

Article

Defending Social Status – Why Russia’s Ukraine Policy is About More than Regional Leadership

Regina Heller

Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg
(IFSH)

heller@ifsh.de

Abstract

Russia’s hard-power policy vis-à-vis Ukraine is not primarily and exclusively about regional power projection, but rather about reclaiming a prime rank in the social order of international relations. My assumption rests on two observations: First, in its coercive attempts to maintain control over Ukraine, Russia is actually losing influence over the country – and the overall neighborhood. Secondly, while discursively putting the Ukraine issue in the context of global power shifts and the renegotiation of world order, thereby advocating for classical principles like state sovereignty and non-intervention, Russia has woefully neglected these principles in Ukraine. I argue that Russia’s Ukraine policy is an attempt of the Russian elites to cope with the unresolved anger over earlier negative experiences of status deprivation in their relationship with the West. The socio-emotional logic is behaviorally traced via a cost-benefit analysis, and cognitively via a constructivist inspired analysis of the official Russian discourse. The socio-emotional perspective helps linking Russia’s regional policy conduct with its global status aspirations.

Keywords

Russia, Status, Emotions, Ukraine, Post-Soviet Space

Introduction

One of the prominent narratives about the drivers of Russia’s current coercive policy vis-à-vis Ukraine describes Russian conduct as an attempt of a regional power to enhancing its geopolitical supremacy over the region as a means to defend its traditional sphere of influence and, thus, the country’s leadership status in the post-Soviet region (e.g. Mearsheimer 2014).¹ In fact, there is much evidence to this geopolitical interpretation: Russia’s economic, military and cultural influ-

¹ For a discussion of the different explanations, see Götz 2016.

ence in the region has been and – 25 years after the breakup of the Soviet Union – is still strong and one can therefore rightly argue that Russia has an interest to maintain control over the region's resources. Projecting power onto the neighborhood appeared quite easy in the 1990s, as Russia still appeared for its neighbors as the 'natural' force in the region, although the country underwent a severe phase of economic decline and political weakness. By 2000, as the economy and politics was recovering, Russia started to more actively adopt to evolving trends in the region by pushing economic and security integration projects – the Eurasian Economic Community (EURASEC, entered into force 2001) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO, founded in 2002) in particular. Subsequently, economic integration deepened. In 2010, EURASEC was complemented by a Customs Union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, both of which were transferred and integrated into the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015 (see also Wilson 2017). With the upgrade of the Shanghai Five into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001 and Russia's inclusion into the BRICS forum (formalized in 2009),² Russia was seen again as a "rising" hegemonical regional power (Macfarlane 2006; Stent 2006).

The nearly simultaneous appearance of Western integration projects, the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in particular, as well as the emergence of democratic tendencies in the post-Soviet space, however, appeared to threaten Russia's attempts to consolidate its regional leadership role. Russia was especially concerned that the revolutionary developments in Ukraine could spill over to Russia, destabilize the domestic political system, and trigger a regime change in Russia. Spinning this logic through, from the combination of external security and domestic power and stability concerns, Russia was forced to balance against EU's and NATO's eastward expansion more assertively in the wake of the 'Euromaidan' protests and once and for all to secure its sphere of influence around its borders. From a geopolitical interpretation, the conflict between Russia and Western actors seemed unavoidable, and an aggressive move, supported by requirements to sustain power and legitimize authoritarian rule domestically and to bring the countries of the region back into Russia's orbit, pre-programmed (Mearsheimer 2014; Motyl 2014). Russian top officials have themselves rhetorically contributed to this geopolitical interpretation. They have recurrently underlined that Russia holds special and 'exclusive' rights in the region, and that any attempts to penetrate what is informally still termed the 'near abroad' will be pre-empted with adequate countermeasures (Medvedev 2008). All this is rhetorically embedded into a global context, namely the idea that Russia has to fight against Western and in particular U.S. American 'imperialism' or 'colonialism' that creates instability in the world in favor of a new, 'better' and more

² BRICS is the acronym for a diplomatic forum on economic and financial questions established between Brazil, Russia, India, China and South-Africa.

stable global order, in which America is balanced by a multitude of regional poles, amidst them Russia.

However, this interpretation ignores a number of paradoxes: First, in its coercive attempts to preserve regional primacy, Russia's regional leadership status is more challenged than ever. Second, while in the global context Russia discursively promotes structures of international order in which there is no one dominating pole and Westphalian principles such as state sovereignty and non-intervention in domestic affairs as normative anchors of global stability, it has woefully violated Ukrainian sovereignty and deliberately created instability. These paradoxes require us to revise our thinking – both about Russia's motives and about the logics of contemporary geopolitics. I suggest an alternative approach, which puts socio-emotional factors in the center of attention. I argue that Russian 'geopolitics' is not primarily driven by the goal to securing regional leadership but by the objective to fulfil its global social status aspirations. From the perspective of social psychology, Russia's policy has its origins in the country's elites' concern over international social status, i.e. a positively distinctive identity in the international social order. In the neighborhood, it is a traditional understanding of power and influence that constitutes this positive collective identity. Social psychology and more recent findings from the International Relations (IR) research on emotions help to understand that Russian status concerns are embedded into negative experiences of status deprivation and misrecognition by the West throughout the post-Cold War era.³ I hypothesize that these experiences shape Russian foreign policy conduct towards Ukraine in the following ways:

1. Risk assessments and judgements about the costs and gains of Russia's policy towards Ukraine are made on subjective, namely socio-emotional, grounds that tend to impede absolute payoffs. We should therefore see a number of costs and unintended effects incurring to Russia that tend to undermine the goal of securing or enhancing regional leadership.
2. The underlying socio-emotional experience turns into a strategic resource for Russia's ruling elite to produce international social status as emotion-based moralization offers effective ways to reinterpret the status-power hierarchy. We should therefore find strong evidences of moral argumentation in the official rhetoric justifying Russia's behaviour towards Ukraine.

In order to probe my claim, I will search for evidence of socio-emotionally induced attempts of social status restoration in Russia's Ukraine policy. I suggest the following path of investigation: In the article's second part, I outline the theoretic-

³ In fact, a number of authors have highlighted Russian fixation with its social status, particularly vis-à-vis the West and pinpointed at increasing dissatisfaction with and complaints from Moscow over insufficient status recognition (Forsberg et al. 2014; Heller 2014; Larson & Shevchenko 2014).

cal basis of my approach, drawn mainly from social psychology, emotions research in IR and the power transition literature. In the third section, I trace the roots of Russian social status concerns. In the fourth section, I analyze the emotion-induced Russian strategy to restore a positively distinctive collective identity for Russia in international relations in the context of its ongoing conflict with Ukraine by a) weighing the gains of Russia's aggressive status-seeking strategy vis-à-vis Ukraine against the costs, thereby assessing in how far Russia's power-politics enhances the country's regional power and influence; and b) showing the strategic use of moral justifications in the official discourse that link back to and take up frames that are connected with past subjective experiences of Western status denial. In the fifth section, I summarize the findings and assess the added value of my perspective.

Failed Great Power Verification as Source for Russian Power-Politics in Ukraine

Status, Identity and Emotions

The status of major powers in international relations, as we know from the power-transition theory, not only relies on and is measured along material capabilities (such as military and economic resources), but also needs to consider a number of other properties including the social recognition of major power status (attribution) by other countries (Volgy et al. 2011, 7; Levy 1983; Fordham & Asal 2007). The literature speaks of 'status-consistent' major powers when they are legitimately recognized as having both capabilities and willingness, as being independent to become involved in international politics, and are expected to do so. Status-inconsistent powers, on the contrary, face a mismatch between capabilities, willingness and independence on the one hand and community-based status attribution on the other (Volgy et al. 2011, 10-12; Danilovic & Clare 2007, 292). Status-inconsistent powers can be subdivided into 'status-overachievers' and 'status-underachievers'. Status-overachievers get status recognition, but lack the attributes to act as such. Status-underachievers are willing and have the power to act as major powers, but do not get the recognition from other states (ibid.).

While status-overachievers are mainly interested in keeping things as they are and are assumed to defend their status in their neighborhood at low costs and risks, status-seeking strategies of underachievers are more dangerous as they are willing to "[...] resolve uncertainty around their status by competing more aggressively than overachievers to create larger roles for themselves in international affairs" (Volgy et al. 2011, 11f.). Most importantly, it is stipulated that status-underachievers evaluate the risks and costs of foreign policy action in a "non-linear manner". In line with Prospect Theory, a psychological theory that explains suboptimal choices of decision-makers, this means that under-achieving powers

“are likely to operate in the ‘domain of losses’ and will be willing to take greater risks and be willing to pay greater costs to achieve status-consistency” (ibid.). Two important substantiations stem from this psychological explanation: First, judgments taken in the domain of loss are prone to errors and miscalculations, because under the condition of risk and uncertainty “it is difficult to foresee the consequences and outcomes of events with clarity” (McDermott 1998, 15; Kahnemann 2009). Second, decision-makers can interpret the domain they are operating in on the basis of either objective or subjective assessments and judgements (McDermott 1998, 37). In the latter case, it is more important how an actor “feels” about the environment or a specific situation he/she faces.

That the “feeling” of status recognition is relevant in international relations is also highlighted in many other branches of the psychologically inspired IR literature (e.g. Crawford 2000; Mercer 2006, 2017; Kemper 1987, 2007; Wohlforth 2009; Onea 2014; Paul et al. 2014; Renshon 2016). One strand that explicitly links status and emotions is the Social Identity Theory (SIT). According to SIT, it is an actor’s (i.e. decision-maker’s) social identification and emotional attachment with a specific group (or collective) identity that gives relevance to subjective assessments of status (Tajfel 1978). Larger collectives and their representatives (political decision-makers, people in high state functions) try to develop and preserve a positively distinctive identity and want to be accepted as a valuable member of their status-group or community (Larson 2017). While SIT assumes that status-seeking is primarily intrinsically motivated and directed at the approval of a certain social (collective) identity, it does not exclude that the intrinsic driver also co-constitutes external, material status-goals. It is clear that higher status in the social hierarchy of states provides for access to material assets such as special rights and powers. Vice-versa, when a collective identity is traditionally based on power and influence, a country will most likely define its social status exactly through these material status markers.

Being recognized in one’s (collective) self-identity is thus socially and emotionally important also for ‘states’ – or what should be rather defined as composite actors in official state positions. Perceptions of misrecognition, unfair or deliberately harmful treatment triggers negative emotional reactions and attitudes (Tiedens 2001; Rosen 2005; Kelman 1965) – “affective energies” (Ross 2006) – that come close to what is described as ‘anger’ in psychological studies on individual behavior (Stets & Burke 2000; Tajfel 1978; Miller 2001). Anger is defined as a “negative phenomenological (or internal) feeling state associated with specific cognitive and perceptual distortions and deficiencies (for example misappraisals, errors, and attributions of blame, injustice, preventability, and/or intentionality), subjective labelling, physiological changes, and action tendencies to engage in socially con-

structed and reinforced organized behavioral scripts.” (Kassinove 1995, 7).⁴ It is important to note that anger is not only and primarily about aggression (Averill 1983), but a multitude of cognitive and behavioral short- and long-term reactions that aim at reverting the discrepancy between the ‘as-is’-situation and the desired and aspired status structure in a social relationship. Gerhards clusters these reactions as behavioral and cognitive “coping strategies” (Gerhards 1988, 212–213). Behavioral coping consists of active attempts to intervene in the social environment with the goal to change the status-power structure and, this way, modulate the virulent emotion. Cognitive coping refers to changes in the mental state through a re-interpretation of ‘self’ and ‘other’ representations, which is mainly based on moral categories.

The Sources of Russian Status Concerns

Undoubtedly, post-Soviet Russia possesses attributes that fulfill the criteria for a major power in world politics. Russia holds the second largest arsenal of nuclear weapons after the U.S. Moreover, as the legal successor to the USSR, Russia is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and thus continues to hold an influential position in world politics. Also regionally, as has been outlined earlier, Russia’s influence is still significant. However, Russia’s economic potential and resources have significantly lagged behind the conceded power attributes, and greater political influence in world politics had not materialized for a long time. Therefore, in Western political as well as academic circles, Russia was perceived as a status-overachiever for most of the post-Soviet period (Freire 2011).

Within Russia, it was equally clear from the beginning that post-Soviet Russia should remain in a prominent position in world politics. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the bipolar system the question of Russia’s national identity and role in world politics became a matter of an intensive domestic debate among the political elites (e.g. Tsygankov 2006). As early as 1993, a common denominator emerged in the debate, namely that Russia has always been and must continue to be a great power. Yet, the view from the West that Russia lacked the capabilities to exert influence internationally was not shared among the political elites in the country. In fact, Russia deemed itself a ‘natural’ member of the elite club of powerful states after the Cold War. This ‘natural’ right of a prime position is frequently ascribed to Russia’s unbroken attitude towards its imperial history that is a driving force for this self-perception and role-definition as a major power (e.g. Light 2014, 215). As the old bipolar system had vanished, Russia had to define itself in a new systemic structure of international relations. Then-Foreign Minister Evgeniy Primakov was the first to establish the idea of an influential, powerful Russia in a multi-polar world in the second half of the

⁴ On action tendencies see also Novaco 1986.

1990s in Russia's foreign policy strategy (Primakov 1996). This idea of Russia as a great power relied on traditional conceptions, as prescribed in the Russian security culture, and has ever since been a constitutive component of Russia's foreign policy concepts.

Three core signifiers in this conception constitute Russian great power status: *centrality*, *equality* and *regional primacy* (Heller 2017). Centrality refers to Russia's role as a permanent member of the UNSC and its ability to disperse power and influence via this organization, traditionally through diplomacy and negotiations. Equality refers to Russia's perceived right to be consulted, especially when it comes to issues of European security. Regional primacy refers to the assumed right to claim an exclusive zone of influence in the post-Soviet region. However, this traditional approach to great power and international relations brought Russia increasingly in conflict with the West after 1991, which led to a situation in which Russian policy-makers perceived the country's major power status to erode, thus developing a status-underachiever attitude.

Erosions to Russian *centrality* eventually began when Western actors started to introduce new understandings and approaches to security, thereby modifying constitutive norms of the traditional Westphalian structure of the international system. This in particular touched upon the sovereignty norm and put forward the idea that a state's internal as well as external sovereignty can be restrained on the grounds of human security and through external intervention. Moscow was never enthusiastic about the concept of 'human security' and its application in international conflict management at the expense of the valuation of more traditional principles such as state sovereignty and non-intervention. It particularly insisted on its application only in the context and with approval of the UNSC. NATO's military intervention in Kosovo 1999, which was justified as a 'humanitarian intervention' and took place without UN consent, reflected a preliminary culmination of a conflict that continued 2003 in the context of the U.S.-intervention in Iraq and was channeled into the discussion over the validity and interpretation of what by mid-2000 became institutionalized in the framework of the UN as the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) principle (Heller 2014).

Russia's status as an *equal player* (on par with the U.S. and with equal right in European security) started to erode in Russian perception with NATO's decision to enlarge to the countries of Eastern Europe. NATO's enlargement towards the East has been criticized since the beginning of the process in the early 1990s (Black 2000). In the Russian view, the expansion of the Western regional security block cemented the division of security to the expense of Russia in Europe and marked the end of the goal that had been formulated after the end of the Cold War to search for a new, inclusive, pan-European security structure in which Russia and the countries of NATO meet on equal footing. The hope for an undivided

security architecture seemed unrealistic, as particularly the new Eastern European member states aimed for security ‘from’ and not ‘with’ Russia. Although Russia was granted a special status in the relations with NATO, it has always complained that Russia is not consulted on equal footing in decisions that affect security in Europe (and issues where NATO disperses its power beyond) (ibid.). Also in the context of American missile defence plans for Europe, Moscow continuously blamed the U.S. for not considering its concerns (e.g. Zadra 2014).

Given these developments, *regional primacy* appeared to remain the last social status marker for Russia. However, the erosion of centrality and equality also affected Russia’s status in its neighborhood. Claims for more democracy and civil society participation such as in Georgia and Ukraine, manifest in the ‘rose revolution’ in Georgia 2003 and the ‘orange revolution’ in Ukraine 2004, heralded the dawn of more liberal ideas to take root in these countries. Deeper integration of these countries through EU-association in the framework of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and later on the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative of 2009, or discussion with and within NATO starting by 2005 on the outlook of integrating Georgia and Ukraine into the Alliance in an undefined future, challenged Russia’s claim for exclusiveness and regional primacy. The fact that Western inclusive strategies have spurred more anger and resentment among the Russian political elites and its decision-makers becomes evident in the context of the Russian-Georgian war. A statement made by the then-Russian representative at NATO Dmitri Rogozin (2008) immediately after the Russian-Georgian war shows quite amply that maintaining social status became an important variable to Russian foreign policy in the neighborhood. In his statement, he underlined that the West “[...] has now started to look at Russia differently – namely with respect – and I consider this to be Russia’s key diplomatic achievement”.

Russia’s Status-Seeking Strategy in the Context of the Ukraine Conflict

Does Russia’s Ukraine policy tie up to the above outlined social status concerns? In how far does it expose typical elements of a socio-emotionally inspired strategy to revert an unfair status structure? In the following section, I assess the behavioral and cognitive dimensions of anger coping on the official state (institutional) level. I assume that in the case of Russia, looking at official policy and state representatives/decision-makers is more important in assessing the level of ‘emotionalization’ of foreign policy than for example looking at the Russian public, because pluralistic bargaining or negotiation with public opinion is not taking place in the relatively closed political environment.

Behavioral Coping: The Costs of Changing the Social Environment

As a result of its interference in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014,⁵ after the breakout of the 'Euromaidan' protests and the dismissal of the pro-Russian Yanukovich-government in Kiev, Russia has changed the geopolitical landscape in a way that it now controls two Ukrainian territories – Crimea directly and the 'Donbas' region. In summer 2014, observers speculated that Russia would try to expand the conflict to other regions in Ukraine, particularly to the South-West, known in nationalist circles as 'Novorossiya' (Robins-Early 2014).⁶ Since Russia entered the Minsk process in September 2014, expansion moves have stopped, but Russia has been accused of obstructing a peaceful settlement and of deliberately aiming at a 'freezing' of the conflict in order to keep indirect control over Ukraine and consolidate its geopolitical grip over the country.

Material Costs

However, keeping further control of these territories comes with significant long-term as well as unintended costs, supporting the assumption that Moscow strongly underestimated Ukrainian resistance and resilience to Russia's hybrid warfare. Although Russia invested comparably little financial resources for its immediate operations both in Eastern Ukraine and in Crimea (Jonson & Seely 2015), Russia has faced considerable additional expenditures. As has been calculated by political analysts from data taken from the Russian federal budget for 2017, "[...] the costs of the military involvement in Ukraine are estimated to amount to over \$40 billion on military personnel and equipment, on refugees and on subsidies for Crimea" (The Moscow Times 2016). Moscow quite unwillingly also took over financial responsibility for the separatist entities in Donbas after a year of violent conflict. In 2016, Russia started to bankroll pensions and social benefits as well as salaries to local employees in the public sphere and to the armed separatists. The ICG calculated that "[i]f consistently maintained, this will cost [Russia] over \$1 billion a year, a substantial sum for the Russian treasury in straitened economic times" (International Crisis Group 2016, 2).

Information about the human costs of the military intervention vary and are contradictory (Demirjian 2015): Estimates from 2016 based on information from the well-known non-governmental organization Russian Soldiers Mothers Associations point to over 2,000 casualties (Shakov 2016). With regard to Crimea, Russia has strengthened the integration of the peninsula into the Russian Federation, mainly by providing subsidies for economic development and modernization. Here, Moscow equally faces long-term costs of modernization and social benefit

⁵ For a detailed assessment, see International Crisis Group 2016; for a description of how the process developed, see Splidsboel-Hansen 2015.

⁶ It was speculated that the pro-Russian separatists wanted to create a corridor between Donbas and the separatist region Transnistria (Kramer & Gordon 2014).

transfers. These subsidies and investments already now are estimated to make up to \$4.5–7 billion annually (Berman 2015). Potential economic gains either cannot fully outweigh these investments, for instance through the cancellation of the Kharkiv Agreement (Ukraine & Rossiiskaia Federatsiia 2010), securing the presence of the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol until 2042 in exchange for “a \$100 discount per thousand cubic meters for Ukraine’s imports of Russian gas” (Bush 2014), or are highly uncertain without the help of Western technology, e.g. through future assets from natural gas exploitation in the Crimea shoreline.⁷

The EU’s and U.S. decision to impose sanctions on Russia as a reaction to its coercive policy towards Ukraine again took the leadership in Moscow by surprise, although all in all, their impact on Russia’s overall economy is assumed to be rather moderate (Russel 2016).⁸ The most serious and long-term effect is presumably the disintegration of Russian firms from Western capital markets and a general worsening of the investment climate. Yet, both President Putin and Prime Minister Medvedev keep insisting that the economic repercussions of the sanctions rather help stabilizing Russia’s economy than putting pressure on it (Medvedev 2016). They argue that the country is increasingly facing hostility from its geopolitical environment, which legitimizes the turn away from macro-economic development towards a militarized economy (Connolly 2016, 1). This strategic subordination of the economy to short-term concerns of national security will make the overall costs of Russia’s power-politics particularly difficult to absorb and keeps Russia’s geopolitical control over Ukraine unstable.

More Legitimacy as a Regional Leader?

With its power-politics vis-à-vis Ukraine, Russia was able to prevent the country from moving closer to NATO, but it could not stop Kiev from rapprochement towards the EU. On the contrary: Ukraine was even more determined to sign the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). Political as well as public resistance against any kind of Russian interference in the political processes in the country has strongly increased (Toal 2017, 281). But Russia faces a legitimacy problem well beyond Ukraine. Its severe economic problems in combination with the ‘big brother’ attitude of its political elites with regard to the post-Soviet neighbors have resulted in a situation where not only the more critical and Western-oriented countries such as Ukraine and Georgia have further distanced

⁷ The Black Sea is [...] considered to be rich in terms of gas hydrates. There is “reportedly 45–75 trillion cubic meters of natural gas under the Black Sea, and by some estimates 45 trillion cubic meters” (Petrov 2016), but these gas hydrates are presumably difficult to exploit (Meray & Sinayuc 2016).

⁸ The dramatic recession that Russia underwent in 2014 and 2015 started already in 2013 and was triggered by a combination of internal institutional problems (lack of property rights, high corruption, etc.) and the fall of global commodity prices. The situation has somewhat stabilized in 2016, although on a low level. On the current economic situation in Russia, see The Bank of Finland Institute for Economies in Transition (BOFIT) 2017.

themselves from Russia, but also those that had so far been loyal to Russia and willing to cooperate. The latter have embarked on a more cautious positioning or started to more independently renegotiate their relations with Russia. Russia's overall weak economic performance since 2013, its conflict with Ukraine and the subsequent Western sanctions, as well as the uncoordinated counter-sanctions against the EU or the temporary sanctioning of Turkey following the diplomatic conflict from 2015 caused significant drawbacks for Russia's economic partners in the neighborhood, particularly those cooperating in the EAEU.⁹

Kazakhstan, for example, is one of Russia's biggest partners in military, economic and political terms in the region. It is member of the EAEU and the CSTO. It has been highly interested in regional economic integration from the very outset and keeps principally committed. At the same time it fears Russian attempts to transform the EAEU into a political instrument and to constrain the sovereignty of other participating states. Moreover the free trade arrangement with Russia and Belarus has negatively impacted the ability of Kazakh products to compete with the increased dominance of Russian goods. Russian counter-sanctions against the EU were imposed without consent from the EAEU member states. Politically, Kazakhstan has to some extent openly distanced itself from Russian foreign policy behaviour vis-à-vis Ukraine and other rhetoric from Russia that seemingly put the history of the independent CIS states in question. In 2014, President Putin for instance claimed that Kazakhstan "never had a state" and that "Kazakhs never had any statehood" – a view he had expressed in relation to Ukraine already in 2008 (cit. in Dolgov 2014). The Kazakh authorities reacted by amending the country's penal code in a way that punishes the threatening of the country's territorial integrity and calls for secession (Laruelle 2016, 2). Kazakh nervousness is driven by the fact that 23.7% of ethnic Russians live in the country's northern territories and could potentially become a source of separatism. In August 2014, President Nazarbayev therefore publicly recalled the country's right to withdraw from the EAEU in case its sovereignty is threatened (Tengrinews 2014).

While Russia's relations with Belarus had occasionally been ambivalent and problematic already before the Ukraine crisis, dissonances have considerably increased thereafter. Belarus has used Moscow's conflict with Ukraine strategically since its outbreak to enhance the country's own political and economic standing vis-à-vis Moscow. While Minsk joined Russia in March 2014 in voting against the UN declaration calling the Crimea referendum invalid, in 2017 President Lukashenka put on a nationalistic and "fraternization" rhetoric claiming solidarity with Ukraine (Sedova 2017). This more critical rhetoric toward Russia evolved in the context of an ongoing economic dispute, mainly about Russian energy delivery and prices for Belarus. Belarus, economically highly dependent on Russia, seem-

⁹ On the functioning of the EAEU, see also Libman 2017.

ingly tries to push for better conditions in the relationship. Lukashenka intensified his pressure arguing that the EAEU favors the economic interests of Russia (Lavnikovich 2017; Tamkin 2017).

Part of this dynamic is also that especially the Central Asian countries started to balance more between Russia and its main competitor in that region, China. In order to compensate economic losses caused by the ongoing crisis in Russia, they have willfully intensified cooperation with China, e.g. for investment or diminished Russian presence (Schenkkan 2015; Radnitz 2016). Chinese-led models of cooperation, such as the 'One Belt, One Road Initiative' (OBOR), gain more ground in Central Asia and could be perceived as a direct challenge to the EAEU's norms and integration attempts. China's initiative appears to be a "more attractive alternative in practically all industrial, trade, and financial dimensions" (Kobrinskaya 2016). With regard to Armenia, another Russian ally in the region and equally dependent on Russia as Belarus, governmental relations did not significantly deteriorate. Both countries still profit more from cooperation than from conflict. However, the Ukraine crisis amplified the ideological split that exists between pro-Russian and more pro-Western segments of the Armenian society (Minasyan 2015). All this has weakened Russia's position as a regional power center and reinforced centrifugal tendencies in the post-Soviet space rather than tying it together.

Cognitive Coping: Discursive Status Transformation through Moral Devaluation of the West

The geopolitical containment narrative that blames the West of aggressive behaviour and depicts Russia's policy towards Ukraine as a means of defending its security in the neighborhood is only the tip of an iceberg of arguments and frames that, on closer examination, are mainly constructed on moral grounds and are more deeply attached to Russian identity and status-markers. In the Ukrainian context, these arguments and frames are used to re-claim the country's self-defined status as a major power in the international social hierarchy and to discursively transforming the perceived status asymmetry between Russia and the West. They intimately connect with earlier negative experiences and episodes of anger over perceived Western status deprivation.

Re-claiming Centrality: On 'Right' and 'Wrong' Behaviour in International Relations

The international community condemned Russia's Crimea annexation as a violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and referred to assurances that were given by Russia to its neighbor after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 to respect and guarantee the borders agreed upon in the dissolution process. Likewise, Russia's military and political support to the pro-Russian separatists in Donbas was sharply criticized as violations of Ukraine's sovereignty (United Nations General

Assembly 2014). Moscow put forward at least two justifications for its policy: First, the Russian government argued that there has been no annexation whatsoever, but that the Crimean people decided themselves via a referendum to exit the Ukrainian state and to seek integration into the Russian Federation. Russia only followed the Crimean application and allowed it to enter Russia in a legal process. Second, Moscow put forward a humanitarian argument. It argued that Russia feels responsible for the protection of its 'compatriot' people – ethnic minorities – in Crimea (and later in Eastern Ukraine) from a "criminal", "fascist" and therefore "illegitimate" regime in Kiev (Putin 2014a). However, there is a strong contradiction between Russia's justification on the normative grounds of humanitarian intervention on the one hand and its previous attitude towards humanitarian intervention on the other.

Both of the above arguments make a strong normative-ethical point, constructing the justification for the intervention along a security logic that takes on a non-state centric perspective. This is interesting because Moscow had become more and more critical about 'human security' and the application of R2P in the global context – especially its military dimension. Russia stood at the forefront of scandalizing the way it was applied by Western powers in the past: "Events such as Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria have, for Russia, become precedents by which Western powers have 'instrumentalized' the principle of humanitarian intervention, and later R2P, to further their own agendas internationally" (Snetkov & Lanteigne 2014, 122). In Kosovo, Russia accused the West of sidelining the UN (Primakov 1999). In Iraq, Moscow pointed to the false pretenses on which the military intervention was justified. In Libya, where the international military intervention was officially legitimized as an R2P operation by the UN and led to a regime change in the country, it more sharply blamed the West for misusing the international mandate for its own purposes (Putin 2014b).

This moral blaming along the argument that the West acts selfishly and abuses international norms was taken up again in Ukraine. It was applied in particular with regard to insinuated Western 'orchestration' of the Euromaidan protests in Kiev. The West in the Russian interpretation not only supported the "unconstitutional" regime change in Ukraine, but actively engineered the civil society forces that finally enacted the revolution (Lavrov 2014; Churkin 2014; Putin 2014a; Peskov 2014). The Russian framing suggests that the West displayed an interventionist practice that again misrecognizes the internationally formulated limits of ethically-grounded external intervention, that it operates beyond international law and that it instead follows the logic reminiscent of the formulation used by former U.S. President George W. Bush: "You are either with us, or against us" (Shoigu 2015). This is also supported by the formulation chosen by Vladimir Churkin (2014), Russia's representative to the UN, who underlined that the

Western policy towards Ukraine resembles a “game without rules”. Hence, rather than justifying its Ukraine policy as objectively ‘correct’, Russian representatives sought to present their behaviour as morally ‘right’, compared to a morally ‘wrong’ Western approach. With this attitude of a ‘good’ Russian vs. a ‘bad’ Western interventionist practice, Putin (2014a) sarcastically comments Western protest to the Crimea annexation and reference to international law in the following way:

“[...] it is a good thing that they [the West] finally called to their minds that there is something like international law. Thank you very much. Better late than never.”

Re-claiming Equality: On (Dis-)respect and Moral Emancipation in the Relationship with the West

A second important morality-based argument is constructed around Western unfairness, unequal treatment and humiliation of Russia in its relationship with the West. Not only is the West blamed for ignoring (and violating) the rules of the international system, as has been explained above, but also for ignoring and refusing Russia’s equal ‘right’ to be consulted and considered on its policy towards Ukraine. This right is on the one hand justified on historicism and historic re-interpretation, i.e. Russia-Ukraine relations constructed as being “inseparable” (Putin 2014a). On the other hand, there is also an emotionally inspired moral line of argumentation, which takes up the ruminating feeling of Russia being ignored by the West, blindsided, and put on a second-rank position in the international social order. This becomes obvious in official statements that reflect on the way in which Western integration models were introduced in the post-Soviet space. Officially, the cause for contention in Ukraine appeared to be the EU’s association policy and the alleged fact that Russia had not been consulted on equal footing on these plans (Medvedev 2014). However, in a relatively high number of statements, various speakers from Russia also refer to their wish of being consulted and their former negative experiences with NATO and NATO enlargement as a proof for Western ignorance, as the following passage from Putin’s Crimea speech demonstrates (2014a):

“We are constantly suggesting cooperation on all key questions, we try to increase the level of mutual trust; we want that our relationship is an equal, open and honest one. But we never saw reciprocal moves. On the contrary: They cheated us over and over again, took decisions behind our back, they presented us with faits accomplis. This happened with NATO enlargement towards the East, and with the rapprochement of military infrastructure towards our borders.”

In fact, many of the emotion-inspired rhetoric figures that emerged in the Russian discourse in the context of NATO and NATO enlargement and embarked on felt humiliation re-appear prominently in the anti-Western discourse over the

Ukraine conflict again. One of them is the 'Western dictate' image. Putin regularly criticized the West for its 'dictate' vis-à-vis Russia and blamed the U.S. to treat Russia as a 'vassal'. The dictate-vassal-image is not new: The first time it appeared was after NATO's military intervention in Kosovo. Vladimir Lukin, then chairman of the foreign relations committee in the State Duma, stated that the West must not treat Russia „like some vassal“ (Charodeev 1999). The image was taken up again at many occasions by Vladimir Putin in the context of EMDS.¹⁰ In the Ukraine context it is again broadened from the initial context of NATO to the U.S.'s and the EU's policy towards Ukraine. Russian officials argue that the EU forced Ukraine to cooperate and to stop collaborating with Russia within the EAEU (Medvedev 2014). Again, the economic terms of cooperation between Ukraine and the EU in the eyes of the Russian speakers will lead to a situation in which the relations between Russia and Ukraine are “dictated by Brussels” (ibid.).

As much as the Russian speakers discursively discredit Western intervention practices on moral grounds thereby 'undoing' Russian mistakes, they also attempt to discursively fight against the perceived Western humiliation by turning the tables and rhetorically humiliating the West. In the following statement, for instance, Putin (2014b) in a bitter tone suggests that the troubles Western countries experience after 'meddling' into Ukraine's domestic affairs and ignoring Russia, serve the West right: “The West would have been well advised to consider the consequences of its influencing the situation in Ukraine before.” The negative emotional attitude of Schadenfreude, i.e. open displays of satisfaction about Ukrainian and Western political setbacks, is equally expressed in the direction of Ukraine: Ukraine does not deserve Russia's help; it did not listen when Moscow warned Kiev, and it must therefore now pay the price of its decisions which will lead to “very hard times” for the country. Prime Minister Medvedev (2014), for instance, prophesizes:

“I feel honestly sorry that the representatives of the Ukrainian elite were not able to neither present nor implement another strategic program for the development of the country. As the head of a government, I can see this every day in the figures, confirming: unfortunately, the hardest part still lies in front of our neighbors [...]”

Via open expressions of satisfaction about the setbacks and political damages of the West and Ukraine, the Russian officials discursively reject to cooperate with the West on the solution of the Ukraine conflict.

¹⁰ E.g. in an interview in the TV-documentary „Kholodnaia Politika” (Cold Politics) broadcasted on Russian television 2012, where he stated that “America does not want partners, but vassals” (Putin 2012).

Conclusion

Prominent explanations see Russia's policy in the Ukraine crisis and the following geopolitical confrontation with the West as a proof for Russia's power-driven strive for regional leadership. This article demonstrated that this explanation carries in itself a number of paradoxes which needed further explanation. I argued that Russian geopolitics is primarily a function to increasing its social status as a major power globally, and not to securing regional leadership in the first place. We need to understand Russia's aggressive stance as an attempt to cope with unresolved anger over earlier incidences of Western status deprivation and to restore a positively distinctive identity for the country. I based my assumptions on theoretical strands in IR that highlight the socio-emotional foundations of foreign policy and the relevance of social status. I argued that the state's political elite over the years developed an underachiever perspective that is firmly rooted in negative experiences and perceptions of misrecognition of its traditional international status by the West. Russia's past experiences and the unresolved status conflict strongly inform Moscow's current Ukraine policy, as the assessment of its behavioral and cognitive dimensions shows.

Behaviorally, Russia clearly acts out of the subjective assessment of a position of loss and pursues a highly risky and costly policy, which has limited geopolitical gains and neglects or miscalculates its immediate and long-term costs and effects. While preventing Ukraine from future rapprochement with NATO seems rewarding at first sight, it might turn out as highly counter-productive in the long-term. Moscow will have to provide subsidies to Eastern Ukraine and Crimea for years to come and find ways of pacifying these regions to prevent the emergence of spaces of insecurity and instability. Ukrainian resistance and resilience as well as Western responses to Russia's policies seem to have been under-estimated by the status-fixated policy conduct of the Russian elite. Neglecting Russia's domestic modernization in favor of promoting a militarized economy will likely have even more serious long-term implications for Russia's economic and political leadership claim. Moreover, traditional Russian allies have started to act more along their own strategic interests than on the basis of accepting Russia as the legitimate power center in the region. If this path is continued, Russia will most likely fail to substantially enhance its material power- and status resources in the post-Soviet space in the future.

On the cognitive level, the analysis revealed a second layer of meaning underneath the dominating geopolitical narrative. Analyzing the official rhetoric put forward in defence of Russia's aggressive stance highlighted the argumentative lines that are based on moral categories and invoke earlier negative experiences of status denial from the West. Putting into question Western practices of intervention, Russia has created highly negative images of the West while depicting Russia in

a positive light and reclaiming centrality. Second, equality is reclaimed through a re-activation of earlier experiences of disrespect and sidelining as well as through a moral rejection of cooperation in the solution of the Ukrainian conflict. In sum, both dimensions constitute a strategic attempt to discursively transform the power-status relationship between Russia and the West with Russia de-legitimizing Western superiority in the global social order and re-claiming a prime rank in a multi-polar world order.

Russian policy conduct towards Ukraine and the neighborhood in general is often described in an all too simplistic manner in categories of 'status quo' or 'revisionism'. My analytical focus on the socio-emotional foundations of Russian power projection vis-à-vis Ukraine shows that it is not primarily about external security or domestic stability, but about forcing the West to accept a new status-power structure and producing a new global narrative, in which Russia's traditional social status – and identity – as a major, influential power is guaranteed. However, I do not seek to undervalue the role played by external security considerations or domestic interests of powerful groups. Rather, I show how strongly earlier socio-emotional experiences can shape present expectations, influence risk assessments and form strategic resources for domestic and international debates in a time when the structure of the international system is being re-negotiated. In the Russian case, social recognition as a regional leader seems more important than real material influence. From this perspective, the gap between Russia's high global power aspirations and its poor regional power performance is most obvious. This gap will grow should external and internal pressures on the country increase in the future. Under these conditions, Russia is likely to remain a highly ambitious, but weak and unstable part in an emerging multi-polar system.

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Bio

Regina Heller is Senior Researcher at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH).

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