Europe in Russia's Academic Discourse: Unlocking the Plurality of Interpretations

https://www.e-ir.info/2012/06/03/europe-in-russias-academic-discourse-unlocking-the-plurality-of-interpretations/

ANDREY MAKARYCHEV, JUN 3 2012

Any meaningful political identification of Russia is possible only through its semantic relatedness with Europe. The political positioning of Russia as a European country has never been seriously challenged in Russian political discourse, which asserts Russia as a European country in terms of its history, culture and civilizational identity. Russian leaders refer to European experience to justify Russia's "normalcy", its belongingness to the European milieu and its alleged compatibility with European political logic. Vladimir Putin, who resumed presidential powers in 2012, in one of his most recent foreign policy articles has repeated an old thesis of compatibility of Russia-sponsored post-Soviet association with the institutional mechanisms of European integrative project – an argument which is meant to substantiate the Kremlin's slogan of "moving together to Europe", addressed to countries with strong pro-European feelings like Ukraine and Moldova.

However, despite this massive pro-European rhetoric, political reality looks much less optimistic. Political relations between Russia and European countries are marked by a series of crises. Russia has refused to partake in EU-sponsored European Neighbourhood Policy and reacted with suspicion to the Eastern Partnership program; the Russian – Estonian tug-of-war over the Second World War monument evolved from the debate on collective historical memories as the most sensitive matter of political identities; the Russian – British dispute over the Litvinenko murder case has raised the issues of security in their most conflicting articulations. Due to all this, neither of the frameworks of bilateral relations seems to work smoothly: economics, along with identity and normative matters, are widely perceived as contaminated by political controversies, while security agenda appears to disjoint the two parties rather than unify them.

Yet apart from diplomatic and political narratives, there is one more rather important, though often under-investigated, subject of analysis – academic discourses that keep certain autonomy in constructing Russia's imagery of Europe and don't necessarily follow the political controversies of the official relations. In this paper I will discuss the structure of Russian academic discourses on Europe, and their intersections with political institutions and practices. They unveil perpetual references to Europe as Russia's constitutive Other for substantiating a set of arguments inherent in Russia's identity-making[2].

Identity, Democracy, Security: the Structure of Russia's European Discourse(s)

The structure of Russia's European discourse is composed of three pivotal elements, which are identity, democracy and security. Each of these three concepts may be viewed as an "empty signifier", open to different interpretations and subject to the struggle for discursive hegemony.

Identity

Iver Neumann, as well as his Russian colleague Viatcheslav Morozov, distinguished two different versions of Europe – "false" and "true" – as a key feature of Russia's thinking about Europe. "False Europe", in their interpretation of

Russian foreign policy philosophy, includes countries with strong anti-Russian sentiments and those having lost the "genuine European values", The "true Europe", on the contrary, is arguably populated by friendly to Russia nations adhered to what Russia considers as "the original spirit of Europe". A "true Europe", most likely, contains, besides what Donald Rumsfeld dubbed "old Europe" (France and Germany), also countries with some degree of cultural affinity to Russia. Politically, the leaning toward the French – German "couple" could be an indication of Russia's search for European subjectivity which is ultimately a pre-condition for Russia's own self-assertion both vis-à-vis and within Europe. Recreation of "a great continental family" became a substantial part of Russia's rediscovering of "old Europe" as its interlocutor.

Russia's construction of its own subjectivity through such type of identity-driven dichotomy may be explained with a reference to Alexander Wendt's "projective identification thesis". It might be instrumental in understanding the role of the Other – i.e. Europe in reference to Russia – "for displacing unwanted feelings about the Self… Individuals who, because of personal pathologies, cannot control potentially destructive unconscious fantasies, like feelings of rage, aggression, or self-hatred, will sometimes attribute or "project" them on to an Other, and then through their behavior pressure that Other to "identify" with or "act out" those feelings so that the Self can then control or destroy them by controlling or destroying the Other… A requirement for this process is therefore "splitting" the Self into "good" and "bad" elements, with the latter being projected on to the Other… This can in turn be a basis for the cultural constitution of enmity, since the split Self needs the Other to identify with its ejected elements"[3]. The Self is "casting" the Other "in a corresponding counter-role that makes"[4] Self's identity meaningful. This is what might shed some light on Russia's mental – and very artificial – division of Europe into "weak" and "strong", "false" and "true", "old" and "new", ascribing to each of these dichotomies judgmental significance. By discursively molding a "true Europe", Russia strives to displace its own fears of being isolated from the European scene. According to the "projective identification" concept, it is the deep split within the Russian Self that provokes and necessitates corresponding binaries in Russia's imagination about other countries. The maltreatment of the Second World War veterans, the pluralization of historical narratives filled by alternative assessments of the previously glorified past, the pro-American sentiments – almost all of the accusations that Moscow addresses the "false" European countries can be easily found within Russia itself as a testimony for the dislocated nature of Russian identity.

The "false – true Europe" dichotomy determines, to some degree, other adjacent conceptualizations. One of them seems to be a contradistinction between "traditional Europe" and "post-Europe". The "false" features of Europe are associated with the evaporation of the national spirit and the growing self-denial of national interests and identities. This Russian discourse, then, seems to deny what Europe itself is proud of – both the refusal of national egos and the valorization of supranational integration.

Russia's "false – true Europe" dichotomy has important historical connotations. The history-driven identity clash is certainly the case of Russia's relations with Baltic countries which are fundamentally damaged by different interpretation of the events of the World War II. The "battle of words" includes a number of dichotomies: "voluntary membership" in the Soviet Union or "annexation", "liberation" from the Nazi Germany or "occupation" by USSR, etc.

Identity and history debate largely intersects with political discourse which actualized the discursive division of Europe in the aftermath of the Georgia war of August 2008. France and Germany have strengthened – in the Kremlin's eyes – their status and reputation of "good Europeans" (those loyal to Russia), while Poland (that signed the final agreement on accommodating the American anti-missile system right in the middle of the Russian-Georgian war) and Ukraine (that was accused in selling arms to Georgia and threatening to prevent the Russian Black Sea Fleet from returning to its naval base in Sebastopol) are put in a different category of unfriendly states. Again, this way of interpreting Europe contains a great deal of Russia's eagerness to present itself as an unalienable part of "true Europe" which is threatened by "false Europeans". It is not incidentally that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov dubbed the treatment by the Georgian authorities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia "un-European", which reveals Russian sensitivity to the concept of European-ness. In a rather indicative way, Russia did not hide its irritation of the display of the EU flag during Mikhail Saakashvili's public pronouncements – a reaction that was arguably grounded in Moscow's resolve to disavow any European connotations as far as Georgia is concerned.

Yet, of course, the fact that the Kremlin assumes the right to pass judgments on Russia's neighbors from the position

of a 'true Europe', does not necessarily imply that the Russian foreign policy discourse becomes structured in European terms. Russia does appeal to the norms of Europe, but stops short of applying these norms to its own policy. That is why this Russian discourse was never recognized as legitimate anywhere beyond Russia itself and thus did not leave any institutional traces in Moscow's relations with other countries. Russia's imagined "special relations" with either of "real" European powers were never institutionalized; moreover, under a closer scrutiny they may turn into a myth. Russia's policy of ostracizing Estonia for its decision to remove the Bronze Soldier monument from Tallinn downtown to a military cemetery resonated neither in Europe, nor even in Russia's "near abroad". Russia's attempts to condition its relations with post-Soviet and post-socialist countries by their adherence to the Soviet/Russian glorious narrative of the Second World War largely failed. Ultimately Russia had to recognize the politically meaningful role of Poland – otherwise associated with "false Europe" – in finding the visa facilitation solution for the residents of Kaliningrad. As Iver Neumann puts it, "this is a situation where pluralism and some kind of generalized liberalism become increasingly central to European identity, with Russia opting for what looks to Europeans like old-fashioned state building. As a result, Russia is out of synch with the development of European identity"[5].

Democracy

The European – Russian encounters of democracy discourses represent another interesting example of the "frictions of ideas". Russia of course understands its vulnerability in issues of democracy, which leads to two discursive moves.

First, even liberal analysts speak of the "democratic deficit" within the EU[6]. This argument is completely borrowed from European academic discourses and very often merges with political logic of a group of scholars associated with the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation[7], a misnomer for the Kremlin-sponsored propagandistic institution settled in Paris and New York.

Secondly, Russian scholars try to project the concept of democracy to the whole international area. It is within this context that the concept of "democratic multipolarity" was introduced, which claims that the idea of democracy, being transferred from the domestic to the international domain, is denotative of plurality of interests whatever the nature of these interests might be. Democracy here may be understood as redistribution of power between the leading nations and developing ones, or those representing the "middle layer" of international system. Yet this predominantly realist vision of multi-polar international society does not resonate in Europe. The underestimation of the institutional and normative mechanisms turns the concept of "democratic multi-polarity" into an image of international society consisting of loosely tied groups of countries whose members share with each other nothing more than power ambitions.

The process of re-signifying democracy as the key normative concept explains why the Russian academic discourse is torn apart between politicization and de-politicization, as well as between norms and exceptions. On the one hand, Russia is certainly eager to be recognized as a "normal country" that fits European standards of democracy and sovereignty; yet on the other hand, it repeatedly makes strong emphasis on the rhetoric of exceptionalism, articulating its alleged specificity and hoping to get preferential treatment from Europe. Nevertheless, Russia's intention to be recognized in Europe as an equal partner in norm-setting is not to be understood as an indication of Russia's possession of its "own" norms that Europe, arguably, either rejects or disregards. Russia seems to be ready to offer an alternative reading of a set of norms constitutive to European identity, but definitely not to substitute them with some kind of Russia-only norms or values.

Security

As I have mentioned, the Russian academic discourses are eager to find their niche in the European intellectual milieu but, in doing so, they reinterpret the key terms and fill them with the content suitable to its own discursive needs. This is why Russian foreign policy discourse became increasingly normative. Thus, Russia accepted – though reluctantly – the legitimacy of human security discourse because of the awareness that it is exactly the normative matters that are being used by European countries to define the "civilized humankind". In fact, Russia's normative

zeal is a crucial tool in its attempts to be accepted as an indispensable member of the international society that, by and large, is grounded in European norms[8]. In fact, what is at stake at this juncture is the drawing of the borders of the international society, and the human security concept seems to be quite fit for this purpose. Seen from this angle, the normative turn in Russian foreign policy can be discussed as one of its political instruments aimed at reinstalling Russia as one of key international subjects and an organic part of the international society.

Yet Russia's intention to join the European security discourse – in a capacity of a sovereign power fully capable of making its own moves – only reveals deep gaps in understanding the nature of security and in striking a balance between its "hard" and "soft" dimensions. The paradox is that nowadays it is Russia that buttresses the split between hard and soft security as supposedly two separate spheres, while both NATO and EU experts are in favor of a more complex vision of security with no strict borderlines between its hard and soft aspects.

The prevailing attitudes in Europe are indeed remarkably different from Russian security discourse. Thus, by arguing that "human security is European security", CIDOB – a Barcelona-based think tank – sent a message to the Kremlin making clear that the EU support of Russia's attempts to restructure the Euro-Atlantic security is conditioned by Moscow's embracement of a more human-oriented perspective on security and a stronger cosmopolitan worldview. A number of recent documents – such as "Helsinki Plus. Towards a New Security Architecture in Europe" report of the joint EU – Russia expert group – explicitly advocate the inscription of human security into global political discourses of which Russia might wish to be a part[9]. The operationalization of this concept in the report was done in a way that can't be dismissed by Russia in its capacity of the successor of the Soviet Union: human security was explicitly presented as encompassing the 'three baskets' of the Helsinki Accords signed by USSR. The explicit linkage to the Helsinki accords constitutes a good platform for promoting a human security agenda in Russian – EU relations on the basis of European understanding of this concept's ability to blur difference between 'internal' and 'external', as well as "hard" and "soft" dimensions of security. Yet my own first-hand experience of being part of the EU-Russian working group on human security shows that even INSOR, the think tank patronized by President Medvedev, displayed little interest in engaging in serious discussion with its European colleagues on the nature and importance of a wider East – West security outlook to include human dimension.

The "Helsinki Plus" report, as many others, place human security as comprising both (and transcending) hard and soft dimensions, and see not much avail in drawing separation lines between them. Yet this thinking, dominated in Europe, remains in sharp contrast with Russia's intentional re-actualization of this hard – soft separation in both academic literature and political speeches. Their authors deem that in hard security terrain it holds critical material resources and is a powerful player, while in soft security it is rather a source of troubles (in environment, migration, human trafficking, etc.). Presumably, Europe does have arguments to reverse this logic: it is exactly because of a convincing experience of tackling soft security issues that the West may share it with Russia, thus testing the Kremlin's intentions to comprehensively change the obsolete practices of governance. Consequently, the acceptance of soft security agenda, in contrast to hard security, necessitates deep domestic debate within Russia, in which academic community should have its loud voice.

—

As this analysis has shown, each of these three concepts has its distinctive profile in the Russian – European discursive exchanges. The academic concept of *identity* is strongly and intentionally politicized (i.e. used for political judgments that often spur conflicts of interpretations, involving the issues of collective memories), but remains largely outside existing institutional frameworks of EU – Russian relations. In case of *democracy* we could see some kind of conceptual transfer: the democracy discourse shifted from domestic to international level of analysis, which had as its most negative effect the reduction of all semantic contexts of democracy to the legalist (and politically irrelevant) principle of sovereign equality, as engrained in Russia's interpretation of the idea of multipolarity. As for *security*, Russian academic discourse since the beginning of 1990s found itself under a strong influence of the "hard vs. soft" conceptualization widely popular among European experts. In both Russian academic and political discourse this dichotomy was legitimized, which is not the case of human security concept that was mostly reduced to technical matters of survival in conditions of disasters, post-crisis management, state regulation of medical and pharmaceutical standards, etc.

In lieu of conclusion

The notion of inter-subjectivity is instrumental in understanding the intricacies of the Russian – EU relations as the interaction of two "ontologically dislocated", or unstable, divided, split and unfixed subjects. A menu of Russia's identity choices may include such its roles as a "different Europe"[10], a "non-Western Europe" (along with Turkey), and a constitutive part of wider Europe, or of "Euro-Atlantic civilization". European and Russian identities are mutually dependent, but the EU role in the moulding the Russian identity is stronger than Russia's role for the EU which seems to be embedded in "the Eurocentric procedure of imposing its own hegemony by means of the exclusionary discursive strategy of devaluing the Other"[11]. This policy can be explained by the EU's adherence to the "thick" (solidarist) version of international society, with clear emphasis on normativity understood as "a way of thinking that emphasizes the central importance of an autonomous legal order for constraining the arbitrary and personal exercise of political power"[12].

In communicating with the EU Russia certainly tries to reject and even challenge its otherness. Academic discourses, therefore, are instrumental in the attempts to avoid alienation from Europe. By the same token, Russian international discourse is torn apart between "sovereignist", "exceptionalist" or "nationalist" reading of Russia as a country surrounded by a fundamentally hostile environment with no reliable friends, on the one hand, and "internationalist discourse" arguing that Russia stays in line with the international community in managing the most deadly security challenges, on the other. It is at this point that we may see the double function of Russia's European discourse: on the one hand, it forms an image of Europe easy to deal and communicate with; on the other hand, it constructs Russia itself through emphasizing the roles it is supposed to play and the qualities to display internationally.

—

Andrey Makarychev *is Alexander von Humboldt Research Fellow at the Institute for East European Studies, Free University of Berlin. His fields of academic research include Russian foreign and security policies, EU – Russian relations, issues of regionalism and federalism. His most recent publications include: "Multilateralism, Multipolarity, and Beyond: A Menu of Russia's Policy Strategies', Global Governance, 2011, 17(3), co-authored with Viacheslav Morozov; "A Russia, a Europa e o Legado de 1989. Conflitis de Interpratacao, Relacoes Internationais, Setembro 2009 (in Portugues); "Russia's Perceptions of Black Sea Regionalism", Turkish Foreign Policy Quarterly, fall 2009; "Conceptualizing Neighborhood: Russia and Its Others", Journal of International Relations and Development, spring 2010; " La Presidencia de Medvedev: el perfil cambiante de la Federacion Rusa", Anuario Internacional 2010. Barcelona: CIDOB, 2010; "Russia, NATO, and the International Societies: Models, Policies, Strategies", iIn: Lius Nuno Rodrigues and Volodymir Dubovik (eds.) Perceptions of NATO and the New Strategic Concept. Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2010; "Politics, Security and Russia's Perceptions of Black Sea Regionalism", in: Black Sea Calling. Edited by Melanie Sully. Wien: Diplomatische Akademie, 2009.*

[1] The author wishes to gratefully acknowledge the much appreciated financial and organizational support of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation which made possible this research.

[2] Martin Muller. Situated Identities: Enacting and Studying Europe at a Russian Elite University,*Millenium: Journal of International Studies*. N 37 : 3, 2008. Pp.3 – 25.

[3] Alexander Wendt. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. P.277.

[4] Alexander Wendt. P.329.

[5] Iver Neumann. European Identity and Its Changing Others. NUPI Working Paper N 710. Oslo: 2006.

[6] Timofei Bordachov. Predely evropiezatsii. Moscow: Higher School of Economics Publishers, 2007. Pp. 162-163.

[7] http://www.indemco.org/

[8] Dmitrii Trenin. Integratsiya i identichnost: Rossiya kak noviy Zapad. Moscow: Evropa Publishers, 2006. P.206.

[9] Helsinki Plus: Towards a Human Security Architecture for Europe. The First Report of the EU-Russia Human Security Study Group. London and Barcelona, May 2010.

[10] Nikolay Shmeliov. Rossiya i Evropa: vmeste ili porozn'? *Vestnik Evropy*, № 19-20, 2007.

[11] Slavoj Zizek. Da Capo senza Fine, in: Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogue on the Left. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Zizek. London & New York: Verso, 2000. P.231.

[12] Jef Huysmans. International Politics of Exception. Paper prepared for presentation at SGIR Fifth Pan-European Conference, the Hague, Netherlands, 9-22 September 2004. P.7.