



# Russia's Role in World Politics

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Power, Ideas, and  
Domestic Influences

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*Edited by*  
ELIAS GÖTZ  
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Elias Götz • Neil MacFarlane  
Editors

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# Russia's role in world politics: power, ideas, and domestic influences

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**Abstract** Russia's role in world politics has become the object of a spirited debate among policymakers, think-tank analysts, and academics. Much of this debate focuses on one central question: What are the main drivers, or causes, of Moscow's increasingly proactive and assertive foreign policy? The purpose of this special issue is to address this question by focusing on the *interplay* of power, ideas, and domestic influences. Our introductory article sets the scene for this analytical endeavor. More specifically, the article has three aims: (1) to review the existing explanations of Moscow's assertiveness; (2) to discuss the challenges, opportunities, and benefits of employing eclectic approaches in the study of Russian foreign policy; and (3) to outline the contributions of the articles that follow.

**Keywords** Russia · Foreign policy · International relations theory · Analytical eclecticism

## Introduction

In recent years, Russia has played an increasingly active and assertive role in world politics. Examples include Russia's takeover of Crimea and meddling in eastern Ukraine; Russia's military intervention in Syria and support for the Assad

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government; the Kremlin's alleged interference in the 2016 US presidential race; the pursuit of closer economic and diplomatic ties with China; and Russia's ambitious military reforms and nuclear brinkmanship.

Not surprisingly, Russia's role in world politics has become the object of a spirited debate among Western policymakers, think-tank analysts, and academics. Much of this debate focuses on one central question: What are the main drivers, or causes, of Moscow's recent assertiveness? The purpose of this special issue is to address this question by focusing on the *interplay* of power, ideas, and domestic influences.

In brief, by "power" we mean factors such as the distribution of economic and military capabilities, geography, and security dilemma dynamics. By "ideas" we refer to factors such as Russia's national identity and its perceptions of history. By "domestic influences" we mean Russia's internal political structures, regime security considerations of the Kremlin, and the pulling and hauling of subnational actors (for example, governmental agencies and business elites).

In principle, most analysts agree that all three clusters of factors—power, ideas, and domestic influences—shape Moscow's actions on the international stage. In practice, however, the existing work tends to focus on one set of factors while neglecting the others. Rarely do scholars provide theoretically informed explanations of Russia's external policies that combine material factors and ideas or that cross international and domestic levels of analysis, notable exceptions being Krickovic (2016) and Tsygankov (2012). There are of course methodological advantages in zeroing in on one set or subset of factors. The downside is that it often impedes a more comprehensive understanding of Russia's external relations. This special issue seeks to fill that void through six contributions that systematically investigate how the interactions between power, ideas, and domestic influences shape Russian foreign policy.

Our introductory article sets the scene for this analytical endeavor. To do so, we proceed in three steps: First, we review the dominant explanations of Moscow's assertiveness; second, we discuss the challenges and benefits of employing eclectic approaches in the study of Russian foreign policy; and third, we outline the contributions of the articles that follow.

## **Russian foreign policy: the ongoing debate**

The study of Russian foreign policy has become a crowded field. A sizeable literature on the topic has emerged in recent years. Most scholars agree that Moscow has adopted an increasingly muscular foreign policy. At the same time, the question of what drives Russia's assertiveness continues to generate considerable controversy and debate. At risk of oversimplifying a highly diverse and rapidly expanding body of research, we suggest that the existing accounts can be roughly divided into three groups—power-based explanations, ideational explanations, and domestic political explanations (this overview draws on Götz 2017).



## Power-based explanations

One group of scholars argues that Russian foreign policy is primarily driven by geopolitical imperatives and the distribution of material power in the international system. This argument comes in two importantly different versions. The first attributes Russia's assertiveness to the country's relative material capabilities, which increased during the 2000s—mainly because of the upswing in hydrocarbon and commodity prices on the world market (see, e.g., Kagan 2008: 13–14; Mankoff 2007: 126–127; Tsygankov 2006: 679–681). In parallel, the West in general and the United States in particular grew weaker because of the 2008–2009 financial crisis and the enormous costs related to the military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. These developments emboldened Moscow to adopt a more assertive and ambitious foreign policy agenda. To be sure, energy prices have fallen in recent years and Russia faces severe economic and financial challenges. But, in a cross-temporal perspective, Russia is significantly stronger than it was during the 1990s (Saradzhyan 2016). This, so the argument, lies at the heart of Russia's recent assertiveness.

The second version turns this logic around and emphasizes that Russia is a great power in long-term decline, especially in economic, demographic, and technological terms (Tsygankov 2009: 360–361). The argument here is that Russia, as a declining power, has incentives to settle scores and create political and institutional structures that serve its interests, while it still has sufficient capabilities to do so. As Nye (2015) puts it, “Russia is in long-term decline, but it still poses a very real threat to the international order in Europe and beyond. Indeed, Russia's malaise may make it even more dangerous, given the tendency of declining states to become less risk-averse.” In other words, it is Russia's impending weakness, not strength, that lies behind its assertive actions (Krickovic 2017: 309–312).

In extension, several scholars suggest that external pressures and security needs go a long way to explain Russia's international behavior. Probably the strongest and most prominent expression of this approach is Mearsheimer's (2014) analysis of the Ukraine crisis. He contends that Russia's takeover of Crimea and its subversion of southeast Ukraine is an attempt to prevent Kiev from establishing closer bonds with Euro-Atlantic institutions in general and, in particular, NATO. Nobody, after all, would want to have a powerful and potentially hostile military alliance on its doorstep (also see Bock et al. 2014; Götz 2015). Along similar lines, many of Russia's foreign policy actions in the last years—including Moscow's budding partnership with China, the 2008 war against Georgia, Russia's intervention in Syria, and the formation of the Eurasian Economic Union—can be understood as part of Russia's counterbalancing strategy against the West (Korolev 2017).

In summary, despite profound differences, these explanations have one thing in common: They attribute Russia's assertive foreign policy to power-political factors—that is, the distribution of material capabilities, external pressures, and geopolitical imperatives. Such arguments are informed, either explicitly or implicitly, by structural realist theories of international politics.



## Ideational explanations

A second group of scholars focuses on the role of ideational factors. For example, there is a large body of literature suggesting that the quest for prestige and status is the main driver of Russian foreign policy. Many studies in this vein argue that Moscow wants to receive status recognition from the West, which is regarded as Russia's "significant other" (see, e.g., Neumann 2008; Tsygankov 2010). Accordingly, Russia's increasingly tough stance vis-à-vis the West has been variously explained as an attempt to validate the country's great-power status, rectify perceived injustices, or as a response to wounded honor (Clunan 2009; Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Neumann 2016; Tsygankov 2012; see also the contributions in Forsberg et al. 2014).

Other scholars place greater emphasis on the role of Russian identity formations. One of the principal representatives of this perspective is Ted Hopf. In a series of sophisticated analyses, Hopf (2002, 2005, 2006) puts forth the argument that Russia's international behavior is enabled and shaped by the prevailing identity discourses on the domestic marketplace of ideas. His argument, in highly simplified terms, is that a centrist–statist narrative has become increasingly popular among large swathes of the Russian population and the country's political elite. Accordingly, Moscow has adopted a tough line toward the West. Hopf (2016) also argues that the shift in Russian popular discourse toward a more nationalist-conservative disposition created permissive conditions for the annexation of Crimea.

In a related manner, scholars have shown that in Russian identity discourses the notion of "great-power status" is closely associated with regional spheres of influence and the right to exert control over neighboring small states (Matz 2001). This can explain why Moscow has worked hard to strengthen its influence in the post-Soviet space through diplomatic, economic, and even military instruments. On this view, the annexation of Crimea can be understood as a defense of Russian great-power status, as defined in the prevailing national identity discourse, rather than a defense of concrete security interests (Clunan 2014; Larson and Shevchenko 2014).

In short, the central claim of these arguments and interpretations is that Russia's external relations are driven not so much by material factors as by ideational influences. This line of reasoning draws on insights from constructivist-inspired theories and approaches in the field of international relations.

## Domestic political explanations

A third group of scholars holds that domestic political factors and dynamics shape Russian foreign policy. For example, numerous accounts have suggested that Russia's assertive actions in the post-Soviet space can be attributed to the country's semi-authoritarian political structures. An example is Ambrosio's (2009) study, *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union*. Ambrosio suggests that the Kremlin wants to roll back democratic advances and prop up autocratic governments in the area of the former Soviet Union. The reason is simple. The Kremlin is wary of democratic and pro-Western



neighbor states out of fear that they might serve as a role model for Russia itself, thereby threatening the Putin regime's hold on power and its domestic structure of governance. Thus, Moscow seeks to reverse so-called color revolutions in the former Soviet area and prevent the spread of democracy closer to Russia's borders (also see Ambrosio 2006; Vanderhill 2013: 41–96; Wilson 2014). Another example of this line of reasoning is found in Allison's (2013) insightful analysis of Russia's Syria policy. According to Allison, one of the underlying drivers of Moscow's diplomatic and military support for the Assad government is "the perceived challenges to Russia's domestic political structure." The Kremlin, so his argument, "is (...) unsettled by the example which the overthrow of yet another authoritarian ruler in Syria might offer to domestic critics within Russia and other illiberal CIS states" (Allison 2013: 818–819).

Other scholars suggest that the leadership in Moscow has adopted a more assertive foreign policy posture to deflect the population's attention from internal failures. For example, writing about the 2008 military conflict with Georgia, Shevtosva (2010: 83) contends that "[w]ithin Russia, the war marked the revival of the old tactic of rallying the population around a common foreign enemy, thus distracting them from their real problems." Similarly, some observers contend that Russia's confrontational rhetoric and saber-rattling vis-à-vis the West is an attempt by the Putin government to purposefully create a "siege mentality" in order to rally the population around the Kremlin at a time of economic hardship (Kaplan 2016: 34–36; Krastev and Holmes 2014; Mendras 2015). The background assumption here is that concerns over regime security shape Moscow's international activities. In the words of Cadier and Light (2015: 205), "the chief drivers of Russia's contemporary foreign policy behavior are objectives and imperatives linked to domestic regime consolidation."

Finally, and related to the previous point, there are scholars who suggest that Moscow's foreign policy can be directly attributed to the narrower interests of political and societal actors within Russia. For example, several observers have pointed to the fact that so-called *siloviki* (that is, people with a background in the military and security services) have come to occupy key government positions in the Kremlin. The argument is that the *siloviki's* Cold War mentality and conservative values, embodied by President Putin, drive Russia's increasingly assertive behavior on the international scene (Bremmer and Charap 2007; Cohen 2007; Staun 2007). In extension, some scholars have suggested that Putin's personal perceptions and worldviews are the chief driver of Russian foreign policy (see, e.g., Forsberg and Pursiainen 2017; Hill 2015). Yet others suggest that Moscow's foreign policy choices are heavily influenced by patronal politics. For instance, Marten (2015) argues that Moscow's behavior toward Iran and Syria has been shaped, to a significant degree, by the economic agendas of informal political networks with close links to the Russian leadership.

In essence, the predominant domestic political explanations of Russian foreign policy attribute Moscow's actions to its semi-authoritarian form of governance, the imperatives of regime survival, and the narrower interests of powerful political and societal actors. These types of arguments are informed—even if this is sometimes only implicit—by *Innenpolitik* theories and liberal approaches to international relations.



## The case for combining power, ideas, and domestic influences

In the preceding section, we have outlined three sets of explanations. Each of them has marshaled some empirical evidence to support its preferred interpretations and appears, at first glance, to be convincing. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that all three perspectives suffer from defects and explanatory shortcomings.

### Shortcomings of the existing explanations

To begin, there are two reasons why scholars should be skeptical of purely power-based explanations. First and most obviously, there are internal contradictions. As noted, some observers suggest that the West's weakness has emboldened Russia to act in a more assertive fashion. Others attribute Moscow's hard-line policies to the fact that Russia is a power in decline. In other words, Russia's weakness *and* its relative strength incentivize Moscow to flex its foreign policy muscles. This makes power-based arguments nearly tautological and unfalsifiable, as both rising and declining power capacities induce Moscow to pursue assertive policies.

Second, power-based explanations have difficulties to fully account for Russia's threat assessments and perceptions. For example, Russian policymakers and strategic planners are highly suspicious of the United States, NATO, and, in recent years, also of the European Union. By contrast, they appear to be less concerned about China. From a purely power-political point of view, this is baffling. After all, China has surpassed Russia in both economic and military terms. Moreover, both countries share a long border. On top of that, China has stepped up its diplomatic and economic activities in the post-Soviet space. Thus, going by power and proximity alone, China poses at least as big a threat to Russia as the US-led NATO alliance—or the European Union, for that matter. However, policymakers in Moscow seem to be overly fixated with the potential threat from the West. This cannot be read off from structural power conditions (for a similar argument, see Tsygankov 2012: 18).

Ideational accounts, for their part, face some explanatory challenges as well. For one thing, it is unclear why Russia has repeatedly pursued policies that undermine its international prestige and status. Think of Russia's takeover of Crimea and its meddling in eastern Ukraine, or its support for the Assad government and the 2008 war against Georgia. All these actions seem to have weakened, not advanced, Russia's prestige and status—at least in the eyes of Western policymakers, who are regarded as the primary target of Russia's hunt for status recognition. This begs the question: Why is Russia pursuing self-defeating prestige policies? Moreover, the scholar Mercer (2017: 168) has shown in a detailed study that “[f]or psychological and political reasons, the odds are against obtaining prestige in international politics.” Thus, it appears that Russian policymakers are chasing what they cannot catch (prestige) by the wrong means (assertive policies). This conclusion raises as many questions as it answers.



A second challenge for ideational explanations is to account for discursive shifts on the domestic level. As described above, an array of scholars contends that Moscow's international behavior is heavily influenced and shaped by the prevailing identity narratives within Russia. But, this argument leaves unanswered the question of why one identity strand wins out over another, and when identity narratives change. Why, for instance, did Russia's predominant identity narrative turn increasingly conservative and nationalistic in 2013–2014? Purely ideational arguments have difficulties to account for this “conservative turn” on Russia's marketplace of ideas. In order to explain it, scholars often refer to the activities of domestic actors who intentionally promote certain ideas for their personal benefit. For example, Wilson (2014: 69) suggests that “Putin has relied on the ‘conservative values project’ to sustain himself in power since the 2012 election.” On reflection, it is not far-fetched that the Putin government is constructing a self-serving ideology to bolster its position domestically. Purely ideational explanations tend to overlook such dynamics. What is more, ideational explanations have little to say about why “conservatism” might appeal disproportionately to the people from whom Putin is seeking support.

Domestic political explanations, in turn, face their own challenges and shortcomings. For instance, the argument that regime security concerns have pushed the Kremlin to adopt an assertive foreign policy has difficulties to account for developments over time. After all, Russia began to pursue an increasingly assertive foreign policy in the mid-2000s. At that time, the Kremlin's popularity increased on the back of a booming economy. In other words, just as popular support for the Russian government was skyrocketing, it adopted a more muscular foreign policy stance. This runs counter to the claim that the Russian government's external assertiveness is driven by internal weakness.

Moreover, the argument that the Kremlin wants to actively prevent democratization processes in the post-Soviet space out of a fear of spillover is not fully convincing either. For one thing, nationalist groups—not liberals pushing for Western-style democracy—dominate domestic opposition in today's Russia. Thus, the risk of a spillover is relatively low to begin with. For another, the empirical pattern shows that regime types do not determine Russia's relations with neighboring countries. For example, Russia has strained relations with autocratic Uzbekistan. At the same time, Russia's relations with Georgia have markedly improved after Mikheil Saakashvili left the political scene in 2012. By most accounts, Georgia has become more—not less—democratic since then (Way 2015: 701). Thus, the fact that Russia has pursued a more restrained policy toward Georgia in recent years runs counter to the democratic-spillover thesis (for an excellent discussion of the conceptual weaknesses underpinning that thesis, see Tansey 2016).

In essence, all three sets of explanations offer valuable insights but also suffer from shortcomings. The articles that follow show in greater detail that, by itself, none of the three perspectives is entirely satisfactory in explaining specific cases of Russian foreign policy. Differently put, the existing accounts provide us with partial explanations of Moscow's actions. They illuminate some aspects but neglect others.

Given this, it appears meaningful to combine elements from power-based, ideational, and domestic political explanations. Indeed, many scholars agree that

