

Aspiration of a great power? Russia's path to an assertiveness in the international arena under Putin

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De Haas, M. (2011) *Russia's Foreign Security Policy in the 21st Century: Putin, Medvedev and Beyond*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Gvosdev, N. K. and Marsh, C. (2013) *Russian Foreign Policy: Interests, Vectors, and Sectors*. Los Angeles: CQ Press.

Leichtova, M. (2014) *Misunderstanding Russia: Russian Foreign Policy and the West*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Sherr, J. (2013) *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad*. London: Royal Institute for International Affairs/Chatham House.

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Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russia has been aiming to define its identity in international politics and regain its great power status. Moreover, Moscow has 'struggled to adjust to dramatic changes in its relative power, to strong challenges to international rule making' (Allison, 2013, pp. 1–2). This has made Russian foreign policy very unstable and

characterized by many changes of scope and direction. Moscow's actions in Ukraine underline, however, that Russian foreign policy has adopted a deeply assertive and conflictual stance which can be seen as the mark of its aspirations as a great power (Freedman, 2014; Sakwa 2014). Assertiveness is here also the result of the fact that Russia has not attained an equal status with the West, or that Russia's interests and worldview are yet to have shaped in a meaningful way the international agenda – or are not taken into account in regards to major international developments (Sakwa, 2013; Tsygankov, 2013; Makarychev 2014). Russia's assertiveness and its engagement in the Ukraine crisis have been explored or predicted for some time in the literature. Moreover, in the last four years and especially since Putin came to power as president for the third time there has been a proliferation of books on Russian foreign policy (Mendras, 2014; Snetkov, 2014; White and Feklyunina, 2014; Curanovic, 2014; Lucas, 2014; Makarychev, 2014; Kanet and Piet, 2014; Tolstrup, 2013; Tsygankov, 2013; Freire and Kanet, 2012; Rowe and Torjesen, 2012; Mouritzen and Wivel, 2012; Mankoff, 2011).

This article focuses on the literature developed in the last four years on Russia's foreign policy by exploring six books which can be thought to be representative for the range of topics and approaches found in the literature: two general books on Russian foreign policy (Gvosdev and Marsh, 2013; de Haas, 2011), one that focuses on security and intervention (Allison, 2013), another on Russia's soft power and influence in the post-Soviet space (Sherr, 2013), and two other on Russia's relationship with the West (Leichtova, 2014; Tsygankov, 2012). The choice for the six books also covers the diversity of standpoints found in the literature regarding a series of factors such as: the background of the authors, their research record, their theoretical standpoints, or their views towards Russia and Putin's regime. In relation to the latter factor Tsygankov and Allison tend to have the most critical attitudes regarding Russian foreign policy and Putin's regime, while the others take a more neutral or slightly favourable position.

De Haas' book looks at Russian foreign policy since 2000 by analyzing its theory and practice, and exploring various policy documents produced by the Kremlin during this period. The analytical approach of the book is rather undeveloped, but it does a good job in highlighting the evolution of the dynamics behind Russia's security policy. His work is influenced by his background in the military and academia (in the Netherlands and Azerbaijan), and generally focuses on Russia's military and security policy. Gvosdev and Marsh present in their book a comprehensive analysis of Russian foreign policy by looking at the various vectors, actors, mechanisms and directions which influence it. Acting more as a general book, it does not really approach the issue from a certain theoretical standpoint. Both have extensive experience working in the academia and military institutes in the United States (US). Sherr looks in his book at the mechanisms through which Russia projects its hard and soft power in the post-Soviet space and compares Moscow's endeavours with those of the West. Power is seen in the book, similarly to realist accounts of international relations, to be the main driver in world politics. The book draws from Sherr extensive experience in researching Russian military, security and foreign policy both in academic and in policy oriented positions.

Allison's book examines the way in which Russia has interpreted the concept of intervention in international relations by focusing on a series of timely case studies ranging from the fall of the Soviet Union up until the Ukraine crisis in 2014. Allison has extensive experience researching Russian foreign policy and more broadly the Eurasian region, most of his research drawing on the realist tradition in international relations theory. Tsygankov was trained as an academic in both Russia and the US, but spent most of his academic career in America. His research draws on constructivism and focuses on the role of identities in Russian foreign policy. In this sense, his book looks at Russian foreign policy through the lens of honor, which he defines as 'what is a "good" and "virtuous" course of action in the international society vis-à-vis the relevant other' (Tsygankov, 2012, p. 4). Leichtova's book tries to explain

how Russia constructs its foreign policy towards the West – loosely defined as the European Union (EU) and the US. In comparison to the other authors, her track record in researching Russian foreign policy is much more limited. On the other hand, she is based in the Czech Republic and from that perspective her work can be considered representative for the way Russian foreign policy is perceived more broadly in post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe.

The six books reviewed point to the fact that the main driving factor in Russia's foreign policy since 2000 has been restoring the country's great power status and reputation. In practice achieving the status of great power is equivalent to reinstating the Soviets Union's sphere of influence in Eurasia, and more broadly acquiring the ability shape the current world order. Much of the debate in the six books is centred on the domestic and international contexts that allowed Putin to embark on a path towards assertiveness, and the sources of power through which he went about doing this. Consequently, in what follows the article highlights the way in which the six books analyze the sources of power together with the domestic and international factors that allowed Putin to become more assertive in regaining Russia's great power status. Rather than analyzing comparatively the way each book approaches these aspects, the article focuses on the most important arguments the six books make – which can be considered to be representative for the broader literature. Moreover, the article finds that regardless of the theoretical standpoints employed the six books highlight Russia's path towards more assertiveness during Putin's three terms as president.

Domestic factors: The centralization of foreign policy?

The six books see the period of impressive domestic economic development during the first part of the 2000s to have been crucial to strengthening Putin's regime. However, the books identify a different domestic aspect to have played a more salient role in allowing Putin to

embark the country on a path towards assertiveness in the international arena. More specially, they refer to Putin's efforts to centralize Russian foreign policy under his rule and coagulate a common view among foreign policy elites. When he came to power in 2000 Putin was confronted with Yeltsin's legacy of a fragmented foreign policy, characterized by the dysfunctional clash of interests between a series of diverging school of thought. Gvosdev and Marsh, Allison, Tsygankov, pay particular attention to three main groups of elites: liberals, pragmatists or moderates and nationalists. Liberals support the adoption of Western norms and do not favour using military force in the post-Soviet space. Pragmatists or moderate nationalists want Russia to be integrated in the international community, but on its own terms. They also argue that Russia has special responsibilities in the post-Soviet space which would legitimate it to act unilaterally. Nationalists see Russia at the center of a distinct Eurasian culture and advocate establishing through Russian dominance in its near abroad Eurasian integration.

While the six books discuss in various degrees the group of elites that have shaped Russian foreign policy since the 1990s, they are not so clear on the means through which Putin sought to bring them together. Some of the strategies briefly mentioned in the books include: the increase in the number and influence of former secret and military in Russian diplomacy (Leichtova, 2014, p. 65); the subjugation of Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister to the views and goals of the President (Tsygankov, 2012); or controlling the foreign investment of Russia energy companies and oligarchs (Gvosdev and Marsh, 2013).

While it is clear from these studies that Putin has aimed to centralize Russian foreign policy and achieve a higher level of coordination, there is less agreement on extent to which he has been successful. For example, Tsygankov (2012) believes that Putin has been successful to a certain extent, as although liberals and dissenters oppose Putin more or less openly, they have not always criticized Russia's foreign policy towards the post-Soviet space or its interventions in Georgia and Ukraine. Sherr (2013) argues that Putin sought to bring

about changes in Russia's foreign policy establishment in order to restore the country's former status of great power. According to him, under Putin the state became more centralized, making the discourse of the foreign policy leadership more important than the view found within the Russian public sphere. On the other hand, Gvosdev and Marsh argue that Putin's' centralization effort have been successful to a certain extent. He achieved this through identifying common threats (such as Fascism or the West encroachment on the post-Soviet space) and proposing ambitious initiatives like the Eurasian Union. However, they contend Russian foreign policy is still driven by various interests. The lack of consensus on the success of Putin's efforts to centralize foreign policy might stem from the rather limited analysis of the means that Putin used in this process. Little is also known about the inner workings of the foreign policy circles which are close to Putin. Future research should aim to interview key individuals around Putin, although given the Ukraine crisis and the increasing isolation of the Kremlin it is hard to think that this would be possible soon.

International factors

Interacting with the 'West'

The broader literature points to Russia's dynamics and shifting relations with the West as the most important external aspect that has shaped Russia's efforts to regain the great power status. Tsygankov, Leichtova, or Allison also frame this as the most salient explanatory factor for the evolution of Russian foreign policy towards more assertiveness. However, in discussing Putin's relations with West the six books share an ambiguous view of the West, rarely distinguishing between the EU and the US. This account draws on the Russian conceptualization of the West which is itself ambiguous and perceives the West as its *significant other*. In this background, Tsygankov argues that three patterns of honorable behavior in relations with the West can be distinguished in the evolution of Russian foreign

policy since 2000. Firstly, Russia has cooperated with the West through building alliances with it and showing commitment to its values. Secondly, it has adopted a defensive position where it has opted for alliances with the West made on Moscow's own terms which are more flexible and less commitment oriented, whilst trying to focus on its internal development. Assertiveness is the third concept, whereby Russia has adopted a unilateral approach in order to promote its norms and values in the international arena. Putin's first mandate was dominated by the need to cooperate with the West especially in terms of the War on Terror. However, his support for the West's efforts after 9/11 has less to do with honor and was partly fueled by Putin's need to reaffirm and safeguard Russia's territorial integrity in the context of dissent in some of its predominantly Muslim areas. Due the expansion of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the increasingly hawkish voices within the Duma and the Russian army in his second and third, Putin constructed a more assertive foreign policy in trying to reposition Russia as a major international power (Tsygankov, 2012).

On the other hand, Leichtova's constructivist analysis finds Russian foreign policy discourse to be part of Putin's utilitarian approach. She argues that Putin has used foreign policy discourse instrumentally in order to deceive the West's of Russia's real intentions. Russia under Putin sent mixed messages to the West, on the one hand showing willingness to collaborate and dialogue, while on the other showing a rather unscrupulous pragmatism in pursuing Russia's national interest (Leichtova, 2014, p. 36). Her constructivist analysis allows her to probe deeply into Russian foreign policy discourse and highlights the way in which these mixed messages underline a shift during Putin's three terms from aspiring to the status of great power to asserting this status.

De Haas' (2011) analysis of official Russian foreign policy documents shows that in the last fifteen years the West has been viewed as a threat, a view which stemmed from the Russian tradition fear of the other. He goes on to argue that in Putin's first term, Russia's relations with

the West have been characterized by a sort of reluctant openness towards cooperation. On the other hand, during 2004-2008, in the background of the coloured revolutions in the post-Soviet space Putin felt increasingly threatened by the West's penetration in its sphere of influence. Russia perceived the coloured revolutions as a battle in its strategic competition with the West, criticizing the former's interventionism. This was part of Russia's Monroe Doctrine which delineated a sphere of responsibility in the post-Soviet space (Allison, 2013). It sparked a widespread view within the Kremlin that if Russia did not embark on an assertive path, the West would continue its expansionist strategy in the post-Soviet space. Hence, maintaining Russia's grip on the post-Soviet states became a key source of power for regaining Moscow's status of great power – further discussed in the section on sources of power.

The six books point to the Georgian-Russian war of 2008 as being a defining moment in Moscow's relations with the West. It signalled Russia's return to the world stage as a great power unopposed by the US, the EU or the international community as a whole. Until the Russian-Georgian war the West was rather complacent in thinking that its influence in the post-Soviet space could not be thwarted by Russia's hard power. Sherr argues that the war made 'risible the notion that as Russia became more prosperous, self-confident and economically entwined with Europe it would abandon its neo-imperial outlook and animus' (Sherr, 2013, p. 58). However, the six books do not analyse in detail the way the Georgian-Russian of 2008 war affected foreign policy decision-making in the Kremlin, or Russia's long term strategic goals in the post-Soviet space. Shedding light on these aspects would require interviews with key elites in the Russian government, but would provide a clearer picture of the way the Russian-Georgia war encouraged Putin to embark the country on an even more assertive path in foreign policy.

Interacting with other parts of the world

During Putin's three terms Russia's foreign policy did not focus to a large extent on relations with international actors outside the West. It primarily sought to create an alternative to the American world order by enlisting the support of the other BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Among them China is Russia's main non-Western focus, being seen by the Kremlin as a source of both opportunities to enhance Russia's international status, but also as a threat to Moscow's power in Eurasia (Kaczmarek 2015). A second priority involved dealing with the Arab world. This has been influenced by Russia's own internal issues with concerning Islamic extremism. The six books focus their attention on Moscow's partnership with China and its relations with the Arab world. Gvosdev and Marsh's book is the only one which contains a lengthy discussion of Russia's approach towards a series of non-Western countries.

Firstly, Russia's relations with China have been based on mutual coexistence and have sometimes been shaped by the threat of external intervention in the Eurasian space. Putin has frequently highlighted the saliency and the high level of trust that characterizes this relationship. De Haas argues that relations between China and Russia have been constantly developing in the last decade, China becoming one of the main vectors in Russian foreign policy in relations to arms and energy trade (de Haas, 2011, p. 48). On the other hand, according to Sherr (2013, p. 16) 'the Russia-China relationship is not yet of strategic, let alone global significance'. Russia is also becoming aware of the challenge that China is mounting to traditional markets for its arms trade. China has been purchasing arms from Russia, copying them and selling them at a cheaper price. Russian-Chinese trade has also increased from 40 billion dollars to 80 between 2009 and 2012. Moreover, by supplying arms to the Chinese military Russia 'is not only taking a strategic gamble with its own future but is also helping the shift in the balance of power in Asia' (Gvosdev and Marsh, 2013, p. 142). On the other hand,

Allison contends that Putin has sought to mobilize the support of China in the Security Council and in other multilateral settings in order to counter the influence of the US (Allison, 2013).

Secondly, in the aftermath of the 2003 US intervention in Iraq one of the goals of Putin's foreign policy was to portray Russia as maintaining a Muslim tradition in the context of the religion's recognized status in Russia and the presence of various Muslim ethnic minorities on its territory (Curanovic, 2014). Putin attended and claimed at the 2003 Organization of the Islamic conference that Russia was a 'Muslim Power'. Putin has also argued that Russian Orthodoxy is closer to Islam than Western variants of Christianity (Gvosdev and Marsh, 2013, p. 297). Nevertheless, the toppling of various longstanding authoritarian regimes – by more or less Muslim movements – during the Arab Spring shook Russia's statist conceptions of the international system (Allison, 2013). The Arab Spring created significant losses to the Russian military and defense industry which led to the breakdown of several defence contracts (of around 10 billion dollars). Moscow seems less willing than the US or the EU to support revolutionary forces that bring about new changes in the region (Dannreuther, 2015). The six books point to the fact that the Arab Spring made the Kremlin fearful that protests in North Africa can spill over to Caucasus or other parts of Russia. This in turn reinforced the path towards assertiveness as a way of securitizing Russia from contagion with widespread popular unrest or Islamic extremism. However, none of six books provides a throughout analysis of the impact of Arab Spring on Russia's global and regional aspiration, or the way the North African revolution affected foreign policy decision-making within the Kremlin.

Sources of power

Regardless of the theoretical standpoint they employ the authors of the six books argue that Russia's primary sources of power which have sustained the path towards assertiveness reside in Moscow's military and nuclear capabilities, together with using its energy resources. In

terms of military power, De Haas finds that achieving the great power status has been equated in the minds of Russian policymakers with developing: ‘the capability of power projection by highly skilled, modern equipped, expeditionary military forces that could be deployed at short notice anywhere in the world’ (de Haas, 2011, p. 39). In this sense, one of Putin’s goals has been to convince the international and Russian public opinion to accept the international use of force. On the other hand, Allison contends that rather than aiming to shape international or domestic public opinion Russia has pushed within multilateral settings for a broadening the scope of international intervention. According to him, in the first half of the 2000s Russia accepted the legitimacy of the evolving character of the principle of international intervention based on human-focused conceptions of sovereignty. Russia acted in this way because it knew that any such intervention would have to be made through the United Nations Security Council where it has the right to veto. However, in the wake of the coloured revolutions in the post-Soviet space Putin denounced American hegemony and intervention and showed less willingness to support the responsibility to protect principle (R2P) based on human factors (Allison, 2013, pp. 69–70). As a consequence, since the middle of the 2000s Russia’s view of legitimate intervention in the international arena has emphasized legality, constitutionalism and the protections of its citizens rather than morality (Allison, 2013, p. 12).

The rise of energy prices from 2003 onwards coupled with the countries impressive energy resources has also been a salient source of power in the international arena for Putin. The books highlight that Putin has offered preferential energy deals for European countries or China in exchange for recognition of Russia’s great power status. Russia has also used energy prices as a political tool in order to put pressure on weaker states. This has been more evident in Russia’s near abroad. Moreover, in the post-Soviet space, the six books also highlight that Putin has had at his disposal a wider range of sources of power besides using (the threat of) military intervention or energy prices in order to assert Russia hegemony in the region. For example,

Sherr lists a series of sources of power and strategies that are available to Russia in the region: it can present an uncompromising position to the states in the region by signalling that it is unwilling to move even an inch on certain issues; it can create the seeds of conflict between the states in the region and then play them against each other; or it can use extortion on corrupt elites in the region, whilst also sending mixed and ambiguous messages to them (Sherr, 2013). Gvosdev and Marsh add to this *arsenal* Russia's significant social capital and prestige in the post-Soviet space which draws on the legacy of the Soviet Union (Gvosdev and Marsh, 2013). On the other hand, Russia has also promoted the concept of sovereign democracy which argues that states should be free from external interference. However, in the post-Soviet space sovereign democracy has been employed as a tool to fend off Western influence, and has not referred to Russian interference (Sherr, 2013).

In practice, Putin's interests in the post-Soviet space have materialized in his third term in the 'creation of a common economic space (which) is the most important event in the post-Soviet space since the collapse of the Soviet Union' (Gvosdev and Marsh, 2013, p. 188). The Eurasian Union offers to the post-Soviet countries the prospect of exporting their surplus work force to Russia and getting a constant stream of remittances. The Eurasian Union has a downside in the fact that it entails creating new barriers with the outside world. The books reviewed here do not focus too much on how the development of the Eurasian has changed Russia's foreign policy, or whether it has fuelled even more Putin's assertive approach to international relations. Given the rather recent development of the Eurasian Union, research on its meaning for the course of Russian foreign policy or the politics of Eurasia is still in its infancy (Cadier, 2014)

Discussion and Conclusions

This review article analyzed the main arguments found in the literature in the last four years by exploring six books which are taught to be representative – the books cover a wide range of topics in Russian foreign policy, while their authors come from various backgrounds. It researched the way these books presented the shift towards assertiveness since Putin became president in 2000 by highlighting the external and domestic factor together with the sources of power which shaped this process. Nevertheless, the six books do not cover all of the explanations present in the literature published in the last four years: such as the influence of far right and nationalist ideas on Russian foreign policy (White and Feklyunina, 2014; Laruelle, 2012), the issue of religion and the development of Russian public diplomacy (Curanovic, 2014), or Russia's efforts to imitate the US pivot to Asia (Akaha and Vassilieva 2014). However, they focus on most of the key factors emphasized in the broader literature: ranging, for example, from Moscow's evolving relations with the West to the development of Russian military and energy sectors. Moreover, regardless of the theoretical toolboxes employed by the authors (mainly realist and constructivist), the six books point that Russian foreign policy has been deeply marked by Putin's leadership. Russia's foreign policy has been continuously evolving since 2000 towards assertiveness, a process through which Putin has aimed to regain Russia's lost status of great power. To that extent, this article emphasizes that Russian assertiveness is evident both in the way Russian foreign policy identities and discourses (Leichtova and Tsygankov), or Russia national, security or economic interests are constructed (Allison, Share, De Hass, or Gvosdev and Marsh). However, the authors also emphasize that the practical manifestations of Russia's assertive foreign policy are hard to predict or evaluate as Putin's leadership has been characterized by contradictory and somewhat erratic decisions.

Most books written in the last four years are influenced by a deeply Western understanding of foreign policy and international relations, with very few exceptions (e.g. Tsygankov or

Gvosdev and Marsh's studies). Empirical insights into decision-making in Russian foreign policy are brought to light through well-constructed analysis of policy documents, but very rarely based on data from in-depth interviews or surveys with policymakers in the Kremlin. The value of the books reviewed here lies in the way they chart the path towards assertiveness in Putin's quest to put Russia again on the map as a great power. Moreover, the trends identified in Russian foreign policy by these books have remained rather constant in spite of the shift towards more assertiveness in Russian foreign policy during the Ukraine crisis. However, none of these books has accurately predicted the scale of Russia's actions in Ukraine and the radicalization of Putin's approach towards Ukraine and the West. One explanation for this might reside in the fact that most studies on Russian foreign policy tend to assume a normative position either criticizing or defending Putin's actions in the international arena.

More work is needed in order to uncover the Ukraine crisis' for Russia's foreign policy and for Putin's leadership— for example, through examining in depth the way Putin has centralized decision-making during the Ukrainian crisis by aiming to rally the country against the perceived threat of Fascism or the West's encroachment in Russia's near abroad. Even though Russia itself views the West in abstract terms, future research should try to disentangle the concept of the West and distinguish between the EU and the US. Scholars should also focus more attention on the broader Eurasian vector which has been a marginal point of interest in the literature. Putin's current isolation in relation to the West might signal an increasing focus in Russian foreign policy towards China and Japan and a broadening of the Eurasian Union. Future research should also enquire into whether Russia's shift towards more assertive in the international arena has been: a) part of a long-term strategy, or b) merely the result of constant adjustment to the shifting international and domestic contexts, or to the way Russia's sources of power have evolved during the Putin's leadership. The six books tend to favour the latter argument without making a clear case in this sense. Nevertheless, the literature seems to agree

that Putin has regained Russia's great power status (or at least that he perceives it like that) to a large extent due to his decision to embark on an assertive path in foreign policy.

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