

## NUPI ARC 2019 Russian foreign policy and interaction effects

This conference has always tried to bridge a gap between fresh policy analysis of current developments in Russia & serious academic perspectives and research.

In my presentation I will try to address a deficit I have identified both in the current debate on Russia and in the scholarly literature on identity:

In current popular analysis, Russian foreign policy is explained from within: even in our presentations today, it is *Russia's* relations to Europe, to the West, to China, to its own past, to the global order, that we address – it is not how these entities relate to Russia - As if Russia's every move can be explained solely with reference to Russia itself.

Identity scholarship often has a similar problem: we dissect the articulation of identity in one political entity and then look at what conditions of possibility such identifications create for foreign policy action: how identity positions shape the foreign policies of one actor such as Russia.

Today for example how the projection of 'Western threat' to the allegedly 'innocent', 'just' and 'great' Russia makes Russia's multiple assertive policies into the West possible.

This is a very useful exercise. But somehow - when watching developments - you get the sense that the processes of othering (- of construing the other as a threat-) in one political entity (Rus) is tied to such processes in other political entities (USA). And that we miss something if we study what the states do in isolation from each other. There are probably important *interaction effects* that we need to take into account if we want to explain the direction of Russian foreign policy.

For those of us working with identity perspectives I think we need to start asking the question 'what happens when two political entities engage in mutual and escalating othering?' and how can we conceptualize and study such processes?

So, I am trying to study such Mutual processes of othering and how they shape Russian foreign policy and will give you two examples: one concerning Russia's intervention in Syria. The other concerning Russia and Norway in the High North.

## SYRIA

Russia's initial engagement in the Syrian theatre 2015 was shaped by a self-identification of a returning great power in rejection of the West – USA in particular – and US' 'dangerous' policies of regime change in the ME.

But in Russian official representations before the intervention in 2015 - you could also find much less belligerent identifications of the USA – such as in Putin's speech to the UN General Assembly in Sept 2015. Here the USA/West was represented as a 'potential partner' in the fight against someone identified as much more different and dangerous: namely the IS.

(For those of us who had studied the Russia/West partnership against terrorism from 2001 this looked like a re-run of what then sometimes was called Putin's Westward turn.)

Based on these two alternative sets of identifications Russia initially operated with two policy tracks in Syria: one track where Russia would cooperate with the USA to settle the conflict (Assad could go, but the state must stay and we will defeat international terrorism together).

This policy track was institutionalized for example in a) Vienna Peace Talks, b) in the establishment of the International Syria Support Group, co-chaired by the US and Rus and c) in the Lavrov/Kerry plans of creating a Joint Integration Center staffed by both Russian and US military personnel.

Then there was a second policy track where Russia would be the center of a coalition consisting of nearly all powers in the region – excluding the Western powers!

This policy track was institutionalized in a) the Astana negotiating process which Russia led b) the tight Russian military cooperation with Assad, Turkey, Iran and others to secure the Syrian states' 'control over its territory', quench the 'terrorists' (also often the opposition) etc.

As we all know the latter track - building on the identification of the West as the greater threat and Russia as a leading alternative great power – prevailed.

Nothing came of the US/Russia collaboration in Syria – developments on the ground looked more and more as a new R/W war of proxy. The alternative coalition with Russia at the center - and excluding the USA - became the key vehicle in Russia's Syria-policies.

Why? You can say that Russia never wanted to collaborate with the USA in Syria, that the invitation at the UN was just double speak and propaganda.

But you could also argue that Russia's foreign policy choices are shaped in interaction with other states and influenced by how other states identify and relate to Russia.

In my case study, I found that the radical Othering of Russia as an unreliable and dangerous actor in the US domestic debate at the time, made it impossible for the US leadership to collaborate with Russia

– Similarly, the fierce anti-Western discourse that the Putin leadership itself had contributed to whip up in Russia came back to haunt the leadership when it suddenly tried to construe the USA as a *reliable partner against terrorism* in Syria.

Kerry and Lavrov simply had no room for maneuver at the negotiating table: Collaboration failed because of sharp and mutual domestic othering processes that bound the leaders at the top.

Moreover, the vocal dismissal of Russia as a legitimate actor on the international stage, increasingly also in official US statements (2015-2017) – had a tangible effect on Russia's way of relating to the West and its choice of policy tracks in Syria. Russia's strategy against the new stigma placed on it these years – was a type of mirroring of the critique that the US levelled against Russia – the US was 'lying, deceiving, breaking promises, being assertive and aggressive' ETC.

Interestingly, Russia, faced with the US' rejection of Russia's self-assigned identity also sought to emulate the role the US has claimed to play in the Middle East – but which it - according to the Russian script - has deceived.

Today, Russia tries to replace the USA in the Middle East by construing itself as operating according to the good norms that the USA propagates, but constantly deceives: a) giving opposing parties in and around Syria a place around the table b) pressuring them to negotiate and compromise a) helping Assad to draft an inclusive, federal constitution etc.

As Russia says it, we now have a Russian 'peacemaker' instead of a US war-maker calling the shots in the ME.

## Russia and Norway in the High North

In the North, Russia self-identifies as a legitimate 'security seeker', a 'law-abiding Arctic great power'. And, with increasing intensity in the years after 2014, as juxtaposed to an 'assertive' US/NATO with global ambitions - intent on 'militarizing the Arctic'. Norway is identified by Russia as the 'good collaborative neighbor' but increasingly also as 'NATO in the North' or simply as an 'extension of US military power'. In recent years Norway is accused of consciously choosing to be a less friendly neighbour.

These changes in Russian identifications can be explained with reference to the internal social glue that such Othering creates (siege mentality to keep Russia united and distract from internal problems). Or they can be explained by the predominance of the hawks in defining Russian foreign policy.

YES, they can. But they can also in part be explained by Russia's encounters with other core actors in the High North, such as Norway and the USA.

In the case of Russia's encounters with Norway - It matters which of these Russian identifications of Norway, 'partner' or 'threat', Norwegian authorities play to.

Just as it matters which of the two Norwegian identifications of Russia that Russia plays to with its talk and actions in the High North: The 'cooperative, reasonable' Russia or Russia as an 'assertive and aggressive actor with nuclear weapons'?? (- Russia is certainly playing to the latter image with recent Military exercises in the Norwegian sea, but I promised I would talk about interaction and reciprocity in relations and therefore I return to Norway.)

Because it does matter how Norway identifies and relates to Russia in the North. Even if we have to be totally clear on the fact that Russia is always and extremely preoccupied with the USA (Putin).

So if we go through changes in Norwegian representations of Russia, we find that Norwegian official representations of Russia have indeed accentuated the identity of Russia as an 'assertive and aggressive actor in the north and now even 'with nuclear weapons'.

Faced with this type of Russia 'Norway' is construed as a just, law-abiding, vulnerable entity in need of protection by its allies, and as an actor that should hold Russia 'accountable'.

In line with the identification of Russia as 'threatening' and Norway as 'vulnerable entity' concrete policy steps have been taken to boost the military presence of our allies and to make Norway into 'Nato in the North' in the years that have passed since 2014.

In line with the identification of Russia as an 'aggressive and assertive' actor and not a 'security seeker' in the North, Russia 'does not have the concerns it says it has' in the North according to Norwegian official discourse (ministerial level, Ministry of Defence). We have heard claims that 'We cannot listen to Russian objections, because Russia speak is propaganda'

This way of relating to, signaling to Russia triggers even more fierce representations of Norway and actions from the Russia side: Read Maria Sakharova, see Russian gunboat diplomacy just two weeks ago.

So this is not about deciding who is most 'offensive' or 'who started', which is difficult all the time we as identity-scholars claim that the social world comes to us through the filter of human interpretation and not as a given reality.

It is about analyzing how such mutual processes of othering unfold, over time, creating conditions for conflict-ridden interaction or cooperative interaction - in these very difficult and turbulent times.