. First, the narrative renders the West as immoral, and thus unfit to lead the world. Second, it juxtaposes a narrative of "moral" values (as opposed to immoral ones) and legitimizes conservative values. Third, Putin brings into foreign policy, a realm defined by secularism, religious faith. Fourth, he creates a profoundly irrational narrative with nationalistic and fascist connotations, by driving social,

cultural and biopolitical features into foreign policy. Lastly, through his narrative, he explicitly he expands his audience, addressing not only the “Russian civilization”, but worldwide adherers to conservatism.

Putin’s narrative of conservatism is focused on religious faith (Orthodoxy specifically and Christianity more broadly) and traditional social features. The myth of traditionalism he proposes is heavily ideologized and exudes nationalism. It excludes and discriminates those that are secular, tolerant, non-Caucasian, identifies with a different civilization or LGBTQ. With his strong emphasis on (a selective and by default subjective interpretation of) history, Putin upholds the Russian civilization and religion as values within foreign policy, most prominently reflected in his 2014 speech on Crimea (Kremlin 2014a):

To understand the reason behind such a choice it is enough to know the history of Crimea and what Russia and Crimea have always meant for each other. Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location where Prince Vladimir was baptized. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.

By moving social and religious problems to the front of foreign policy, Putin expands his audience to worldwide conservatives. At the same time, he infuses problems of international law with social and religious issues. His foreign policy also speaks to nationalistic audiences that reverberate with ethnos, “cultural matrixes”, “historical codes” and genes, as highlighted by Foreign Minister Lavrov’s essay on the ideology of Russian foreign policy. Lavrov (2016) argues that the Russian people should “decide their own destiny despite the European West’s attempts to subjugate Russian lands and deprive them of their own identity.” He continues: “I am convinced that this wise and far-sighted policy is in our genes.” Putin’s cultural ministry’s move to propose the ban of cultural content that is not conforming with national values speaks to this conviction.

Conclusions

Rationality as a concept in foreign policy analysis is ubiquitous and unfalsifiable. Yet the consensus built around Russia's foreign policy's rationality remains unchallenged. However, if

we define rationality in the Weberian sense of value rationality, Putin's strategic narrative reveals powerful markers of the opposite.

To make sense of Russian foreign policy and analyze the claim of its rationality, we need to look at the strategic narrative. Strategic narratives help explain how powers seek to impose a shared meaning of how the international order does, or should, function. They also help us understand how discourse can structure identities and the experience of international affairs and how state-led attacks on critical others and the self-promotion via 'nation-branding' can be part of the same effort.

Putin's foreign policy narrative is profoundly ideologized one, marked by normativity, exceptionalism, messianism and spirituality. His discourse is built around national identity and juxtaposition of the West as "the other". Putin's strategic narrative encompasses contradictions between embraced (and universally accepted values) and policies. The Kremlin constructs its role as an enabler of specific, non-universal values, though Moscow discursively embodies universal values. Putin defines Russia as sovereign by default, blames the West for violating sovereignty and upholds Ukraine's sovereignty while invading it. In Russia's foreign policy narrative, values are both specific and universal, both good and bad, both applicable and non-applicable.

When narratives are highly ideologized with politically extreme ideas (from the left and/or right), inculcated with moral authority bestowed upon leaders, they become irrational. Putin's identitarian, profoundly ideologized narrative, securitizes the West through juxtaposition as inherently immoral and threatening. Russia's strategic narrative has complex and powerful implications for the way we understand foreign policy in the Western world. To analyze and frame Putin's value-laden foreign policy is the first step towards understanding it.

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