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Analysis

Multipolarity as resistance to liberal norms: Russia's position on responsibility to protect

Xymena Kurowska

In Western analysis, Russia's insistence on the supremacy of international law serves as little more than a strategy to sustain parity with the West. The Kremlin's justification of its use of responsibility to protect is seen as an abuse of humanitarian language and a smokescreen in the pursuit of geopolitical interests. Formulated from within the liberal paradigm, such interpretations underestimate the normative saturation of strategic action. This article examines Russia's discourse of multipolarity not as being purely strategic—as is widely held—but rather as a form of resistance to the perceived liberal hegemony of

the West. The effects of such resistance resemble the outcomes of strategic manoeuvring but they should not be reduced to such. Bolstered by a sense of betrayal by the West, Russia's evolving discourse of multipolarity provides an alternative vision of the world order that contests the imposition of liberal values and bestows upon the authorities an actual responsibility to contain the West's dominance. Both Russia's interpretation of responsibility to protect and its position in the debate arise from this agenda.

Introduction

The Russian position on responsibility to protect (R2P)¹ is seen as contradictory. Explicitly, Moscow does not set itself against an obligation to protect populations from

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mass atrocities.² Russian engagement with R2P after the 2005 UN World Summit demonstrates acquiescence to rather than rejection of the idea of sovereignty as responsibility, although its understanding of sovereignty does not derive from the liberal conceptual framework underlying R2P advocacy in the West. Russia is keen to take up the role of watchdog within Western-driven development of R2P, speaks with irony of the ‘so-called responsibility to protect’, and identifies with the responsibility while protecting initiative which seeks to curtail the expansive interpretation of R2P.³ Among Western UN diplomats, the Russian position is differentiated from that of ideological adversaries of the doctrine, such as Cuba and Venezuela, even though the Russians ‘are very hesitant to add R2P language’ to any Security Council resolution.⁴ Their standpoint is often referred to at the UN as ‘nuanced opposition’ and is organised around three themes: the primacy of prevention over intervention; the state ownership of the protective process rather than external imposition; and the sequence of action in which the use of force is the last resort.⁵ Such position corresponds to the literal reading of the R2P doctrine.

The official Russian stance is that Moscow does not dispute the responsibility of states to protect their populations or the complementary international responsibility to protect under the exclusive authority of the Security Council. The Kremlin is instead against its current implementation,⁶ which is seen to target regime change in line with Western democratic peace theory and democracy promotion.⁷ Moscow’s objection lies in the forceful imposition of a liberal system of values which ‘glorifies individual rights over peace and stability’.⁸ In opposition to this practice, Moscow claims to be a protector of the UN Charter against the challenge of what it sees as the ‘creative proliferation’ of R2P. The aim is clear enough: the insistence on the sovereign equality prescribed by international law against the consolidating practice of intervention maintains the façade of parity with the West.⁹ It also provides for an advantageous position from which to expose the West’s ‘double standards’—i.e. its allegedly cynical appeals to humanitarianism in a number of military interventions—and as such creates conditions for Russia to take up the role of the representative of those marginalised in the international system. However, the charge of double standards cuts both ways: Moscow’s own practice regarding responsibility to protect Russian-speaking citizens in neighbouring countries seems to contradict its firm support of the state’s responsibility to protect and it clashes with the basic premise of non-interference into domestic affairs.

How to make sense of this contradiction? The default analytical position is to attribute strategic abuse of the humanitarian doctrine to the pursuit of geopolitical goals. But the lens of hypocrisy provides only a trivial explanation and thus ignores the origins of the current

controversy. By mechanistically reproducing the template of ‘the Russian menace’,¹⁰ it dismisses Russia’s input into norm contestation, regardless of how illiberal that input may be. Yet the fact that political action is deceptive and that political actors are inherently self-interested does not exclude the possibility that their interests include certain compatible norms in the promotion of which Russia may purposefully engage. Accordingly, the aim of this article is to examine the derivation of Russian resistance to the Western form of humanitarian intervention and now R2P. It seeks an interpretive explanation of situated meanings and meaning-making practices of actors in their particular settings rather than imposing meanings abstracted from specific contexts.¹¹ In order to do so, I investigate domestic sources of the interpretations, attitudes and practices that Russia brings to the R2P table.

The reconstruction stems from the observation that ‘a feeling of *obida* (injury) at perceived humiliation by the West [...] became the foundations of policy’,¹² and that the current defiant tone of Russia’s foreign policy choices is framed by resentment. Historically, Russia has not been included in the club of the liberal modern states.¹³ The sense of insufficient recognition from Western capitals has tended to result in Moscow adopting either defensive or assertive policy postures.¹⁴ This trajectory is perhaps best illustrated by Russia’s initial acceptance of Western normative and strategic leadership following the demise of the Soviet Union. However, the perceived slights from the West in the 1990s quickly gave rise to the revival of the great power discourse which resists liberal norms and contests humanitarian intervention. The failure to indulge this resistance has led to the current administration’s normative defiance of the liberal world order.

Inherent in this trajectory is the discourse of multipolarity which developed as a central term in Russia’s domestic lexicon of resistance against the West.¹⁵ As a formative foreign policy concept, the doctrine shapes Russia’s attitude toward other basic norms of contemporary international society.¹⁶ It is employed by scholars and political leaders alike to envisage an international system which liberates Russia from the normative pull of the Western hegemonic order. Such a system is fundamentally premised on the idea that various regional ‘poles’ decide independently on how to implement democratic values and implicitly emphasises the right of every state to protect its own culture and institutions in the face of Western dominance.¹⁷ As illustrated by Russia’s claim of the duty to protect compatriots, this right extends from the state to a ‘pole’. At the juncture of foreign policy and domestic self-image, the Kremlin thus insists on its own vision of ‘sovereign democracy’ in contrast to liberal democracy.

The image of Russia as a mistreated great power which has overcome its moment of weakness to dethrone the West is not a mere fabrication of an authoritarian leadership. Deeply entrenched at the societal level, it resonates with long-standing historical grievances and provides a range of normative resources for asserting the ethical and strategic justification of concrete foreign policy choices. The discourse of multipolarity is not considered here to be a causal determinant of specific foreign policy outcomes. Instead, I illustrate how foreign policy formulations and domestically constructed representations are constitutive of one another.¹⁸ While the multipolarity discourse serves as the starting point of the inquiry, it does not represent either objective reality or a platform for moral superiority. Without doubt, it functions as a powerful symbolic frame for the rationalisation of fiercely anti-liberal policy choices. But if we take seriously its normative underpinnings, the Russian position becomes less contradictory, although no less antagonistic, than commonly thought.

The article begins by revisiting the significance of the experience of anarchy and chaos in the 1990s, commonly known as *bespredel*, to Russia's constructed sense of betrayal by the West and impulse to take revenge for this degradation. Initially triggered by the eastward NATO enlargement process in the mid-1990s, to which Russia strongly objected, the peak of Moscow's diplomatic humiliation coincided with the NATO Kosovo campaign in 1999 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Domestically, Putin's 2000 election slogan of 'the dictatorship of law'¹⁹ heralded the comeback of the state as an agent responsible for restoring stability. At the intersection of domestic and foreign policy, many sympathetic academics endorsed the resurgent great power discourse and the political agenda of multipolarity as a potential counter to Western dominance.

Subsequently, I examine the impact of the multipolarity resistance discourse on Russia's stance in the R2P debate. Here, Brazil, China, India and South Africa tend to associate with the Russian normative agenda of curbing liberal norms and its claim to represent the unrepresented in the UN. The homogeneity of the group should not be taken for granted, however.²⁰ Russian commentators emphasise that Moscow is consolidating its existing great power status in contrast to rising powers which seek to acquire a higher rank.²¹ Brazil, China, India and South Africa avoid the characteristically outspoken Russian diplomatic stance—as illustrated by their abstention from the General Assembly vote on 27 March 2014 that declared the Crimean referendum invalid—which may indicate their attempt to avoid taking sides in the West-versus-Russia confrontation.

Finally, I look at the justifications around the Georgian war of 2008, the importance of the 2011 Libyan intervention for Russia's position on Syria, and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 to show how the evolving multipolarity discourse manifests in concrete cases. This is to contextualise the mixture of legally warranted self-defence and the protection of the Russian speakers in Georgia; the rage over the Libyan 'cheating'²² when international intervention resulted in regime change; the ensuing construction of the Russian diplomatic triumph in Syria; and the apparent shift away from an argumentation based on international law to justice-based legitimisations of the use of force.

Bespredel, betrayal, resistance

The 1990s are commonly seen as a time of ontological crisis²³ for post-USSR Russian society. The domestic discourse of that period, cast in terms of subjugation to the liberal world order, exposes the strong perception of Western complicity in the trauma of the 1990s. Two themes stand out. First is *bespredel*,²⁴ the lawlessness associated with the return to an almost pre-Hobbesian state in daily life where citizens were defenceless against criminals' impunity. 'The dictatorship of law', espoused by Putin's regime, is beyond doubt a political claim to have put an end to the domestic *bespredel* of the Yeltsin era. The rule of law is understood in this context to refer to the state's responsibility to provide order by direct rule, thus privileging order over individual rights and freedoms which, as the Foreign Minister Sergey Ivanov emphasises, lead 'to loss of orientation in the domestic and international politics'.²⁵

The second theme in the domestic discourse is the frustrated hope of 'catching up with the West': the abortive attempt to embrace democracy which was cut short by Western betrayal,²⁶ triggering resentment over forced dependency on the West.²⁷ Initially instigated by the NATO enlargement, Russia's sense of betrayal came into sharp relief in 1999 during the NATO campaign in Kosovo which was not mandated by a Security Council resolution. Yeltsin describes these events as 'the ground slipping beneath his and Russia's feet'.²⁸ The Kosovo crisis marked the breakdown of his political project to ensure domestic acceptance of Western dominance. The opposition, and subsequently Yeltsin's own selectorate, grabbed the opportunity to announce that the West had revealed its true face²⁹ and the rules established at the Cold War's end had unravelled.³⁰ Henceforth, at times of normative confrontation with the West, the insistence on international law as sole guarantor of the

world order has been a recurring theme. It serves to emphasise formal parity with the West vis-à-vis Russia's actual subordination, but also remains a tool of politico-normative struggle from within this position.

After the NATO operation, Igor Ivanov formulated what became a default Russian strategy, i.e. the objection to changing 'basic principles of international law' in order to replace them with the doctrines of 'limited sovereignty' and 'humanitarian intervention'.³¹ The opposition to regime change acquires a similarly moralistic tone: 'we cannot let hundreds of people die to control the words and actions of one man', as Yeltsin said about Milosevic.³² Taking sides, the argument goes, would cause inevitable suffering to the civilian populations of the unsupported side and the 'lawlessness will spawn more lawlessness'.³³ Thus priority needs to be given a priori to negotiation over partisanship because a non-local has limited knowledge.³⁴ This framing of neutrality clashes fundamentally with the liberal interventionist impulse. As bluntly put by Venediktov, such neutrality has one rule of thumb: 'let them smother each other because we do not know which one took out the knife. Then we'll see'.³⁵

The Kosovo campaign, while marking a low point in Russia's identification with the prevailing international order, also provided opportunities for symbolic retaliation against the West's perceived betrayal and self-assertion after a decade of submission. In March 1999, Prime Minister Evgeny Primakov, on his way to Washington for an official visit, turned his plane around over the Atlantic as an act of protest against the beginning of NATO's Kosovo campaign. After the campaign, during the night of 11 June 1999, the Russian peacekeepers from the NATO Stabilisation Force (SFOR) secretly rushed to Pristina airport to reach it before NATO forces. In the West, both gestures were condemned and ridiculed.³⁶ In Russia, the combined effect was a groundswell of defiant pride. Vladimir Lukin accurately represented the mainstream in his assertion that 'Russia cannot be treated like some lackey. We're partners, not lackeys'.³⁷

Sensitivity over status and resistance to norm imposition continues to define Russian statements on managing international crises. In 2007, Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference announced a turn towards an independent foreign policy with a distinct role for Russia: the stabilisation of the international system through a reaffirmation of international legal principles.³⁸ Interpreted in the West as mere diplomatic machismo, domestically it harkened back to the famous phrase of Russian statesman Alexander Gorchakov who stated after the Crimean war (1853–1856): 'Russia is not angry but it is refocusing'.³⁹ In the words of Sergey Lavrov, Russia 'has returned to the

world arena as a responsible state which can stand up for its citizens',⁴⁰ a task which is to be prioritised over the West's universal human rights.

Starting in the mid-1990s, Russia's political establishment began to develop the discourse of multipolarity as a counterweight to US unilateralism.⁴¹ First officially formulated by then Foreign Minister Primakov,⁴² the doctrine is currently being articulated by an assortment of experts⁴³ and facilitated by the Valdai Club whose official mission is to provide an international framework for leading experts to debate Russia's role in the world.⁴⁴ The Russian discourse of multipolarity⁴⁵ is a neo-realist interpretation of post-bipolar international relations based on the classical view of politics as an endless rivalry for influence.⁴⁶ It posits an emerging polycentric world where the US does not play a hegemonic role but the world system consists of a number of regional poles striving to maintain the balance of power.⁴⁷ Faithful to its US intellectual origins,⁴⁸ the discourse of multipolarity sees state sovereignty as the cornerstone of the international system and attempts to undermine it as disruptive of global order. The responsibility of the state extends to its duty of maintaining internal order and stability.

The Russian discourse of multipolarity does not dispute the classical neo-realist hypothesis that multipolar systems containing especially powerful states, potential hegemons, are the most dangerous (war-prone) systems of all.⁴⁹ Rather, it uses the metaphor of multipolarity, a notion of a distribution of power among significant poles that are able to disrupt major political arrangements, to procure a discourse of resistance towards 'the liberal anti-pluralism'.⁵⁰ The latter contests the idea that increasing interdependence in the globalising world leads to ideological homogeneity synonymous with liberal democracy. It thus objects to the liberal 'end of history' which assigned the role of loser to Moscow and its sociopolitical model.⁵¹ The ongoing politics of forceful democratisation, often justified in the name of humanitarian intervention, are seen in this context as a tool for gaining influence and of exclusion.

What prevents the transition to a truly multipolar world order, the argument goes, is the continuing hegemony of international norms generated during the short-lived 'unipolar moment', i.e. the US' uncontested dominance in global affairs immediately after the end of the Cold War.⁵² As they were created for the benefit of the Western leaders of the 'unipolar' system, these 'post-historic' norms limit the sovereignty of weaker actors.⁵³ Yet the currently dominant Western normative model runs into increasing conflict with the polycentric world under formation as the hegemonic norms show their underlying character amid instrumentalisation by new centres of power.

As is characteristic for a counter-hegemonic discourse, multipolarity contains both a claim to an objective depiction of reality, in this case supplied by the IR theory of structural realism, and a normative judgment and consequent political agenda for the future. As a political project, multipolarity seeks to expose the limitation of the liberal model as a theory and as political and cultural practice. The Russian position on international norms, which does include a responsibility to protect, derives from this programme. It describes 'humanitarian intervention' as contradictory to the UN Charter and its reformulation, the 'so-called responsibility to protect', as an object of international 'speculation'.⁵⁴ Cast this way, R2P is not just an ideological justification of political actions and the use of force against select countries. It also reveals a broader political agenda which moulds basic international norms to the liberal model and thus weakens international law which in its current conservative rendition does not envisage legal possibilities for intervention for reasons other than to maintain international security. The next sections look at recent manifestations of the multipolarity resistance discourse in connection with the claim to a responsibility to protect.

Responsibility and ideology

In Russia's engagement with R2P, legal justification serves to imbue the claim to responsibility with a moral right and duty to represent those unable to voice their concerns on the global stage. Despite the professed pragmatism in Russia's foreign policy, this re-grounding through law consolidated as Russia's ideology in international affairs, exposing a characteristic co-constitution of strategic and normative aspects. Lavrov urged the international community to establish 'the triumph of law [...] over the revolutionary mode of action', exemplified in Libya by the Western pursuit of regime change under the guise of humanitarian intervention. If Western states, he maintains, 'continue to be over-preoccupied with the rule-of-law within states, Russia and China have identical views on the need to uphold the rule of international law among states'.⁵⁵ To use its veto as a custodian of international law is then 'a responsibility vis-à-vis the UN Charter'⁵⁶ towards those who have no representation in the Security Council. Russia's Foreign Policy Concept spells out explicitly as unacceptable that:

[...] military interventions and other forms of external interference which undermine the foundations of international law based on the principle of

sovereign equality of states be carried out on the pretext of implementing the concept of 'responsibility to protect'.⁵⁷

But as seen from Moscow, 'somehow any intervention ends up in regime change by NATO'.⁵⁸ This reveals R2P to be linked to liberal democracy as the only solution for any problem of intra-state political order, and thus a cover for arbitrary regime change.⁵⁹ The anxiety of the current Russian regime, heightened by the recent 'spectre of the revolutions' (colour revolutions in the Eurasian region and the Arab Spring), is not sufficient to explain such sensitivity. The domestic discourse brings into play the Russian experience of regime change: it is not always from authoritarian to democratic and it may mean bread lines and hyperinflation.⁶⁰ Indeed, 'the biggest regime change on the planet' (the demise of the Soviet Union) was followed by pre-Hobbesian *bespredel* and 'sovereign democracy'.

In changing regimes by force and following intervention with lengthy prescriptive state-building, the West engages in a form of messianism which wreaks considerable havoc, begrudgingly admitted post facto but stubbornly absent from forward policy consideration. The Russian approach is instead 'limited', representing a particular neutrality without picking favourites since 'it may be that the government is right'.⁶¹ To be sure, and as the case of Russian mediation in the Syrian crisis demonstrates, this claim to neutrality is concomitantly a strategic attempt to outdo Western support for revolutionary action. The Russian permanent representative to the UN in New York, Vitaly Churkin, explained vetoing a resolution for intervention in Syria by resorting to the Russian 'political philosophy' which rejects confrontation and cannot agree with the 'unilateral, accusatory bent against Damascus'.⁶² Even if Moscow's claims of being the only power who met with all the parties to the conflict⁶³ are taken at face value, this type of neutrality has little in common with the liberal paradigm of humanitarian action.

In the UN context, Moscow claims to express general support for R2P while working to 'create safeguards, including international legal safeguards, to prevent obvious violations of the concept'.⁶⁴ How it does so reveals the normative saturation of strategic action, i.e. the co-constitution of strategic framing and identity effects. Three types of practices are most relevant here: questioning the status of R2P as a (legal) norm by emphasising the contestation of its third pillar, namely international intervention; the separation of human rights matters from the R2P dossier to curb the latter's 'creative proliferation', premised on the liberal notion of the individual as the referent object of security; and the promotion of regional international organisations as legitimate interveners in a multipolar world where

Russia seeks legitimisation for peacekeeping within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).

In the run-up to the 2005 World Summit, Russia's major concern was to devise criteria for the authorisation of the use of force by the UN Security Council.⁶⁵ In a General Assembly debate in 2005, it questioned the definition of 'responsibility to protect' as an 'emerging norm' and insisted that there is insufficiently wide support within the international community for such a norm.⁶⁶ In 2009, it proposed that the strategy for implementing R2P focus on working toward a broad recognition of the concept in well-defined terms.⁶⁷ Efforts to curtail the proliferation of R2P have focused on maintaining a certain distance between the emerging doctrine and discussions on human rights. Although Russia conceded in the 2005 statement that human rights violations other than genocide can be a legitimate cause for intervention by the international community, the 2009 and 2012 statements omit this admission.

In contrast with the liberal position, concerned fundamentally with the rule of law and human rights violations within states, Russia evokes a literal reading of paragraphs 138–139 of the World Summit outcome document to justify the commitment to sovereignty understood as state responsibility to provide security and order within its borders. The assistance of the international community in this task can only be auxiliary and subordinate to the principle of non-interference. This premise is neither automatically anti-humanitarian nor merely instrumental in Russia's normative confrontation with the West. It highlights instead the clash between the state-centred security discourse and the universalist liberal principles underpinning R2P's third pillar. Any twenty-first century humanitarian crisis exposes these tensions and in Russian practice the caution against the individual-centred rationalisation has tended to prevail. Illustratively, despite the initial rhetoric of protecting the Russian population of South Ossetia, the 2008 intervention in Georgia ultimately relied upon a self-defence justification, a standard resource in the state security repertoire. Importantly, even the initial explanations regarding the protection of Russian speakers focused on Russia's responsibility as a state (a regional 'pole') to defend compatriots rather than individuals facing repression.

Moscow has further campaigned for the increasing involvement of regional organisations in early warning as well as use of force under the UN Charter. One of the staunchest supporters of the Secretary-General's 2011 report on the role of regional organisations in implementing R2P,⁶⁸ the Kremlin argues in favour of the expertise and legitimacy that such actors provide. The Arab League support for the intervention in Libya

was therefore an important factor for Russia's decision not to block the resolution in the Security Council. Further, the support for regional organisations to act under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter illustrates Russia's desire for greater relevance of the so far dormant Russia-led CSTO, viewed with suspicion by Western governments. The multipolarity imaginary provides the context within which the campaign for greater regional hegemony may redress the imbalance of the current world order.

The UN forum thus serves as part of Russia's larger opposition to the expansion of Western liberal norms, which are seen to undermine the system of sovereign democracy within an emerging multipolar (or polycentric, as commonly used by Russian experts) world order. The specific contestation of the humanitarian interpretation of R2P represents a strategic manifestation of Russia's normative aims. Part of this agenda is a notion of responsibility to protect within a 'pole', for strategic and normative reasons. In the UN, this agenda also shows in Moscow's support for humanitarian resolutions that address crises outside of the Russian regional 'pole', resulting in Moscow's backing of mandates for recent and ongoing humanitarian interventions in Central and West Africa (Central African Republic, South Sudan and Mali). The next section looks briefly at the normative mismatches between the liberal universalist underpinnings of R2P and Russia's own understandings of responsibility which stem from the multipolarity discourse.

Resistance in practice

Georgia

Russia's mobilisation of responsibility to protect in its Georgian intervention in 2008 appears to be a transgression of the professed Russian position on military intervention. It thus invites an explanation in terms of the instrumentalisation of the humanitarian cause. Much of the analysis indeed emphasises hypocrisy and abuse in the Russian justification of the Georgian intervention,⁶⁹ referring in particular to Putin's statement after his return from South Ossetia in early August 2008 which included mentions of genocide against the local population. The normative mismatch that occurs here is in fact the extension of the liberal paradigm into the Russian discourse. The Russian use of humanitarian language was seen as R2P's 'third pillar' justification, i.e. acting on the responsibility of the international community to intervene, which was, however, performed unilaterally and out of particularistic interests. Yet Moscow's argument about

the protection of its citizens belonged to the state-centred paradigm of security.⁷⁰ Problematic as it is given the phenomenon of ‘passportisation’ in the region, the claim still reflects the idea that the responsibility to protect is a task of the state rather than the international community acting on liberal principles of human security in which the referent object of security is the individual regardless of their citizenship. Lavrov epitomises this approach in saying that:

*[...] according to our [Russian] Constitution there is also a responsibility to protect—the term which is very widely used in the UN when people see some trouble in Africa or in any remote part of other regions. But this is not Africa to us, this is next door. This is an area where Russian citizens live. So the Constitution of the Russian Federation, the laws of the Russian Federation make it absolutely unavoidable to us to exercise a responsibility to protect.*⁷¹

The instrumentality thesis which interprets Russia’s use of humanitarian language as abuse underestimates the normative structures of Russian authorities engaged in strategic interaction. It dismisses as manipulation the domestically held sentiment that the crisis was ‘painful to watch’ for the Russian public which ‘feels very close to the nations in the post-Soviet republics.’⁷² It also conceals the confusion among the establishment in wake of post-facto rationalisations.⁷³ Medvedev even made a slip of the tongue, calling the operation ‘ponuzhdenye k miru’, although such an expression does not exist (there is prinuzhdenye k miru—peace enforcement).⁷⁴ The ultimate procurement of the legal justification for action was however not random. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs decided to call it self-defence, in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter.⁷⁵ In the Russian discourse of resistance, the appeal to international law was still more important than references to the protection of compatriots, which would prove central in the annexation of Crimea.

Libya and Syria

The interrelated cases of Libya and Syria exhibit a number of practices particular to the Russian resistance discourse of multipolarity. In domestic politics, the Russian decision not to veto the Security Council resolution authorising military intervention in Libya (resolution 1973) was compared with ‘the 1999 turnaround over the Atlantic’, suggesting a radical change from the usual position towards international intervention for humanitarian purposes,⁷⁶ which never materialised. Putin reproached the then prime

minister Medvedev for Russia's complicity in the operation which he called 'a medieval call for a crusade',⁷⁷ and seized the occasion to contest the Western interpretation of humanitarian intervention, while emphasising the Russian responsibility to defend international law. As expected in Moscow, Libya confirmed the Western pattern which 'starts with a nice formula [no-fly zone] but in the end the leader is killed and the regime is changed'.⁷⁸

The exploitation of UN Security Council resolution 1973 by the US and NATO, who orchestrated the removal of Muammar Gaddafi's regime, gave Russia ample opportunity for ideological criticism.⁷⁹ It quickly protested against 'a twisted interpretation of the Security Council resolution'⁸⁰ and accused the West of hypocrisy and betrayal: NATO's supposedly civil-minded bombing brought about civilian losses and the Western declarations of stopping short of regime change proved hollow. Russian authorities were particularly troubled by how NATO appropriated the language of R2P to serve unilateral political purposes and raised concerns that 'the Libya model' would become part of subsequent NATO strategy, undermining 'the very foundation of the world order'.⁸¹ It was agreed in Moscow that 'the Libya model' should not be repeated in Syria.⁸² The alleged prevention of this scenario via Russian diplomatic channels held therefore as much symbolic as strategic importance. Unsurprisingly, Putin cited this rationale in his appeals to the value of international law,⁸³ which tends to be interpreted in Western analysis as dogged political support for the Assad government.

Within the multipolarity discourse these two are interlinked: the conservative rationale of international law is a political tool to maintain the regional balance of power. The toppling of the Assad regime would upset such a balance but the person of Assad is not important per se. Consistent with its anti-liberal approach, Moscow argued that the violent conflict should be treated not as a one-sided repression of innocent civilians but as a civil war.⁸⁴ The use of the civilian protection argument to rationalise forceful and direct intervention instead of negotiation ('the Libyan precedent') would equate to partisan intercession in a civil war. In contrast, Russia advertised its diplomatic efforts in the Syrian conflict as part of the UN mediation, and the Geneva Communiqué⁸⁵ became the centre of its investment.⁸⁶ The biggest boost to the Russian framing came in September 2013, when Putin capitalised on a possible gaffe by Kerry saying that the only way for Assad to avoid a strike was to turn over his entire chemical arsenal. Moscow proposed that Syria surrender its chemical weapons to an international commission headed by the UN, and Assad quickly agreed.⁸⁷

Crimea

The reasons given for the swift annexation of Crimea in March 2014 include the protection of the Russian speakers, as well as the strong historical and cultural ties to the peninsula.⁸⁸

The difference in the interpretation of protection is well captured by Michael Ignatieff who construed the Russian argumentation as an abuse of R2P since the doctrine presupposes universal protection of civilians regardless of nationality.⁸⁹ The Russian defence refers to the moral obligation of protecting compatriots on the territory of the former Soviet Union and prior to it the Russian empire.⁹⁰ This is a consistent rationalisation in Russia's resistance discourse of multipolarity which links the duty to contain Western hegemony with the state responsibility to protect. More particularly for the crisis around Crimea, the rhetoric shifts away from the focus on international law to arguments about justice.

In his speech to justify Russia's action on the peninsula, Putin introduces extra-legal arguments which hitherto had hardly been present in his discourse.⁹¹ This may indicate that Russian authorities now feel confident enough to move past the international law argument. Fyodor Lukyanov, the Chairman of the Russian Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, the editor-in-chief of *Russia in Global Affairs* magazine and a prominent member of the Valdai Club, represents a widely-held domestic opinion in saying that the Crimean referendum has put an end to the post-Soviet Union period. He characteristically describes that 'bygone' era as having 'buried the dreams of equal rapprochement and mutual ideological enrichment, and [given] the winning side the right to interpret human values and the rules of international relations at will'.⁹²

Whether in a more militant way as an announcement of the crushing defeat of the West,⁹³ or an opportunity to re-evaluate policy in the post-Soviet space in the pursuit of 'a fairer world order',⁹⁴ domestic representations of the Kremlin's action in Crimea demonstrate a normative confrontation that calls for a redress after 25 years of humiliation. The resistance discourse of multipolarity remains the core of this conservative opposition to the liberal Western dominance. While one may want to control for the impact of propaganda, the views of the citizens are not at odds with these representations. According to the independent Levada Centre's poll conducted between 21 and 24 March 2014, 'the Russians got offended at the West for Ukraine', with 61 per cent expressing hostility against the US and 53 per cent against the EU.⁹⁵

Conclusion

In order to explain the derivation and substance of Russia's position on R2P, this article eschewed the analytic scheme of a hypocritical or backward Russia. It also refrained from tracking to what extent Russia has advanced—or has failed to advance—from a traditional pluralist to a solidarist liberal ideology of international society, an analysis which would be in line with a progressive and linear understanding of norm evolution. Rather, the article has been guided by two other conceptual premises of analysis: the co-constitution of domestic representations and foreign policy choices, and the normative saturation of strategic action. The aim has been to make sense of the specific normative commitments that underpin Moscow's strategic contestations of R2P. This is contextualised by placing domestic representations of Russia's identity within a larger resistance discourse of multipolarity.

Formulated at the juncture of academia and policy beginning in the mid-1990s, the Russian multipolarity discourse employs the neo-realist theory of IR to promote a political agenda which contests the Western model of liberal normative order which is seen as having been imposed upon Russia in its moment of weakness. The normative substance embedded in this agenda has evolved, from a frustrated attempt to embrace Western norms after the demise of the Soviet Union which bred Russia's sentiment of betrayal, to a growing protest against the dominance of norms generated during the 'unilateral moment', to the explicit counter-hegemonic posturing that marks Russia's normative contestation today. This revisionist posture, which thrives on resentment, is an important product of the multipolarity discourse of resistance. Too often, however, it is reduced in political analysis to simply an outcome of pure instrumentalisation. In truth, the strategic and the normative cannot be so easily disentangled in Moscow's contestation of R2P.

In opposition to the liberal notion of a universal responsibility to protect any individual facing oppression, Moscow emphasises other principles: the responsibility of the state to protect its citizens, the responsibility of its position as permanent member of the Security Council to uphold international law, and the responsibility to represent the unrepresented. All these components have been problematised. The most controversial has been the practice of creating Russian citizens through 'passportisation' within the self-proclaimed Russian 'pole' and instrumentalisation of international law. Importantly, the Kremlin's practices of exercising its self-defined responsibilities do not follow a coherent agenda if judged in rational terms. Instead, they are a reflection of Russia's identity at the nexus of domestic representation and foreign policy and a manifestation of vital interests of the Kremlin.

Pursuit of this agenda conjures up the overarching duty that Russia bestows upon itself, namely the responsibility to contain Western hegemony. The rage which has recently accompanied this pursuit may win the support of some of the staunchest ideological opponents of the West in the Global South. But it can also challenge the claim that Russia serves as a responsible ‘pole’ in a genuinely polycentric world order. The opinion of the Chinese representative to the UN after the General Assembly vote on the validity of the Crimean referendum is illustrative: while he questioned the rationality of the vote and ultimately abstained from it, he also emphasised that ‘all parties should exercise restraint and [...] continue the efforts to iron out their differences through political and diplomatic means’.⁹⁶

As this discussion suggests, normative mismatches will continue to persist in norm contestation as they reveal deep-seated commitments which translate into concrete political practices. These tend to be discarded as strategic abuse by liberal advocates of R2P. Such statements are themselves displays of a particular political agenda which holds other interpretations to account derived from its very presuppositions but deems itself universal. As the Russian example illustrates, adopting such assumptions as an objective measure in scholarly debate conceals the inbuilt political leanings.

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Endnotes

1. In this article, I use ‘R2P’ when referring to the set of documents adopted at the UN level and ‘responsibility to protect’ in reference to Russian conceptions.
2. Russia did not vote against R2P in the abstract, in 2005 or 2009. In the 5th Committee of the General Assembly it also abstained.
3. See the contribution on the Brazilian approach to R2P in this issue.
4. Interview at the Permanent Mission of the Netherlands to the UN, New York, 22 May 2013. See the contribution on the US approach to R2P in this issue for comparison with the American reluctance to use R2P language.
5. Interview at the Permanent Mission of Italy to the UN, New York, 10 April 2013.
6. Interview at the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the UN, New York, 11 April 2013.
7. Interview at MGIMO, Moscow, 14 May 2013.

8. 'Sergey Lavrov on Philosophy of Russian Foreign Policy'. *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn'*, 22 March 2013. Available at: <http://interaffairs.ru/read.php?item=9274> [Accessed 21 May 2014].
9. Allison, *Russia, the West, and Military Intervention*, 208.
10. See Rieber, 'Persistent Factors in Russian Foreign Policy' for genealogy of the 'Russian menace' in Western analysis.
11. For use of the interpretive explanation in IR see Lynch, *Interpreting International Politics*.
12. Sherr, 'The Implications of the Russia-Georgia War', 205.
13. Zarokol, *After Defeat*.
14. Tsygankov, *Russia and the West*, 5, 51.
15. Makarychev and Morozov, 'Is "Non-Western Theory" Possible?'
16. Makarychev and Morozov, 'Multilateralism, Multipolarity, and Beyond'.
17. Kosachev, 'The Specifics of Russian Soft Power'.
18. Hansen, *Security as Practice*.
19. See Gel'man, 'The Dictatorship of Law in Russia'. See also a series on the Russian state NTV channel 'Cool 2000s—How Russia Broke Through the Miserable 90s' for a projection of the myth of the horrid Yeltsin's era and the breakthrough that Putin made by the tight control over the society. Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cE9kw05Ku_A [Accessed 21 May 2014].
20. See Rotmann, Kurtz and Brockmeier in this issue.
21. Shakleina, 'Russia in the New Distribution', 163.
22. Sergey Lavrov in Vladimir Solov'ev's show on Russija 1, 10 February 2013. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXL3FYBVr8o> [Accessed 21 May 2014].
23. Astrov and Morozova, 'Russia: Geopolitics from the Heartland'.
24. Prozorov, *The Ethics of Postcommunism*, 280. The term *bespredel* is applied here more in a historical sense which reflects its imprint on the emerging discourse of resistance in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Space does not allow for a discussion of the polysemic nature of the term. With the growing autocratic tendencies, in the course of the 2000s, *bespredel* no longer primarily applies to the instability of the 1990s and refers more to the lawlessness of the dominant practices of the Putin regime itself.
25. 'Sergey Lavrov on the Philosophy'.
26. On betrayal by the West in Western literature see for example, Service, *Russia: Experiment with a People*.
27. The period saw a particular revival of the term *obcom*. Derived from the OblastCOMmittee of the Communist Party, in the 1990s it came to denote dependency on the US, with Yeltsin and Kozyrev, his first foreign minister, labelled by the opposition as agents of the Washington *obcom*. Today, it is in circulation as a joking description of the Kremlin paranoia about Washington financing the opposition and the requirement for registering non-governmental organisations receiving external funding as 'foreign agents'.
28. Yeltsin, *Midnight Diaries*. After 10 years, the polls confirm that Russian public opinion has a negative attitude towards this military intervention and evaluates NATO's motives as suspect. See <http://www.newsinfo.ru/articles/2009-03-23/nato/539490/> [Accessed 21 May 2014]. Interpreting the results, one needs to take into account the influence of the anti-American and anti-Western propaganda around the Libya crisis.
29. Yeltsin, *Midnight Diaries*, 258.
30. *Ibid.*, 255. Compare with the words of Grachev who argued that NATO had bombed not only Milosevic but also the UN and post-Cold War Europe 'as an idea, as a political and civilisational project. Gorbachev's crystal dream of a "common European home" [has been] left in pieces'. Cited in: Averde, 'From Pristina to Tskhinvali', 575.
31. Igor Ivanov, 'Russia and Today's World'. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 20 January 2000.
32. Yeltsin, *Midnight Diaries*, 257.
33. Sergey Lavrov at the 3988th meeting of UNSC. See UNSC, 'Letter dated 24 March 1999'.
34. Interview at MGIMO, Moscow, 14 May 2013.
35. Radio Echo Moskv, 2 September 2013. Available at: <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/exit/1147856-echo/> [Accessed 21 May 2014].
36. Neumann and Pouliot, 'Untimely Russia', 134.
37. *Izvestia*, 15 June 1999.
38. 'Putin's speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy'. *Kremlin.ru*, 10 February 2007. Available at: http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912type82914type82917type84779_118123.shtml [Accessed 21 May 2014].
39. The telegram with the phrase was sent in August 1856 to all Russian embassies and representations abroad. It was a declaration of pursuing a more active role in international politics. See also interview with the head of Putin's administration Sergey Yastrzhembskiy. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 22 February 2007. Available at: <http://www.rg.ru/2007/02/22/yastrgmsky.html> [Accessed 21 May 2014].
40. Sergey Lavrov at the Foreign Ministry's MGIMO University, 1 September 2008. Note: unless otherwise indicated all public pronouncements, interviews and speeches of the Foreign Minister Lavrov are available on the website of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation under Documents and materials of

- the MFA http://www.mid.ru/bdomb/brp_4.nsf/english [Accessed 21 May 2014].
41. Tomas Kolesnichenko, 'Our Foreign Policy Cannot Be the Policy of a Second-Rate State-Primakov on NATO Relations, Multipolar World'. *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 17 December 1996.
 42. Evgeny Primakov, 'On the Horizon—A Multipolar World: International Relations on the Eve of the 21st Century'. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 22 October 1996.
 43. The names include Sergei Lavrov, Sergei Prikhodko, Aleksei Bogaturov, Vyacheslav Nikonov, Vyacheslav Inozemtsev and Sergei Karaganov.
 44. See <http://valdaiclub.com/about/>.
 45. For a detailed analysis of the discourse of multipolarity until 2003, see Kononenko, 'From Yugoslavia to Iraq'.
 46. Bordachev, 'Without Ideology or Order'.
 47. In one scenario of such a system, a 'pluralistic unipolarity', the unipolar centre is not one state, i.e. the US, but a group of responsible states, including Russia.
 48. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.
 49. Ibid.
 50. The concept comes from Simpson, *Great Powers and Outlaw States*.
 51. Lukyanov, 'Russian Dilemmas in a Multipolar World'.
 52. Krauthammer, 'The Unipolar Moment'.
 53. I follow an anonymous reviewer in the reconstruction of this feature of the multipolarity discourse.
 54. Lavrov's interview for *Mezhdunarodnaya zhizn*. Available at: <http://interaffairs.ru/read.php?item=8760> [Accessed 21 May 2014].
 55. Interview of Sergey Lavrov on Rossija 24 channel, 27 April 2012.
 56. Interview of Sergey Lavrov for the documentary film on Syria by Hubert Seipel for the German channel ARD, 13 February 2013.
 57. Point 31b of the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation approved by President of the Russian Federation on 12 February 2013. Russia thus protests against resolutions that would be turned into 'blanks' for military intervention 'in circumvention of the UN and the destabilisation of whole regions for the sake of a so-called regime change'. See Lavrov, 'The Foreign Policy Outcomes of 2005'.
 58. Interview at the Voice of Russia Radio, Moscow, 17 May 2013.
 59. Interview at MGIMO, Moscow, 14 May 2013.
 60. Interview at Centre for Political and International Studies, Moscow, 15 May 2013.
 61. Interview at MGIMO, Moscow, 14 May 2013.
 62. UNSC, 'Statement of Vitay Churkin', 3.
 63. Interview of Sergey Lavrov for TV channel, RTVI, Moscow, 9 April 2013.
 64. Interview at the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the UN, New York, 11 April 2013.
 65. Mikhail Kamynin, the Spokesman of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 12 September 2005.
 66. UNGA, 'Statement of Mr Denisov', 5.
 67. UNGA, 'Statement of the Russian Federation'.
 68. UN, 'The Role of Regional'.
 69. See Allison, 'Russia Resurgent?'; Allison, 'The Russian Case for Military Intervention in Georgia' for extensive discussion.
 70. The Law of 24 May 1999 on the state policy of the Russian Federation towards compatriots abroad which includes Russian citizens living abroad and former citizens, or descendants of citizens, of the Soviet Union, the Russian Republic and the Russian Empire.
 71. Interview of Sergey Lavrov to BBC, Moscow, 9 August 2008.
 72. Interview at Voice of Russia Radio, Moscow, 17 May 2013.
 73. Interview at Centre for Political and International Studies, Moscow, 15 May 2013.
 74. Interview at MGIMO, Moscow, 14 May 2013.
 75. Interview at Centre for Political and International Studies, Moscow, 15 May 2013.
 76. Radio Echo Moskvy, 'Rossijskij razvorot nad Liviej?', 28 March 2011. Transcript available at: http://ria.ru/history_comments/20110328/358592850 [Accessed 21 May 2014].
 77. 'Statement by Dmitry Medvedev on the situation in Libya'. *Kremlin.ru*, 21 March 2011. Available at: <http://eng.news.kremlin.ru/news/1933> [Accessed 21 May 2014].
 78. Interview at Centre for Political and International Studies, Moscow, 15 May 2013.
 79. Baev, 'Not Everything is Wrong'. As Churkin remarked earlier, 'the passion of some Council members for methods involving force prevailed'. UNSC, 'Security Council Approves'.
 80. Interview at the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, New York, 11 April 2013.
 81. MFA Spokesman Alexander Lukashevich, 12 Nov 2011.
 82. Interview of Dmitry Medvedev to *Financial Times*, 20 June 2011. Available at: <http://eng.news.kremlin.ru/news/2429> [Accessed 21 May 2014]. Interview of Sergey Lavrov for Bloomberg, 1 June 2011.
 83. Interview of Putin for Associated Press, 4 September 2013. Available at: <http://www.rg.ru/2013/09/04/intervue.html> [Accessed 21 May 2014].
 84. Baev, 'Not Everything is Wrong'.
 85. Action Group for Syria, Final Communiqué. Available at: <http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/>

- Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf [Accessed 21 May 2014].
86. UNSC, 'Statement of Sergey Lavrov'.
 87. The binding and enforceable SC resolution to eliminate Syria's stockpiles reflects what Russia had been advocating: the resolution does not fall under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which would allow it to be enforced by military action (if Assad fails to comply, then the issue will be referred back to the UN). There is no attribution of the blame for chemical attacks and no ICC referrals. UNSC, 'Resolution 2118'.
 88. See 'Putin's Speech on the Crimea'. Channel RT TV, 18 March 2014. Available at: <http://russian.rt.com/article/24532> [Accessed 21 May 2014].
 89. Ignatieff, 'Is the Age of Intervention Over?'.
 90. For an analysis see Menkiszak, 'The Putin Doctrine'.
 91. Ibid.
 92. Fyodor Lukyanov, 'Perestroika 2014'. *Gazeta.ru*, 16 March 2014. Available at: <http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/column/lukyanov/5952017.shtml> [Accessed 21 May 2014].
 93. Andranik Migranyan for the Valdai Club, 7 March 2014. Available at: http://valdaiclub.com/near_abroad/67280.html [Accessed 21 May 2014].
 94. Timofei Bordachev, 'Totalnaya, mirnaya, zatyazhnaya'. *Izvestia*, 6 March 2014.
 95. Poll available at: <http://www.levada.ru/02-04-2014/rossiyane-obidelis-na-zapad-iz-za-ukrainy> [Accessed 21 May 2014].
 96. 'UN General Assembly Adopts Resolution Affirming Ukraine's Territorial Integrity'. *Xinhua*, 28 March 2014. Available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2014-03/28/c_126325576.htm [Accessed 30 March 2014].
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