

VASIL MIRAKISHVILI

FREE UNIVERSITY OF TBILISI

vmira22@freeuni.edu.ge

IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Abstract

The article discusses the influence of the ideological and cultural characteristics on Russia's foreign policy, which are the main features of Russian society and which were formed by the ruling forces over a long period at the different stages of the development of the Russian Empire.

Before Russia's large-scale military aggression in Ukraine, international relations researchers mainly discussed Russia's foreign policy in terms of the theory of political realism and the influence of ideological and cultural factors on Russia's foreign policy behavior was either entirely rejected in their works, or they were given very little importance.

According to the representatives of the school of political realism, Russia would be satisfied with the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and the establishment of control over the eastern regions of Ukraine. Further large-scale aggression was not expected, as it would not be a rational and beneficial action for Russia itself. At the same time, the steps taken by Russia were viewed as a coercive response to the eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Alliance and the European Union, carried out to ensure security.

Contrary to the above-mentioned assertion, the political leadership of the Russian Federation still decided on a large-scale military invasion of Ukraine and, as it turned out later, had been preparing for a long time to take this step. Accordingly, the practical action of the Russian Federation revealed the weaknesses of the theory of political realism and showed that it is impossible to discuss the foreign policy behavior of the states only in realistic and rational frameworks, and there are other important factors influencing the foreign policy decisions of the states. Such factors are ideological and cultural features, beliefs, ideas, and opinions, which are widely shared by the population of a particular country and, at the same time, represent the mechanism of self-identification of the nation. Therefore, when discussing the foreign political behavior of states, it is more relevant to use "constructivist" approaches, according to which international politics is a human creation, not physical and material, but purely intellectual and ideological, while the international system is a collection of ideas, certain thoughts, systems of norms that are organized by certain people at a certain time and place. And if the thoughts and ideas that make up the international system change, then the system itself will also change because it exists in thought and ideas.

The discussion of the system of international relations and the behavior of states in this system in terms of "constructivism" sheds light on Russia's seemingly irrational decisions and self-damaging actions, which in turn provides an opportunity to predict the foreign policy activity of revisionist states.

Keywords: politics, ideology, Russia, constructivism, Ukraine.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a group of international relations researchers tried to dispel the decades-old perception of the unpredictability of Russia's behavior in the world and to prove that it was possible to consider Russia as a more or less reliable partner. In this regard, the representatives of the school of political realism made a special effort, substantiating that Russia's foreign policy behavior in a "multipolar" and chaotic environment was determined by realistic approaches and was characterized by sharp rationality and pre-calculated steps aimed at ensuring its own security. "Realists" believed that Russia felt threatened by the policy of the "North Atlantic Alliance" and the eastward expansion of the European

Union, in response to which the only goal of Russia's action was to change the world order established after the Cold War and return to the influence of the Soviet Union.

Based on the above, representatives of the theoretical school of political realism, such as Scott J. Feinstein, Ellen B. Piro, John J. Mearsheimer, and others, argued that Russia's foreign policy behavior was thoroughly rational and predictable. Accordingly, they were more critical of the foreign policy direction of the United States of America and the European Union and tried to prove that in order to reduce tensions with Russia, it was necessary to provide appropriate security guarantees, which in turn would be ensured by maintaining Russia's traditional spheres of influence. "Realists" also supported the so-called version of the use of "limited aggression" and argued that large-scale aggression on the part of Russia was not expected because it would not be a favorable and rational decision considering the expected consequences (Feinstein and Pirro 2021; Mearsheimer 2014; Charap and Colton 2017; Thalís 2018).

If Russia's occupation of Georgian territories in 2008 did not have a significant impact on realistic approaches to Russia's actions, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 raised important questions about Russia's rational and pragmatic behavior. That is why some researchers of international relations tried to correct the gap in realist approaches by staying within the framework of the theory of political realism. For this purpose, the concept of "vernacular realism" was introduced, which implies explaining the reasons for the foreign policy behavior of states and specifically Russia, not by geopolitical interests, but by "tradition" formed over a long time. At the same time, "vernacular realists" recognize the objective circumstance that the Russian authorities have historically always succeeded in providing false information about the outside world to the domestic Russian society and, in this regard, creating a desired information field within the country (Babitsky 2022).

Despite the recognition of the existence of a certain idealistic component in Russia's foreign policy, representatives of "vernacular realism" and classical realism agree that Russia's aggressive foreign policy does not have an ethical (idealistic) character and is driven by a purely materialistic basis – the intention to protect the borders of its own state in a Hobbesian anarchic world, although they disagree on what Russia might mean by its borders (Babitsky 2022).

On the other hand, Russia's large-scale military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 once again called into question the claims of representatives of the political realism school about the rationality and predictability of Russia's actions and caused some confusion among researchers of international relations and the services of certain states engaged in analytical work. There was a need to analyze the essence of international relations in a new way and to theoretically explain why a specific country, and, in this case, Russia, behaves contrary to expectations.

In this regard, particularly noteworthy is the theoretical school of "constructivism" and the work *Social Theory of International Politics* by one of the important representatives of this school, Alexander Wendt, according to which international relations are socially constructed, states consider each other according to the ideas they have about each other and how they perceive the outside world. The perceptions of specific states are shaped by the ideological and cultural views formed in the societies of these states. Accordingly, in addition to rational, materialistic intentions, world politics is also significantly influenced by ideas, which, in turn, change the meaning of matter itself from time to time. Therefore, according to Wendt, the international system, along with the materialistic one, also includes idealistic elements (Wendt 1999).

A. Wendt's definition of international relations allows not only to explain the unexpected and useless, damaging actions of the Russian Federation but also to foresee its next steps, which in turn is of great importance for the participants of international relations – states and associations of states, for the right policy towards Russia to form.

Analyzing Russia's behavior from the perspective of "constructivism" sheds light on the main reasons that led to the formation of Russia's foreign policy in its current form and is related to the cultural and ideological features of the Russian state and society, which especially manifested themselves in the conditions of military aggression against Ukraine.

At all stages of the existence of the Russian Empire, ideologies were developed in the Russian political elites and society and then actively introduced in the broad layers, by which the necessity of the existence of the empire and the growth of its strength was substantiated. Such was, for example, the idea of the so-called "Third Rome" and the mainstay of Christianity that was used particularly effectively during several military campaigns against the Ottoman Empire. Later, the mentioned idea was further specified and received the content of the main defender of "Orthodoxy", which, in turn, was caused by the hostilities against the European countries, mainly Christian (Catholic and Protestant), on the European continent.

After the revolution in Russia and later the Bolshevik coup, the Russian Empire, which changed its face in the form of the Soviet Union, was a state created on an entirely ideological basis, and it was the communist ideology in the form of “Marxism-Leninism” that became its distinguishing mark from the outside world. The communist regime declared the capitalist West as the main ideological enemy and set the society as a goal to fight against it.

In the background of the economic and political crisis that started in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the existence of the Russian Federation as a unified state was threatened, which was strengthened by the stirring up of national feelings in the constituent entities of the Federation. There was also an attempt at direct secession from the Russian Federation, in particular by the Republic of Chechnya, which resulted in two wars and terrorist acts on the territory of Russia. Along with the brute force with which the Russian political leadership maintained the territorial integrity of the state, there was an urgent need to develop an appropriate ideological basis that would justify the existence of multiple ethnic groups and respective territorial units within the unified Russian state. That is why active work had started in the mentioned direction, especially after V. Putin became the President of the Russian Federation, for whom the main goal was to strengthen the official vertical and establish complete control over the various branches of the government formed as a result of democratic reforms.

Accordingly, with the active support of the Russian government, the involvement of government bodies, special services, and representatives of academic circles, a sort of mixed, hybrid type of ideology was formed, which was a mixture of the ideas of the Soviet Union and Tsarist Russia. The above found its reflection on state symbols as well. The anthem of the former Soviet Union was declared the national anthem of Russia, while the state coat of arms represents the heritage of Tsarist Russia. In order to effectively influence the given mixed ideology on the broad strata of the population, printed and television mass media were actively involved in its dissemination, and later, the Internet and social networks were effectively used. Through the press, television, and the Internet, ideologues associated with the Russian government have been inculcating the idea in Russian society for years that Russia as a state can exist only in the form of an empire under the conditions of constant strengthening and territorial expansion. The so-called concept of the “Russian world” meant people speaking not only Russian but also other Slavic languages all over the world. In this regard, special attention was focused on the former republics of the Soviet Union. Russian ideologues, such as A. Dugin, emphasized Russia’s spiritual, religious, and divine purpose on earth and declared the salvation of the world as the main goal of the Russian Empire (Dugin 2009; TVO Today | The Agenda 2015).

The Russian Orthodox Church, under the leadership of the Russian Patriarch Kirill Gundiaev, was actively involved in the formation and implementation of the new ideology (Orthodox Church 2019). The Church not only supported and does support the aggressive foreign policy of Putin’s regime but also represents one of the main proponents of the idea of uniting the Orthodox nations, especially the Slavic Orthodox, in the “Russian world”¹. The unification of Ukraine and Belarus in the common Russian space played a significant role in the implementation of the mentioned idea. On the other hand, Ukraine, and in particular Kyiv, has a pivotal importance in the Russian historical and ideological discourse because it is considered the main cornerstone of Russian statehood and national identity.

As a result of the combined efforts of the state, academia, the church, the controlled media, and public organizations, broad sections of the Russian population have been re-indoctrinated with new interpretations of old ideologies. This has reached such a scale that the Russian government itself, and in this case, the Putin regime, has become a hostage of its own bogus historical and ideological discourse.

Before the start of active hostilities in Ukraine, a large number of military-political experts agreed that it would be much more profitable for the Russian Federation to threaten the possible use of military force because by starting real military operations, Russia would take an immense risk, consisting in the loss of its political and economic dominance on a regional scale. Accordingly, there was a general agreement regarding the issue that starting a large-scale military conflict would be a strongly irrational decision for Russia. It also seemed unconvincing that the Russian political regime called NATO’s eastward expansion a mortal threat to Russian statehood because Ukraine and Georgia, as the principal countries of NATO’s Eastern Partnership, were not expected to integrate more in the near and medium term in the North Atlantic Alliance.

¹ Kirill Gundyaev, in his sermon on March 6, 2022, supported the military invasion of Ukraine and explained it by the need to protect the Russian world and values in Donbas, which oppose the “gay parade”.

Considering all of the above, along with material factors, the false historical discourse formed over decades and the ideology created by the regime played a significant role in the unexpected “irrational” decision taken by the Russian political regime against existing expectations.

The Russian political elite was not able to make rational decisions, even after Russia suffered a heavy defeat from a military point of view, failed to fulfill the main task – to capture the capital of Ukraine, Kyiv, and was forced to withdraw the military units from the north of Ukraine to avoid complete destruction. Instead of the huge losses of human and material resources² becoming the basis for making somewhat sane political decisions for the Putin regime through the state propaganda information machine and using an ideological cover, the society was again presented with a new goal – the “liberation of the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine from the Nazis”.

In order to achieve the unity and obedience of the society, the Russian government is actively trying to carry out the Soviet propaganda narratives of the Second World War, which is manifested in the frequent use of such words as “fascism”, “Nazism”, “patriotism” in political statements, television programs and printed publications. For this purpose, was also used the event held in Volgograd, dedicated to the fortieth anniversary of the Battle of Stalingrad. For propaganda purposes, a bust of Stalin was put up, and the name “Stalingrad” returned to the city for one day. Russian President V. Putin also arrived in Volgograd and threatened the West with the use of nuclear weapons because of the aid provided to Ukraine. Putin also emphasized the possibility of the appearance of German tanks “with the image of a cross” on the territory of Ukraine, thus trying to connect the ongoing military operations in Ukraine and the fight against fascism³.

On the other hand, the Russian discourse of the Second World War is totally based on the Soviet historical discourse, presenting the Soviet Union as the defeating force of fascism, while the role of the allies was minimized. For decades, generations have been raised in this discourse, shaped not only through history textbooks but also through theater and cinema, fiction, and scientific literature. As a result, a kind of collective memory was formed about the Second World War, which was wholly shaped by the then regime and derived from its interests.

Sociologist James V. Wertsch, in his work *Voices of Collective Remembering*, recalls an incident that happened during his stay in Russia when he had the opportunity to talk to high school students about the Second World War in one of the schools. A complete surprise to him was the opinions expressed by the students about the role of the Allies in the defeat of fascism. In particular, the students confidently told him that in the early years of the war, the US benefited greatly from selling armaments while making no real contribution to the efforts of the Allies. However, the USA and Great Britain only entered the war and opened a second front when they were convinced that the Soviet Union was defeating fascist Germany. In the analysis of the mentioned fact, J. V. Wertsch develops the opinion that collective memory instead of direct experience is mainly formed by the so-called “textual mediation”, meaning not only history textbooks but also the media, and this is particularly characteristic of countries such as Russia (Wertsch 2004).

In the rhetoric of Russian government representatives and ideologues, the facts of using religious motives are also frequent when they refer to the USA and the European Union as “servants of Satan” fighting against Orthodox Christianity, and they “reassure” the public that in case of a nuclear war, which could lead to a catastrophe on the whole earth, Russians will go to heaven and their enemies will go to hell⁴.

In this regard, together with various propagandist media, the Russian Orthodox Church stands out, whose servants actively preach about the need to fight against the “satanic” West, which demands the legalization of same-sex marriages from “Orthodox” Russia. Representatives of the Russian Church also release various videos in which they pose with military weapons and equipment, thus trying to create an imitation of a personal example for the population and congregation.

It is worth noting that Putin’s regime uses information operations based on ideology not only to influence the Russian population but also to influence international entities so that states refrain from helping Ukraine for fear of nuclear war. The Russian government is trying to present itself to the international community as an extremely destructive group of people imbued with the idea of “Great Russia”, ready to make the most dangerous decisions, including self-destruction among others if its foreign-

² According to the data of the General Staff of the Defense Forces of Ukraine, the losses of the Russian Armed Forces in the form of casualties amounted to 133,190 soldiers. According to the data of the US Central Intelligence Agency, Russia’s losses in the form of wounded, dead, and missing are more than 200 thousand soldiers (General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine 2023; Stepanenko et al. 2023).

³ The speech of the President of the Russian Federation V. Putin in Volgograd on February 2, 2023. V. Putin announced that the West will respond to the supply of heavy weapons to Ukraine and that the modern war with Russia will be “different”.

⁴ Statement of Russian President V. Putin on October 19, 2018, about the possibility of using nuclear weapons (Interpressnews 2023).

political ambitions are not met⁵. Therefore, Russia has actually acquired the signs of a “terrorist state”, which considers intimidation of others, both through threats and actual terrorist actions, as the main means of securing its interests.

Blackmail with nuclear weapons, supported by the ideology of “Great Russia”, also serves the purpose of saving the Putin regime since the expected military defeat in Ukraine creates the preconditions for regime change, which may not necessarily be non-violent, since to maintain Russian statehood and the “idea of Russia” in its current form, it will be necessary to identify the responsible persons and punish them appropriately. If Putin’s political regime does not finally decide to use nuclear weapons and, at the same time, fails to communicate the expected failure in Ukraine to the Russian population in a form acceptable to the public, the public elites, carrying the hybrid ideology of “Great Russia”, will become a priority to save the idea itself, one of the means of which is likely to be demonizing members of the existing regime and holding them accountable.

Considering the high degree of ideologization of the Russian society and the broad strata of the population, it is unlikely that the Russian state and society, after the failure experienced in Ukraine, will be able to make drastic changes, transform into a democratic, open society, and become a reliable partner in international relations, based on a rational judgment of mistakes. Even if this were to be attempted, a long period would be necessary, during which Russian society would have to reassess its current values and try to break free from its ideological shackles. Accordingly, the world community should prepare to establish relations with Russia after the war, which, in turn, will be a difficult challenge for the system of international relations because Russia’s nuclear potential and the threat of manipulation of this potential by political elites will not disappear anywhere. The “hybrid ideology” will also continue to exist and will likely remain the main basis of populist promises and plans for political forces for a long time to come.

Considering the example of Russia, it is possible to conclude that in order to make relevant conclusions in the process of analyzing the foreign-political behavior of states, only “realistic” approaches are not enough, important are also the ideological-cultural features of the societies of specific states, formed over decades through written texts or other means of information as a result of historical discourse. The example of Russia shows us that the ideological factor, which, at a certain stage, may be used by the ruling elites to achieve purely materialistic goals, transforms over time into the main determining factor of the state’s foreign policy behavior. As a result, the political officials of the states are forced to stay within the existing ideological framework when forming acceptable decisions at the strategic level, which ultimately affects the degree of rationality of the actions taken. Accordingly, since ideological-cultural features and historical discourse have a significant impact in international relations on the identification of “enemies”, “competitors”, and “friends” by states, their consideration also makes it possible to predict the foreign-political behavior of states, which is very important for international actors in terms of short, medium and long-term policy planning as well as preventive measures.

References:

- Babitsky, Andrey. 2022. “With Russia, Vernacular Realism Tramps Political Realism.” Wilson Center, June 21, 2022. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/russia-vernacular-realism-trumps-political-realism>.
- Chokheli, Ket. 2023. “Dimitri Medvedevi – ukrainis mkhridan q’irimze dartq’ mis shemtkhvevashi ruseti m zad aris, q’vela sakhis iaraghi gamoiq’enos.” 04.02.2023 (in Georgian). <https://1tv.ge/news/dimitri-medvedevi-ukrainis-mkhridan-yirimze-dartymis-shemtkhvevashi-ruseti-mzad-aris-yvela-sakhis-iaraghi-gamoiyenos/>.
- Charap, Samuel, and Timothy J. Colton. 2017. *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia*. London: Routledge.
- Dugin, Alexander. 2012. *The Fourth Political Theory*. Moscow: Eurasian Movement.
- Feinstein, S. G., and E. B. Pirro. 2021. “Testing the World Order: Strategic Realism in Russian Foreign Affairs.” *Int Polit* 58: 817-834.

⁵ The Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, D. Medvedev, said that in case of an attack on the Crimean Peninsula by Ukraine, Russia is ready to use all kinds of weapons (Chokheli 2023).

- General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. 2023. Facebook, February 7, 2023.
<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/>.
- Interpressnews. 2023. “Vladimer Putini – ts’armoudgenelia, magram phaktia: chven isev gvemukrebian germanuli Leopard tankebit, romlebzec jvrebia – vupasukhebt.” 02.02.2023 (in Georgian).
<https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/743324-vladimer-putini-carmoudgenelia-magram-paktia-chven-isev-gvemukrebian-germanuli-leopard-tankebit-romlebzec-jvrebia-vupasuxebt/>.
- Mearsheimer, John J. 2014. “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin.” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5: 77–89.
- Orthodox Church. “Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow - Why They Plot Against the Russian Orthodox Church.” YouTube video, 4:56. October 20, 2019.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVTvJXroA0g>.
- Stepanenko, Kateryna, Karolina Hird, Grace Mappes, George Barros, Layne Philipson, Nicole Wolkov, and Frederick W. Kagan. 2023. “Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 6, 2023.” ISW – Institute for the Study of War, February 6, 2023.
<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-6-2023>.
- Thalis, Alexander. 2018. “Threat or Threatened? Russian Foreign Policy in the Era of NATO Expansion.” Australian Institute of International Affairs, May 03, 2018.
<https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/threat-or-threatened-russian-foreign-policy-in-the-era-of-nato-expansion/>.
- TVO Today | The Agenda. “Competing Ideologies.” YouTube video, 1:31:36. February 11, 2015.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLiKiDnMSFw>.
- Wendt, Alexander. 1999. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wertsch, James. 2004. *Voices of Collective Remembering*. Cambridge University Press.