

Article

Russia's Foreign Policy from the Crimean Crisis to the Middle East: Great Power Gamble or Biopolitics?

Philipp Casula

University of Zurich

philipp.casula@hist.uzh.ch

Abstract

The Crimea Crisis of 2014 and the subsequent conflict in Eastern Ukraine have brought to the fore the troubled relations between Putin's Russia and the West. Observers have been oscillating between disbelief and alarm, trying to figure out Russia's conduct in foreign affairs by referring to imperialism, a new Cold War, or to an inherently autocratic character of Russia to explain its foreign policy. The 2015 Russian intervention in Syria has further buttressed these interpretations. Instead, this paper investigates Russia's foreign policy along three key types of modern power in political history: sovereignty, reason of state, and biopolitics. It highlights how their respective instruments are fielded by Russia in four different cases: South Ossetia (2008), the conflicts in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine (2014 and ongoing) as well as and during the Syrian civil war (esp. since 2015). The aim of the paper is not to explain the reasons underlying Russia's foreign policy but rather to highlight its formal mechanisms, which often resemble those of traditional great powers, including sovereignty and reason of state. However, in the context of global governance, biopolitics plays an increasingly important role for Russia.

Keywords

Russia, Crimean Crisis, Syria, Foreign Policy, Biopolitics, Sovereignty.

Introduction

The swift occupation of Crimea by unidentified troops in March 2014 and its subsequent incorporation into the Russian Federation has puzzled Western politicians and scholars. The European Union and the United States have reacted by imposing sanctions on selected individuals of the Putin regime and continued to expand sanctions to different sectors of Russia's economy. Analysts have responded by drawing parallels to the Cold War, by identifying a neo-imperialist course in Russia's foreign policy, or by referring to Russian expansionism as means to

secure regime popularity (Petersson 2014). Similarly, the scale and intensity of the diplomatic and military intervention in the Syrian conflict came to the surprise of all those who regarded Russia as struggling with Western-imposed sanctions and an incapability to wield power beyond its direct neighborhood.

This paper seeks to answer the research question whether this foreign policy conduct is really out of the ordinary: how is Russian foreign policy justified, how it is implemented? What aims does it pursue and how? The paper is less concerned with underlying *reasons* of Russian foreign policy, less with *why* it acted in one way or another, and much more with *how* power is wielded in foreign relations. It argues that contemporary Russia disposes of all types of power typical for a modern political subjectivity. Its foreign policy conduct aims at different things in different regions at different times adopting different styles of power. Russian foreign policy can thus not be reduced simply to common labels such as “great power politics” or “neo-imperialism”.

In the following, I will undertake a formal analysis and scrutinize Russia’s most recent foreign policy highlighting how different types of power have been exercised by Russia during the Crimean Crisis and in Ukraine as well as in the Syrian Civil war.¹ Hence, I am not interested in the events as such but rather a) how they have been cast in key texts, and b) which power techniques have been deployed to make them happen.

The paper looks at selected foreign policy events through three basic concepts of political theory. Following particularly Foucault’s (2007) definitions, it will underscore the changing preferences in the choice of foreign policy tools adopted by the Putin regime since its ascent to power. The basic notions taken into consideration are *sovereignty*, *reason of state* and *biopolitics*. Deploying these concepts involves a selective reading of Foucault and consciously disregards other of his approaches to power. This conscious choice has the clear advantage of providing a coherent framework of analysis. Furthermore, *Security, Territory, Population* is one of the few texts, in which Foucault openly develops ideas pertaining to international relations, while generally, Foucault is much more concerned with “the domestic arena of liberal societies” (Selby 2007, p. 332). This paper particularly discusses the Russian mimicry of “humanitarian interventions” in 2008 (Georgia) and 2014 (Ukraine) but also extends the discussion to the Russian meddling in the Syrian conflict (2015).

The paper locates itself in the wider field of the growing literature of *International Governmentality Studies* (IGS). IGS includes “a whole series of investigations that

¹ Hence, “forms of power” and “tools” are not the same: three forms of power (sovereignty, reason of state, and biopolitics) are associated respectively with three tools of power (“law and war”, “military-diplomacy- economy”, and “security”) as will be discussed in more detail below.

are putting Foucault's hypotheses to work across the full spectrum of concerns and topics that animate IR" (Walters 2012, p. 83). IGS do not aim at developing grand theories but rather at answering detailed questions about the *functioning* or the *procedures* of IR phenomena. IGS argues that "the world comprises multiple projects of rationalizations and practices of governance, (...) which confront and act upon a reality that they only ever manage to shape partially and incompletely because that reality inevitably frustrates, eludes obstructs their best intentions. The ethos of inquiry becomes one of mapping these attempts at rationalization, exploring their differences, their successes and failures, their fissures and their mutations (...) – all with as much empirical connections as possible" (Walters 2012, p. 89). Hence, they encourage a *formal* analysis of IR events asking what shape an event did take.

Theoretically, the paper shows that IGS can encourage both a constructivist and realist reading of international relations. Realism and constructivism are but two academic attempts at rationalizing IR. Politicians, too, engage in seeing IR through realist and constructivist lenses. Realism is understood here as a school of thought centered on nation-states ("groupism"), self-interest ("egoism" of states), "anarchy", and "power politics" (Goodin 2010, p. 133). Constructivism, in contrast, "emphasizes the social and relational construction of what states are and what they want" (Goodin 2010, p. 299). In contrast to realism, constructivism does not presume a fixed identity or an objective national interest. Rather, these notions are themselves subject to constant negotiation and renegotiation.

The possibility of a realist interpretation runs against the expectations of what is possible with a Foucauldian toolkit, which is usually posited in the realm of post-structuralism. It also runs against the actual use of Foucauldian terminology in works such as of R.B.J. Walker, Richard Ashley, Jim George or Cynthia Weber. However, while these authors invoke Foucault to refute realist analysis "they owe much more to (...) textual idealists than they do to Foucault" (Walters 2012, p. 328). The main conceptual point this paper wants to make is that a Foucauldian background allows *both* for realist *and* for constructivist/post-structuralist readings of IR.

Empirically, the paper analyzes how Russia used the tools associated with the forms of power of sovereignty, reason of state, and biopolitics since the collapse of the USSR and especially after the intervention in South Ossetia. The paper's main claim is that Russia's military interventions in Georgia, in Ukraine, and Syria do not represent a break with previously professed principles of Russian foreign policy and instruments. Rather, Russia adopts the entire repertoire of devices, means, or mechanisms available to modern states: all the tools of sovereignty, reason of

state, and biopolitics remain present, both in domestic and in foreign policy.² The comparison between Russia's use of power suggests that in the Near abroad, Russia tends to adopt a de-territorializing biopolitical stance, undermining the sovereignty of other former Soviet republics and highlighting a *Russkii mir*, i.e. a space without state-borders in which Russian life is placed. Beyond the borders of the former USSR, however, Russia tends to play the territorial game of sovereignty, stressing nation-states in their current borders and their non-violability, emerging once more as a (self-professed) "defender of territoriality" (Nunan 2016: 12).

Methodologically, the paper will adopt a genealogical, discourse-analytical stance and scrutinize key documents published by the Russian government, including Russian federal laws and speeches by key politicians. It will also draw on popular literature issued by publishing houses close to the Kremlin. While the body of literature stems from different periods, this is not to suggest a uniform discursive field, but rather to highlight continuities in foreign policy discourse.³ The methodology, which this paper leans on, is not Foucauldian archaeology but his genealogy (Foucault 1971). Genealogy is focused on recasting the "family tree" of a phenomenon, in this case: the exercise of power in Russian foreign policy. However, the search for continuities in genealogy can also reveal discontinuities: "Not the enhancement of one's present-day status, or the grounding of a contentious claim, but rather that of introducing elements of contingency and specificity" (Walters 2012, p. 117) into what Russian foreign policy is. Thus, while possibly searching for continuity in "authoritarian imperialism", we might discover that Russian foreign policy actually is "a hodgepodge of bits and pieces" (Walters 2012, p. 118).

The main contribution of this paper consists in providing an analysis of Russian foreign policy adopting a discourse analytical approach, highlighting the rise of biopolitics as determinant of foreign policy decisions in the post-Soviet space and the dominance of sovereignty for Syrian case. The time frame of the study covers the period from 2008-2016, focusing particularly on Russia's interventions in Georgia and Ukraine as well as in Syria.

² Modern states and modern societies dispose of distinctive ways of exercising power. They have a characteristic political rationality. Foucault went as far as to state that "One of the numerous reasons why [Fascism and Stalinism] are, for us, so puzzling is that in spite of their historical uniqueness they are not quite original. They used and extended mechanisms already present in most other societies. More than that: in spite of their own internal madness, they used to a large extent the ideas and the devices of our political rationality" (Foucault 1982, p. 779)

³ Discourse is not understood as merely textual but as of comprising both text and practice. The paper does not adhere to a distinction between texts and facts. Rather, it treats texts as facts and facts as texts. It looks at how "facts" and "texts" interact to form a discourse. Hence, the paper will be particularly concerned both with how political texts, speeches, demands and statements engage in describing IR phenomena, and how mechanisms of power are deployed to make "facts happen."

Biopolitics in Crimea and in the Near Abroad: Compatriots, Security and the Mimicry of Humanitarian Interventions

If biopolitics means defining a *bios*, a life, or a population, then Russian foreign policy has recently assumed a biopolitical dimension in the Near abroad, emphasizing increasingly the importance of a vaguely defined “Russian life”. While the idea of protecting ethnic and other Russian-speakers outside the territory of the Russian Federation is not new and has been acted on in the past too, I will advance evidence to buttress the claim that the *shift* to a biopolitical rationale in Russia’s policy to the post-Soviet space is new. While this claim is complicated by the difficulties to define who belongs on which grounds to the Russian population, vagueness of the concept makes it malleable and thus a particularly dangerous notion for the nation-states in the Russian neighborhood. The problem of defining a “Russian” population echoes claims of constructivism that nation-states’ policies are about perceptions, about social and relational constructions, such as a *Russian life*.

“Biopolitics deals with the population, with the population as political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power’s problem” (Foucault 2007, p. 245). Put differently, biopolitics is power exercised on the population. It does neither aim at nor relate to a specific territory and its relation to the sovereign, nor at the state as focal point of all political activity. It is hence a de-territorialized form of power that transgresses borders. The tool Foucault associates with biopolitics is *security* (Foucault 2007, p. 20). Security encompasses all means to steer, to regulate, and to govern a population taking into account its inherent qualities (Gros 2012, p. 211-218). “Security is related to normality and liberty, not to war and survival, nor with coercion and surveillance. It differs from sovereignty and discipline as it is a cost calculation inside a series of probable events” (Bigo 2008, p. 96).

Humanitarian interventions fit into the scheme of security, because they claim to be specifically aimed at preserving threatened live and go well beyond simple military activity. They deploy a “caring for a population”, however continue to work with biopolitical, disciplinary and sovereign technologies, including violence (Piotukh 2015). Humanitarian interventions involve occupation, state-building, economic development, and infrastructure improvements; they reorder space and people, while strike on the “enemies” of humanitarian projects; they attempt to “optimize the health, welfare and life of populations” (Dean 2010 p. 20). While sovereignty requires a territory to be delimited, biopolitics needs a *population* to be defined. The population that is increasingly coming into play and becoming a factor determining or legitimizing Russian foreign policy in the Near abroad is the community of ethnic Russians in the post-Soviet space. Whom exactly to consider belonging to the group of *sootchestvenniki* (compatriots) is, however,

everything but clear.

Already under Yeltsin, efforts have been undertaken to define the “compatriots” and to develop a strategy towards this population. These efforts under Yeltsin, Medvedev and Putin to provide clarity about what it means to be a Russian *sootchestvennik*, however, resulted in rather murky laws. The Federal Law No. 99-FZ “On state policy toward compatriots living abroad”, adopted in May 1999 and amended in July 2010 (Federal Law No. 179-FZ), offers a very broad definition. It even underlines the principle of self-identification as basis for being recognized as *sootchestvennik* (Kremlin Press Service 2010).⁴ For Oxana Shevel, the 2010 law institutionalized ambiguity, because “the official definition of compatriots is (...) vague enough to allow defining compatriots by a virtually infinite combination of ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural, and even professional characteristics. For example, the compatriots definition in the law can accommodate an interpretation that all former Soviet citizens are Russia’s compatriots” (Shevel 2011, p. 89). The law reflects discussions that have been raging in the years before and reflects demands expressed in the wider political discourse. Egor Kholmogorov or Andrei Isaev, for example, underline that Russianness is above all about culture. Isaev stresses that “not soil and blood, but language and culture” determine being Russian. Russianness “is a declarative right” (Isaev 2006, p. 8). Kholmogorov (2006, p. 266) hints that one might also become Russian just by serving the Russian state.

In 2005, Putin highlighted that the end of the USSR, “for the Russian people, became a real drama” (Putin 2008, p. 272). On March 18, 2014, after the Euro-maidan and the events on Crimea, he repeated: “Millions of people went to bed in one country and awoke in different ones, overnight becoming ethnic minorities in former Union republics” (Putin 2014a). Security concerns became visible on the issue of migration to Russia. The aim of Russian migration policy is to control the flows of people between Russia and its neighboring countries in order to tackle the perceived demographic problems. Putin declared demography to be one of the most pressing issues in Russia – a problem of “love, women, and children” that can also be tackled by more immigration from former Soviet republics (Putin 2008, p. 330; see also Rotkirch et al. 2007, p. 351–352).

Thus, the care about the compatriots has also a foreign policy side. The defense

⁴ Article 3, for example, reads as follows: “As compatriots are also recognized those persons and their descendants, who live outside the territory of the Russian Federation and usually belong to those people, who historically live on the territory of the Russia, [those] who made a free choice for a spiritual, cultural or juridical connection with the Russian Federation, as well as their relatives in direct ascendant line, who lived on the territory of Russia, including former citizens of the USSR, who live in states, which have been part of the USSR, who received their citizenship or who became stateless”, Federal’nyi zakon 179-FZ “O vnesenii izmenenii v Federal’nyj zakon ‘O gosudarstvennoi politike Rossiiskoi Federatsii v otnoshenii sootchestvennikov za rubežom”, 23.07.2010, retrieved 23 January 2017 <http://base.garant.ru/198858/#block_13>.

of Russian citizens or russophone populations abroad became a key issue and a rationale for justifying the exertion of pressure on neighboring countries (Jackson 2003). The compatriots also figure prominently in the 2013 Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation. It underlines that “particular attention will be paid to providing support to compatriots living in the CIS Member States.” Another aim will be to negotiate “agreements on the protection of their (...) rights and freedom (...) ensuring comprehensive protection of rights and legitimate interests of Russian citizens and compatriots residing abroad, and promoting, in various international formats, Russia’s approach to human rights issues” (MFA of Russia 2013).

The intervention in South Ossetia in 2008 was explicitly made on the grounds of saving the lives of the *sootchestvenniki*. After hostilities had started, Dmitri Medvedev affirmed on August 8, 2008: “Civilians (...) are dying today in South Ossetia, and the majority of them are citizens of the Russian Federation. In accordance with the Constitution and the federal laws, as President of the Russian Federation it is my duty to protect the *lives and dignity of Russian citizens* wherever they may be” (Medvedev 2008, emphasis added).

Four days later, it is South Ossetian people and not Russian citizens who are in need of protection. With Ukaz 1194 of August 12, 2008, a day of mourning was declared to commemorate the “humanitarian catastrophe in South Ossetia”. The decree underscored that “Georgian forces (...) illegally invaded and attempted to seize South Ossetian territory (...). This act constitutes *genocide against the South Ossetian people*.” (Kremlin Press Service 2008, emphasis added). The Notion of Russian citizens disappears, and the protection of the South Ossetian population emerges. However, in both cases it is a life-and-death matter. The reference to South Ossetians and to a humanitarian catastrophe makes the Russian intervention less particularistic and locates it in a universal claim to protect human life. However, the biological category of “South Ossetians” and legal concept of “Russian citizens” are blurred, as Russian authorities handed out of passports in the years preceding the five-day war.

With regard to Crimea and Ukraine, Putin adopted a similar rhetoric. Since Crimeans had no Russian passports, he drew on a broad understanding of compatriots, and stated that in Ukraine “live (...) millions of ethnic Russians, *russophone citizens*, and Russia will always defend their interests with political, diplomatic, and legal means” (Putin 2014a, emphasis added). Whereas under Medvedev in 2008, Russia still maneuvered trying to define South Ossetians as Russians in legal terms, under Putin, policy has tilted towards a broader interpretation of compatriots, which can be ethnic, linguistic, or cultural, and *not only* legal. Under Putin’s tenure since 2012 a shift occurred towards stressing a civilizational definition of Russianness, i.e. making it broader on the one hand, because it refers

to multiethnicity (*mnogonatsionalnost'*) and yet on the other, assigning to ethnic Russians a special role as “stateforming” people (*gosudarstvobrazuyushchii narod*) within Russia. These positions come along using the terminology borrowed from Russian nationalism, which Russian official discourse had widely avoided beforehand (Malinova 2013, p. 198-199). The incorporation of Crimea marked the shift from a biopolitical power that justified the occupation of the peninsula to sovereign power that redefined the legal status of Crimea and its inhabitants.

With this shift to biopolitics, Russia also allots to the former Soviet republics a special place in its foreign policy not only due to geographical proximity and resulting socio-economic ties, but because their populations include Russian or russophone minorities, and thus actual or potential compatriots. In this light, it seems, the Kremlin displays an interest in the population of the CIS in the first place, and only then, in the nation-states they inhabit. Russia reserves the right to intervene to protect those populations with whom Russia claims to have “close historical, cultural and economic ties. Protecting these people is in our national interests. (...) We cannot remain indifferent if we see that they are being persecuted, destroyed and humiliated” (Putin 2014a). Foreign Minister Lavrov succinctly put it in a sovereign/legal language on April 23: “Russian citizens being attacked, is an attack against the Russian Federation” (Lavrov 2014). Such an interpretation of compatriots means that the current Russian foreign policy explicitly recognizes a mismatch between the sovereign territory of the Russian Federation and the population for which the Russian state claims responsibility. However, biopolitics is but one form of power wielded by modern Russia. Before turning to sovereignty and Russia’s diplomatic and military engagement in the Syrian conflict, I will discuss the “reason of state”-side of Russia’s foreign policy, since both biopolitics and sovereignty feed into the rationale *raison d'état* and thus of increasing the power of the Russian state.

Reason of State: Stability, Diplomacy and Balance of Power

Reason of state means to put the state’s interests above all other political goals – here the “realist” potential of Foucault’s triptych of power comes to the fore, as this form of power rests on the nation-state as key point of reference. Reason of state describes the knowledge necessary to form, preserve, strengthen and expand the state. It is “a certain political consideration that is necessary in all public matters, councils and plans, which must strive solely for the preservation, expansion, and felicity of the state, and for which we must employ the most ready and swift means” (Foucault 2007, p. 339). In this perspective, there is no divine or natural order. The state is the sole principle and aim of governmental ratio, supplanting the key place held beforehand by the prince (chosen by God) under sovereignty. Formerly, it had been all about securing, preserving and increasing the wealth of the *sovereign*, now it was increasingly the *state itself* that had to be secured and ex-

panded. In this sense, reason of state is deeply conservative, it is about conserving and preserving the state: “With *raison d'état*, politics and government are located firmly in a *material world* characterized by dynamics, processes, and relations of military, economic and social force. The ruler's task is (...) to enable the state to survive and thrive in an environment where it must exist and *compete alongside other states*” (Walters 2012, p. 26, emphasis added).

Its key tool is a military-diplomatic technology that consists in securing and developing the state's forces through a system of alliances and the organization of military forces (Foucault 2007, p. 365). “Key to the operation of this technology is the idea of ‘balance’ and ‘equilibrium’ in the system of interacting forces that is now identified with the European world of states” (Walters 2012, p. 27). In addition, the economy becomes a tool in the hand of reason of state. In a mercantilist understanding, the economy has to contribute to the states' greatness (Foucault 2007, p. 439). This logic has never completely changed: while reason of state originates in the 17th century, it continues to be applied, explicitly or implicitly, by all nation-states, not only by Russia, but, alas, with different degrees of intensity. When issues that are considered to be vital interests of a state are at stake, military action can never be considered off the table. Reason of state explicitly allows breaking the law if this serves the state. In this sense, the *coup d'état* and the state of exception that suspend the validity of law, while running against the principles of sovereignty, would squarely fall into the realm of state reason, because it elevates the state interest above the law or the constitutional order (Foucault 2007, p. 438-440).

Gaddy and Hill (2013) argue that the state is a “mythic entity” in Russia. They interpret Vladimir Putin as a *statist*, a *gosudarstvennik* or *derzhavnik*, appointed to serve the Russian state and restore its greatness. He is, in this perspective, by definition *not* a sovereign, whose only aim is to preserve his personal power, but rather an executor of the state's interests. This paper has no evidence either to support that he is doing the former, nor that he is the latter. Neither is this the point. However, Putin's well-known statement made in 2005 that “the collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century” (Putin 2008, p. 272), perfectly reflects *raison d'état* thinking and at least shows that Putin wishes others to think that he has state interests in mind only. The statement also underscores that in his vision, present-day Russia is an extension of the Soviet Union, which in turn was heir to the Russian empire. Hence, Soviet demise meant a weakening of the Russian state, of its institutions and of its reach. Restoring Russia's power has been a clearly stated goal of Putin's tenure, from its very beginning, and is in line with the principles already in place under Primakov.

The handling of the national economy and especially the crackdown on the Oligarchs' political ambitions provides another good example to see how Russian

policies are in line with reason of state. In a mercantilist fashion, Russian oligarchs have been put at the service of the state. In Russian political discourse, hints abound at such an understanding of the economy. Valerii Fadeev, editor of the renowned *Ekspert* magazine, declared for example that “the strength of the state consists in being able to organize the activity of the private economy in a way, that it achieves results for the country as a whole and not only for itself” (Fadeev 2006, p. 141). Andrei Kokoshin concurs and underlines that “not all private entrepreneurs can become ‘locomotives of national success’ without the help of the state. (...) the central role of the state benefits the competitiveness of Russia and of its friends and partners” (Kokoshin 2006, p. 96). In this vision, state and economy are closely intertwined. Not only should Russian companies serve state interests, contribute to Russia’s greatness, also, the state comes back as economic player. The energy sector is maybe the most obvious example for how economic and political interests are entangled to bolster state power (Orlov 2006). In view of this statist thinking, two foreign policy tenets of the current leadership come to the fore: a preference for stability over democracy, and the striving for a balance of power.

Firstly, the *stability-over-democracy principle* holds both for domestic and foreign policy. Hence, in the Kremlin’s view, Syria’s Bashar al-Assad is better than a “radical” and split opposition, Ukraine’s Viktor Yanukovich better than “fascists” in power. Official Russia abhors any revolutionary scenario that might tip over the balance of power in disfavor of Russia. As Boris Kolonitsky commented, “after 23 years apart, Russians and Ukrainians have shaped very different narratives from the same Soviet memories. Soviet culture romanticized and sanctified revolution”, now, however, “the very term revolution has come to carry negative connotations for Russians” (Kolonitsky 2014). Indeed, while Russia’s opposition at first managed to mobilize 50,000 Muscovites to protest against the Kremlin’s action in Crimea, later even critical voices such as that of Dmitri Bykov (2014), caution both against a “Ukrainian euphoria” and a Russian “patriotic trance” as well as against revolutions in general. The Kremlin itself obviously rejects any revolutionary scenario. Statements such as “no revolution, no counterrevolution” (Putin 2008, p. 80) must be seen both against the backdrop of the upheavals of the 1990s and against the background of the Color revolutions in Russia’s neighborhood, which left a deep mark in the Kremlin (Saari 2009). Hence, Russia seems to be a status quo force, whatever the status quo is. Unless, of course, change is to the advantage of the Russian state, as the Georgian and Crimean cases exemplify.

From the Kremlin’s viewpoint, military intervention in South Ossetia was thus a restoration of the status quo: it “was not so much redrawing the map, as aggressively reasserting the status quo that had been in place since 1992-1993, when the two territories de facto seceded from Georgia” (Waal 2011, p. 113). The Russian state could easily accept two dependent territories, de jure belonging to Georgia,

but not their return to into the hands of a Georgia leaning to the West. The internationally not recognized sovereignty of Abkhazia and South Ossetia just cements the dependence of Russia. As a matter of fact, Russian troops refrained from invading all of Georgia, which would have been a step far beyond status quo ante restoration. A similar logic seems to apply to Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. Russia always played a special role on the peninsula and this special role was threatened by feared pro-European takeover in Kiev. The same holds for the Donbas: Russia could accept to have only indirect influence over this territory, but not its loss to Europe. Hence, in these cases, Russia was willing to break international law to maintain the influence it had before.

Secondly, Russia's official vision abhors any turbulence in the international *balance of power*. With the West perceived as creeping closer to Russia's borders, even swallowing former satellites, and seen as obstructing the planned Eurasian Economic Union this balance is threatened. The Eurasian Union became a cornerstone for Russian attempts to maintain a balance of power and strengthen the bonds between former Soviet republics (Putin 2011). Since at least 2002, the former Soviet space became the top priority of Russian foreign policy, as Putin (2008, p. 106-128) himself declared. In his view, the interests of the CIS and Russia coincide. A shared history and culture, economic interests, the issue of immigration and the Russian diaspora are all elements invoked time and again to stress the importance of the former Soviet Union in the eyes of Russian foreign policy (MFA of Russia 2013). The Near abroad increasingly turned into a "Russian sphere of identity", into a "Russkii mir" that goes beyond the borders of the Russian Federation (Zelevyev 2014). A key factor in this identity-based conception of belonging to Russia is the memory of World War II in the Russian official narrative. The foreign policy is unambiguous about the central ideational role the CIS plays for Russia. Hence, "Russia intends to actively contribute to the development of interaction among CIS Member States in the humanitarian sphere on the ground of preserving and increasing common cultural and civilizational heritage" (MFA of Russia 2013). In the same paper, Ukraine is earmarked as a "as a priority partner within the CIS".

The Russian intervention in Syria contradicts thinking in terms of sovereignty because it represents a breach of Syrian sovereignty itself. Russia's position in Syria can be seen less as being concerned about Syria but about its own relations with the West and the balance between Russia and the West in the Middle East. From a reason of state perspective the main concern would be how to maintain an equilibrium between pro-Russian and pro-Western forces, and also generally to oppose that the West once more dictates the course of events in that region. Put differently, the intervention in Syria is a means to reassert Russia as a global player again.

Summing up, both in the Ukrainian crisis and in the Syrian conflict, reason of state and balance of power play a key role. Russian foreign policy course steers to maintain a balance with the European Union regarding Ukraine, and with the West (and Iran) concerning Syria. However, regarding Syria the role of the “more traditional form of power”, sovereignty, is the most salient one.

Sovereignty, “Sovereign Democracy” and the Syrian Crisis: Russia as Defender of Territoriality?

In a speech held at the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels in March 2014, Barack Obama extensively commented on the Russian occupation of Crimea and the crisis in Ukraine. In the same speech, he highlighted the importance of “universal” liberal and democratic ideals, which he considered to be threatened by “an older, more traditional view of power”, according to which “ordinary men and women (...) surrender their rights to an all-powerful sovereign” (Obama 2014). Indeed, classic political theory texts on sovereignty, starting with Thomas Hobbes, explain that this form of power is about individuals transferring their rights to an almighty and benevolent sovereign, who is primarily concerned with maintaining security within a specific territory. The key tools that sovereignty adopts to this end are laws (to secure an orderly society within) and violence (to enforce these laws internally and to defend the territory from external threats). Sovereignty echoes tenets of realism with nation-states as central actors, which seek to maximize power and it seems much more apt to describe Russia’s role in Syria than its conduct regarding Crimea.

The concept of sovereignty dates back to the Renaissance and is thus associated with the post-medieval modernization of monarchic power (Singer & Lorna 2006, p. 451). “The traditional problem of sovereignty” consists in “conquering new territories or holding on to conquered territory, (...) its problem was in a way: (...) how can the territory be demarcated, fixed, protected, or enlarged?” (Foucault 2007, p. 92-93). Foucault calls this “Machiavelli’s problem”: Sovereignty is all concerned about upholding the relationship between a prince and his territory. It is this relationship alone around which sovereign power revolves. Sovereignty is concerned with upholding itself. In sovereignty, there is no utopian *telos* or specific vision for state and society. Sovereignty is circular in the sense that the only goal it proposes is an orderly, lawful society, in order to keep-up the relationship between prince and territory. The public good ultimately is obedience to the law. What characterizes the goal of sovereignty is nothing else than submission to this law. The end of sovereignty is self-preservation through authority and law or, put differently: its aim is “its continued exercise, that is, the persistence of sovereign rule over a territory and the subjects’ obedience to law” (Singer & Lorna 2006, p. 448). The key danger that sovereignty faces is *dispossession*. Hence, while sovereignty seems to be a principle of domestic politics it also has a foreign policy dimension,

since the prince has both to fend off internal and external enemies who threaten to dispossess the prince.

The traditional tools of sovereignty to uphold the relationship between prince and territory are laws (internally) and war (externally). Sovereignty “consists in laying down a law and fixing a punishment for the person who breaks it, which is the system of the legal code with a binary division between the permitted and the prohibited, and a coupling, comprising the code, between a type of prohibited action and a type of punishment. This, then, is (...) juridical mechanism” (Foucault 2007, p. 20). The hint at “punishment” aptly shows that legitimate violence is a built-in feature of sovereignty. This is in line with other conceptualizations of sovereignty (Singer & Lorna 2006, p. 451-452).

These themes of sovereignty, the concern for territory and the use of laws to defend the relationship between the sovereign and territory all play a role in contemporary Russian politics. It is not a coincidence that “Sovereign democracy” has been for many years of Putin’s tenure a key notion used by Russian political pundits to describe the Russian political system, until Medvedev (2006) officially dismissed the term. However, while the term was put aside, its importance in political practice was not (Averre 2007). The insistence on sovereignty meant two things: firstly, that Russia’s political system should be considered as a democracy *sui generis* and every meddling into its affairs is unacceptable. Secondly, it is the stress on lawfulness, internally and externally, in a very narrow understanding. Hence, while there is a difference between “sovereignty” as a concept of political science and “sovereignty” in “sovereign democracy” in Russia, both share the idea of power exercised over a territory and are linked by the emphasis put on the role of one sovereign. Let me briefly discuss both dimensions.

Firstly, sovereign democracy means that “Russia is an independent, active participant of international life, and it has, like other countries, national interests, which you have to take into account and to respect” (Putin 2014). However, Russia perceives itself not as any other country but as a traditional great power with clear spheres of influence. This is in line with the classic precepts of sovereignty in terms of a territory, which has to be defended and preserved. Key texts of Sovereign democracy reflect this concern for Russian uniqueness. While the “democratic order” of Russia emerges out of the European civilization, Russia contains a unique character (Surkov 2008, p. 10). In addition, this sense of belonging to Europe, includes a take-over of the “European economic model”, because “the European way is the path of success, of growth” (Surkov 2008, p. 95). However, this belonging to Europe has certain limits, because it means giving up sovereignty. Viacheslav Nikonov, for instance stresses, that EU member states transfer “60-70 percent of the sovereign functions to Brussels” (Nikonov 2007). Sergei Glaz’ev recently echoed Nikonov, pointing out that any association with the EU

means transferring sovereignty over the economy to Brussels (Echo of Moscow 2014). Sergei Karaganov, too, criticizes any possible take-over of European norms as a loss of sovereignty (Karaganov 2004; 2005). Hence, the sense of belonging to Europe visible in early texts on Sovereign democracy is flawed from the start by concerns about Russia's nature and the stress that belonging to Europe does not include a sacrifice of sovereign power. Nikonov predicted already in 2003 that "Russia will be integrated into the international system but always try to follow its own path" (Nikonov 2003). A key problem in Russia's relations to the West remains the use and abuse of international law and its relation to state sovereignty.

Secondly, as early as 2000, Putin promised a "dictatorship of law" (Putin 2000), and, oddly, this promise was fulfilled internally and externally in a specific sense. The influence of the executive branch of power on the judiciary weighs heavily, precisely because the Russian leadership so zealously strives to build its power on law. Political lawsuits thus became common practice in contemporary Russia. The executive branch exploits the courts to use the law against political opponents, treating them as if they were criminals, just because they threaten to destabilize the existing system. The punk-musicians of *Pussy Riot*, for instance, were convicted on *hooliganism* charges, a broadly defined infraction with a long tradition in Russian history.⁵ The Khodorkovsky trials are another case in point. Additionally, what comes into play is the prevailing legal culture. According to these legal traditions, police, prosecutor and judge see themselves as a team that share the goal to convict a criminal and to serve the interests of the state (Reznik 2012). Indeed, after the turbulent 1990s, Putin's regime has promised few other things but order, stability and lawfulness. The Kremlin's policies lack any utopian element, both internally and externally (Prozorov 2010, p. 272). Basically, the existing system is supposed to remain in place as it is. Putin has been unambiguous about this: "I want to be quite clear in saying that we do not and should not fear change (...) But it is time to say firmly that this period is over and there will be neither revolution, nor counterrevolution" (Putin 2008, p. 80). The crackdown on presumed and real criminals, on any forces that threaten to disrupt this order, fits in this vision of a "dictatorship of law".

Law also plays a key role in Russia's foreign policy. Referring to the Western conduct in international affairs, Putin claimed that "our approach is different: we proceed from the conviction that we always act legitimately. I have personally always been an advocate of acting in compliance with international law" (Putin 2014a). Again, on March 18, Putin condemned Russia's "Western partners", stressing that they "prefer not to be guided by international law in their practical policies, but by the rule of the gun. (...) They act as they please: here and there, they use force

⁵ *Hooliganism* has a specific meaning in the Russian context, cf. Weissmann (1978), Neuberger (1989; 1993), or Konecny (2004).

against sovereign states (...) To make this aggression look legitimate, they force the necessary resolutions from international organizations, and if for some reason this does not work, they simply ignore the UN Security Council and the UN overall” (Putin 2014b). The same theme resurfaced in the context of the Syrian crisis. Foreign minister Sergei Lavrov complained about Western conduct in the Middle East and stressed that the West “need(s) to be trained that the affairs can only be conducted on the basis of equality of rights, balance of interests, and mutual respect” (Lavrov 2013). From a Russian perspective, in Libya and Iraq, the West acted “illegally” and without legitimacy plunged these countries into chaos. Russia claims to act differently in Syria. The sovereign themes of order and lawfulness are seamlessly combined – democracy or dictatorship, respect for or disregard of human rights play a completely secondary role.

Valerii Zor’kin has produced the key text in regard to Russia’s official stand on international law and sovereignty. Published as early as in 2004, it has been reprinted several times. Zor’kin fervidly defends state sovereignty and the principles of the “Westphalian system” (Zor’kin 2006). In many ways, it reflects the same concerns voiced by the US foreign policy community after the end of the Cold War, deploring the lack of a principle structuring international relations and the resulting international chaos. As a matter of fact, the Cold War could be seen as modern variant of the Westphalian system, with clear-cut state entities and zones of influence as well as a certain, balance of power sealed in a treaty. Now, Zor’kin identifies two dangers for state sovereignty. First, human rights and the right of self-determination of the peoples that he claims are abused to undermine sovereignty. Second, national states loss of capacity to govern effectively: “We find ourselves in an absolutely chaotic world (...). In this lawless global chaos there is only one law – the one of the strong and aggressive: of the superpowers, of dictators and of the leaders of mafia-like and terrorist groups”. The praise for the presumably clear order represented by the Westphalian system, however, ignores its mythical character and that the clear borders it promises only exist against the backdrop of their constant shifting and violations (Coward 2005).

On the one hand, the Russian regime insists on respecting the norms of international laws. In the UN Security Council, Russia can stop resolutions and still enjoys a status on par with other super powers. As a matter of fact, Russia and China repeatedly stopped resolutions against Syria since the outbreak of the civil war. If the UN is bypassed by Western powers, as in 1999 or in 2003, Russian officials deplore the breach of international law and the abuse of the concept of humanitarian intervention. When Russian diplomacy once consented to such an intervention in Libya, it promptly caused a rift in the Russian top-echelons of power (BBC 2011), with many Russian observers highlighting that the West had overstepped the mandate granted by UNSCR S/RES/1973. Since then, the Rus-

sian foreign policy position on military interventions has hardened. Any intervention in Syria, for instance has been regularly dismissed. Russia's own intervention is grounded on a specific invitation by the Syrian regime and is recognized as legal, also internationally.

On the other hand, Russia itself has been very flexible in interpreting international laws and especially the "Responsibility to Protect" in its direct neighborhood, and whenever possible an international legal framework was invoked to support a foreign policy that actually broke international law.⁶ Both in the case of the two Georgian breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and in the case of Crimea, Russia invoked the need to protect the local populations against presumed reprisals by Georgian and Ukrainian forces respectively. However, even in these cases a complex legal procedure was staged, upholding Russia's insistence on lawfulness. In the case of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the unclear legal situation allowed Russia to exploit remaining juridical loopholes (Waters 2013). Especially in the case of Crimea's incorporation into the Russian Federation, multiple legal steps were taken to maintain a lawful façade.⁷ These complex legal steps included a go-ahead by the Russian Federal court that circumvented Federal Law 6-FKZ (2001) that would have required Ukrainian consent to Crimea becoming part of Russia.⁸ This *prima facie* perfectly legal procedure reflects the two tenets of sovereignty, the concern about territory on the one hand, and stress on lawfulness as means to exercise power on the other.

Regarding the intervention in Syria, the biopolitical dimension has less importance in Russia's rationale of power. Reporting on the conflict in Russian media, however, often underscored the threat to the lives of Orthodox Christians.⁹ The Russian intervention is, thus, cast as if protecting a community, which is similar to the Russian one. The predominant rationale, however, corresponds to the sovereign and territorial form. Borrowing the notion from Nunan (2016, p. 17), a "post-territorial morality" dominates Russian foreign policy in the Near abroad.

⁶ UNSCR 1674 of April 28, 2006 underscores the states' responsibility to protect their population and the possibility to limit their sovereignty in case of failure to ensure this protection. Cf.: <<http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/331/99/PDF/N0633199.pdf?OpenElement>>.

⁷ Russia at first even denied to have occupied foreign soil and it took Putin a month to formally acknowledge his decision to send Russian troops. Putin acknowledged the Russian troops' intervention in a Q&A session on Russian TV on April 17, 2014: He also stressed his personal role and the role of Russian special forces in Krym – Put' na rodinu, released on 15.03.2015 on channel Rossia-1. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2015/03/150320_crimea_film_battle>.

⁸ On March 16, a referendum was hastily conducted on Crimea and a day later, the peninsula declared independence, which Russia promptly recognized. Then, two days later, on March 18, Putin signed the interstate treaty "On the admission of the Republic of Crimea into the Russian Federation and creation of new sub-federal entities" and received the consent from the Supreme Court on March 19. On March 20, the treaty is ratified by the Duma by a 443-1 vote with no abstentions, and ratified by the Federal Council on March 21.

⁹ See, for example, Anastasiia Popova's Syrian diary TV-reports or her interview with Metropolitan Ilarion, which portrays the Syrian civil war as a "tragedy for historical Christianity" (Popova 2013).

Beyond the borders of the CIS, instead, as the Syrian case shows, the defense of the “territoriality of the nation-state” prevails as power rationale.

Thus, foreign policy statements concerning Syria repeatedly stress Syrian integrity, sovereignty, and the illegitimacy of foreign intervention. In an effort to avert Western airstrikes against the Syrian regime after use of chemical weapons was detected in 2013, the Russian state stressed from the start key elements of sovereign power. In an article for the *New York Times*, Vladimir Putin underlined that “We are not protecting the Syrian government, but international law. We (...) believe that preserving law and order in today’s complex and turbulent world is one of the few ways to keep international relations from sliding into chaos. The law is still the law, and we must follow it whether we like it or not” (Putin 2013). Here Putin picks up the classic circular argument of sovereignty, “the law is the law”, and law prevents the world from “chaos”.

In addition, the 2014 Dushanbe declaration of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit is full of hints at the key themes relating to the sovereign rationale of power. The heads of state stress the need “to strengthen the legal foundations of international relations” and, referring to UN principles, to reciprocally respect “sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity of state, (...) non-interference in internal affairs” (SCO 2014). The declaration specifically mentions to support the “sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity” of Syria as well as the “independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity” of Afghanistan (SCO 2014). By the same token, Sergei Lavrov stressed twice that “it is necessary to fully respect Syria’s sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity (...) [to] respect for the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic as a multiethnic, multi-religious, democratic and secular state” (Lavrov 2016).

Additionally, it should not be overseen how Russia has deployed in addition to its sovereign apparatus (international law and war) also tools from *raison of state*. If the military-diplomatic technology consists in securing and developing the state’s forces through a system of alliances and the organization of military forces, then this perspective brings to the attention the alliances that Russia succeeded (but also failed) to establish to contain the Syrian crisis. The agreement regarding the destruction of the Syrian chemical arsenal was a rare example of US-Russian cooperation, to which the US reluctantly agreed in 2013. Furthermore, Russia managed to establish a division of labor with Iran in Syria, and after having overcome deep disagreements with Turkey, especially after the downing of a Russian military jet by a Turkish plane in November 2015, managed to find common ground with Ankara.

In 2015, Russia undertook unprecedented diplomatic efforts to advance nego-

tiations between the Syrian regime and representatives of the opposition. Sergei Lavrov travelled the Middle East. He even brokered a meeting between Syrian and Saudi security officials (RFI 2015). However, efforts to build a large coalition under Moscow's auspices failed, and especially disagreements with Riyadh remained, while Assad lost ground in Syria. At this point Russia deployed its military and sustained its support until it enabled Moscow to renew its bid for an alliance, this time including parties with as divergent interests as Turkey and Iran.

Thus, Russia might be one of the few states that is on good working terms with Damascus and Ankara, that has good relations to the Kurdish factions in Northern Syria and to the Turkish government, that can talk to Israel and to Iran. However, Russia failed with the Gulf states, showing the limits of its diplomatic capabilities.

Conclusions: Biopolitics in the Near Abroad and Sovereignty Everywhere Else

This paper has shown that International Governmentality Studies can imply realist and constructivist readings of foreign policy. The territorial exercise of sovereign power, Russia's concern for territorial integrity and sovereignty, all echo main tenets of realism, while the biopolitical definition of a "russkii mir" and of "compatriots" refers to the field of identity politics and constructivism.

The main empirical argument advanced in this paper has been that Russian foreign policy adopts all mechanisms of modern power, however, it fields different rationales in the "Near abroad" and in the "Far abroad". In the post-Soviet space, Russia is increasingly inclined to advance a biopolitical approach, as exemplified by the intervention in Georgia 2008 and by the Crimean Crisis. In the "Far abroad", sovereignty is the predominant rationale, as demonstrated by Russia's Syria policy. However, these are trends and, as demonstrated above, there is a mix of instruments at work.

More in detail, the concern for an ill-defined "Russian" population beyond Russia's borders means that Russia adopts a deterritorialized form of power that transgresses the borders of post-Soviet nation states. Their sovereignty is thus called into question. Because of this mismatch between the territory of the Russian Federation on the one hand, and the *Russkii mir* or its "sphere of identity" on the other, Russian foreign policy contains a constant expansionist potential aimed at preserving influence over territories where the "compatriots" live. The biopolitical rationale seems to prevail over the rationale of sovereignty in the Near abroad. However, the Crimean example shows how at the beginning of the crisis, Russia argued in biopolitical terms ("save compatriots") but then moved on to deploy tools associated with sovereignty and built a whole legal edifice to justify the of-

ficial “reunification” of Crimea with the Russian Federation. To argue in favor of a biopolitical *turn* in Russian foreign and domestic policies seems too a bold statement, which would also run against Foucault’s own position. To maintain such a claim would mean to deny pre-Putin Russia any modern subjectivity. Rather, there is a continuum of forms of power. While it might be true that reason of state and sovereignty are “more traditional” forms of power, they are not outdated and continue to play a role in Russian foreign policy, for example in Syria, where claims to “save lives” play a smaller role concerning Russia’s involvement. While there have been attempts to cast Russian support for the Syrian government as an effort to save lives, especially those of Syrian Orthodox Christians, the Russian approach there corresponded less to biopolitics and much more to the toolkit of sovereignty and of *raison d’état*.

The preservation of sovereignty and territoriality has become the paramount concern of Russian foreign policy in the “Far abroad”. To this aim, Russia has deployed its whole diplomatic apparatus to build alliances with other nation-states. Regarding Syria, Russia has also deployed its military apparatus, especially after initial diplomatic efforts failed in 2015. After the fall of Eastern Aleppo in December 2016, in which Russian support played a key role, Moscow returned to dictate a diplomatic solution summoning the conflict parties to an inconclusive summit at Astana. It did so building an alliance with Turkey and Iran, however, delegating the usual international brokers, such as the United Nations and the European Union to the role of mere bystanders, and sidelining other important players such as the U.S. and the Gulf states as well as the Kurdish YPG. Moreover, from a reason of state perspective it is no contradiction that Russia switches between the roles of mediator and warring party.

Therefore, while Russia might deploy a deterritorialized power in the Near abroad that threatens other states’ sovereignty, it paradoxically assumes the role of a champion of territoriality and sovereignty in other parts of the world. Furthermore, it would be too easy to flatly claim that Russia is an “imperialist” state or a “great power” that aims to restore its sphere of influence. While this paper highlighted less the underlying *reasons* for a specific foreign policy, it has shown that different *aims* and different power mechanism (*methods*) are at work, depending on time and place. They even might coexist and overlap. It has focused on the “how” of power and less on its “why”. Russian foreign policy is not simply about “restoring territory” but follows different trajectories in different parts of the world adopting a mix of power mechanisms. Hence, while there certainly are long-durée continuities in Russian foreign policy, it also is full of breaks and shifts – it is not in a finite state, but ever-changing and dynamic.

Bio

Philipp Casula, University of Zurich, philipp.casula@hist.uzh.ch, <http://www.hist.uzh.ch/de/fachbereiche/oeg/projektmitarbeiter/philippcasula.html>

Philipp Casula is a postdoctoral fellow of the Swiss National Science Foundation from the University of Zurich, currently based as visiting scholar at the University of Manchester. His PhD thesis in sociology analyzed the domestic politics of contemporary Russia in terms of hegemony and populism. His current research interest includes the cultural history of post-colonial Russia, especially the relations of the USSR to the Middle East and their cultural representation in Soviet media and academia.

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