

Dr SLIWINSKI Krzysztof

Assistant Professor

Department of Government and International Studies

Hong Kong Baptist University

Ukrainian Crisis – clashing interests, visions and values.

International relations have always featured competition and cooperation. These two are inextricably linked to the category of national interest. As such national interests serve as reference point in formulation of every state's foreign policy. Fundamentally, it is in the national interest of every state to preserve what it already possesses but also to expand and gain new values. For that reason national interests are profoundly motivating. They integrate and consolidate political elites and the citizens of every state around their contents. Behind the conceptualization of every state's national interests there is usually a broad vision regarding the role and aspired position in international relations, especially *vis-a-vis* its neighbors. When shared by political elites and societies at large, this vision may become the driving force for state actions in international arena. Analyzing states' actions, parallel to the vision one also has to pay special attention to the value systems that are dominant in political cultures of particular states. Value systems ultimately define how states go about the realization of their national interests.

Looking at the Ukrainian Crisis one easily spots the differences between not only the visions that are behind the national interests of Western states, members of the European Union and the Russian Federation but also the value systems that they subscribe to.

As for the EU and its particular member states the underpinning values are those of liberal democratic governance, peace and prosperity. The processes of European integration are absolutely unique in the history of international relations since after hundreds of years of bloody wars between most of the states on the European continent, it was the European Communities, funded after the end of the WWII that finally brought democracy, peace and prosperity to Europe. Today, the war between EU member states is "not merely unthinkable

but materially impossible”.¹ In terms of the vision that defines European national interests on the surface one would definitely observe the strong will to preserve what EU has already achieved. That would however be superficial. EU and specially some of its member states are not purely *status quo* actors. Particularly Central and Eastern European members of the EU are very much in favor of expanding the sphere of liberal democracy, peace and prosperity further to the East. In reality no one wants to be the bordering state of the EU. Additionally, there are tangible political and economic benefits to be achieved every time the EU expands.

On the other side of the equation there is the Russian Federation - a considerably young state with turbulent history and equally turbulent political environment. Its political culture is strongly influenced by lack of stability and long-lasting tradition of strong, central governments. With an exception of a very short period at the beginning of 1990s, the Russian Federation never really experienced liberal democracy. The brief and chaotic in their nature processes of democratization produced mostly fears among average citizens and political void that had to be fulfilled. To cut the long story short, this as well as the overwhelming sense of loss of power and prestige after the collapse of the Soviet Union have shaped the political culture in Russia differently from the Western Europe. The values that Russian political and economic elites tend to subscribe to have more to do with Machiavelli's and Hobbes' visions of human nature (competitiveness and appetitive behavior) rather than, as is the case of Western Europeans, with more idealistic and optimistic features as observed by Rousseau or Locke. Consequently the vision of the national interest as envisaged by many Russians (both political elites and society) tends to be much more defined by expansionism or revanchism, rather than preserving the *status quo*.² In this light one could interpret Putin's ideas of the construction of Eurasian Economic Union as opposed to the economic and political integration taking place within the European Union.

This ultimately informs us of what is happening around Ukraine. On the one hand there is a collection of EU states that stand for peace, prosperity and democratization and on the other there is a centralized power in Kremlin, which defines its national interests very

¹ The exact wording in Schuman Declaration of the 9th of May of 1950. The Schuman Declaration is a stepping stone to subsequent creation of European Communities – European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), European Economic Community (EEC) and European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM). See more at: http://europa.eu/about-eu/basic-information/symbols/europe-day/schuman-declaration/index_en.htm .

² One cannot but notice numerous polls that time and again prove that Putin's foreign policy enjoys high support among many ordinary citizens of the Russian Federation. According to the last polls carried out by Levada Centre Putin's approval in February 2015 reached 86%. See more at: <http://www.levada.ru/eng/>

much in terms of a zero-sum-game and consequently conceptualizes its security through the realist notion of the maximization of power. This translates into challenging of the *status quo* by designing foreign policy to gain political influence over formally independent neighbors or even territory acquisition as the case of Crimea clearly shows.³

This is not to shame and blame the Russian Federation or its President Wladimir Putin. This is only to observe facts as they happen. After all, domestic politics and by extension international politics as they are practiced are only rarely based on morality. Most of the time the major criterion turns out to be effectiveness. Consequently one has to observe that it seems that in the short term Putin's foreign and domestic policies seem not only effective but also publically supported. On the other hand, the Ukrainian crisis has brought sanctions, which in the long run may produce dire consequences for Russian economy and consequently for Russian political stability.

Scholars of international relations have been debating for years whether liberal institutionalism is effective. It seems that the strategy that the West has been applying towards Russia since 1991, which was based on accommodation and close cooperation through an interlocking system of security and economic institutions, has not worked. Russia is pushing for its own, different vision of international politics. The great challenge that now stands in front of the political elites in the West is to shape Russia's international environment in such a way as to influence its political outlook – values as well as broad vision behind its national interests. Sanctions will definitely not do the trick, especially if they are designed and implemented in a highly limited manner as they are.

³ Crimea is not the only example of territorially expansionist policy of the Russian Federation. In 2008 war broke out between Russia and Georgia, which resulted in Russia officially recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent regions and pledged military assistance. By the same token separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk can count on the support from the Russian Federation.