

When the Internal and External Collide: A Social Constructivist

Reading of Russia's Security Policy

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Abstract:

This study investigates the evolution of Russia's internal and external security priorities and state identity under President Putin through the prism of its narrative on the war on terror. Drawing on social constructivist theories of identity, security and narratives, it argues a change occurred from the regime conceptualising Russia as a weak state, which prioritised the internal security threats and the fight against terrorism in the early period, to a strong state, whose main security 'Other' was the West. As a result, the Russian leadership have relegated the fight against terrorism to an operational level and now emphasises the struggle to defend their strength from external pressures.

The current direction of Russian security policy is the subject of some controversy, both in academic and policy circles. This is reflected in the increasing talk of a 'new' Cold War emerging between Russia and the West (Sakwa, 2008), and the ongoing debate over Russia's internal security strategy in the North Caucasus (Sagramoso, 2008 Russell, 2008). In this way, most analysis focuses on either external or internal security, and the two are treated as unrelated. In contrast, this article argues that the two are tightly inter-connected around the issue of Russia's national identity, and in this way seeks to move beyond the familiar parameters of Russia's relationship with the West (Trenin, 2007, Lo, 2003), or the content of its more assertive foreign policy (Tsygankov, 2005).

In the course of the Putin presidency, Russia's state identity underwent a dramatic transformation. On coming to power, the Putin government presented Russia as a weak state, for whom internal rather than external issues were paramount. This even stretched to accepting a need for external assistance in order to guarantee its own security.¹ However, since the mid-2000's the Russian leadership have constructed an image of a Russia in which it has overcome its internal problems and has subsequently emerged as a strong state. This reflects a clear conception of what defines a state as strong and weak among the Russian elites. Within this very particular construct of a strong Russia, the remaining internal security

¹ Russian Foreign Policy Concept 2000

concerns underwent a process of externalisation, aided by the re-emergence of the image of the enemy, in Russian the *'obraz vraga'*.²

This transformation of official discourse draws parallels with the conceptions of weak and strong states within the International Relation's sub-literature of Security Studies. Scholars have noted that what differentiates a weak from a strong state is the degree of internal challenges to the basic tenets of the state, national sovereignty and territorial integrity (Ayoob 1995: 15-16).³ These studies, thus, focus on applying objective and external criteria to specific case studies in order to categorise to particular state. This paper, however reverses this model and instead considers the way in which the narratives of a 'weak' and 'strong' state are appropriated by the state elites in their discourses. The way in which state authorities interpret these notion can then impact on how they construct a vision for their country's development, identity and its political, social and economic priorities is significant because

'a state's behaviour is viewed as an intention to reproduce its identity as a state actor conditioned by shared norms, for example, if a state identifies itself as a great power, it will act to reproduce that identity in terms of prevailing norms regarding great power behaviour' (Lomagin, in Kanet, 2007:32-33).

Taking this into account, this article examines the ways in which notions of weak and strong state were appropriated by the Putin regime at different stages during his Presidency.

To capture and analyse the inter-connectedness between internal and external security and their relationship with identity, this paper traces the evolution of Russia's discourse on the fight against terrorism. In the last decade, terrorism has featured extensively in Russia's security discourses, and has spanned both the internal and external sphere of Russian security. Russia's war on terror was at the heart of President Putin's project when he came to power in March 2000, and thus it has attracted a lot of academic debate and often criticism from the West (Blank, 2003; Baev, 2006; Kennedy-Pipe, Welch: 2005; Golts: 2004). However, the place of the fight against terrorism in Russian security policy

² *'Obraz vraga'* is a Russian term for the perception of enemies – it is used by Russian and Western analysts to describe the way in which Putin's regime sought to blame Russia's problems on specific and unspecific enemies of Russia, but also to utilise the fear of the enemies in order to galvanise support from the population for the regime itself.

³ Ayoob has characterised less developed states as those that are weak (lack of internal cohesion and legitimacy), vulnerable (marginalised and easily permeated by external actors) and insecure (susceptible to internal and interstate conflict).

has been largely ignored by analysts since relations between Russia and the West declined during Putin's second term. An analysis of the Russian official discourse on the fight on terrorism thus sheds light on the major developments of Russian state identity, perceptions of internal and external security. To this end, the first two and last two years of Putin's presidency will be comparatively assessed, with a particular focus on Russia's fight against international terrorism. This will also allow the question of what has happened to the major security discourse of the early Putin period to be considered. The paper concludes by comparing and contrasting these two periods in order to assess the evolution of Russia's security priorities and national identity over the Putin period. The scope of this article is limited to the highest official discourse, primarily focused on those groups who have the position and power to shape Russia's security policy (Buzan et al, 1998:31-32), and thus does not include alternative or marginal security discourse present in this period (Morozov, 2002:411).

Security studies and social constructivism:

As a result of the post-Cold War paradigm shift in security studies, scholars now acknowledge the need to conceptualise and analyse external and internal security realms as inter-related phenomena (Campbell, 1998). Therefore, 'internal and external dimensions of security are inseparable' (Mishra, 2007:234), and are best pictured as tightly inter-connected strands of the same process, centred on the construction of a state's identity. To address the subject outlined above, the article adopts a social constructivist perspective. It therefore rejects the traditional International Relations notions that actors and their interests are objective and static entities and that rational and objective interest derive from the material capabilities of actors (Katzenstein, 2005). Instead, identities are cultural constructs that are established within an inter-social sphere (Finnemore, Sikkink, 2001:394) and as a result interests, policies and state's priorities are drawn from a particular construction of a state's identity (Hopf, 2005:226). This conceptual approach enables the inter-relationship between Russia's state identity and the construction of its internal and external security threats and priorities to be explored.

Section 1: Putin's early period and Russia's war on terror, 2000-2002

a) Russia's state identity

Immediately on coming to power, Vladimir Putin put forward his own vision of Russia. He outlined its identity and security concerns, as well as its ambitions and aims for the near future. In this context, Putin identified several key challenges for Russia's future, which were crystallised in his very specific construction of Russian identity as a weak state. In his Millennium manifesto in late 1999, Putin noted: 'for the first time in the past 200-300 years, it [Russia] is facing the real threat of slipping down to the second and possibly even third rank of world states'.⁴ Russia's major security threat was thus the decline and weakness of Russia itself. As a result, Putin launched a large-scale securitisation of Russia's domestic situation with a prioritisation of internal security threats over external ones. Russia's National Security Concepts in 1997 and 2000 reinforced this image further by re-iterating the immediate need to deal with internal security concerns.

In this context, Putin stated that Russia had a choice to remain a weak state and be left behind or deal with its domestic problems and rebuilt itself in order to re-emerge as a strong state once more.⁵ In this way, 'a central theme running through Putin's policy' was 'recognizing Russia's weakness and diminishing its impact on domestic and foreign policy' (Lynch, 2005: 143). The desire to re-construct a strong state harks back to traditional Russian notions of strength condensed around a state-centric model of government, in which the state dominates rather than represents society, through slogans of managed or sovereign democracy (Neumann, 2008:146). Within this construction of Russia's identity as a weak state, the issue of international terrorism transcended both the internal and external spheres, and played a dual symbolic role. On the one hand it was identified as the main source of danger for Russia's internal sphere (Putin, 2000), due to the role it was said to play in the Second Chechen war in 1999, but also in the external sphere as a major global threat to the current world order. On the other, it also became a way of re-establishing Russia as a strong power on the international stage. Although, it was presented as the source of threat and thus an existential threat to Russia, international terrorism provided an avenue for Russia to return to the international stage as an equal and active participant via cooperation with other great powers against international terrorism. Indeed, recognition of Russia as a great power by the Western community became a litmus test for achieving the goal of becoming a strong state. In this context, Neumann suggests Russia's view of its strength and international position

⁴ Vladimir Putin, 'Russia at the turn of the millennium', 29 December 1999, reported in *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 30 December 1999.

⁵ Vladimir Putin, Annual Address to the 'Annual Address to the Federal Assembly', 8 July 2000, available at: http://www.kremlin.ru/appears/2000/07/08/0000_type63372type63374type82634_28782.shtml, accessed 01 December 2008.

'stems from the tacit assumption that a small-power Russia is an impossibility. Russia has to be a great power, or it will be nothing' (Neumann, 2008: 128-129).

b) Russia's internal security priorities

The blame for Russia's weakness was thus placed on its wider socio-economic and political failures, such as its fragile economy, the weakness of state apparatus, international isolation, the demographic situation and international terrorism operating within Russia's borders.⁶ Within this extensive list of domestic problems, international terrorism was singled out as issue number one. In his television interview with ORT, President Putin in January 2000 stated that:

'I would not start changing anything, because I am absolutely convinced that we will not resolve any problems: not economic, social ones in a situation when the state is falling apart. Therefore, I think that there is nothing unusual that today we are devoting so much focus and attention to the problem of terrorism'.⁷

A victory over international terrorism was hailed as a key stepping stone towards Russia asserting its sovereign rights over its territory, and regaining its status as a confident and strong domestic and international actor.

In this period, all terrorist activity and a series of other processes taking place on the Russian territory, especially in its southern regions, were thus put under a single umbrella of international terrorism operating in Russia (Mirwaldt and Ivanov). Both the Chechen incursion into Dagestan in August 1999 and the apartment bombings in September 1999 were placed within this wider image of international terrorism rather than as individual domestic security incidents. The proponents of these acts were thus presented as an alliance of Islamic terrorists and former Chechen separatists set on attaching Russia and the rest of the civilized world (Snetkov, 2007:1352-1355). The building of this image had begun in 1997, with official statements regarding public executions, the adoption of Islamic tradition, and the general Islamisation of Chechnya under the Maskhadov's regime (Panfilov, 2008). In this context,

⁶ See footnote 3.

⁷ Vladimir Putin, interview with the ORT TV channel, 15 January 2000, available at: (pres site), last accessed 15 November 2008.

Chechen separatism was blurred into an image of Islamic terrorism and the Russian military operations in Chechnya in 1999 sent to deal with these groups were labelled as a 'police counter terrorist operation' and not a war.

The attempt to conflate internal Russian issues with international Islamic terrorism was re-enforced further following September 11th. Putin was the first world leader to send his regards to President Bush, and Russia very actively offered its support to the US-led war on terror. In a statement Putin noted that,

'What happened today [September 11th terrorist attacks in New York] underlines one more time the importance of the Russian proposal to unite international forces in the fight against terrorism. That is the plague of the 21st century. Russia directly knows what terrorism is and for that reason we understand the feelings of the American people'.⁸

Unlike the first Chechen campaign which was said to be motivated by the need to restore constitutional order in the Republic, the second Chechen conflict centred on repelling the threat of international terrorists operating inside Chechnya. The Russian government claimed that, there were extensive links between Chechen separatists and other international terrorist Islamic organisations operating outside of Russia such the Al Queda groups in Afghanistan. Many stories in the official media emphasised the role of foreign fighters in Chechnya. For example, Rossiiskaya Gazeta suggested that two thirds of Chechen fighters were mercenaries, and gave detailed descriptions of the way that these foreign mercenaries paid Chechen boys between 10 to 100 dollars to lay down mines (Kozireva 2000; Lapsky 1999). The motivation of these foreign fighters seemed therefore to be numerous and diverse, but crucially they were not in any way related to the previous Chechen conflict in 1994-96 which centred on the question of secession and indigenous Chechen attempts to gain independence from Russia.

To the same end, Putin made a concerted effort to argue that this anti-terrorist police operation was not against Chechnya, Chechens, North Caucasus or even Russian Muslims.⁹ As noted by Bacon, international terrorism was in fact presented as an existential threat not only to Russia but also to the

⁸Mereu, D. (2001) 'Russia: Media Say Attacks Were Not Only Against U.S.' Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, 12 September, available at <http://www.rferl.org/features/2001/09/12092001125639.asp>, accessed 5 April 2007

⁹ Vladimir Putin, interview with the French television channel TF1, France 3, radio station RFI and television channel ORT, 23 October 2000, available at: , last accessed 02 December 2008.

survival of the Chechen nation and its economy (Bacon, *et al* 2006). In this way, the threat posed by Chechnya was thus presented not as stemming from within Russia but from external actors taking advantage of Russia's domestic weakness. In turn this had a direct reflection on policies aimed at the Chechen threat, which centred on non-negotiation with the terrorist groups, whilst making a concerted effort to promote a Russian-backed local Chechen leadership to facilitate a peaceful settlement.

c) Russia's external security priorities

International terrorism was portrayed as an existential threat to the global community. From this perspective, Russia's ongoing domestic fight against terrorism was said to be simultaneously ensuring the survival of international society. As noted by the Head of General Staff of the Armed Forces, Valery Manilov in September 2000: 'Those guys, killed in Chechnya, are defending the whole of Europe from terrorism' (Kozyreva 2000). This inter-linking between the internal and external environments was not confined exclusively to the communality of threats but also the approach to addressing this threat. The Russia government regularly suggested that the global community make a more of a concerted effort to develop a common approach to counter-terrorism. This was in evidence as early as 1999, and thus predated the launch of a similar rhetoric by US-led after 9/11. To this end, Russia initiated a series of UN resolutions aimed at security threats emanating from Afghanistan and the Al Qaeda terrorist cells located there in the late 1990s, early 2000s. In October 1999, Russia sponsored UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1267, which threatened to impose sanctions on the Taliban, unless it surrendered Bin Laden. UNSC resolution 1333 reiterating these demands in December 2000. For Russia international terrorism thus came to represent a security threat operating in multiple parts of the world, and it fell to the international community to establish a united front to counter-act this global danger.¹⁰

In this way, the international sphere, particularly the West was increasingly presented in a more positive light and in less confrontational terms than in the immediate period following the NATO bombing of Serbia in the first half of 1999. As a result, Russia chose to place less emphasis on previously contentious issues of the late 1990s, such as NATO expansion (Morozov, 2004: 318).

¹⁰ Sergei Karev, Speech of the representative of the Russian Federation at the VI Committee of the 55th session of UN General Assembly, 13 November 2000, available at: [last accessed 19 February 2009](#).

Instead, in his speech to the Federal Assembly in July 2000, President Putin suggested that Russia aimed to become a state which is: ‘Strong and self-confident. Strong, not against other strong states, but with them’.¹¹ The Russian leadership was focused on rebuilding its position as a great power, amongst other great powers, by talking about the importance of international cooperation and negotiation for Russia’s foreign policy (Kortunov, 2002). Whilst Russia expected its sovereignty and national interests to be respected, including in its actions in Chechnya, it developed a positive external outlook *vis a vis* the West.

With this aim in mind, the Russian leadership sought to persuade the international system of the need for cooperation against international terrorism, and that this common challenge was the source of many of security threats¹². Prior to 9/11 Russia largely failed to persuade its Western counter-parts that its actions in Chechnya were in fact a legitimate response to the internal threat posed by international terrorism.¹³ Famously, in February 2000, the then Republican Presidential candidate George W Bush suggested that the IMF and Export – Import Bank would cut its loans to Russia if it continued its military campaign in Chechnya (Williams 2004:198). In Europe, criticism came both from individual state governments and various regional organisations, such as the EU, OSCE and the Council of Europe. For example the EU threatened to review its assistance programmes to Russia and the EU External Relations Commissioner Chris Paten, in December 1999 noted that ‘we do want the best possible relationship with Russia. But the disproportionate use of force in Chechnya does not make it easier for us to have that sort of relationship’ (Knox 2003).¹⁴ Therefore, in contrast to Russian expectations most Western analysts rejected suggestions that military actions in Chechnya aimed at defeating rebels’ with links to international terrorism (Williams, 2004: 198). Russia also failed to persuade the West that Islamic terrorism, particularly developing around its Southern borders should become a top priority for international security.

However, a shift in international outlook following the September 11th terrorist attacks in New York galvanised this previously unsuccessful securitising move. Some commentators have argued that the

¹¹ See footnote 5.

¹² See footnote 9.

¹³ Igor Ivanov, Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation, Speech at the 106th meeting of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, on the issue of ‘ The Russian input into the Council of Europe and the recommendations from PACE (1456) about the situation in the Chechen Republic, 11 May 2000, available at: last accessed 30 October 2008.

¹⁴ Russia’s voting rights in the Council of Europe were removed for the period 2000 – 2001

link between Russia's problems in Chechnya and the US war on terror was an opportunistic move (Cornell, 2003:167-168). Others characterise it as merely a smoke screen for what was really going on in Chechnya, or that it was purely a mechanism for restoring Russia's links with the West, following the break down of relations in the late 1990s. However, it is more accurate to characterise Putin as seeking to capitalise on the prevailing mood for a cooperative approach to terrorism to build ties with the West and the US in particular. Thus, although Putin's support for the US-led war against terrorism was to some degree a 'gamble', due to the long list of outstanding disputes between Russia and the West and the threat that such arrangements posed to Russia's other partnerships China, Iran, India, Central Asian influence (Antonenko, 2001-02:49), this should be qualified.

Firstly, as already noted, Russia attempted to convince its Western partners to pay more attention to the issue of international terrorism even before 9/11, particularly in relation to its Southern borders including Afghanistan. Therefore, the US-led war on terror was partially interpreted as the West finally acknowledging an issue which Russia had been raising for some time before.

Secondly, rather than merely a smokes screen for its action in Chechnya, counter terrorism did in fact develop into a vehicle for cooperation between Russia and its international partners after 9/11, although less successfully than it was hoped at the time. On the bilateral level, Russia's most successful cooperation was with the US, as Russia shared America's vision for the war on terror, which Lieven conceptualises as 'an alliance between states for the protection of states' (Lieven 2002:249). Immediately following 9/11 President Putin offered extensive practical assistance to the US, especially in relation to the US military deployment in Central Asia, but also sharing intelligence sharing, opening up of the Russian airspace and cooperation in search and rescue operations in Afghanistan, as well as participation in international anti-terrorist initiatives. For example, Russia supported the US' proposal to launch military action in Afghanistan at the APEC meeting Shanghai 15-21 October 2001 (Antonenko, 2001-2002:50).

Support was reciprocal, and President Bush noted the increased cooperation between the two sides at the joint US-Russian summit in May 2002 and in September 2003 when he stated that 'Russia and the United States are allies in the war on terror. Both our nations have suffered at the hands of terrorists,

and both of our governments are taking actions to stop them' (Knox 2003). The establishment of a US-Russian working group on terrorism in February 2003, was followed by the US State Department placing a number of Chechen groups¹⁵ on their list of international terrorist organisations in August 2003. There was also a marked toning down of condemnation of Russia's actions in Chechnya. In the American press in 2001 and 2002 the Chechen issue became closely linked with what Williams calls the 'Chechen –Afghan – Al Qaeda' myths, which he notes became 'a veritable industry' especially during the Afghanistan campaign winter 2001-2002 (Williams, 2004: 204).

Therefore, the strategy of using international terrorism to build relations with the US and gain greater recognition of Russia's own domestic struggles with terrorism was to some degree a success. However, it had less impact on relations with Europe. Despite the muting of criticism of Russia immediately after 9/11, it re-emerged rather swiftly at the Russia-EU summits in 2002. Russia's European partners continued to make a distinction between Chechen rebels and Al Qaeda and insisted that it should negotiate with Chechen representatives, as was stated at the Russia-EU Brussels Summit of November 2002 (Herd, 2002: 118). Similarly, the Council of Europe declined to send observers to the Chechen Presidential Elections in October 2003 on the grounds that they did not want to give support to 'Soviet style' elections (Knox 2003).

At a multilateral level, Russia built a degree of rapport with NATO on the issue of global terrorism, particularly following the establishment of the NATO – Russia Council in 2002. Russia also became an active participant in the UN Security Council Counter terrorism Committee (Lynch, 2005: 150). The threat of international terrorism and the need to counter act also became a mechanism for cooperation in non-Western multilateral organisation, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Thus, the Russian strategy of justifying its policy in Chechnya and building its great power status through international against terrorism following September 11th was not an outright success but certainly achieved some of the expected aims.

To sum up Putin's first term in power: Russia presented itself as a weak power that was hoping to reassert itself as a strong domestic and international actor. However, this could not be achieved until its

¹⁵ These included Riyadus-Salikhin Reconnaissance and Sabotage Battalion of Chechen Martyrs.

internal security threats were overcome. Thus, the impact of international terrorism on domestic security became one of the key referent threats to Russia's existence, and one of the key factors that was preventing Russia from fulfilling its ambition of regaining its 'true' identity as a strong state. At the same time, international terrorism was also presented as an existential threat to the rest of international community. In this period Russia sought to rejoin what it saw as an international community of strong states and international terrorism played a role in this as a source of cooperation between Russia and the other great powers. Thus, internal security issues were not only prioritised and securitised within the Russian official discourse, but were also directly intertwined with Russia's view of itself and its international outlook.

Section 2: Putin's late period and Russia's war on terror, 2006-2008

The spirit of cooperation and alliance building that emerged between Russia and the West in the aftermath of 9/11 was short lived. By Putin's second term, mutual suspicion and disappointment re-emerged in Russian perceptions of the West, similar to those prevalent in the mid-1990s. A major source of this perception was that Russia believed it had successfully solved its internal problems, but that the international community continued to refuse its rightful place amongst other great powers. This led to a review of Russian security priorities.

a) Russia's state identity

By the mid-2000's official characterisations of Russia as a weak state, rife with internal and external security threats had disappeared. In its place, a new image of Russia as a strong state emerged. This was premised on Russia having resolved its internal challenges, whereby Russia was now a state for whom its main security concerns related to the external rather than internal sphere.

As part of the process of de-securitising internal security, a simultaneous process of externalisation of security along temporal, geographical and even normative axis was evident. On the temporal axis, there emerged a process of historicisation of Russia's internal weaknesses, symbolised by the fear of a return to the era of Yeltsin. Russia's instead focussed on the future, exemplified by the launch in September

2007 of the official Concept of Long-term Socio-economic Development of the Russian Federation to 2020¹⁶. Geographically, security threats are increasingly perceived as not only stemming from Chechnya and North Caucasus but from the wider international system as well. As a result, there has been a blurring of lines between the threat emanating from the West and international terrorism. As demonstrated in his post-Beslan speech, Putin argued that it was the ‘unnamed’ enemies outside Russia that were trying to take a piece of Russia away from it.¹⁷ On the normative level, Russia increasingly rejected what it saw as Western imposed ‘values’ and challenged the notion of universal norms, whilst emphasising the importance of its national values, culture and interests.

On this basis, the overall message from the Russian authorities was one of greater self-confidence. As part of its domestic strength Russia began to present itself as a great power in the international system, able to defend its position and interests, and who was no longer prepared to be sidelined in major international developments. As mentioned in a recent foreign policy appraisal: ‘the firmness of the international positions of Russia directly hinges on the situation within the country. The internal strengthening of Russia makes our foreign policy more purposeful and productive, and Russian diplomacy increasingly relevant in world affairs’ (2008). Therefore, Russia was ready to take its rightful place on the international arena among other great powers.

b) Russia’s internal security priorities

The Russian internal sphere was characterised by the emergence of two, and at times interlinked and yet often independent, processes: the narrative of desecuritisation and the narrative of risk. As part of the attempt to de-securitize the internal sphere, a process emerged of disassociating the image of previous weakness from the new symbols of strength. A striking example was the transformation of the image of Chechnya, previously constructed as a ‘state breaker’, it became a ‘state maker’. Through a process of normalisation, political developments, such as the referendum over the new Chechen constitution in March 2003 and the holding of Presidential and Parliamentary elections in 2003, 2004,

¹⁶ More detailed on this new initiative see new reports from NewsRu.com available at: <http://txt.newsru.com/finance/25nov2008/conception.html>, accessed 16 April 2009.

Whilst the effect of the recent global economic crisis has forced the Russian government somewhat to re-examine the feasibility of such socio-economic as well as military programmes in the immediate future, these have been re-negotiated, put back by a few years, but as yet not suspended outright; On the economic initiative: <http://www.rian.ru/economy/20081001/151746239.html>, accessed 16 May 2009.

¹⁷ Vladimir Putin, ‘Address to the Nation’, 4 September 2004, available at: http://president.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2004/09/04/1958_type_82912_76332.shtml, accessed 16 June 2005.

2007 and 2008, were used to generate a new image of Chechnya as part of a strong Russia. For example, the Chechen capital, Grozny, shifted from being a city in ruins into ‘a garden-city’.¹⁸

In latter stages of normalisation process, especially with the rise of Ramzan Kadyrov to the Chechen Presidency, a joint message of de-securitisation developed between the Federal and Republican political leaderships. On 1 March, 2007 Kadyrov stated that. ‘if the federal authorities continue to support the region the way they are today, then in the next few years our region – which I consider to be the most peaceful region – will become the most prosperous’. Despite cracks appearing between the Republican and Federal political authorities over economics, the security issues of the early 2000s are now largely unmentioned. Indeed, on 16 April 2009, the Russian National Antiterrorist Committee (NAC) lifted the decree implementing the counter-terrorism operation in Chechnya¹⁹, which served to finally rehabilitate Chechnya from representing a security threat to the Russian Federation. Indeed, the memory of Chechnya as a security threat is being disarticulated through a process of historical revisionism. References to the Chechen conflict, in Putin’s 2005 Federal Assembly speech, were limited to the first campaign under Yeltsin rather than the counter-terrorist operation of 1999, thus safely kept within the confines of ‘Russia’s most recent history’.²⁰ This historicisation of the Chechen conflict serves to reinforce further the official narrative that President Putin had succeeded in rebuilding Russia as a strong state without internal security problems.

Within this construct of Russia’s identity and its internal and external sphere, the discourse on the war on terror was significantly downgraded, losing its central role as a key gathering mechanism for Russia’s identity as the primary ‘other’. In this way, the problem of international terrorism operating inside Russia continued to feature in Russian security discourse but in a different manner. Indeed, official descriptions of terrorist activity featured familiar themes from the earlier period, that emphasised that international terrorist groups and centres came from outside Russia. For example, the Head of the Ministry of Interior of Dagestan Adilgerey Magomedtagirov declared that: ‘Wahhabism is an imported product’.²¹ However, the severity of these threats has been downgraded from existential

¹⁸ A remark made by a group of doctors returning on an official trip from Chechnya on 16 May 2007

¹⁹ For a detailed outline of this announcement see ITAR-TASS daily reports on 16 April 2009, available at <http://www.itar-tass.com/eng/level2.html?NewsID=13843796>, accessed 16 April 2009.

²⁰ Vladimir Putin, Address to the Federal Assembly, 25 April 2005, available at http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/04/25/2031_type70029type82912_87086.shtml, accessed 10 March 2009.

²¹ 20 November 2008 Regnum, available at <http://www.regnum.ru/news/1087077.html>, accessed 09 December 2008.

threats to potential risks.²² In August 2008, Prime Minister Putin stated that 'serious blows have been dealt to terrorist leaders and networks. But we should be aware that this threat remains - it is very serious'.²³ In many ways this is reminiscent of the discourse, which was prevalent in the pre-wars (1990-93) and inter-war years (1996-99) about Chechnya. In the absence of open conflict the threat from the North Caucasus tends to be refocused upon familiar themes of criminals and bandits undermining the stability of the region.

As part of the downgrading of the threat from terrorism to domestic security, it was argued that terrorism could now be contained within legislative and conventional security measures. To this end, Russian legislators have created a series of new counter terrorist laws, such as the new Counter Terrorism law in 2006 and the creation of the National Anti-Terrorism Committee with local branches throughout the Russian Federation. In this respect, increasing emphasis is being placed on preventing the terrorists from successfully implanting themselves in Russia rather than directly tackling terrorists already there. As demonstrated by the law on NGOs in 2006, the Russian state has sought to reinstate its control over all non-state activity. As a result, a new conceptualization of threat has emerged which merges terrorism with independent activity and influences from the West. This was highlighted by Aleksandr Torshin, deputy chairman of the Federation Council and a member of the National Antiterrorist Committee (NAC), when he stated that "Foreign NGOs often turn into platforms for recruiting terrorists and extremists. What is particularly alarming is that in most cases they recruit young people', he also suggested that foreign, especially European governments not only do not clamp down on such activity in their countries but operationalise the information disseminated by such NGOs for their own propaganda purposes.²⁴

Thus in this period, a redefinition of internal security threats was evident, with a less specific and wider conception of challenges adopted. The common theme among these was that they were perceived to challenge the political authority of the regime, and usually represented as originating from non-state

²²According to an interview with the Minister of Interior, Rashid Nurgaliev, in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* most of the terrorist activity no longer represents 'large scale and coordinated armed resistance. In recent times the presentation of the North Caucasus region has taken on a more general criminal direction', Press release of the Ministry of Interior, 05 February 2008, available at <http://www.mvd.ru/press/interview/5188/>, accessed 10 November 2009.

²³ Vladimir Putin interview in *RIA Novosti*, 4 August 2008, cited in 'Putin says terrorism remains a major threat for Russia', Johnson's Russia List, #30 - JRL 2008-141, available at <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/2008-141-30.cfm>, accessed 10 May 2009.

²⁴ Aleksander Torshin, Deputy chairman of the Federation Council, quoted in *RIA Novosti*, 08 April 2008, cited in 'Foreign NGOs support terrorism in Russia - senior senator' in Johnson's Russia List, #24 - JRL 2008-72, available at: <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/2008-72-24.cfm>, accessed 01 May 2009.

actors both on the extreme nationalist as well as pro-liberal sides of the political spectrum. In this way, the notion of the ‘vrag’ [enemy] was not only diverse and extremely malleable but also highly ad hoc in nature, often reflecting the current developments not only on the internal but also external sphere. In particular opposition liberal movements associated to the West within Russia itself are now targeted, most recently highlighted by reports that the Russian government appeared to have leveraged extensive pressure on liberal-independent and pro-Western Mayoral candidate Boris Nemtsov in the Sochi local elections in April 2009.²⁵ Pressure is also applied to more nationalist groups through the use of anti-extremism legislation, and in 2007-2008 at least six trials ended with a conviction for xenophobic activities.²⁶ The application of anti-terrorist and anti-extremist measures in tandem and ad hoc in practice is at the heart of the blurring of these two specific issues into a communality of threats around the notion of ‘vrag’. Therefore, international terrorism was on the one hand downgraded to no longer presenting an existential threat, and on the other, placed within a wider construct of other potential security risks which threatened to derail the course of country’s development in this period.

In this context, the threat of terrorism, as in the earlier period, continues to be employed for legitimising other security policies. In the wake of the August 2008 military clashes between Russia and Georgia, Russian officials and the state-owned media sought to highlight the threat of Georgian terrorists operating within Russian territory. For example, in September 2008, the chair of National antiterrorist committee and head of the FSB Alexander Bortnikov raised the issue that international terrorist groups were ‘trying to get into the territory of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the Russian Federation to prepare for [terrorist] acts’²⁷. Therefore, the Russian internal sphere has not been fully desecuritized within official discourse as it has become a potential source of instability. In this respect, international terrorism continues to play a key role, but has been subsumed within the wider image of the ‘obraz vraga’ that is threatening Russia from abroad but also from within.

c) Russia’s external security priorities

²⁵ For more information about the mayoral race in Sochi, prior to the elections 26 April 2009 see the report by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 16 March 2009, available at http://www.rferl.org/content/The_Circus_Comes_To_Sochi/1511167.html, accessed 16 April 2009.

²⁶ Galina Kozhevnikova, ‘Winter 2007-2008: An Epidemic of Murders against the Backdrop of Elections’, 23 March 2008, Reports and Analyse, SOVA Centre, available at: <http://xeno.sova-center.ru/6BA2468/6BB4208/ACE26E6>, last accessed 10 March 2009.

²⁷ Interview with Alexander Bortnikov, Head of Federal Security Bureau, ‘Russia is strengthening its antiterrorist security of key facilities, afraid of Georgian terakts’ in Regnum, 19 August 2008, available at: <http://www.regnum.ru/news/1043516.html>, accessed 10 April 2009.

In the minds of the Russian leadership, having regained the status of a strong state, it was expected that this would be recognised by the West. However, this acknowledgement was not perceived as overcoming, leading Putin to state that the return of a strong Russia is ‘not to everyone’s taste’.²⁸ This perception of being spurned by the West was a major factor in the Russian leaderships reconsideration of what the key referent threat to Russia and the international system is. In this respect, global terrorism gave way to the increasing threat emanating from the West and its domination of the international system at the expense of others (Trenin, 2006). Putin suggested that:

*‘Looking back at the more distant past, we recall the talk about the civilising role of colonial powers during the colonial era. Today, ‘civilisation’ has been replaced by democratisation, but the aim is the same – to ensure unilateral gains and one’s own advantage, and to pursue one’s own interests. Some are not above using the dirtiest techniques, attempting to ignite inter-ethnic and inter-religious hatred in our multiethnic and democratic country’.*²⁹

In the immediate period following September 11th Russia hoped a common fight against terrorism could strengthen relations with the West, but very soon the US led global war on terror became a major source of tension between the two. Russia questioned the goals, aims and future targets of the West’s counter-terrorist strategy, and in particular its use in justifying US intervention in Iraq in 2003 (Ferguson, 2004). Russia places great emphasis on the centrality of the principle of national sovereignty within the international system, and as a great power expected to play a central role in the development of future international norms. Thus, for Russia

‘the Iraq crisis has also undermined a lot in terms of international antiterrorist efforts in another key point of conflict in the contemporary world, in Afghanistan. The impact of the Iraq events – post factum, so to speak – calls into question, and then also destroys what at the initial period of the international antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan was achieved by truly united efforts of the international community at large, by the then existing “world antiterrorist

²⁸ Vladimir Putin, Annual Address to the Federal Assembly, 26 April 2007, available at: http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/04/26/1209_type70029type82912_125670.shtml, accessed 16 February 2009.

²⁹ See footnote 27.

coalition” on an impeccable legal and political basis of UN resolutions and UN Security Council resolutions.³⁰

From a Russian perspective, Western unilateralism was now destabilising the international system as much as international terrorism, a perception compounded by tension over the prospective NATO expansion to include Georgia and Ukraine. A point exemplified by Putin in 2007, ‘today we are witnessing an almost uncontained hyper use of force – military force – in international relations, force that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts’.³¹ At the same, the Russian leadership became disillusioned in their attempts to convey to the West that their actions were violating what Russia interprets as key national interests, such as the expansion of NATO. This has evident in the frequent detailing of what Russia proclaimed as Western ‘double standards’ between the West’s own behaviour and expectations of how Russia should behave. Alexander Aksenyonok for example suggested in December 2008 that

‘no one can ignore Russia’s natural state interests; there are lines that cannot be crossed. None of these warnings have been taken seriously; and in general Moscow’s arguments have long been running across a wall of more or less polite indifference. One has the impression in this regard that Russia is ready to give up trying to explain its actions and, instead, to act primarily from its own vision of the situation, rather than from possible foreign reactions’.
(Aksenyonok, 2008)

This perception was only aggravated further by what Russia perceived as the West’s unacceptable level of interference in the so-called coloured revolutions in the post-Soviet space (Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) (Simes, 2007), and subsequent direct interference in Russian politics via financial, social, political and moral support of certain candidates in the 2008 Presidential elections.³² On this basis, the West began to be perceived as a threat to internal security, with the Russian leadership alarmed by what it perceived as Western sponsored civil unrest in the colour revolutions,

³⁰ Press release: ‘Russia in International Counterterrorism Cooperation in 2008’, by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, available at: http://www.in.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/itogi/37D2CC4F7789ADC6C325752E00533147, accessed 22 March 2009.

³¹ See footnote 27.

³² Personal communication with Dr Peter Duncan, 03 March 2009.

leading to a belief that this must be avoided with Russia at all costs.³³ Events in the external sphere thus had a direct and profound effect on Russia's perceptions of its internal sphere, demonstrating once more the tight inter-connection between these security spheres in Russian official discourse.

As outlined above, internal challenges in this period were externalized in order to fit within the Russian construction of a strong state. In this way, the West became a scapegoat for many of Russia's internal as well as external problems. This is illustrated by a comparison of how Russia's economic situation was presented between the turn and the end of the decade. Whilst in the early Putin years, the Russian authorities recognized that the country's economic problems were at least partly due to its internal developments, such as Soviet legacy and the economic strategy of Yeltsin, in 2008 economic problems were presented as the result of developments external to Russia. Within this narrative, the US is identified as the chief culprit for plunging the global community into a recession. At the United Russia's 10th Congress on 20 November 2008, Prime Minister Putin characterised this global crisis as due to 'the abuse of "cheap money" and other related mortgage problems in the United States that have prompted a chain reaction, causing a global financial system paralysis and a general mistrust on the markets, which was bound to affect the real economy'.³⁴ Therefore, in contrast to 2000-2002 when a common global external threat of international terrorism was seen as an opportunity for cooperation with the West, in 2008 a common global economic crisis is perceived as a threat to Russian interests and status.

Indeed, even the discourse about cooperation in the fight against terrorism has lost its saliency. Yet as outlined above, despite being downgraded the issue of international terrorism is still active in Russian domestic security. As a result, Russia continues to be willing to cooperate on counter-terrorism externally, but this cooperation is no longer accorded such significant and takes place at a more operational level, and thus contributes little to high political relations. For example, at the St. Petersburg G8 Summit in July 2006, the United States and Russia jointly announced the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism; in September 2006 the Sixth International Meeting of the Heads of special services, security agencies, and law-enforcement organizations took place to discuss

³³ See footnote 31.

³⁴ Vladimir Putin, Speech at the United Russia's 10th Congress, 20 November 2008, available at: <http://premier.gov.ru/eng/events/1212.html>, accessed 23 January 2009.

future actions and cooperation.³⁵ Similar operational cooperation has taken place on a trilateral basis between Russia, EU and the US, such as trilateral meeting in June 2007 to discuss border management and the situation in Afghanistan.

Taking this into account, it is unclear whether the regime regards the threat of international terrorism as any less important than at the start of the decade. However, it is evident that the Russian leadership are frustrated that the actions of the West in not recognizing Russia as a great power has come to overshadow the need for cooperation against international terrorism. In 2006 Margelov, the chairman of the Federation Council's foreign affairs committee stated that:

"It would be fair to say that neither the wars under the slogan of spreading democracy, on which the U.S. alone has spent more than \$400 billion, nor the tougher regulations encroaching on human rights in historical democracies, have left terrorists defeated...The global community remains disintegrated; its members settle accounts between themselves and, without defining the phenomenon they are fighting against, they continue to divide terrorists into 'ours' and 'theirs'".³⁶

Therefore, the West is seen as responsible for restricting the development of a multilateral approach to fighting terrorism, by only choosing to cooperate with states that are willing to accept Western dominance. In this way, the West is perceived as putting its own interests above cooperation, especially with regard to Russia by 'expanding infrastructure, especially military infrastructure, to our borders'.³⁷ Indeed, certain issues are perceived by Russia to be slowing down the joint-international effort to combat terrorism, such as the West's double standards towards Russia in relation to counter-terrorism. An example is the refusal to extradite certain Chechen figures, residing in Europe, like Akhmed Zakayev from the UK.³⁸ This process of exporting animosity in one area of foreign policy into cooperation in the fight against terror was particularly evident during the recent escalation of tensions between Russia and the UK. The recent crisis over the murder of the former FSB operative Alexander

³⁵ For a summary of current initiatives see: The United States-Russia Working Group on Counterterrorism Joint Press Statement and Fact Sheet, 20 June 2008, available at: <http://moscow.usembassy.gov/ctwg.html>, accessed 20 February 2009.

³⁶ Mikhail Margelov, Chairman of the Federation Council's foreign affairs committee, quoted in RIA Novosti, 11 September 2006, cited in Johnson's Russia List, #13 - JRL 2006-205, available at: <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/2006-205-13.cfm>, accessed 09 April 2009.

³⁷ See footnote 27.

³⁸ See footnote 29.

Litvinienko in London in 2006 and the subsequent tension between Russia and the UK over the extradition from Russia of a named suspect, Lugovoi, by the UK police authorities, resulted in the Russian suspension of its counter terrorism cooperation with the UK in July 2007.

If the increasing friction between Russia and the West has dampened their cooperation over counter-terrorism, international terrorism continues to be a key mechanism for cooperation between Russia and its non-Western partners, in particular in the former Soviet Union. Russia actively participates in regional organisations with a focus of counter-terrorism, such as the SCO and CSTO, as well as at global level in the UN. However, Russia no longer tends to introduce the issue of Chechnya and North Caucasus as an example of international terrorism operating inside a state. Instead the focus has shifted to international groups and movements posing a threat to other states. For example within the framework of the SCO, Russia's concern with terrorism is focused on the threat to the regimes' of the Central Asian Republics rather than within its own borders³⁹.

To sum up, international terrorism remains an important issue for Russia, but it is no longer the single most important one. As noted by President Medvedev in March 2009, the threat from international terrorism continues to be a priority for Russia; however it is now ranked also alongside the threat from NATO and other local crises, and is no longer the same level of priority from Russian political or military circles as in the previous period.

Concluding remarks

This paper set out to analyse the way in which notions of weak and strong state were played out in Russia under the Presidency of Vladimir Putin, and what these notions came to represent. It concludes that these two concepts are much more dynamic, malleable and complex notions than presented in other studies. In this way, Russia is a 'difficult' case for security studies because it does not fit either within the weak or strong state paradigm. In the early period, 2000-2002, the Russian elites' operationalisation of the notion of a weak state fitted neatly within scholarly understandings of this term. However, the subsequent reconstruction of Russia as a strong state from the mid-2000's onwards

³⁹ Sergey Lavrov , Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Statement at the Meeting of SCO Council of Foreign Ministers, May 15, 2009, available at: http://www.in.mid.ru/Brp_4.nsf/arh/98D7CC300536531EC32575B70049D7BF?OpenDocument, accessed 17 May 2009.

poses scholars a more difficult question. This conception of does not correspond to the typical notion of a liberal, Western and established strong state, such as those in Western Europe. It focuses less on state or security governance and more on Russia regaining international prestige and its political elites maintaining a tight control over the state. In many ways, even within this construct of a strong state there remains insecurity, both within the elites and in some ways the public, that Russia will not be taken seriously as a strong state, or that its fundamentals will be challenged. In this way, the internal sphere, whilst no longer presented as an existential threat, continues to be watched carefully by the elites as a potential 'risk', whilst in the external sphere Russia continues to feel challenged with regard to its international standing as a great power. An underlying logic of the traditional notion of a 'strong' state, which is often ignored, is that it designates a confident state. Confidence is something that still eludes the Russian elites, and perhaps explains the ongoing inter-linkage between internal and external security concerns, which makes Russia simultaneously a strong and a weak state. This represents a form of hybridisation between these two types of statehood.

Russia's narratives about weak and strong states challenge the assumptions that strong states have eliminated all internal security threats and managed to break the link between external and internal security concerns. As this article has outlined, the change in Russian identity during the Putin Presidency emphasise the direct inter-relationship between internal and external security. Indeed, the realisation that internal and external security dimensions are inter-linked is now being acknowledged even by scholars studying what could be described as traditional strong states, especially those of Western Europe. Russia in this case provides an even more vivid and stark illustrative example of this interaction. In both the early and late periods of Russia under Putin, external security priorities, especially its relationship with the West and international terrorism, have had a marked impact on its construction of internal threats. It is not that one field, external or internal, dominates or more actively impacts on the other. Rather, internal and external security priorities, together with state identity are inter-linked processes. Therefore, Russia's relationship with the West, its policy towards the North Caucasus or its approaches towards the war on terror cannot be considered simply by examining either the external or the internal sphere. Nor can they be fully understood without contextualising these security realms within the wider sphere of state identity, and other political, social and economic policies.

With this in mind, whilst most focus and attention in Russia foreign and security studies is now increasingly shifting towards the external security realm, especially in terms of Russia's relationship with the West, energy politics and its more assertive position on the international stage, Russia's ongoing counter-terrorist efforts, domestically and internationally should not be forgotten. Despite ongoing tensions in Russia's internal sphere, particularly in areas such as the North Caucasus it would appear that President Putin's counter-terrorist strategy has to some extent been successful. On the international stage, despite increasing assertiveness, Russia continually strives to establish a multi-lateral cooperation framework to combat and counter-act this threat. Perhaps one could even suggest that when it comes to the external sphere and in relation to this particular issue, Russia is in fact behaving like a traditional strong state not only in acknowledging that international cooperation is necessary to address a global issue, but that it can establish working relations with other states regardless of political tensions. Thus, contrary to the assertion of Russia as a combative within the 'New Cold War' paradigm, this positions Russia as a cooperative rather than confrontational partner.

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