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PARTICULARISM AND UNIVERSALISM IN RUSSIAN POST-SOVIET FOREIGN POLICY: RUSSIA'S DISCOURSE ON HUMANITARIAN COOPERATION IN THE CIS

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This article offers a discussion of Russia's post-Soviet search for international legitimacy, informed by the notions of social antagonism and hegemony elaborated by E.Laclau and C. Mouffe. It is argued that discourse on humanitarian cooperation in the CIS is at the heart of Russia's current attempts to gain international legitimacy: it addresses the demands of identity construction antagonistically opposed to the European 'other' and simultaneously inscribes Russian identity within a counter-hegemonic normative discourse.

Key words: political legitimacy, identity, discourse analysis, hegemony, social antagonism, Russian post-Soviet foreign policy

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Introduction

> To itself, a nation appears as an expression of justice, and the more spontaneous its pattern of social obligations, the more this is true […]. To others, it appears as a force or an expression of will.
>
> Henry A. Kissinger, *A World Restored.*

One of the main premises of this study is that contemporary Russian discourse on humanitarianism is part and parcel of Russia's post-Soviet quest for political legitimacy – the problem that Russia has been grappling with since it emerged as a nation-state in 1991. The key insight here is that states seek to present their foreign policies as legitimate to respective audiences, be it the domestic public or the international community. Both domestic and international legitimacy are achieved through a considerable discursive effort. Domestic legitimacy is conceptualized as a stable link between foreign policy and identity created in discourse that makes both appear consistent with each other (Hansen 2006: 25). International legitimacy has been much less regularly viewed through the prism of discourse analysis theory. In academic literature it is equated with legitimation and understood as a process of advancing justifications whereby states attempt to connect their exercise of power to standards of justice and standards of appropriate and acceptable behavior (Allison 2013: 6-9). However, it is possible to analyze both domestic and international legitimacy if we concentrate on how states reconcile particularism and universalism and engage in the articulation of normative and historically pregnant concepts as part of identity construction. Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe's discursive theory of antagonism and hegemony, I would argue that humanitarianism – differently defined – is at the heart of Russia's current attempts at identity construction and legitimation: it enables Russia's policy of humanitarian cooperation in the CIS to speak to Russia's privileged vision of itself as well as to certain fundamental international rules and norms.

The travails of Russia's post-Soviet quest for legitimacy

Russia's post-Soviet search for legitimacy can be conceptualized as a learning process whereby Russian foreign policy makers have attempted to adjust the particularism of interest-

based policies and the universalism of international rules, norms and values. Having shed its imperial baggage, post-Soviet Russia's initial take on non-messianic universalism was rationalism, a set of universally valid principles and guidelines that could be applied to formulating particular policies. However, as is always the case with universalism, the universalism(s) that Russia came up with proved difficult to translate into the terms of a particular political order, legitimate both domestically and internationally. The controversy arose due to Russia's policy stance and policy legitimations at the sub-systemic, regional CIS level, because they were continuously at variance with the normative principles that Russia upheld and promulgated at the systemic, international level.

Let us begin with the early 1990s, when, in the hot-house climate of Russia's post-independence politics, 'geopolitics' was hailed as a new reference point for Russia's external relations. In 1992 Russia's first Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev expressed his commitment to geopolitics understood as a rational, balanced and non-partisan assessment of Russia's national interests when he suggested that "the geopolitical dimension of our interests is probably one of the most normal criteria for defining a new foreign policy orientation, with Russia still a missing component of the democratic pole of the Northern Hemisphere" (Kozyrev 1992: 86). No longer considered "a bourgeois science", geopolitics was discursively well-placed to reinforce a break with the Soviet past. It also responded well to the challenge of democratization by couching political arguments in the language of self-evident, objective truths.

Nonetheless, when it came to formulating and legitimizing particular policies, 'geopolitics' became synonymous with the global distribution of power and security threats and highlighted the importance of Russia's national rather than international security. In particular, geopolitics-informed discourse was underpinned by a growing concern that conflicts on Russian periphery could easily spill-over onto the territory of Russia proper and trigger the dissolution of Russia in its current borders. As a result, in a distinctly geopolitical move which involved drawing new borders on top of the already existing ones, the newly established successor states were subsumed under the designation "common post-Soviet geopolitical space," – a natural sphere of Russian influence in areas where its vital interests were affected. To sum up, 'geopolitics' was not just a conceptual venue through which the problematic of national interests entered the foreign policy debate. 'Geopolitics' replaced 'relations', as identities, foreign policy roles and prescriptions came to be read directly off the map. Put shortly, the rise of geopolitical rhetoric marked Russia's failure to 'relate' to others, i.e. to reconcile multiple interests and to

come up with an idea of a normative regional order meaningful to the CIS elites and underpinned by a concern other than Russia's territorial integrity.

This failure was not altogether lost on some high-ranking foreign policy officials who refused to equate both the end of ideological crusading and pragmatic pursuit of national interests with the absence of any sense of mission for Russia in the world. They stressed the need for Russia to develop a new image in the humanitarian sphere, lest we "create an impression that in seeing to our interests we forget problems confronting others" (Lukin 1992: 93). Initially those 'others' whose well-being and rights Russia was called upon to protect were identified as compatriots abroad. However, as was the case with the seemingly universal appeal of de-ideologization and geopolitics, the universal appeal of minority rights protection proved difficult to reconcile with the regional dimension of Russian foreign policy as well as with Russia's domestic policies. For one thing, Russia had difficulties in dealing with its own national minorities. Secondly, Russia was ready to take up the issue of minority rights protection in relations with some post-Soviet states, but not with others, and was therefore potentially vulnerable to accusations of having a double standard. Finally, the rhetoric of rights was not entrenched in public consciousness deeply enough to have wide popular appeal, and was too closely associated with the terms of a West-dominated world order that refused to recognize Russia as a great power.

What was needed was a normative discourse that would proceed 'bottom-up' this time: it would have Russian national interests as its point of departure and would address both Russia's regional concerns with security and global concerns with status. As a result, a wider normative appeal – while falling short of full-fledged universalism – would derive from Russia's claim to act in the name of a common cause and common security interests across the post-Soviet space. Finally, this careful balancing act between national interests and common values would be in keeping with Russia's traditional 'great power' role in the region and should therefore reflect Russia's own tradition of political thinking and political rhetoric. Not surprisingly, the magic solution that checked all the boxes was Eurasianism – a loose set of ideas expounded by a group of like-minded Russian émigrés who had coined the designation 'Russia-Eurasia' in an attempt to come to terms with the political and social fallout of the Bolshevik take-over. 'Russia-Eurasia' meant the spiritual centre and the metaphysical – Orthodox – core of the continent that was destined to eventually subsume and transform in its own image the Latinized European periphery. But 'Russia-Eurasia' also referred to the centuries-old historical process of economic

exchanges and cultural cross-fertilization between Slavic and Turkic peoples that culminated in the equal political status granted to both within the Soviet state (Tsymburskii 2007: 426).

In the post-Soviet setting Russia's 'Eurasianness' hinged on the consensus that Russia was the only power capable of and willing to address the multiple security dilemmas in Eurasia. However, contrary to the classical Eurasian theme of 'dissolving' 'Russia' in 'Eurasia', the post-Soviet tendency was to set Russia apart from Eurasia politically, regardless of whether 'Eurasia' referred to the post-Soviet space or to the continent as a whole. Due to this ambiguity inherited from classical Eurasianism, Russia could position itself as a global force for good: it could claim to act on behalf of and represent internationally not only the other successor states, but also the non-Western world at large. Russia's global civilizational role was rooted in the history of centuries-old relations with Christian, Islamic and Asian civilizations. It also rested on firm institutional foundations, as Russia is uniquely placed to use its position in the UN in order to support a "multilateral dialogue of cultures, civilizations and states" (Stankevich 1992: 99). In a nutshell, Russia's global mission in both civilizational and geopolitical terms – as being a mediator between Western institutions and Eastern diversity and a guarantor of Eurasian and, therefore, global stability – was in keeping with a pro-active and diversified foreign policy befitting Russia as a great power.

However, while the geopolitics-informed and Eurasianism-inspired discourses reinforced and buttressed each other, the resulting official 'geopolitics/Eurasianism' constellation was largely dismissed as instrumentalist 'cheap talk' and as a smokescreen for Russia's renewed imperial ambitions. According to the prevailing scholarly account, the alleged inclusiveness and universalism of Russia's global Eurasian mission ran counter to a pronouncedly geopolitical mindset that underpinned Russia's drive for integration in the CIS. The discursive inscription of the post-Soviet space as a sphere of vital Russian interests simultaneously recasts it as a sphere of political-military responsibilities and obligations and confers a certain 'moral right' to interfere. Despite all the niceties of Russia's global mission, the operational core of Eurasianism was the retrieval of great power status through Russia's continuing politico-military primacy in the region. If the Eurasian discourse was meant to counterbalance pragmatism with a healthy idealism and imbue Russia's pursuit of its national interests with a wider normative appeal, it lost all substance through a discursive coupling with 'geopolitics.' As a result, 'geopolitics' and 'Eurasianism' became coterminous and almost indistinguishable from each other.

The failure of the 'geopolitics'/'Eurasianism' constellation to gain Russia international legitimacy for its regional CIS policies highlighted the difficulty in trying to infuse values into particular actions and political decisions and of trying to convert power into authority. Throughout the late 1990s and well into the 2000s Russia found itself in essentially the same predicament. On the one hand, Russia attempted to justify its actions and reactions in legal-political terms: it positioned itself as a staunch supporter of multilateralism within the framework of the UN and a guarantor of sovereignty, non-intervention and other principles of international law. In mid-2000s a strong normative current was added to the predominantly legal justificatory discourse as sovereignty became a repository of cultural and political uniqueness and a *sine qua non* of global diversity. At the same time, Russia continued to behave as a regional hegemon trying to enclose other CIS states in a Russia-led hierarchical order and selectively applying global order norms at the CIS regional level (Allison 2013: 149). This policy stance has been criticized as inconsistent with the pluralist position that Russia espoused in wider international forums.

At this point we need to take stock of the argument so far and elucidate the relationship between policies, policy legitimations and discourse. It may well be argued that for the greater part of the 1990s Russia's efforts to justify its special, exclusive role as a security provider and conflict mediator in the CIS met with no success because the conceptual contradiction between national identity and international norms – epitomized by the controversy over Russia's self-proclaimed Eurasian mission – remained unresolved. Hence the failure to procure a UN mandate for Russia-led peacekeeping efforts in the CIS.

However, this policy failure was presaged and, in fact, made inevitable by another – discursive – failure to establish a self-enclosed and fully constituted discursive totality underpinned by a process of differentiation between two signifiers: 'geopolitics' and 'Eurasianism.' 'Geopolitics' spelled control and domination instead of the pragmatism and restraint with which it was initially associated, while 'Eurasianism' amounted to self-serving propaganda rather than genuine ethical intention. Instead of having their meanings fixed and stabilized once and for all in the discourse, the two elements turned out to have multiple meanings that entered into a relation of equivalence and produced alternative meanings and new relations of difference. The failure of the 'geopolitics'/'Eurasianism' coupling to evolve into a discourse that lent itself to clear interpretation also highlights the fact that legitimacy, just like

any socially stable relation, requires a considerable practical discursive effort (Jackson 2006: 39).

Russian Humanitarian Discourse: In Search of Legitimacy?

How can conceptualizing political legitimacy as discourse enhance our understanding of its conditions of possibility? If international legitimacy is about discursively linking policies to wider international norms, then discourse analysis might prove useful by introducing a crucial 'intervening variable' – identity, or a human collective's vision of itself. Indeed, some discourse theorists are mainly interested in policy legitimation; at the center of their research is a concern with how a stable link between foreign policy and identity is created in discourse (Hansen 2006: 25). Other researchers focus on how the identity of 'one' and the identities of 'many' are reconciled within a single political order, how unity is created where it did not exist previously, and how unity can result from political struggle and articulation, from the dispersion and sharing of common ideas and values that transcend particular interests. On this reading it is through moral and intellectual leadership that "a multiplicity of dispersed wills with heterogeneous aims are welded together with a single aim and the basis of an equal and common conception of the world" (Laclau and Mouffe 1987: 68). This directly relates to Russia's attempts to create a regional order whereby "a potential (or actual) hegemon has a particular conception of norms that it enforces and tries to socialize others into viewing as legitimate" (Allison 2013: 44). Finally, there are those discourse theorists who try to combine all three – 'self', 'other' and 'policy' – dimensions. They try to identify a core constellation of concepts that conditions possible policies and that is involved in the construction of who 'we' – the state/nation and the region – are (Wæver 2006: 25-27).

On all these accounts, discourse is understood as structures of meaning determining what can be meaningfully said within a particular discursive field. On the one hand, domestic discourses about 'we' concepts such as 'state,' 'nation,' 'people' and 'Europe' comprise the conceptual universe which Russian policy-makers appeal to when making foreign policy. Consequently, according to Wæver, instead of the customary image of political speech as haphazard and offhand, it is more appropriate to think of politics as "a constant and relatively tight loop, where the political argumentation on a specific issue is strongly dependent on the basic conceptual logic which is available in society" (Wæver 2006: 30). On this, largely poststructuralist conceptualization, foreign policy problems are not handled from fresh

beginnings, as their solution is stitched into the fabric of discourse "that is already partially structured through previously articulated and institutionalized identities" (Hansen 2006: 24).

On the other hand, it is possible to envision a change of both policy and identity if discourse is conceptualized along the lines suggested by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, i.e. as a structured totality underpinned by a particular configuration of its elements. This configuration assumes the form of a system of differential positions between objects whose identities are relational and therefore necessary because they depend closely upon one another (Laclau and Mouffe 1987: 105-106). This would account for the regularity and repetitiveness of particular statements. At the same time, the relational and differential logic of the discursive totality is never complete or simply given. To illustrate this point, Laclau and Mouffe explicate the distinction between 'the social' and 'society:' society exists as an attempt to subvert the openness of the social, to subsume the surplus of meanings within a stable, finite and closed system of differences – an attempt that can never fully succeed. Two opposing logics are at work here. On the one hand, discourses try to construct the centre, to discipline meanings and arrest the flow of differences through the practice of articulation, whereby privileged signifiers – nodal points – are attached to a chain of signification. On the other hand, 'discourse,' 'society' and 'identity' reveal the limits of their objectivity when all the differential features of an object enter into a relation of equivalence and identity, no longer considered positive or objective, turns into pure negativity and negation of the 'other.'

Put differently, an antagonistic relationship is achieved by means of fixing the boundary between the 'inside' and the 'outside,' the 'self' and 'other' – a process that amounts to excluding all alternative articulations and confining them to the realm of 'otherness,' which is never accorded the same moral register as the realm of the 'self' (Morozov 2009: 65-71). However, although politicians often purport to speak in the name of communities with stable, self-enclosed, objectified identities, these identities never amount to pure being, uncontaminated by the presence of the 'other.' The mutual constitution of 'self' and 'other' ensures that the sedimentation of a particular identity can never be complete. In fact, the original political decision on the exclusion can be reactivated and contested again, paving the way for alternative articulations of the boundary between the 'self' and the 'other' and, ultimately, change in the conception of the 'self.'

In view of the light that Laclau and Mouffe's conceptualization of discourse sheds on the relationship between 'self' and 'other,' I would like to explore the role that the notion

'humanitarian cooperation' plays in Russia's relations with its external environment, in particular with the European Union and the Soviet successor states comprising the CIS. Or, if we were to paraphrase the above statement in the language of discourse analysis theory, I am interested in how 'humanitarian cooperation' comes to appear as an object in Russia's discourse on the EU and the CIS. My main hypothesis is that the attribute 'humanitarian' operates as a core identity-constitutive element in contemporary Russian discourse that fixes its meaning in the direction of closure, uniformity, simplification and further antagonism with Europe. While initially part and parcel of international legal discourse as 'humanitarian law', the attribute 'humanitarian' loses its clearly defined position within the differentiated – law, ethics, politics – discursive structure.   Put succinctly, Russian discourse on 'humanitarianism/humanitarian cooperation' both reveals and reproduces the structuring logic of Russia's self-exclusion from Europe and self-identification with its 'near abroad.'

Fully in keeping with Laclau and Mouffe's ideas about the material character of every discursive structure, the coinage 'humanitarian cooperation' clearly transcends the realm of rhetoric and purely linguistic phenomena (Laclau and Mouffe 1987: 108). Instead, it refers to a set of practices rooted in a system of informal networks and institutions, the most formal being *Rossotrudnichestvo*, a Federal agency accountable to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and "responsible for matters relating to the Commonwealth of Independent States, compatriots living abroad and international humanitarian cooperation." Interestingly, *Rossotrudnichestvo* was preceded by another organization, the Russian Centre for International, Scientific and Cultural Cooperation, which was attached to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and had been in operation for 6 years prior to 2008, when *Rossotrudnichestvo* was created. Political commitment to 'humanitarian cooperation,' was initially affirmed in 2005, when heads of 10 CIS states signed the "Declaration on Humanitarian Cooperation," affirming its status on a par with other – e.g., economic, military, political, technological – forms of cooperation within the structured totality of Russian foreign policy discourse.

The discursive construction 'humanitarian *cooperation*' presents a clear counterpoint to the emerging norm of 'responsibility to protect' and to its rhetorical and conceptual precursor, 'humanitarian *intervention*'. The Western powers – the EU, the US and NATO – were at pains to demonstrate the humanitarian aspect of the 1999 humanitarian intervention in Kosovo. The breach of the principle of non-interference was justified on the grounds that "obeying the law, in the instance, would have led to a far worse result," namely gross human rights violations and

severe human losses and deprivations (Franck 2003: 231). By contrast, Russian policy makers laid emphasis on cooperation, i.e. on the consent of the governments involved, in an attempt to dismantle the conventional 'human rights vs. the rights of states' juxtaposition that legitimized the 1999 humanitarian intervention. Indeed, cooperation in the humanitarian sphere between CIS member states creates a single humanitarian space within which citizens of CIS states enjoy important liberties and rights qua *citizens* rather than men and women. In contradistinction to the European discourse on humanitarian intervention, the Russia-CIS conceptualization of 'humanitarianism' is devoid of a specific human rights dimension.

How does a non-human rights definition of humanitarianism become possible? This study argues that the attribute 'humanitarian' operates as a 'floating' signifier along the lines suggested by Laclau and Mouffe. When attached to a privileged – nodal – discursive point, it contributes to a partial fixation and structuring of the discursive field in the direction of unification and totality (Laclau and Mouffe 1987: 112). This is how 'humanitarian cooperation' gradually evolves into a new frame of reference for Russia's relations with the Soviet successor states within the CIS: the privileged signifier 'cooperation,' referring to consensual, non-violent inter-state relations based on mutual adjustment of differences and respect for sovereignty, strips humanitarianism of any grounding in human rights. As a result, 'humanitarian cooperation' becomes shorthand for "cross-border people-to-people contacts in the spheres of culture, science and education" as defined by President Putin during an informal meeting between CIS leaders in Moscow in 2005 (President of the Russian Federation, 2005b). This fixity of meaning comes to the fore in the document entitled "The main directions of the Russian Federation's policy in the sphere of international cultural-humanitarian cooperation" and signed into force by President Medvedev on December 18, 2010 (Ministry of the Russian Federation, 2010). This document repeats almost verbatim the wording of the CSCE Helsinki Final Act of 1975, in particular its objectives relating to co-operation in humanitarian and other fields (Basket III). However, on this reading educational, cultural and information exchanges are completely devoid of their original human rights problematic. They no longer refer to the practical realization of individual freedoms – freedom of movement and freedom of expression – but are said to foster greater mutual understanding between peoples and mutual trust between states, to help overcome cultural barriers and negative stereotypes.

'Humanitarian cooperation' in Russia's relations with other CIS states points to the antagonistic limits of objectivity and universality of the EU's discourse on human rights: it

celebrates the sovereignty of every party involved while, at the same time, keeping Russia's borders open and allowing visa-free travel for citizens of other CIS states. For example, the signing of the Treaty on Kazakh-Russian State Border on January 18, 2005 was hailed by both President Putin and President Nazarbayev as "opening up new possibilities for business and humanitarian cooperation, the broadening of direct people-to-people contacts and friendly exchanges" (President of the Russian Federation, 2005a). Indeed, as of 2015 Russia still allows citizens of other CIS states to travel visa-free and seek employment in Russia despite having introduced a foreign passport requirement. President Nazarbayev, in particular, spoke from both a contemporary and a historical perspective when he stressed that "together we prevailed and rose to victory in the deadliest war of the 20th century" so that the newly-delimited Russian-Kazakh border could be "a border of friendship and neighbourliness" paving the way for regional integration. Speaking 10 years later in the context of Kyrgyzstan's upcoming accession to the Eurasian Economic Union, Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev expressed his hope during the meeting with President Putin in March 2015 that the Accession Treaty would be ratified by May 9, because "we still have people who have been to the battle front in World War II and who remember the times when customs did not exist" (President of the Russian Federation, 2015). Similarly to his Kazakh counterpart, the Kyrgyz President attempted to legitimize Kyrgyzstan's integrationist foreign policy by drawing an analogy with the common, positively-assessed Soviet past.

As such, the pragmatism of cross-border people-to-people contacts within the framework of humanitarian cooperation in the CIS and the Eurasian Economic Union highlights the inherent ambiguity of the EU's attempts to simultaneously rely on the integrationist logic of human rights rhetoric and the sovereign logic of restrictive border controls and visa regimes in its relations with neighbouring non-EU states (Nicolaidis and Lacroix 2003: 145). This ambiguity has been recently taken up and widely commented on by the Russian media in the context of EU's continuing inability to cope with the flows of refugees. As an example of typical commentary, the host of the daily "News of the Week" show Dmitry Kiselev recently suggested that Russia and the West have swapped places: while wall-building as it was practiced by the USSR used to be a symbol of the Cold War and embodied human rights violations, it is now being practiced by the US and many European states despite constant talk of human rights, including the freedom of movement (Kiselev, 2015). However, revealing the delegitimizing discrepancy between European discourse and practice would not be enough to establish a relation of antagonism with

Europe as Russia's constitutive 'other.' Russia's discourse on humanitarianism produces 'Europe' and 'the West' as pure negativity in the process of equivalential articulation, whereby a relation of total equivalence cancels out all differential features of the object and annuls its positivity (Laclau and Mouffe 1987: 127-128).

How do Russia and Europe end up being antagonistically opposed to each other? Here we are reminded by Laclau and Mouffe that "to enumerate is never an innocent operation" (Laclau and Mouffe 1987: 62). Enumeration establishes equivalence through a major displacement of meaning from objects themselves to the contextual position of their articulation. In the case of Russia's discourse of humanitarianism, a chain of equivalence between important historical events endows Russia with a privileged subject position and identity and denies it to both the West and Europe. The Declaration on Humanitarian Cooperation – the first ever document dedicated specifically to humanitarian cooperation – was signed by the CIS heads of state on May 8, 2005 in Moscow. The Declaration, while reiterating the commitment of its signatories to humanistic ideals, equality and multilateralism, presents the victory in the WWII as not only a *military* but also a *spiritual* victory achieved through stamina and perseverance of the peoples of the CIS states (Declaration on Humanitarian Cooperation, 2005). Commenting on the adoption of the Declaration, Chairman of the CIS Executive Committee Vladimir Rushailo emphasized the idea of a joint struggle against all forms of violence and national/religious intolerance in the name of commonly shared humanistic ideals that has informed the creation of the CIS-wide humanitarian space (Rushailo, 2006). The CIS was further recast as a realm of non-violence, multilateralism and cooperation when, during his visit to Turkmenistan in February 2015, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov highlighted the importance of cooperation within the framework of the UN and OSCE, including "in the context of the upcoming 70th anniversary of WWII victory, the 70th anniversary of the founding of the UN and the 40th anniversary of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act" (Lavrov, 2015). The relation of equivalence forged between these historical dates reinstates Russia and the CIS in the identical subject positions of 'liberators' and 'peace-builders.' In addition, the inclusion of the Helsinki Final Act in this chain of equivalence is central in scripting the relations between Russia and the West in terms of an irreconcilable antagonism. It taps well into the main argument made by President Putin in his much-discussed speech delivered at the 2007 Munich Security Conference: the West forfeited the founding principles of OSCE through a single-handed reliance on military might, whereas international security for all can only arise out of the linkages between cooperation in the

political, military, economic *and* humanitarian spheres (President of the Russian Federation, 2007).

This representation of the EU as a realm of force is greatly facilitated through the discursive framing of the Ukrainian crisis as 'humanitarian' and establishing a relation of equivalence between President Poroshenko's military response to domestic insurgency and its support by the EU. In his short "Address to the Fighters of Novorossiia" issued on August 28, 2014, President Putin referred to the operation of the Ukrainian military in Donetsk and Lugansk regions as "a forceful operation that poses a deadly threat to the people of Donbass and that has already caused huge losses among civilians" (President of the Russian Federation, 2014b). By contrast, the activities of the pro-Russian Novorossia fighters are framed by the Russian media and politicians as "humanitarian combat operation." The upshot of such framing is that Russia appropriates the normative concept and discourse on humanitarianism and denies it to the EU. The antagonism between Russia and the EU is further entrenched through the accusations that Kyiv wants to replace the OSCE observer mission with an EU civilian mission thereby forfeiting the implementation of the Minsk II agreements and undermining the mechanism of multilateralism and dialogue agreed upon in Minsk. In fact, it was during his 'Crimean' speech that President Putin leveled two accusations against the EU/the West that square broadly with two − literal and symbolic − meanings of humanitarianism discussed above. On the one hand, President Putin laments the fact that Russia's willingness to cooperate with the EU is not reciprocated, as evidenced by the EU's "endless procrastination in negotiations over visas." This is in contradistinction to Russia's policy of humanitarian cooperation in the CIS that opens up borders and fosters people-to-people contacts in the region. On the other hand, the speech established a chain of equivalence linking Western policies in former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lybia and the Ukraine and condemned these policies as illegal, unlawful and self-serving. These actions stand in contradistinction to Russia's overall commitment to cooperation, consensus, multilateralism and mutual respect in relations with its CIS neighbours and further afield (President of the Russian Federation, 2014a).

To recap, the attribute 'humanitarian' proceeds from being detached from the international legal discourse and de-politicized in Russia's relations with the CIS states to being re-politicized again in Russia's relations with the EU/the West. As a 'floating' signifier that needs constant fixing, 'humanitarianism' makes possible the relation of hegemonic articulation, whereby Russia assumes the representation of the totality of the post-Soviet states within the

framework of 'humanitarian cooperation.' At the same time, this hegemonic relation hinges on an antagonistic relation with the EU/the West which allows Russia to lay claim to universalism by highlighting the importance of humanitarian cooperation in fostering international security as opposed to unilateral use of force. In the final analysis it is safe to assume that perhaps for the first time since its independence Russia can claim to have achieved conceptual and normative consistency between its CIS and European policies.

Conclusion

The discursive construction 'humanitarian cooperation' ensures that the logic of Russia's principled self-exclusion from Europe is conceptually and normatively in keeping with the logic of integration within the post-Soviet space. Put another way, this construction helps Russia harmonize relations with its multiple 'others.' This is no mean feat, considering Russia's continued failure throughout the 1990s to make its proclaimed political predominance in the CIS compatible with the desire to become part and parcel of the common European political, normative, economic and cultural space *and* with the desire to be a valued member of the international community and to be able to speak on its own behalf. In the language of discourse analysis as foreign policy theory, 'humanitarian cooperation' helps to bridge the gap between particularism and universalism in Russian foreign policy: it translates the discursive structures of meaning sustaining Russia's privileged 'vision of itself' into the language of international norms and, simultaneously, into the terms of foreign policy towards the CIS and further afield. It is precisely this link between foreign policy and identity and the successful inscription of both within the terms of a global normative order that provides Russia with political – domestic and international – legitimacy. Or, to use Laclau and Mouffe's terminology, Russian discourse on humanitarianism can be conceptualized as a counter-hegemonic discourse: it is opposed to the EU/Western discourse on humanitarianism/human rights and, simultaneously, offers a different, alternative definition of humanitarianism that enables Russia to act politically.

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