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Historical aspirations and the domestic politics of Russia's pursuit of international status

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ABSTRACT

What determined Russia's national interests and grand strategy in the first decade after the Cold War? This article uses aspirational constructivism, which combines social psychology with constructivism, to answer this question. Central to aspirational constructivism are the roles that the past self and in-groups, and their perceived effectiveness play in the selection of a national identity and the definition of national interests. This article explains why Russian political elites settled on a statist national identity that focused on retaining Russia's historical status as a Western great power and hegemon in the former Soviet Union and in engaging the country in bounded status competition with the United States.

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As the Cold War ended and Russia transitioned to post-communist rule, practitioners and scholars feared that this process would not occur peacefully. As early as 1992 and as late as 2005, Russians and Americans feared a "Weimar Russia" scenario, where, similar to the fifteen years of the German Weimar Republic, the weakness of democratic institutions would pave the way for *revanchist* nationalist control of Russia and a descent into war (Cheney, 1992; Kreisler, 1996; Radzikhovsky, 2005; Yanov, 1995). Concerns over the internal consequences of Russia's "humiliation" and "defeat" in the Cold War led to calls to sustain Russian democracy at all costs, and domestic and international concern over Russia's post-Soviet identity (Perry, 1998). At issue was whether Russia would accept its new, lesser position in the Western international order, a core concern given the centrality of status and satisfaction to theories of great power war, power transition, and the possibility of peaceful transformation of the international system (Wohlforth, 2009). The issue of state status and satisfaction is of ongoing importance today, given concerns about U.S. decline, the rise of China and India, and not least, Russia's revision of its border with Ukraine and support for rebels there.

Status and satisfaction, however, speak to a much broader debate in international relations theory about what states want. Over the course of Russia's long "revolutionary decade"—1991–2004—Russia remained unsatisfied with its new status, but its grand strategy took neither a revanchist nor an accommodating turn. Rather than accept its less powerful position, Russia became more aggressive and assertive as it weakened in the 1990s, even while it kept seeking partnership with the West. Russia swung from competition to cooperation, yielding constant concerns about a new Cold War with the West. So, what determines Russia's national interests and grand strategy during and after shifts in the distribution of material power? Answers to this question have immediate implications in other parts of the world, given power transitions underway in Asia and elsewhere.

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Rationalist approaches to international politics generally assume Russian interests are pre-determined, not amenable to change via social interaction, and will be pursued in a strategic manner; they are silent on the substance of those interests. Within realism, predictions differ, though there is a general assumption that status is a national interest. Defensive realists argue that Russia's decision to cooperate or compete would depend on whichever strategy maximized its security. Some expect that Russia would be rapidly socialized into the new distribution of power, and accept its second tier status (Waltz, 1979). Offensive realists expect Russia to maximize its power, which usually begets hostile competition (Mearsheimer, 2001). Other realists argue that great power wars are most likely when one side is unsatisfied with its status (Gilpin, 1981; Wohlforth, 2009). Other scholars and policymakers focus on domestic politics and a nationalist backlash as the primary cause for concern in times of power transition (Cheney, 1992). In line with realist predictions about shifting material capabilities, scholars and pundits in the early 1990s suggested that Russia would fight rather than cede its position in Europe and Eurasia (Mearsheimer, 1990).

Much constructivist international relations scholarship suggests that Russia's post-Soviet interests and its status hinge on its identity (Hopf, 2002; Larson and Shevchenko, 2003, 2010; Morozov, 2009; Neumann, 1996, 1999; Tsygankov, 2012). This article uses an approach — aspirational constructivism (Clunan, 2009) — that combines social psychology with constructivism to explain how Russia came to have these interests in bounded status competition. Aspirational constructivism uses social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1979) to argue that political elites are psychologically motivated to create national identities that promote collective self-esteem. These national self-images are psychologically based on political elites' collective historical aspirations and value rationality regarding their country's international status and domestic political purpose. Proponents promote national self-images through identity management strategies. These strategies range from assimilation into a desired ingroup, competition for social recognition from that ingroup, creatively inventing a new dimension on which one's status is superior to that of the desired ingroup (van Knippenberg, 1989). A national identity only becomes dominant if it passes tests of its “fitness”: Other political elites evaluate whether competing self-images and the identity management strategies used to fulfill them possess historical validity and can be effectively enacted under current conditions. If a candidate identity passes these elite fitness tests, it will define the country's national interest and shape its behavior with respect to international status.

Central to aspirational constructivism are the roles that the past self and in-groups play in the selection of a national identity and the definition of national interests. At the core of the argument is that the past national “self” forms a historical reference point in elite evaluations of current competing national self-images. Elite collective memories of the high and low points of the country's past create aspirations to replicate the best and avoid the worst in that history. These historical aspirations provide a benchmark of historical validity against which current national self-images are evaluated. Elites also establish certain countries as desired in-groups or as out-groups. These in-group and out-group identifications also serve to winnow the field of contending national self-images. A final test of fitness of a particular national self-image is whether it can be enacted in current conditions. This evaluation is based on the psychological need to verify one's identity in the circumstances one faces, what psychologists refer to as verification of the self in context. As such, elites rely not only on historical memory, but also on the perceived successes and failures of proponents of various national self-images in attempting to carry them out (Clunan, 2009, pp. 36–46).

This article explains why Russian political elites settled on a statist national identity that focused on retaining Russia's historical status as a Western great power and hegemon in the former Soviet Union in the turbulent decade after the Cold War's end. It complements the contribution of Larson and Shevchenko in this issue, as it explains the domestic origins and dominance of Vladimir Putin's status-driven national self-image that they detail. Elite aspirations to retain Russia's historical status led Russian political elites quickly to reject the initially dominant liberal internationalist national self-image and elevate to power a statist self-image advocated by the likes of Yevgenii Primakov and Putin. The majority of Russian elites, including statists, generally identified Russia as being part of the West. Russian foreign policy as a result shifted rapidly from following the West to competing for status with the United States within an overarching cooperative orientation towards the West. This article explains why the radical Westernizer self-image failed, and the statist self-image succeeded in passing elite fitness tests and the impact this had on Russia's post-Soviet foreign policy over the course of Russia's long revolutionary decade, 1991–2004.

The domestic politics of Russia's international status during the critically important period of 1991–1993 is the subject of the first section. The next two sections highlight how these early political struggles yielded a domestic political consensus on Russia's status aspirations. This consensus centered on the domestic legitimacy of Russia's hegemonic position and behavior in the former Soviet republics, and the illegitimacy of a status and of behavior that was subordinate to the West, particularly the United States. The next section turns to how this domestic aspirations regarding Russia's status shaped official definitions of the national interests over 1994–2004, while the penultimate section focuses on how the domestic consensus on Russia's status helped elevate and consolidate the statist national self-images of Yevgeny Primakov and later Vladimir Putin.

1. International status in Russia's domestic identity politics

The 1991–1993 period was a critical one in the domestic battle over of Russian national identity. Post-Soviet Russia began its existence with liberal internationalists dominating the new government. Many of the key politicians who occupied the senior posts in the newly minted Russian Federation's executive branch advocated this radical Westernizing national self-image (Arbatov, 1993; Checkel, 1992; Lukin, 1999; Rahr, 1992; Shlapentokh, 1998). They considered Russia's historical quest for great power status to be a root cause of its previous authoritarian regimes and suppression of its people. As such, they rejected efforts to uphold this status, as it would delay, even cripple, Russia's development as a Western market democracy.

Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev laid out the radical Westernizer identity management strategy of assimilation in 1992. National interests would be premised on “our internal transformation,” not on transforming global politics or pursuing great power status. He stated Russia's national interests as joining a Western path of political and economic development. “We want democracy and human rights – he declared – not a ‘humane socialism,’ a normal market without ‘socialist’ or any other reservations. This means that we, too, have finally chosen good health and prosperity. We want to return to a normal development cycle, which we dropped out for 70 years.” (A Transformed Russia in a New World, 1992, pp. 85–89; Kozyrev, 1991).

For liberal internationalists, the past held little of legitimate value because of Russia's autocratic traditions and the messianic and militaristic totalitarianism of Soviet rule. The nascent market democracy that was developing prior to the Bolshevik Revolution was seen as the main source of historical legitimacy, as it comported with the goal of becoming a “normal” – meaning Western – country that put the health and prosperity of its citizenry at the heart of the national interest. Communist messianism led to “expansion and reckless confrontation with the outside world” as well as the exhaustion of the economy (A Transformed Russia in a New World, 1992, pp. 85–89; Kozyrev, 1991). Russia now should reject that past and focus on its national interest of becoming a market democracy. Kozyrev and his domestic counterpart, acting Prime Minister Egor Gaidar, advocated a national self-image that stipulated unadulterated adoption of Western institutions and values and cooperation with the West. “We can unhesitatingly follow the same road” as the West, Kozyrev said (A Transformed Russia in a New World, 1992, pp. 85–89).

For Russian liberal internationalists, national self-esteem could only be enhanced by adopting the positive and distinctive features of Western countries and rejecting Russia's past and its great power aspirations because they were the source of its negative self-esteem. Once Russia became a member of the West, its greatness would stem from its ability to be a competitive market democracy, similar to Japan or Germany. Despite their initial dominance, these radical Westernizers failed to lock in their liberal internationalist national self-image as the foundation for Russia's new identity and its national interests. They soon succumbed to the historical aspirations for great power status that all other political elites held (Clunan, 2009, pp. 45–56).

The elite consensus that liberal internationalism failed to pass tests of historical fitness was forged in 1992 and 1993 out of the centrist and revanchist opposition to Kozyrev and Gaidar and the moderate Westernizer and statist critiques of their programs (Arbatov, 1993, p. 24). Such widespread criticism reflected a broad consensus on the perceived legitimacy of Russia's past international status and elite aspirations to retain it (Clunan, 2009, pp. 45–56).

The early demise of liberal internationalism was not inevitable. National-restorationist self-images were largely marginalized in 1991 and 1992 because of their association with the USSR and with the failed putsch against Gorbachev in August 1991. The coup attempt by Soviet hardliners served not only to further the disintegration of the Soviet Union but also briefly made critique of radical democratization and liberalization illegitimate, thereby providing a honeymoon for reformers (Lukin, 1999). Russian political elites were generally supportive of Yeltsin during this period. Based on a May 1993 elite survey, the All-Russia Center for the Study of Public Opinion (VTsIOM) found “support for market reform and the development of private property, [and] general support of President Yeltsin's policies.” Rather it was “specific criticisms of his foreign and domestic political activities” that served as the first of the tests of fitness that the liberal internationalists failed to pass (VTsIOM, 1994).

Nor could the liberal internationalists' fall be easily ascribed to a failure to respond to a worsening international environment or perceptions of a hostile West, as realism might expect. Russian political elites – with the exception of the conservatives and hardliners who had been marginalized by their support for the attempted August 1991 coup – did not perceive the West as a threat (Kullberg, 1993, p. 21). VTsIOM (1993, 1994) found that most Russian foreign policy elites in 1993 had positive attitudes toward the West and the United States; only 1 percent viewed the United States as “enemy number 1.” The same year, another poll of Russian political elites found that less than one in five political elites saw the United States as a threat. Political elites identified the primary external threat as coming from the Middle East, followed by the former Soviet republics and East Asia. Significantly, these results were replicated among military officers and members of the Communist Party. Moreover, three times as many elites thought that domestic rather than foreign problems were the primary threat Russia faced (Vox Populi, 1993). The overwhelming majority of elite respondents (86 percent) did not foresee an attack on Russia in the near future; of this number, over a third said there was no likelihood at all. Only one-tenth thought such an attack was likely (ibid., 1993). This view continued well into the post-Soviet period. Despite positive attitudes toward market democratic reform, Yeltsin, and the West and an unthreatening international environment, liberal internationalists were accused of betraying Russia's national interests in pursuing policies unbecoming to Russia's historical status (Karaganov, 1993; Kozhokin, 1992; Reddaway and Glinski, 2001). For many in the political elite, the liberal internationalist manner of radical Westernization meant denying and rejecting Russia's past strengths and abandoning its history as a great power, which involved the exercise of special rights and responsibilities in the former Soviet republics and Eurasia. By the spring of 1992, critics across the political spectrum had begun to attack liberal internationalist positions in foreign policy and radical market reforms on the domestic front.

2. The domestic validity of Russia's hegemonic status in the former Soviet Union

Policy toward the former Soviet republics emerged as one of two key tests of the historical fitness of liberal internationalism, the other being policy toward the West. Foreign Minister Kozyrev was criticized on all sides for being slow to realize that the former Soviet republics should be the top priority of the Russian Foreign Ministry, as they formed the historical basis for Russia's status as a great power and its distinctiveness as a Eurasian, rather than Western or Eastern, power. VTsIOM (1993) found that “on the whole, the foreign policy establishment is for the restoration of Russia's great power status via preserving her special place as a Eurasian power in the international relations system.” Liberal internationalists, particularly Foreign Minister Kozyrev, were accused of abandoning their “compatriots” when violence broke out in March 1992 between Russian speakers and the Moldovan authorities in Transdniestria and of doing nothing to stop the anti-Russian “apartheid” being institutionalized in Estonia and Latvia (Malcolm, 1994).

The key shift in political elite discourse away from liberal internationalism took place in April 1992, when State Chancellor Sergei Stankevich publicly broke with the Kozyrev-Gaidar line and joined national restorationists and statists in rejecting assimilation into the West as the proper national mission for Russia (RFE/RL, 1991).[2] In so doing, Stankevich launched the decade-long debate on what the “Russian idea” or Russian national identity was. Stankevich drew a firm line on Russian policy toward the FSU and criticized Kozyrev for being insufficiently “tough” on the “near abroad,” a term for the former Soviet republics that heretofore had been used only in national restorationist discourse (A Transformed Russia in a New World, 1992, p. 100). Stankevich clearly and starkly set Russia's historical role of dominating the former Soviet republics as the standard for judging the legitimacy of Russia's foreign policy and for defining its interests in the former Soviet Union (Stankevich, 1992).

Rather than accept the judgment of the West's superiority and the clear implication of Russian inferiority, Stankevich redefined Russia's Eurasian identity as positive and superior to that of the West. Furthermore, he linked that superiority to Russia's historical status as a global great power and multicultural empire, the very things that liberal internationalism had deemed to be negative. It was not enough for Russia to seek democratic modernization and assimilation into the Westernized global economy; its traditions demanded a more global and differentiated role and status. Stankevich's discursive turn reflected a different identity management strategy – one of social creativity – than liberal internationalism's strategy of complete assimilation into a superior West.

After Stankevich's break with liberal internationalism, the sources of Russia's positive distinctiveness—its collective self-esteem – became a central axis around which the political discourse revolved. The issue was whether, in becoming more Western, Russia would lose the positive features that had distinguished it from other countries: its great power status and special role in the Eurasian heartland. Stankevich and others suggested that being like the West was not a sufficient source of national self-esteem for Russia; given its notable history, national self-esteem required distinguishing Russia in positive ways from the West. Such a desire to distinguish oneself positively is a core expectation of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Stankevich's break with liberal internationalism prompted an eruption of public calls for a role that emphasized Russia's historical status and its difference from the West, and a reorientation away from liberal internationalism has followed (Bogaturov and Kozhokin, 1992; Goncharov, 1992; Malashenko, 1992; Simoniia, 1992; Vasil'ev, 1992).

3. The domestic illegitimacy of a status subordinate to the west

Policy toward the West proved a second key test of liberal internationalism's historical legitimacy for Russian political elites. Overall they did not favor a “return to confrontation” (VTsIOM, 1993, 1994). However, given their aspiration for international status, political elites soon found that following the West's lead was inappropriate at best and humiliating at worst (Karaganov, 1992; Sestanovich, 1994). The majority of the political elite opposed the second-class status entailed in the liberal internationalist self-image, as distinct from opposition to the West, or the United States per se (Malcolm, 1994, pp. 169–170). Regarded as consistent with the liberal internationalists' overtly pro-American foreign policy orientation, this second-class status led many in the political elite to distance themselves from pro-Western viewpoints. As moderate Karaganov (1993) stated

> A great deal of damage has been inflicted on the country (even if in an indirect sort of way) by the actions of our ultra-liberals. Their readiness to automatically take for granted the opinions of the Western partners [while] disregarding the deep psychological trauma and a sense of injury sustained by a majority of the members of the Russian elite, even though traditionally pro-Western, over the downfall of the USSR, has led to a deepening of a split in the views on our foreign policy. Worse still is the fact that the attraction of Western civilization as such has waned, even if partially.

The notion of Russia's “humiliation,” its illegitimate loss of its international status even though it had not been defeated in war, was a persistent theme in conservative statist, national-restorationist, and neo-communist discourse. While recognizing the continued importance of the United States to Russia, even moderates, such as Kozhokin (1992, pp. 41–42), charged that “in dealing with the United States, Russia finds itself more and more often in the humiliating role of a suppliant. We may be said to be asking the Americans to help us attain prosperity in return for following in the wake of their policy.” In its acceptance of a second-class status relative to the United States, liberal internationalism was failing on the grounds of historical aspirations to persuade Russian political elites that it sufficiently valued Russia's historical great power status and that it was capable of effective enactment of that status.

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[2] Stankevich was a very prominent democrat; he had been a leader of the Interregional Deputies' Group (IRDG) in the Soviet Supreme Soviet who had criticized Yeltsin for relying on Communist Party apparatchiks in his administration.

In contrast, Westernizers, especially liberal internationalists, compared post-Soviet Russia to postwar Germany and Japan, suggesting that as a defeated power it should recognize its guilt and repent in order to regain standing. In the liberal internationalist view, Russia's new status was not as a humiliated power but as a newly minted member of the democratic club that had to earn its stripes.[3] Kozyrev (A Transformed Russia in a New World, 1992, pp. 85–89) and other liberal internationalists (Zagorskii, 1993) pointed to the experience of Japan and Germany in an attempt to justify their claim that the universalism of market democracy was not just compatible with but necessary for national individualism and hence Russia's uniqueness. These efforts were unpersuasive to most Russian political elites, because, as Stankevich (1992) put it, a status for Russia comparable to Japan's was that of "the role of junior partner, which is not worth accepting." Such second-tier status in the international system was not worth having, as it did not conform to their aspirations for great power status on a par with the status Russia had enjoyed in the past.

Russia's status relative to the United States therefore became the most important criterion in defining the fitness of national self-images. This historical status related not only to Russia's material capabilities but also to its past efforts to carve out a model of development distinct from the West's. Moderate Kozhokin (1992) advocated statism as the historically legitimate national identity that recognized "the Eurasian essence of Russia as a definite civilizational phenomenon." This desire for an inherent and positive distinctiveness from the West, one that cast Russia as equal to the West in non-material as well as in material terms, pervaded elite discourse throughout the post-Soviet period. Such historical distinctiveness would allow Russia to be compared to the United States and the West as an equal, rather than as a pupil. Even moderate Westernizers criticized the liberal internationalist's stance on the legitimacy of Russia's past. While they believed that "there is no doubt about the wisdom of choosing in favor of the Western model of economic and political development," in their view, Russia's Soviet and tsarist history was not completely unusable (Arbatov, 1993, p. 11). In the eyes of Russian political elites, maintaining Russia's historical status was commonsense (Hopf, 2013).

The views of Russian political elites regarding the FSU and relations with the West from 1985 to 1993 provides compelling evidence that historical aspirations weighed heavily in weakening the perceived fitness of the liberal internationalist national self-image and shifting discourse toward statism and national restorationism. The major mistakes that the liberal internationalists and their New Thinking predecessors were accused of committing all related to the loss of Russia's historical status. According to VTsIOM (1993, p. 33) surveys, the two major groups of elite complaints regarded the loss of the former Soviet republics and subservience toward the United States. While neither anti-Western, nor anti-American: "the majority of members of the elite [wanted] Russia and the USA to be equal partners [*ravnopravnye partnyory*] in the future" (ibid.). Most of the political elite regretted the USSR's collapse, for which Boris Yeltsin and the liberal internationalists in his administration were widely blamed (VTsIOM, 1993, 1994, pp. 38–41).

Russian political elites themselves emphasized the importance of the past in forging the "patriotic consensus" around Russia's historical status as a great power. Observers and participants from across the political spectrum ascribed the dominance of great power thinking among political elites to the "trauma" of having lost their past status (Trenin, 1999), which led to a national "inferiority complex" (Karaganov, 1993). In arguing for Western understanding, liberals and moderates wrote of the Russian elite's need for "psychological adaptation" to their changed position on the world scene (Trenin, 1999).

4. The impact of status aspirations on official definitions of Russia's interests

By 1994, the liberal internationalists' national self-image had been discredited for: ignoring Russia's past greatness; undermining the power and prestige of the Russian state; and being incapable to achieve the due image abroad under existed Russian conditions. Most of the liberal internationalists had been removed from office and replaced with statists. In between the extremes of liberal internationalists and national-restorationists, the center became dominated by the consensual aspiration regarding Russia's international status as a great power and centrists and conservatives gained positions in government. Russian foreign and domestic policy shifted toward positions more in line with statist and national-restorationist self-images. Westernizers' voices became fewer, as "democratic forces became discredited, confused and split" (Arbatov, 1997a, pp. 143–144, 1997b, p. 80). A common-denominator consensus had emerged among the elite: Russia was a global great power and the rightful hegemon in the "post-Soviet space" (Holden, 1994; Prizel, 1998; Malinova, 2009).

From 1995 on, these common aspirations regarding Russia's international status were increasingly evident in official policy. Mindful of the upcoming presidential elections, Yeltsin sacked his unpopular liberal internationalist foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, in January 1996 and replaced him with a statist, Evgenii Primakov. Statists crowed at having brought about Kozyrev's downfall (Karaganov, 1996). While Yeltsin and his economic advisors continued to stress cooperation with the

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[3] Good examples of both views were voiced at a conference on Russian national identity I attended in 1997 at the Carnegie Center in Moscow. A member of the audience took the opportunity to vent his ire at Russia's "humiliation" at the hands of the West and the Russian liberals. A moment later, Fedor Shelov-Kovedyaev, a prominent member of Kozyrev's team, leaned over to me (a presumably sympathetic Westerner) and asked, "What humiliation? I don't think we have been humiliated, do you?"

West, Russian diplomacy stiffened on the Russian diaspora, Bosnia, NATO enlargement, and – especially after Primakov's appointment – international sanctions against Iraq, Cuba, Serbia, and Libya.

5. The fitness of statist national self-images in post-Soviet Russia

In contrast to radical Westernizers, those espousing statist national self-images advocated rebuilding Russia's identity and national esteem on the basis of its historical great power status and Russia's integration on that basis into the Western-dominated international polity and economy. They insisted on reinstating, or reimagining the criteria by which Russia's status in the world should be judged. Such reimagining constituted social creativity strategies, while the demands for social recognition of Russia's existing great power criteria fall under social competition strategies (van Knippenberg, 1989). Those employing social competition strategies regarding status would argue that their exclusion from or lesser status in a group was unjust, that they deserve inclusion or elevation to a higher position, and that the “Other's” elevated position should be decreased. Additionally, they emphasize that adjusting social recognition requires self-improvement (rather than competing in a zero-sum fashion for material resources), since their goals and those of the desired in-group are not seen as mutually exclusive. Russian statists, including Primakov and Putin, did not portray Russia and the United States or the West as having necessarily incompatible interests; rather, as both countries were great powers, they shared the same goal of preserving international order.

Foreign and then Prime Minister Primakov epitomized the great power aspiration, with his statist definition of Russia as global great power in a multipolar world (Primakov, 1996). Primakov's stature across party and ideological lines as well as his political survival and promotion after the fall of the Chernomyrdin government in March 1998, was both an indicator of elite aspirations regarding international status and the “lowest common denominator” aspect of his statism.[4] Primakov based his foreign policy on the premise that “Russia, despite present-day difficulties, was and remains a great power. Her policy in the outside world must correspond to this status” (Primakov, 1996). Russia's foreign policy orientation toward the West was to be based on “equality,” not on “a partnership where one leads and another is led,” as Primakov declared in his first appearance before the State Duma's International Affairs Committee (Official Kremlin International News Broadcast, 1996).

Primakov adopted a strategy of social creativity relative to the United States in order to gain domestic and international recognition of Russia's status. The national interest was defined as maintaining Russia's global status by repeatedly pointing out Russia's Eurasian geography and historical role in both Europe and Asia as a great power. Primakov sought to gain recognition mainly through symbolic assertions of Russia's status. He signed declarations with China about their joint commitment to a multipolar world and condemned U.S. unilateralism while doggedly pursuing Russia's “special relationship” with NATO and equal status in other Western institutions. The government repeatedly stressed its inclusion in the Western economic clubs (the London and Paris Clubs, in addition to the G-8) in an effort to prove to domestic critics that the other powers recognized Russia's great power status. Primakov and his successors continuously used the UN Security Council to remind the world of Russia's status as one of the five global powers with a veto (Primakov, 1996, 1997). Primakov's stance epitomized the political elite aspiration regarding great power status.

Primakov made his social creativity strategy of a “multipolar world” – in which Russia played the starring role as system stabilizer and upholder of international law – the calling card of Russian foreign policy. This was particularly so after the U.S. intervention in Serbia over Kosovo (Clunan, 2009, pp. 174–175). He depicted the United States, with its emphasis on humanitarian intervention, democracy promotion, and use of force without United Nations authorization, as acting in a manner unbefitting a great power, as it was not fulfilling its duty to stabilize world politics. Russia, in contrast, was acting as a status quo great power should, upholding international order and the established rules of a great power concert system (Primakov, 1997). To that end, Primakov declared a strategic partnership with China and generally pursued efforts to counteract perceived U.S. efforts to erode Russia's status. Primakov also made Russia's dominance in the former Soviet republics a key priority of foreign policy. Russia stepped up its opposition to NATO expansion and continued to pursue efforts to establish a privileged relationship with NATO.

Primakov's social creativity strategy received broad support across party and ideological lines, thanks to both elite aspirations regarding international status and the “lowest common denominator” aspect of his status-driven national self-image. He was essentially a man for all seasons, respected for his professionalism. For the conservatives, he represented the face of past Soviet power and prestige. For liberals and moderates, he offered the pragmatism and nonpartisan comportment that Kozyrev had lacked. Primakov was perceived as restoring Russia's dignity on the international stage, and his social creativity strategy therefore passed the elite test of historical fitness. His professionalism was a key factor in assessments of his ability to successfully enact the status-driven identity he supported (Cast and Burke, 2002; Oakes, 2002). As Arbatov (1997a, p. 144) phrased it, Primakov's cross-partisan appeal “testifies to the new minister's own professional prestige rather than to any emerging consensus on Russia's external relations.” The Russian elite was content to separate their criticisms of domestic policies from foreign policy so long as the latter was focused on the limited interest of great power status maintenance. Primakov did not specify concrete national interests other than this.

In practice, Primakov's policy meant a rejection of the overtly hostile ideological and material conflict of the Cold War in favor of competition to gain recognition of Russia's role as a global great power. As such, the main foreign policy disposition toward the West was a reflexive one of status competition, but within a framework of cooperation with the West. Russia was to attend to “all azimuths” of the world more on principle than for objective interests (Primakov, 1997). In many areas, this strategy impeded productive Russian cooperation with the West, as Russian officials reacted to perceived slights to Russia's prestige rather than acting on more realistic assessments of Russian capabilities and needs.

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[4] This observation is based on my discussions with Lilia Shevtsova and Dmitrii Trenin during my work at the Moscow Carnegie Center in 1998.

Pursuit of status as a great power required competition with the United States, while identification of Russia as part of the West mandated that such competition be bounded. This definition of the national interest – and Primakov's social creativity strategy – continued into the Putin administration. The primary difference between the Primakov and Putin years lay in the nature of competition, which shifted from symbolic to internal development, and in the level of official rhetoric, where the constant assertions of Russia's great power status and rights were somewhat reduced. In addition to Primakov's social creativity strategy, Putin sought to adopt a social competition strategy, one focused on Russia's internal development as the key to its global recognition.

Putin, on becoming prime minister in 1999 and then president in 2000, followed Primakov's lead in offering something for everyone, neither rejecting the West entirely nor denying the importance of Russia's past greatness. While the 2000 Foreign Policy Concept stressed pragmatism and an international role commensurate to Russia's diminished means, the broad outlines of Primakov's social creativity strategy continued under the new president (Stepanov and Iusin, 2000). Despite the widely touted “pragmatism” of Putin's foreign policy, it remained largely a reactive one, premised on recognition of Russia's proper place in the international system and also laced with latent resentment of the United States for not sufficiently recognizing that status. As one Russian analyst noted, Russia under Putin is still “covet[ed] respect” (Trenin, 2005).

Putin modified Primakov's social creativity strategy of a multipolar world to highlight Russia's “traditional” role as a joint stabilizer of the international system that, in Russian eyes, had placed Russia on a par with the United States during the Cold War. This theme appeared in Primakov's foreign policy as well but was especially evident in Putin's depiction after the attacks of September 11, 2001, of Russia's joint responsibility with the United States to rid the world of terrorism. As Putin (2002) declared

> Russia is one of the most reliable guarantors of international stability. It is Russia's principled position that has made it possible to form a strong anti-terrorist coalition… Our major goal in foreign policy is to ensure strategic stability in the world. To do this, we are participating in the creation of a new system of security, we maintain constant dialog with the United States, and work on changing the quality of our relations with NATO.

The desire here is to create a positive and distinctive role for Russia in which its status is equal to the United States, but using as a criterion the attributes of a truly responsible and reliable stabilizer of world politics rather than material capabilities. In contrast to the Soviet role in a “superpower condominium,” Russia's status is premised not on nuclear danger but on jointly fighting common threats from non-state actors and thereby providing international stability for the rest of the world.

The main difference between Primakov's and Putin's identity management strategies was that Putin more often argued that the basis for such respect could only come through modernizing the Russian economy and strengthening the Russian state. In Putin's statist national self-image, Russia's place was unquestionably among the advanced industrial countries of the West, but as a country that retained its own distinct historical traditions. Putin offered a historically legitimate hybrid of Russia's greatness with a Western emphasis on international economic standards. The result was statist developmentalism. Putin advocated an identity management strategy similar to Primakov's, but one focused on the criteria for inclusion not only in the great power club (Primakov's focus) but also in the Western global economy. His strategy incorporated Primakov's social creativity but grounded Russian identity in social competition in order to be recognized as both modern *and* great.

Despite Putin's orientation toward the West and his pragmatism, his “idea” for Russia rested squarely on what he termed “belief in Russia's greatness.” In emphasizing Russia's greatness, Putin was filling the psychological need to assert Russia's distinctiveness from other, lesser, European countries. In Putin's self-image the efforts to preserve Russia's distinctive traditions, while accepting elements of Western capitalism and the demand of Russia's assumption of its rightful place among the group of great powers and in the West, all while being not fully Western (Clunan, 2009).

Official foreign policy discourse until 2004 shifted away from Primakov's hostile rhetoric about countering U.S. power to strategic cooperation and efforts to facilitate Russia's economic development (Trenin, 2004; Trenin and Lo, 2005, p.18). Putin mollified domestic critics of this Western orientation with his strong statist position on restoring Russia's might, his skillful manipulation of national symbols, and, most fundamentally, his unequivocal stand on squelching the insurgency in Chechnya. While not everyone in political elite fully supported this change in foreign policy orientation, as Andrei Tsygankov persuasively argues, Putin moved away from merely asserting Russia's primacy – as Primakov had done – to actively building the basis for its international status (Tsygankov, 2005, p. 134). Putin insisted at the turn of the century that Russia's role in the world had to be based on its economic capabilities, not merely its military might and territorial expanse, a message that appealed to Westernizers and Western-oriented statists.

Putin appealed to both liberal and moderate Westernizers by declaring he would strengthen the state by encouraging state-led economic development conducted in cooperation with business and by liberalizing government regulation and reforming the judicial system. At the same time, Putin argued that the purpose of modernization was to maintain Russia as a great power, which earned him the backing of statists and national restorationists alike (Tsygankov, 2005, pp. 140–141; Trenin, 2004). In foreign policy matters, Putin distanced himself somewhat from the multipolar rhetoric of Primakov but sought to use Russia's energy and diplomatic resources to diversify and strengthen Russia's economy and international political influence. He cultivated friendly relations with the leaders of Germany, China, and the United States. Even before the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, Putin adopted a more conciliatory posture toward the United States. In contrast to previous Russian leaders, he reacted mildly to the 1999 and 2004 rounds of NATO expansion and U.S. determination to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty. Putin did not support, however, the U.S. war against Iraq in 2003 and threatened to veto any UN security resolution authorizing the use of force. After the war, the political elite praised Putin for carefully "stage-managing" the war with the United States and for raising Russia's status to that of "a privileged security partner of the mightiest state in the contemporary world" (Karaganov, 2005, p.30).

Russian-Western relations were not severely damaged until 2004, a consequence not of the Iraq War, as some Western realists (Ambrosio, 2005) claimed, but of the "color revolutions" in the former Soviet Union and the muted Western response to the terrorist attacks in Beslan, Russia, that led to the death of over 300 hostages, half of them children (Ryzhkov, 2004; Trenin, 2004, 2005, p. 5). Mutual recriminations over efforts to democratize the former Soviet republics mounted, and the West again criticized Russia over Chechnya and its move toward authoritarianism (Coalson, 2005 Yasmann, 2004a,b).

Putin's strategy of social creativity and social competition, following on that of Primakov, was well received by political elites. In 2001, 77 percent of Russian political elites believed that there had been positive changes in Russian foreign policy in the preceding decade. These changes were attributed to the periods when statists asserted Russia's great power status. Thirty-five percent of the political elite associated positive changes in Russian foreign policy with Putin's tenure as president, while only 16 percent associated them with the early Yeltsin years. Twenty-five percent attributed the change to Primakov's tenure (Gorshkov, 2001). A majority of the political elite agreed that Russian foreign policy corresponded more to its national interests and was more balanced with regard to East and West. This agreement bridged the divide between Westernizers and traditionalists favoring a Russian path of development, with more than half of the political elite accepting these propositions – although the portion of traditionalists adopting this view exceeded the share of Westernizers by 10 points. Sixty-six percent rejected the premise that Russian foreign policy had become more confrontational with regard to the West (ibid.).

The appeal of statist social competition and social creativity strategies becomes clearer in light of the finding that forty-six percent of Russian political elites believed that "there is no direct connection between a country's economic potential and its international position," believing instead that it is related to military might, culture and educational levels (Schulze, 2001, pp. 25–26). Such views sharply contrast with Western views about the centrality of economic development to international political influence. They do however correspond with social psychological expectations regarding the use of social creativity and competition strategies to enhance self-esteem. This positive assessment appeared to stem more from elite testing of the fitness of Putin's and Primakov's diplomacy and use of available resources to uphold Russia's status than from a material change in Russia's international position. When asked what resources were available for strengthening Russia's international position, the political elite most often chose the "new, more flexible and pragmatic style of Russian foreign policy," which narrowly edged out "more meaningful use of the natural resource potential of the country" (Schulze, 2001, p. 27).

6. Conclusion

Russia's national interests have not been defined on the basis of conventional cost–benefit assessments, perceptions of material threat, or the identities projected onto Russia by other countries. Aspirations to regain the international great power status that Russians believe their country enjoyed during the tsarist and Soviet past were critical to the creation of its present national identity and national security interests. As early as 1993, Russia's elite converged around a status-driven statist national self-image that generated diffuse national interests in *social*, rather than material, competition for global status, primarily with the United States. The rise of Vladimir Putin to the presidency did not bring a radical shift in Russia's definition of its national identity or national interests. Rather Putin reflected and entrenched the elite's consensus that Russia's identity was that of a global great power and that the state's strength and modernity are the core methods to attain the country's interests. At the same time, elite identification with the West oriented Russian leaders towards joining the West, and prevented an overtly hostile status-driven foreign policy. Dire predictions of aggressive and risky Russian behavior were not fulfilled during the first post-Soviet decade, suggesting the importance of understanding the role international social status plays in shaping states' behavior. Central to this absence of aggression was the lack of perceived direct threat to Russia's historical status in the former Soviet Union. Once that status was seen as directly challenged, beginning in 2004 with the "colored revolutions" and continuing through the 2013–2014 crisis over Ukraine's association agreement with the European Union, Russia's behavior changed. Responses included Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, annexation of Crimea and armed intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2014.

The question of whether states are driven to compete for international status or prestige has important real-world implications. This article has highlighted the importance of elite aspirations to restore Russia's historical great power status to the definition of its post-Soviet national self-images and national interests. Such aspirations stoked fears that Russia would take a revanchist tack in its relations with the outside world. Russian policymakers' constant proclamations of its great power status and its efforts to keep its status on a par with the United States suggested Russia was embarked on a confrontational course with the United States. This prompted repeated talk about "a return to the Cold War." Drawing on recent research in social psychology, this article suggests, however, that such declarations may well be directed primarily to a domestic audience, as they are efforts to enhance Russians' own sense of their country's self-worth – unless elites perceive a direct threat to the survival of their country's historical status (Brewer, 1999, 2007). Policymakers need to look beyond the surface of such proclamations and behavior if they are to avoid misperceiving the sources and reasons for a country's pursuit of international status – in this case, Russia's.

Promoting Russia's resurgence as a great power within the existing international order has been the domestically legitimate identity management strategy when Russia was weak, as it was throughout the 1990s, and as it grew stronger thereafter. Russian political elites reject rapid and total Westernization and following a pro-Western line in foreign policy as unbefitting Russia's greatness, even though most are positively inclined toward the West. For Western decision-makers, the primary problem is that Russian political elites want to participate in the contemporary, Western-dominated international society, but they view this society through a nineteenth-century lens rather than one that takes into account the impact that democratization, economic liberalization, increasing interdependence, globalization, and softened sovereignty are having on that society. Russian political elites view the countries of the former Soviet Union through this nineteenth century lens, as the part of the historical basis of Russia's great power status and unique Eurasian form of development. Western encroachments in this region are equated with loss of Russia's historical status and therefore threaten national self-esteem. It is not surprising, from this perspective, that Russian policymakers would risk its relations with the West over countries that are considered core to its identity as a great power, as it has done in its war with Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014. It is in the former Soviet Union, therefore, that Russia is most likely to compete with the West, and it is the only region where genuine confrontation is likely. Such competition is unlikely to reach levels approaching that of the Cold War, as the Russian political elites seek entry into the Western political order rather than replacing it with their own. However, Western policymakers should expect Russian leaders to continue to make pronouncements about and take action to preserve Russia's historical rights as a great power in the former Soviet Union.

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