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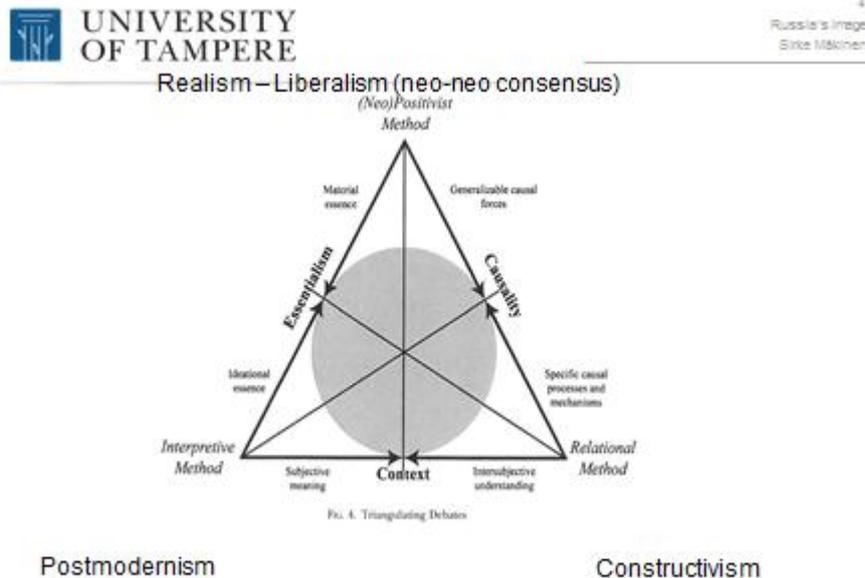
European Perceptions of Russia’s Image and Identity

Introduction: a constructivist approach to the studies of identities and international relations

The lecture started with the positioning of the teacher within the field of IR metatheories / paradigms and methodologies. The teacher employs a constructivist approach (see e.g. Burchill et al 2001; Brown 2001) and methodology of anti-positivism (see Howard 2010 & PICTURE 1). From that position follows that it is important to study identities and images of states/nations and other political entities when studying international relations. In previous studies it has been argued that “images that ascribe an identity to a nation have now become a mainstream component of international relations research (Neumann 1998, 2). The power of images in international relations has been emphasised: “After the cold war ended – identity – not ideology – and reciprocal state images and perception of each other – not strategic nuclear balance – became the pivotal factors promising a better understanding of international relations” (Taras 2013, 2). The emphasis on the importance of studies of identities and images is based on the very ‘core’ of constructivism, according to which the most important aspect of international relations is social, not material (Jackson in Taras 2013, 4). The focus of study is on “the social construction of reality which takes place when ideas, thought processes, and norms become the primary explanatory variables in place of material phenomena. Images, perceptions, self-images and misperceptions form integral parts of constructions of reality” (Taras 2013, 5). According to the social constructionist approach, identities are not considered as permanent essences, they are not given, but they are socially constructed. Identities for their part have effect on how we understand our interests, or how the

identity of a nation or of a state is constructed has impact on how the interests of that nation or state are perceived. Finally, these interests, or perceived interests, have impact on what kind of actions a state takes, what kind of foreign policy decisions it makes and implements. This was the approach which guided the lecture and the literature which had been chosen for this lecture.

PICTURE 1. Methodological and theoretical positions in IR (reproduced from Howard 2010)



Howard 2010, 405

Studies on Russian and European identity construction

If we then think about Europe and Russia, the relationship between European and Russian identity formation, we can see that Western scholars have usually focused on how identity has been constructed in Russia, in the past and in the present, that is, how Russians themselves have constructed Russian identity in different temporal periods and by different actors. Russian identity formation has been studied in particular in relation to Europe/the West and the question has been what has been the role Europe or the West has played in the identity construction of Russians. As Iver B. Neumann (1996) has argued Europe has been the main other in Russian identity formation. There are fewer studies on how Europeans perceive Russia's identity or Russia's image, or the role which Russia has played in the construction of identity of Europeans. Neumann (1998) has argued Russia has been one of the others in European identity formation, for example in the past the Turkish other has been more significant.

European representations of Russia from the 16th century until 19th century

If we follow Neumann's (1998) analysis we can see that there have been at least three factors/frames which have had impact on how Russians, Russian identity has been perceived and represented in Europe from the times of the Muscovy until the October Revolution in 1917. These three factors have driven Russia further away from Europe – in the European representations of Russia and Russia's identity: the question of Christianity, civility and regime type. Throughout this long period – with variations which will be referred to during the lecture - Russia has been represented somehow different from 'us'. At the beginning of this period – 16th and 17th centuries - the religious factor was more significant than at the end of this period: questions were raised as to whether Russians represented true Christians. Those who had had contact with Russians/Russian priests were astonished by their 'lack of scholarship and heretical teachings and practices' as well as with Russians' close ties with non-Christian people (Neumann 1998). Russian cultural habits were also interpreted somehow barbarian and closer to Asiatic than European ones, and further evidence was also found in the cruelty of government (Neumann 1998; see also Golubev 2013). In the 18th century a strategic discourse entered the field too: now Russia was also taken as an actor in the European states system and potentially a valuable ally against the Turk (Neumann 1998). In the 19th century Russia was truly taken as a part of Europe – it represented a legitimate player in the Concert of Europe. However, despite giving Russia a role in Europe, the discourse of Russia as barbarian and Asiatic remained and there was also a fear of Russification of Europe: Barbarian Russians could conquest the civilized Europe (Neumann 1998).

European representations of the Soviet Union

During the Soviet period and the Cold War there were two main discourses: a military and political threat and a political model to follow. What should be mentioned, according to Neumann (1998), was that the social construction of the Soviet Union was integral to Europeans' social construction of political identity as such and so it also constituted a part of everyday politics. In the so called authorized discourse the Soviet Union – its political system and culture were represented as barbarian and authoritarian and the Soviet Union as an actual military and political threat. In the alternative discourse – Soviet Union as a model to follow, it was actually the political and economic model in abstracto which was admired, not necessarily the empirical reality of the Soviet Union, Russia as 'the land of the future' as Neumann (1998) argues.

European representations of the Russian Federation

Neumann (1998) referred to two different representations of Russia in the 1990s. The first one of them was Russia as a learner – a learner of market economy and liberal democracy. Russia was perceived as a country becoming more like 'us' thanks to the change of its economic and political

system. Another representation – Russia as a potential threat – could materialize if ‘aggressive nationalists’ came to power.

In the 2000s many scholars have referred to the ‘problem of great power’ when discussing the image of Russia in the West and Russo-Western relations in general. The continuing dimension in Russia’s international politics has been the search for the recognition as great power and this has constituted one of the main problems in Russia’s relations with the West (Neumann 2013, Sakwa 2011). Moreover, Russia’s search has not been successful. The reasons for the failure to be recognized as a great power have been identified mainly as different kind of attributes or characteristics of a great power status. That is, the main reason, according to Neumann (2013, 35) is the rationality of governing or using the Foucauldian term- governmentality. If in the West the question has been “how the state can govern less” (ibid.), in Russia the state has chosen the direct rule – for example, civil society has not been allowed the freedom to act independently and thus to form a resource on which the state could rely. In Western perceptions this kind of rationality appears ‘backward’. Richard Sakwa refers to the choice of the Russian political elite as dual or partial adaptation – that is, the emphasis has been on sovereignty in international affairs and a distinctive developmental path (2011, 97). Russia has not adopted the modernization path chosen by the West but has claimed to adapt it to its political culture and traditions.

Discrepancy of the projected and perceived images

The discrepancy between the images which are being constructed by the Russian elite and the images that are perceived abroad has been recognized in previous studies (Feklyunina 2008). As mentioned above, Russia’s main projected image is that of great power but not as an empire. Even though the political elite argues that it has legitimate interests in the post-Soviet space, the priority of economic interests rather than geopolitical ones are emphasized (ibid.) However, the image of Russia in the West focuses on human rights and military issues, and not on economic issues. The main problem according to the scholars has been that the reality of Russian domestic and foreign policy does not correspond to the image which has been projected by the state (Feklyunina 2008, Solov’ev and Smirnov 2008). Whatever image or brand building campaigns are launched, they cannot get to their goal if the words do not match the deeds.

Image of Russia/Russians in Finland

The image of Russia and Russians varies from country to country and this is true also within the European Union. Accordingly, EU countries have implemented different policy approaches to Russia. Finland, which became a member of the European Union in 1995, has been identified as one of the ‘friendly pragmatists’ in relation to the Russian Federation (Leonard and Popescu 2007). During the lecture we looked more closely at the Finnish public opinion on Russia and Russians. The image of Russia in Finland has been influenced by the factors mentioned also by Neumann (1998) when discussing European representations of Russia and Russia’s role in European identity

formation. That is, cultural questions including religious 'Otherness', different political periods and current politics have impact on how Russia is perceived in Finland (see Raittila 2011). There are three different frames within which Finns perceive Russia and Russians: the frame of threat, the frame of possibility and the frame of Otherness (ibid.). Russians as individuals, in particular Russian immigrants in Finland are usually seen through the frame of possibility.

Discussion: Russophobia and Finnish-Russian relations

The Master and doctoral students were asked to read the two articles mentioned below for the lecture. The pedagogical approach of the lecture was interactive; students should have participated by contributing to group discussions based on the lecture content and two articles.

Dr. Valentina Feklyunina is based at the University of Newcastle, UK, and has her PhD from the University of Glasgow, UK. Feklyunina's article discusses the concept of Russophobia as used by the Russian political elite. She contributes to the constructivist discussions of Russia's identity and thus supplements the lecture's constructivist approach. Moreover, her article reinforces the analysis put forward by Neumann on some of the problems in Russo-Western relations. As for Dr. Anni Kangas (University of Tampere, Finland), she makes a theoretical contribution to the practice turn in International Relations and thus moves away from the constructivism per se and the thesis of identity questions being at the centre of focus and having the most important impact on how relations of a state to another or foreign policies are formed. The analysis part of the article deepens our understanding of the Finnish-Russian relations, the image of Russia in Finland, by studying political cartoons and documents of the interwar period and thus, gives historical perspective to the contemporary Finnish public opinion on Russia introduced during the lecture.

The students were asked to reflect on the lecture and the two articles and discuss in groups what thoughts these two articles provoked. In particular students may have discussed the following questions:

How Russophobia was understood in these articles/what was the approach employed?

How Russophobia had been constructed by Russian political elites and media, what were the key elements of this narrative?

What was the connection between Russophobia and competing identity discourses in Russia?

What had been the key positions in Finland towards Russia/the Soviet Union (the inter-war period)?

- Feklyunina, Valentina. 2013. Constructing Russophobia. In *Russia's Identity in International Relations. Images, perceptions, misperceptions*. ed. by Taras, Ray. Abingdon. Routledge, 91-109.
- Kangas, Anni. 2011. Beyond Russophobia: A practice-based interpretation of Finnish-Russian/Soviet relations. *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol 46, 40-59.

To conclude

The purpose of the lecture was to show the change and continuity in the perceptions of Russia in Europe. The continuous factor has been the representation of Russia as the Other in European identity formation. The otherness has been related to the political practices and political system and cultural practices including religion. However, the recognition of Russia as part of Europe has also been part of the perception, and by some groups Russia might have also been taken as a model to follow (e.g. as a representative of ancien regime or an alternative political system). The main argument of the lecture was that images, perceptions and identities were socially constructed and thus, changeable by human action. In addition, the teacher pointed out that there was no one European image of Russia or one Russian image of Europe, as well as there was no one Russian identity or one European identity. Accordingly, there is e.g. no inherent, permanent Russophobia in European identity formation and Russo-Western relations, but Russophobia may materialize/may have materialized in a given temporal and spatial context and as an outcome of political motives of a given political group. Occasionally, the concept of Russophobia might have also served some purposes of the Russia's ruling elite/given political groups.

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