

Lost in Translation

IS THERE A WAY TO OVERCOME THE DIFFERENT POLITICAL LANGUAGES OF RUSSIA AND THE WEST?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 174
September 2011

Yulia Nikitina
Moscow State University of International Relations

Between Russia and the West, differences in terminology are perceived to signify irreconcilable differences in values, leading to a mutual lack of trust. Observe the language used by these former foes – violation of human rights *or* stability, autocracy *or* sovereign democracy, democracy promotion *or* pursuit of national interests. After the end of the Cold War, the West tried to make its own “official” political language universal, being sure that it needed no translation. However, in the case of Russian-Western relations, this has not led to mutual understanding, even if some concepts have freely crossed borders. This is not because certain political concepts are misunderstood or lack precise equivalents in the other’s political culture. It is worth the effort to decipher others’ political concepts rather than reject them outright.

Psychology in International Relations

Theorists of international relations tend to be attracted to universal motivations for explaining state behavior – a struggle for power, for example, or the search for security and peaceful coexistence. Such concepts are not goals in and of themselves, but means to other ends. No universal frames for understanding behavior can really exist since one’s behavior can be understood only via his or her – or a state’s – internal frame of reference. Similar “goals” (such as power maximization) can have diverse explanations.

From this psychological point of view – after all, “states” really are made up of people – the driving force of state behavior can thus be generalized as simply “self-actualization,” the desire to realize one’s full potential – to maximize one’s abilities. But self-actualization means different things to different states, as it does to different people. In order to interpret a state’s behavior, therefore, it is important to understand its conception of itself. Such a conception is broader than just the current elite’s views and different from the notion of national interests. National self-concept refers to a state’s

perceptions and assessment of its own past and future, of its resources and capacities, place and role in the world, its identity and mission. Just as one's personality can have different parts, which can lead to contradictory behavior, different political and social groups within a state can have divergent approaches to their country's self-concept but still act at the international level as a unified actor.

One way to get at differences in self-concept is to consider the different effects of high and low self-esteem. On a personal level, individuals who enjoy high self-esteem operate differently than those with low self-esteem. The former generally have firm values, principles, and beliefs, and act upon these without feeling guilty about their choices. They consider themselves equal in dignity to others and respect their differences. They also respect social rules and the needs of others, and do not act at the latter's expense. Individuals with low self-esteem, in contrast, tend to seek out external approval of their actions, and they often feel inferior to others.

In international relations, we might translate this into states' search for legitimization. States with "high self-esteem" seek legitimacy from among their own population or no one at all (as dictatorial regimes are wont to do). They believe they – and not external restrictions (such as the "international system") – are largely responsible for and determine their own behavior. At the same time, they can be expected to respect social rules (international norms). States with "low self-esteem," on the other hand, seek legitimacy from the international community. They blame everything on others or on "fate" instead of locating the source of their problems in their own behavior.

However, one breaks down differences in self-concept, it remains the case that perceptions of others are based on one's values and understandings – we judge by our own standards. For example, U.S. concerns about the rise of China and its aspirations for global leadership are groundless if China's self-concept does not presuppose global leadership despite its extensive resources. In China's place, the United States might strive to become a global power but this does not mean this is China's goal.

We also cannot assume that the principles one teaches at home can be directly "taught" to others. This is easily demonstrated by the failed cases of "enforced" democratization and state-building in Iraq or Afghanistan, for example. "Democracy" often survives on foreign shores only in its ritual forms, blended (as is often the case with the spread of world religions) with local beliefs and practices.

This does not mean that such societies are underdeveloped vis-à-vis the West when it comes to certain political concepts. They are just incomparable. For example, studies of non-Western regionalism have demonstrated that international organizations are often created to help their members preserve their sovereignty rather than to delegate it to a supranational level. As a result, integration within the European Union is now treated more as an exception than a rule. International relations should be approached as if it were a dictionary, not a mathematics handbook with ready formulas and axioms.

Application to Russian-Western Relations

Such psychology-based concepts can help us analyze relations between Russia and the West. The main problem in NATO-Russian relations, for example, differs according to the sides. For NATO members, the problem is Russia's irrational lack of trust in NATO's good intentions. For Moscow, it is NATO's stubborn refusal to recognize Russia as an equal partner. Both sides deny the other's accusations.

In fact, there is reason to believe their denials are genuine. Russia *is* ready to trust the West. The West does *not* deny Russia's equality as a partner. Russian willingness to trust the West can be illustrated by the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization's relentless attempts to cooperate with NATO. The latter dynamic is exemplified by the discussion surrounding the Russian draft of a European Security Treaty. Russia seeks new rules of the game because it feels it is not treated as an equal partner in existing Euro-Atlantic security structures. Western states, for their part, have never really questioned Russia's equality in the international system and thus do not see much sense in a new regional institution or treaty.

Both sides may genuinely misperceive the other's behavior and, hence, not believe their denials. But another dynamic might also be at play. The sides might in fact believe what the other is saying. This puts their accusations in a different, somewhat less sincere light. Perhaps the West accepts that Russia does not see it as a threat; it is instead the West that perceives Moscow as a threat. And perhaps Russia gets that the West accepts it as an equal; instead, it simply feels itself inferior to the West.

Here I focus on the latter point. A Russian "inferiority complex" may lead Russia to seek out external approval for its actions and to be obsessed with its international image. The search for a "national idea" (the proper context for discussion about "sovereign democracy") has demonstrated that Russia does not really know what it wants to be or how to find its place in the world and to be valuable to itself and others. Soviet ideology held fifteen republics together until their self-perceptions began to change. Twenty years later, Russia still suffers from an identity crisis.

In contrast, NATO outlived the end of the Cold War because it reinvented itself; it found a new way to achieve "self-actualization." CSTO and other exclusively post-Soviet regional organizations are perceived as ineffective, even by members, precisely because they lack a clear unifying idea. On the other hand, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is perceived to be more viable not because of its capacities (it is, in the end, mainly a talking shop) or impressive membership roster that includes China, but because it is based on an idea – the "Shanghai spirit" (a "nonconfrontational model of interstate relations" allegedly based on trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for the diversity of national cultures, and aspirations to common development). An international organization acquires value when it discovers its own meaning and purpose as an entity, and is not simply a collection of diverse states.

It is also worth underlining that disparity within an organization like the CSTO does not necessarily imply that the organization lacks a future. For instance, Uzbekistan, a CSTO member state, questions most of the organization's collective initiatives and sometimes even blocks important decisions requiring consensus. Other

members perceive such behavior as unreasonable and non-cooperative and leads observers to conclude that the CSTO is ineffective and doomed to decay. However, one could argue that Uzbekistan does believe in the CSTO's future; otherwise, it would have already withdrawn from the organization, as it withdrew from the Eurasian Economic Community (Eurasec) in 2008. Usually it is the most active member of a group or community who, in the name of common goals and interests, opposes its leader. As well, a "dissident" often helps unify a group as other members begin to better understand their common values and interests.

Policy Relevance

Just like professional ethics dissuades psychologists from giving advice, the kind of analysis above is intended mainly to provide actors with an outside view of their situation that can help them find their own solution.

What policy-relevant recommendations can follow from such a framework? Generally, policymakers should not defend their perceptions of others' behavior solely on the basis of the latter's actions. They should also be open to analyzing their own internal and domestic forces and motivations that can lead to certain perceptions of behavior rather than others. To change others' behavior, a state may first need to overcome its mistrust of the other and change its own actions accordingly. In the case of Russian-Western relations, this translates into having a sincere informal dialogue concerning the content and causes of each other's worries and perceptions. A good dictionary and the will to learn each other's language are needed to achieve mutual trust.