

Teaching International Relations after Russia's Annexation of Crimea

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Executive Summary

This article uses the author's teaching experience at higher education institutions in Latvia to discuss the applicability of several international relations (IR) approaches and to assess their usefulness and limitations when it comes to explaining the origins and progression of the conflict in Ukraine. It looks at mainstream IR theories and their usefulness in explaining Russia's foreign policy behaviour. It also addresses Western assessment of Russia's character and intentions, the impact of domestic influences on Russia's foreign policy, and the use of restrictive measures by the West to shape Russia's policies. This article concludes that theories and concepts are useful to a certain extent. Their value lies mainly in serving as lenses through which various outcomes in international affairs can be discussed and explained. They help to generate hypotheses about the origins of Russia's foreign policy. Their usefulness, however, is limited because theoretical instruments only identify potential explanations for state behaviour, while more complete explanations must rely on in-depth expertise of Russia. This underlines the importance of actor-specific expertise. Due to the uncertainty inherent in international politics, however, even this kind of improved actor-specific expertise is mostly helpful to explain Russia's behaviour, while prediction and foresight are hard to attain.

Unexpected events in international relations (IR) usually provide academics with plenty to discuss. Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and its consistent support for the separatists in Ukraine's Donbas region are no exceptions. Heightened interest in Russia's foreign policy in the aftermath of 2014 has resulted in a steady stream of books and articles that were published over the past seven years. Attention of Western policymakers and academics has refocused towards Russia, resulting in a better understanding of Russian domestic politics and foreign policy. The focus of this article, however, is on how the conflict between Russia and Ukraine can be used for the purpose of teaching international relations and foreign policy theories. The annexation of Crimea was shocking, the military conflict in the Donbass region was a tragedy, and the conflict is still ongoing with casualties on a weekly basis. This conflict, however, also provides ample material for academics to demonstrate the usefulness of theoretical and conceptual instruments. The fact that Russia's conflict with Ukraine can be looked at from a variety of perspectives underscores the complexity of international affairs.

The following analysis is based on my experience of teaching various international relations and foreign policy courses at the University of Latvia and the National Defence Academy of Latvia. At the University of Latvia, I mostly work with students of political science, both undergraduates and post-graduates, while at the National Defence Academy I work with cadets who are on career paths to becoming officers in the Latvian National Armed Forces. While students and cadets clearly perceive Russia as a potential threat to Latvia (and to Russia's other neighbours as well), their perspectives on Russia are also different. After all, cadets are practitioners whose task is to create a sufficient military deterrent against Russia. If deterrence fails, it will be up to them to defend their country against an external aggression. For cadets, Russia represents something more than it does to students at a civilian university. An additional point worth emphasizing is that the public interest in Russia's policies towards Ukraine have not faded away since 2014. Flare-ups of the conflict in Donbass region are

regularly reported on Latvian media, and there is considerable interest in Russia's policies towards Ukraine and in relations between Russia and the West more broadly.²

The IR courses that I teach at both institutions address concepts and theories that span three levels of analysis – the individual, the states and international system. The primary focus of these courses is on international security. This in itself is an indicator of the transformation of regional security environment of which Latvia is a part. The courses that look at the “individual – state” nexus are the foreign policy and foreign policy decision-making courses. The courses addressing the “the individual - international system” nexus primarily deal with mainstream IR theories, such as Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism. These courses also focus heavily on theories and concepts that are part of the contemporary debates in international security. Most subjects that are addressed in my courses have some relationship to Russia's domestic politics and foreign policy.

It would be beyond the scope of this paper to cover most ways in which Russia has become the subject of discussions in my classes, therefore the subsequent sections of this brief article look at four broad issues that bring together theoretical elements and Russia's policies. The first section looks at applicability of mainstream IR theories in explaining and understanding Russia's foreign policy behaviour. The second section addresses Western assessment of Russia's character and intentions. The third section deals with the relationship between Russia's domestic and foreign policies. Finally, the fourth section discusses Western efforts to shape Russia's policies and Russia's attempts to influence Western policies.

The article concludes that although theories and concepts are useful instruments whose value lies mainly in serving as lenses through which various outcomes in international affairs can be discussed and explained, their usefulness is also limited because theoretical instruments only identify potential explanations for state behaviour, while more complete explanations must rely on in-depth expertise of the specific actor (in this case Russia). Thus, theoretical hunches in the end either are or are not supported by empirical evidence.

Mainstream IR theories and Russia

Russia's annexation of Crimea and support for the separatists in the eastern part Ukraine provides an opportunity discuss the usefulness of Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism to explain the origins of this conflict. The Realist worldview focuses on great power competition and the usefulness of military force to defend vital state interests. Alternatively, insights into the origins of the conflict can be provided by Liberalism, with its emphasis on international institutions, economic (and other) interdependence, and the effects of political regimes on foreign policy. Constructivism provides another line of inquiry into the origins of the crisis, and foreign policy behaviour is mostly explained with reference to identities of the actors involved, and to domestic and international norms.

² At the time when this article was written in early April 2021, there were signs that the armed conflict in the Donbass region had escalated again, and Russia had moved significant military forces to Crimea and in the vicinity of the Donbass region. Russian authorities had issued statements that it might need to take measures to protect its compatriots if Ukraine escalated the conflict.

Of the three IR theories, Realism offers a powerful explanation of Russia's policies towards Ukraine. Russian worldview was (and still is) that of great power competition, and the events in Ukraine had the potential to damage Russia's vital interests for years to come. Turning of the tables in Kyiv might have been bad news for Russia's military and economic interests in Ukraine, and would have been a major loss for Russia. A realist would expect Russia to respond forcefully to domestic turmoil in Ukraine and the possibility of its geopolitical reorientation away from Russia.³ In short, Russia's aggression to prevent Ukraine from aligning with the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was predictable and, to some extent, almost inevitable.

Liberalism, however, would mostly explain Western policies towards Ukraine and Russia by emphasizing the increasing differences between the West, Russia, and Ukraine. Relations between Russia and the West had soured before 2014 because Russia had grown increasingly authoritarian. Ukraine, however, was regarded as deeply divided and the future trajectory of its political regime was uncertain. It hardly seems to be a coincidence though that the mass protests in Ukraine that started in late 2013 were met with Russia's coercive policies. There was a prospect that Ukraine would gradually become more democratic. Thus, it would also become increasingly different from Russia. It is likely that this was perceived as a threat by the Russian political elites. This is very much in line with Michael W. Doyle's argument that the very same factors that facilitate peaceful relations between democracies create preconditions for conflict between democracies and nondemocracies.⁴

Constructivism offers a less specific view of international relations, but it does offer a different ontology.⁵ State behaviour is primarily driven by immaterial factors such as identities and norms. People have identities and, arguably, states have identities too, although states may have multiple identities and those identities can be contested domestically. A Constructivist take on the origins of the conflict in Ukraine would be that the conflict was caused by the different (and perhaps incompatible) identities of the actors involved. Two aspects are of key importance here. First, state identity is primarily determined by the character of the political regime. This part of identity essentially goes back to the explanation of the conflict that has been provided by Liberalism, that is, that the conflict was exacerbated by the differences in political regimes in Russia, Ukraine, and the West. Second, Russia's intervention in Ukraine probably has something to do with its great power identity which is very competitive. Great powers may want spheres of influence for security purposes to shield them from their competitors. But spheres of influence are also a crucial aspect of identity confirmation. A great power is a great power because it has its own sphere of influence. If its sphere of influence becomes reduced, then its great power identity can be called into question. In short, great powers may want spheres of influence for security purposes, but spheres of influence are also a crucial aspect of great power identity.

All in all, Russia's behaviour can be understood as largely consistent with the Realist worldview, but it is also a challenge to the rules-based order in Europe. Although it would be an exaggeration to claim that Realism provides a full explanation of the

³ Mearsheimer, J.J. Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault. *Foreign Affairs* 93:5, 2014. pp. 77-89.

⁴ Doyle, M.W. Liberalism and World Politics. *The American Political Science Review* 80:4, 1986. pp. 1151-1169.

⁵ Wendt, A. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

origins of the conflict, there is probably some truth in the Realist argument. The big question, however, is about the reasons why Russia seemed to look at the world through the Realist lens while its Western partners did not. This is where Liberalism and Constructivism are helpful. A common theme in analyses that aim to explain the outbreak of the conflict was that Russia and the West 'sleepwalked' into this conflict.⁶ It is not uncommon for actors to assume that worldviews of other actors are similar to their own. If the EU and NATO Member States did not see eastward enlargement and the establishment of ever closer partnerships of these organization with states in Eastern Europe as threatening, then their leaders probably believed that Russian leadership were also unlikely to perceive the EU and NATO enlargement as threatening. Democratic participation in Ukraine, though chaotic at times, was commendable from the Western perspective because one of its aims was to advance democracy in Ukraine. Meanwhile, Russia perceived the events in Ukraine in early 2014 as a direct threat to its interests, perhaps even as a decisive break in relations between Ukraine and Russia. Thus, Russia used a window of opportunity to secure its vital interests in Ukraine before the domestic scene settled down after the Euromaidan and coercion by military means would have elicited a more forceful response from Ukraine and its western partners.

Although the mainstream IR theories provide useful insights into the origins of the conflict in Ukraine by emphasizing the impact of different variables, these competing explanations are incomplete and insufficient. Realism emphasizes great power competition and policies aimed at creating spheres of influence, but it does not seem in retrospect that Russia's policies towards Ukraine have succeeded. Relations between Russia and the West have broken down, Ukraine has aligned with the EU and NATO, and Russia's aggression has revitalized NATO. Russia's initial tactical victories have not brought strategic achievements. Thus, additional insights from the conflict need to be addressed in order to provide a more comprehensive explanation of the conflict in Ukraine. This conflict, however, provides an excellent basis for in-class discussions on the usefulness and limitations of the mainstream IR theories.

Russia's character and intentions

One key consequence of the conflict in Ukraine has been the reassessment of Russia's character and future intentions towards its neighbours. Assessments of a state's future intentions involve judgments about its character, previous foreign policy behaviour, domestic drivers of its foreign policy, risk propensity, and other influences on its behaviour. When it comes to great powers or regional powers, the continuum of potential future foreign policy behaviour ranges from the acceptance of a status quo to unlimited revisionism. States that are satisfied with the status quo are unlikely to prepare plans for how to overthrow the existing international order, while states that for some reason are dissatisfied with the status quo are likely to engage in revisionist behaviour.⁷

The question then is about the extent to which Russia might want to transform the present international order in its favor, the reasons for doing that, and indicators of revisionist behaviour. Is Russia a status quo state, a limited aims revisionist, or an

⁶ Speck, U. How the EU Sleepwalked Into a Conflict with Russia. Carnegie Europe, 10.07.2014. Available at: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2014/07/10/how-eu-sleepwalked-into-conflict-with-russia-pub-56121>

⁷ Davidson, J.W. The Origins of Revisionist and Status-Quo States. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

unlimited aims revisionist state? Although there is no consensus regarding Russia's character and future intentions among analysts and policymakers, it seems that Russia is widely regarded as an opportunistic power.⁸ Since Russia's influence and standing in the international system was greatly reduced since the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union, it has reasons to oppose the American-led unipolar world order. For the past 15 years, Russia has advocated for a multipolar world in which Russia would be able to protect its domestic politics from foreign interference and project its influence abroad. Russia is revisionist at least to some extent.

The question then becomes about the extent of Russia's revisionism and the means that Russia is ready to use to pursue its revisionist policies. Answering this question, unfortunately, is compounded with several difficulties. First, behaviour is situational; states may not know themselves how they will behave in the future in circumstances that are hard to predict in advance. Second, much of state behaviour is ad hoc, that is, behaviour is in response to international crises or states may use windows of opportunity. It is hard to distinguish pre-planned strategic behaviour from opportunistic behaviour. Third, it is hard to distinguish offensive and defensive behaviour. The use of military force can be seen as an indicator of revisionism, but military force can also be used to prevent others from encroaching on one's interests. In the case of Russia, its use of military force against Ukraine is presented as evidence of Russia's revisionism, and there is certainly some truth to this argument. But the extent of this revisionism is hard to determine because Russia has used coercion against Ukraine largely to prevent it from leaving Russia's sphere of influence. The use of force may represent a challenge to the existing international order, but it is hardly a sign of unrestricted revisionism that would amount to a roll-back of the EU and NATO enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe. Fourth, determining Russia's revisionism is also hard because the extent of revisionism may vary depending on the issue and geographic area. Revisionist policies may be limited to a specific geographic area and thus have limited consequences for the global order. Also, revisionist policies may be directed at challenging policies pursued by other great powers without specifically altering geographical areas adjacent to the revisionist great power. To sum up, the assessment of Russia's policies towards Ukraine leaves room for interpretation about the extent of Russia's revisionism. Although Russia is not a status quo state, its revisionism has thus far been limited. There is no guarantee though that its revisionism will remain limited.

Relationship between Russia's domestic and foreign policies

There is a strong relationship between domestic and foreign policies. Although this relationship is not necessarily acknowledged by structural realist analyses of international affairs, domestic influences on foreign policy are regarded as key driving forces in most of the foreign policy analysis literature.⁹ Foreign policy decision making

⁸ Treisman, D. Why Putin Took Crimea: The Gambler in the Kremlin. *Foreign Affairs* 95:3, 2016. pp. 47-54.

⁹ Theories of foreign policy mostly focus on the continuum between the state and the individual, while international relations theories place a premium on the state-level and/or system-level factors. For examples of foreign policy theories see some of the following contributions: Allison, G., Zelikow, P. *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*. 2nd edition. Longman, 1999., Jervis, R. *How Statesmen Think: The Psychology of International Politics*. Princeton University Press, 2017., Neustadt, R.E., May, E.R. *Thinking in Time. The Uses of History for Decision Makers*. The Free Press, 1986., Halperin, M.A., Clapp, P. *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy*. 2nd edition. Brookings Institution, 2007.

is likely to be influenced by a variety of factors, including political leaders' calculations about the likely impact of foreign policy decisions on their domestic standing, various governmental and non-governmental interests, and public opinion. All these considerations have been present in debates over Russia's policies towards Ukraine and the West.

Since Russia's political system has grown heavily centralized over the past two decades, much attention has been devoted towards the relationship between Russia's foreign policy and Vladimir Putin's domestic standing. In a personalistic autocracy, the legitimacy of the regime largely rests upon the leader's ability to secure public support.¹⁰ This has led to the simplistic notion that Russia's use of force is the result of the need to prop up domestic support for Putin. The argument is that once public support for Putin's decreases to a level where it is perceived as threatening the legitimacy of the regime, Russia tries to score a significant foreign policy victory. A variation of this argument sees Russia's foreign policy as increasingly reckless because each consecutive foreign policy victory needs to be more impressive than the previous one. In a nutshell, this line of thought stipulates that Russia's foreign policy adventurism and confrontation with the West are pursued for domestic purposes. Public support for Putin was at its highest after the annexation of Crimea, but it has somewhat decreased recently. Arguably, this makes Russia dangerous because it would need to score a win abroad to keep its president in power. This argument has been especially visible in the Baltic states, where it has been amplified by historical injustices that were committed by Soviet Union.

The above argument, however, is not persuasive. The rally around the flag effect is well-known to those who have studied political science, and it has indeed been demonstrated that the support for political leaders in office usually increases during international crises.¹¹ There are, however, two caveats that need to be taken into consideration. First, the rally around the flag effect may be short-lived. When states decide to use military force abroad, the public may support this because it believes that political leaders know what they are doing and that they have information at their disposal which justifies the use of force. Public support may evaporate though if it becomes clear later that the justification for the use of force was shaky and that political objectives may have been attained by other means or downsized altogether. Second, the simplistic interpretation of the rally around the flag effect makes no distinction between different types of international crises and use of military force abroad. It would, however, be very difficult for Russia to replicate the success of the annexation of Crimea in terms of public support. Although the public support for Putin may increase substantially if he manages to decisively humiliate NATO either in the Baltic region or elsewhere, the risks inherent in this kind operation are probably too big. Also, if the use of force abroad turns out to be less successful than intended, or if the military conflicts become protracted, then public support may as well dissipate. Thus, the rally around the flag effect is far from guaranteed and may indeed backfire to hurt leaders who may be tempted to initiate foreign crises to shore up support at home. Also, Russia's political decision-making system can be less centralized than it may seem from outside, and

¹⁰ Frye, T. Russia's Weak Strongman: The Perilous Bargains That Keep Putin in Power. *Foreign Affairs* 100:3, 2021.

¹¹ Baker, W.D., Oneal, J.R. Patriotism or Opinion Leadership? The Nature and Origins of the "Rally 'Round the Flag" Effect. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45:5, 2001. pp. 661-687.

Putin himself has been characterized as a risk-averse political leader, contrary to the macho image that is often presented to the public.¹²

To what extent can the West shape Russia's behaviour?

The international system is inhabited by sovereign states who can do as they please if they are powerful enough. Although states can try to shape the behaviour of their peers, the instruments at their disposal are imperfect. Russia is a case in point because a key theme in Russia's foreign policy has been strengthening its ability to shield itself from unwanted external influences and increasing its ability to pursue domestic and foreign policies as it sees fit. Russia's pursuit of multipolar international system can be also interpreted in this light. In a unipolar system, only the sole superpower enjoys true sovereignty. The transition to multipolarity is then marked by increased ability of the former second-tier powers to chart their course independently. Arguably, Russia has succeeded in minimizing external influences on its domestic politics while attempting to increase influence abroad. Over the past 30 years, many of Russia's smaller neighbours have tried to neutralize Russia's attempts to influence their domestic and foreign policies, but in the past five years some of Russia's more powerful international partners such as the United States, Germany, France, and United Kingdom, have become wary of Russia's efforts to influence their domestic politics.

Taking into consideration that Russia has consistently tried to minimize the ability of other actors to influence its behaviour, to what extent is it possible for the EU and NATO to shape Russia's policies? Overall, the ability to influence Russia's policies depends upon three interlinked factors. First, the ability of NATO and the EU to influence Russia can be looked at through the concept of deterrence. In short, NATO (and to some extent the EU) would like to persuade Russia not to initiate a military aggression against one or several of its Member States. Particular attention has been paid to security of the Baltic states, which have been sometimes singled out as the place where Russia might use its military force after Ukraine. If possible, the West would also like to deter Russia from further aggression against Georgia, Ukraine, and other states in the European neighbourhood. The possibility for the West to influence Russia's behaviour regarding states that are not part of the EU and NATO, however, is significantly less than the likelihood of discouraging Russia from trying to coerce Member States of the two organizations. Although it is not entirely clear that Russia needs to be deterred from taking military measures against NATO Member States, because Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) might have been special cases, relations between Russia and the West have deteriorated to such an extent that it is no longer possible to discount the possibility of an open military conflict. The prospects of deterring Russia from initiating military hostilities with NATO and EU Member States are quite promising, but it is less likely that deterrent measures would succeed at deterring all aspects of hostility.

Second, much attention has been paid to the use of economic instruments to restrain Russia's aggression and shape its choices. The economic sanctions that were imposed in 2014 and were aimed at limiting Russia's aggression against Ukraine did not cause much economic pain in Russia *per se*, but in combination with the collapse of the oil

¹² Galeotti, M. We Need to Talk About Putin: How the West Gets Him Wrong. Ebury Press, 2019.

prices they delivered a major blow to the Russian economy.¹³ The negative effects of economic sanctions and Russia's countersanctions has been limited.¹⁴ The economic restrictive measures that the EU has employed against Russia have had limited utility in terms of compellence. These measures have likely had a restraining effect, but that has been restricted to limiting further aggression against Ukraine. Negative economic sanctions have not managed to secure visible concessions from Russia. That is not unusual because compellence is more difficult than deterrence. Although sanctions have had a negative effect on Russia's economy (Russia has issued repeated calls for the EU to lift sanctions), sanctions have not resulted in Russia's willingness to make concessions in the face of international pressure.

Third, attempts of the EU and NATO Member States to influence Russia's policies to a great extent depends on their ability to formulate a common view on the extent of the deterrence and compellence that they wish to pursue, and on their ability to retain cohesiveness of both organizations in the face of Russia's attempts to sow discord among their members. Until now, the EU and NATO have been quite consistent in their pursuit of policies aimed at Russia, but there has been little to no willingness to pursue a more ambitious approach towards Russia which would be more confrontational. There is disagreement among the EU and NATO Member States about the need to contain Russia and about its character and future intentions. Although Russia is seen as a declining power, different conclusions have been drawn regarding its future behaviour. One view stipulates that Russia's weakness makes it more dangerous, while the opposite view is that Russia's bluster can be largely ignored. In the meantime, the restrictive measures remain in place. This may change though if Russia's policies change.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates the usefulness of international relations and foreign policy theories in discussing the conflict in Ukraine from various perspectives. It also displays the limitations inherent in the application of such theories. The opportunities and problems related to the use of theories and concepts for the purpose of explaining the conflict in Ukraine are somewhat similar to the relationship between theory and practice discussed by Alexander L. George.¹⁵ Theories are useful for the purpose of framing the situation, but they only point our attention to specific variables that might have a significant impact on actors' behaviour. Theories are not able to predict whether the variables will play an important role in given circumstances. Because of the specific character of foreign policy (behaviour is strategic; states engage in deception; states deny their involvement in certain events; information about actors' interests is not publicly available) testing the applicability of theories is problematic. Theories are good for the purposes of identifying potential explanations, but they have to be tested empirically to provide the actual explanation.

¹³ Christie, E.H. The Design and Impact of Western Economic Sanctions Against Russia. *The RUSI Journal* 161:3, 2016. pp. 52-64.

¹⁴ Giumelli, F. The Redistributive impact of Restrictive Measures on EU Members: Winners and Losers from Imposing Sanctions on Russia. *Journal of Common Market Studies* 55:5, 2017. pp. 1062-1080.

¹⁵ George, A.L. *Bridging the Gap: Theory & Practice in Foreign Policy*. United States Institute of Peace, 1995.

The conflict in Ukraine is a case in point. It is likely that the variables identified by mainstream IR theories – Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism – have some influence on actors' behaviour. The conflict in Ukraine involves actors whose strategic-military considerations, political regimes, and identities are markedly different. There are also differences among the actors in terms of their preferences regarding stability and change in the international system (status quo vs revisionism). Domestic influences also matter, and the actors are to some extent influenced by the punitive measures used by other involved actors. But theoretical propositions face limitations when it comes to testing them. Not only are there limitations inherent in access to information to be used for the purposes of theory testing, but there are uncertainties regarding interplay of different variables. This underlines the importance of actor-specific expertise, and there have been significant advances in that respect in recent years because of a renewed interest in Russia's foreign policy behaviour. Due to the uncertainty inherent in international politics, however, even this kind of improved actor-specific expertise is mostly helpful to explain Russia's behaviour, while prediction and foresight are more difficult to attain.