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Russia and the diffusion of political norms: the perfect rival?

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ABSTRACT

Russian norm diffusion has been studied mainly as the mirror image of the EU's, but deserves to be studied in its own right and complexity. Three core categories of political norms are explored: sovereign choice, regime and conservative ideas. It is argued that Russia does not promote a coherent political model, by lack of one, but rather diffuses a disparate set of conservative ideas and non-democratic practices. Russia's normative positioning is equivocal. It champions established international norms like sovereignty, placing itself within the dominant normative community, but contesting the application by the West. When it comes to certain liberal political norms (often reduced to a strawman version), it questions their validity and rejects them, placing itself outside the dominant normative community, but claiming to defend "genuine" European values. This makes Russia an ambiguous norm contestator, rather than the perfect normative rival of the EU. The complexity of its norm contestation follows from exogenous motives: it is predominantly an anti-hegemonic reaction against what it perceives as the Western imposition of norms, harming vital Russian interests.

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Introduction

The diffusion of norms¹ by Russia has been both over-researched and under-researched. It has been over-researched in the sense that a lot of literature is devoted to the norms the Russian Federation is assumed to stand for: sovereign democracy, authoritarianism, illiberalism, conservatism, civilizational thinking. It has been under-researched in the sense that there are very few systematic studies of the diffusion of these norms and their effective adoption. With researchers getting increasingly interested in competition over the neighbourhood, Russian norm diffusion received mounting attention, but was studied mainly as the mirror image of EU norm diffusion.

As a result, many questions need to be answered in the study of Russia's promotion of political norms. What does Russia promote? How is this linked to its own domestic system? Who are the bearers of these norms? How does Russia position itself vis-à-vis

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the EU or Euro-Atlantic normative community? How does it promote and diffuse norms? What do they aim to achieve? What do they effectively achieve? It goes without saying that these are far too many questions to answer here. This article seeks to make a contribution primarily by exploring which political norms Russia diffuses in its external relations and what this means for its supposed role of norm contestator. It thereby revisits the literature on Russian foreign policy and norms against the background of theoretical literature on norm diffusion and contestation. Three relevant categories of political norms are detected: the sovereign right to choose; regime type; conservative ideas. The distinction between these three categories is essential to understand Russia's complex role as norm diffuser and contestator.

The article is rooted in the claim that Russian norm diffusion needs to be studied in its own right, in its specificity and complexity. This claim will be supported by different arguments. First, it will be argued that Russia's norm diffusion has too often been approached as the simple mirror image of the EU's or Western norm diffusion, in particular in the field of regime promotion. Second, a congruence between Russia's domestic model and the norms it promotes cannot be a priori assumed. Third, Moscow does not offer a coherent, systematic alternative, but its norm diffusion is characterized by a patchwork of ideological and particularistic ideas and driven by state and non-state actors. Finally, it will be argued that to understand Russian norm promotion and diffusion, it is key to understand its anti-hegemonic positioning vis-à-vis what Russian leaders called a liberal "elite club".

In order to make the points mentioned, this article will first develop the idea of norm contestation and roles theoretically. After that it will answer the question which political norms Moscow diffuses. The subsequent section makes some tentative statements about the instruments of Russian norm diffusion. All this paves the way for a balanced attempt to situate Russia on the spectrum of norm dynamics roles, distinguished in the theoretical section. Finally, the article concludes with reflections on the anti-hegemonic motives behind Russia's promotion of political norms.

Norm contestation: a theoretical note

Beyond contestation as mirror image

The days of the EU's regional "normative hegemony"² have passed. In particular in the 1990s, in the aftermath of the collapse of communism and with a long waiting list of applicant countries, the EU was regarded by many countries in Central and Eastern Europe as the model to follow. The norms it promoted rested on broad consent and even an appearance of universality. Its leading role appeared as natural and uncontested. This changed when some countries, Russia in particular, started questioning this leadership, rejecting the right of the EU to impose its norms on others. This became particularly clear with the launching of the term "sovereign democracy", emphasizing Russia's right to choose its own path to democracy. With the declining willingness, inside and outside Europe, to take the EU's norms for granted, the interest of researchers in norm contestation grew.

As the interest came in the first place from researchers who had been studying EU norm diffusion, research on norm contestation was often undertaken from an EU-centric perspective. Many authors approached the norms Moscow rejects or defends with the EU or "the West" as point of reference and as a reaction against them. Russian norm promotion then regularly appears as the mirror image of Western

norm diffusion.³ Since the EU promotes democracy, Russia is seen as diffusing authoritarianism. Since the EU exports its own political “model”, Russia is assumed to do the same. Yet, this approach raises some issues. First of all, authoritarianism is a very broad concept. If it is the antonym of (liberal) democracy, it stands for a wide range of very different regime types and varied instruments of suppressing rights and liberties.⁴ When it is suggested that Moscow is exporting authoritarianism, it at least needs to be explained which norms exactly it is diffusing. Secondly, various authors have assumed that Russia is simply exporting its own (authoritarian) political model.⁵ The mere assumption of congruence between the domestic political model and the norms exported is again transplanted from the study of EU norm diffusion. It reflects the idea behind the influential Normative Power Europe concept of Ian Manners, whereby the EU’s political form (and normative nature) “predisposes it to act in a normative way” in international relations.⁶ In the case of Russia, this is not per definition the case. Most fundamentally, the question can be raised whether Russia has a clear political model of its own. It has been labelled in the most diverse ways, for example as managed democracy, competitive authoritarian system,⁷ dual state,⁸ heterarchy,⁹ neo-patrimonial system¹⁰ or even simply reduced to *sui generis* “Putinism”.¹¹ Pavlovsky argues that

despite his image as an all-powerful tsar, Putin has never managed to build a bureaucratically successful authoritarian state. Instead, he has merely crafted his own version of *sistema*, a complex practice of decision-making and power management that has long defined Russian politics and society and that will outlast Putin himself.¹²

He argues that the “governance style relies on indirection and interpretation rather than command and control”.¹³ These types of conceptualizations raise serious doubts on whether Russia has a specific model, let alone one that is exportable. Any research thus needs to clarify which norms Russia seeks to diffuse and study these norms in their own right.

Norm contestation

To grasp Russia’s norm diffusion and contestation,¹⁴ we need to understand what forms norm contestation can take and what roles can be distinguished when it comes to defending or contesting norms.¹⁵ The focus is hereby specifically on contestation by state representatives, in this case of Russia, challenging “robust” norms in their foreign policy discourse.¹⁶ Deitelhoff and Zimmermann speak of “norm robustness” when a norm is widely accepted and when it guides actions.¹⁷

From the norms dynamic literature, we retain two useful distinctions between types of norm contestation. First, the contestation of norms *within* a normative community needs to be distinguished from contestation *between* normative communities.¹⁸ The latter are often characterized by asymmetrical relations, whereby the more powerful community seeks to diffuse its norms to other communities. Second, a distinction can be made between “applicatory” contestation and contesting the “validity” of a norm.¹⁹ Applicatory contestation refers to contesting when and how to apply a norm. As it does not contest the norm itself, it usually strengthens the norm. Validity contestation questions the righteousness of the norm itself. As a result, it challenges the core of the norm and tends to weaken its robustness. As discussed below, today Russia undoubtedly positions itself in a different normative community when it rejects certain political liberal norms, while interestingly it often does so on the basis of the claim that

it defends “genuine” European norms (understood as a selected set of conservative norms). In other cases, concerning norms of public international law, it mainly questions the application of norms by the West.

Related to this, distinctions can be made between types of actors, according to their different intentions towards the dominant norms. Are the norm contesters simply resisting norms or are they actively presenting an alternative set of norms, thus performing the role of “rival entrepreneur”²⁰? Bloomfield presents a norm dynamics role spectrum, revealing different attitudes vis-à-vis status quo norms: “Pure norm entrepreneurs” and “competitor entrepreneurs” intend to challenge the status quo norms.²¹ They belong to a different normative community but disagree among themselves on the scope and content of the new norms. On the other side of the spectrum, “pure norm antipreneurs” and “creative resisters” are part of the same status quo normative community, intending to defend the status quo norms, but the latter accept some degree of change. In the case of Russia, it can be argued that – at least in some respects – it moved from “creative resister” within a Western normative community (thus defending the Western political norms, but seeking some adaptation of those norms) to a role outside this community, explicitly rejecting these norms.²² Whether it is a “competitor entrepreneur” or a “pure norm entrepreneur” needs to be established further in this article and will require a nuanced answer.

Which norms?

Which political norms is Russia diffusing in its foreign policy? Three categories are distinguished in this article: norms related to the sovereign right of countries to make their own choices; to regime type; and conservative ideas. It goes without saying that these three categories are interconnected and partly overlap.

Before exploring these three categories, a few words need to be added about the sources of norm diffusion and the channels through which they are communicated. Inevitably the norms diffused result from a complex aggregation of views held by various domestic elite groups. Since this article deals with norm diffusion across the borders, the internal forces of Russian foreign policy matter most. Romanova distinguishes state institutions, parties, the business world, civil society and epistemic communities.²³ She underlines the relative coherence among these forces when it comes to their view of the liberal order: “Attempts to present an alternative view remain timid and are limited to the non-systemic opposition and a narrow part of the epistemic community”.²⁴ Moreover, norm promotion happens to a great extent through streamlined official narratives (for example on “sovereign democracy” or the West’s imposition of norms). These are voiced primarily by the two main foreign policy actors: president Putin and minister of foreign affairs Lavrov. They also feature in key documents, like the Foreign Policy Concept.²⁵ It is this discourse that leads the following analysis, while the subsequent section will reflect on channels of norm diffusion. Where relevant, more specific sources of certain norms will be indicated.

Sovereign right of choice

A first category of norms which are crucial to understand Russia’s role are those related to sovereignty and non-interference. This approach fits within the influential “statist”

foreign policy school in Russia. This tradition puts the emphasis on power, stability and sovereignty as prerequisites for the state's ability to govern.²⁶ The most assertively proclaimed norm today is the sovereign right of countries to make their own choices.²⁷ There are ample references in the official discourse to the EU and the West imposing their will. Putin spoke about the imposition of a "unilateral Diktat".²⁸ Foreign minister Lavrov referred to the extension of the liberal world order "as an instrument for ensuring the growth of an elite club of countries and its domination over everyone else".²⁹ Also the Foreign Policy Concepts state the goal of "respecting national and historic peculiarities of each State in the process of democratic transformations without imposing borrowed value systems on anyone".³⁰ Clearly, Moscow's reading is that EU norm diffusion serves the purpose of power and the creation of spheres of influence. It is in the first place this element they have started to resist actively. The concept of "sovereign democracy" launched in 2005 illustrates this well. This term, introduced by Surkov,³¹ was expressed in Putin's State of the Union during that same year:

Russia is a country that has chosen democracy through the will of its own people. It chose this road of its own accord and it will decide itself how best to ensure that the principles of freedom and democracy are realised here, taking into account our historic, geopolitical and other particularities and respecting all fundamental democratic norms. As a sovereign nation, Russia can and will decide for itself the timeframe and conditions for its progress along this road.³²

Within Russia "the ideas underpinning the concept of 'sovereign democracy' have taken root in mainstream foreign policy narrative".³³ Formulations have changed since its launch, but the idea of sovereign choice has been extended to different domains, such as the economic and cultural spheres.³⁴

Regime promotion

A second category consists of the norms related to regime promotion. Because of the assumption that they form the mirror image of EU democracy promotion, this category has received broad attention. There is disagreement about the question whether Russia promotes a regime or not. Some authors have simply put Russia in the role of an inhibitor of Western democracy promotion in the post-Soviet space. Tolstrup, for example, argued that Russia is a "negative external actor" "because it actively weakens the liberal performance of its neighbours".³⁵ In a similar way, Natilizia sees Russia as a "black knight", seeking to thwart democracy and to weaken democratic forces.³⁶ Ambrosio referred to "authoritarian resistance" to regional democratic trends, based on strategies of insulating (preventing foreign NGOs from opposing the regime), bolstering (supporting authoritarianism) and subverting democratic trends.³⁷ Yet, the question remains whether Russia weakens democratization efforts because it opposes democracy and wants to promote an alternative regime or rather because it is concerned about instability and seeks to weaken regimes unfriendly to Moscow.³⁸ This would make loyalty the determining factor, rather than intrinsic concerns about the regime type.

Many authors have argued that non-democratic powers are not per definition autocracy supporters.³⁹ In a general study, Bank argues that authoritarian diffusion is mainly pragmatic and interest based, except when it is backed up by a missionary ideology, as was the case for communist regimes.⁴⁰ In the absence of that, the diffusion of an authoritarian ideology tends to have limited appeal. Weyland reaches a similar conclusion and speaks of "immunisation" against Western democracy

promotion.⁴¹ When regime survival is at stake, non-democratic regimes will opt for “targeted, calculated collaboration and instrumental learning” and seek to reinforce their regional influence.⁴² For Russia specifically, Babayan argues that Russia is not engaged in autocracy promotion because of a lack of ideological underpinning.⁴³ Only when it considers strategic interests threatened, will it resort to military or economic threats and incentives “to make the compliance with Western policies less preferable”.⁴⁴ Also Way finds little support for the thesis that Russia is making the post-Soviet space less democratic. Moreover, he points at Moscow’s inconsistency in support for autocracy.⁴⁵ Evidence suggests that if Russia engages in regime promotion or democratization inhibition, it does so in a differentiated way in the post-Soviet space. It certainly has not resisted democratization over the entire line. In the case of the “velvet revolution” and regime change in Armenia in 2018, for example, Russia did not oppose democratization.

As mentioned above, Russia lacks a clear exportable political model. It can therefore not be seen as promoting a particular regime type, but rather as diffusing disparate ideas about governance and selectively legitimizing non-democratic practices.

Conservative ideas

If Russia does not have a coherent regime model to export, how about the diffusion of conservative ideas? According to Chebankova, Russian conservatism presents a “distinct value package”, which may serve as an alternative for the West.⁴⁶ Within Russian conservatism she distinguishes between ideational and positionist perspectives. The former is a reaction against globalization and post-modernity by a return to values of modernity: family, patriotism, national bourgeoisie. The positionist perspective is similar to Western conservatism. It puts a central emphasis on strong statehood, multipolar international relations, and the plurality of cultures. It is strongly tradition oriented. According to Chebankova this positionist perspective has the strongest influence on Russian domestic and foreign policy.⁴⁷ Yet, she refers to this as “a position”, rather than an articulated society project. Therefore we cannot speak about the diffusion of a coherent conservative ideology, but rather of diffuse conservative ideas.

Laruelle refers to the influence of the school of “young conservatives” (*mladokonservatory*), who have embraced an illiberal agenda. Some of their ideas on rebranding Russia as an international conservative power, voiced among others by Boris Mezhuyev, have found their way into the Kremlin.⁴⁸ For this school “illiberalism is no backward-looking ideology but rather an engine of revolutionary dynamism, uniquely capable of powering rebellion against the global liberal status quo”.⁴⁹ According to Morozov, “paleoconservatives” (*starokonservatory*) have replaced moderate conservatives and have dominated the political landscape since 2012.⁵⁰ They stand for an “explicit rejection of modernity as detrimental to tradition and organic spirituality”.⁵¹ In contrast to their moderate predecessors, who complained about unequal treatment by the EU, “today’s paleoconservatives have embraced the image of Russia as a traditionalist sovereign power and, in that sense, the opposite of Europe with its moral decadence and helplessness in the face of repeated crises”.⁵² Russia is presented as the defender of the genuine values of Europe. This fits within the idea of a binary between “true” and “false Europe”, whereby Russia stands for true Europe and Western Europe represents the false, Americanized Europe.⁵³ It fits within the

broader civilizational thinking, often drawing on the heritage of Vadim Tsymbursky, which has strong appeal in Russian debates and resonates with some Huntingtonian ideas.⁵⁴ This thinking rejects the universalism of Western values.

An issue of confusion is who the bearers and diffusers of conservative ideas are. Literature in this field often refers to both intellectuals and politicians. But it is unclear whether these intellectuals influence certain elite circles or the entire state apparatus. A classic example is that of Aleksandr Dugin, who appears in a lot of literature on Russian conservatism,⁵⁵ but was at some point erroneously presented as Putin's advisor or inspirer. When it comes to their translation into the official political agenda, the conservative ideas are often formulated in vague terms only, with vague references to family, fatherland or spirituality. Foreign Minister Lavrov, for example, stated that "human solidarity must have a moral basis formed by traditional values that are largely shared by the world's leading religions".⁵⁶

Robinson sees official conservatism as one strand of conservatism, putting the emphasis on traditional values, borrowing elements from Orthodox and civilizational conservatism, but overall more moderate and pragmatic.⁵⁷ Also according to Laruelle, the Putin regime still represents "a moderate, centrist conservatism", but faces challenges either "to ally with or marginalize more radical voices."⁵⁸ Russian conservatism has a long tradition and was "co-opted" by the Russian regime, that engaged into an "étatization of preexisting illiberal beliefs and attitudes. In embracing these beliefs, the state has been not so much carrying out a deliberate strategy as adjusting to a reality that has grown less and less favorable to the ruling elites".⁵⁹ Morozov, on the other hand, speaks of "Putinite paleoconservatism", celebrating difference and mutual exclusion between Russia and the West.⁶⁰ Putin has referred to Western post-modern values being out of step with the conservative views of the Russian "moral majority", in particular when it comes to "stable identities" such as gender, family or nation.⁶¹ Paleoconservative ideas are closely linked to ideas of an "illiberal" democracy, a regime where electoral competition is preserved, but no longer goes hand in hand with rights and liberties, which are seen as essential conditions in the concept of liberal democracy.

Yet, it is important not to see the conservatism of Russian authorities in a monolithic way. Laruelle distinguishes between three continuously evolving "ideological ecosystems" in the Putin regime: the presidential administration, the military-industrial complex and the Orthodox realm.⁶² The latter two stand for the most consistent conservative agenda, while the presidential administration mainly uses conservative ideas for instrumental reasons. Along the same lines, several authors have emphasized the instrumental use of Orthodox and civilizational discourses by the regime.⁶³ Others, such as Gudkov, have referred to the pseudo character of the regime's "imitation traditionalism".⁶⁴ Again, we are confronted here with disparate ideas rather than a coherent state ideology. The next section will reflect on how these norms are diffused.

Paths of norm diffusion

When the EU diffuses norms, it does so to a large extent in an explicit and transparent way. The norms and rules to be adopted are listed in public documents (Accession Partnerships, Action Plans, Association Agendas, etc.). Conditionality determines the primary dynamics. In the case of Russia, norm diffusion is much harder to study. Not only is there less openness about the specifics of its norm promotion

towards certain countries, but the policy is also less systematic. It is a “patchwork of different policy practices”⁶⁵ and follows both official and non-official channels. This implies that Russia’s paths of norm diffusion are harder to study. Only a limited number of systematic case studies on specific countries is available.⁶⁶ Moreover, one of the major analytical challenges is to distinguish which norms in post-Soviet states result from the active diffusion of political norms by Russia and which ones can be attributed to the shared legacy of the Soviet system and the post-communist transition, as Samokhvalov and Rabinovych point out in their contribution to this special issue.⁶⁷

Despite this lack of systematic empirical research, what can be said tentatively? It goes beyond the scope of this article to give an overview of Russia’s coercive practices in diffusing norms. Makarychev argues that Russia engages in “constructing enemies” rather than making friends, selectively resorting to coercive practices.⁶⁸ This was the case, for example, with the restrictive trade practices that Russia applied to the Eastern Partnership states to dissuade them from signing an Association Agreement with the EU. Let us have a more detailed look at how Russia seeks to shape domestic politics through non-coercive means. Noutcheva mentions four soft mechanisms of external influence: persuasion of domestic actors, legitimization of domestic policies or practices, legitimization of domestic actors, diffusion of ideas.⁶⁹

The idea that Russia diffuses conservative norms through “the power of examples”⁷⁰ is confirmed by Makarychev, who claims that Russia seeks to increase its attraction on third actors not so much through active promotion, but simply by going back to its historical roots and by distinguishing conservative Russia from liberal and multi-cultural Europe.⁷¹ This allows Russia to profile itself and to create channels of communication with conservative forces elsewhere. It also allows Russia to promote certain narratives and to diffuse its interpretation of events. Undeniably, Russia’s conservative profiling has had appeal in certain conservative circles, including in the West.⁷² There is, however, no systematic evaluation at hand assessing the emulation of Russian conservative ideas beyond specific parties or politicians. Moreover, the impact of the myriad of conservative norms across Russia’s borders is particularly challenging to analyse. Despite clear similarities with European and American conservative narratives, it is difficult to separate whether the latter result from Russian influence, develop in parallel or result from a common foundation.⁷³ Russian conservatism has moved away from its position of Russia’s *Sonderweg* into a degree of “Europeanization”, whereby it sees itself more connected to the conservatism in the West.⁷⁴ Due to this greater confluence with conservative attitudes on the rise in the West, Russia

takes advantage of these new voices, consorts with them, and often tries to amplify them, but it did not originate this homegrown dynamic and has no realistic influence over it. Russia acts not as a societal transformer, but as an echo chamber of European and American societies’ own doubts and transformations.⁷⁵

Reflecting the nature of the Russian *sistema*,⁷⁶ the legitimization of domestic actors seems to be connected more strongly to personal and business links than it is to norms. Yet, when it comes to the legitimization of domestic practices, the credo of civilizational pluralism and the rejection of the universality of Western norms can act as a powerful legitimizer for non-democratic regimes. The same holds for the idea of sovereign democracy, whereby the idea of sovereign choice, without foreign intervention, clearly becomes the most important denominator. This may delegitimize Western democracy promotion⁷⁷ or simply provide a useful pretext for undemocratic practices.

Finally, Russia may use formal or informal institutions as vehicles of influence and persuasion. Laruelle attributes an important role to the Orthodox Church seeking to position itself “as the leader of a new ‘moralist international’”.⁷⁸ The Russian Orthodox Church is used instrumentally to target parts of the population in countries like Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine, adding mainly to the conservative agenda Russia promotes.⁷⁹ Similar stories can be told about media, such as Russia Today, targeting certain audiences abroad and playing a key role in distributing a Russian narrative. Yet, this narrative often serves more the purpose of thwarting certain “Western” interpretations of events than actively diffusing norms. Equally important is how the concept of “Russian world” (*russkiy mir*), expressing the idea of a Russia bigger than the actual territory of the Russian Federation, has served as a vehicle to instrumentalize the Russian speaking diaspora.⁸⁰

To conclude on a side note, it goes beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate the effectiveness of Russian norm diffusion, apart from stating that there is a need for a proliferated set of case studies, looking at specific sectors, instruments and target groups of norm diffusion. To date there is little evidence of coherent and sustained diffusion of political norms. Convergence may occur in specific cases, such as restrictive legislation on NGOs. Armenia, for example, emulated the Russian legislative model on this front.⁸¹ Referring to Georgia and Ukraine, Delcour and Wolczuk have argued that, even when Russia seeks to act as “a spoiler” of Western democratization in post-Soviet states, this may often have counter-productive effects and reinforce democracy support.⁸² It is broadly recognized that the role of domestic actors and the domestic configuration of forces is of crucial importance in determining the effectiveness of Russia’s norm diffusion.⁸³

Situating Russia as norm contestor

Where then do we situate Russia as norm diffuser and norm contestor? Is it the perfect normative rival of the EU (or by extension the Euro-Atlantic community)? The division between Western norm defenders on one side and Russia as challenger on the other side is certainly not that linear. The reality is more complex and ambivalent: both sides claim to be the true defenders of some key international norms. This is the case for norms such as sovereignty and non-interference, but also for multilateralism – despite multiple violations. Russia also stands up for some of the core norms of Europe’s post-Cold War arrangements. It has profiled itself as the defender of the principle of indivisibility of security, laid down in the 1990 “Charter of Paris for a new Europe”.⁸⁴ This norm was at the heart of the draft European Security Treaty, proposed in 2009 by then President Medvedev.⁸⁵ Despite Moscow’s critique of the West imposing its norms on others, it presents itself in this field as the defender of the agreed norms and positions itself within the status quo normative community. When it comes to political liberal norms, however, the story is different. Liberal norms are frequently dismissed as a pretext for maintaining Western dominance. Ambassador Soltanovsky, Russia’s Permanent Representative to the Council of Europe, stated for example: “The protection of human rights is no longer perceived as a supreme value and the basis of this organization, but only as a populist tool to combat geopolitical rivals”.⁸⁶ He added that the scandalous “politicization of human rights” has taken “a systemic character”. Instead, Russia presents itself as defender of “genuine” European norms, de facto a disparate set of illiberal norms. In sum, the representation of Russia

as a full-fledged norm contestator or challenger of the status quo is at least a simplification, predominantly following from an overemphasis on political liberal norms.

Rephrasing the above, where does this place Russia on Bloomfield's norm dynamics role spectrum? When it comes to political liberal norms, Russia has moved away from the "Western" normative community and today positions itself firmly in a different normative community than the West, assertively challenging the norms of the latter. It is hard to classify the country within this spectrum of roles. As Russia openly challenges the status quo and the universality of Western norms, it appears minimally as a "competitor entrepreneur" and in some case as a rivalling "pure norm entrepreneur", radically rejecting Western "post-modern" norms. On the other hand, it presents itself as the defender of "authentic" European norms and makes active use of "Western" norms like sovereignty and of conservatism to challenge the norms of "the West". This would also allow to define Russia as a "creative resister".

The reason for this conundrum may be that Russia discursively produced its own image of Western status quo norms and created to some degree a strawman. It is fighting a rival that does not really exist in these terms, but consists of the image Moscow itself has created: a unified post-modern, ultraliberal West, that has rejected any form of tradition. It thus ignores the diversity of opinions and policies that exist within the West. The most clear example is probably the widely disseminated concept of "Gayropa", whereby the EU's status quo norms get discursively almost reduced to the imposition of LGBT rights and same sex marriage on an "unwilling majority".

A further complication follows from the debate whether Russia is genuine when it invokes established norms of the international community or whether it contests norms through a "parody" of certain "Western" normative discourses. According to Burai, Russia's normative discourse systematically refers to and reproduces the Western discourse, in particular on norms "where standards of behaviour are profoundly contested".⁸⁷ For example, Russia invoked principles of self-determination and the "Kosovo precedent" to justify the annexation of Crimea. Also the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) has been invoked to justify military intervention. Burai argues that the "parodic appropriation of normative language has a destabilizing normative impact", exposing the Western normative discourse by problematizing the "contingent nature of normative contextualisation".⁸⁸ In this sense the selective and parodic imitation of Western or EU normative discourse can be seen as a form of norm contestation. It has the capacity to decentre European identity by challenging "the EU's power to define the normative meaning of Europe",⁸⁹ by confronting it with the inconsistent and biased application of its own norms, whether it is R2P, self-determination or human rights.⁹⁰ Inevitably this weakens the validity of the norm. A similar idea is reflected in Bettiza and Lewis's concept of "liberal mimicry": "a type of meaning contestation, which consists in adopting the *form* of liberal discourses and practices, while simultaneously giving these a non-liberal *content*",⁹¹ with the goal of redefining the meaning of liberal norms. Kurowska and Reshetnikov refer to Russia's "trickster practice of 'overidentification' with norms, which apparently endorses but indirectly subverts the normative frameworks within which it is performed."⁹²

Self-evidently, the argument of parody as contestation can be analytically challenging. While offering a revealing perspective, it may be problematic when it is simply assumed that Russia's imitation of norms is driven by the consistent intention to mock them, while the same question is not asked about other actors referring to

similar norms. Also, Western actors have amply abused international norms for their own strategic purposes, ultimately rendering it difficult to determine where exactly to situate the dividing line between rhetorical abuse of norms and outright parody.

Russia's motives behind norm diffusion

To understand Russia's equivocal norm diffusion, it is crucial to distinguish between endogenous and exogenous motives.⁹³ Endogenous motives are typical of autocratic regimes, who are driven by internal motives to spread their ideology over the world. As argued above, Russia lacks such a coherent ideology, despite the support of some elites for a diffuse conservative agenda. Its main motive is exogenous. It is a reaction against what it perceives to be the Western imposition of norms, harming vital Russian strategic interests.⁹⁴ In other words, its norm diffusion is driven more by strategic and pragmatic instrumental reasons than by ideological conviction. It is a resistance against what Putin and Lavrov labelled a Western "Diktat" and the Euro-Atlantic community abusing the extension of liberal world order to maintain domination. This anti-hegemonic positioning is the backbone of Russian foreign policy today. There is consensus among many authors that the latter is driven by its ambition to regain great power status and to maintain regional influence.⁹⁵ Tatiana Romanova speaks of a "neorevisionist challenge", explaining

why Russia has consistently exploited the in-built contradictions of the liberal international order. It is Russia's dissatisfaction with the post-Cold War settlement, and in particular Moscow's belief that it does not have the place it deserves in today's global order.⁹⁶

Laruelle adds:

Illiberalism thus offers a way for a postliberal Russia not only to establish a new normalcy at home, but also to reject the low status of rule-taker (or even a spoiler or rogue state) that the liberal world order has allocated to it.⁹⁷

Krickovic argues along similar lines, stating that "Russia's leaders see the current international order as fundamentally unjust and detrimental to their country's interests, but also profoundly destabilizing".⁹⁸ From the perspective of Social Identity Theory, this is an understandable reaction. If an actor is frustrated about its status within the dominant normative framework, it will try to alter the status markers, i.e. the norms against which its behaviour and leadership are measured.⁹⁹ Where these norms withhold status (as is the case of political liberal norms), it is imperative to weaken them. Where these norms protect you from interference by leading forces in this hegemonic order (as is the case of sovereignty or non-interference), it is crucial to defend them – even if this done selectively in practice. Krickovic calls Russia a "desperate challenger" of the hegemonic order.¹⁰⁰ It is a power in relative decline, hoping to reverse this decline by changing the international order. In light of this international order that constrains Russia and limits its capacity to rise, the rejection of liberal norms and promotion of illiberal norms get a different meaning. Rather than being driven by intrinsic motivations, they are part of "a power political fragmenting strategy designed to undermine the legitimacy, stability, and interpretation – and therefore the influence – of liberal norms and their entrepreneurs."¹⁰¹ They serve the purpose of breaking "the West's monopoly over the application and meaning of liberal principles in world politics" and "articulating alternative non-liberal identities and normative

frameworks,” which may mobilize support.¹⁰² Therefore, according to Makarychev, also the

projection of [a] Russian conservative agenda outside of national borders has to be understood as the key element of subverting [the] EU liberal project as intrusive and disrespectful to national sovereignties (“democracy promotion” and “regime change”) and fostering radicalization in affected countries (instead of “democratic peace”) ...¹⁰³

Conclusion

This article argued that Russia’s norm diffusion cannot simply be approached as the mirror image of the norms upheld by the EU or the West. A distinction was made between different relevant categories of political norms which Russia promotes or diffuses: sovereign choice, regime and conservative ideas. The right of sovereign choice, without Western interference, has resonated strongly in several post-Soviet states. However, Russia cannot be said to promote a specific (authoritarian) regime, by lack of a clear political model or coherent ideology of its own. Yet, it may be seen as a promotor of a disparate set of conservative ideas and non-democratic practices. Russian norm diffusion is not a very coherent policy, but a patchwork of different practices, often operating through the power of example or informal links, rather than systematic policy instruments.

Russia may be a norm contestator, but it is a complex and ambiguous one, rather than the EU’s perfect normative rival. It champions certain norms of public international law, such as sovereignty, positioning itself within the dominant normative community, but contesting the application of those norms by the West. When it comes to liberal, in particular “post-modern,” norms of the West, it takes a radically different normative position, challenging those norms vocally, albeit often in the form of a strawman.

Notes

1. A norm can be defined as a “standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity” (Finnemore and Sikkink, “International Norm Dynamics,” 891).
2. Haukkala, *The EU-Russia Strategic Partnership*.
3. This literature takes different forms. Some focus on Russian norm diffusion as actively undermining the liberal international order (e.g. Kagan, *The Return of History*; Kagan: “The Strongmen Strike Back”), strengthening authoritarian rule in the post-Soviet space (e.g. Jackson, “The Role of External Factors”; Vanderhill, *Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad*; Roberts and Ziemer, “Explaining the Pattern”) or resisting and thwarting EU or American democracy promotion (Ambrosio, *Authoritarian Backlash*; Ambrosio, “Insulating Russia”; Tolstrup, “Studying a Negative External Actor”; Natalizia, “Black Knight”).
4. See also the plea of Marlies Glasius to study authoritarian and illiberal practices rather than regimes. (Glasius, “What Authoritarianism Is ... and Is Not”).
5. See, for example: Jackson, “The Role of External Factors”; Vanderhill, *Promoting Authoritarianism Abroad*; Robert and Ziemers, “Explaining the Pattern.”
6. Manners, “Normative Power Europe,” 242.
7. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*.
8. Sakwa, *The Crisis of Russian Democracy*.
9. Sakwa, “Heterarchy.”
10. Gel’man, “The Vicious Circle.”
11. Pynnöniemi, “Surkov and the Three Pillars of Putinism.”
12. Pavlovsky, “Russian Politics Under Putin,” 10–11. *Sistema* “combines the idea that the state should enjoy unlimited access to all national resources, public or private, with a kind of

- permanent state of emergency in which every level of society – businesses, social and ethnic groups, powerful clans, and even criminal gangs – is drafted into solving what the Kremlin labels ‘urgent state problems.’ Under Putin, *sistema* has become a method for making deals among businesses, powerful players, and the people. Business has not taken over the state, nor vice versa; the two have merged in a union of total and seamless corruption” (14).
13. Pavlovsky, “Russian Politics Under Putin,” 11.
 14. There is a fairly broad consensus on defining norm contestation as the discursive rejection, questioning or disapproval of norms (See Wiener, *Theory of Contestation*; Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, “Things We Lost in the Fire”). In this sense rivalling norm diffusion can equally take the form of norm contestation.
 15. Bloomfield, “Norm Antipreneurs.”
 16. This differs from the Critical constructivist approach, theoretically developed by Antje Wiener, whereby norm contestation implies a permanent “mode of critique through critical engagement” with norms (Wiener, “Theory of Contestation – a Concise Summary,” 109).
 17. Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, “Things We Lost in the Fire.”
 18. Hoffmann, “Norms and Social Constructivism.”
 19. Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, “Things We Lost in the Fire.”
 20. Bob, *The Global Right Wing*.
 21. Bloomfield, “Norm Antipreneurs.”
 22. It should be noted that our analysis is limited to political norms. When it comes to economic norms. Makarychev speaks of “liberal imitation” of the EU (Makarychev, “Normative and Civilisational Regionalisms”).
 23. Romanova, “Russia’s Neorevisionist Challenge.” Among the civil society organizations, the Orthodox Church needs special mention. In the epistemic community, Karaganov has considerable influence (see Bettiza and Lewis, “Authoritarian Powers,” 570).
 24. Romanova, “Russia’s Neorevisionist Challenge,” 87.
 25. See *Foreign Policy Concept*, 2008, 2013 and 2016.
 26. Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy*.
 27. See for example multiple references in the *Foreign Policy Concept* of 2008 and 2016.
 28. Putin, “Meeting of the Valdai Club.”
 29. Lavrov, “Foreign Minister Lavrov’s address at the 53rd Munich Security Conference.”
 30. *Foreign Policy Concept*, 2008.
 31. Okara, “Sovereign Democracy.”
 32. Putin, “Annual Adress.”
 33. Averre, “Sovereign Democracy.”
 34. Laruelle, “Making Sense of Russia’s Illiberalism,” 123–4.
 35. Tolstrup, “Studying a Negative External Actor,” 925.
 36. Natilizia, “Black Knight.”
 37. Ambrosio, “Insulating Russia from a Colour Revolution.”
 38. Tolstrup, “Studying a Negative External Actor.”
 39. Risse and Babayan, “Democracy Promotion and the Challenges of Illiberal Regional Powers”; Brownlee, “The Limited Reach”; Tansey, “The Problem with Autocracy Promotion.”
 40. Banks, “The Study of Authoritarian Diffusion and Cooperation.”
 41. Weyland, “Autocratic diffusion.”
 42. *Ibid.*
 43. Babayan, “The Return of the Empire?.” See also Kolesnikov, *Russian Ideology after Crimea*.
 44. Babayan, “The Return of the Empire?,” 438.
 45. Way, “The Limits of Autocracy Promotion.”
 46. Chebankova, “Contemporary Russian Conservatism,” 28.
 47. *Ibid.*, 49.
 48. See for example Mezhyuev, “Island Russia”; Mezhyuev, “Civilizational Realism.”
 49. Laruelle, “Making Sense of Russia’s Illiberalism,” 116–17. Laruelle also notes that in Russian debates “the term illiberalism as such is not used; rather, the preferred descriptor is conservatism” (117).
 50. Morozov, “Identity and Hegemony.”
 51. *Ibid.*, 3.
 52. Morozov, “Identity and Hegemony,” 36.

53. Neumann, "Russia's Europe."
54. Morozov, "Identity and Hegemony"; Makarychev, "Normative and Civilisational Regionalisms."
55. See for example Chebankova, "Contemporary Russian Conservatism."
56. Lavrov, quoted in Morozov, "Identity and Hegemony," 33.
57. Robinson, "Russia's Emergence as an International Conservative Power," 28.
58. Laruelle, "Making Sense of Russia's Illiberalism," 126.
59. *Ibid.*, 116 and 118.
60. Along the same lines many ideas have been launched about Russia's need for "civilisational self-concentration" (Tsygankov "Towards a New Strategy").
61. Chebankova, "Contemporary Russian Conservatism," 42.
62. Laruelle, "The Kremlin's Ideological Ecosystems."
63. See for example Tsygankov, "Crafting the State-Civilization," 153–4.
64. Gudkov, quoted in Maslovskii, "The Soviet Model of Modernity," 52.
65. Makarychev, "Beyond Geopolitics," 139.
66. Examples include Roberts and Ziemer, "Explaining the Pattern"; Delcour and Wolczuk, "Spoiler or Facilitator"; Delcour, "Multiple External Influences"; Roberts, "Explaining the Pattern"; Natalizia, "Black Knight."
67. See also Dorina Baltag's contribution to this special issue, referring to "post-Sovietness" as path dependency.
68. Makarychev, "Beyond Geopolitics," 138.
69. Noutcheva, "Whose Legitimacy?."
70. *Ibid.*, 319.
71. Makarychev, "Beyond Geopolitics."
72. See for example the case of Pat Buchanan in the US, who in a blog raised the question "Is Putin One of Us?." He presents Putin's ideas as a model for "de-Christianized" America and sees the potential alliance of "conservatives and traditionalists in every country arrayed against the militant secularism of a multicultural and transnational elite" (Buchanan, "Is Putin One of Us?").
73. Laruelle, "Mirror Games." Robinson notes that "conservatism is inherently national" and therefore some regard it as "non-exportable" (Robinson, "Russia's Emergence," 11–12).
74. Laruelle, "Mirror games," 197.
75. *Ibid.*, 197.
76. Pavlovsky, "Russian Politics Under Putin."
77. Noutcheva, "Whose Legitimacy?," 318.
78. Laruelle, "Mirror Games," 178.
79. Makarychev, "Beyond Geopolitics," 142.
80. Suslov, "Russian World" Concept, 338.
81. Roberts and Ziemer, "Explaining the Pattern."
82. Delcour and Wolczuk, "Spoiler or Facilitator."
83. See also Laure Delcour's contribution to this special issue, as well as Risse and Babayan, "Democracy Promotion."
84. CSCE, *Charter of Paris for a New Europe*.
85. Article 1 stated that "the Parties shall cooperate with each other on the basis of the principles of indivisible, equal and undiminished security" (European Security Treaty, "The Draft of the European Security Treaty").
86. Soltanovsky, Interview with *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*.
87. Burai, "Parody as Norm Contestation," 68.
88. *Ibid.*, 76 and 77.
89. Morozov and Rumelili, "The External Constitution of European Identity," 28.
90. The Russian Foreign Ministry has published several reports with specific allegations of human rights abuses in Western countries. See Romanova, "Russian Challenge," 377–8; Bettiza and Lewis, "Authoritarian Powers," 566.
91. Bettiza and Lewis, "Authoritarian Powers," 567.
92. Kurowska and Reshetnikov, "Tricksters," 1.
93. Weyland, "Autocratic Diffusion."
94. See Krickovic, "The Symbiotic China-Russia Partnership," 309.

95. See inter alia: Neumann, "Russia's Europe"; Babayan "The Return of the Empire?"; Risse and Babayan, "Democracy Promotion"; Makarychev, "Beyond Geopolitics"; Delcour and Wolczuk, "Multiple External Influences," Natalizia, "Black Knight."
96. Romanova, "Russia's Neorevisionist Challenge," 82–3. She adds that the interplay between domestic and foreign policies has increased the intensity of Russia's neorevisionist critique (84).
97. Laruelle, "Making Sense of Russia's Illiberalism," 127.
98. Krickovic "The Symbiotic China-Russia Partnership," 309. See also Bettiza and Lewis, "Authoritarian Powers," 572.
99. See Ward, "Lost in Translation."
100. Krickovic "The Symbiotic China-Russia Partnership."
101. Bettiza and Lewis, "Authoritarian Powers," 572.
102. *Ibid.*, 560.
103. Makarychev, "Beyond Geopolitics," 140.

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