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Russia's quest for respect in the international conflict management in Kosovo

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the emotion-based status-seeking logic in Russia's foreign policy vis-à-vis the West, presenting the example of Russia's reactions to NATO's military campaign against Serbia in 1999. It is argued that Russian assertiveness in combination with expressive rhetoric must be understood as a result of the ruling elite's need to have Russia's identity and self-defined *social status* as an equal great power in world politics respected by its Western interaction partners. Russia's reactions to NATO's intervention, which was not authorized by the UN Security Council, must be read as a strategy coping with the emotion anger about the perceived humiliation and provocation of status denial and ignorance by the West. We find various elements of such a coping strategy, among them the verbalization of the feeling of anger among Russian political circles and the media; uttering retaliation threats, but no 'real' aggressive, retaliatory action; minor and temporary activities aimed at restoring Russia's image and status as an influential an equal power. On the surface, the Kosovo episode did not result in any visible break or rift in the Russian–Western relationship. However, emotionally it has lead to a significant loss of trust in the respective partner on both sides.

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1. Introduction[1]

For several years now, the debate about Russian foreign policy goals, especially in its relations with the West, has been revived. Since Vladimir Putin's coming to power in 2000, Russia's policy has become much more confrontational, oscillating between assertiveness on the one hand, at times reminiscent of the Cold War era, as most recently in the conflict in and over Ukraine 2014, and the wish to cooperate with the West on the other. This also comes along with a language permeated with harsh, uncompromising rhetoric, angry verbal protests and emotional overtones from Russian politicians and diplomats whenever they deem Russia's international status and role as an influential power not adequately respected by the West. Is Russia's foreign policy and rhetoric an expression of classical *realpolitik*, of power projection and great power balancing, limiting U.S. influence in Europe and maintaining its spheres of influence in the post-Soviet space (Aksenyonok, 2008; Ambrosio, 2005), as neo-realists (Waltz, 1979) would predict? Strikingly, in many instances, Russia does not make strategic use of the asset status it constantly claims and defends as a means of material power projection. Rather, in many instances, status claims remain on a rhetoric level. Moreover, Russia's assertiveness seems risky and costly with regard to the maintenance of stable and good relations with Western partners.

Is Russian assertiveness, then, a function of domestic power consolidation, as liberal theorists (Moravcsik, 1997) would presume? Many argue that Putin uses nationalistic rhetoric, anti-Western sentiments in Russian society and images of Russia

[1] This article is based on a paper presented at the International Studies Association Convention in San Diego 2013. The article is a substantially revised and updated version of this paper. For more ideas see also: Heller (2013).

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as a great power in order to strengthen his own position in the political system of the country (Pribylovsky, 2013). However, the liberal explanation also falls short of some peculiarities: The recourse and reference to Russian *greatpowerness* is not an exclusive phenomenon that occurred only when Vladimir Putin came to power for the first time. In fact, this specific foreign policy characteristic is a constant factor, driving post-Soviet Russian foreign policy behavior towards the West, and we can observe it already since the mid 1990s, when the Russian elites found a consent on Russia's identity as a great power in international relations. The narrative of Russia as a great power in world politics, thus, seems to be deeply rooted in the identity of the elites and is not only a pawn in domestic power struggles but seems to serve more fundamental, social and emotional, identity-stabilizing functions.

In this paper I argue that neither neo-realists nor liberals are fully correct with their explanations of Russian foreign policy behavior vis-à-vis the West. Russian assertiveness in combination with the expressive rhetoric must be rather understood as a result of the ruling elite's deeper-layered, emotion-based judgment that Russia's identity and self-defined *social status* as an equal great power must be respected by its Western interaction partners. Each time this self-concept is denied, Moscow reacts angrily, both verbally and with concrete actions, laden with emotions and thus following other logics than those that are predicted by rational choice theories. In order to show that this respect-seeking logic is a constant feature of Russian foreign policy, I chose a case from the pre-Putin era, namely Russia's reaction to the 1999 NATO air campaign against Serbia. I hypothesize that the West's denial of Russia's self-defined social status as an influential and equal power in world politics in the Kosovo case was an emotion-evoking factor, while the actions and rhetoric on the Russian side can be read as emotion-driven attempts to restore its self-defined and self-allocated status in the relationship. The West was harshly, and for months, criticized for its military intervention in Kosovo, executed without a mandate from the United Nations. Angry verbal outrage from the Russian leadership, the country's political class, also mirrored in the media, showed a broad consensus on the opinion that the West's decision had been inappropriate in terms of respect for Russia's self-defined identity and international role. A number of activities followed, which appeared like contorted maneuvers and provocations, not rational, well-calculated policy: starting with Prime Minister Primakov's demonstrative U-turn during his flight to Washington in the first night of NATO's air campaign and ranging to the *coup de main*-like seizure of Pristina airport by Russian paratroops a few months later.

2. Status, respect and emotions – understanding Russian foreign policy from a social-psychological perspective

2.1. The role of social respect

From the perspective of social psychology, Russia's foreign policy vis-à-vis the West, its inconsistencies and assertiveness, are expressions of the attempt to regain the *social status* in international relations it occupied during the Cold War. Scholars of social psychology believe that individuals, groups and states strive for a positive position (status) as members of a social community (Tajfel, 1978). They are concerned about their status not because it provides them with power assets, but because it provides them with a "positively distinctive identity" (Welch Larson and Shevchenko, 2010, p. 66). Consequently, the character of social behavior in groups respectively in any social interaction is subject to the acknowledgment of this self-defined rank by others (Taylor and Brown, 1988). This is, of course, not to say that rational motives do not play any role at all in status-relevant issues. As Steve Wood points out, status (or in his words prestige) "is distinct but not isolated from power: material, social or imagined" (Wood, 2013, p. 387). Vice versa, prestige, that is, the "recognition of importance" (Wood, 2013, p. 388), constitutes an important basis of being and acting as a great power.

Social respect is a form of acknowledgment of social status – and, thus, respect claims are active requests to acknowledge this status. According to Wolf (2011), (social) respect refers to the evaluative dimension of social status; the subjectively defined adequate recognition of one's self-conception and value. This means that respect includes two aspects: the *wish* to be respected and the *moral judgment* that this treatment is just and appropriate. Social respect "is an attitude we expect others to show by the way they treat us" (Wolf, 2011, p. 113). Speaking of *respect expectations* seems, thus, conceptually more adequate. Wishing and moral judging, in turn, are two cognitive elements which constitute and are tied to emotions (Haidt, 2001). Being respected, thus, is socially *and* emotionally important, as this acknowledges the 'self' in its subjectively defined identity, rank and status in a social relationship (Stets, 2005; Wolf, 2011; Tiedens, 2001). Although this logic of respect is derived from individual psychology, it can be assumed that it applies also to larger groups, thus also to states. It does so through shared identities and the reproduction of emotional and cognitive practices by group members (Sasley, 2011). It can be assumed that, when respect for a state's identity and status definition is refused or challenged, actors who identify themselves with this identity tend to react emotionally. In other words: the denial of social status in a specific situation when its approval is important for maintaining self-esteem can trigger an emotional reaction.

2.2. The emotional dimension of status denial

The literature suggests anger to be a typical emotion that emerges and shapes a relationship when social status is denied, that is, when A refuses recognition of status to B (Kemper, 1978; Isbell et al., 2006; Lerner and Keltner, 2001; Scherer, 2005).[2]

[2] Other emotions connected to status loss are shame and contempt (Kemper, 1978; Neckel, 1991). Shame is a "self-condemning" emotion; the blame for status loss is attributed to oneself. Contempt is experienced when the other is perceived as being socially inferior.

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