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HABIT, ARGUING AND EMOTIONS IN RUSSIA-EU RELATIONS PRE-2022: CONCEPTS OF SOCIAL ACTIONS¹

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Abstract. The article draws on International Relations theorizing of different logics of social action to provide yet another conceptual interpretation of the dynamics of EU–Russia relations before the deepest crisis started in 2022. The research concentrates on the logics of habit, arguing and affective action. Logics precluding changes in EU–Russia relations are illustrated by foreign policy moves and perceptions of both sides pre-2022 crisis. According to the logic of arguing, Russia refuted the EU’s claim to have the better argument, while the EU did not accept Russia’s self-attributed status of a country belonging to the Western lifeworld with shared political culture and did not take Russian arguments as genuine. Consequently, in the logic of affective action, Russian authorities got frustrated and angry because of the EU’s denial of an important Russian affectual need for belonging. The habits of mutual distrust and the incompatibility of mutual perceptions lead to the routinization of the conflict that is very difficult if not impossible to overcome.

Key words: EU, Russia, logic of social action, conflict, affection, emotions, dialogue, arguing, routinisation

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Since 2014, the relations between Russia and the EU have been in a deep crisis and reached their lowest level ever in February 2022. The chances for improvement are almost

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non-existent from the perspective of both sides. The EU consolidates the lack of positive perspective in mutual relations with regular packages of sanctions, while Russian leadership reorients Russia away from the Western world and shows its firm intent to withstand any sanctions. Both parties persist in their policies, which makes any applied discussion of prospects of a positive change in bilateral relations politically not viable and at least premature, if not senseless. However, from a conceptual perspective, it is important to single out different logics of social action which may lead to change (not necessarily positive) in bilateral relations.

The article is aimed at conceptualizing the empirics of the EU-Russia relations through the concepts of logics of social action beyond realist or geopolitical explanations. Mainstream analysis of conflict dynamic in the EU–Russia relations include alternative or co-existing explanations: clash of interests and/or clash of values. The logics of social action can explain the motivation of actors within both co-existing approaches. Of course, there are multiple conceptual perspectives on the reasons of the crises in the Russia–EU relations briefly presented in the literature overview part below. The present article has an ambition of presenting yet another explanation on the grounds of the so-called emotional turn in International Relations (IR) rarely applied to the case of Russia.

Nature and stages of the EU–Russia relations: Literature overview

The academic literature explaining the EU–Russia relations at different stages describes them in terms of ups and downs and numerous acute crises [Arbatova, 2013], sinusoid between pragmatic cooperation and strategic partnership [Borko, 2014: 4], problematic relations as a steady trend [Busygina, 2013], rivalry and sanctions as the “new normal”, strategic distrust [Fischer, Timofeev, 2018], dialogue without dialogue [Danilov, 2021], and also phases of optimism and pessimism, inclusion/exclusion discourse, growing mutual disappointment.

As Parkhalina and Danilov pointed out in early 2000s, in the international security sphere Russia had been dividing the West into good guys (the EU) and bad guys (NATO / US) who had started an international intervention without a UN mandate in Kosovo in 1999 [Parkhalina, 2002; Danilov, 2004]. However, Russian attitudes changed after the launch of the EU’s Eastern Partnership Program in 2009 and the signing of Association agreements and free trade agreements with Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine in 2014.

After the 2014 crisis, Zagorski wrote that sorting out common interests would not work in case of EU-Russia relations [Zagorski, 2016]. The “five principles” adopted by the EU in 2016 limited the room for cooperation with Russia from prior selective engagement to no prospects of returning to business as usual [Potemkina, 2021]. In 2021, Gromyko described the relationship between Russia and the EU as “dismal” and being probably in their “worst shape since the end of the Cold War” [Gromyko, 2021].

As to the normative dimension, Gromyko and Casier believe that the EU-Russia relations started with asymmetrical cooperation from 1992 to 2003 (the master and the pupil) [Gromyko, 2013; Casier, 2016], because normative power by definition implies asymmetrical relations [Diez, 2013]. By 2021, Russia had less and less incentives to believe in EU’s normative power and EU’s ability to pursue fair play [Gromyko, 2021: 9].

My argument in a way builds upon Casier’s normative approach [Casier, 2013] which is built on the basis of intergroup dynamics and attributional bias concepts.

Logics of social action in IR

I analyze the logics of habit, arguing and affective action to understand the dynamics of bilateral relations between Russia and the EU.

International Relations (IR) scholars conceptualize logics of social action in international relations as sets of menus, often juxtaposing the included models/logics:

- 1) model of rationality; model of historic precedents; habit-driven model (Rosenau);
- 2) logic of consequences; logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen);
- 3) logic of consequences; logic of appropriateness; logic of arguing (Risse);
- 4) logic of consequences; logic of appropriateness; logic of arguing; logic of practices (Pouliot).

Before debates within IR, social action was extensively discussed within philosophy and sociology. Max Weber introduced four types of social actions, all of which were mentioned above under a different terminology adopted in IR: instrumental rationality; value rationality; affectual social action; traditional approach based on habits. Affectual social action is usually not debated by IR scholars alongside with logics of appropriateness, consequences, arguing and practices, but it forms a separate emerging field in IR, mostly related to intergroup relations and conflicts. Hopf concentrates on the study of habits [Hopf, 2010], while affectual social action as one of the logics of behavior remains understudied. The so-called “emotional turn” in IR [Mercer, 1996; 2006; Crawford, 2000; Ross, 2006; Bleiker, Hutchison 2008; Fierke, 2012; Koschut, 2014; Åhäll, Gregory 2015; Ariffin et al., 2016; Clément, Sangar, 2017] might help to introduce affective behavior in IR as the fourth type of social action originally introduced by Max Weber. In this article, this logic will be called the logic of affective action. I analyze the affective actions of social groups like policy-makers and bureaucracies of the EU and Russia who interact at the international arena or are responsible for the development of domestic policies with international outreach.

My claim is that the logic of affective action in relation to other logics works as a hinge, which switches between the logics based on different types of rationality. More frequent explanations for switch between the logics implies changes in the environment/material factors (e.g. global financial crisis, shifts in the global or regional balance of power, COVID-19 pandemic) and/or changes in the social actor itself (for states, those might be domestic reforms; new capabilities; changes in the identity). In addition to the further debated externally-induced and internally-induced changes, the logic of affective action is yet another driver of change in social behavior.

Habits, routinisation of conflicts and possibilities for change

The question about change is crucial to understand the case of enduring conflicts. The concepts of routine and habit are often used as synonyms in social sciences [Clark, 2000]. Hopf situates the concept of habit within the practice turn in IR. The logic of habit, according to Hopf, is mostly present in the routine activities of international organizations like the IMF, or in the durable relations of amity or enmity of states [Hopf, 2010: 547]. Habits and routine tend to preclude change, however, change is still possible.

According to Rosenau, individual habit-driven actors and groups are open to new stimuli and are capable of learning and, thus, changing either through 1) externally-

induced changes (necessity to adapt to new circumstances) or 2) internally-induced changes (development of new skills and capabilities) [Rosenau, 1987]. The readiness to learn might be different for different actors, regrettably, for some of them, only historic traumas can activate this learning mode.

The whole debate between Russia and the EU (and the West in general) can be conceptualized through this two-fold approach of externally-induced or internally-induced changes.

In 2003–2005, after the first wave of the so-called “color revolutions”, Russian political elites started to believe that externally-induced changes especially democracy-promotion, make developments within a country unpredictable and chaotic, thus, external influence over Russia should be limited. Russian authorities in the official discourse use the argument that only internally-induced changes are favorable to national development, which might be illustrated by the Russian arguments on the detrimental role of external forces in the so-called color revolutions or the “subversive nature” of Western soft power aimed at fostering democratic and free market reforms in non-democratic countries. According to Morozov, the Kremlin attempted to redefine democracy as a truly universal value that needed to be liberated from Western hegemonic control [Morozov, 2008]. Since February 2022, Vladimir Putin continues blaming the West of interference in domestic affairs, while denying any expansionist behavior on the Russian part.

The EU believes that externally-induced changes work through the so-called normative power [Manners, 2002] propagated through programmes of cooperation like the “Eastern Partnership”.

Logic of arguing: a missed opportunity in the EU–Russia relations?

In addition to externally and internally-induced changes, the logic of arguing represents a relational approach to change in IR. If actors do not have common understanding of the rules of the game and do not share the interpretations of the rules of the game they are playing, then, arguing should help to: 1) test whether the other actor is genuine in his or her statements (that is to establish trust); 2) agree on the underlying problem; 3) agree on the normative principles to find a mutually satisfying solution [Risse, 2000: 13].

The first dimension of the process of arguing is credibility: to start a truth-seeking process, actors need to trust each other. Arguments of biased or self-interested actors are not credible in comparison to the argumentation of those who are perceived to be neutral or moral [Risse, 2000: 17]. In order to understand whether an actor is credible, the following validity claims developed by Habermas and seconded by Risse can be applied: 1) truth of assertions; 2) moral rightness of the norms underlying the argumentation, 3) authenticity (sincerity) of the speaker. In its relations with the EU, Russia uses all three types of validity claims.

The first claim on the truth of assertions is embodied in the mutual accusations about the fake news phenomenon and so-called post-truth. Such accusations were abundant before 2022 and reached their peak since then. The EU is very much concerned with the issue of external disinformation from Russia. Following the European Council Conclusions from 19 and 20 March 2015, the East StratCom Task Force was created to “address Russia’s ongoing disinformation campaigns”¹. In 2016, the European Parliament (EP)

¹ Questions and Answers about the East StratCom Task Force. 28.04.2021. URL:

adopted a resolution on EU strategic communication to counter propaganda¹, the Action Plan against Disinformation was adopted in 2018² In March 2019, before the elections to the European Parliament, the EP adopted a resolution, condemning Russia's disinformation campaigns³. In Russia, in March 2019, a law on blocking fake news entered into force. In 2022, the EU introduced a media ban against Russian state-owned TV channels, Russia reciprocated by banning several EU / Western media on the territory of Russia.

The second validity claim deals with the moral rightness of the norms. Although that Russia has never openly questioned the universal norms adopted within the UN system, it tried to become a norm entrepreneur at the global level. Russian authorities try to introduce the so-called traditional values as a basis for Russian national identity, and these trends reinforced since 2022 at the legislative level.

Since at least 2009, in international organizations, Russia advocates an idea that human rights and fundamental freedoms should be promoted through traditional values to increase acceptance of universal human rights at the grass-root level. In September 2012, the UN Human Rights Council adopted the Russia-sponsored Resolution "Promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms through a better understanding of traditional values of humankind: best practices"⁴.

In the 2023 Russian Foreign Policy Concept, one of the foreign policy priorities is to "consolidate international efforts to ensure respect for and protection of universal and traditional spiritual and moral values (including ethical norms common to all world religions), and counter the attempts to impose pseudo-humanistic or other neo-liberal ideological views, leading to the loss by the humankind of traditional spiritual and moral values and integrity".

The third validity claim deals with the authenticity of the actors: to what extent they are sincere in their claims. Russian leadership believes that the EU is hypocritical in blaming Russia for lack of democracy. To refute the consistency between the words and deeds of its interlocutors, Russia established in 2007 the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation for monitoring human rights violations in European countries and the US, with offices in Paris and New York.

https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/2116/-questions-and-answers-about-the-east-stratcom-task-force_en (accessed: 05.07.2023).

¹ European Parliament resolution of 23 November 2016 on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties (2016/2030(INI)), Strasbourg. URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0441_EN.html (accessed: 05.07.2023).

² Joint communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the regions. Action Plan against Disinformation. Brussels. 05.12.2018.

³ European Parliament resolution of 10 October 2019 on foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes (2019/2810(RSP)). URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0031_EN.html (accessed: 05.07.2023).

⁴ Study of the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee on promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms through a better understanding of traditional values of humankind (A/HRC/22/71). 2012. URL: http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/AdvisoryCom/Session10/A.HRC.22.71_en.pdf (accessed: 05.07.2023).

Another dimension of this validity claim is the attention to the violations of human rights of Russians and Russian-speakers abroad. The most prominent case in early 2000s was the rights of Russian-speaking population in the Baltic states, which in 2004 became members of the EU and NATO. This is another way to demonstrate to the EU that it is not credible in its human rights discourse unless, for example, the situation with the so-called alien's (non-citizen's) passports in Latvia is resolved [Romanova, 2016].

At the current stage of mutual relations since February 2022, the EU does not perceive Russian authorities as a credible actor. Russia reciprocates.

Agreeing on the underlying problem in EU-Russia relations

In order to start arguing about the norms, actors need to agree on the underlying problem. Before the current acute stage of the crisis, both the EU and Russia blamed each other for the lack of cooperation and, thus, suggested that the other actor should change its behavior. The EU believed that the relations with Russia were problematic because of the nature of the political regime in Russia and its expansionist neo-imperial policies in the Eurasian neighborhood. Russia mirrored this perception and believed that the EU interferes with its neighborhood programmes (European Neighborhood Programme and later the Eastern Partnership Programme) to the traditional sphere of Russian influence where Russia has its "privileged interests" rooted in common history. This appears to be a classical realist dilemma related to power projection, however, both actors frame the debates in terms of shared European / OSCE-wide values or integrationist intentions in the format of continent-wide free trade area from Lisbon to Vladivostok. But do we really live in a common space of shared norms and shared culture, or in a common lifeworld in the terminology of the logic of arguing?

One of the preconditions for the process of arguing is that actors need to belong to a common lifeworld [Risse, 2000: 11]. In absence thereof, a common lifeworld can be constructed by referring to common history and memory, and shared experiences. Security communities with shared values and identities like the EU, NATO and Western democracies, or, most generally, international institutions do form common lifeworlds [Risse, 2000: 15]. Pre-2022 Russia wanted to belong to this common lifeworld because such belonging leads to cooperation within the group. Russian membership in the OSCE and the Council of Europe implied such belonging but we know that Russia accuses both organizations of predominantly pursuing the political agenda imposed by the EU / NATO members.

An illustration of the Russian attempt to build a common lifeworld based on common history is the article published in 2016 by the Russian minister of foreign affairs Sergey Lavrov "Russia's Foreign Policy in A Historical Perspective"¹. The major claim of the article is that from a historical perspective, Russia has always been an important actor in European affairs and that Russia belongs to Europe as "one of the branches of European civilization". The EU's understanding of common history would imply that Russia should not present itself as the savior of Europe in World War II, but address such issues as the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and Soviet domination over Eastern Europe.

¹ Lavrov S. Russia's foreign policy in a historical perspective. *Russia in Global Affairs*. No. 2. 2016. P. 8–19.

Russia tried to build a common lifeworld with the EU on its own initiative by promoting the ideas of the Draft European Security Treaty (2008), a common economic space from Lisbon to Vladovostok and the Greater Eurasia initiative. Of course, not just for the sake of living in a common lifeworld, but to have an equal access to the discourse about norms and their interpretations. All these initiatives failed as the EU was claiming that the already existing formats (both multilateral within the OSCE, European Neighborhood Policy, Eastern Partnership and bilateral relations) worked well enough to look for alternatives.

In its turn, the EU does not want to see its worldviews and interests challenged and assumes that it already has “the better argument” and, thus, other actors have to adopt it. For the EU, it is embodied in the phenomenon of normative power. For Russia, it was not clear why the EU was ready to use the logic of arguing (with joint search of truth by all participating actors) within its own lifeworld, for example, trying to accommodate the interests of illegal migrants and asylum seekers, but is not ready to accommodate the interests of Russia in the process of equal arguing aimed at truth-seeking. Russian leadership perceived this situation as unfair and unjust. And very often, as Müller writes, fairness as an accommodation of competing modes of justice is more important for actors than distributive outcomes [Müller, 2004: 401]. Kaveshnikov develops a somewhat similar argument about the modes of justice in relation to Russian strategy of conflict settlement by using the concepts of reciprocity justice and subject-centered justice [Kaveshnikov, 2023].

In Russian elites, a perceived false promise of the logic of arguing, or, it might be more correct to say, Russian (ungrounded?) expectations about the potential of two-directional changes promised by the logic of arguing, created strong affective reactions of frustration and anger.

The logic of affective action as a spoiler for cooperation

Hopes for a mutual truth-seeking arguing might create frustration and anger for the actor, whose norms are supposed to change more in comparison to other actors involved.

Affective action consists of different emotional reactions. Intergroup emotions theory [Mackie et al., 2008; Sasley, 2011; Mercer, 2014] explains that intergroup emotions derive from self-categorization (belonging) and identification (group identity). Self-categorization makes members of the group act as they think the group members should behave on the basis of their specific shared beliefs. The key question is whether self-attribution of status works or the status is an external reward? As demonstrated in the previous sections, Russian claims that it belongs to Europe, European civilization and shares European values are not really accepted by the EU, which does not extend its lifeworld to Russia, but is ready to extend it to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Russia is not perceived by the EU as a genuine truth-seeker, but is seen as a self-interested actor not deserving a genuine dialogue. After the 2014 Crimean crisis, NATO united by the feeling of anger towards Russia reconstructed its understanding of the Russian identity “from being a partner of the West to becoming a pariah state” with lower status [Koschut 2018: 288].

In the Russia-West status conflict, the prevalent Russian emotion is anger as well, as Heller claims. Grounding her research in the social psychology literature, Heller explains that anger is a reaction to perceived unfair treatment or disrespect towards one’s self-defined identity [Heller, 2010; 2018]. Tsygankov provides a more nuanced explanation of Russian

foreign policy through the emotional shifts from fear to hope to frustration depending on the Western attitudes from low to rising to declining support of Russia [Tsygankov, 2014].

The combination of Russian frustration prior to 2014 followed by anger undermine the prospects for cooperation with the EU unless these emotions are substituted by hope again. In Tsygankov's logic, Russian emotional shifts are reactionary and depend on Western attitudes, thus, the EU should take the lead in trying to switch the conflict mode to the cooperation mode. However, we should remember that parties to the conflict tend to think that the other side has more freedom of choice and room for maneuver. Thus, the EU's power is also largely seen as reactive [Cross, Karolewski, 2021].

Concluding remarks

The interplay of different logics of social action in EU-Russia relations create the following picture which provides one of the possible explanations of the crises in the EU-Russia relations. After the collapse of the USSR, the EU acted towards Russia, on the one hand, on the basis of habit of confrontation and enduring rivalry inherited from the Cold war and, on the other hand, on the basis of amity bias based on the self-attributed status of the external driver of democratic changes, which led to the collapse of Soviet ideology. The basic assumption of the EU within the logic of arguing is that it has a better argument in discussing norms and rules of behavior in the process of truth-seeking, thus, other actors have to adapt their norms and interests to the EU standards.

From Russian official perspective, the situation looks differently. Moscow does not believe that the EU has the monopoly over the better argument. However, Russia believed that the EU was ready to participate in a genuine truth-seeking process to accommodate the competing justice models to find a solution to the underlying problem. Eventually, it turned out that both actors do not want to change: the EU is sure to have the better argument, Russia does not want to be the object of externally-induced changes.

Before getting to this disappointing conclusion, Russia tried to attribute itself a status of a country belonging to the common lifeworld with the EU. In its turn, the EU did not accept Russia's self-attributed status of a country belonging to the Western lifeworld with shared political culture and did not take Russian arguments as genuine. In return, Russian authorities got frustrated because of the EU's denial of an important Russian affectual need for belonging and angry because of the perceived injustice that Russian interests could not be accommodated by the EU in the process of equal debates on norms. As a consequence, Russian frustration and anger reinforced the routinization of the conflict. After 2022, Russian authorities' counter-sanctions strategies of import-substitution, de-Westernization and closure in the domestic political and social spheres make unimportant the factor of belonging to the common lifeworld, thus, the motivation of Russia for change of its behavior is next to zero.

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