

Conceptualizing a Nation: A Constructivist-Informed Analysis of Identity, Nationalism, and Continuity in Post-Soviet Russian Foreign Policy

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to explore the narrative of a resurgent Russian nationalism by developing a multidisciplinary analytical approach through which to theorize the relationship between identity, nationalism, and interest continuity in Russian foreign policy-making. This approach will draw on both constructivist international relations theory and sociological inquiry in order to create a theoretical-conceptual framework of analysis, focusing on the role of international and national identity formation processes in shaping RFP behavior over time. In order to add empirical weight to this analysis, this framework will be applied to theorize Russian foreign policy behavior in Ukraine and Kazakhstan over the post-Soviet period before employing a ‘historical narrative’ method of process-tracing through which to chart the evolution of Russian foreign policy behavior in post-Soviet space. Throughout, this paper argues that both interest continuity and increased assertiveness in post-Soviet contexts are fundamentally shaped by interrelated processes of identity formation.

Introduction:

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, there has been persistent international concern regarding a perceived growth in assertive, nationalist Russian policy-making that challenges the sovereignty, and sometimes territorial integrity, of states within post-Soviet

space.¹ Throughout the post-Soviet period, seemingly regardless of the significant fluctuations in its domestic and international circumstances, Russian interest in the maintenance of a tightly-controlled sphere of influence within the former bounds of the Soviet Union has remained a policy priority.² This paper contends that in order to best analyze the trajectory of Russian foreign policy in its former republics in the post-Soviet age, a nuanced understanding of Russian identity is critical, arguing that it is Russian international identity projection of great powerness, in concert with Russian national identity rooted in its imperial history, that shapes the development of Russian interest, and therefore policy, formation.

This paper aims to explore how the dual projects of Russian national and international identity formation have influenced the trajectory of Russian foreign policy engagement in post-Soviet space since 1991. Despite the noted growth of domestic nationalist sentiment and state-led national identity building programs pursued throughout the post-Soviet period, nationalism remains “one of the most poorly understood themes in the analysis of Russian foreign policy”;³ currently, there is no established analytical approach through which to investigate the relationship between nationalism, national identity, and foreign policy, which lies at the intersection of sociology and international relations.⁴ Consequently, this paper will draw on both of these disciplinary traditions to establish a multi-level framework of analysis through which to examine continuity of interest in RFP within the context of Russian national and international, or system-level, identity formation processes. In incorporating a sociology-based analysis of national identity within a larger, system-level constructivist theoretical framework, a

¹ Laruelle, “Why No Kazakh”, 65

² Trenin, “Russia's Spheres”, 3

³ March, “Nationalism”, 79

⁴ Prizel, *National Identity*, 7

comprehensive image emerges of a contemporary Russian foreign policy driven not only by power-political ambitions, but compelled by nationalist and historical imperative. Throughout, I will argue that these national and international identity processes necessarily contextualize any power-seeking and pragmatic elements of RFP; that is, RFP behavior is directly and profoundly shaped by Russian identity formation processes at both the international and national levels.

In order to make this argument, this paper will first establish a dual theoretical-conceptual framework of analysis, drawing on theoretical constructs from multiple disciplinary traditions in order to identify the international and national identity formation process within Russian foreign policy more broadly, and then apply it to specific case studies, developing a nuanced analysis of these identity formation processes and their impact on RFP behavior. Secondly, this paper will then trace the trajectory of RFP behavior with regard to PSS throughout the post-Soviet period, seeking to identify the manifestation of nationalist policies over time. This paper will look specifically at the trajectory of Russian foreign policy behavior in the cases of post-Soviet Ukraine and Kazakhstan: both states occupy critical geostrategic locations along the Russian border, and are significantly impacted by Russian nationalism, due to historical fault lines within each country that have created ethnic Russian minority-majorities in key regions.⁵

Methodology:

It is clear that the study of nationalism in relation to Russian foreign policy offers a valuable analytical focus within broader research.⁶ However, in order to avoid “unconscious

⁵ Trenin, *The End*, 131

⁶ March, “Nationalism”, 79

adherence to the prejudices of the day”⁷, this paper aims to incorporate nationalism- and national identity-focused analysis into a larger theoretically-guided study of RFP behavior, positing that the international relations theory of social constructivism provides “scholars of RFP with a framework... particularly well suited for exploring change and continuity in Russia’s interests”.⁸ Combined with its critical focus on identity as a catalyst for action, the constructivist-based theoretical approach provides a natural foundation for the exploration of the intersection of nationalism, national identity, and foreign policy behavior. While nationalism is not often an “explicit focus” of constructivist inquiry, the centrality of identity formation in constructivist studies of RFP allows for the inclusion of nationalist discourse in these processes.⁹ To investigate the relationship between socially constructed identity formation processes and RFP outputs in specific contexts, this paper will apply the qualitative method of theory-guided process-tracing to examine the trajectory of RFP in a given setting over time, looking specifically at the emergence and deployment of nationalism-informed foreign policies. The method of theory-guided process-tracing has been selected for its use in the “study of phenomena characterized by complex causality”.¹⁰ Due to the intersubjective formation of nationalist policies and national identity, as will be explored later in this paper, a “historical narrative” process-tracing method will be employed, as the sequential nature of this approach both allows for the study of the relationship between variables and acknowledges the existence of endogeneity within explanatory variables; that is, it allows for the exploration of “causal feedback loops” without resorting to “circular reasoning”.¹¹ This research design is particularly

⁷ Keohane, *Neorealism*, 3

⁸ Feklyunina, “International Norms”, 7

⁹ March, “Nationalism”, 83-84

¹⁰ Falleti, “Theory-Guided Process-Tracing”, 4-5

¹¹ Büthe, “Taking Temporality”, 485

suiting for inquiry into Russian foreign policy behavior: while a multidisciplinary analytical framework is used to examine identity and interest formation within RFP, the historical narrative approach to studying the trajectory of these interests and behaviors allows for the theoretical investigation to be “complemented by contextual knowledge”.¹² While theory identifies causality, it is the “knowledge of the history” that enables one to “determine the significance of these behaviors”.¹³

Theoretical Discussion:

To investigate the questions set forth above, this paper proposes the development of a theoretically-informed framework through which to analyze and interpret the trajectory of post-Soviet RFP behavior. Based on a social theoretical approach to the study of international relations, this paper establishes a two-tier framework of analysis, drawing on both constructivist IR theory and sociological inquiry to provide a bridge between conceptualizations of nationalism and national identity, and the theoretically informed study of foreign policy. In this framework, the first tier of analysis will employ a structural constructivist theoretical approach to the study of RFP behavior in the post-Soviet era in order to investigate and establish the motivation underlying RFP actions.¹⁴ Within this theoretical context, a second tier of analysis will serve to integrate a sociologically-informed conceptual framework to explore the relationship between nationalism, national identity, and RFP formation.

¹² Bates, “Area Studies”, 168

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Wendt, “The agent-structure problem”, 355

The reason for such an approach is threefold: firstly, the “main obstacle” in investigating the relationship between nationalism and foreign policy lies in the lack of disciplinary crossover between sociological conceptualizations of nationalism and various theoretical approaches to the study of foreign policy.¹⁵ The integration of sociological conceptual analysis into a larger IR theoretical framework addresses this problem by providing for a synthesis of analysis across disciplinary lines. Secondly, the nature of constructivist IR, in its “emphasis on ideational factors”, particularly identity, “indicates significant potential overlap” with the study of nationalism.¹⁶ While constructivism is a social theory of international relations, the foundations of the theory are distinctly sociological in nature¹⁷; this offers a theoretical basis for the integration of extra-theoretical conceptualizations of social phenomena into the study of RFP. Thirdly, while many political and sociological studies of nationalism “have an explicit domestic focus”¹⁸, the incorporation of nationalism-focused analysis within a system-level theoretical framework provides increased theoretical coherence to understanding the impact of nationalism on policy formation at the international level.

Constructivist inquiry is also particularly suited to the study of continuity and change in foreign policy – understanding the practice of global politics as continually made and remade allows for the tracing of social phenomena over time, which in turn illuminates such continuities and changes.¹⁹ As such, constructivism presents the logical choice of theoretical framework on which to center this paper. More specifically, this paper will adopt a structural constructivist

¹⁵ Prizel, *National Identity*, 7

¹⁶ March, “Nationalism”, 83

¹⁷ Ruggie, “What Makes the World”, 862

¹⁸ March, “Nationalism”, 79

¹⁹ Feklyunina, “International Norms”, 7

approach grounded in the work of Alexander Wendt to further investigate the driving factors behind Russian interest in sustained foreign policy engagement in PSS over time. Taken alone, a structural constructivist framework would locate state identity formation as occurring exclusively at the system level, emphasizing the role of an external definitional “other” in shaping a state’s identity and therefore, interests.²⁰ In this way, what Wendt conceptualizes as the driver of interest formation is best defined as ‘international identity’, that is, a state’s external projection of its self-image at the system-level. However, the rejection of domestic determinants of foreign policy and location of a state’s international identity as the sole core of foreign policy formation results in an incomplete account of the existence of nationalist foreign policies: nationalism is, by its very nature, a domestic-level social-political phenomenon.²¹ Nonetheless, while nationalism originates at the domestic level, nationalist ideas are often coopted by state actors and applied to influence system-level politics, particularly with regard to state foreign policy interest formation.^{22 23}

In drawing on the underlying shared social basis of sociology and constructivist IR to investigate the trans-disciplinary social phenomena of nationalism and national identity, there emerges a conceptual space that allows for the incorporation of this secondary analytical lens while keeping the system-level analysis of structural constructivism intact. Conceptual frameworks of analysis are particularly useful in the investigation of “social phenomena... linked to multiple bodies of knowledge” across disciplines²⁴ – the goal in creating a conceptual

²⁰ Wendt, “Anarchy”

²¹ Breuilly in Prizel, *National Identity*, 2

²² Prizel, *National Identity*

²³ March, “Nationalism”, 79

²⁴ Jabareen, “Building”, 50

framework of analysis is to provide a “comprehensive understanding” of given phenomena and the relationships between them in order to better understand the functioning of “real world social systems”.^{25 26} Positioned within a larger constructivist theoretical framework and locating causal mechanisms in identity-driven interest formation at the international level, this paper contends that the influence of nationalism on foreign policy can be analyzed through investigation into processes of national identity formation and projection. In establishing such a framework of analysis, this paper has two objectives. Firstly, to identify and more deeply conceptualize the four social phenomena under investigation: nationalism, national identity, international identity, and foreign policy formation. Secondly, understanding all four of these concepts to be fundamentally intertwined, as the formation of a nationalist foreign policy is necessarily dependent on the existence of a distinct national identity within the state²⁷, to identify the relationships between these phenomena. In establishing and analyzing these relationships systematically, this conceptual framework can guide analysis to provide a more nuanced understanding of how these concepts interact.

National identity underpins foreign policy interest-setting in concert with international identity: while Wendt rejects the use of national identity as a basis for explaining states’ self-interest within a constructivist framework as too highly variant²⁸, this rejection is overly dismissive of the salience and stability of national identities over time.²⁹ Nationalism remains “the world’s most potent political force” in “shaping events”³⁰, and it is clear that national

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Wendt, “The agent-structure problem”, 355

²⁷ Prizel, *National Identity*, 8

²⁸ Wendt, “Collective Identity”, 387

²⁹ Prizel, *National Identity*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4-7

identity discourse offers insight into both international and domestic political identity formation and political prioritization³¹, thus shaping states' policies and behaviors on a global scale.

The inclusion of national identity as a determinant of outward foreign policy preferences does not negate the role of international identity in shaping foreign policy; in fact, this paper argues that the inclusion of this conceptual framework within broader constructivist analysis illuminates how international and national identities are mutually reinforcing, again drawing on the critical underlying principle of the overarching theoretical framework – the mutual constitution of the social phenomena that drive state action. Actor identity, the core driver of interest, is not a monolith, but an outcome of complex historical and social processes that typically draw from many sources; this complex actor identity can be understood as formed through multiple co-constitutive interlocutory processes, both mirroring significant 'others' internationally, while also constructing the contemporary self in reference to the historical self.³² This paper argues that any state identity is double-stranded, created not only through the process of 'othering' at the system level but also through domestic-level nation-state interlocution, resulting in the coalescence of national identity.

The Russian Case:

The first tier of analysis as set out in the theoretical framework above provides for the system level examination and explanation of continuity in RFP interest in PSS. While RFP is often conceptualized as materially power-seeking, a structural constructivist lens allows for the

³¹ Smith, *National Identity*

³² Hopf, "Crimea", 241

incorporation of ideational level analysis, framing power politics as socially constructed³³ – in the case of Russian interest in PSS, RFP behavior is conceptualized not only as the pursuit of the material benefits of regional primacy, but as the pursuit of the ideational level components of primacy, specifically status recognition. Drawing on Alexander Wendt’s “mirror theory” wherein an actor’s understanding of self “[tends] to “mirror” the practices of significant others over time”³⁴, this paper identifies the United States as post-Soviet Russia’s self-referential “other” in the process of system-level identity formation and, relatedly, projection. As such, contemporary Russian international identity is deeply informed by the historical relationships and global status built by its Soviet predecessor³⁵, which had amassed international prestige in competition with the US. Though the bipolar system of the Cold War has become obsolete, its practices “remain a social fact”,³⁶ and post-Soviet Russian international identity remains inextricably linked to the recognition of its international great power status and, more specifically, its status as a great power equal to the US. Competitive power politics, in turn, are socially constructed through system-level interlocution and reliant upon actor identity.³⁷ Russia’s pursuit of global great power status in the face of significant material constraint is most fully explained in this way: Russia may pursue rational power-seeking goals, but its specific interests and actions are determined by a profoundly entrenched system-level identity as a global great power.³⁸

The identification of Russian international identity as synonymous with great power status is not just assumed as constructed theoretically vis-à-vis the US and others, but is

³³ Wendt, “Anarchy”, 396

³⁴ *Ibid.* 408

³⁵ Hopf, “Crimea”, 229

³⁶ Wendt, “Anarchy”, 421

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 396

³⁸ Tsygankov, “Vladimir Putin’s Vision”, 135

empirically evident and explicitly referenced in RFP documents and discourse; in fact some claim “great powerness”, or *derzhavnost*’, is the “core of [Russian] foreign policy”.³⁹ Great power imagery is indeed a mainstay of Russian political discourse, with much of RFP centered on the belief that Russia is destined to engage in great power politics in the international arena⁴⁰; beyond simply seeking to be perceived as a great power, RFP discourse asserts this status as its right.⁴¹ While the narrative of Russian great powerness within the international system is often presumed to be a direct outcome of the increasingly authoritarian politics of President Vladimir Putin, *derzhavnost*’ has long played a central role in RFP rhetoric; the concept of rightful Russian great powerness is one of the clearest continuities in RFP discourse throughout the post-Soviet period.⁴²

This paper contends that in pursuing policies that place PSS as Russia’s zone of privileged interest, Russia continues to conceptualize its “security borders [as] those of the defunct Soviet Union”⁴³, and it is this self-perception that informs not only Russian interests in PSS, but RFP behaviors and perception of threats therein. The narrative of Russian aggression in PSS is intrinsically related to the perceived threat of Western, and to a lesser extent, Chinese, encroachment. This, in turn, leads to the securitization of post-Soviet space within RFP discourse. Securitization within a constructivist framework of analysis identifies the “emergence of a new social fact, i.e. a threat” as occurring through processes of intersubjective reasoning⁴⁴; as identity claims grow stronger, the securitization of a given issue grows stronger.

³⁹ Gunitsky, “One Word”

⁴⁰ Lynch, “Realism”, 14

⁴¹ Trenin, “Russia's Spheres”, 3

⁴² Tsygankov, “Russia's Power”, 44

⁴³ Lynch, “Realism”, 10

⁴⁴ Balzacq, “Constructivism”, 63

In the case of Russia, the system-level impact of domestic nationalist rhetoric has increasingly been noted as Russian nationalism has “begun ineluctably to influence Russian foreign policy”⁴⁵, examined here through the deployment of a second conceptual tier of analysis. Defining Russian nationalism is perhaps especially difficult; it has been argued that there are many Russian nationalisms, embodying both ethnic and civic conceptualizations of the Russian nation.^{46 47} It is clear that ethnic conceptualizations of the Russian nation have been prevalent in the realm of foreign policy creation, consistently drawing links between the state and ethnic Russians living outside its contemporary boundaries.⁴⁸ Increasingly, however, official Russian nationalist discourses have moved toward a civic conceptualization of the Russian nation as related to the ‘Russian idea’.⁴⁹

This state-level nationalism is expressed through policy creation, and is based on a view of the Russian nation as both ethnic and civic: those who live within the modern borders of Russia are Russian, no matter their ethnicity, but ethnic Russians outside of Russia are Russian as well, no matter their location within PSS. There is also a third conceptualization of “Russianness” – that of “compatriots” in *Russkiy mir*, the “Russian world”, which has “gradually received more Russian attention” throughout Putin’s presidencies.⁵⁰ The concept of compatriots

⁴⁵ March, “Is Nationalism Rising”, 11

⁴⁶ March, “Nationalism for Export”, 408

⁴⁷ Laruelle, “Russia”, 94

⁴⁸ Fawn, “Ideology”, 12

⁴⁹ March, “Nationalism for Export”, 8

⁵⁰ Allison, “Russian ‘Deniable’ Intervention”, 1283

is not solely ethnonational, but has “emerged from a hybrid of ethnic, linguistic, historical, [and] political” definitions of Russianness⁵¹, and has increasingly been integrated into RFP discourse.⁵²

These varying conceptualizations of the Russian nation – and its relationship to statehood – are rooted in the development of a post-Soviet Russian national identity. While nascent states tend to find themselves “heavily reliant on their collective memories as the bases for their national identities”⁵³, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly emergent Russian state experienced a “profound crisis of political and national identity”.⁵⁴ Historically, Russian national identity has been predicated on the idea of empire⁵⁵ – this centuries-old idea, along with “the [Soviet] notion of ethnic homeland”⁵⁶, creates a strong ideational link between Russian national identity and post-Soviet territory.

This territorial conceptualization of national identity is linked to the pursuit of RFP goals in PSS: in recognizing these states as less than fully sovereign⁵⁷, Russia is drawing on these historical ideas of self. The “sense of other” integral to the formation of a national sense of self is only very thinly present in the Russian perception of FSU states⁵⁸: the trajectory of RFP in the post-Soviet era, and the Russian rhetorical construct of the near abroad shows that the Russian conceptualization of FSU states often is indistinguishable from the Russian understanding of self. The inclusion of a shared ethnicity serves to strengthen this perception considerably. Indeed,

⁵¹ King and Melvin, “Diaspora”, 122

⁵² Laruelle, “Russia”, 89

⁵³ Prizel, *National Identity*, 3

⁵⁴ Lynch, “Realism”, 7

⁵⁵ Light, “Foreign Policy”, 36

⁵⁶ Fawn, “Ideology”, 15

⁵⁷ Deyermond, “Uses of Sovereignty”, 968

⁵⁸ Fawn, “Ideology”, 13

“what is foreign when, amid the debris of that lost empire, about one-sixth of the [ethnic] Russian nation resides outside the borders of the Russian state?”⁵⁹ RFP objectives within PSS throughout the post-Soviet period appear to be fundamentally aligned with the features of national identity as set out earlier in this paper: “historic territory, collective historical myths and memories, a mass public culture, shared legal rights and duties and a common economy with territorial mobility for members”.⁶⁰

Despite the “weak[ness]”⁶¹ of Russian national identity in the earliest post-Soviet years, Russian interest in PSS remained consistent. Under Vladimir Putin, there has been a more concerted effort to pursue and establish a salient Russian national identity for post-Soviet Russia^{62 63} and, as this paper posits, a not-coincidental increased assertiveness in foreign policy in the region. In various contexts throughout the twentieth century, the presence of a strong national identity “has greatly hindered the pursuit of a seemingly pragmatic foreign policy”.⁶⁴

The links between Russia’s national and international identities are illustrated in RFP behavior, which appears increasingly nationalistic, and the pursuit of nationalist goals – such as in Crimea – serves to further “deepen the rhetorical and cognitive dissonance between Russia and the West”.⁶⁵ Russian national identity and international identity are fundamentally linked through the shared concept of *derzhavnost*: while the Russian ideal of great powerness is shaped through system-level interlocution with the US (and other global powers), *derzhavnost*’ is also

⁵⁹ Lynch, “Realism”, 8

⁶⁰ Fawn, “Ideology”, 11

⁶¹ Prizel, *National Identity*, 8

⁶² Galeotti and Bowen, “Putin's Empire”

⁶³ Ziegler, “Great Powers”, 549

⁶⁴ Prizel, *National Identity*, 6

⁶⁵ March, “Nationalism Rising”, 11

shaped by historic conceptions of self at the national level – “Russian nationalism's great-power statism”.⁶⁶ Taking foreign policy to be “a means of establishing [a state’s] presence within the international system”,⁶⁷ and understanding Putin’s national identity project to be related to Russian state-building efforts⁶⁸, this conceptual framework shows the linkages that allow understandings of Russian national identity at the state level to contribute to the projection of influential great powerness as Russia’s international identity through foreign policy implementation.

The Ukrainian Case:

In recent years, studies on Russian foreign policy behavior toward Ukraine have comprised an increasingly large percentage of RFP-focused literature, wherein, discursively, Russian interest in Ukraine is often simultaneously positioned as both unique and more broadly representative of the potential consequences of Russian revanchism and aggression in its “near abroad”.⁶⁹ Explanations for the prioritization of Ukraine within RFP are largely divided between geopolitical arguments and ideational approaches focused on the social and historical aspects that are understood to have constructed the contemporary relationship.^{70 71} Realist approaches to understanding the continuity of this prioritization within RFP tend to focus on the strategically key geopolitical situation of Ukraine between Russia, the West, and the Black Sea region.^{72 73}

⁶⁶ Allensworth, “Derzhavnost”, 51

⁶⁷ Prizel, *National Identity*, 10

⁶⁸ Galeotti and Bowen, “Putin's Empire”

⁶⁹ Götz, “Neorealism”, 302

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Tsygankov, “Vladimir Putin’s Last Stand”, 287

⁷² Sasse, *Crimea*, 1

⁷³ Götz, “Neorealism”, 308

This paper argues, however, that there is a significant ideational component to the Russian perception of Ukraine, unanswered for by structural realist analysis and transparently evident in Russian discourse dismissive of Ukrainian autonomy, with President Putin on various occasions referring to Ukraine as “Little Russia” and “not a real country”, and to Ukrainians and Russians as “one people”.^{74 75} This discourse is ideational in nature and indicates the importance of identity considerations in the analysis of RFP in Ukraine. More than occupying a central place in RFP as a straightforwardly geostrategic priority, the importance of Ukraine to Russia, including its material importance, is profoundly informed by historical, social, and cultural links between the two powers.

In applying a constructivist lens through which to analyze Russian foreign policy toward Ukraine in the post-Soviet era, this paper explores how Russia’s system-level self-image as a global great power shapes RFP preferences in Ukraine. The Russian self-perception of great powerness defines post-Soviet RFP behavior in Ukraine: Russia not only finds its system-level identity as a great power in historically-informed understandings of self, but perceives a Russian-oriented Ukraine to be imperative to this great powerness.⁷⁶ While the prevailing arguments documenting Russian foreign policy behavior in Ukraine, particularly regarding the military incursions into Crimea and Donbas, emphasize the material and geostrategic advantages to assertive actions, this paper argues that these interests are conditioned by system-level processes of identity formation.

⁷⁴ Marson, “Putin”

⁷⁵ Pifer, “Mr. Putin”

⁷⁶ Solchanyk, *Ukraine*, 9

Within a power-political paradigmatic view, Russian goals in foreign policy engagement with Ukraine are understood to be pragmatic, rational, and power-seeking: straightforwardly geopolitical, Russia seeks to exert influence over Ukrainian policy decisions and effectively balance against the US, if not at the system level, then regionally. However, RFP behavior in Ukraine has not achieved these goals; nor, this paper argues, could it expect to. Far from simple pragmatic power accumulation that would shore up Russian influence in Ukraine, regionally, and vis-à-vis the United States, thereby securing the great power recognition the government openly strives for, as RFP behaviors in Ukraine have grown increasingly assertive and, in turn, spurred anti-Russian sentiment in Ukraine and alienated Russia within the international arena, pragmatic realpolitik has diminished in its explanatory capacity.⁷⁷ The current situation in Ukraine is at a pragmatic deficit: despite the ostracization of Russia within the international community after the unsanctioned invasion of Crimea, Russian incursions into sovereign Ukrainian territory continued with the occupation of Donbas – a years-long occupation for which Russia simply does not have sufficient material capacity.⁷⁸ A strictly power-political approach cannot provide the necessary context with which to evaluate these actions, and therefore provides an unconvincing explanation for RFP behavior; if EU and NATO expansion, along with US encroachment was the primary trigger for Russian intervention, as structural realist accounts would suggest,⁷⁹ there is no real mechanism for explaining either timing or location, as similar structural conditions have been intermittently present in various parts of the FSU throughout the post-Soviet era, notably after Ukraine’s Orange Revolution in 2004.⁸⁰ Without allowing for

⁷⁷ Herd, “Living”, 221

⁷⁸ Stanovaya, “What the West”

⁷⁹ Mearsheimer, “All the West’s Fault”

⁸⁰ Tsygankov, “Vladimir Putin’s Last Stand”, 281

historical and social context, normative constraints, or the role of perceptions formed through system-level processes of interlocution, such arguments are significantly weakened.

Russia's Ukraine policy reflects a perception that "without Ukraine not only can there be no great Russia, but that there cannot be any kind of Russia at all".⁸¹ This perception of Ukraine within broader RFP discourse is shaped by Russia's historically and socially constructed perceptions of self at the international level, dependent upon a conceptualization of Russia as a global great power – and of Ukraine as a vital element in ensuring the recognition of Russian great powerness at both the material and ideational levels. In this way, Russia's international identity formation processes led to a continuity of interest in the country, and a historically-informed rationale for the deployment of particularly assertive policy behaviors. It also calls attention to, but cannot adequately answer for, elements of nationalism that fundamentally underpin RFP actions in Ukraine.

Understanding Russian nationalism as comprised of both civic and ethnic understandings of Russia's nationhood, it is clear that both elements have suffused RFP discourse and action in Ukraine. These dual elements of Russian nationalism have consistently informed RFP preference-setting and implementation in Ukraine, consistently emphasizing RFP engagement in the ethnically and linguistically Russian east of the country. The nation-focused rhetoric of the Russian state that encompasses Ukraine in various forms is largely based on the historical development of Russian national identity. Russian "political and cultural history" – constituent elements of its contemporary national identity – are commonly understood to have originated in

⁸¹ Karpinskii in Solchanyk, *Ukraine*, 9

the medieval Kyivan Rus just over a millennium ago.⁸² Kyivan Rus is identified not only by Russians, but also Ukrainians as the foundation of their state- and nationhood.⁸³ Crucially, in addition to the political and cultural history of a nation, the territorial history of that nation plays an integral role in national identity formation processes.⁸⁴ In locating the origins of Russian national identity in the ancient state of Kyivan Rus, which was comprised of both Ukrainians and Russians and centered on the territory of modern-day Ukraine,⁸⁵ contemporary Russian national identity is profoundly informed by a perception of Ukraine, and Ukrainians, as a fundamental part of the Russian nation.

The historically and socially constructed Russian perception of Ukraine has a powerful impact on Russia's perception of self, reflected in both national and international identity formation processes. The ability of Russia to exert influence over, if not outright control, Ukrainian territory, people, and politics, is an integral component of Russian national identity, grounded in centuries of Russian imperial dominance over Ukraine. This national identity is reflected at the system level in Russian pursuit of great power status – Russian great powerness is fundamentally premised on the inclusion of Ukraine within Russian spheres of influence. In placing Ukraine as a central component of Russian identity at both the national and international levels, these identity formation processes serve to mutually constitute and reinforce RFP interests in the state.

⁸² Solchanyk, *Ukraine*, 4

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Smith, "National Identity", 12

⁸⁵ Pifer, *Eagle*, 2

Application

To provide empirical support to the argument that both continuity in RFP interest and increased assertiveness are inherently shaped by international and national identity formation processes, this paper employs methods of theory-guided process-tracing to chart RFP behavior toward Ukraine throughout the post-Soviet era, with a particular focus on identifying the presence of any nationalist elements in either discourse or action. This will be achieved through evaluating RFP toward Ukraine in three discrete time periods, tracing RFP over time within manageable limits.

1993-1997

By the summer of 1993, it was clear that the relationship between the newly post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine “was not going well”.⁸⁶ In Russia, 1993 represented a shift away from the early pro-Western Russian foreign policy agenda toward foreign policy goals “influenced by geopolitical thinking and also by various degrees of Russian nationalism”.⁸⁷ This anti-West, pro-nationalist shift in policy prioritization resulted in an “increased focus” on relations with Ukraine.⁸⁸ It was at this time that the “emergence of Crimea as a salient post-Soviet political issue made the region a key interface between the two distinct, but interrelated, processes of state and nation building in Ukraine and Russia” occurred.⁸⁹ While the “Crimea question” was predominant within Russian foreign policy discourse toward Ukraine throughout this time period, much of the rest of RFP discourse toward Ukraine was focused on border-demarcation

⁸⁶ Pifer, *Eagle*, 28

⁸⁷ Bukkvoll, “Off the Cuff”, 1143

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Sasse, *Crimea*, 4

issues stemming from the Soviet collapse, including the formalization of the post-Soviet Russian-Ukrainian international border.

By 1997, however, most of the intense border disputes would be resolved to a reasonable degree, and rhetoric regarding the ownership of Sevastopol cooled once an agreement was reached on territorial leasing arrangements that summer. That same year, Yeltsin officially recognized the Russian-Ukrainian border, signing a treaty affirming the “immutability of existing borders”.⁹⁰ The official demarcation of borders was not, however, matched by an increase in Russian acceptance of Ukrainian independence: at the end of 1997, Yeltsin remarked, ‘it is impossible to tear from our hearts that Ukrainians are our own people.’⁹¹

In viewing RFP toward Ukraine in the period between 1993-1997, several interwoven themes emerge as to the nature of this relationship. Firstly, it is clear that establishing and asserting Russian normative and territorial influence over Ukraine, or at least parts of Ukraine, constituted the main RFP interest throughout the time period, informed by historical patterns of relations and “the introduction of nationalist elements into [Russian] foreign policy discourse”.⁹² These same historical patterns of relations and nationalist perceptions resulted in the development of a widespread and “fairly strong conviction that Ukrainian independence is a temporary phenomenon”,⁹³ despite the evident desire within Ukraine to forge an independent Ukrainian state.

⁹⁰ Trenin, *The End*, 167

⁹¹ Bukkvoll, “Off the Cuff”, 1142

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

2003-2007

By 2003, Russian foreign policy behavior toward Ukraine had largely moved on from the border debates of previous years: Kyiv had granted Crimea autonomous status, the regionalist and separatist movements on the peninsula had “fragmented”, and the Russian nationalist mobilization in the region, based on a “blurred Soviet-Russian identity”, was ineffectual.⁹⁴ The key event at this time was the Orange Revolution, a protest movement spurred by the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election, in which Russian-backed Viktor Yanukovych was challenged by the Western-favored opposition of Viktor Yushchenko. “Ukraine’s 2004 presidential elections were... a contest over national identity”,⁹⁵ namely, the assertion of Ukrainian national identity vis-à-vis that of Russia. A post-Soviet and independent Ukrainian national identity had begun to consolidate in the face of repeated RFP attempts to reassert Russian control in the 1990s,⁹⁶ and now manifested in the Ukrainian rejection of the Russian-backed, Russian-speaking, Donbas-born Yanukovych.⁹⁷

Between 2003-2007, RFP behavior toward Ukraine remained proprietary, continuing to seek the exertion of Russian influence in the country’s domestic political scene, with the intention of keeping Ukraine closely in its sphere of influence – and removed from the West.

⁹⁴ Sasse, *Crimea*, 255-257

⁹⁵ Kuzio, “Democratic Revolutions”, 47

⁹⁶ Pifer, *Eagle*, 11-12

⁹⁷ Kuzio, “Democratic Revolutions”, 43

RFP behavior toward Ukraine at this time should also be contextualized by the strengthening Ukrainianization narrative of the Yushchenko regime.⁹⁸

2013-2017

Between 2013 and 2017, RFP behavior toward Ukraine changed dramatically: in the span of these four years, Russia went from acknowledging Kyiv's sovereign status to annexing one part of the country and occupying another. By 2013, vast changes had taken place in both countries: Viktor Yanukovich had campaigned again, and this time been elected president, and Vladimir Putin had returned for a third presidential term, consolidating an increasingly authoritarian regime amidst protests in Russia. Most notable, however, is the closeness of Ukraine and the West by this time, even under the generally Russia-friendly Yanukovich regime; indeed, by the autumn of 2013, Ukraine and the EU had come close to signing a landmark trade agreement, despite the Russian threat of retaliatory protectionist policies to be levied in the event of such a deal.⁹⁹ In late 2013, however, Yanukovich withdrew from the EU agreement in favor of closer integration with the Moscow-led Eurasian Customs Union,¹⁰⁰ sparking a wave of nationalist and pro-European "Euromaidan" protests in Ukraine, and eventually resulting in the collapse of the Yanukovich regime in February 2014.¹⁰¹

After the removal of Yanukovich from the Ukrainian presidency, RFP behavior and rhetoric toward Ukraine shifted from coercive to the outright annexation of Crimea, framed as an

⁹⁸ Kulyk, "Language", 283

⁹⁹ Anishchuk, "Putin Warns"

¹⁰⁰ Allison, "Russian 'Deniable' Intervention", 1257

¹⁰¹ Salushev, "Annexation", 40

intervention on behalf of the ethnic Russians and “Russian compatriots” in Crimea,¹⁰² a territory which had, for decades, been understood to present a “high potential for conflict”.¹⁰³ More than invading Crimea, however, Russia proceeded to back an insurgency in Donbas that allowed for the “symbolic” annexation of eastern Ukraine – so-called Novorossiia, which is “both a spatial and an ideological justification for Russia’s legitimate reassertion as a great power”.¹⁰⁴ The effect of these territorial reassertions was extreme: at the system-level, Russian intervention in eastern Ukraine triggered heavy Western sanctions that “have hamstrung the once-booming Russian economy”,¹⁰⁵ and damaged Russian influence at all levels, particularly with regard to the countries of the FSU – FSU leaders became nervous, and, effectively, Putin “lost Ukraine”.¹⁰⁶ In tracing RFP behavior toward Ukraine between 2013-2017, it is possible to see a striking return, if not continuation of transition-era RFP behavior and rhetoric regarding Ukraine: the denial of Ukrainian sovereignty, the assertion of Russian ownership over Crimea, particularly with regard to Sevastopol and the Black Sea Fleet, and the use of coercive power to exert influence over Ukraine.

Analysis

By tracing specific empirical instances of Russian foreign policy behavior toward Ukraine across three time periods, it is possible to identify how RFP interests and implementation have evolved or held constant throughout the post-Soviet era in order to investigate the narrative of an increasingly assertive, nationalist RFP agenda, as set out earlier in

¹⁰² Allison, “Russian ‘Deniable’ Intervention”, 1296

¹⁰³ Sasse, *Crimea*, 129-133

¹⁰⁴ Laruelle, “Three Colors”, 55-57

¹⁰⁵ Diener, “Assessing Potential”, 473

¹⁰⁶ Herd, “Living”, 221

this paper. The result of such tracing is the identification of a considerable continuity in RFP behavior toward Ukraine, in which assertive, nationalist, and proprietary claims over Ukrainian territory, resources, and people serve as a long-term feature of RFP discourse. The empirical observations resulting from this investigatory process are contextualized and explained by the theoretical analysis performed above, which identifies the confluence of Russia's socially and historically constructed international and national identities as the driver of RFP behavior in Ukraine.

It is clear that conceptually, Ukraine occupies a fundamental role in Russian processes of self-perception, wherein the separation of Ukraine from Russia is seen “not only [as] a question of Russia's structure or borders, [but] about her soul”.¹⁰⁷ This paper argues that, based on the analysis offered, the “othering” mechanism so crucial to identifying the self vis-à-vis others is not only weak in the Russian perception of Ukraine, but functionally absent altogether. That is, in the intersubjective process of national identity formation, the creation of one's identity is reliant on processes of “othering”; in the case of Russia and Ukraine, this process, due to historical and social context, is not triggered, and therefore there is no mechanism present with which Russia is able to differentiate its identity from that of Ukraine. Such proprietary sentiment, which manifests at the state level in nationalist foreign policy rhetoric, is further reflected in Russian international identity, which is in large part predicated on a Russian claim to Ukraine, and in particular, its heavily ethnically Russian eastern regions.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Fedotov in Bukkvoll, “Off the Cuff”, 1142

¹⁰⁸ Hopf, “Crimea”, 247-248

Drawing from both empirical evidence and theoretical analysis, tracing these events allows for speculation regarding a causal link between Russian national identity and increasingly assertive policy preferences on its historical territory. In applying an identity-informed framework of analysis, it emerges that the major difference between 2004 and 2014 was the renewed national identity project that characterized Vladimir Putin's third presidential term; this nationalist project was based in an increasingly coherent and anti-Western self-perception at both the national and international levels.^{109 110} This increase in a cohesive national identity allowed for separatist movements in eastern Ukraine to flourish, and prompted the system-level securitization of the longstanding border issue in the face of perceived Western antagonism, making Ukraine "still more important to constituting the Russian self".¹¹¹

The Kazakh Case:

After the 2014 invasion of Crimea, there was a spike in debate over whether Putin would continue to reassert Russia's historical territorial claims; the general consensus seemed to be that if Putin continued to pursue a path of territorial revisionism, "presumably Kazakhstan could come next".¹¹² Like Ukraine, Kazakhstan is a country of regions, with a significant ethnic Russian minority-majority in the northern regions adjoining Russia, and serious political and ethnic divisions along that line.¹¹³ The exclusion of this large population of ethnic Russians from post-Soviet Russian territory was a "major worry" in the 1990s, understood to be just as salient a concern as "the political separation of the Russian Federation [and] Ukraine".¹¹⁴ Also like

¹⁰⁹ Hill, "Putin", 143)

¹¹⁰ Sasse, *Crimea*, 257

¹¹¹ Hopf, "Crimea", 247

¹¹² Olcott, "After"

¹¹³ Golunov and McDermott, "Border Security", 33-34

¹¹⁴ Trenin, *The End*, 119

Ukraine, Kazakhstan occupies a regionally geostrategic position: it is among the largest and most self-sufficient of the post-Soviet states, and is the largest in Central Asia, providing Russia with access to wider Asia, and serving as a key interest among global powers, including the US, the EU, and, increasingly, China.¹¹⁵

Examination of the Russian-Kazakh relationship in the post-Soviet period has been dominated by pragmatic interpretations of RFP¹¹⁶: Kazakhstan is not only valuable in terms of its position as an energy-rich country in a geostrategic corridor, but it retained a degree of dependency on external investment and infrastructure well into the post-Soviet period, allowing for continued exertion of Russian influence within the country,¹¹⁷ meaning Kazakhstan is both politically, militarily, and economically valuable and relatively accommodating of Russian involvement within the country.¹¹⁸

However, while the geopolitical aspects of Russian interest in Kazakhstan are both important and manifestly evident, there are also clear ideational constructs within the relationship as well, particularly in regard to the historical narrative of Russian dominance of the steppe,¹¹⁹ and other “historical and cultural ties to Russia continue to be of fundamental importance”.¹²⁰ This paper argues that it is a socially and historically constructed Russian great power identity that gives meaning to these geopolitical goals beyond straightforward pragmatism. Indeed, in the context of the earliest post-Soviet years wherein Russia sought to

¹¹⁵ Zabortseva, *Russia's Relations*, 32

¹¹⁶ Nurgaliyeva, “Kazakhstan”

¹¹⁷ Fawn, “Ideology”, 24

¹¹⁸ Allison, “Strategic Reassertion”, 288

¹¹⁹ Neumann and Wigen, “Importance”, 320

¹²⁰ Fawn, “Ideology”, 25-26

move closer to the West, Russian interest in Central Asian states was neither especially pragmatic nor power-enhancing: focusing on Central Asia, considered to be inherently “counterdemocratic” and “a burden for Russia and a drag on its resources”, could only slow its economic and political recovery.¹²¹ Nonetheless, Russia pursued a policy of deep engagement in the region through the strengthening of economic, security, and political ties, for which it did not have the material capacity.¹²²

Applying a structural constructivist framework of analysis to post-Soviet RFP behavior toward Kazakhstan allows for the examination of how Russia’s international identity as a global great power affects the trajectory of RFP in an independent Kazakhstan. As previously established, Russian great power discourse is dependent on its status as “the pivotal state” within PSS: Russia perceives this status, in turn, unable to be “validated without Kazakhstan playing the role of loyal second”, particularly in the absence of a Russia-oriented Ukraine.¹²³ The Russian perception of a “loyal” Kazakhstan as a fundamental guarantor of regional primacy, and therefore Russia’s global great powerness, is best understood as profoundly shaped by the historical and social construction of this Russian identity, which inherently functions to perpetuate inherited patterns of social interaction.¹²⁴ While the Russian empire established control over contemporary Kazakh territory in the mid-1800s, modern Kazakh statehood is usually identified as having originated in the Soviet era, with the conferral of republic status being granted by Moscow in 1936;¹²⁵ in this way, contemporary Kazakh “territorial identity [is]

¹²¹ Belokrenitsky, “Russia”, 1094

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Laruelle et.al., “Untangling”, 214

¹²⁴ Wendt, “Anarchy”, 421

¹²⁵ Nygren, “Rebuilding”, 175

a product of Stalinist engineering”.¹²⁶ The historical narrative of the Russian construction of Kazakhstan continues to inform the Russian perception of the Kazakh statehood and territorial integrity as reliant upon the Russian recognition – and gift – of such.

Further, like in Ukraine, the socially and historically constructed Russian interest in Kazakhstan is strengthened by interest expressed among global powers toward building relations with Kazakhstan, and within the region more generally. While the EU has made limited overtures to Kazakhstan throughout the post-Soviet period,¹²⁷ the key great powers operating in the region are the US, and, increasingly, China,¹²⁸ triggering a new social “process of signaling, interpreting, and responding” between actors,¹²⁹ refocusing Russian interest in Central Asia, and within Kazakhstan more specifically.¹³⁰

While material and geostrategic considerations clearly shape RFP priorities and implementation in Kazakhstan, these considerations are necessarily contextualized by the socially constructed Russian perception of its role in Kazakhstan. In many ways, Russia perceives contemporary Kazakhstan as a (Soviet-era) Russian construction, innately subject to Russian influence. This perception is the product of centuries of social interaction between – and Russian domination of – Kazakh people and territory. This paper argues that, based on a structural constructivist theoretical approach, rather than maintaining a strictly pragmatic

¹²⁶ Fawn, “Ideology”, 17

¹²⁷ European Commission, “Kazakhstan”

¹²⁸ Allison, “Protective Integration”, 301-302

¹²⁹ Wendt, “Anarchy”, 405

¹³⁰ Ziegler, “Russia”, 242

geopolitical interest in Kazakhstan, RFP interest formation is necessarily, directly, and fundamentally informed by the Russian international identity formation process.

It is also clear that RFP discourse and behavior in Kazakhstan contain various elements of Russian nationalist sentiment. The inclusion of Kazakhstan in a post-Soviet “Russian community” is not solely an ethnic concept, but can be understood to include “a number of Russified [ethnic] Kazakhs” throughout Kazakhstan.¹³¹ In PSS, “the boundaries between Russians and other ethnic groups... [are] often indistinct”,¹³² and civic Russian nationhood is understood to exist throughout a “common post-Soviet civilizational space”.¹³³ However, other RFP behaviors toward Kazakhstan are deeply informed by an ethno-centric image of the Russian nation, with a particular focus on RFP engagement on behalf of ethnic Russian compatriots in Kazakhstan, a population that has existed “since the sixteenth century”.¹³⁴ During the post-Soviet period, northern Kazakh regions have remained not only ethnically, but culturally and linguistically Russian; the ethnonationalism of this population has been viewed as particularly intransigent throughout this period.¹³⁵

The marriage of civic and ethnic elements of Russian nationalism and their relation to RFP behavior toward Kazakhstan in the post-Soviet era is most evident in the Russian perception of a Russian-aligned Kazakhstan as located firmly within *Russkiy mir*, a socially and historically constructed “civilizational space” that entrenches a Eurasianist vision of Russian nationhood into

¹³¹ Rasizade, “Reflections”, 25

¹³² King and Melvin, “Diaspora”, 122

¹³³ Morozova, “Geopolitics”, 670

¹³⁴ Olcott, *Kazakhstan*, 174

¹³⁵ Trenin, *The End*, 108

official rhetoric.¹³⁶ Contemporary Russian Eurasianism is both geopolitical and ideational in nature, presenting an ideationally constructed “third continent between East and West”, at the center of which lies Russia.¹³⁷ The Eurasianist vision of nationhood that informs Russian perceptions of behavior toward Kazakhstan is an outcome of historical narratives of Russian national identity;¹³⁸ for centuries, Russian national identity was “fused” with its imperial identity,¹³⁹ allowing Russia to differentiate its status from other European empires through “proprietary claims to the spaces and peoples of [Central] Asia”,¹⁴⁰ specifically, the “valorization of the steppe in Russian history”.¹⁴¹

The history of empire that informs Russian national identity and the perception of rightful great powerness that shapes Russian international identity in the post-Soviet era are historically and socially constructed, and this paper argues, mutually constitutive. In the case of RFP behavior toward Kazakhstan, these co-constituted identities are historical constructs that find their origin in the Russian conquering of the Kazakh steppe: in Imperial Russia, great powerness and empire were “to a considerable extent” synonymous – and “without [Ukraine and the steppe] Russia would cease to be”.¹⁴²

Application

In performing the identity-driven analysis above, this paper argues for an understanding of RFP behavior in Kazakhstan as stemming from an incoherent vision of Russian national

¹³⁶ Herd, “Living”, 215

¹³⁷ Laruelle, “Two Faces”, 115-119

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ Prizel, *National Identity*, 157

¹⁴⁰ Bassin, “Geographies”, 52

¹⁴¹ Laruelle, “Two Faces”, 118

¹⁴² Lieven, *Ukraine*, 10

identity as relates to Kazakhstan's territory and people. Until this vision consolidates, and in the absence of any perceived encroachment by the West, it is likely that RFP toward Kazakhstan will continue to advocate for Eurasianist integration rather than the territorial integration of Kazakhstan into Russia. To provide empirical support to this argument, this paper will again engage with the 'historical narrative' method of theory-guided process-tracing to chart RFP behavior toward Kazakhstan throughout the post-Soviet era.

1993-1997

After Russia's brief turn West between 1991-1993, a geopolitical and nationalist reorientation cemented the importance of engagement in post-Soviet space, including in Kazakhstan, on which a great deal of Russian ethnonationalist sentiment was focused.¹⁴³ In examining Russian-Kazakh relations between 1993-1997, it is clear that "the [Russia-Kazakh] border issue was explicit and acute".¹⁴⁴ Though there was no official call for the revision of the border from Moscow, the fear of such remained acute enough that in 1997, Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev moved the Kazakh capital to Astana in the north of the country to solidify Kazakh authority within the region.¹⁴⁵ The problems arising from the arbitrary nature of this border were largely ethnic in nature, and the border demarcation process continued even after the Russian recognition of border legality in 1994.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Solchanyk, *Ukraine*, 36

¹⁴⁴ Zabortseva, *Russia's Relations*, 16

¹⁴⁵ Trenin, *The End*, 198

¹⁴⁶ Golunov and McDermott, "Border Security", 37

Throughout the 1990s, “the meaning of Russianness, both at home and abroad, remained ill-defined”.¹⁴⁷ Beyond the protection of ethnic Russians abroad, there was no real conceptualization of what the external Russian nation might encompass, especially in the case of Kazakhstan, where “mapping the “Russianness” of the Kazakh steppes is complicated”.¹⁴⁸ Cultural Russianness continued to suffuse much of the country outside the ethnic Russian northern territories, and despite clashes, the Kazakh government remained relatively “sensitive to Russian rights”.¹⁴⁹

2003-2007

An inclination toward “strategic reassertion” of Russian influence in Central Asia was identifiable within RFP discourse in the earliest years of the first Putin presidency, accommodating a “growing nationalist consensus” at the state level, despite the unclear nature of this nationalist sentiment.¹⁵⁰ As an important energy partner in PSS, in the early Putin years, Kazakhstan became a focal point for Russian engagement in the region, but also was identified as “the key state for military–strategic and economic access” to Central Asia.¹⁵¹ As Russia continued to develop its post-Soviet international presence, an increased interest in Central Asia was matched by a continued “deterioration in Russian–American relations”.¹⁵²

Also at this time, the “growing nationalist political consensus” in Russia was consolidating, focused on the assertion of “a form of soft and nuanced hegemony” within PSS,¹⁵³

¹⁴⁷ King and Melvin, “Diaspora”, 123

¹⁴⁸ Laruelle, “Why No Kazakh”, 68

¹⁴⁹ (King and Melvin, “Diaspora”, 122

¹⁵⁰ Allison, “Strategic Reassertion”, 277-284

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 291

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

particularly vis-à-vis the United States. As the US continued to pursue engagement with Central Asian countries, “the notion of Eurasianism” began to take hold at the state level in both Russia and Kazakhstan.¹⁵⁴ By 2003, RFP rhetoric and behavior in and towards Kazakhstan was increasingly focused on “integration-related initiatives” within a Eurasianist discourse; this strengthening of ties between the two countries was framed as “a specific historical path”, and continued to shape RFP toward Kazakhstan even in the absence of material return.¹⁵⁵

Several themes emerge upon the tracing of RFP developments toward Kazakhstan between 2003 and 2007, most notably the Russian affirmation of Kazakh territorial integrity and a growing narrative of Eurasianist integration, placed against the backdrop of increasing regional assertion vis-à-vis the West. Russian assertion against the West in Kazakhstan was fairly effective throughout this timeframe: unlike in other PSS countries, Kazakhstan’s pro-Russia authoritarian regime remained stable, and both Russia and Kazakhstan increasingly committed to the concept of Eurasian integration.

2013-2017

Between 2013 and 2017, RFP behavior toward Kazakhstan was largely centered on Eurasianist discourse, and the Russian-Kazakh relationship was strengthened through the pursuit of consolidating the Eurasian Economic Union, framed in RFP discourse as “an integration project”.¹⁵⁶ Largely a “Moscow-led” project,¹⁵⁷ the EEU represented a significant step in strengthening Russian-Kazakh bilateral relations, aiming at extensive economic integration, but

¹⁵⁴ Zabortseva, *Russia's Relations*, 103

¹⁵⁵ Zabortseva, *Russia's Relations*, 114

¹⁵⁶ Nazarbayev and Putin, “Kazakhstan”

¹⁵⁷ Laruelle, “Why No Kazakh”, 66

likely also at “establishing political influence over Kazakhstan and the Central Asian region”.¹⁵⁸ Indeed, due to its roots in Eurasianist identity discourse, the Russian approach to the EEU was also one of “cultural leadership”, in which the EEU was perceived to entail at least a degree of political and “social integration”.¹⁵⁹ However, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 had not only damaged its relationship with Kyiv and the West, but significantly hampered Russia’s ability to promote high-level Eurasian integration with its key partner in that venture.¹⁶⁰ Even as Nazarbayev brought Kazakhstan into the EEU, he spoke of withdrawing from the agreement “should Eurasian integration ‘threaten independence’”.¹⁶¹

In the years between 2013-2017, RFP behavior in Kazakhstan, and indeed throughout the whole of post-Soviet space, was greatly impacted by the Russian annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Donbas. The unilateral and aggressive actions of Russia in Ukraine created tension in Russian relations throughout the FSU, particularly in Kazakhstan, which, after Ukraine, “hosts the largest population of ethnic Russians” outside Russia.¹⁶² This constrained Moscow’s ability to pursue any true deep integration with Kazakhstan at a time when the exertion of Russian influence over PSS was being prioritized and relations with the West were growing increasingly hostile.¹⁶³ In tracing the trajectory of RFP behavior during this time period, there is a continuation, and strengthening, of RFP interest in Kazakhstan from a Eurasianist, rather than ethnonationalist, perspective. As Moscow continues to perceive its relationship to

¹⁵⁸ Nurgaliyeva, “Kazakhstan”, 101

¹⁵⁹ Kirkham, “Formation”, 123

¹⁶⁰ Laruelle, “Why No Kazakh”, 75

¹⁶¹ Zabortseva, *Russia's Relations*, 3

¹⁶² Diener, “Assessing Potential”, 476

¹⁶³ Kaczmariski, “Domestic”, 406

Kazakhstan through a Eurasianist lens, and the Kazakh government remains accommodating to Russian interests, Russian territorial reassertion seems unlikely to manifest.

Analysis

In examining the trajectory of Russian foreign policy behavior toward Kazakhstan throughout the post-Soviet period, it appears that ethnonationalist tendencies and rhetoric have been largely supplanted by a more “civilizational” nationalist vision¹⁶⁴ of Russian-Kazakh integration in line with a Eurasianist-informed national idea. When placed in the context of the theory-driven analysis above, which identifies international and national identity formation processes as the catalyst for foreign policy behavior, this paper argues that it is clear that the Russian assertion of great powerness vis-à-vis the US, and to a lesser extent, China, in the region has informed this “Eurasianist” worldview. Further, it appears that such Eurasianist discourse intensified as Russian national identity formation processes began to cohere around a non-ethnic, but rather ‘civilizational’ nationalist understanding of self in relation to Central Asia. With regard to Kazakhstan, however, such a cohesion process is incomplete.

The relationship between Russian processes of self-identification and its perception of Kazakhstan is clearly strong: Russia, both as a state and as a nation, is perceived as necessarily encompassing of “either all, or significant portions” of Kazakhstan.¹⁶⁵ The key difficulty lies in identifying what parts of Kazakhstan are perceived as belonging to Russia. At various times, it has been suggested that Russian borders should incorporate: contemporary Kazakhstan in its entirety, as part of a Russian “supra-state” that would “restore Russian influence over the near

¹⁶⁴ Morozova, “Geopolitics”, 674

¹⁶⁵ Solchanyk, *Ukraine*, 19

abroad”;¹⁶⁶ the Kazakh steppe, or roughly sixty percent of Kazakh territory;¹⁶⁷ or the largely steppe-synonymous northern regions of Kazakhstan, made up of an ethnic Russian minority-majority.¹⁶⁸

This paper argues that the difficulty in identifying “Russian” Kazakhstan points to a weakness in Russian national identity formation vis-à-vis Kazakhstan; that is, the othering mechanism used to identify oneself versus an oppositional “other” is splintered, and there is no cohesive model for a differentiation of Kazakhstan and Russia at the nation-level. Based on the analysis offered above, this paper posits that the lack of territorial reassertion by Russia within Kazakhstan is due in large part to this variance. If, however, territorial reassertion was to occur, it would likely occur in the most ethnically Russian regions of northern Kazakhstan, where both ethnic nationalism and historically Russian territory have the greatest overlap, and therefore, the process of ‘othering’ is weakest. This indecision is reinforced by the general lack of perceived threat to Russian-Kazakh integration, and therefore to Russian great powerness expression, at the system-level: in Central Asia, US presence has waned in favor of Chinese presence during the 2010s.¹⁶⁹ While Russia perceives China to be a regional competitor, it is not perceived to be a threat, per se,¹⁷⁰ making territorial reassertion in Kazakhstan less likely. These perceptions are grounded in social interactions over time between Russia and its ‘others’; if these social interactions shift negatively, the perceived importance of ‘protecting’ Russian compatriots in

¹⁶⁶ Laruelle, “Russia”, 91

¹⁶⁷ Rasizade, “Reflections”, 22

¹⁶⁸ Solchanyk, *Ukraine*, 83

¹⁶⁹ Allison, “Protective Integration”, 302

¹⁷⁰ Herd, “Living”, 228

Kazakhstan could increase correspondingly, as the self-other interlocution process that shapes national identity contracts to ‘otherize’ the perceived non-Russian Kazakh population.

Conclusion:

Throughout the post-Soviet period, Russian foreign policy behavior in post-Soviet space has increasingly been characterized as both assertive and nationalist in nature, a narrative that has been reinforced in the wake of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.¹⁷¹ This paper has aimed to investigate the validity of this narrative by tracing RFP behavior in PSS since 1991 in order to identify the presence or absence of nationalist elements in RFP rhetoric and corresponding behavioral practices therein. To this end, three interrelated arguments have been presented: firstly, in order to explore the relationship between nationalism, identity, and foreign policy formation in an analytically-rigorous way, a multi-level, multidisciplinary analytical approach should be developed; secondly, that the trajectory of RFP in PSS is most accurately explained by analysis using a theoretical framework based on investigation into both international and national identity formation processes; and thirdly, that assertive behavior in post-Soviet RFP is directly influenced by the consolidation of a national identity.

While “rising nationalism of various strains has been an undeniable trend [within RFP discourse] for many years”,¹⁷² analysis thereof tends to focus on the power-political and geostrategic components of RFP behavior; as such, nationalist rhetoric is often framed as functionalist discourse employed by realists and used to justify assertive behavior in Russia’s

¹⁷¹ Tsygankov, “Vladimir Putin’s Last Stand”, 294

¹⁷² Laruelle, “Three Colors”, 71

self-defined sphere of influence.¹⁷³ Though nationalist rhetoric has clearly been instrumentalized in order to achieve Russia's geostrategic objectives within post-Soviet space, this paper contends that neither RFP objectives nor nationalist behavior can be understood without employing an identity-focused analysis. The reason for this is twofold: firstly, Russia's geostrategic objectives in PSS are socially constructed, and fundamentally informed by the system-level Russian self-identification as a great power; secondly, nationalist rhetoric is necessarily predicated upon the recognition "that there exists a nation with an explicit character" – nationalist behavior at the system-level is reliant upon the existence of a national identity.¹⁷⁴ This does not negate the analytical value of geostrategic and power-political theories for the study of RFP behavior in PSS but rather frames both geostrategic goals and power-political competition as profoundly conditioned by social and historical processes of identity formation.

The aim of this paper has not been to present a single 'grand-theoretical' approach to the study of nationalism, identity, and foreign policy formation, but rather to offer a theoretically-informed alternative analytical approach through which to better understand the trajectory of contemporary RFP behavior in post-Soviet space. The multidisciplinary analytical framework developed here serves to identify the role of international and national identity processes in foreign policy formation, behavior, and outcomes; from this analysis, this paper concludes that, with regard to foreign policy-making, a given state's national and international identities work together as the critical drivers of interest formation. Understanding identities to be "inherently relational"¹⁷⁵ and taking the co-constitution of social phenomena to be the critical theoretical

¹⁷³ Allison, "Russia Resurgent", 1146

¹⁷⁴ Breuilly in March, "Nationalism", 80

¹⁷⁵ Wendt, "Anarchy", 397

foundation of this paper, the identity of a state is therefore conceptualized as double-stranded; that is, national and international identities are mutually reinforcing, thus both determining state interests at the system-level.

When applied to the case studies of post-Soviet RFP engagement in Ukraine and Kazakhstan, this approach provides an identity-focused framework of analysis to explain and conceptually explore RFP behavior within its social and historical context. Though post-Soviet Russian nationalism is fairly fluid, comprised of ethnic, civic, and ‘civilizational’ components, RFP behavior toward Ukraine and Kazakhstan is clearly identifiable as containing nationalist elements. Upon theoretically-informed analysis, the continuity of RFP interest in maintaining hierarchical relations with both Ukraine and Kazakhstan is understood to be driven by Russia’s international great power identity together with its inherently territorial post-imperial national identity. While both countries are perceived as integral to Russian national and international level conceptualizations of self, the Russian perception of Kazakhstan as an interlocutory ‘other’ is more pronounced than in the case of Ukraine. Further, and crucially, at the system-level, in 2014, a heightened interest among Western powers in building strong relations with Ukraine coincided with Ukrainian pro-democratic domestic mobilization. This paper has argued that this confluence of factors resulted in Russian territorial reassertion in eastern Ukraine when a socially-constructed, system-level threat perception triggered the securitization of longstanding nationalist interests.

Throughout the post-Soviet era, the Russian projection of self as a global great power vis-à-vis the United States (and, to an extent, other global powers) has remained consistent, drawing

on a coherent historical understanding of self. Taking a constructivist view of the international system, the Russian international identity as a great power can be understood as increasingly structurally embedded, as the pursuit of great power status continues to inform Russian engagement at the system-level. In contrast, however, Russian national identity did not quickly coalesce after the collapse of the Soviet Union: there was no official understanding of what constituted the post-Soviet Russian nation, reflected in the variety of nationalist schools that emerged in the Duma in the 1990s.¹⁷⁶ As the Russian national idea has become increasingly coherent, there has been an “increasing emphasis on Russian exceptionalism and non-European essence” at the national level.¹⁷⁷ With the increasing coherence of an ‘official’ nationalism at the state level, the Russian perception of post-Soviet states has grown increasingly proprietary, especially with regard to those that have ethnic and cultural ties to Russia. Viewed through a constructivist theoretical lens, “stable territoriality [and] sovereignty... are internationally negotiated terms of individuality”¹⁷⁸, and in failing to distinguish between self and other, the consolidation of Russian national identity allows for reassertion of control over those it perceives as part of the Russian nation.

¹⁷⁶ Laruelle, “Russia”, 89

¹⁷⁷ March, “Nationalism”, 84

¹⁷⁸ Wendt, “Anarchy”, 402

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