Culture, Political Economy and Civilisation in a Multipolar World Order

The case of Russia

Ray Silvius

RIPE SERIES IN GLOBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

ROUTLEDGE

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2017
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-95604-9 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-31566-591-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Taylor & Francis Books

Tables

Acknowledgements

As an 'intellectual' project, this book began during my Ph.D. studies at Carleton University. I feel fortunate to have done my doctoral studies in an environment that was to my mind equal parts critical, permissive and heterogeneous.

My utmost appreciation is extended to my doctoral supervisor, Randall Germain, whose good humour, constant encouragement, and sage wisdom helped guide me first to a completed Ph.D., and subsequently to this completed project. There is no better mentor in the world of International Political Economy that I am aware of. Randall recognised some virtue in my initially clumsy formulations, perhaps thinking in his historical mode of thought that there was an important question worth broaching in all of this. I also thank Rianne Mahon and Piotr Dutkiewicz for their guidance and immensely helpful comments on early versions of my dissertation. Additional gratitude is extended to Piotr for helping to facilitate a number of crucial experiences in Moscow and Warsaw. Such experiences were indispensable, not necessarily for any 'data' collected during them, but for giving me a further sense of the historical and geographical markers that shape one's thinking.

Likewise, I am grateful to Anastasia Nesvetailova, who, since serving as the external reviewer during my Ph.D. defense, has been a consistent supporter. My deepest appreciation also extends to my Russian language instructor at Carleton, Marina Sabanadze, for her patience and intelligence in assisting me with my Russian language studies at Carleton University.

This project has come to fruition while I have taught at the University of Winnipeg. During this period, I have enjoyed the immense fortune of having supportive friends and colleagues, as well as inquisitive students. The unflinching collegiality of Peter Ives must be acknowledged in particular. Peter might be known to most in academic spheres as a peerless scholar of Gramsci and language. He is equally capable at helping a young colleague learn the ropes in a department, in a university and in the academic publishing world. My thanks as well to Carlos Colorado, whose friendship and deep commitment to scholarly dialogue and interdisciplinary collaboration have made the day to day more enjoyable. Moreover, I extend my sincere appreciation to invaluable research support provided by my former University of Winnipeg Political

Science students, Jessica Praznik, Mitchell Sherren and Dana Tucker. Similarly, thank you to another student, Terra Poole, for assisting with some of the final pesky formatting work on this manuscript.

I also acknowledge the Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS), and Carleton University for providing doctoral funding, which enabled the original research upon which this work is based. The author also acknowledges the University of Winnipeg for providing funding for additional research supports.

So goes the academic side. I have had the immense fortune to have experienced slivers of post-communism from the ground up. The existential engagement with the book's subject matter began when I lived in Jõhvi, Estonia, while on a Canadian government funded exchange programme called Canada World Youth. Ostensibly, we Canadians were there to talk about 'civil society' with our Estonian counterparts. In actuality, we had thorough and complicated encounters in post-communism, nationalism, history, language and empires in apartments, on rock beaches, on buses, in what might be described as disco bars. This experience has conditioned a certain caution that I take into my work on geographical and historical spheres whose complex realities I have not had to negotiate for extended periods but which intrigue me nonetheless. My firm wish in such situations is a dignified and progressive outcome for all involved, but I hesitate to name exactly what this might look like.

On the personal side, I have an unpayable debt to my mother, who raised me in such a way as to always first give the other person the benefit of the doubt and instilled in me her own distinctive sense of intrigue about the world. Growing up in a single parent household in semi-rural Manitoba, Canada, I should never have been able to experience global politics in far-off interstitial zones, but perhaps that was somehow a fate that she helped facilitate.

Finally, all of the other sentiments and more go to Jill. I apologise for dragging you into post-communist geographies when all you wanted was to travel to warm waters.

Chapter 4 is derived in part from an article, 'The Embedding of Russian State-Sanctioned Multipolarity in the Post-Soviet Conjuncture' published in *Globalizations* on 29 October 2015, available online: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14747731.2015.1102944.

Chapter 5 is derived in part from an article, 'The Russian State, Eurasianism, and Civilisations in the Contemporary Global Political Economy' published in *Journal of Global Faultlines* in April 2014, available online: https://www.keele.ac.uk/journal-globalfaultlines/issues/volume2number1.

Contents

1 Introduction and methodology

The introductory chapter proceeds as follows. Section 1 consists of an introduction, during which I situate the book thematically. In Section 2, I state my research problem and questions. Section 3 is comprised of the methodology. Section 4 contains key concepts of this work and a rationale for their use. The chapter concludes with Section 5, in which I outline the structure of the work.

1 Introduction

In this book, I explore the limits to liberal democratic universalism and US hegemony at both the material and ideational level by way of the example of contemporary Russia, and how select Russian officials, state bodies, and 'political technologists', a term I describe below, represent the contemporary global political economy. As the Russian political economy becomes selectively integrated into the global capitalist political economy, it would appear that there is little discursive space for articulating Russia's *samobytnost'* or uniqueness. However, such integration involves considerable state involvement, which is reflected in Russian state attempts to articulate a response to liberal democratic universalism and American hegemony in an environment of geoeconomic and geopolitical contestation. In this response, select Russian officials seek to reject Western triumphalism by appealing to 'home grown', but 'polysemic', ideas and cultural frames that valorise Russian conduct and question the moral and practical legitimacy of American hegemonic precepts. Collectively, these efforts provide the basis for what may be considered Russian alternative 'state-sanctioned' understandings of world order.

This book is about the emergence of such understandings during the post-Soviet conjuncture, with a particular emphasis on the 'Putin era' (2000–present) and the unevenly 'resurgent' Russia of this era. It is a work that accentuates the 'semiotic' (symbolic) and 'extra-semiotic' (material) dimensions of state projects amid the prolonged 'transitional' Russian political economy. In suggesting here that beliefs are *produced* by the state, my contribution gauges the role of key state officials and state organs in both opening and circumscribing political imaginations in accordance with projects of 'world order' significance.

As it engages with historical materialist and historicist modes of analysis, this book reflects an interest with the state's role vis-à-vis social forces and its attempts to articulate a hegemonic consensus about Russia's place in, and nature of, world order. The Russian state strives to produce a relatively coherent set of concepts about world order, which it attempts to establish as a new normal, common-sense thinking about global affairs to rival liberal internationalism. It then attempts to convince the Russian citizenry and the external world of the veracity of such concepts. Thus I conceive of the Russian state as a multitudinous agent which, in addition to its authoritative, bureaucratic and coercive role in administering the Russian economic base, articulates a particular vision of national, international, and 'civilisational' political and economic life. In addition to its role of organising the Russian economy along a combination of statist and market principles, official Russia develops concepts and ideas that render these moves intelligible according to longer Russian intellectual and cultural legacies. It does so by developing and utilising 'cultural' terminology – understood as collective intelligibility, purported tendencies, shared intersubjective meanings and familiar frames – as a means of rendering political decisions intelligible and fostering legitimacy and consent.

This book also reflects my view of the state's coercive and consensual role as being embedded within certain cultural and historical understandings while the state works to cultivate such understandings. Situated within the field of International Political Economy (IPE), the work embodies a concern with the relationship between the domestic and international and upholds the argument that the two may only be understood dialectically. Moreover, it develops out of reflections upon a specific body of literature found in IPE – that which focuses on the phenomenon of world order, global capitalism and the internationalisation/transnationalisation of the state – and a questioning of some of its theoretical and practical implications when it comes to investigating developments beyond the mature capitalist core. As such, this book grows out of discussions within the field of IPE and is particularly concerned with examining national-cultural contexts in which large-scale historical shifts occur. Central to the concern is the manner by which national representations – how the nation and its members have been imagined – have accompanied shifting social and economic orders whereby members of Russian society have negotiated, accepted, or rejected new forms of capitalist sociability.

I develop a synopsis and critique of the materialist precepts of world order thinking in critical IPE in Chapter 2. For the purposes of locating the project here, it is sufficient to allude to the strengths and insights as well as the shortcomings of this literature. This literature, which develops the thinking of Robert Cox in various ways, is implicitly concerned with the extension of American hegemony over the global periphery in transforming statist developmental regimes to (neo)liberal-capitalist models (and in some cases the role of European capital in transforming its sphere of influence). The transnational variant of this literature, represented by scholars such as William Robinson and those of the Amsterdam School, conceives of social relations

across national borders as the primary motor for global political and economic change, particularly by way of transforming and disciplining national units within the global periphery. In doing so this literature is able to perceive the constitution of social classes across borders and escape narrow methodological nationalism to tell us much about the nature of contemporary transformations in the global political economy.

Nonetheless, these insights warrant further reflection. Where does Russia fit in the context of understanding America's ambitions towards global systems management? Historically, where does the Soviet Union's attempt at forging a state-socialist alternative world order fit amid theorising on the American world order? And if in fact post-socialist Russia is in the process of adopting a liberal-capitalist, or state-capitalist, or quasi-capitalist order, what does this look like and how has it been accomplished? As it pertains to Russia, what does the disassembling of the Soviet empire, a prolonged transition to a market economy and the reconstitution of political authority look like? Rendering comparable those national political economies and societies deemed peripheral, or semi-peripheral, to the global capitalist core comes at the cost of specificity and overlooks emerging fault lines within the US-led global liberal democratic project. Furthermore, broad comparative sweeps mask the manner by which historicised ideas become activated in the present amidst emerging geopolitical and geoeconomic tensions. On the one hand, only on a most generic level was Russia's emergence from the Soviet period comparable to fellow post-Soviet states and other 'transitioning' economies, due to its size, geopolitical position, imperial history and aspirations to global prominence. On the other, Russia faces broad systemic pressures and resulting political struggles while selectively integrating into the global political economy. This book, therefore, takes as its starting point Russia's distancing from Soviet economic practices in becoming a 'state capitalist' political economy, while official Russia has nonetheless made selective appeals to Russian difference, particularity and identity on the terrain of 'culture' and 'civilisation'. Collectively, such appeals constitute Russian state-sanctioned alternative understandings of world order.

My entry into the question of world order comes through an analysis of the 'ideational' limits of liberal internationalism as represented by Putin-era Russia, which provides us with a case which manifests the failure of any easy transmission of the ideas associated with a Western-inspired liberal democracy or global capitalist 'sociability'. Components of world order as articulated by official Russia result from a perceived need to offer a vision of Russia in the world which captures Russia's reputed uniqueness and reflects a wealthier, more assertive and 'sovereign' Russia than was evident in the immediate post-Soviet period. This is by no means a straightforward process: for example, ideas about a modern, democratising and market-friendly Russia, which is increasingly integrated into global economic structures, have also figured prominently in Putin's readings of world order, particularly during his first term as president. However, the uncontested adoption of Western liberal

thought deemed to correspond with American liberal hegemony did not occur, as a particularly Russian 'filter' was tacitly or overtly employed to shape understandings of global political life and Russia's place within it. In addition to reflecting material conflicts arising out of economic competition and military threats, Russian state-sanctioned alternative understandings of world order display a thoroughly intersubjective or ideational component, whereby global political life is translated through shared understandings of moral appropriateness, legitimacy and manageability. An investigation of these understandings forms the basis of this work. The result is a series of ideational and material practices which are temporally conjoined but whose logical relationships reflect the messy world of political volition.

My intention with this book is to add to the discussion about world order as found in the IPE tradition the extent to which semiotic and extra-semiotic, ideational and material elements of state projects need not directly coincide. In addition to being constituted by material practices, national political economies are consolidated through mediating devices in the form of intersubjectively held or produced beliefs, representations of national social orders whereby the limits of the possible are understood and circumscribed. To declare that such things matter is hardly controversial. But it has important ramifications for how the international/transnational is conceived in an era in which the concepts associated with American hegemony and global capitalism – those which are intended to provide the consensual basis for extended American leadership – are met by 'rising' non-Western political economies seeking their own 'ideational stamp' on world order. Do corresponding representations constitute a threat to global capitalist sociability? Do they contain counterhegemonic potential? Are they better thought as comprising an ideological veneer with which market practices are consolidated, albeit in new national or regional forms? Such questions animate this work.

2 Problem statement, research question and temporal parameters

In this work I examine Putin-era Russia by way of conceptions of Russian state, society and nation amid contemporary world order, as well as the nature of this world order itself. It is therefore designed to understand the creation, existence or perpetuation of national, if not 'civilisational', intersubjective ideas amid concrete transformations in Russia's social, economic and political order and the production of new and reinvented concepts which accompany that order. The Russian case demonstrates that significant fault lines within contemporary world order exist at the material and ideational level. In the process, it provides clues as to what a post-hegemonic world order may look like according to prominent tendencies within official Russia's self-representations.

The research questions I pose are situated with one eye on the manner by which Russian leadership interprets Russia's collective place within world order and the other on how it understands and represents this order itself. How are we to understand state-sanctioned representations of Russia in the

Putin era, and how do these representations stand in relation to the advent of a capitalist economy and social order? How has political authority cultivated particular intersubjective understandings to legitimize both its role within society and Russia's place in the world? What does the terrain of national representation tell us about contemporary Russian state projects and how do we conceive of contemporary world order in light of this terrain?

This book has been developed to meet the following objectives. First, my intent is to bring critical scrutiny and a larger cultural component to the critical IPE literature through a specific case, Russia. In doing so, my objective is to assist in incorporating the phenomenon of Russian post-communist transitions into contemporary IPE thinking through granting attention to the Russian case. Specifically, I examine representations of state and society amid a transition to some form of capitalist society, and the state's role in developing the imagery, concepts and ideas deemed suitable for the purposes of this order. Second, this book is a contribution to the emerging sub-discipline of Cultural Political Economy by developing an understanding of cultural representations in the case of post-Soviet and Putin-era Russia.

At the time of writing (Fall 2015), amidst open geopolitical and geoeconomic competition between Russia and the West over Ukraine and Syria, as well as Russian state efforts to further consolidate the Eurasian Economic Union, Russian 'revisionism' is a matter for much speculation in English language scholarship and popular commentary. However, my intention is to demonstrate official Russia's longer run disarticulation of American hegemony and 'concepts of control'. Such a disarticulation unevenly spans the longer post-Soviet moment, takes new shapes during Putin's first two presidential terms (2000–2008) and that of Dmitri Medvedev (2008–2012), before manifesting itself more decisively in Putin's third presidential term (2012–present). This book is an extended and updated version of my dissertation, which focused primarily on the period corresponding with Putin's first two terms as president, and in which an earlier, but similar, case was made. There is a need to consider the longer trajectory of ideas and tendencies which predate, yet figure prominently in, the present geopolitical and geoeconomic conflicts between Russia and the West, in general, and Russia and the United States, more specifically.

I acknowledge that powerful arguments can be made about the long-run historical antecedents to Russia's contemporary global position, including relative 'backwardness' and the late development of capitalist, and then socialist, projects of national modernisation amid prevailing world orders.[1] There is no good reason to avoid incorporating this into a purportedly historical analysis other than to cite the limits dictated by feasibility and my desire to focus on the post-communist period and contemporary questions. Moreover, by concentrating on Putin's first two presidential terms, insofar as ideas and practices associated with Russian difference became concrete during this time, this work serves as an 'empirical corrective'[2] to disciplinary trends of forecasting globalised or multipolar political economies. This matter is taken up throughout the book.

3 Methodology

Rationales for employing particular methodologies in the social sciences range from informed to the dogmatic. The debate concerning the appropriateness of focusing solely on Russia, the former members of the Soviet Union, or assimilating both into wider comparative/positivist accounts of 'democratic transition' is not new and scarcely resolvable here (see Schmitter & Karl, 1994; Bunce, 1995 and 1999). The legitimacy of single cases is also firmly established within the universe of social science research. Single cases are indeed warranted as phenomena in their own right, as *intrinsic case studies* that are interesting for their own unique qualities (Berg, 2001). For the field of IPE, *national* cases are far from obsolete, as they serve as prisms through which broader global forces are refracted. They are therefore helpful in extending discussions on particular theoretical orientations. My critical historicist approach straddles what Eckstein (1975; see also Blaikie, 2000, pp. 219–225) refers to as the *configurative-ideographic* and *heuristic* case studies. In the former, a descriptive account is given to provide understanding of a phenomenon under examination. In the latter, a case is examined to provide tentative understandings towards the development of theory. A certain caveat applies here, though, with a rejection of strictly positivist methodologies: generalizable knowledge is not sought here nor understood as the appropriate standard for this project, yet appropriate attempts are made to provide tentative explanations within the case studied. Therefore, it is erroneous to view this as a purely descriptive exercise, and I am uncertain as to whether typologies within the social sciences consulted thus far aptly capture the logic of historical research.

An appropriate methodological strategy is required to understand complex and far reaching transformations. A critical historicist conception of the macro-historical transformation of society and economy is sensitive to historical change, contingency and social agency. It contains insights into the shared ideational and cultural frames through which political, economic and social orders are mediated, consolidated, or rejected. Furthermore, it views historically specific, particular social formations as the broader configurations in which human action is patterned. Sensitive to shared cognitive frameworks, this approach eschews economism and determinism and defends a non-reductionist reading of the relationship between economic base and political superstructure while redirecting attention to shared representations in understanding the prospects for collective social action.

Aspects of the historicist IPE approach bear a certain resemblance to the configurative approach as outlined by Katznelson (1997) with important distinctions. The configurative approach suggests that 'variables' are complicatedly conjoined in specific historical instances. Therefore, it rejects the positivist inclination to seek universal hypotheses. Furthermore, direct univariate causation is impossible to determine; variables are co-extensive and reciprocal. Actors are not atomistic, unfettered and rational in the abstract; they are embedded in a shared temporal milieu. An approach to historical inquiry

within the configurative tradition therefore similarly emphasises the shared frameworks within which actors imagine and act. Historicist IPE similarly acknowledges historical complexity, with the important added condition of consciousness, perception and agency. In its critical variant, historicist IPE asks how political, economic and social institutions come about by way of the balance of social forces, but it remains sensitive to how ideas about collective social life endure *despite* radical political and economic transformations.

In developing configurative and contextual accounts of social action and meaning, a critical historicist approach demonstrates one's scepticism of isolating individual variables for cause-effect analysis. Interpretive actions are required both on the part of the scholar and social actors to comprehend the generation of intersubjective human meanings while offering a limited and weaker, non-determinative form of the cause-effect mechanisms of social change. Critical historicism scrutinises the subject/object divide, which posits that external reality discloses itself fully to a rational mind capable of deploying objective categories in the process of measuring and distilling social reality.

The 'case' of Russia warrants particular attention for a number of reasons: 1) as the primary inheritor of Soviet institutions; 2) as a self-declared global power, wherein ideas of Russia's international prestige and significance are causally efficacious; 3) as a site where alternative ideas about world order are produced; 4) as nonetheless representing a lacuna in conceptions of global change in much IPE speculation. A single case is warranted here, particularly given the size, complexity, and 'world historical significance' of the case!

How does one study intersubjective ideas? The task is daunting to the researcher in the uncertainty and opportunity such a study presents. Cultural representations, symbols and understandings are shared, produced, rejected and challenged by all members of a national political community, to varying degrees. As such, the terrain of cultural production is vast and, for all practical purposes, limitless. The contours of my investigation necessitate that I focus upon and thoroughly analyse a bounded range of concrete instances deemed emblematic or most powerful in expressing the phenomenon of national intersubjective ideas, while linking these to a theoretical understanding and empirical display of the contemporary nature of the Russian political state. While this could legitimately come in the form of, for example, artistic production, literature and developments in popular culture, such aspects are not given a predominant place here. These forms are relevant to the current study insofar as shared normative and ideational frameworks are crucial for understanding political orders. Indeed, investigating non-state-sanctioned cultural production guards against reducing nationalism to instrumental attempts by state authorities to produce the nation by instead seeking the substance of nationalist understandings in society itself. Nonetheless, I am specifically concerned with the 'positive' role of state authority in fashioning worlds amid social, economic and political complexity (Poulantzas, 2000). As such, I have largely focused my attention on 'speech acts' of representatives of various

iterations of 'official Russia': select Russian officials, governing bodies, or 'political technologists' deemed to consolidate or represent existing political authority. The research strategy employed, therefore, is to analyse the content of Russian government documents, reports and initiatives and presidential speeches to detect 'official' understandings of the nation and/or world order.

A note on terminology is warranted here. As it pertains to questions of foreign policy and corresponding understandings of world order, I use the terms Putin's regime, Russian officials, the Russian state and the executive somewhat interchangeably. I am operating under the assumption that while the production of foreign policy concepts and ideas invariably involves a complex of actors and institutions, the president bears an overwhelming amount of responsibility for the formulation of foreign policy in Russia (see Trenin and Lo, 2005). While the Russian state is characterised formally by a dual executive structure comprised of the presidential administration, on the one hand, and prime minister and ministries on the other, the precise relationship between the two remains murky (Sakwa, 2008). While foreign and domestic policy ideas may come from a variety of sources during the period in question, they are invariably given the presidential stamp of approval by Putin. Thus, when representatives of the Russian state spoke about foreign or domestic policy during Putin's presidency, it may be assumed that there was either tacit or explicit approval from Putin.

I examine documents, speeches and commentary produced by the Putin regime to determine what components constitute the administration's conceptions of Russia in world order and how this state of affairs is represented to Russian and non-Russian population. Given this intention, I have focused primarily on that material expressing Russia's 'positive' role in fashioning world order processes, and its 'negative' role in resisting the extension of American ideational and material influence. That is to say, I am purposefully seeking concepts that serve to frame the nature of contemporary world order, Russia's status in this order and the legitimacy of this order.

Seeking understandings of world order in the vast array of documents and speeches presented by the Russian state as well as synopses of these documents and speeches may be misleading: these do not have as their primary intent a demonstration of a Kremlin position on world order alone. Rather, they are, on the one hand, comprehensive statements on multiple aspects of Russian political economy and society, as well as both the internal and external challenges to Russia's governability. The comprehensive aspect is most evident in the case of the annual Addresses to the Federal Assembly. On the other hand they are also very specific statements and positions offered by Russian officials for very specific purposes and to very specific audiences.

It is not always clear, perhaps, how an individual statement or document contributes to an alternative conception of world order. By alternative conceptions of world order, I mean those which are purposefully given with the intention of creating a contradistinction to the 'concepts of control' that frequently accompany American aspirations to global leadership: polyarchic democracy,

human rights, and capital mobility, for example. In doing so, official Russia cultivates political and practical legitimacy amongst social forces and actors that are, at best, lukewarm, and worst, hostile to liberal postulates and American geopolitical and geoeconomic power. In conceiving of 'official Russia', I clearly do not mean to suggest that a monolithic entity has imposed a consistent vision of world order during the period under question. Certainly, during the Putin era, Russian state discourse is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that resists easy classification and binary oppositions. Rather, I wish to demonstrate that flexible and polysemic ideas cultivated at different times by dispersed actors cohere into a relatively stable understanding of contemporary world order that serves as a counterpoint to liberal universalism and American hegemony.

My decision to impose such an analytical framework – that is, searching for understandings of world order in the statements, speeches and documents produced by official Russia – was made on the assumption that we can find important regularities and ambiguities within these statements and that these tell us something about the strategic positioning of the Russian state. When deemed appropriate, I have included longer quotations so as to present ideas in greater context. In so doing, I hope to preserve the integrity of the statements without reducing the words to a simplified code. That is to say, I do not wish to simply count up the number of times Russian officials speak about, for example, Eurasianism or multipolarity without postulating some significance of these terms. To involve Clifford Geertz (1973), one simply does not go to the trouble of accumulating considerable amounts of material from the Russian government only to count particular words. One could employ a strictly quantitative methodology to determine the prevalence of certain 'buzzwords' in Putin's discourse (see Godzimirski, 2008, for example), however, my analysis proceeds from the judgement that much energy has been expended to reconciling Russian particularity with the nature of contemporary world order. Proceeding from this assumption permits some degree of abstraction from particular documents, which enables tentative conclusions about common prevalent themes, while the particularity of much of the work is retained.

While I engage with neo-Gramscian scholarship in this book, I depart somewhat from the understanding of state as political plus civil society. When I employ the term official Russia, I refer to its political authority, headed by the president and comprised of those supportive of state apparatuses. I do this out of methodological necessity as I investigate the role that such a group plays as a socialising force in offering state-sanctioned visions of world order. I would have preferred to explore in greater detail the link between this Russian political state and the vast complex of civil society institutions, economic actors, the Russian Orthodox Church, think tanks, technocratic experts, bureaucratic fractions and the media, but such a project is overly ambitious. Indeed, in confining myself largely to the Putin regime, I was ensured of a relatively accessible stock of information which demonstrated state views on the matter of contemporary world order.

If one may see Putin's regime as increasingly fusing political and economic power in Russia (Stent, 2008),[3] ideas produced by the regime become explicitly attached to political–economic imperatives. In a period of the continued large-scale transformation of the Russian political economy, what are the recurring ideas and conceptual frameworks utilised by the Russian state? This question follows from my conception of representations, which has a threefold purpose. First, how has official Russia interpreted prevailing trends in the global political economy and Russia's place within it? Second, how does it appeal to Russian particularities when representing material 'facts'? Third, how can we understand world order and the corresponding domestic component in Russia as a normative vision on the part of the Russian state and a project that it seeks to implement amid contemporary constraints and opportunities?

The inner workings of Russian elite circles and political negotiations stemming therefrom remain beyond the scope of my analysis. Indeed, this is a perennial problem of 'Kremlinology': how does one make plausible inferences about Russian elite negotiations based on scattered clues? Avoiding such speculation on the inner workings of Kremlin power and the extent to which Putin represents a particular faction may lead to an incomplete theorisation of the problem of Russian (political) state power. Nonetheless, it remains beyond the scope of my analysis. Indeed, it reflects a genuine problem about how such information is made available, particularly to an English speaking public. Ascribing coherence in foreign policy to a comprehensive Putin plan is also partly due to the somewhat mythical insistence upon the cohesion of such a plan, whether it pertains to foreign or domestic policy. Such an insistence is somewhat misleading. For example, Russian thinking on multipolarity and Eurasianism unquestionably predates Putin's presidency. Furthermore, no single political figure can determine the intersubjective ideas used to understand political phenomena. Yet Putin has been thought of as being capable of such an undertaking, which is part of the very power of Putinism itself.

I decided upon prevalent themes after an initial reading of major speeches and documents, including the annual speeches to the federal assembly, which represent a significant component of the Russian government's vision of itself and its priorities and are meant for consumption by Russian society, Russian politicians and anyone who cares to access them. I came to such a decision after engaging with various secondary sources and attending numerous conferences in my early scholarly life in which advocates and detractors made ostensibly objective and disinterested assessments of the state of affairs in Russia. Given that the Putin era has been much commented upon, and of intense interest to scholarly audiences in both Russia and beyond, it is difficult to conceive of an analytical and conceptual framework completely from scratch, as it were. Cox's dictum that theory is always for someone and some purpose often appears in the practice of Russian studies and the intellectual production accompanying it. Indeed, given the highly politicised nature of scholarly or popular work on Russia, where research interests and conceptual frameworks appear to be influenced by the very question of whether one is a