Putin and the Two Fears of the Prince

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This article is the second in a two part series. Read the first piece here.

Fear is not the first emotion that comes to mind when thinking about leaders like Vladimir Putin. Anger, defiance, or contempt – those are more like it. There are neuropsychological and semantic reasons for that: some emotions 'want' to be expressed. Anger, for example, fulfils an important function in communicating that a red line has been crossed (van Kleef et al. 2008: 16f). A deeper look into contemporary affective science suggests that all emotions have physiological manifestations. Specific 'microexpressions,' for examples – contractions of facial muscles that last for just a split second – that cannot be suppressed or concealed (Ekman 2003: 15). Analogously, so-called appraisal theories of emotion propose that physiological 'activation' precedes cognitive appraisal of a situation (Lazarus 1991; Tomaka et al. 1997: 63). Even when sociocultural norms, identities, or values should put constraints on the individual's behaviour, emotions often override them (Turner 2009: 341). These observations should also apply to political operatives, including the Russian leader.

In a contribution to E-International Relations in November 2020 I argued that we might use emotion as a conceptual tool in foreign policy analysis. Focusing on fear, the piece suggested that human emotion presents us with a phenomenon that has been comprehensively studied across psychology, linguistics, and neuroscience and that it is, to an extent, generalisable. It might therefore offer us some analytical leverage and a way to work out some of the thornier epistemological and methodological issues facing the discipline: the debate over the primacy of structure or agency, bridging the gap between theory and practice, or the seemingly unavoidable choice of a level of analysis. This article, centred again on the emotion of fear, probes the plausibility of some of the theoretical points made previously by applying it to episodes in Russian-Western relations.

It was an assessment of the academic literature on Russian foreign policy that triggered my interest in psychological explanations in the first place. Prevailing theoretical paradigms have a mixed track record in guiding the analysis of Russian foreign policy, let alone producing predictions of future policy moves. A telling example, when surveyed in late February 2014, only 13.9% of IR scholars thought that Russia would intervene militarily in response to the political crisis in Ukraine, while more than half ruled out that possibility (Maliniak et al. 2014). There is, however, a wide spectrum of opinion. Some *social constructivists* suggest that Russia's assertive turn is the product of a process of identity formation in relation to Europe (e.g. Neumann 2016; Tsygankov 2016). Analysis informed by *liberal* theory traces Russian foreign policy back to authoritative tendencies in domestic politics (e.g. Lynch 2016; McFaul 2018). On account of the ambiguity of the term, reference ought to be made to a summary of what 'liberalism' refers to in the context of foreign policy analysis (see Doyle 2012). *Structural realism*, on the other hand, continues to emphasise that Russian behaviour is the inevitable result of faulty, ideologically driven Western policy (e.g. Mearsheimer 2014). Policy prescriptions drawing on these analyses vary accordingly.

These theories suffer from some deficiencies with respect to modelling the behaviour of individual decision-makers in the social context. Structural realism and liberalism rely on the rational actor assumption, whereas much of the constructivist scholarship, emphasising the intersubjective nature of the social world, offers no distinct theory of individual actorhood. Both rationalist and constructivist models rely on a traditional, 'cognitivist' outlook, i.e. they focus on factors that can be 'known' and 'understood,' which does not reflect the state of the art in decision science. These shortcomings notwithstanding, the question that emerged in my research is whether we are missing

something in studying patterns of change and continuity in Russian-Western relations, and more generally, in analysing states' foreign policies. Were scholars making good enough use of all the explanatory tools available?

The broader movement in IR promoting re-engagement with human nature and a focus on affective phenomena, of which my work is part, should therefore not be mistaken for an effort to disprove rationalist or constructivist models. In fact, in many instances, affective science corroborates the assumptions made by other theories. The objective is to showcase the usefulness of emotion as a lens on foreign policy, connecting material capabilities, governing structures, ideas, and the individual. In the spirit of Graham Allison's insightful study of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the main purpose of 'conceptual lenses' is to compare and contrast. By doing that, he suggested, 'we see what each magnifies, highlights, and reveals as well as what each blurs or neglects' (Allison 1971: v).

Some affective phenomena already feature prominently in the field of foreign policy analysis. Academic interest in Russia's (as well as China's) *status concerns*, specifically Russian responses to perceived disrespect or denial of its great power status, has been growing steadily (e.g. Larson and Shevchenko 2010; Forsberg 2014; Tsygankov 2014). In international politics, status is more than just nice to have. As 'reputation for power,' status makes states more secure and enables them to achieve their aims without having to resort to force (Gilpin 1981: 31). Historical great power status may also further the ruling elite's domestic objectives by providing a concept around which to build national identity and strengthen community ties. The prototypical response to a denial of status, i.e. not recognizing another's rightful place in the social hierarchy, is some form of anger. It could be argued, therefore, that the literature on status concerns is built around psychological claims concerning social identity, perceptions of 'unfair' treatment, and anger. In this context, anger, defiance, or outrage should be understood as more than just an automated, primitive response but as the affective component of an attempt to restore status. The point here is that foreign policy analysis staked on status concerns generally does not make the connections between the concept of status and affective experience explicit. Engaging more thoroughly with the psychology of status seeking (and denial) as well as the experiential by-products of anger should enable us to hypothesise under what conditions certain concerns, such as security, military might, territory, status, or values matter, and when one concern matters more than another.

The same can be said for *fear*. Despite its foundational place in the IR literature, the phenomenon has been studied predominantly within rationalist frameworks of deterrence, bargaining, or strategic choice. The ways in which the subjective experience of fear or loss aversion impact decision makers on a personal level has received comparatively less consideration. If some events in international politics are based on psychological processes, as seems to be an assumption underlying all of our traditional IR theories (if only implicitly), it stands to reason that the mechanisms by which these phenomena unfold should receive more attention.

A staple category in explanations of Russian-Western relations is the former's *fear of encirclement*. It rests on both social and psychological factors. Through a process of socialisation, the historical precedent of multiple land invasions has implanted a sense of insecurity in Russians. In part, this has been, and continues to be reinforced by the size of the country and the associated challenge of protecting its vast borders. In his theory of 'affective geopolitics,' Gerald Toal argues that while the size of Russia's territory already induced a 'sense of vulnerability,' it 'has been accompanied by discourses about plots and encirclement schemes by historic enemies, portraying Russia as a besieged fortress.' Education, culture, religion, state holidays and rituals have created 'the nation-state as an embodied condition' (Toal 2017: 46-47). In other words, many Russians deeply care about the security and integrity of the motherland in ways that seem unfamiliar to Western observers.

There is no reason to assume this deep-seated concern does not extend to the state's elites. As Neil MacFarlane (2016: 351) suggests:

Putin and his colleagues in the Soviet security apparatus were acculturated into this perception of isolation, hostility, and threat in their formative years. That formation may affect the cognitive framing of their current situation. In other words, despite the possible instrumental value of their rhetoric, they may also believe what they say about the threat from the West.

To this end, deeper engagement with how fear of encirclement is being perceived by leaders, and the kinds of affective action tendencies this might promote, may be instructive. Some of the possible consequences of fear are discussed in my earlier article. Among them, 'the fearful' have a higher tendency to identify future threats (including ones that do not exist) and they are worse at calculating the costs and risks of their choices. As a consequence, they might behave in a way that – even if intended as defensive – is seen as threatening by others.

Whichever anxieties Russian elites might have already had were exacerbated by the slide of the country into chaos and corruption throughout the 1990s, and associated feelings of powerlessness vis-à-vis a prosperous and self-assured West. Especially the decision of the US and its European partners to take military action against Yugoslavia in 1999, despite vocal protest from Moscow, marks a crucial turning point in relations. To this day, the NATO bombing campaign is used as an example of US hegemonic ambitions, pursued outside the common framework of international law, in the guise of humanitarian intervention. It challenged the post-Cold War role Russian policy makers foresaw for the UNSC among international institutions but more importantly, their self-image. Apart from the humiliation, Russians agreed that NATO intervention set a dangerous precedent. Among the elite, it implanted fears of Western-backed insurgencies in the 'near abroad' and destabilisation in Russia's own peripheral regions. The resulting defiant attitude helped in formulating a common vision of a Russian Federation that should restore its rightful status as a great power.

One Russian observer remarked that NATO had bombed not just Serbia, but also the UN and post-Cold War Europe, 'as an idea, as a political and civilizational project'. For many, 'Gorbachev's crystal dream of a "common European home" lay in pieces' (Grachev 2009). Such swan song for Russian designs of a rules-based international order might have masked a deeper, civilizational shift that began around the same time. Up until the turn of the century, Europe was commonly viewed as 'the main track of civilization' (Putin 1999) – a model to emulate. 'We are a part of the Western European culture. No matter where our people live, in the Far East or in the south, we are Europeans,' the new president proclaimed in a speech before the German Bundestag (Putin 2000: 169).

By the mid-2000s, perspectives regarding Europe had changed considerably. Talk of a 'common European home' had given way to representations of Europe as something 'other,' 'false,' or even 'rotten' (Neumann 2016: 1392). It ought to be mentioned that such representations did not arise out of nothing. Russian conceptions of Europe and 'Western' patterns of human development had evolved and shifted over centuries (see Greenfeld 1992: 267; MacFarlane 1994). Whether it was being viewed positively or negatively, Europe has always been central to the Russian self-image and the psychological, ideational, and normative aspects of that relationship. The concept of Europe, MacFarlane argues, 'occupies a psychological, as well as an institutional and geographical, space' and encompasses evolving perspectives regarding 'European' ideas and norms (MacFarlane 1994: 237). Put differently, concepts of Russia and Europe are interdependent. Or, as Andrei Tsygankov puts it: 'the "self's" assessment of the "other" is subject to variations, depending on the "other's" willingness to accept the "self's" influence' (Tsygankov 2018: 103).

This (re-)definition of the 'self' in relation to Europe helps explain the downturn in Russian-Western relations from the mid-2000s onwards. Depending on whether the 'self' (Russia) and its influence is recognised or denied by the 'other' (Europe and the West), it may generate either *hope* or *resentment* and the perception of threat (Tsygankov 2018: 103). This has crucial implications on whether the 'self' will be primed toward benevolence or spite – cooperation or acting as a spoiler. According to Tsygankov, this emotional evolution from fear to hope to frustration has been a recurring pattern in Russian-Western relations since the 19th century:

Hope frequently turned into frustration with what Russia saw as the other side's unwillingness to reciprocate and, ultimately, mistrust and fear that the Western nations indeed aim to undermine Russia's sovereignty and security. Sustained fear and mistrust on occasions turned into anger and anger-shaped policies of abandoning cooperative initiatives and adopting patterns of defensive or assertive behaviour (Tsygankov 2014: 346).

Jack Barbalet, who studied the emotional effects of differentially distributed levels of power and prestige, argues that when an 'other' becomes simply too powerful for one's own side to realise their interests, anger and resentment are often accompanied by fear (Barbalet 1998: 133). In contrast to a scenario where a lack of power is viewed as one's

own failing and fear leads to a flight response or social withdrawal, when the other side is blamed for one's powerlessness, fear occurs jointly with resentment and the response is likely to be of the 'fighting' kind. 'Such perceptions,' Turner writes, 'may be mobilized by ideologies or arise spontaneously, but in either case, very intense emotions like vengefulness are aroused, and these are the emotions of violence' (Turner 2009: 350).

Towards the end of Putin's second term, these emotions were on full display. Most famously, when he launched a verbal tirade against US unipolarity at the 2007 Munich Security Conference: '(…) the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. (…) It results in the fact that no one feels safe. I want to emphasise this – no one feels safe!' In August of the following year, Russia's assertiveness manifested itself in undeniable terms. Putin responded with overwhelming force to a Georgian attack on the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali, crippling the Georgian military in all but five days. Russian actions imposed a heavy toll on civilians, too, and were met with vehement criticism from the Western world.

The subjective hierarchy of concerns can be used to explain why Russian decisions in the early stage of the war did not seem to factor in potential repercussions of 'disproportionate' action against Georgia. These included, for example, the threat of sanctions, capital flight, the increased intractability of the war the longer it would last, and the humiliation dealt by the refusal of even some CIS states to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The affective intensity of officials' fear and outrage outweighed such potential consequences of taking action. As these consequences became harder to avoid, their impact on policy appreciated. By recognising that Russian conduct during the August War was heavily affectively charged, we can square the scale and intensity of the initial invasion with the decision, just five days later, to desist from pushing on to Tbilisi and forcing the Georgian president from power.

In 2013, Ukraine's move to conclude (and later refuse to sign) an Association Agreement with the EU set in motion another series of fateful events, culminating in the annexation of Crimea in late March 2014. In marked contrast to the bulk of Western expert opinion and media coverage, notable IR theorist John Mearsheimer blamed the West for the crisis because it had fallen prey to 'liberal delusions' and ignored the political reality of just how important maintaining control over its borderlands was to Russian elites (Mearsheimer 2014). Irrespective of how one evaluates Mearsheimer's argument, his structural realist take on Ukraine highlights the role of fear in many of our classical frameworks of IR theory that are applied to study cases in international politics.

Realism generally describes politics as determined by the anarchical structure of the international system (structural realism) or the lust for power inherent in human nature (classical realism). However, realist politics may also be traced to fear. When viewed through the prism of fear, the pursuit of power is not an end in itself but an essential survival strategy. Classical realists stated this quite clearly: 'power struggles are seen as emanating either from the animus dominandi of human nature or from fear, or from a mix of the two' (Neumann and Sending 2010: 685). Structural realists, too, despite their emphasis on the balance of power between states, make psychological assumptions; the theory's state-centrism merely disguises its ontological foundations in human nature (Freyberg-Inan 2004: 3; Johnson and Thayer 2016).

Russian foreign policy analysis informed by 'liberal' theory has tended to be diametrically opposed to structural realist conclusions. While the term does not denote the same, uniform explanation across cases, liberal accounts often assume a similar, Western-centric vantage point. Starting from this normatively charged position, Russian foreign policy often serves as an inverse template, a 'dark double' of US foreign policy (Foglesong 2007: 11). As a consequence, liberal explanations of Russian behaviour often dovetail with the official US foreign policy line. Evidently, when policy prescriptions precede analysis, explanations of state conduct are somewhat constrained. Furthermore, a liberal position might blind the analyst to seeing how the impact of the policies of one's 'own' side are being perceived. For example, why it is that NATO expansion, recognising Kosovo's independence, or the construction of a missile defence system in Europe are met with such fierce rejection by Russian officials are important questions in and of themselves that are often left unaddressed.

Such questions are more difficult than they seem. The argument that Russia should be afraid of NATO, for example,

is not supported by an assessment of 'hard,' i.e. primarily military-related, security factors. In the early 1990s, Russia viewed NATO as a relic of the Cold War, now devoid of a purpose. Its plans for enlargement were misguided, driven by organisational inertia, but posed no real threat (Patrushev 2005). Even after the most recent phase of enlargement, experts suggested that NATO presence on the Russian border amounts to more of a 'speed bump' than credible deterrence. Why, then, do Russian leaders keep referring to the alliance as the number one threat to national security? The answer has to be sociopsychological: NATO's purpose has come to be viewed as mounting a perennial attack on Russian culture and values. The threat posed by the alliance is thus not being perceived as a military but primarily a psychological or ontological one.

The 'affective' lens primes the analyst to be sensitive to these nuances in leaders' perception and motivation. Neither the Russian-Georgian war nor its incursion into Ukraine can be directly ascribed to an affective response, or even viewed as the result of the worsening of relations between Russia, Europe, and the US. However, the emergence of an embedded, almost institutionalised, contemptuous attitude towards the West surely lowered the threshold and aided Russian elites in the process of rationalisation and ex-post justification of determined action.

Niccolò Machiavelli, in his treatise on leadership written for Lorenzo de' Medici, suggested that a prince (or a state leader) should have two fears: 'one internal, concerning his subjects; the other external, concerning foreign powers. From the latter, he can defend himself by his effective arms and his effective allies. (…) concerning his subjects, when external affairs do not change, he has to fear that they may be plotting in secret. The prince will protect himself against this danger by avoiding being either hated or despised and by keeping the people satisfied with him' (Machiavelli and Bondanella 2005: 63-64).

In other words, the two fears of the prince are foreign invasion and popular uprising. Since the late 1990s, Russian leaders have been quite vocal about both kinds of fear, including frequent references to Western-backed insurgencies in the 'near abroad' or even Russia itself. In their own experience, the threats they reacted to might have been of a different kind, though. Rather than a military invasion, elites may be more sensitive to challenges to a system of government they have constructed, undoubtedly with hard work, which provides for their livelihood and physical well-being. Russian officials have suggested as much by expressing their aversion to democratisation and regime change – though such references are fewer than warnings of Western incursion using a security vernacular. 'Since 2004, Putin and his colleagues have taken the democratization of neighbouring countries, notably Ukraine, to be a compelling threat, not so much to Russia, but to the structure of power and profit he and his colleagues have attempted to build in Russia' (MacFarlane 2016: 351-52).

It is possible that Putin and those around him evoke fear of encirclement to self-rationalise other, more existential anxieties. Mark Galeotti (2016) argues that, 'to many in and close to the Kremlin, Russia faces a real threat, not borne by tanks and missiles but cultural influences, economic pressure, and political penetration. This is, in their eyes, a civilizational threat aimed at making Russia a homogenized, neutered, subaltern state.' At the core of this civilizational threat lies the centrality of individualism and political competition in Western societies which is pitted against collectivist desires for stability and concentrated authority in Russian culture (Tsygankov 2018: 102). The encirclement narrative is thus closely connected to one's self-identification as 'superior' through a process of affective change. As Alexander Motyl (2014) observes, 'the superiority of Russia and Russian civilization are still closely held values, as is the belief that the West is hostile and that the country needs a strong leader, Putin, to assert Russia's greatness and combat Western influence.'

Going forward, Putin will have to face a simple reality: with every additional month in office, he has more to lose and fewer ways out. It has also been documented that long-standing leaders like him are prone to psychopathologies like detachment, hubris, or fear of persecution (see Robertson 2015). For Putin, who is surely convinced that the prosperity and security of Russia depend on him, it is not just his political legacy that is at stake. More viscerally, the success of his policies, the course of the country, and the question of his succession have direct implications on his financial and physical security. All of this raises the stakes in the perception of the leader considerably and provides fertile ground for high-intensity affective responses.

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