



Which Factors, Domestic or Foreign, are More Important in Shaping Russian Foreign Policy during the Putin Era?

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Abstract: *This paper explores the factors influencing Russian foreign policy during the Putin era, focusing on whether domestic or foreign elements play a more significant role. It argues that Russia's foreign policy is deeply rooted in its national ideology, shaped by historical experiences, Orthodox Christianity, and the concept of Russia as the "Third Rome." Putin's policies emphasize restoring Russia's great power status through assertive diplomacy, leveraging domestic support rooted in messianic consciousness, and counteracting Western influence, especially in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) region. The paper concludes that domestic cultural and historical factors have been more influential than external pressures in shaping Putin's foreign policy.*

Keywords: Russian Foreign Policy; Putin Era; Messianic Consciousness; Great Power Status.

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1. Introduction

Since the era of Tsarist Russia, Russia has consistently been regarded as one of the most powerful countries in the world. Therefore, Russia's foreign policy has always been a central focus of research. However even up to present, Russia's diplomatic actions remains complex and unpredictable. It is only possible to identify some distinctive characteristics of Russia's foreign policy, the most notable being its assertive diplomatic strategy. (Allison, 2004) The 2008 Russo-Georgian War and Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea serve as prominent examples of this assertive diplomatic approach. Intriguingly, Russia's robust diplomacy seems hasn't supported by its economic strength. Therefore, it is challenging to comprehensively explain Russia's foreign policy merely based on external geopolitics and other factors from a realism perspective. This article posits that Putin is a representative of Russian ideology. The Putin phenomenon, a product of Russian history and culture, is not an anomaly. His administration's foreign policies are deeply rooted in history. So, this paper aims to delve into the internal cultural dimensions and explore the fundamental reasons shaping Russia's foreign policy in Putin era.

2. The root of Russia's national ideology

To comprehend the underpinnings of Russia's assertive diplomatic style under Putin, it is essential to trace the historical roots and evolution of Russia's national ideology. By examining Russia's historical trajectory from the Kievan Rus' through the era of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and into the present day, we can gain a clearer understanding of the cultural and ideological foundations that inform Russia's foreign policy decisions.

Starting from the establishment of the Kievan Rus' in the 9th century, through the eras of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and continuing to present-day Russia, the nation has consistently maintained a stance of strength in its interactions with the West (Neumann and Pouliot, 2011). This stance is reflected in various aspects such as ideology, military, economy, and politics. The root of this confrontational attitude lies in Russia's strong national consciousness, deeply ingrained in its culture. This strong national consciousness is the belief in Russia's perpetual greatness. According to Berdyaev (Tuchkova, 1999), this consciousness has shaped the Russian mindset and

national policies make them proud of their nations. It represents a long-standing and deeply rooted view of Russia as a great power. The origin of Russia's perception as a great nation primarily comes from geographical factors. By the end of the 15th century, under Ivan III's leadership, Russia, after over 400 years of expansion, became the world's largest country (Bushkovitch 2011). Spanning the vast expanse of the Eurasian continent, this immense territory instilled in Russians a sense of powerful nation.

3. The Third Rome theory and messianism

Furthermore, Russia's national ideology is also shaped by the Eastern Orthodox concept of the 'Third Rome.' In the history of Christianity, ancient Rome was long regarded as the center of Christianity, termed 'the First Rome.' Following the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 AD, the Byzantine Empire's capital Constantinople had become the 'the Second Rome.' In 1453, Ivan III regarded himself as the direct successor of the Byzantine Emperor and thus adopted the Byzantine double-headed eagle as the national emblem of Russia (Strémooukhoff 1953). With the strong support of Ivan III, the status of the Eastern Orthodox Church in Russia rapidly ascended, and the theory that Moscow is the 'Third Rome' was proposed (Poe 2011). This theory positioned it as the leader of the Orthodox world, asserting that Russia is a unique nation, chosen by God, which called Messiah, and entrusted with a significant spiritual mission (Curanović 2019). The 'Third Rome' theory provided religious backing for Russia's large-scale external expansion and solidified the national psychological foundation of 'great power hegemony.' This messianic consciousness fostered a unique self-perception within the Russian nation, believing itself to bear a special historical mission and moral responsibility. This self-perception influences Russia's behavior on the international stage, prompting it to adopt more proactive and assertive strategies in safeguarding its national interests and propagating its values (Duncan 1989). The influence of this messianic consciousness in Russia is manifested in the veneration of powerful leaders, deeply rooted in the political culture of Russian authoritarianism. This has also led to the Russian predilection for strong leaders, as reflected in Putin's high approval ratings and his firm stance on international issues (Suslov 2023). Simultaneously, this mentality also affects the Russian public's support for foreign policy. Within Russia's foreign policy, the core of this messianic consciousness lies in pursuing great power status and propelling Russia to play a significant role in international affairs (Engström 2014). The "Third Rome" theory emphasizes Russia's role as the leader of the Orthodox Christian world. This notion has been particularly evident in the policies of the Putin administration toward Ukraine and Georgia, including the annexation of Crimea and support for separatist movements in eastern Ukraine.

When Putin was elected president, Russia faced significant domestic and international challenges. Domestically, the economy was in decline, with industries, livelihoods, and investment severely impacted. Public health deteriorated, and life expectancy fell. Internationally, the West's push for NATO expansion further reduced Russia's strategic space, leaving the country diplomatically isolated. Despite these daunting circumstances, Putin displayed remarkable calm, confidence, and decisiveness.

He recognized the enduring influence of traditional Russian culture and sought to harness the power of Orthodox Christianity, particularly the concept of a "messianic consciousness," to foster national unity. Putin proposed the idea of "Russia's new thinking," which aimed to blend universal human values with Russia's historically tested traditions—values shaped by the turbulent events of the 20th century.

Putin's emphasis on the revival of Russia's great power status became a cornerstone of his foreign policy. He articulated this vision in several key statements and documents, such as the 2000 "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," where he asserted that Russia's primary diplomatic objective was to secure a respected position in the international community that aligns with its interests as a global center of influence.

In his article "Russia at the Turn of the Millennium," Putin explored the messianic aspects of Russian culture, emphasizing how historical cultural features continue to shape the country's trajectory. (Putin, 1999). His policies towards the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) reflect this approach, aiming to restore Russia's status and consolidate influence in the post-Soviet space through both cultural and strategic efforts.

4. The impact of the Soviet Union and Yeltsin on Russia's National Ideology

Since the inception of the Third Rome theory, the concept of the "Messiah complex" has taken root in the minds

of the Russian people, sowing the seeds of "great-powerism" and "messianism." (Stremoukhoff, 1953) Subsequently, during Russia's national development, the successful defense of Europe against Mongol invasions, victories in the Great Patriotic War and World War II, and the establishment of a powerful empire in the post-war Soviet Union, all these historical facts have convinced the Russian people, who have endured numerous hardships, that Russia is the chosen "Messiah" by God to save the world. (Duncan, 1989) After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Eastern Orthodox Church made a full comeback, and after a brief period of confusion, the Russian people's "great-power mentality" fully revived, influencing their perception of their country's status.

The Soviet Union's emergence as a superpower, competing with the United States for global dominance and leading the socialist world, instilled a sense of honor and dignity in the Russian people, thus enhancing their messianic consciousness. However, the Soviet Union's abrupt disintegration plunged Russia into a severe geopolitical crisis. This period revealed deep-seated conflicts, territorial disputes, and religious tensions with its former Soviet counterparts. NATO's eastward expansion significantly diminished Russia's international political influence, deeply wounding its national pride, accustomed to superpower status. And triggering a resurgence of their messianic consciousness. (Rutland, 2015)

Following this, the Yeltsin administration's pro-Western foreign policy orientation failed to yield the expected benefits (O'Loughlin, 2001). Western countries and international organizations did not offer significant support to Russia, instead imposing strict demands. This failure exposed the naivety of Russia's aspiration to align with the West. The United States, having triumphed in the Cold War, was not inclined to accept Russia as an equal global partner (Kuchins, 2015), further damaging Russian national self-esteem. This period saw a growing public desire for stronger leadership and a more assertive foreign policy, reflecting widespread discontent from the government to the populace.

Concurrently, the surge in Orthodox believers in Russia from 31% to 72% between 1998 and 2008 (Pew Research Center, 2014) exemplifies the revival of the messianic consciousness, indicating its persistence through the Soviet era and beyond.

Thus, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the shortcomings of the Yeltsin administration not only led to a geopolitical crisis but also profoundly affected Russia's national identity. This created a context for Putin's ascent as a leader responding to the public's longing for a return to national dignity and global influence. Consequently, the foreign policy in the Putin era, far from being a mere reaction to recent history, represents a continuation and adaptation of Russia's historical and cultural traditions, particularly emphasizing the restoration of national glory and global influence."

5. Putin's Ambition to Resurgence of Great Power Glory

Following Boris Yeltsin's resignation on December 31, 1999, and Vladimir Putin's victory in the Russian presidential election in March 2000, Russia embarked on a new phase, the 'Putin Era' with his image as a 'benevolent czar'. When Putin was elected president, Russia faced significant domestic and international challenges. (Rukavishnikov & Puffer, 2004) Domestically, the economy was in decline, with industries, livelihoods, and investment severely impacted. Public health deteriorated, and life expectancy fell. Internationally, the West's push for NATO expansion further reduced Russia's strategic space, leaving the country diplomatically isolated. (Kuchins, 2015) Despite these daunting circumstances, Putin displayed remarkable calm, confidence, and decisiveness.

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6. Putin's foreign policy against CIS

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia viewed the CIS region, encompassing the independent states that were part of the Soviet Union, as its sphere of special interest. It continued to implement its great power foreign policy in these areas, resisting intervention from other countries or forces. (Røseth, 2019) To strengthen control over these states, Putin actively promoted their integration in military, economic, and political aspects upon taking office, especially in military defense. For instance, the establishment of the 'Collective Security Treaty Organization Rapid Reaction Forces' in May 2001 led to Russia setting up a series of military bases in countries like Azerbaijan. These bases not only fulfilled Russia's military needs but also played a 'peacekeeping' role in conflicts among CIS countries, allowing Russia to intervene and mediate as a 'paternal figure'. (Kuchins, 2015)

In promoting the economic and military integration of CIS countries, Putin occasionally employed a 'big stick policy' to maintain Russia's absolute dominance in the region, even at the cost of interfering in the internal affairs of these countries and compromising their sovereignty. (Trenin, 2011) For example, the 'Color Revolution' in Georgia in November 2003 led to strained relations between Russia and Georgia and strengthened the Georgian government and people's determination to join NATO. In response, the Russian government imposed severe sanctions and conducted military exercises around Georgian territories and waters. In August 2008, the Russian Federation Council officially recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two autonomous republics of Georgia, effectively closing the door on Georgia's potential NATO membership. (Asmus, 2010)

In relations with Belarus, Russia also exhibited its great power posture. After coming to power, Putin actively pushed for the deepening of the Russia-Belarus Union. In 2002, he proposed that Belarus join Russia as its seventh administrative region or form a federal state with Russia in the style of the European Union, effectively asking Belarus to cede some of its sovereignty to Russia. However, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko rejected these proposals, repeatedly stating, 'Belarus will never join the Russian Federation under any circumstances, as Belarus is an independent country.' (Feklyunina, 2012) Lukashenko later proposed further perfecting the union mechanism to advance Russia-Belarus relations, emphasizing equal status and rights in the union. Yet, this proposal was not accepted by Putin. In Putin's view, Belarus, with a GDP less than 3% of Russia's, a population only one-fifteenth of Russia's, and highly dependent on Russian energy, could not be an equal partner in the union. In handling Russia-Belarus relations, Russia and Putin clearly positioned themselves as the 'paternal figure' of the CIS countries. (Connolly, 2018) To safeguard its interests, Russia showed a willingness to risk a new Cold War, firmly opposing Western intervention in the CIS region. This also demonstrates that, in the national consciousness of Russia, the CIS is still considered part of Russia's sphere of influence. When Putin recognized the independence of Luhansk and Donetsk and launched the war against Ukraine, he openly questioned Ukraine's right to statehood and its history, claiming that the annexation of eastern Ukraine was a territorial recovery in line with history and popular sentiment.

7. The public opinion inside Russia

The long-standing authoritarian dependency psychology in Russian society dictates that its political arena must be controlled by a "messianic" or "Tsar-like" figure, significantly influencing Russia's choice of political system and its democratization process. As Beliaev asserted: "Messianic consciousness is the tradition of ancient Russia," and "totalitarianism is always embedded in the blood of Russia." (Lukashevich, 1965) Indeed, in traditional Russian culture, "democracy" is an entirely foreign and marginalized term, and Russians tend to place more trust in a "paternal good Tsar" than in themselves. Historical figures highly respected in Russia, like Catherine the Great, Peter the Great, and Stalin, were all autocratic rulers deeply influenced by Russian traditional culture, implementing hardline foreign policies. It could even be said that the communism of Stalin's era was an expression of messianism detached from religious foundations and integrated into social culture (Murvar 1971). This situation has not changed today. In 2016, Russian media once again voted for the greatest leaders of the past century, and

the poll results showed Putin, Stalin, and Lenin tied for first place, while democratic reformers like Nicholas II were ranked at the bottom.

This makes it easy to understand why, since Putin came to power, he has enjoyed a high approval rate in Russia. This is largely due to his assertive diplomatic style, which is seen as restoring Russia's voice on the international stage and urging the world, especially Western countries, to pay attention to Russia's stance. (Rose, 2015) His strong approach during the 2014 Crimean crisis further solidified his image as a respected hero in Russia. Russian media acknowledge the economic and social costs of these "victories," but Western sanctions aimed at undermining Putin's rule have had the opposite effect, with Russian elites and the general populace steadfastly supporting him. (Treisman, 2016) In January 2015, Russia's First Deputy Prime Minister Shuvalov stated at the World Economic Forum in Davos that Russians would never abandon their leader under foreign pressure, warning the West against attempts to overthrow Putin. The Russian people are willing to sacrifice everything for Putin, who in his first term took measures to strengthen presidential power, centralizing foreign policy decision-making around the Russian elite under his leadership. Most Russians, especially older generations, are indifferent to democracy, giving little importance to democratic processes and elections. (Fish, 2005) Therefore, during Putin's tenure, while Russia's political system was democratic in form, presidential power was nearly limitless. As Putin firmly grasped the power of appointing officials, his early close aides and friends almost monopolized all senior positions in Russia. In fact, most Russians, especially middle-aged citizens, seem indifferent to whether the decision-making process is democratic, as long as the leader's decisions align with their perception of Russia's national status and superior national image.

8. Conclusion

Through the above research, it is evident that 'Messiah consciousness,' a core element of Russian traditional culture, has a vital, lasting, and stable impact on shaping Russia's foreign policy in the Putin Era.. Even geopolitical and other conflicts are also derived from this. This consciousness has shaped the Russian people's "great power mentality" deeply rooted in national psychology. At the same time, it also contributed to the dependence and tolerance of Russian society on authority. The interaction of these two mentalities endows Russia's foreign policy with a unique "great power doctrine" style. No matter what strategy Russia takes, its ultimate goal is to strive for world power status. From the tsarist Russia period, the Soviet Union period to the era of the Russian Federation, the leaders' absolute control of foreign policy and tough measures are usually favored by the public. Of course, we should also recognize that Russia today is different from tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union in the past. The federal government has established a democratic framework, which means that the seeds of democracy have been planted in the hearts of the Russian people. The voice and demand of the Russian people, especially the younger generation, for participating in national politics will gradually increase, which will have a continuous impact on Russia's domestic and foreign policies. Of course, due to the imperfection of the Democratic belt, this may take a long time.

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