

## Interview – Andrei Tsygankov

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview – Andrei Tsygankov

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Andrei P. Tsygankov is a Professor in the Department of International Relations at San Francisco State University. He teaches Russian/post-Soviet relations, comparative foreign policy, and IR theory. He is a graduate of Moscow State University (Candidate of Sciences, 1991) and the University of Southern California (Ph.D., 2000). Tsygankov is a contributor to both Western and Russian academia. In the West, his publications include *Anti-Russian Lobby and American Foreign Policy* (2009), *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin* (2012), *The Strong State in Russia* (2014), *The Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy* (2018, editor), *Russia and America* (2019), *Russian Realism* (2022), and numerous journal articles. Tsygankov also published a well-received textbook, *Russia's Foreign Policy* (2006, six editions). In Russia, his best-known books are *Modern Political Regimes* (1996), *Russian Science of International Relations* (2005, co-editor, also published in Germany and China), *Sociology of International Relations* (2006, co-authored, also published in China), and *Russian International Theory* (2013, two editions). Tsygankov has spoken at forums in Berkeley, Stanford, and the World Affairs Council, amongst others. He also served as program chair for the International Studies Association (ISA) conference, the largest scholarly association in the field.

### **Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?**

The most interesting research in IR/Russia is about the role of ideas, values, and power in shaping foreign policy, international orders, and political regimes. The ideas/power nexus has already produced concepts that have informed important studies of Russia and other cultures, such as those of national exceptionalism, ontological security, and securitization. The more the world departs from West-centeredness, the more likely we are to see the development of concepts that engage both ideas and power. Some examples include recent scholarship by Haro Karkour, Ayse Zarakol, Hedrick Spryut, and Eric Ringmar. Peace and order will increasingly depend on complex negotiations of the balance of power and cultural differences. In IR terms, this means a combination of constructivism, critical theory, and realism, suggesting the significance of research that cuts across paradigms and appeals to both Western and non-Western audiences.

### **How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

Already in graduate school, the first global shift that influenced me was the Western military intervention in Yugoslavia. I came to the U.S. for grad school at the age of 31, with a formed worldview and an appreciation for cultural and political pluralism. Hayward Alker, John Odell, and Ann Tickner – my teachers at USC [University of Southern California] – expanded my mind, introduced me to important literature, and taught me how to turn my ideas into empirical research. However, the Western intervention in Yugoslavia undermined any hopes for a culturally and politically pluralist world order. The intervention was meant to consolidate the U.S.' power and vision of the world. Serbian local nationalism was met with the global yet nationally exceptionalist idea. The subsequent U.S. intervention in Iraq and elsewhere consolidated these developments. The U.S. global power is based on the exercise of force and the idea of exceptionalism that denies others an equal contribution to the international system. To many nations worldwide, this means that the U.S. and its Western allies were never interested in a genuinely global and pluralist international system but only in making the world in the Western image. It was only a matter of time before others, including Russia, would fight back using their available power and nationalist ideas. Force is often met with force, not

## **Interview – Andrei Tsygankov**

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submission.

The second global shift was predictable in principle but not in detail, and had to do with Russia's military intervention in Ukraine, first in 2014 and then in 2022. It was predictable in principle because Russia is a great power that felt humiliated by the West after the Cold War. The above-described Western military interventions accompanied by NATO expansion and a lack of policies to integrate the country into global structures, both politically and economically, have stimulated the rise of political nationalism in Russia since the mid-2000s. What was less predictable was the offensive action favored by Putin, who, until 2022, was largely an asymmetric and defensive actor hoping to find a way to get along with the West. Putin's character is the principal reason behind the decision to invade Ukraine. However, the initial nationalist, nationally exceptionalist impulse came from the Western center of the international system. Putin decided he had the right to do in Ukraine what the U.S. did in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. The shift teaches us to study nationalism as a global and systemic – not only as a local – phenomenon. And, of course, it teaches us to pay attention to both ideas and power.

**Over the course of its history, Russia has alternately been included and excluded from 'The West'. What impact has this liminal position had on Russian identity?**

The impact is, of course, fundamental. The liminal position has shaped Russia's perceptions since the Kyiv Rus' (the 9th-13th century state from which Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine claim cultural ancestry) and has been central to the country's domestic and foreign policy debates. Russia's three IR schools – Statists or Realists, Westernizers, and Civilizationists – each proposed their language to capture the country's unique position in the international system. Realists view it in terms of preserving the global and regional balance of power. Westernizers argue that Russia is a distinct yet European power that belongs with the West and is responsible for adopting its values at home and promoting them abroad. Finally, Civilizationists define Russia as culturally and politically distinct from the West, but they, too, view Europe and the West as their main significant other. My two recent volumes on Russian realism and the Civilizational tradition expand on these themes. I am in the process of writing the final volume on Russian Westernizers.

**In your 2021 article, you argue that Russia's search for guiding principles has turned inwards because of its 'ontological insecurity'. How do you define the concept, and how does it manifest in Russia's foreign policy?**

My definition of ontological security stresses Russia's anxieties and insecurities as related to the West's (non) validation or recognition. Without such recognition, Russia is less likely to cooperate with the West and more likely to build its identity as anti-Western. In this case, all Russian IR schools are likely to prioritize the national and non-Western in the country's identity construction. This dynamic is well-familiar to scholars of Russia's identity. Alternatively, if the West seeks to reach out and build relations with Russia, the domestic debate shifts in favor of Westernizers and pro-Western voices. At least, this is how it was before the war in Ukraine. Today, even Westernizers sometimes argue that any dialogue with the West must be based on mutual respect, rather than "European values."

**You also argue that there has been a convergence in Russian IR and foreign policy around a distinct set of values. To what extent is this true? Given that Russia is often treated as a monolith, could you talk about where the main sources of disagreement in academia and policy lie?**

By no means should Russia be treated as a monolith. Internally, it is a large, complex, and extremely diverse nation with many social, political, regional, and intellectual sources of potential tensions and disagreements. Historically, while being a strong state system, Russia has sought to accommodate different religious, ethnic, social, and political groups. Suppressing their difference is impossible for a long time and could only occur under extreme foreign and domestic pressures. Externally, Russia is located on the cultural and geographic border between the Western and non-Western worlds, absorbing ideas from both. This remains the greatest source of Russia's vibrance and intellectual richness, but this also creates multiple potential sources of tension. That's why, except for Stalinism, Russia has never been a dictatorship in the classic sense. Alexander II used to say that ruling Russia is not difficult

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but utterly useless. Today's disagreements are also multiple, although they are expressed differently, given the realities of the war. I have tried to document some intellectual disagreements regarding the war. Sociologists also identified multiple differences among various social and age groups on the war, the economy, political system, foreign policy, and other issues. Polling is harder in today's Russia, yet the picture scholars paint is quite complex.

**In *Russian Realism*, published in March last year, you make the case for a distinct way in which realists in the country see the defence of state priorities. What are these priorities, and do you see any misunderstandings by the international community about how Russia perceives its national interests?**

Russian realists are diverse. Generally, like their Western counterparts, they stress the defense of national interests, including the protection of sovereignty, power, security from foreign threats, and prestige on the international scene. However, their moral arguments in defense of Russia are informed by national history and, therefore, differ from those of non-Russian realists. Most of them are predominantly defensive in their values and orientation because their country has never been in a position of global dominance, and often had to defend itself from external – and frequently, Western – intervention. Today, many Russian realists are arguing for siding with China and non-Western powers because they believe the West has unleashed the war to defeat and dismember Russia. Because of their largely defensive orientation, Russian realists also discuss the need for domestic stability and development more frequently than their Western counterparts. The notion of *Derzhava* (the literal meaning of *derzhat* is 'to hold together') brings together the foreign and domestic dimensions of power and governance. As much as some imitate American neorealists, Russian realists are reminiscent of classical realist tradition and geopolitics.

**Your upcoming book, *The “Russian Idea” in International Relations*, is centred on Russia's ‘civilizational’ tradition. How would you define a ‘civilizational’ approach to IR, and how does that express itself in the Russian case?**

In the book, I argue that civilizationists view Russia as culturally, not just politically, distinctive from the West. The country's three traditions of civilizational thinking – Slavophiles, Communists, and Eurasianists – focus on Russia's unique spiritual, social, and geographic roots, respectively. Each tradition, however, is internally divided between those claiming Russia's exceptionalism, potentially resulting in regional autarchy or imperial expansion, and those advocating the 'Russian Idea' as global in its appeal. Those favoring the latter perspective have stressed Russia's unique capacity for understanding different cultures and guarding the world against the extremes of nationalism and hegemony. To thinkers like Vladimir Solovyev, Nikolai Berdyayev, Mikhail Gelfer, and others, Russia's uniqueness is in its ability to learn from others and bridge different cultures, regions, and social systems. Today, rather than supporting the war in Ukraine, such thinkers advocate dialogue and political compromise between Russia, Ukraine, and the West. They also reject the idea of final victory, stressing the conflict's complexity and all parties' responsibility for it. With Mikhail Gorbachev, they see the roots of the conflict in post-Soviet nationalism and the West's lack of consideration for Russia's interests and security concerns.

**Does memory play a larger part in Russian IR theory and foreign policy than it might elsewhere?**

Memory is important in all social studies because it connects with our identity, values, and sense of belonging, making our research relevant. It's perhaps a truism, but no research is universal because it has roots in a particular culture and set of values. In Russia, memory politics reflects the values I have briefly highlighted – those of a strong state, great power, independent civilization, a distinct European nation, and others. Today, the official stress is on the memory of conflicts with Western powers and their defeat, which is part of Russian history and helps the Kremlin's narrative of the war in Ukraine. Because Russia is currently at war with Ukraine and in a proxy confrontation with NATO and the West, the top-down politics is then met with bottom-up support, finding many advocates of the war to a final victory. In this sense, memory politics is significant in both Russian IR and everyday life. The memory of Russia's special relations with non-Western nations is also utilized. The fact that most non-Western nations view the West as (neo) imperialist and Russia as helping to resist it globally is a great resource in Russian foreign policy. Most non-Western nations have not supported Western sanctions against Russia or military assistance for Ukraine.

However, I wouldn't say that memory politics is less important elsewhere. There is an overall tendency in the Western

## **Interview – Andrei Tsygankov**

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media and politics to treat Russia as the “dark double.” Europeans have recently decided to do away with monuments to Soviet soldiers by equating the Soviet Union to Nazi Germany. Ukrainians are getting rid of everything Russian – language, religion, culture, history, etc. Americans are polarized about their cultural symbols and history. And there is an appetite in some parts of the West to “cancel” Russia that deserves a special conversation.

### **What is mainstream IR missing by overlooking Russian IR theory? Are there non-Western or regional strands of IR theory that can help us understand Russia more effectively?**

By overlooking Russian or any local IR, mainstream IR becomes focused on itself, producing unidimensional and ethnocentric research. It is useless in building a globally pluralist world, and is more likely to support nationalist and militarist foreign policy. Post-colonial, critical, and “non-Western” IR approaches are more valuable because of their sensitivity to various Western biases, and engage with the concerns and interests of those outside the West. Of course, these approaches have also been developed outside the context of studying Russia and must be modified to different cultural conditions. This is why studying Russian IR is essential. Understanding others is a constant challenge that must be overcome based on cultural dialogue. Without global and national dialogues about the international order, social justice, and diversity, nationally exceptionalist discourses will remain powerful, and the shadow of war will loom.

### **What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?**

As I hope it follows on from I have already said, my advice is to study the ideas/power nexus and engage in scholarship across cultures, paradigms, and research traditions. The increasingly multipolar and multicultural world will welcome this kind of research.