

Mirror, Mirror...: Myth-making, Self-Images and Views of the US Other in Contemporary Russia

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In Russia the claim to be recognised as a great power seems inseparable from national identity (Lo 2002, 20). The phenomenon was vividly illustrated by Vladimir Putin when he was president for the first time in his statement that 'either Russia will be great or it will not be at all' (Shevtsova 2003, 175). Even in the years of deepest political and economic crisis, during the Yeltsin presidencies in the 1990s, there was among the political elites and the public alike a stubborn insistence that Russia was now and forever a great power, no matter what (Lo 2002). Tellingly, Yeltsin's first, markedly liberal and pro-Western foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, remarked that Russia was 'doomed' to be a great power (Lo 2002, 19). There were also historical parallels to this, indicating a perennial link between sentiments of national identity and great power aspirations. However backward Russia was according to the domestic eighteenth century discourse, it had an unflinching view of moral greatness and an everlasting rightful status as a *velikaya derzhava*, or great power (Prizel 1998, 167).

The key significance attributed to the great power quality has, of course, political implications. In the words of one observer, 'the great power identity is fundamental, not only in an identity perspective but for the very prospects of the regime of remaining in power' (Vendil Pallin 2009, 268). Squandering the great power heritage or being indifferent about it would seem to be recipes for getting voted out of office.

The idea about Russia as a nature-ordained great power is not the only notion of key significance in contemporary political discourse, however. There is also a deep-rooted idea accounting for why Russia has so often throughout its history actually fallen short of realising its supposedly preordained great power potential (Petersson 2011). This is the notion of the recurring Times of Troubles (*smuta*), which denotes deep socio-political and economic turmoil during which state weakness is endemic and the country is beset by foreign intervention, weak domestic leaders, and internal opportunists conspiring with aggressive foreign powers, all at the same time (Solovei 2004). The articulation of this idea is a potent weapon in domestic political life, as it can be used to sow suspicion against political actors allegedly working in favour of foreign interests. It is also a powerful rhetorical device endorsing nationalist arguments about the need to ensure a strong, respected and, if needed, feared Russia.

Since such periods of societal unrest come and go in Russian political history, it follows that they are also (temporarily) overcome in the end. Moreover, they are ended in a manner that reveals Russia's inherent great power potential, above all the fine qualities of its people and the leaders that appear to unite them. Just like in the case of the paradigmatic *smuta*

between 1598 and 1612-13 (Dunning, 2001), the troubles end as a result of a united popular effort and also due to the emergence of a bold and resourceful leader in the nick of time who unites the people behind him, restores order, throws out the foreign intruders and punishes the internal troublemakers. Visibly, therefore, the two myths stand in a dialectical relationship to each other, as the one accounts for the shortcomings of the other. They live off each other and sap each other's strength.

The point that I wish to make in this chapter, and which I have developed elsewhere, is that these two forceful political ideas, the one about the preordained great power status and the one about the cyclically recurring Times of Trouble, make up two partly symbiotic, partly countervailing political myths which reveal and reflect major dynamics of contemporary political developments in Russia. Indeed, I would argue that Vladimir Putin's great successes among the electorate can partly be understood through the lens of a political myth perspective. Political myths resonate with widespread sentiments about national identity, and acclaimed political guardians of mythical traditions thus garner support and legitimacy from the voters. In such a manner, Putin has been skilled at claiming to be the keeper and restorer of the great power tradition, at the same time as he has been the one to allegedly combat and overcome the contemporary Time of Troubles marking the presidencies of his immediate successor, Boris Yeltsin.

Analytically, political myths are narratives which are *believed to be true or acted on as if they were true* by a group of people, and hence they have implications for the lived and perceived political reality of those people. It is beside the point to try to decide whether these political myths are actually true or false (Blustein 2008, Bottici 2010). It is a fact, though, that the common usage of the term to a certain extent hampers its usefulness as an analytical tool, which calls for pedagogical efforts on the part of the user. I still find the term expedient, though, since it does not carry the political connotations of the contending term 'ideology', does not presuppose a certain methodological approach as does the terms 'narrative' or 'discourse', but connotes an intimate link with national identity which I find highly relevant.

I would thus argue that political myths provide building blocks for a group's efforts to define a common purpose and a collective identity. Preferred readings of the past, shared by many, are of central importance for the construction of collective identities, and such readings are what political myths most often are about. The myths provide a general framework into which people can strive to fit to make sense of their destinies and life paths. If individuals and groups can be part of a larger narrative which puts their present in relation to a greater past and indicates the direction towards a preferably brighter future, it adds considerable strength to their construction of identities. Their strivings are endowed with meaning, a sense of cohesiveness, and added significance.

Identity, stereotypes and images of the Other

Political myths about the national Self are not the only key to the understanding of national self-images, however. I would posit that the publicly projected image of the Other as represented by the United States is vital for the understanding of contemporary Russian self-identity. A working hypothesis might be that in times of weakness and *smuta*, there would be a more engaged attitude towards the outside world, including the United States, as Russia in a state of weakness cannot afford to antagonize the stronger powers. On the other hand, someone has to be blamed for the shortcomings, not least in view of the unfulfilled expectations for great powerhood, and so the US might be attributed blame for this. In other words, there are no unidirectional links.

Contemporary theories on identity construction would have it that social actors do not and cannot know their identities *a priori*. Rather, it is through social interaction that a sense of the Self is formed (Suzuki 2007:30; Neumann 1999:13; Greenhill 2008:345). 'The face of the other summons the self into existence', says Iver B. Neumann (1996:150). That is why negative stereotypes and enemy images are so central for the definition of group identities (Sibley 1995, Elias & Scotson 1999). When depicting the Other as not being up to the standards of one's own group, the image of the Self is boosted as virtuous and good. For a number of reasons enemy images hold special clout for welding groups together. The enemy is as a rule projected at least as roughly equal in strength to the in-group, and most often he is also believed to be at least potentially stronger. Moreover, the enemy collective is described as evil, inflexible and with a set of goals that is incompatible with that of one's own group (Cottam 1994:20). In such a manner a looming—or at least potential—danger to the collective self is conjured up and prompts the group to close ranks and strengthen its internal cohesion.

Enemy images constitute a particularly powerful and compelling kind of stereotype that tends to guide action. A stereotype, as a frozen and most often negative image of the Other (Petersson 2006), is a statement about assumed characteristics of an individual on the basis of his/her perceived group belonging. Stereotypes about other nations work according to the same principle of extreme simplification. For the adherents to the stereotype it provides 'a useful fit' with reality rather than 'an exact match' (McGarty et al 2002:8). The rationale for common action might well build on erroneous assumptions, but may serve to nurture common action all the same. Enemy images project a sense of imminent threat and danger which, to keep the resultant damage level at bay and presupposes concerted action (Petersson 2006, Luostarinen 1989).

The centrality of the Self/Other nexus in identity construction, be it on an individual or collective level, is a universal phenomenon. In contemporary social theory it has often been argued that conceptions of Self tend to mirror the practices of significant others over time. This is what lies behind the notion of the 'looking-glass self' (Wendt 1992: 404); only through this mirror image can a

view of the national Self be properly discerned. Significant also for the purposes of this chapter, the idea of the mirror image is compelling for the study of Russia and Russian identity. The stereotypical images of the US are not only antagonistic, however; typically they communicate envy and contempt at the same time. This complexity makes it even more interesting to follow and analyse the development of Russian images of the US. The images of the both envied and denigrated superpower of the United States is not only interesting in itself, but is also essentially revealing for the understanding of contemporary Russian self-identity.

Russia-US Relations in history

Ever since Peter the Great, the debate on whether Russia should pursue its own path of development or open up a window on the West has been a driving force in Russian politics (Rabow Edling 2000). Seen in a historical perspective, then, the United States has not enjoyed a central position in the construction of Russian national identity for very long. Rather, the US constitutes a comparatively recent obsession (Shlapentokh 2011). Instead, it is Europe, as represented primarily by Germany, France and the United Kingdom, that historically has been the main concern (cf. Neumann 1996, 1999). During the nineteenth century a large number of Russian intellectuals saw Europeanness as the main and overarching problem for Russian national identity, and there were repeated warnings about the incessant intellectual colonization of Russia by the 'Romano-Germanic' world (Laruelle 2008: 2-4).

The Russian focus on the United States is, therefore, largely a product of the second half of the twentieth century. World War II left Germany defeated, and the United Kingdom and France drained of resources and strength. As a consequence, the United States stood out as the undisputed leader of the Western bloc. Since the US was now the emergent leader of the West, it was by way of analogy attributed all the negative characteristics pertaining to the West in Russian discourse: cultural inferiority, reprehensible morals and shallow ideals (Harle 2000:120).

In general Russian politicians and the public alike harboured mixed feelings towards the United States during the twentieth century. At the outset, Soviet rulers were in fact rather positive. They looked at the US as a fellow challenger to the European colonial powers, as kind of sorts in the international arena (Harle 2000:120). However, during the 1930s a bout of anti-Americanism surfaced (Shlapentokh & Woods 2004:170), not least in connection with the Stalin-era obsession with internal and external enemies and the constantly reiterated theme of capitalist encirclement.

During the cold war a curious mixture of feelings of material inferiority and ideological and cultural superiority informed relations with the US. It has often been recounted how Soviet politicians used to apply the US as a yardstick for assessing economic development and military might, at the same time as they condemned it and predicted its demise (Jönsson

1984). The US was consistently deplored for ideological reasons, as well as for being morally defunct. These mixed feelings affected elite assessments of what level of cooperation should be maintained with the US, also for politicians in the post-Soviet era. Indicatively, in the late 1990s the US was prominent on the list of perceived worst external threats to Russia, as well as on the roster of the international partners that were the most preferred (Petersson 2001:114).

Views on the US and the West after 1991

As we know, the dissolution of the Soviet superpower in 1991 profoundly affected Russian national identity. When compared with the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation had lost a third of its territories and 40 per cent of the population. Twenty-five million ethnic Russians who used to be citizens of the Soviet Union found themselves outside of the borders of the Russian Federation, often in what suddenly turned out to be less than benign surroundings. For those who remained within the borders, a seemingly bottomless socio-economic chasm opened up in the wake of shock therapy and market economy reform. Russia's decline was as abrupt as it was steep. One malicious saying had it that whereas the Soviet Union had been a superpower, post-Soviet Russia could be said to be a 'Burkina Faso with missiles'; this image of course did not square well with the great power myth. However, in those turbulent times, comparisons with the United States did not become less important for Russian self-perceptions and identity. The US was still the yardstick against which Russia measured Russia itself. In the search for a new national identity, interaction with this significant Other maintained its vital importance (Prizel 1998:10).

The early 1990s encompassed a brief period when dominant Russian political discourse on the United States was positive, stressing Russia's natural 'belonging' to the West. This coincided with the peak of the Democratic Russia movement, which showed an impressive power of political mobilization before and in the immediate aftermath of the August coup in 1991. But it failed to secure a stable and central presence in the Russian political arena (Flikke 2006). According to Neumann (1999:169), one of the reasons why the democratic movement never developed further was the lack of reciprocity; in West European political discourse Russia continued to be Other. Russia was quite simply not let into the living room of the purported common European house but continued to be relegated to its wings, and the US views were perceived as no less denigrating. Another explanation has been offered by Sherlock (2007) who argued that the Yeltsin regime performed dismally when it came to defining political myths that could shore up its legitimacy. A golden opportunity was offered and lost by the bold and resourceful crushing of the August coup in 1991, where Yeltsin himself was cast in the role of principal hero. However, this formidable material for myth construction was squandered two years afterwards because of Yeltsin's heavy-handed suppression of the political resistance mounted by the Russian parliament. Among other things this led to the White House—the site of parliament which had been the principal

arena of resistance to the August ring-leaders—being rendered useless as a symbol for the new democratic Russia and for Yeltsin's own role in it.

In the 1990s it was a popular undertaking among foreign scholars to subdivide the political spectrum in Russia into different ideological inclinations such as liberals, centrists and Eurasianists, defined according to stated preferences about international partners (Prizel 1998; Dawisha & Parrott). The liberals held the United States to be the preferred international partner as well as offering an economic model to be emulated. The centrists' idea of Russia-US relations was purely instrumental: Russia should uphold these relations in order to attain certain goals, such as to protect itself against the influence of potentially more threatening antagonists like China and Japan. Prizel (1998:272) graphically described this centrist attitude towards the United States as a relationship 'free of romance and mutual admiration'. For their part, the Eurasianists stuck to the enemy image of the US and opposed any kind of drawing closer in terms of bilateral relations (Prizel 1998). Since the enemy was viewed to be assertive, Eurasianists contended, then so should be the behaviour of Russia.

To summarize, Russia and the West—notably the US—were during the cold war and thereafter 'simultaneously allies and potential foes' (Shevtsova 2005:338). The attitude towards upholding a working relationship with the United States is aptly summed up in the expression 'whether we like it or not' (Petersson 2001), which signals great ambiguity. On the one hand, the United States is denigrated and detested, on the other it is also admired, albeit reluctantly. In the ways it demonstrates sovereignty and projects power in the world arena the United States has been the primary role model during and after the Cold War (Trenin 2007:98).

The 'reluctant admiration' of the US has not only been due to its economic might and achievements, or its status as the sole military superpower of the post-Cold war world. Also, its resolve in international politics and the commitment to defend individual citizens at all costs has been counted as one of its strengths (Petersson 2001:115-116). The mixed feelings about the United States were clearly expressed by President Medvedev in 2009: 'The issue of harmonising our relations with Western democracies is not a question of taste, personal preferences or the prerogatives of given political groups', he said. These relations were to be maintained out of necessity, and he cautioned against the notions of a 'happy and infallible West' and an 'eternally underdeveloped Russia'. The demand for respect and for treatment as an equal was clear (Johnson's Russia List 2009-#168, 10 September 2009).

During the first two terms of Vladimir Putin's presidencies, analysts identified an increasingly alarmist rhetoric in Russia that pointed out how the United States was a source of an imminent security threat (Mendelson and Gerber 2008). Political and economic shortcomings were increasingly blamed on external and internal foes, a phenomenon which

stood in stark contrast to the Yeltsin years where the predominant focus had been on internal threats, such as centrifugality, separatism and organized crime (Petersson 2001). In more recent periods, recurrent themes have included foreign encirclement, outsiders' dangerous influences, and the alleged and persistent wish of outside powers to meddle in the internal affairs of Russia, just like during the paradigmatic Time of Troubles.

The United States was attributed the greatest part in such schemes (Shlapentokh & Woods 2004:169). The negative outlook on the US was mirrored in public opinion, especially among the younger strata of the populace, where 20 per cent asserted that the US was an enemy of Russia and an additional 40 per cent saw it as a rival (Mendelson and Gerber 2008:117). In the views of Shlapentokh (2011), however, these sentiments were not indicative of any inherent public dislike of everything American. Rather, the negative views about the US were created and inculcated by the ruling elite in an increasingly authoritarian Russia, as well as by the mass media which all too readily followed instructions from central authorities.

At the same time, and seemingly paradoxically, other analyses have shown patterns of convergence, including at the personal level in Putin's relations with his then opposite number in the US, George W. Bush. Their policies were highly congruent on the war on terror where Bush propounded what Putin wanted to hear given the Russian leader's views on Chechnya. Russian print media expressed a preference for a Republican incumbent in the White House, since presidential representatives of that party tended to be more pragmatic, oriented towards traditional, hard security matters, and less insistent on the observance of human rights in other countries of the globe (Petersson & Persson 2010).

At the summit meeting in Moscow in July 2009, the 'reset decision' was made to start from a clean slate and set aside strained US-Russia bilateral relations, adversely affected by the war between Russia and Georgia in 2008 and the US-initiated plans for missile shield defense deployment in Poland and the Czech Republic. President Medvedev observed that the proceedings had great importance not only for bilateral relations but also for 'the trends of the world' (Medvedev 2009). He took an almost bombastic tone as he stressed the importance of improvement in the relations between the two powers. There was more than a remnant of the old Soviet superpower mentality in his statement, suggesting that all major political matters around the globe were to be settled at summit meetings between the US and Russia. Not least curious was the President's understanding of globalization which, rather than making governance structures in the world more complex, enhanced the opportunity structures for Russia and the US to affect world developments:

I would like to emphasize that each of our countries understands its role in its own way, but at the same time we realise our role and responsibility for the situation in this world - especially in a period when the level of globalization has reached such dimensions and such parameters that the decisions we make very often determine the situation in general. And such powerful states as the

United States of America and the Russian Federation have special responsibility for everything that is happening on our planet (Medvedev 2009).

Thus, in Medvedev's statement the dominance of the two powers seemed to be taken for granted. It was as though the financial crises of the West and the rise of East Asia had not taken place. Russia's uncontested great power status was again being claimed, and no signs were seen of the old, persistent Time of Troubles that had resurfaced in the 1990s. Russia was, according to this logic, back where it belonged. President, Medvedev asserted that greatness can never be a given but has to be earned (Medvedev 2009a). While at the time it was intended as a criticism of the US tendency to take its great power status for granted, the statement could—probably contrary to Medvedev's intentions—be read as equally applicable to Russia's situation: it is hard to live up to the myth of being an eternal great power unless Russia steers clear of Times of Trouble and unrest and, in addition, *earns* respect and recognition in the eyes of the outside world.

Conclusion

There is one more dimension to take into account in this review of Russia's identity and global status. It is the question of which countries matter most in the outside world and how important they are in shaping the image of one's own nation. In line with the political and economic recovery presided over by Putin and administered for a short while by Medvedev, Russia has increasingly come to play the role of norm-transmitter, challenging not just the US but also the European Union in its self-proclaimed mission to promote norms of democracy and human rights worldwide (Wagnsson 2008).

Within the framework of what has been referred to as Greater Europe, there is unease, not least triggered by the Eurozone crisis, about the EU's future role in global affairs or, paradoxically—in Europe itself. No longer is it self-evident that the EU is the moral, economic and political centre of Europe; it is being increasingly challenged by states such as Russia and Turkey. The norms that Russia has promoted are different compared to those propagated by the EU which include democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Russia's standard setting has centred on a robust and resolute interpretation of sovereignty, national self-determination and the struggle against terrorism. The latter has been pursued with a fervency equalling US zeal in this matter during the presidency of George W. Bush (Wagnsson 2008).

If the EU is in general decline the same can be said about the US, which is no longer the sole and uncontested superpower. In view of its chronic economic difficulties and the conspicuous lack of political initiatives to resolve the crisis that largely characterized the administration of President Barack Obama, the US has lost ground in relation to China. How is this salient to the study of images of Russia? There is no doubt that this steady American

slippage will subsequently affect the centrality of images of that country in Russian national identity construction. It is a natural conclusion to draw that just as the attention during the twentieth century shifted from Europe to the US, China will probably replace the US as the yardstick against Russia will measure itself in the future.

Ever since Peter the Great, Russia's leaders have been careful to assert Russia's belonging to Europe. On this basis alone the prospective shift represents a major challenge for future constructions of Russia's national identity.

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