Interview – Vera Michlin-Shapir

https://www.e-ir.info/2022/04/12/interview-vera-michlin-shapir/

E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, APR 12 2022

Dr Vera Michlin-Shapir is an expert on the impact of global trends on Russian domestic transformations and Russia's media, as well as on foreign and defence policies. Her book *Fluid Russia: Between the National and the Global* was published in 2021 with Cornell University Press. She worked at the Israeli National Security Council, Prime Minister's Office, 2010–16, and was a Research Fellow at the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies, 2016–20. She holds a PhD from Tel Aviv University, an MPhil from St Antony's College, University of Oxford, and a BA from King's College London.

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

The interaction between individual agency and the social system, structure, and habitus has always fascinated me the most, and prompted my interest in history, politics and international relations. I was always curious about the extent to which contextual transformation in the perception of time and space impact and shape our individual decisions and actions. If you'd like, you can see these questions as being about how much control we have over our life decisions. These queries are, in my opinion, the most interesting, and they shape my research agenda. My new research, funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation, looks at how trends of globalisation, which undermine long-term relationships and routines, are creating vulnerable audiences, who can be targeted in online influence campaigns. In this project, I examine how disruptions to the reproduction of identity, which are widespread in globalised societies, were used by Russian state actors in online influence campaigns on Twitter.

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

While writing my recently published book, *Fluid Russia*, I realised that the most significant shift in the last 50 years is the fragmentation in the collective perception of time. I also understood that the significance of the problem is not in our inability to agree about what happened in the past, but our failure to imagine together what will happen in the future. In the past 50 years, an increasing amount of people were able to interpret the past more freely, without the intervention of social institutions such as the church or the state. This is a significant and unprecedented freedom that is a result of the recent and most radical phase of human convergence that we popularly refer to as globalisation — but it creates a complication. In *Democracy in America*, Alexis Tocqueville wrote, "as the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity". This means that our image of the future is based on our understanding of the past. If we cannot agree as a collective on what happened in the past, it is hard for us to imagine a good future for our society.

One of the most inspiring thinkers of our times, the late sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, observed that the difference between the generation that was born after the Second World War between 1946-1960 of 'baby boomers', their children of 'generation x', and grandchildren of 'generation y', are their divergent attitudes to work and savings. While 'baby boomers' were "*working hard, saving pennies for a rainy day or for their children* ", later generations were far less concerned with work, and savings have been steadily decreasing. So, we have gone from a world where people saved for future eventualities for their entire lives, to a world where saving make little sense, since the image of the future is obscured.

This is coupled with our current discourse on climate change and the ensuing environmental catastrophe. While I do not question the scientific significance of global warming and the urgency of this issue — the discourse that we are producing around it is emblematic of the fact that we cannot imagine a good future as a collective. We live like there is no bright future ahead of us and that, in my opinion, is actually inhibiting collective action to tackle climate challenges.

In *Fluid Russia*, you explore the impact of globalisation on the formation of Russia and its national identity in the post-Soviet era. How do questions of Russian identity interlink with the challenges posed by globalisation?

Fluid Russia considers the ideas that I mentioned above in connection to the transformations that Russia experienced after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia is rarely considered within the context of globalisation, and the transformations in the perception of time and space that it brought about. My main point is that globalisation, and not just the collapse of the Soviet state, became a determining factor in national identity formation in Russia. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia was exposed to global trends — the radical enhancement in the movement of capital, people and information. This shaped Russian society along the lines of flexibility and adaptability, and Russians were encouraged to form their own identities and their own understandings of the past. State monopoly over these processes ceased.

However, alongside the freedoms that Russians experienced, globalisation's disruptions were revealed. Forming one's own identity is a complex, and not necessarily pleasant, task. Putin came to power with the promise to fix these grievances and to reinstate a firmer sense of national identity. In this narrative, globalisation plays a central role in the formation of Russian national identity. What is most interesting is the fact that not only was Russia impacted by global trends, but its reactions, in turn, also shaped the course of globalisation. Increasingly, Putin's regime became the avant-garde in the coalition of self-proclaimed 'conservative' and 'revisionist' forces that challenge globalisation.

How do you view the latest standoff between Ukraine (supported by much of the West) and Russia? Is it a product of old tensions resurfacing, or are there new ulterior motives to the crisis?

The findings in Fluid Russia are relevant to understand Russia's motivations to go about this devastating war in Ukraine. Putin's regime positioned itself as one of the most vocal and active challengers of globalisation and hegemony of Western liberal ideas. Ukraine's drifting westwards, closer to NATO and the European Union, is seen by Putin not only as a geopolitical-strategic challenge, but also as an ideological challenge. Ultimately, what Putin is most fearful of is the fact that despite his decades-long project to reinstate a stronger and more stable national identity in Russia, Russian society continues to converge with global Western trends. He fears that these trends would make him obsolete. Hence, he cracks down on domestic opposition, and goes to war against Ukraine.

How important is the energy sector going to be in deciding and maintaining Russia's global position in the long-term?

For many years, the regime in the Kremlin relied on several sources of influence on the international arena. This was used as part of what Russia saw as broader struggles and confrontation with the West, using access to its energy resources as means to widen gaps between Western allies — particularly between Germany and the rest of the North-Atlantic community, and between Europeans and their American allies. This was, however, a risky game, because in the West, oil and gas were becoming increasingly unpopular among many audiences, who were calling for transition away from reliance on energy resources produced by authoritarian regimes and towards renewable energy. What we see now with current sanctions against Russia is the coming together of these trends and the beginning of the end of this Russian tool. This was always a fickle strategy, and now, it has turned against them.

Is media freedom under threat in Russia?

Upon his accession, Putin made it his first and primary goal to control the information space in Russia and try to influence the international information space. His success was contingent on leaving this space flexible to some

extent, in order to allow it to be more vibrant and attractive to audiences. Complete compliance and censorship run the risk of producing content that is boring to audiences. The war in Ukraine forced the Kremlin to completely clamp down on media freedom. In the short-term, it helps the Kremlin maintain control over public opinion at a very critical political point. However, in the long run, it runs the danger of suffocating the media space and further hinders its ability to communicate with the Russian people. I have written a *recent report* in connection to the Kremlin's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

What changes have you observed in Israeli foreign policy between your time working for the Israeli National Security Council (2010-2016), and now? How much of the change can be attributed to the change in leadership and the new government of Naftali Bennet?

Israeli foreign policy has undergone several major shifts in recent years, which cannot be attributed directly to any specific leader. Israel is developing multi-faceted and complex relationships with various actors, showing enough flexibility and adaptability to 'punch above its weight' in the international arena. Relations with Russia are only one such example. Over the past decade, Israel developed a relationship with the Kremlin that avoided a 'zero-sum game', and was quite workable, despite profound contradictions in the national interests of the two states. Currently, the ability to communicate with Russia has diminished, but overall, this more nuanced approach from Israel allows Prime Minister Bennet to offer some forms of mediation with the purpose of ending the suffering in Ukraine.

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

I would like to quote Zygmunt Bauman once more: "We live in a globalising world. That means that all of us, consciously or not, depend on each other." As scholars and policy professionals, we should, in my opinion, work to enhance the understanding that humanity is, by nature, interdependent. Inequality, injustice, and corruption bring about violence and misery, not only to the societies in which they are prevalent, but everywhere else as well. As we are seeing unprecedented violence raging in Europe for the first time in many decades, we should reflect on Bauman's words. We cannot turn our back on misery, and we should engage with other nations' and peoples' problems as if they were our own — because if we do not engage them, these problems will soon become our problems too.