Towards neoclassical realist thinking in Russia?

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Even given the relatively recent emergence of international relations (IR) as a discipline, it is still at a young age in Russia. Its development there started in the Soviet Union in the 1970s but it was confined to Marxist critiques of other (bourgeois) schools, and most studies took place in Moscow, which made it easier to control their content. With the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia saw a rapid increase in IR studies. The discipline became much more pluralistic. However, it has stayed empirical rather than oriented towards the construction of distinct theoretical concepts. Various theoretical paradigms have been borrowed from the West to explain events or developments in Russia or elsewhere. For that very reason, there are limits to how far we can talk about the development of IR theoretical studies in contemporary Russia.

Realism swiftly acquired a central role in Russian IR studies, for reasons explored below. Its application to empirical cases has ensured its firm link with official documents and speeches. Still, Russian realists have been quite heterogeneous, and in the course of the chapter we will identify historical, structuralist, geo-political and politico-economic currents before coming to neoclassical realism. At the same time, Marxism was rejected due to the historical failure of communism in the Soviet Union, liberalism was judged to be too naive, and constructivism and post-structuralism were considered to be too specific and lacking real-world explanations. Studies of these paradigms in Russia were much more theoretical than empirical and their influence on the IR discipline in Russia has so far been marginal.

In Russia, neoclassical realism has only recently gained ground; in a nutshell, it is about ‘bringing the state back in’ to the debates about the international system and the pressure it exerts on national interests. At the same time, it has followed the Russian tradition, in that neoclassical realism has mostly been used for empirical purposes rather than for any sort of theoretical advance. Even those who are not neoclassical realists
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sometimes have to apply its categories and lines of reasoning because this is the only paradigm that enjoys public support and that is reflected in the basic Russian foreign-policy documents.

In what follows we first explore in more detail the theoretical context of realist and neoclassical realist studies in Russia. We then turn to the ontology of (neoclassical) realism is Russia. We start with the three key filters that are pivotal for Russian neoclassical realists: the strong authority of the President; debates about Russian identity and about Russia belonging – or not – to the West/Europe; and the collision of hard security interests with the wish to maximize profit. We then examine how these ‘filters’ influence Russian debates on three categories, pivotal for Russian IR studies: polarity, national interest and neighbourhood/coalitions. This is different from the conventional approach, which traces methodology and the evolution of the discipline rather than following the subject of research. However, our logic is determined by the nature of Russian realism; only through changes in the context of the three categories can we trace developments in Russian realist thinking. In doing so, we address both theoretical work and key Russian foreign-policy documents.

Realist studies in Russia in methodological context

In the Soviet Union IR studies started in the 1970s but were limited to the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) and the Moscow Institute of International Relations (MGIMO). However, even these institutions produced – instead of their own theoretical research – summaries and compilations of Western works, adding at the end a Marxist-Leninist critique. This was due to the specificity of humanities in the Soviet Union, the essence of which was that everything had already been formulated by the Communist Party and its ideology and there was no need to advance this knowledge. Thus the approach taken by these institutes was the only way to introduce at least some Soviet readers to Western thinking and trends in IR studies.

This ideological approach to world politics led to the prevalence of empirical studies over solid theoretical research and conceptualization. The approach had a serious impact on post-Soviet IR studies. The transformation of the humanities in Russia started from the revision of history, from the effort to understand what really happened. As a result, it strengthened the development of IR from historical rather than philosophical roots.1

Certainly, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the liberalization of research. Andrey Tsygankov and Pavel Tsygankov astutely identify three key tendencies of that time: pluralization, Westernization and isolation.2 Pluralization emerged when Marxism lost its centrality in the Russian
social sciences and IR studies spread beyond Moscow establishments. Westernization and isolation are two poles of the same phenomenon. The former was due to the fact that knowledge-hungry Russian specialists addressed fundamental Western IR works, although this meant a lack of independent Russian studies; indeed, Alexei Bogaturov concluded in 2000 that Russian IR studies had for ten years concentrated only on mastering and absorbing Western works instead of producing original works. Isolation became a reaction to this Westernization and manifested itself in a refusal to learn from sources outside Russia (and so any learning in the field was mostly empirical).

Whether the development of IR studies is attributed to the period in which Russia aspired to break with the Soviet legacy, or to the experience accumulated precisely in the Soviet period, (neo)realism promptly became the dominant IR theory in the new Russia. Various factors contributed to the strength of realist paradigms. First, Russia has been characterized by a powerful state machine in all periods, but especially in modern times. The post-Soviet decades of Russian history reconfirmed this trend. After a brief period of weak statehood in the 1990s, the centrality of federal institutions, particularly that of the presidency, was re-established, and the ability of subnational entities and companies to design their policies was curtailed. The growing influence of powerful ministries reinforced this centrality of the state. Hence, the IR paradigm, which gives primacy to the state (i.e. primarily executive power), fits neatly in studies of Russia.

Second, and linked to the first factor, foreign policy became an instrument to mobilize the support of the Russian population, and realism, which provides a simplistic explanation of state motives, became an attractive methodology. This tendency was exacerbated by the fact that throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium the emphasis was on the empirical application of IR, while non-applied research was not properly supported and the development of more theoretical IR thinking (which one Russian scholar famously called textbooks for senior students) was not encouraged.

Third and last, all strands of realism provided the basis for consensus among the political elite. Most analysts, especially those who were close to the Kremlin and other parts of the executive branch, were ardent supporters of this paradigm. This, in turn, led to the all-permeating presence of realist thinking in numerous documents and statements related to Russian foreign policy. This, however, does not mean that other schools (liberalism, neo-Marxism, constructivism) did not develop. However, they have thus far been much less influential in Russian social sciences and marginal to the discussions of the political elite.

Andrei Tsygankov and Pavel Tsygankov as well as Alexander Sergounin have called Russian realists derzhavniki (i.e. those who
support the great statehood of Russia). More recently, however, Sergounin\(^8\) recognized two currents in Russian realist thinking, real-politik and geo-politics/Eurasianism, a typology that emphasizes the importance of the identity debate in Russia.

Tatiana Shakleina and Alexei Bogaturov\(^9\) describe six approaches to Russian realism: systemic-historic, which dates back to 1970s Soviet research; structural,\(^10\) which emphasizes Russia’s relations with the West; geo-political, which conceptualizes the specificity of the Russian position in both Europe and Asia; political sociological; political psychological; and, finally, political economic. These classifications certainly remain important, as they demonstrate the dividing lines in Russian (neo)realism and its pluralization. Moreover, they reveal some of the features of Russian neoclassical realism, which is developing on this basis and which certainly exploits the arguments about Russian identity and, to a lesser extent, the specificity of Russian interests abroad (security and politics but also economics). There is also more than a hint of the nascent interest in psychology and sociology, for example in relation to how the Russian polity perceives the pressure of the world system.

Although these studies certainly provide early signs of neoclassical realism in Russia, it is hardly possible to talk about well defined realist schools in Russia. This is mainly due to the lack of fundamental, non-applied studies and the plethora of analytical papers and applied research that make use of various ideas. Moreover, which concepts and approaches are borrowed depends on the goal pursued rather than on methodological clarity and consistency. Therefore, we use the differentiation between various strands of realism below mainly for analytical purposes.

Neoclassical realism is relatively new to Russian researchers and consequently many recent works do not differentiate between neorealism and neoclassical realism. Valery Konyshev, for example, analyses neoclassical realism as one of the trends in contemporary US neorealism.\(^11\) Moreover, the term ‘neoclassical realism’ has been used in Russia to describe neorealism.\(^12\)

The recent popularity of neoclassical realism among Russian scholars is largely due to the writings of Fareed Zakaria, whose analysis of US politics immediately attracted attention. Zakaria’s appeal in turn was due to Newsweek (he was editor of Newsweek International and he wrote a column for Newsweek itself), his use of fairly simplistic realist categories, and his critique of the United States and thoughts about its decreasing influence in some spheres.\(^13\) However, we have witnessed a gradual shift in the approach to Zakaria’s works, from an emphasis on empirical materials to a greater stress on theory. An increasing number of Russian scholars now use his ideas to rethink Russian politics and Russia’s interactions in the international arena.
From around 2009 we have therefore seen a more specific interest in neoclassical realism. On the one hand, some summaries and critiques of the basic categories of neoclassical realism have appeared. On the other hand, Russian scholars have tried to construct an alternative picture of world politics with the help of the neoclassical realism. Neither approach has been without flaws. For instance, Ivan Chikharev tried to marry neoliberalism and neoclassical realism in developing his vision of a ‘smart power’. Timofei Bordachev interpreted neoclassical realism as a departure from a traditional approach to the vision that ascribes a primary, definitive role to various sets of internal politics within the international system. He concluded that the rise of neoclassical realism is due to the weakening of (crude military) power.

Three specific Russian filters have shaped the development of Russian neoclassical realism: the political system, with the dominance of the all-powerful President; an unresolved identity question, with national identity oscillating between belonging to Europe and becoming a Eurasian power; and conflict between economic interests (profit maximization) and an improvement in political status as well as hard security preoccupations. These filters are examined below before we get to the debates about polarity, the national interest and neighbours/coalitions.

Filters in question: what determines the specificity of Russian neoclassical realism?

*The particularity of the political system*

The Russian polity is distinct from that of many other countries because it was constructed around one post (or even one person), namely the President of Russia. The roots of this phenomenon go back to the charismatic Russian tsars. The tsar was substituted by the Communist Party after the October 1917 revolution, thus interrupting the construction of civil society. After 1990 the President and administration (‘the Kremlin’) replaced the Political Bureau of the Communist Party, which had been responsible for the design of the internal and external policies of the Soviet Union.

Foreign policy had always been regarded as the domain of the tsar, the Politburo or the President, with little space reserved for interest groups or civil society. The early 1990s were a slight exception but Vladimir Putin’s reaffirmation of the centrality of the state re-established this tradition. The influence of the Russian parliament, interest groups or civil society on foreign policy remains marginal. Putin’s statement in 2010 (when the former President was Prime Minister) that he was ‘fed up with making foreign policy’ and that this was currently the domain
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Debates on the particular interests and options open to Russia within the international system are deprived of any meaning by the absence of domestic players capable of challenging the authority of the President. It also logically restricts the scope of neoclassical realism in Russia. Jeffrey Taliaferro, Steven Lobell and Norrin Ripsman rightly argue that neoclassical realists ... expect policy to deviate from the requirements of systemic imperatives when the state has limited authority to conduct foreign policy, when there are many domestic veto players in the policy process, when domestic opposition to the government's policy is high, or under other domestic political circumstances that impede policy flexibility.18

At the same time, the specificity of Russian foreign and domestic policy is that it presupposes rationality and intelligence on the part of political leaders. On the one hand, it strengthens the realist tradition with its belief in the rationality of all decisions. On the other hand, it deprives political deliberation over policy choices of any meaning. Simplistic political analysis, therefore, makes neoclassical realism marginal.

The only exception, which has resurfaced so far, was the widening debate about the (plausible) competition between the charismatic and extremely popular Putin, who in 2008 moved to the position of Prime Minister, and the President, Dmitry Medvedev, whose political and leadership ambitions were said to be on the rise, and who was viewed as gradually emancipating himself from Putin.

In a sense, the fake respect for democracy and the constitution in 2008, when Putin was ineligible to run for a further term as President, led to the return of some power to the government and at the time even provoked tension between the President and the government/Prime Minister (evident in their debates about the appropriate reaction to the events in Libya). If competition between the two became overt, neoclassical realism could get a more prominent position in Russia. However, the prospects for this became dim by the end of 2011, when it became evident that Putin was going to stand in the presidential elections again.

Between Europe and Eurasia? The issue of identity

The debate about Russia’s (non-)belonging to the West/Europe19 dates back to the eighteenth century and to the transformation initiated by Peter the Great, who sought to bring Russia closer to Europe, thus making it an essential part of European politics. (Some authors trace it to an earlier period, when Russia, emerging from the Mongol yoke, came into
contact with European countries and monarchies. In summary, due to its geographical position, history and culture, Russia can be examined as a part of Europe, as ‘another Europe’ (on a par with Western Europe), as a non-Europe (a Eurasia entity), or, more recently, as part of the West but not part of Europe. The idea of Russia belonging to Europe has always been a stumbling block for realists. Being socially constructed, this category of belongingness conflicted with efforts to define Russia’s real role in the region, to understand Russia’s objective and material interests.

The debates about Russia belonging to Europe (or not) presuppose that Moscow should (or should not) follow the European path of development and imitate all its political, bureaucratic and economic institutions; or whether it has to stand by itself, reaffirming its Eurasian identity and grouping other countries around itself. Internal interpretations of this dilemma have been the basis for various external initiatives. Moreover, throughout its history Russia has tried to reconcile the two options (being in Europe and being by itself) without actually choosing one. This debate has so far been the most important and the most speculative filter in Russia and, hence, has the largest potential to shape the specificity of Russian neoclassical realism.

What interests? Between enhancing political power and maximizing economic benefits

The third factor specific to Russia today is that it oscillates between two different tendencies. On the one hand, the security services prevail. Most of these are successors to the all-powerful Soviet KGB and they have fully recovered their position after experiencing a downgrading in the 1990s. Today, all events are believed to have security implications and are, therefore, analysed through that prism. Moreover, the role of the security services has been enhanced because they have always been viewed by Putin as the only source of objective and unbiased information. Furthermore, scarce resources are used to enhance the standing of Russia in the world, to return it a great-power status. This is one explanation why, for example, Moscow strives to access the World Trade Organization as a developed country, or seeks to develop a new regime for energy exploration and supply (instead of the Energy Charter, for example).

On the other hand, Russia strives to maximize its profit from the sale of oil and natural gas, or from the export of nuclear technologies or space exploration. Both Putin and Medvedev have stressed the need to create all the conditions necessary for Russian companies to succeed abroad. It has been argued on a number of occasions that Putin is much more aware of oil and gas prices than of the number of warheads in a particular location.
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These Russian external interests are frequently associated with the liberal approach to markets and economic relations but not necessarily free markets, at least in the way they are generally understood in the West. The logic of profit maximization has, for example, determined the non-liberalization of the Russian gas market as well as the closing of forty-two sectors of the Russian economy to foreign investors seeking majority shares.

Profit maximization frequently competes with security considerations and the outcome of this competition is not always easy to predict. This competition between political/security and profit-maximization logics is the third filter that is of interest to neoclassical realists in Russia.

Towards neoclassical realist thinking in Russia: three issues in focus

Polarity and Russia

Polarity has so far been the most important issue for both (neo)realists and those who apply neoclassical realist paradigms in Russia. The largest part of Russian IR writing is devoted to this problem. It is also well documented in various foreign-policy documents. The question of polarity entered the Russian agenda in the mid-1990s, when Russia became disillusioned with unrestrained cooperation with the West.

Few writers, however, have attempted to define what polarity means. Bogaturov’s writings provide a rare exception. He argued that a multipolar world is composed of several comparable poles, while a unipolar or bipolar system is characterized by the contrast between one or two centres of power and the rest of the system. On this basis, Bogaturov, in a structuralist way, argued that the world was characterized by unipolarity, with the United States being placed at the centre of the system. However, he maintained that this unipolarity had a pluralistic nature; in other words, the United States cooperated with the major powers in directing global development. Moreover, the United States and its allies used non-global (NATO) or informal (G8) institutions to further its leadership.

Supporters of the systemic-historic approach argued for more simplistic models. One is that the world is unipolar, with the United States exploiting a decrease in the power of multilateral forums such as the United Nations. They would also maintain that today’s system, due to unipolarity and the asymmetrical leadership of the United States, is less democratic than it was during the Cold War. Moreover, it has also incorporated negative imperial patterns reminiscent of the Soviet Union.
Other systemic-historic realists would maintain that the world is multipolar. One variation is to interpret multipolarity as a competition of ideas and values, of civilizations, of the ability to challenge the dominant discourse. Another interpretation of multipolarity is to say that the United States is counterbalanced each time by a different actor (i.e., China or the European Union when it comes to the economy, or Russia in the military field). Finally, Russia (as well as some other actors) can aspire to become a pole due to their geo-political position, energy resources, intellectual potential, membership of particular international organizations, or nuclear power. In this vision, Russian influence in the post-Soviet space contributed to it becoming a pole.

Some systemic-historic realists argue that the multipolar world can actually be quite dangerous for Russia, because too many potential poles are located within the immediate proximity of Russia and can, therefore, lead to centrifugal processes.

Researchers who are close to the structuralist paradigm have recently argued that it would be useful to recreate a nineteenth-century concert of powers which govern the world on the basis of shared views, ‘with the participation of the USA, Europe, Russia, Japan, India, most probably China’. This view is close to the idea of pluralist unipolarity but presupposes a further decline in US influence. Yet another modification of the pluralist unipolarity is a model according to which the future of the world is essentially determined by four players: the United States, Europe, China and India.

A more recent systemic-historian version of polarity argues that US influence is decreasing but is not being compensated by the growth of any one power, which might lead, in fact, to the absence of any pole in the near future. Russia has to adapt to this situation internally through economic restructuring, modernization, improvement of its demographic situation and upgrading of its resources in order to meet its international ambitions. Although multipolarity does not catch the headlines, the geo-political assumption is that Russia has the potential to be an independent pole in IR due to its history and traditions.

Finally, Serguei Afontsev approaches the ‘polarity’ problem from the political economy perspective. He argues that Russia and China can make today’s world multipolar. Moscow draws its strength from energy, investment capabilities and military power, while China’s advantage lies in the increase of its share in the International Monetary Fund and in its effort to establish a free trade area in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Three preliminary conclusions can be drawn. First, Russian discussions have drifted towards the concept of the ‘entropy of power’ (although without using this term). At the same time, the idea of ‘balancing’ the United States through various means has played a prominent part.
Second, two domestic filters have grown in importance in these debates. One is Russian identity, with clear differentiation of Russia from the West, while preserving the claims of being a European country. Another one is the competition of politics/security versus profit-making agendas. Third, structuralist and historic realists have been most influential in developing elements of a neoclassical realist vision of polarity in Russia. The peculiarity of the debates on polarity in Russia is that they have always been in line with the official discourse on international relations. The appointment of Eugeny Primakov (a vehement proponent of multipolarity) to the position of the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1996 coincided with the intensification of the debates on multipolarity and with criticism of unipolarity.

The current trend is for an encouragement of multipolarity, reaffirming its presence through various means. Both Putin, while President, and Sergey Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs, have emphasized cultural pluralism and acceptance of various civilizations as the basic norms for international relations. This means that multipolarity is mostly conceptualized today as having an ideational and civilizational basis (with Russia being a distinct part of the European civilization).

The 2008 Russian Foreign Policy Concept mentions nascent multipolarity only once, as an undisputed fact, substituting it mostly with multilateralism and civilizational pluralism. Similarly, the 2009 National Security Concept mentions a cooperative multipolar world as a key strategic interest of Russia, while stressing multivector diplomacy. This might be a way to bypass the notion of balancing, which underlies multipolarity, in favour of the entropy of power. A relatively new notion of a polycentric world, introduced by the Sergey Lavrov and based on multivector diplomacy and non-confrontation in the pursuit of national interests, should also be viewed through the ‘entropy of power’ perspective. Promoting a transfer from undemocratic unipolarity to multipolarity (with cooperation rather than balancing; with Russia being accorded one of the key roles) Russia clearly adopts a revisionist strategy to today’s IR. Furthermore, the Foreign Policy Concept stresses ‘equality, mutual respect and mutually beneficial cooperation as well as the norms of international law’. It therefore implies that Russia no longer seeks to be recognized as a part of the West but rather views itself as an equal participant in international relations, hence the dilemma of whether Russia is European or Eurasian is solved at present in favour of being a part of both, while needing the recognition of neither.

National interests: security versus business

‘National interest’ is a category of prime importance for realists. However, its study remains relatively new within Russia. Even ‘national security’
was notoriously absent from the discourse of politicians and political scientists until the 1990s. Debates on the national interest in the Soviet period were circumscribed by the need to see international security as achievable only through the transformation of the whole system of international relations. The concept of soft security (as opposed to crude military security) was introduced in Russia in the 1990s. Since then, concerns over economic challenges, financial (in)stability, information security and, increasingly, sustainable development and climate change have gained centrality. Globalization has similarly become a central concern that requires a transformation of national security and an adjustment of national interests.

Growing attention has been paid to the internal stability of Russia, to the strength of its institutions and policy processes as well as to the needs of its internal modernization and market development. These ideas have also gradually worked their way into the official documents of the Russian Federation. At the same time, hard security issues (including military aspects and counter-intelligence) were not abandoned. Security thinking permeated all spheres and the security implications of virtually all activities have come under close scrutiny. They naturally were reflected in the basic foreign-policy documents of Russia as well. All these trends required a conceptual basis.

Systemic-historic analysts came to associate the national interest with Russia’s ability to respond to the challenges of globalization and the transformation of the international order. In their view, Russia has little choice as regards the process of globalization, which is objective and independent. What choice there is, however, is between entering the process of globalization consciously (i.e. keeping in mind its interests and goals as well as its strong and weak points) and passive drifting. Therefore, Russia’s key task, according to this view, is not only to maintain its territory but also to use it rationally. For some conservative systemic-historic analysts, Russian national interests are also linked with the recognition of its specificity, of its peculiar history and the traditions of the Russian empire (i.e., the refusal of Westernization or Europeanization). For Russian structuralists, on the other hand, hold that globalization is managed and directed by the United States. Therefore, key challenges to Russian national security and to its interests will emerge from unipolarity and more specifically from an aggressive Washington. The alternative is to further its own vision of global governance.

Representatives of the geo-political school would argue along similar lines, insisting that Russia capitalize on its capabilities and potential to get ‘a stable position in the world system’. Its most recent branch (geo-economic) would insist that Russian national interests should increasingly coincide with the interests of its key financial and industrial groups (i.e., leading companies, which can restructure the space
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and accumulate resources, knowledge and wealth and thus further the interests of the state). Last but not least, realists assess what qualities a state needs to remain competitive in the globalizing environment. Nearly all realists would admit the importance of energy resources. They therefore recommend Russia to pay particular attention to this sphere, guaranteeing its energy security through close links between the state and companies, on the one hand, and through a cautious policy of agreements with third countries, on the other. At the same time, they rightly argue that Russia should diversify its economy instead of relying on the export of energy resources to the developed world. In particular, they stress the need to borrow technologies from the West to catch up with it and to guarantee drastic renovation of production capacities. Otherwise, Russia will lose its economic competitiveness, based on knowledge and innovation. They therefore encourage the development of Russian science and research and the enhancement of a Russian role in relation to the Internet.

For representatives of all strands of Russian realism, national interests are ensured in all spheres through a strong state (i.e. the executive branch of the government, President and Prime Minister). They differ, however, on the priorities which this strong executive power is to pursue. Hence, two filters are of particular importance for national interests and national security and the nascent neoclassical realism debates on it: one is the strength of the executive power; the other one is a nearly overt conflict between economic interests/profit-making and hard security. Interestingly, the identity filter is of less importance for debates on national interest, which can be explained by the growing confidence of the Moscow leadership that Russia is an entity on its own, a European one, and with no need to fight for the recognition of its Europeanness.

The neoclassical realist thinking on national interest will grow out of the systemic-historic analysts’ ideas on globalization and the Russian role in it. Its second source will be provided by political economists and geo-political thinking on the nature of real interests in today’s world (where the economy and profit-making will be overtaking the previously exclusively hard security domain).

The Russian National Security Concept stresses the need to guarantee the interests of the individual, society and the state. It then continues that Russia has enough resources to manage globalization and to become one of the leaders thereof. The Concept also argues that the national interests of Russia will be negatively affected by the unilateral power politics of other states. Therefore, the Concept structures Russian national interests in line with the logics of the systemic-historic and structuralist-realist currents. At the same time, the Concept is not coherent in defining how Russia plans to harness globalization. Instead, having mentioned globalization, it concentrates on either traditional elements of security
(national defence, state security, the security of Russian society more generally, non-interference in domestic affairs and equality of countries), for example energy security, which constitutes a source of strength but certainly does not make it a leader in globalization. Science, technology and education appear only briefly, towards the end of the document.

The document seems to be patchy, drafted by several interest groups, and reflects the conflict between an orientation towards modernization and the market economy, on the one hand, and an orientation to hard security, on the other hand. Moreover, the hard security and old-fashioned definition of national interest clearly prevail, which essentially over-securitizes all spheres of life and justifies further enforcement of the power ministries. Finally, despite the emphasis on the interests of the individual and society, the interests and security of the state are all-permeating. This is a further illustration of the specificity of the Russian political system, with its emphasis on the all-powerful executive branch.

All these inconsistencies, however, reflect that the state is not as monolithic as it used to be and the pressure of the international environment is perceived differently by various actors. It could be said that today’s Russia represents a useful empirical test of neoclassical realism.

The 2008 conflict with Georgia over South Ossetia and Abkhazia provides yet another excellent illustration of how national interests are increasingly expressed in neoclassical realist terms. Russia’s military intervention in another state would have been much easier to justify in terms of peace-keeping and humanitarian reasons. Yet Russia preferred to stress the sufferings of Russian civilians. Moscow, therefore, emphasized that its reaction to the conflict was a result of an interaction with civil society. In doing so, Russia also once again emerged as a revisionist state.

It was further reaffirmed in the statements of Putin, who then, interestingly, continued that Russian companies should invest in Abkhazia because it is in their interests to do so and the state would encourage and support them. By doing this he appeased not only hard security but also economic interests within Russia, ensuring the balance between the two competing sets of interests.

Neighbourhood, temporary coalitions and the search for unity

The final element of realist thinking which permeates Russian writings is that of coalition-building and a search for unity. It is firmly linked with Russian debates about belonging to the West/Europe or being by itself and thus looking to design a coalition of its own.

Most representatives of the systemic-historic school of Russian realism argue that Russia must consider the conditions with which it can
and should join Europe/the West to maximize its power in the world. They would remind us, however, that efforts to integrate Russia with the West without due attention to national interests led to attempts on the part of the West to establish control over Russian territory, to push it out of its sphere of influence (i.e. post-Soviet space) and to exploit its national resources.62

The pragmatic turn towards cooperation with the West strengthened in this millennium. The idea is to resolve shared problems but on conditions which are acceptable to Russia and minimizing any dependence on the West. The likelihood of Russian ‘emancipation’ will depend on developments in the world and in such (potential) partners as the European Union and China,63 which present alternative sources of innovation.

For some representatives of structural realism, Russia is a part of a single global system and for them, therefore, the whole discussion is meaningless.64 Russian political economists would support this point of view. Other representatives of structuralist realism would maintain that Russia, the West and the East can coexist indefinitely without actual integration.65 The specificity of Russian history, its size and structure of interests will, in their view, prevent it from becoming a part of the West within the next ten years.66

Russian geo-political realists also present a wide spectrum of views. Some of them imply that the West is not (yet) ready to embrace Russia, owing to historical stereotypes. For this reason, they argue, Russia should not integrate with the West/Europe.67 For other geo-politicians, it is not a question of the West’s readiness; rather, staying outside and combining specific Western features with oriental and Russian traditions, Russia can preserve its specificity and become a new power in international relations.68

In summary, the identity filter has been key in Russian policy towards its partners and towards the construction of coalitions. At the same time, the competition between economic interests and the hard security agenda is gaining strength. In adopting a pragmatic, cooperative approach while paying attention to the identity debates, neoclassical realism will, on the issue of neighbourhood and temporary coalitions, draw on the systemic and geo-political (neo)realist approaches.

Three further things are to be noted. One is that the cherished European identity is not the driving force in Moscow’s coalitions. Secondly, being confident, Russia no longer needs proof of its European credentials and reserves the right to decide on its coalitions pragmatically. In other words, economically motivated behaviour and strategic security interests will in future prevail over further affirmation of a European identity. Finally, most writers are cautious about any sort of reconstruction of the Russian empire. They therefore challenge the thesis...
of Wohlforth that there is 'a bias towards expansion', 69 which is central to the Russian history. The inherent belief is that – to use neoclassical realist terminology – when the 'entropy of power' prevails, the regional level becomes more important and has to be (re)constructed but on the basis of pragmatic involvement as opposed to over-stretch.

Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept 70 maintains that the West has tried to contain Russia, but Moscow insists on equality and a multilateral approach to international relations. Moreover, Sergey Lavrov bluntly states that current developments are characterized by the synthesis of various civilization models and also by their dynamic competition. 71 This statement implies that Russia does not intend to integrate itself with the West but would prefer to cooperate with it if the parties have shared interests in doing so.

Furthermore, the Russian attitude towards the European Union has become pragmatic to the point of being cynical. Instead of treating it as a single bloc, Russia opts for cooperation with those individual member states that are willing to cooperate and stand up for their promises. In other words, economic and security pragmatism clearly rules over ideational preferences.

The recent document about how foreign relations are to further Russian modernization is an excellent illustration of this approach. 72 While the European Union is the first specific partner to be discussed, it is not mentioned in the key goal-oriented introductory paragraphs. Moreover, a brief enumeration of cooperation points with the European Union is followed by a more extensive elaboration of dialogues with various states. This very document also elaborates along similar lines Russian cooperation with Asia (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, ASEAN) and individual countries.

The importance of various structures on the post-Soviet space has been stressed in every single foreign-policy document (Concepts, National Security Strategy, various speeches, etc.). However, pragmatism again is gaining ground and the wish of Russia to integrate at any cost has receded. Instead, common challenges such as modernization and soft and hard security issues are stressed.

All these coalitions can obviously be conceptualized as the belief of Russia in the gradual entropy of power and in the regionalization of international relations at a time of weakening unipolarity. 73 A new Russian term for this process is ‘deglobalization’, which is caused by both financial crisis and fundamental systemic shifts. It was coined by Sergey Lavrov in September 2010. 74 As a result of deglobalization, according to his vision, regional structures volunteer to take more responsibility for governance, and Russia has to participate in them and – where possible – shape them. Thus, current Russian practice is an embodiment of nascent neoclassical realist ideas.
Conclusion

Analysing the early development of Russian realism, Sergounin argued that it has thus far been a powerful school of thought. Moreover, he argued that realist writings also led to at least three positive results: greater predictability of Russian foreign policy; help in overcoming the divide between Eurasianism/Westernization; and the articulation of Russian interests.

This chapter has demonstrated the evolution of the three key realist notions (polarity, national interest and neighbourhood/coalitions) in today’s Russian IR thinking and political practice. We have claimed that neoclassical realism has so far mostly developed in Russia on the basis of systemic-historic realism, which further strengthened its empirical bias. However, neoclassical realism in Russia has the potential to borrow creatively from structural, political economic and geo-political currents, depending on the issue in focus. We also introduced three filters that determine the specificity of Russia’s neoclassical realism. They are the overpowerful executive branch, identity debates, and the clash of the economic and security agendas. We believe that identity and the competition between the economic and political agendas condition the current outcome of the discussion on polarity, national interests and neighbourhood/coalitions. Strong executive power, concentrated in the hands of the President and the Prime Minister, however, limit the immediate prospects for neoclassical realism in Russia.

Another reason for the growing popularity of neoclassical realist thinking in Russia is provided by foreign-policy practice. Most conceptual foreign-policy documents as well as visionary speeches stress the need for a national, pragmatic, specifically Russian approach to world politics. The aspiration to design a specific place for Russia in the international system serves as an additional stimulus. The dynamics between political and economic interests is key here, while identity debates are being sidelined due to the growing self-confidence of Moscow.

Finally, an essential element that will contribute to the specificity of neoclassical realism in Russia is its very limited normative dimension. Borrowing ideas from neo-institutionalism and constructivism will allow Russian realist scholars and politicians to upgrade their approaches and methodological tools, to claim that they are in line with methodological developments while not challenging their cynical attitude to the role of norms and ideas.

Notes

1 See A. Bogaturov, *World Politics: Theory, Methodology and Applied Analysis* [in Russian] (Moscow: Komkniga, 2005); T. Shakleina and A. Bogaturov,


6 Tsygankov and Tsygankov, ‘Post-Soviet Studies of International Relations in Russia’.


8 Sergounin, ‘Russia: IR at a Crossroad’.

9 Shakleina and Bogaturov, ‘Place of Realism in Russian Studies of International Relations’.

10 This term can be misleading because Russian structuralists have nothing in common with what is understood as structural realism.


13 Numerous works of Farid Zakaria are available in Russian, including some journal articles and two books: F. Zakaria, *Post-American World* (Moscow: Evropa, 2009) and *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (Moscow: Ladomir, 2004).


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21 See for example D. Trenin, Integration and Identity: Russia as ‘the New West’ [in Russian] (Moscow: Evropa, 2006).


29 A. Arbatov, ‘Russia: Particular Imperial Track?’ [in Russian], Rossiya v Globalnoi Politike, 6 (2005), pp. 78–89.
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46 Ibid.
48 Kortunov, ‘Invigorating Russia’s Foreign Policy’.
55 Luneev and Shirokov, ‘The Formation of a New World System and Russia’.
62 Krylov, ‘New Perspectives of Russia in the International Arena’.
63 V. Lapkin, ‘Factors for Political Self-Determination of Russia in the Contemporary World’ [in Russian], Mirovaya Ekonomika i Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya, 6 (2006), pp. 39–49.
64 M. Cheshkov, Global Context of Post-Soviet Russia: Essay on Theory and


71 Lavrov, ‘The Future of European Cooperation’.

72 Programme of the Effective Systematic Use of Foreign Policy Factors to Further the Long-Term Development of Russian Federation, No. 4980 (Moscow: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 10 February 2010).

73 Interesting comments about growing regionalization of Russian foreign policy have been made by A. Bogaturov, 'Equilibrium of Non-Trust: Russian Priorities on the Background of the Change of Power in the US' [in Russian], Mezhdunarodnye Processy, 7:3 (2009), pp. 25–36.

74 S. Lavrov, Transcript of the Speech of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation in MGIMO(U) MID of Russia [in Russian] (Moscow, 1 September 2010).

75 Sergounin, ‘Russian Debates on International Relations in the Post-Communist Age’.

76 Ibid., p. 108.