Status conflicts between Russia and the West: Perceptions and emotional biases

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ARTICLE INFO
Article history:
Available online 16 October 2014

Keywords:
Emotions
Europe
Foreign policy
Perception
Russia
Status
United states

ABSTRACT
This article looks at the status conflicts between Russia and the West and asks: why do these conflicts exist despite attempts to avoid them? If status conflicts refer to merely a symbolic recognition, then they should arguably be easier to solve than conflicts stemming from competition for power and resources. Yet, status conflicts can be difficult to solve even when they were not conceived as zero-sum games. The article argues that status conflicts cannot be understood without the interplay of perceptions and emotions. First, what really matters is not objective status but perceptions thereof and there seems to be a gap how Russia and the West perceive status in general. Secondly, the perceptions of when status is gained or lost seem to be emotionally loaded. Russia is more willing to understand its relative status when military or economic issues are at stake, but if the dispute deals with international norms and questions of justice Russia is more likely to interpret Western action as violating its status and conversely, it is more likely to interpret its own action as enhancing its status when it is defending such values differently from the West.

1. Introduction

When, for example, looking at Russia’s behavior in the ongoing Ukrainian crisis, it is easy to claim that status concerns are extremely important for the Russian leaders in the Kremlin. Other examples of the Kremlin’s recent actions that seem to make sense, in terms of status, range from significant issues of international diplomacy to smaller events of celebrity politics. Indeed, the quest for status can be seen as being typical for Russia and its foreign policy for a much longer time. The idea of great powerness is understood as forming the core of Russia’s state identity throughout centuries, including what we can observe today (Clunan, 2009; Hopf, 2002; Oldberg, 2007; Omelicheva, 2013; Smith, 2012; Trenin, 2011). As it was famously proclaimed by the Russian foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov (1996): “Russia always was, is and will be a great power;” or as more recently was stated by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (2012): “I am convinced that Russia simply cannot exist as a subordinate country.” In particular, status concerns play a key role in Russia’s relations with the West that is considered historically as the primary “other” to Russia (Neumann, 1996). Status and honor have often been regarded as motivations for Russia either to go to war, or to cooperate with the Western partners and also explain why their relationships were difficult (Tsygankov, 2012; Wohlforth, 1998). Prominent scholars claim that the key problem in the mutual relationships is not about security, but rather about how Russia receives the status and respect from the West that she expects (Monaghan, 2008; Neumann, 2008; Sakwa, 2008; Stent, 2014; Tsygankov, 2012).

Status can be seen as a factor that sometimes helps avoid conflict because it tells who should have priority. More often though it is seen as causing conflicts and impeding cooperation, especially when material interests are at stake, in this case it adds an intangible, emotionally loaded dimension. In relations between Russia and the key Western states and their political institutions, “the West” (Bavaj, 2011), a status conflict emerges when Russia perceives that she deserves a status recognition.
from the West and the West fails to deliver it. This propels Russia to take angry action that forces the West to take Russia into account but this situation, again, does not increase the level of trust in the relationships.

Many researchers have argued that if the importance of recognizing status and showing respect to Russia were correctly understood by the West, such conflicts, or overreactions at the minimum, would be avoided. Deborah Welch Larson and Andrei Shevchenko (2010, p. 93) have contended that Russia and China 'have been more likely to contribute to global governance when they believed that doing so would enhance their prestige’. Vincent Pouliot (2010, p. 239) suggests that ‘if NATO wants Russia to play by the rules of the security-from-the-inside-out game, it should provide with enough cultural-symmetric resources to have a minimally successful hand in the game’. In view of Jeffrey Mankoff (2007, p. 133), ‘Russia that is sure of itself and its standing in the world is likely to make a more stable, predictable partner for the West’. Stephen Cohen (2012) argues that ‘the guiding diplomatic tenet must be recognition of Russia’s parity with the United States as a sovereign nation and legitimate great power’. In most cases, these authors at least implicitly suggest, recognizing Russia’s status as a great power would not be too demanding since showing respect is symbolic politics and does not require giving up any essential material interests.

There is, of course, another group of scholars who also see that many problems in Russia’s relations with the West stem from status concerns, but they believe that the policy of the West, in so far as it would acknowledge Russia’s status concerns, would not satisfy Russia’s identity needs. Instead, such status moves would lead to endless clashes, because no reasonable balance could be found. It is Russia’s responsibility to accommodate its status aspirations to the new circumstances. For example, Hannes Adomeit (1995, p. 65) contended that self-assured and self-confident states would behave rationally, whereas Russia that is obsessed with its lost great power identity possesses many irrational, unpredictable, contradictory traits in its foreign policy. For Donald Jensen (2014), the United States’ approach to Russia in 2013 ‘was too Russia-centered, thereby encouraging the Kremlin’s delusion that Moscow is a global power with comparable status to Washington’. The key solution to the status conflict in the view of this more hard-liner group of scholars is that Russia should give up its futile aspiration to be a great power. In fact, status politics may lead to a self-reinforcing cycle. When the West tries to compensate policies that Russia claims have undermined its status by showing Russia more respect and awarding higher status, it sends mixed signals. When Russia believes that the West really thinks that it deserves a higher status, behavior that violates Russia’s status appears even more intentional and directed against Russia.

This article argues that status politics is more complicated than about withholding or granting status according to some real or imagined criteria. Moreover, neither granting nor withholding status automatically resolves status conflicts. This is because status conflicts do not emerge merely from a gap between perception and objective reality but between two perceptions. Russia perceives that it has not received the status recognition it deserves and the West believes it has already respected Russia. The basic problem is not that the West purposefully ignores Russia or undermine her status when it is able to do so, in other words, that it shows disrespect independently of material or other interest at stake. Rather, Russia and the West have diverging conceptions and perceptions of status.

How these mechanisms function depends on many cognitive and emotional elements that will be explored in this article. I will look first at the role the perception of status play from theoretical standpoint; and then examine the role the status perception play in Russia’s relations with the West in reality. I will make two broad points in support of my analysis. First, the key Western leaders have most of the time, at least from their own perspective, wanted to pay attention to Russia in order to minimize problems related to status. Yet, from the perspective of the Russian leaders, their experience has been opposite. Second, there are divergent perceptions between Russian and Western leaders and political commentators of whether Russia in key international contexts has gained or lost her status. Both of these gaps in perception contribute to the ‘status dilemma’ between Russia and the West.

I will base my analysis on statements and comments that can be found in memoirs, research literature and newspaper sources. Such an analysis can be objected on the ground that it is not clear when the perceptions stated are the real perceptions or they are just politically motivated statements of the situation. Yet, memoirs and official statements are directly indicative of status granting. Although such a gap between private and public thinking may exist, it should not be exaggerated a priori: on the contrary, in practice public statements often seem to reflect genuine perceptions (Mastny, 1996, p. 9). A number of anonymous background conversations with policy-makers and analysts both in Russia and in the West support this view. Moreover, the cases discussed here will not constitute any systematic final test of the claims above, but they serve as an illustrative or tentative plausibility probe of the existence of the psychological mechanisms in perceiving status in the relations between Russia and the West.

2. Status, perceptions and foreign policy

The representatives of the realist theory in IR have an ambivalent view of the role of status in international politics. On the one hand, it is seen as important and often driving politics more than mere material concerns. But on the other hand, many realists seem to think that status just reflects more fundamental material concerns of national interests. Classical realists said many things about status — or related concepts such as prestige, respect, honor, standing, or reputation — but did not have any proper theory of it. Hans Morgenthau (1978, p. 85) talked a lot of the importance of prestige, but then concluded that it is rarely the primary objective of foreign policy and it should not be. From Raymond Aron (1962, pp. 76–77) we can learn that ‘glory’ leads to extremes but a man full of glory should be unaware of his fortune or indifferent to it in order to be entirely worthy of it.
If we summarize the existing knowledge of status and related concepts in international relations, we can contend that status is important for the states for several reasons (Onea 2014; Paul et al., 2014; Steele, 2008; Volgy et al., 2011; Wolf, 2011; Wood, 2013b). If a state has been granted high status, it cannot be ignored in international negotiations and its interests are often seen as more legitimate. High status provides a robust basis for ‘soft power’. But high status is also important purely for reasons of self-esteem because it sustains a positive self-image. Self-esteem in international relations does not necessarily have to do with the dimensions of power, or power understood in the traditional way. Yet, grouping states into great powers, middle powers and lesser powers is the most typical way of categorizing states that no state can escape. Moreover, a high international status of a nation is often an important aspect of the identity of its citizens.

States thus have a clear incentive to achieve a higher status position. If status positions are hierarchically ordered, this would naturally lead to a conflict between the status seekers and the status granters. However, states also have an incentive to grant status to others or at least, not to violate the status of others (Wolf, 2011). If a state freely grants status to another state, it would naturally lead to a con...
1990 in order to show greater respect to his guest, the Soviet leadership first interpreted the invitation to the ‘summer cottage’ as an insult.

This brings us back to the question of what determines the appropriate level of a state’s status aspirations. There are two potential sources. The first is the attributes deemed relevant for status the state has relative to other states that may possess higher, equal, or lesser status. The second source is status aspirations that have historical origins in the domestic discourses of the nation. Anne Clunan (2009) argues that this is the case with Russia. Some believe that status becomes more important in the cases of ontological insecurity (Ringmar, 1996; Steele, 2008). Valeria Kasamara and Anna Sorokina (2012, p. 288) think that ‘the Great Power pathos is compensatory to the respondent’s insecurity, mistrust of other and the aggressive and unfriendly atmosphere in Russia’.

A related question is whether a state that is confident about its status is more or less likely to start a conflict. Theoretical suggestions here are not always clearly articulated, but the tendency is to assume that a state that is confident with its status is less likely to launch a conflict for status reasons (Lindemann, 2010). If the status-holder is not confident about its status, it is assumed, it is more likely to react to the status challenges posed by the states of a lower rank that a confident state could ignore. Moreover, it is not self-evident in which box we should put Russia. For Andrei Tsygankov (2012) Russia’s foreign policy becomes assertive, when internal confidence is strong but Western recognition is weak. Maria Raquel Freire (2011), by contrast, sees Russia as an ‘overachiever’ in terms of status, in other words, the other states have granted more status to Russia than it actually deserves and that is why Russia has become more assertive.

If states have a tendency to aspire for higher status, when and how do they accept status loss? One answer to this question is that they accept status loss when they have to, and when efficacy tests are univocal. Perceptions thus matter only to a degree and are important in situations when information is ambiguous. Social identity theory would expect that states as other human groups would then try other strategies to enhance their positive self-esteem. Another potential answer is that states are willing to downgrade their status in the past in order to feel positive about their present status. It is politically safe and identity wise to think that status losses took place in the past, when the current leaders were not responsible for them. So in Russia, Putin’s regime can accept that status loss took place under the Yeltsin era, but it is hard to acknowledge that any present action would have damaged Russia’s status.

Although IR scholars have been dealing with status and related questions, a more detailed research agenda looking at the role of these issues has been developing slowly. Status concerns create many dilemmas to which there are no self-evident answers. The rest of this article looks at how such dilemmas have shaped Russia’s relations with the West. How has Russia perceived the changes in its status and the policies of the West from the perspective of status? Have the attempts to compensate status violations been successful? Russia can be a fruitful case for considering these theories and assumptions about the role of status, although stronger generalizations would require more comparative research. Nevertheless, the significance of status has often been emphasized in Russian foreign policy but claims about it have often remained unspecified.

3. Perceiving the West’s willingness to grant status to Russia

Russia’s status aspirations seem to have produced a prolonged status conflict with the West in the post-Cold War era. For the West, a status conflict with Russia has not been a desired effect of its policies. At the end of the Cold War and thereafter the key Western actors did not want to conduct policies that had undermined Russia’s status. “We have not responded with flamboyance or arrogance — I have not jumped up and down on the Berlin Wall” assured President Bush the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev (Zelikow and Rice, 1995, p. 127). Chancellor Kohl was grateful and supportive towards Russia and built a personal friendship with both Gorbachev and Yeltsin. The EU was very careful not to antagonize Russia during the early stage of their relationship (Haukkala, 2010). The West did, however, perceive the world in terms of their values and conducted policies that reflected this.

In the Russian perspective, by contrast, the policies of the West undermined Russia’s status. Russia and the West did not share the same view as to how much status Russia deserved but even more importantly, they did not perceive their mutual actions in the similar way. Russia regarded foreign policy of the West as purposefully undermining her status. In view of Karaganov (2010, p. 7), ‘the West has treated Russia like a defeated adversary ever since an internal anti-communist revolution brought about the end of the Soviet Union’. Some American diplomats and politicians may think alike, but typically they put the blame on the preceding or the succeeding administration. The former US ambassador to Russia Jack Matlock (2010, p. 170), for example, has argued that ‘the Clinton administration dealt with Russia as if it no longer counted, even in European politics’. Defense Minister Robert Gates (2014, p. 158) also admits that ‘when Russia was weak in the 1990s and beyond we did not take Russian interests seriously’.

In particular, Russia felt that her status was undermined when NATO decided about its enlargement. This is an important episode to look at because interpretations of the motives and commitments not to enlarge NATO have been formative to the image of the West in Russia. In Russia’s perspective, not only NATO’s expansion did demonstrate that the old enemy images of Russia were still alive in the West but it also discarded Russia’s status in being able to participate in the European security architecture on an equal footing and violated previous agreements by the Western leaders that NATO would not expand after German unification (Primakov, 1999).

The Western leaders saw the motivation of NATO’s enlargement differently. It did not reflect old enemy images but the vision of Europe whole and free and it was based on common norms agreed upon in the Paris OSCE charter including the
commitment of ‘fully respecting each other’s freedom of choice’. Neither a formal commitment to refrain from enlarging NATO nor a veto right was given to the Russian leaders (Kramer, 2009; Sarotte, 2014). But Russia and its concerns were not entirely ignored either. President Clinton tried to reassure Yeltsin that ‘NATO enlargement is part of a means to achieve our shared goal of a more stable Europe. And that goal includes a close cooperative NATO-Russia relationship, to which I am also committed’ (Asmus, 2002, p. 140). Clinton ‘emphasized that the U.S. had no intention in sidelining Russia and instead underscored how much the two leaders had already accomplished’ (ibid., p. 146). Clinton (2004, p. 750) told Yeltsin that ‘a declaration that NATO would stop its expansion … would make Russia look weaker, not stronger, whereas a NATO-Russia agreement would boost Russia’s standing’. Russia was not, indeed, satisfied with the Partnership for Peace scheme because it put Russia into a similar position with its former Eastern European satellites. Yeltsin stressed that problems can be solved by the two presidents: ‘to Yeltsin anything was possible if only he could talk one on one with his friend whose name he pronounced “Beeel!”’ (Albright, 2003, p. 254). As a form of compensation, to reassure Russia that it was not left out but respected, a NATO-Russia Founding Act was concluded and Russia was offered a seat at the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council. Clinton also promised to support Russia’s membership in G8, the WTO and other international organizations.

Russia did not see the establishment of the Permanent Joint Council (PJC) as any major act of goodwill (Forsberg, 2005). It committed itself to the work of the PJC only half-heartedly but expected that the Council would give Russia a chance to influence NATO’s agenda and decision-making. This did not happen but Kosovo conflict in spring 1999 caused a renewed status conflict between Russia and NATO because Russia was not able to influence decisions about NATO’s war on Kosovo. Strobe Talbott (2002, p. 340), the deputy secretary of the state, recalls how in the talks on the post-conflict stability force with the Russians the key questions were ‘all variations of the same theme: Did the U.S. and its allies respect Russia? Were we prepared to treat Russia on the basis of equality?’ Russia was again compensated after Kosovo War for the neglect that it had suffered in the run-up and during the war. In the Kosovo Force (KFOR) operation Russia was given a special arrangement in the command structure but not a sector of its own. Moreover, NATO representatives tried hard to reestablish broken relations and to assure Russia that her views are taken seriously.

A new NATO-Russia Council was established in 2002. The British Prime Minister Tony Blair, among others, wanted that the new forum would reflect the idea of ‘equality’. In his memoirs, he explained that ‘one thing I did get completely’, was how important respect was for Putin’s Russia (Blair, 2010, p. 244). Meanwhile Germany’s Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (2006) whose government had backed both Kosovo war as well as NATO’s second round of eastern enlargement, elevated Russia to an European nation, a democratic state and a global player. Putin (2000, p. 177) had clearly stated that he did ‘not see any reason why cooperation between Russia and NATO shouldn’t develop further; but I repeat that it will happen only if Russia is treated as an equal partner’. The idea was that the parties avoided the format of 19 + 1 in order to Russia feel equal with the other members in the NRC.

Yet, Russia was not fully satisfied with the new council either. The same kind of pattern of establishing a special arrangement with Russia that then created both expectations as well as disappointment could be found when Russia was invited to join the group of major industrial powers G7. The Western leaders had invited the Soviet and Russian leaders to G7 meetings already in the early 1990s and started to talk about Russia’s inclusion in the club. The invitation to join G7 formally was issued in 1997 in the context of the decision about NATO’s first post–Cold War enlargement (Gilman, 2007). On the basis of its economic criteria Russia would not have merited the inclusion in the group of major economic powers in 1997 or before: the decision was largely seen as purely political. When Russia then was not invited to G7 meetings, a status conflict emerged because Russia has been given the signal that it belongs to the club. For Russia, the decision to invite her to join G7, despite Russia having not fulfilled the criteria, was not seen as a sign of good-will of the Western powers, since the membership was conceived as something that Russia had rightfully, even if belatedly, deserved.

By contrast, the format of 7 + 1 was uncomfortable to Russia. In view of Yeltsin (2000, p. 131) ‘it kept Russia feeling like a student taking an exam. This was unacceptable. I thought that there should be no double standards’. In Yeltsin’s perception Russia was not invited earlier as a full member to the G8 only because Japan wanted to extract political concessions. Russia’s ambivalent status in the G8 also caused conflicts because of raised expectations of its position. When Russia was not invited to the ministerial meeting of the G7 countries in February 2010 in Canada, the former strongly protested. Russian foreign ministry saw the decision as incorrect and reflecting the old stereotypes (RIA Novosti, 2010). Such an argumentation gave grounds to believe that had Russia not been invited to the G8 in the first place, the G7 meeting without it had been seen as less insulting. On the other hand, right after his inauguration in May 2012, President Putin decided not to attend the G8 meeting, although the hosting Obama had decided to move the meeting from Chicago where a NATO summit was held right after the G8 meeting. He wanted to disconnect the two meetings and make it status wise easier for Putin to attend the G8 meeting. But for Putin, according to the Kremlin watchers, the most relevant reason for his cancellation was that the White House had announced that Obama would not participate at the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation summit (APEC-2012) which Russia was hosting in September of the same year in Vladivostok.

The status conflicts between Russia and the West have thus not disappeared during the Putin era despite the overall view that Russia is a rising power with a growing international significance. George W. Bush (2010, p. 195) first put ‘a high priority on personal diplomacy’ with Putin when they met in June 2001, but then he revised his opinion of Putin and was not willing to engage with him. Putin felt this change and during his first encounter with President Obama, the Russian president reportedly complained for almost an hour about the disrespectful treatment he had received from George W. Bush and Condoleezza Rice (Mann, 2012, p. 186). Yet, the problems did not disappear with Obama either. A telling incident was when the US Ambassador to Moscow Michael McFaul snapped at a Russian journalist that Russia “turned out to be a wild country!” When this was
interpreted in the Russian media as insulting the ambassador quickly apologized and blamed his poor Russian: “Did not mean to say ‘wild country’. … I greatly respect Russia”, he added (Joffe, 2012).

4. Perceiving Russia’s performance and status in international relations

Russia and the West do not only perceive differently the level of status that Russia has received, they also differ in their perceptions about what factors or actions contribute to Russia’s status. Many instances, however, seem to lead to parallel views of how Russia’s status is conceived. For both Russia and the West traditional yardsticks of power in international politics were Russia’s growing GNP, its energy resources and military build-up. These have been factors that have conceived as strengthening Russia’s position as a great power. International crises and related military and diplomatic action are, however, often more difficult to assess in a similar way. Often they constitute crucial test cases of Russia’s status that can be looked at more closely in order to discern to what extent the perceptions in Russia and in the West differ.

In most cases, whether the West likes it or not, Russia’s diplomatic interventions and use of military power, when successful, have been seen as improving Russia’s status internationally. In particular, both Russian and Western commentators believed that the war in Georgia in August 2008 strengthened Russia’s status. Sergey Karaganov (2010, p. 7), for example, argued that ‘it was only after the West encountered an armed rebuff in South Ossetia that it stopped its expansion’. For Stratfor’s George Friedman (2008), the Russian invasion of Georgia announced that the balance of power had shifted. Russia’s diplomatic intervention in the Syrian crisis also seems to be positively evaluated both in the West as well as in Russia (Lukyanov, 2013a). Not only did the Russian commentators see Russia scoring ‘a brilliant diplomatic victory’ (Golts, 2013), Western commentators similarly regarded that ‘Russia gains clout with Syria initiative’ (White, 2013), ‘Russia is emerging as a great power’ (Murray, 2013) or that it ‘has helped reassert Russia’s role’ (Sly, 2013).

The perceptions of Russia and the West of Russia’s status changes are more diverse when Russia attempts to prevent the West from making decisions on the international level or when it tries to demonstrate its presence by using military force less successfully than in the Kosovo War. Russians typically do not count such failures as status losses. Rather, Russian representatives believe that in such cases Russia’s inaction would demonstrate its lesser status and think that even a failed attempt is better in status terms than no attempt at all. Even the drastically failed attempt during the Kosovo War to seize the Pristina airport was seen positively by the Russian commentators as an effective demonstration that Russia is not ‘a lackey’ as discussed in Heller (this issue). For Yeltsin (2000, p. 266) it was a ‘sign of our moral victory in the face of the enormous NATO military, all of Europe and the whole world’. On the other hand, the Western leaders saw the Pristina episode not as a moral statement but rather as a sign of Russia’s unpredictability as a partner (Clark, 2002). For Albright (2003, p. 423), the event was ‘farcical’. On the basis of it, the West became frustrated with Russia and was less willing to show respect. As Iver Neumann and Vincent Pouliot (2011) have argued, ‘Moscow’s quest for equal status prompted quixotic practices that were often dismissed by Western countries’.

Indeed, Russia has often not registered when it has lost status in the eyes of the Western partners. The OSCE Istanbul Summit in 1999, where a Charter for European Security and Adapted Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty was signed, was generally regarded in the West as one where Russia had to accept that it was bound by the OSCE rules and the CFE Treaty. Yet, for Yeltsin (2000, p. 348) ‘the summit was an important international victory for Russia’. Another case where Russian and Western perceptions starkly differed was the “Bronze Soldier” dispute in Estonia in April—May 2007. Russia protested against the removal of the Soviet Era statue in Tallinn from the center to a nearby cemetery. Russian representatives argued that it violated the rights of the Russian minority and was a sign of Estonian glorification of fascism. Members of the nationalistic youth organization Nashi, supported by the Kremlin, demonstrated in Moscow and blocked the Estonian embassy (Myers, 2007). Official Estonian websites underwent cyber attacks, presumably launched from Russia. Russian leaders believed that it had given a lesson to Estonia that the rights of the Russian minority and the sanctity of the war time memorials cannot be violated. From the Western perspective, however, diplomatic harassment that constituted a violation of the Vienna convention and the alleged cyber-attacks decreased Russia’s status, and the lesson to do with the memory issue towards which the West had shown some initial understanding was lost in the diplomatic crisis.

A third example of diverging perceptions of Russia’s status between Russia and the West was Russia’s decision to recognize Abkhazia and Ossetia as independent states in August 2008 after the Russo-Georgian war. The West held the decision irresponsible and interpreted Russia’s difficulty in getting any of its closest partners to recognize these break-away republics as a significant set-back and status loss. Professor Lincoln Mitchell of Columbia University, for example, argued that Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was “clearly a diplomatic defeat for Russia. It reveals a Russia that is more isolated than Russia would want to let on” (Whitmore, 2009), “In terms of comparative diplomacy, the Russian independence recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia looks extremely weak to the considerably greater number of nations recognizing Kosovo’s independence” (Averko, 2012). For Russia, by contrast, the recognition of the break-away republics had again “given a lesson” to the West, or at least to those countries that had recognized the independence of Kosovo. One year later, after the recognition Medvedev assured that he did not regret the decision that was irreversible. Five years after the act Putin (2013) reasoned that “Russian Federation’s difficult but correct 2008 decision to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was decisive for giving these two young countries the chance to choose their own future”. Finally, Russia’s proposal of an European security treaty was an attempt to enhance Russia’s status in the European security system but it turned out to be more a loss to Russia’s status, since it did not get much positive support from the West (Tsygankov, 2014). The Western commentators regarded it as a non-starter as the key interlocutors neglected Medvedev’s treaty initiative and tried to address Russian concerns within existing structures such as NATO and the OSCE (McNamara, 2010; Weitz, 2012).
Similar debates and differences in perception can be traced when looking at the two recent major issues on the diplomatic agenda. As noted above, Russia’s role in mediating an international solution to the Syrian crisis in September 2013 was widely seen as a positive sign and as a proof that Russia is back in the game. Yet this reading was much more common and widespread in Russia than in the West. Noteworthy is John McCain’s (2013a) comment that by allying with world’s most offensive tyrannies Putin is not enhancing Russia’s global reputation but destroying it.1 Similarly, the refusal of Ukraine to sign the association agreement with the EU in November 2013 was regarded by many Russians as a diplomatic victory for Russia and a further sign of its improved status. Yet, the perceptions were different in the West. The outcome did not improve Russia’s status but it was a pyrrhic victory or a ‘lose/lose outcome’ (Wood, 2013a). In reviewing the achievements of the past year Fyodor Lukyanov (2014), a Chairman of Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, concludes that ‘Russia certainly has improved its standing’. Putin’s nomination as the most influential person by the Forbes magazine in November 2013 was seen as underlining this image (Lukyanov, 2013b). Former US Ambassador to Moscow, Stephen Sestanovich, in turn, argued that Putin’s diplomatic tools are getting weaker and the recent record should be a problem for Putin. In his view, Russian officials portray their moves regarding Syria as a huge success because these officials simply cannot speak of the Russian initiatives in any other terms (Barmin, 2013).

If Russian leaders do not perceive any of their actions as lowering the country’s status, when do they accept a status loss? If they never accept a status loss, the expectations would be constantly rising and become sooner or later totally out of touch. It seems that Russian leaders have accepted status loss in two occasions. First is constant information about Russia’s material power resources that can be deemed objectively in some relative terms. Second, Russian leaders seem to accept that its status has been lower in the past in order to justify the present: they exaggerate Russia’s low status in the 1990s in order to create the impression that its status during the Putin era is higher than during the Yeltsin era. Conversely, the West may admit that Russia’s status has been rising during the Putin era but they do not admit that a lower status in the past had resulted from Russia’s own action.

5. Conclusions

This article has discussed the conflicts between Russia and the West that arise from interpretation of Russian international status. It asked why such conflicts exist despite attempts the avoid them. If the essence of status conflicts is just a symbolic recognition of a country’s international standing, then they should be easier to solve than problems stemming from competition for power and resources. Yet, status conflicts often arise as unintended outcomes of interaction and could be difficult to solve because of perceptions and emotional biases attached to them.

The article does not intend to address the issue of whether Russia has received too much or too little respect from the West. Instead it suggests that status conflicts cannot be understood without the interplay of perceptions and emotions. First, the article argues that what really matters is not so much an objective status but rather perceptions thereof and there seems to be a gap of how Russia and the West perceive Russian status and in particular Western acts in honoring or ignoring it. Secondly, the perceptions of when status is gained or lost seem to be emotionally loaded. Although not much can be said without studying the issue more systematically, it seems that Russia is particularly concerned with status issues if the dispute deals with emotionally loaded issues, such as NATO enlargement or Kosovo War. Conversely, the West is more likely to interpret Russia’s action as not enhancing its international status when it is defending international values differently from the West.

Acknowledgment

I want to acknowledge the financial support of Academy of Finland to the project on “Emotions in Russian Foreign Policy” (2011-14) as well as to the Finnish Center of Excellence in Russian Studies – ‘Choices of Russian Modernization’ (2012-2017) that have made this research possible. I would also like to thank participants in the seminars and conference panels in Helsinki 2012, Naantali 2013, Mainz 2013, Toronto 2014 and Frankfurt 2014 (Anette Freyberg-Inan, Deborah Welch Larson and the co-editors of this special issue in particular) for comments on earlier drafts of this article.

References


1 This statement is somewhat contradictory because at the same time he (McCain, 2013b) also declared that the deal with Syria ‘gave Russia a position in the Middle East which they haven’t had since 1970’.


