

The Influence of Institutional Decision Making Mechanism in Russia on the Relations with the European Union

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This article examines the influence of internal factors (such as decision-making processes, political culture, and the connection between government and society) on Russia's foreign policy toward the European Union in the context of neoclassical realism. Excessive personalization and a closed decision-making structure do not encourage effective reactions to emerging challenges and affect the possibility of cooperation in the post-Soviet space. Institutional mechanisms and their impact on a country's foreign policy are extremely important in the theory of neoclassical realism. This article also analyses EU – Russia relations over major periods and the role of internal factors in Russian policy.

Despite an orientation toward long-term cooperation between the EU and Russia, a contradiction remains between Russia's over-centralized decision-making structure and the EU's decentralized system. In addition, political leaders and elites play less of a role in the EU, where there is a real separation of powers and competencies. These factors hamper EU – Russia cooperation because Russia prefers to establish bilateral relations with each state. As a result of all these factors, long-term relations may be at risk. However, the decentralization of power, increased efficiency of political institutions and the active participation of civil society will improve the level of mutual trust and overcome the current issues in EU – Russia relations.

Key words: foreign policy, mechanism of decision making, neoclassical realism, Russia, the European Union

Introduction

Historically, the policy-making process in Russia has been extremely private and personalized. Since the times of the Russian Empire and the USSR, the head of state personally sets the priorities for foreign policy, bearing personal responsibility for these decisions, with other institutions having less significance and performing mainly an auxiliary function. Despite the change of political regime in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been a clear trend toward democratization and increasing the role of different actors in the foreign policy discourse. Most experts say that foreign policy making remains one of the least-developed areas of governance [Yakovlev-Golani, 2011, p. 8]. The post-Soviet legacy is clearly evident in the structure of the existing hierarchy, the main characteristics of which are excessive centralization and the role played by personal relationships at the level of political elites.

This article looks at the impact of the political decision-making process in Russia on relations with the European Union according to the theory of neoclassical realism, which allows an

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analysis of the effects of external factors on foreign policy. The study examines the hypothesis that the process in Russia is highly centralized and personalized communications. In addition, differences in the nature of foreign policy-making processes in Russia and the EU have a negative impact on the relationship between the two partners.

The purpose of this study is to show how intervening variables (political decision-making institutions, political culture, and the relationship between the government and society) define the dependent variable (Russian foreign policy) in relations with the EU within the framework of neoclassical realism. The study first explores the importance of institutional arrangements and their effects on the conduct of foreign policy in the framework of neoclassical realism. Then it analyzes stages of EU – Russia relations and the influence of domestic factors in Russia. In conclusion, it assesses the current transformation of the institutional mechanism toward improving its efficiency and presents possible ways of implementation.

The role of intervening variables in the framework of neoclassical realism

In 1998, Gideon Rose [1998] used the term “neoclassical realism” for the first time in a review of scientific monographs by authors proposing a new approach to the analysis of international relations. Continuing the notion of neo-realism regarding the key role of systemic and structural factors in the international arena, the adherents of neoclassical realism focused mostly on analyzing the foreign policy behaviour and decision making of certain states. Despite some similar characteristics and parameters within the existing system of relations, however, actors may follow radically different foreign policies that show the influence of certain internal forces.

Also, unlike neoclassical realism, the neo-realist approach does not consider states’ behaviour to be homogenous, given that the internal factors that help determine the real strength of a country are affected by external forces and drive foreign policy [Schweller, 2004, p. 164]. However, according to neoclassical realism, with regard to the role of domestic political decisions, the purpose and scope of foreign policy are determined primarily by the position of the state and its relative power in the international system [Rose, 1998, p. 58]. This is the main difference between neoclassical realism and liberalism, where the internal politics are completely dominated by external causes.

As Tatiana Romanova [2012] explains, neoclassical realism consists of three parts:

- the independent variable, which includes the external environment and the system of international relations;
- the intervening variable, which represents the complex set of domestic relations, including institutions, the relationship between state and society, public perception, and ideology. Neoclassical realism allows for the role played by individual personalities, their image as leaders, ideology and specific features that affect the policy-making process; and
- the dependent variable, which is the country’s foreign policy.

The analysis of the effect of the intervening variable on the dependent variable requires considering several factors emphasized by neoclassical realists. First, the actions of those involved in political decision making are not always rational, but are based on existing paradigms of thinking, personal views and experience. Rose [1998, p. 147] rightly stressed that “foreign policy choices are made by actual political leaders and elites, and so it is their perceptions of relative power that matter, not simply relative quantities of physical resources or forces in being.” There is a clear link between neoclassical realism and constructivism.

Second, states are heterogeneous and differ on the basis of “their ability to extract and direct resources from the societies they rule” [Schmidt, Juneau, 2009, p. 15]. The higher the

level of skill and data consolidation between state and society, the stronger and more effective the state and its pursued foreign policy become. Therefore, the established system of political mechanisms, with a clear division of roles and responsibilities, provides a positive impetus for the foreign policy-making process. A well-developed bureaucracy, coupled with democratic procedures, does not allow the process to be concentrated in the same hands; local elites and individual leaders carry markedly less weight in domestic politics. However, good governance requires the development of institutions as well as the mobilization of existing resources. When trust in government is at low levels, there is no single, unifying ideology. In contrast, shared values not only improve communication between civil society and the state, but also automatically enhance the country's image in the international arena.

Thus, according to the theoretical foundations of neoclassical realism, the intervening variable affects foreign policy. Moreover, all the internal factors are interrelated, and changing some factors, such as political ideology or institutions, can affect those internal factors, as well as the dependent variable, namely foreign policy.

The formation of Russia's foreign policy and its impact on relations with the European Union

Foreign policy making in Russia is traditionally a closed and personalized process with little involvement of experts and business communities. The key figure is the president, who, according to the constitution, defines the main directions of foreign policy. Therefore, the analysis of different periods of EU – Russia relations must start with the specific figure of the president of the Russian Federation and the direct action of the Kremlin.

The breakup of the Soviet Union and the rise to power of Boris Yeltsin led to the creation of a new system for formulating national foreign policy. It was in this period that the constitutional basis was created for a strong presidency that emphasized the president's central role at the strategic level. Other existing institutions, mostly inherited from the Soviet Union, played only secondary and coordinating roles, as their direct influence was severely restricted. This is most clearly reflected in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was forced to close 36 embassies and consulates all over the world between 1991 and 1993 [Checkel, 1992]. Nevertheless, the ministry continues to implement the Kremlin's foreign policy ideas, is fully aligned with the president of the Russian Federation and is embedded in a hierarchical power structure [Biberman, 2011, p. 670]. Other executive bodies involved in foreign policy making include the Security Council and the Office of the Foreign Policy of the Presidential Administration. However, as Anatoly Torkunov [2004, p. 264] notes, the lack of a highly efficient mechanism for a common foreign policy strategy in practical terms leads to contradictory results in the international arena. This inconsistency is reflected in current EU – Russia relations.

After the breakup of the USSR, Russia had to find its place in the changing world order and entered a new stage of cooperation with its partners. At the beginning of the 1990s, its foreign policy echoed the country's internal turmoil. The lack of clear national interests and solidarity with the West significantly weakened Russia's position on the international stage. Russia, along with the EU, supported the formation of new actors during the initial breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991–92. It refused to intervene in the events in the Balkans, which also contributed to the inconsistencies in foreign policy pursued by Andrei Kozyrev, the foreign minister whom critics nicknamed "Mr. Yes." In particular, interventions of the United States in Eastern Europe and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Bosnia in 1996 met no resistance from Russian elites.

A key moment in EU – Russia relations came in 1994 with the conclusion of the legally binding Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. It proposed a model that emphasized the fact that Moscow could become an equal partner only if it committed to the shared values of respect for democratic rights and freedoms and the liberalization of its economy. However, the agreement's entry into force was delayed for three years due to the negative impact of the first Chechen campaign on Russia's image abroad.

Meanwhile, the Russian president's popularity was declining at home, where anti-western sentiment was growing, due to the fact that Russians were openly dissatisfied with the lack of progress of the ongoing internal reforms and with inconsistent foreign policy, which adversely affected Russia's position in the world.

The results were Kozyrev's resignation and appointment of Yevgeny Primakov as foreign minister in 1996, the end of "blind" solidarity with the West and foreign policy aimed at protecting national interests. Alexei Bogaturov [2007, p. 61] notes that Russian foreign policy became both pragmatic and principled, insofar as partnership and cooperation with the U.S. and the EU were not in doubt. Nevertheless, Russia was able to maintain some pragmatism and independence by keeping its support flexible and based selectively on national interests. At the same time, another unilateral humanitarian intervention by NATO in Kosovo exposed the limited use of Russia's foreign resources, which meant its position was often ignored. In response to NATO and the EU's expansion, Russia's independent foreign policy had to become more complex to defend its national interests in the region and the world, which influenced Russian elites.

In the 21st century, the major developments in Russian foreign policy have been connected with the personality of Vladimir Putin, who still plays a key role in the political decision making. Although Yeltsin's influence continued for some time, as a new president Putin took active steps to establish a centralized hierarchy not only in domestic affairs but also in foreign policy. By 2004, a new institutional system had developed, by which time most of the former ruling elite were gone [Averkov, 2012].

In 2000, Russia published the "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," which highlighted cooperation with the EU as an important political and economic partner. At the same time, Russia clearly indicated its intention to pursue its own national interests by moving toward a strategic partnership that would not be defined by the EU. During Putin's first two terms as president, Russia's position in the region and the world was strengthened. The notion of common values is gradually disappearing, periodically arising on the agenda and becoming less useful as a tool to solve any pressing problems.

In 2003, EU – Russia relations entered a new phase, with four common themes: economic issues; democracy, governance and the rule of law; security; and culture, science and education. Two years later, "road maps" were developed that determined the main directions of cooperation, such as energy regulation, transport, crime and migration issues. In addition, both parties became strategic partners, which meant that "Moscow moved closer – albeit formally – to the position of a European insider" [Karaganov et al., 2005].

Elected president in 2008, Dmitry Medvedev almost immediately faced his first serious test – the armed conflict in South Ossetia, which directly affected relations between Russia and the EU. Despite harsh criticism and minor measures taken by the U.S. and EU, Russia's victory reaffirmed it as a regional leader in the post-Soviet space, ready to fight for its national interests. From a geopolitical point of view, the EU had failed to develop a tougher stance on Russia, having not imposed any specific political or economic sanctions. Its only action was to stop negotiating the new Partnership Agreement with Russia; those negotiations resumed two months later, however, despite the fact that Moscow had not complied with the EU's condi-

tion of a full withdrawal of Russian troops. Nevertheless, the efforts of the European Union, in particular France, translated into conflict at a diplomatic level.

Several trends are important in the context of political decision making and institutional dynamics with regard to foreign policy. Despite Russia's foreign policy being unconditionally strengthened by constitutional powers and Medvedev's personal meetings with heads of state, as prime minister Putin also remained active on foreign policy issues and met with political leaders, focusing particularly on Eurasian integration. During this period Russian foreign policy fell under the portfolio of both the president and the prime minister, resulting in some overlap. Russia's foreign policy has always involved a relatively high level of personal relationships with western leaders, including European ones. If this was a critical factor under Boris Yeltsin, those personal relationships remained equally important for Putin.

Since the departure of Medvedev as president, foreign policy making has become clearer and more predictable, as Putin as president has assumed the key role [Turkowski and Ćwiek-Karpowicz, 2012, p. 73]. The 2012 presidential elections did not change the balance of power, as the institutional arrangement proved once again that the EU remained a key partner for Russia. Shortly after his inauguration, Putin signed the decree "On measures to implement the foreign policy of the Russian Federation," which paid special attention to relations with the EU. In particular, it set out the following urgent tasks for Russian foreign policy:

- Advocate for the strategic objective of creating a common economic and humanitarian space from the Atlantic to the Pacific;
- Seek an agreement with the European Union on the reciprocal abolition of visas for short-term trips of their citizens;
- Uphold the principles of equality and mutual benefit in working on a new strategic partnership agreement between Russia and the EU;
- Contribute to the effective implementation of the "Partnership for Modernization" initiative; and
- Develop mutually beneficial partnerships to establish a single European energy sector, strictly complying with existing bilateral and multilateral treaty obligations.

Obviously, with Russia's increasing role in the international arena and in the region and its willingness to defend its national interests, the EU could no longer dictate its terms. However, Russia and the EU lack a certain incentive to resolve problems in a way that would strengthen their cooperation [Turkowski and Ćwiek-Karpowicz, 2012, p. 80]. Russia's long-term plans focus on the rapidly developing Asia-Pacific region, and those plans generally do not interfere with EU – Russia relations because of differences in the nature of their decision making. Despite Moscow's pronouncements to modernize, it has not kept up. The EU expresses its dissatisfaction with the Kremlin's unfulfilled plans to modernize, but because of the worsening situation in the eurozone, its relations with Russia have moved gradually to the sidelines. However, for Russia, the crisis in Europe is "a chance for a qualitative leap forward in relations," an opportunity for further developing a strategic bilateral partnership despite the continuing distance them [Lukyanov, 2012].

Thus, the foundations of today's foreign policy-making process were laid under Yeltsin's leadership, maintaining a clear focus on the primacy of the president despite changing political priorities. Its centralized nature increased Russia's ability to mobilize resources at critical moments, with the increased importance of the perception of specific elites, coupled with an emphasis on personal bilateral relations with political leaders rather than on institutional interactions that may adversely affect the stability of relations with Europe. Of course, the president should make decisions on key foreign policy issues; at the same time, the lack of involvement of

other actors, the excessive centralization and the hierarchical power structure have significantly reduced the efficiency of Russia's foreign policy-making process [Kortunov, 2004].

One of the key problems of modern relations between Russia and the EU is the different levels of centralization in political decision making. Consequently, Russia prefers to establish relations bilaterally with individual European states, while the EU involves a wide range of actors in its foreign policy, which is challenging for Russia's highly personalized foreign policy.

Conclusion

The theory of neoclassical realism, with its emphasis on the intervening variable, is an effective tool for analyzing Russian foreign policy making, because throughout modern history, it has been shaped and defined by a key political leader in the person of the president. Neoclassical realism also helps explain Russia's use of various tools in its dialogue with different actors, according to its national interests.

The EU has traditionally been considered the main political and economic partner of Russia, despite the EU's shift in foreign policy toward Russia, which has also been under scrutiny in Europe. Russia's commitment to the strategic goal of creating a single economic and humanitarian space from the Atlantic to the Pacific has a large long-term and positive impact on the dynamics of the whole European region. However, to achieve this objective, the parties must overcome several areas of disagreement, which include not only issues of an economic or ideological nature, but also differences in decision-making systems.

The main disadvantages of the Russian political decision-making process – a high degree of centralization and institutionalization, coupled with the dominant role of individual leaders and elites – jeopardize Russia's long-term relationships with its partners, in particular with the European Union. However, in Russia there is a clear tendency to complicate domestic political realities and ideologies and to engage civil society and business in some form of interaction with the state. The broader involvement of interest groups can become a catalyst for change in Russian foreign policy and will allow for more active grassroots cooperation in the future, and also shows the willingness of power to engage in a new form of dialogue. In order to realize the opportunities, the partnership between the EU and Russia must overcome some challenges: a surge in the EU's capacity to guarantee security in the region and the involvement of a broad range of players in the process of foreign policy-making in Russia.

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Влияние институционального механизма принятия политических решений в России на формирование курса внешней политики в отношениях с Европейским союзом

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В статье анализируется влияние внутренних факторов (таких как институты принятия политических решений, политическая культура и связь между властью и обществом) на формирование внешней политики России в отношениях с Европейским союзом в рамках неоклассического реализма. Излишняя закрытость и персонализированность сложившегося процесса принятия политических решений в России не позволяют эффективно реагировать на возникающие вызовы и негативно отражаются на возможных долгосрочных перспективах сотрудничества. Особое внимание уделено важности институциональных механизмов и их влиянию на проведение внешней политики государств в рамках теории неоклассического реализма. Также выделяются и анализируются основные этапы российско-европейских отношений и роль внутривластных факторов России, влияющих на данный процесс.

Безусловно, Россия и ЕС нацелены на долгосрочное партнерство. Однако существуют определенные трудности во взаимодействии между российским централизованным и европейским децентрализованным механизмами принятия внешнеполитических решений. Кроме того, чрезмерная концентрация власти в узких кругах российских элит не способствует развитию диалога с государствами Европы, где зачастую политический вес конкретной личности ниже и существует эффективное распределение полномочий среди институтов в данной сфере. Учитывая излишнюю централизованность российского механизма принятия политических решений, выстраивание долгосрочных отношений с партнерами, в частности с Европейским союзом, становится трудной задачей. Децентрализация власти, повышение эффективности институциональных механизмов и более активное участие гражданского общества смогут повысить общий уровень доверия и вывести диалог с Европой по ключевым вопросам на новый уровень.

Ключевые слова: внешняя политика, механизм принятия политических решений, неоклассический реализм, Россия, Европейский союз

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