The Influence of Identities on National Interests:

The Case of Russia's Security Policy

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to assess the ability of a systemic approach like social constructivism to explain security policy, in comparison to theories at the state or individual level like those in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA). Here I focus on one of the basic tenets of constructivism, the constitutive relation between identities and interests, taking the analysis of Russian security policy as a case of study. After reviewing some of the main works on this subject, I conclude that progress has been hindered by the constructivist dismissal of agency in favour of structure as well as by the ambiguity of the concept of identity. Therefore, I propose to take the role conceptions of decision-makers as the base for a convergence between constructivism and FPA's more "traditional" approaches.

Introduction

Constructivism has asserted itself as a theoretical paradigm in IR in the last decade. Its associated concept of "identity" has been adopted by a new wave of studies on the importance of ideas *versus* material factors in international politics (Hyde-Price, 2000:24-25). However, some constructivist views – especially, the emphasis on structure rather than on agency – have made it difficult for researchers to test their views in case studies. The policies of specific states seem to be determined by the intersubjective meanings – including identities, norms or "cultures of anarchy" (Wendt, 1999:246-312) – in which they are embedded, rather than by their individual preferences.

The impact that the rise of the constructivist paradigm has had in the analysis of Russia can be assessed, for instance, by looking at a sample of the doctoral dissertations completed in the last decade.[1] Authors writing on the influence of ideational factors on Russian foreign and/or security policy in the 1990s referred to one general concept, "ideas"; another one associated with Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), "belief systems"; and a third from the "new" paradigm, "identity" (Herman, 1996a; Kovalev, 1996). Then, at the start of the 21st century, the concepts used are "identity" and "discourse", two of constructivism's central terms (Bjelakovic, 2001; Clunan, 2001). Finally, the most recent dissertations define themselves as "constructivists" in an explicit way (Long, 2002; Lee, 2004). However limited this selection may be, it is no doubt representative of a general trend in academic IR, particularly among younger scholars.[2]

The purpose of this paper[3] is to assess the ability of a systemic approach like constructivism to explain security policy vis-à-vis theories at the state or individual level like those in FPA, highlighting their common ground and explaining where they depart from each other. I will argue that constructivist theory has limited its own ability

of analyzing state actions, criticizing but not avoiding some of the shortcomings of other systemic approaches, like neorealism. By contrast, I suggest that a synthesis with FPA would be better prepared to advance research on the influence of ideational factors on national interests, and consequently, on state policy.

I start by making a comparative analysis of constructivism and FPA's main tenets about the effects of ideational factors – like "identity" – on national interests. As I am interested here on evaluating the prospects for a convergence between both approaches, I have selected Wendt (1992, 1999) as the most influential representative of the *modernist* or "moderate" constructivism, which seems better prepared for building bridges between the different schools than the linguistic, postmodern or critical constructivisms[4]. Then, I make a comparison between some of the works on identity and Russian security policy, as a case study of constructivist theories. Finally, I conclude by proposing a synthesis of constructivism and FPA's role theory, as a way of overcoming the dismissal of agency in favour of structure by the former.

Constructivism and FPA compared

Studies made at the state level have been dismissed as "reductionist" by the main constructivist authors, paradoxically on the same grounds as neorealists like Waltz (1979), who assert the primacy of the international structure as the main explaining factor for the actions of individual states. Wendt (1999:26-27; 147-150) presupposes that these actions depend on the states' identities and interests, both of which are in turn constituted and/or caused by the social structure of the international system. In identifying his theory as holist, he argues that the explanation of systemic effects cannot be reduced to actors' properties. This conception prevents a successful application of his theory to the analysis of foreign policies (Smith, 2001:45); which on the other hand is

not the author's purpose, as he explicitly locates his constructivism at the systemic level of analysis.

However, in order to justify his methodological choice of focusing on the international rather than on the state or the individual, Wendt implicitly lefts us with the impression that the role of decision-makers in defining policies is rather limited, as they are immersed in a social structure of identities which escape their control, constituting the way in which they see the world and perceive national interests. The result is, in my opinion, a slightly mechanical and deterministic conception of what takes place below the international level, which does not account for changes in state policies due to purely domestic factors.

On the other hand, the author's aim is precisely *endogenizing* identities and interests, instead of treating them as exogenously given by the anarchical structure of the system. From his viewpoint, they are the product of social interaction between actors – the *alter* and the *ego*,– which in his analysis are states (Wendt, 1992, reprinted 1995:132, 140). These interactions are the framework where identities are formed, which in turn have causal/constitutive effects on national interests. Therefore, we might ask whether social interactions between *individuals* – like diplomats or government officials from different countries, during bilateral contacts, meetings of international organizations and so on,– also contribute to form, sustain or change the identities of their respective states as international actors. If that is the case, the same would happen during social interactions at the domestic level like the decision-making process; this would, for example, introduce a social element to Allison's models of bureaucratic and governmental politics (Allison and Zelikow, 1999).

It must be noted that research on the influence of ideas on foreign and security policy did not start *ex novo* after 1989, when the first constructivist International

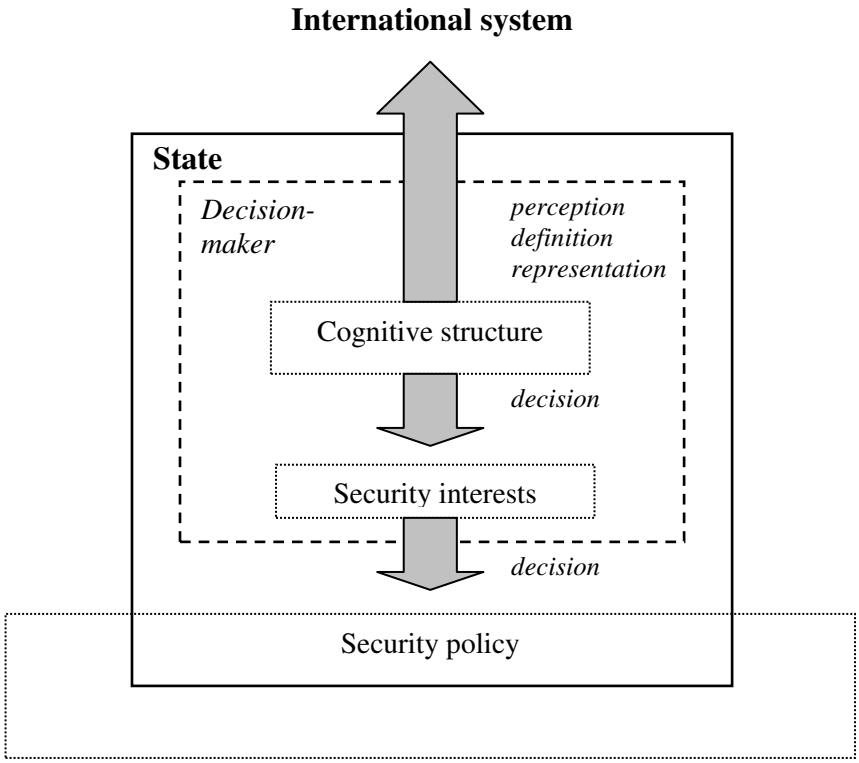
Relations (IR) book was published (Onuf, 1989). Rather, there is a certain continuity between constructivist authors and some traditions in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), especially cognitive and role theories (Wendt, 1999:3, 227; Hudson, 2002:5; Kubálková, 2001:27). Both approaches emphasize the causal and constitutive effects of ideas: as the culture in which all social relations – including international politics – are embedded, or as the personal beliefs of individual decision-makers. In this sense, both are located at the "idealist" rather than at the "materialist" side of the ontological *continuum.*[5]

Starting in the 50s, several authors – who became collectively known as the *phenomenological perspective* of FPA – "conceived of the relations between states as the product of the actions of individual states and they believed the values, mindsets and beliefs of actors guided these actions" (Herrmann, 2002:123). This approach was initiated by Snyder, Bruck and Sapin (1954, reprinted 2002:58-59, 127-129), who criticized the conceptualization of national interest as an objective reality. On the contrary, they viewed foreign policy as a process that starts with the "definition of the situation" by decision-makers, who are in turn influenced by the "socially defined norms and values" that they have internalized, as members of their own decisional unit as well as of society. A constructivist like Wendt seems to share this conception – although he refers to states, not individuals – when he writes that "actors… define their interests in the process of defining situations" (Wendt, 1995:136).

Cognitive studies have paid attention to this issue in the framework of *representational research*, which has studied how policy-makers interpret the environment in order to adopt decisions (Tetlock and McGuire, 2005:486-490). Individual belief systems, in this view, are the ideational lens through which they perceive and represent the world (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993). Once again, the

comparison with constructivism's concept of identity as "a property of intentional actors that generates motivational and behavioral dispositions… at base, a subjective or unit level quality, rooted in an actor's self understandings" (Wendt, 1999:224) is illuminating. Here, the main difference with FPA is the view of identity as simultaneously constituted by internal – actor's beliefs – and external/social structures: according to constructivists, in order for identity to be sustained, others have to represent the actor in the same way as it sees itself. But I do not think that this applies equally to all the different types of identity: it is certainly the case with *role identities,* but not with *personal/corporate* or *type identities* (Wendt, 1999:224-229).

Fig. 1 Cognitive FPA and security policy



Source: Elaborated by the author, based on Snyder *et al.* (1954), Tetlock and McGuire (2005).

A specific group of ideas that policy-makers have in mind when making decisions are their views on the roles of their country in the international system, which have been the object of study of a particular strand of FPA (Holsti, 1970; Walker, 1987a, 1987b). For role theory, state behavior is conceptualized as a product of its position in the international system, which is in turn caused by both the *ego*'s – policy-makers' – conceptions and the *alter*'s – other actors' – prescriptions about it. The first, agency side of this model has been criticized by constructivists, saying that as roles are by definition part of a social structure, they cannot be assumed *motu proprio* by an actor, but depend on fulfilling the expectations of others on an established set of conditions and behavior. For them, roles are a form of identity, and as such they cannot be reduced to the total sum of the ideas of every single actor. Nonetheless, a certain degree of "freedom of interpretation" by actors is recognized, to avoid what would be otherwise a "purely mechanical affair" (Wendt, 1999:227-228). We might ask ourselves, then, how role identities are adopted and internalized by states, if it is not through the conceptions of individual decision-makers.

The influence of identities on security policy

In this analysis of the conceptualization of the influence of ideational factors in state policy-making, I want to explore now the particular aspect of security, which is frequently included into the broad category of "foreign *and* security policy."[6] This would seemingly obscure the specificity of security – which is not about promoting our national interests in general, but about protecting ourselves from risks and threats[7] (Wolfers, 1952:484-485; Buzan, 1991:432),– by considering it a part of a state's foreign relations. Nonetheless, as the following pages will show, models of foreign policy-making can be – and indeed have been – adapted to the study of security policy.

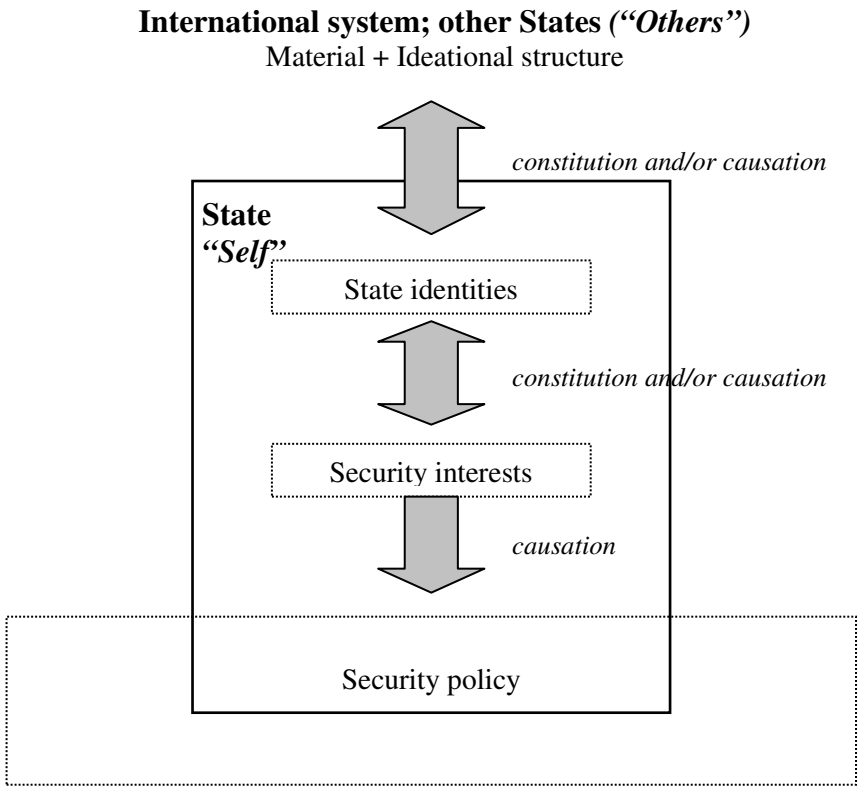
The first systematic attempt at a "constructivist theory of security policy" was Katzenstein's (1996) volume, which deals with the influence of culture, institutions, norms and identity, which we shall include into the category of "ideational factors", as opossed to material factors. In one of the opening chapters, several possible lines for research are suggested (Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein, 1996:52-53):

a) the effects of culture, institutions and norms of states' environment on their security interests and policies;
b) the effects of culture, institutions and norms of states'environments on their identity;
c) the effects of states' identities on their security interests and policies;
d) the effects of states' identities on normative structures;
e) the reproduction and reconstruction of culture, institutions and norms by state policies.

We will focus on the third of this relations, as we are not interested here on how identities are formed *per se,* but only on their influence on security interests and policies.

Jepperson *et al.* (1996:60-63) distinguish between two types of security interests: those that have an independent existence – we might call them "objective" security interests, as survival and well-being,– and those that depend on our identities. As in this view identity is a relational concept which derives from social structures, by defining ourselves we are at the same time defining our "Others", from which threats to our security are derived. They see a correlation between identity and security interests: a change in the former causes a change in the latter.

Fig. 2 Constructivism and security policy



Source: Elaborated by the author, based on Jepperson *et al.* (1996), Kubálková (2001), Wendt (1999).

If we define risks and threats as possibilities of being harmed – what is endangered being our independence and sovereignty, our economy, the lives of our citizens and so on,– we find that their degree of objectivity varies depending on the security sector that we are considering (Buzan, 1991; Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde, 1998). Risks and threats in the military sector are clearly independent from our ideas about them: only the identity of a "suicidal" would fit a state that did not consider them as such. In the case of the political, societal, economic or environmental sectors, the consensus would be more difficult. States that identified themselves as authoritarian or democratic regimes would perceive political risks and threats differently. The same would happen to those

that considered themselves as a "superior culture" or as multiethnic societies, in the case of the societal sector; to economic powers and to the developing world, in the case of the economic sector; and to highly industrialized and agricultural countries, in the case of the environmental sector. Security interests, in this sense, seem to be clearly influenced by ideas about the "Self".

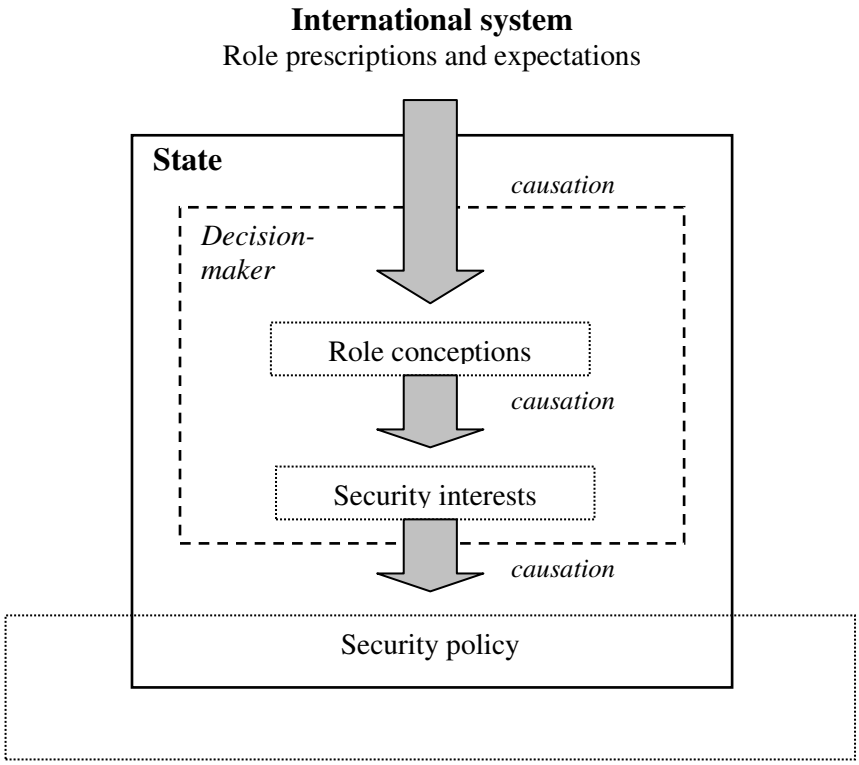
In spite of the increasing attention to identity issues in security studies, our previous critique about the multiple meanings of that concept also applies here. In relating identity issues to security, it is frequently taken in its ethnic and cultural sense, therefore associating it with the societal security sector; an example of this is Hyde-Price's (2000:26-29) analysis of security and identity in Europe.[8]

But what about the relational concept of identity, which figures prominently in the thinking of constructivists? It could be argued that ethnic and cultural groups also have relational identities, as they often define themselves in relation to "Others". However, Wendt places "type identities" – which include sharing a language or place of birth – in the lowest point of the *continuum,* according to the degree of external recognition by other actors that they need to exist: "the characteristics that underlie type identities are at base *intrinsic* to actors" (Wendt, 1999:225-226). Paraphrasing him, I *am* Spanish and Spanish-speaking "all by myself", whether or not Others exist to recognize it. At the highest point would be "role identities", which by definition are positions in a social structure.

Aggestam (2000:89-91; see also 1999) refers to "national identity" in her analysis of European "politics of identity". Here, "national" is not understood in a personal sense – belonging to a "nation",– but at the state level: how a state sees itself *and* is seen by the rest of actors, i.e. its *role* in the international system. This author has the merit of making a connection between constructivism and FPA, through the relation between

"role identity" at the state level and the "role conceptions" of decision-makers: "Policy-makers are depicted … as actors collectively representing the state as a *social actor* … role conceptions have a social origin and … the state is the role-beholder" (Aggestam, 2000:95). Therefore, the link between a state's national (role) identity and its security interests and policy would be the role conceptions of its decision-makers.

Fig. 3 Role theory and security policy



Source: Elaborated by the author, based on Holsti (1970), Walker (1987a, 1987b), Aggestam (2000).

Identities and security interests in the case of Russia

Russia's national identity is one of the best known examples of how contested this concept can be. Its foreign and security policy has been presented, throughout its history, as a debate between competing ideas about itself and relations with other

countries: “Slavophiles” *versus* “Occidentalists”, “Socialism in one country” *versus* “World revolution”, “European” *versus* “Asian”, “Cooperative” *versus* “Confrontational”, etc. The duality of Russian identity has been often compared to its national symbol, the eagle with two heads: one looking to the West and the other to the East. These ideas about the “Self” usually correspond to ideas about the “Other”: Russia seems to be defined *for* or *against* others, rather than having an essential character of its own. This would confirm that identity formation is a relational process, as constructivists argue (Wendt, 1992). Consequently, self-representations and threat perceptions – the Others we are *against* – are inextricably linked.

The number of authors concerned with identity issues in Russian foreign and security policy has continuously increased since the collapse of the Soviet Union, even though mainstream authors have continued to apply more “traditional” concepts. However, this interest did not start in a theoretical vacuum: Pursiainen (2000:60-68) has shown how the studies of the importance of ideology in the Soviet system made by “Sovietologists” during the Cold War are a clear precedent of this. But, as he points out, the real impact of the ideas of Russian policy-makers on their actual decisions has remained difficult to measure, in spite of the advances that have been made on that topic.

Light (1996:36-38) studies the redefinition of Russian “imperial” identity after 1991. The change of the role of “empire” for that of a “normal state” caused uncertainty about what Russia’s national interests should be; as long as a new identity was not consolidated, interests would remain uncertain. In this way, Light argues that there is a causal link between identity and interests; her narrative of the theoretical debates that preceded the elaboration of the new foreign policy concept can be considered an account of the attempts at redefining Russia’s post-Soviet identity. The connection

between these debates and actual foreign policy were the decision-makers, who actively participated in them and were influenced by the ideas that were being discussed (Light, 1996:87).

The same topic is considered by Mendras (1997:90-91); nonetheless, she does not focus on the thinking of political leaders, but on how ordinary Russians have understood the redefinition of their national identity after the loss of "empire". Interestingly, she concludes that their "imagined community" does not need to correspond to the official representation; although she is speaking mostly on spatial terms, comparing the Soviet and post-Soviet borders, we can speak here of multiple national identities at the domestic level: the "official" identity held by government elites and the identities of the population, which defines Russia in a different way depending on factors like his place of residence or his ethnicity (Mendras, 1997:103).

From a wider historical perspective, Neumann (1996) draws a parallel between Russia's perceptions of Europe and its self-definition from the Napoleonic wars to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the Yeltsin presidency. According to this author, Europe – rather than "the West" – would have been the "Other" in relation to which the Russian identity has been formed.[9] The concept of identity that we find here is therefore relational: again, not so much about what the meaning of being Russian is, as about what Russia wanted to be, what *role* it should have as a state, as the author makes clear from the outset: "The making of Russian policy is dependent on what sort of political project its *politically leading citizens* want Russia to be" (Neumann, 1996:1, emphasis added).

However, as the italicized part of the quote reveals, what is really considered relevant for the study of foreign and security policy is not identity in an abstract sense, as part of the broader cultural system; but how decision-makers and those with an

influence on them view that political project. The selection of texts, therefore, is not a sample of ideas and beliefs about Europe among all Russians, but only those held by the political elites and their intellectual advisers; even if the object of study is national identity as such, it is empirically analyzed by means of the individual conceptions of decision-makers.

A possible solution to that is Herman (1996b:283-285), who introduces "the constitutive effects of norms on actor behavior" as an additional factor. He distinguishes between regulatory and constitutive norms, arguing that changes in the latter are necessary to explain major policy changes as Gorbachev's "New Thinking". Although he uses the concept of "complex learning" to explain the reassessment of national interests, originated by debates in Soviet research institutions that spread to the policy-making elite, he rejects individualist explanations because he does "not see learning as and act of individual cognition that can be aggregated to generate insights about state or institutional behavior. Cognitive evolution is a social process" (Herman, 1996b:285). By taking transnational specialist networks as his unit of analysis instead of individual decision-makers, he departs from cognitive theories to adopt constructivist views on the influence of the ideational structure; although we could say that the study of collectively held ideas is not incompatible with "traditional" FPA.

In recent years, Hopf has became known by his extensive work on Russian identity and its influence on foreign policy (2002). This author chooses a "thin social cognitive" version of the concept of identity, trying to avoid the burden of a too constraining theoretical framework that would not account for a variety of empirical results: for him, identity is a cognitive device that the human mind uses to understand the world, and it is reproduced through everyday practices rather than through roles and norms (Hopf, 2002:5-6, 10). As a consequence, he also takes an important step to solving the

contradiction between holist ontology, on the one hand, and methodologies based on the analysis of the discourse of political leaders, on the other. He studies "identities" inductively from a variety of textual sources that are not limited to official documents, but also include journals, newspapers, memoirs, textbooks, and even popular fiction (Hopf, 2002:34-35). This broadens the somewhat artificial consideration of identities as an exclusive domain of the intellectual elites,– which are implicitly supposed to "decide" what their society is.[10]

Furthermore, Hopf must be credited in my opinion for not leaving the decision-maker out of his model, as other authors do following a rigid conception of ontology and levels of analysis. For this author, "any Soviet or Russian foreign policy decision maker is part of a social cognitive structure that comprises the identities and discourses… [which] constitute [his] understanding of himself. His… understandings of other states, therefore, must necessarily involve the interaction between this complicated social Self and those external Others" (Hopf, 2002:20). Political leaders are presented as members of a society at the domestic level, who are not impervious to the ideas and values present in it; rather, they draw their own ideas and values from their social context *and* use them as their cognitive device to define national interests when making policy decisions (Hopf, 2002:290).

Russia's quest for a post-Soviet identity has been negatively assessed by Lo (2003:113), who considers it a failed project during the Yeltsin period. Now, we could doubt whether Putin's declarations on Russia's role in the world and his policy decisions are coherent, or rather identity has been instrumentally used "as a force unifying instead of dividing society and as a means of consolidating his political authority in the process" (Lo, 2003:98). This uncovers a two-way relationship between

identities and interests: not only can the former influence the latter, but also the other way round, when identities are changed in order to advance specific interests.

Conclusion

We have first seen that some of constructivism's assumptions have a deterministic conception of what happens in the decision-making process: social interactions between states at the international level are privileged over those at the domestic level, between groups or individuals, as the *locus* of identity formation. The multiplicity of identities also make it an ambiguous concept, which in some cases is "fixed" – as in the case of some personal identities – and in others is continuously evolving through interaction with the rest of actors. With regard to security, risks and threats can have an "objective" sense – being independent from identities – or a "subjective" sense, being associated with specific perceptions of the "Self" and the "Others".

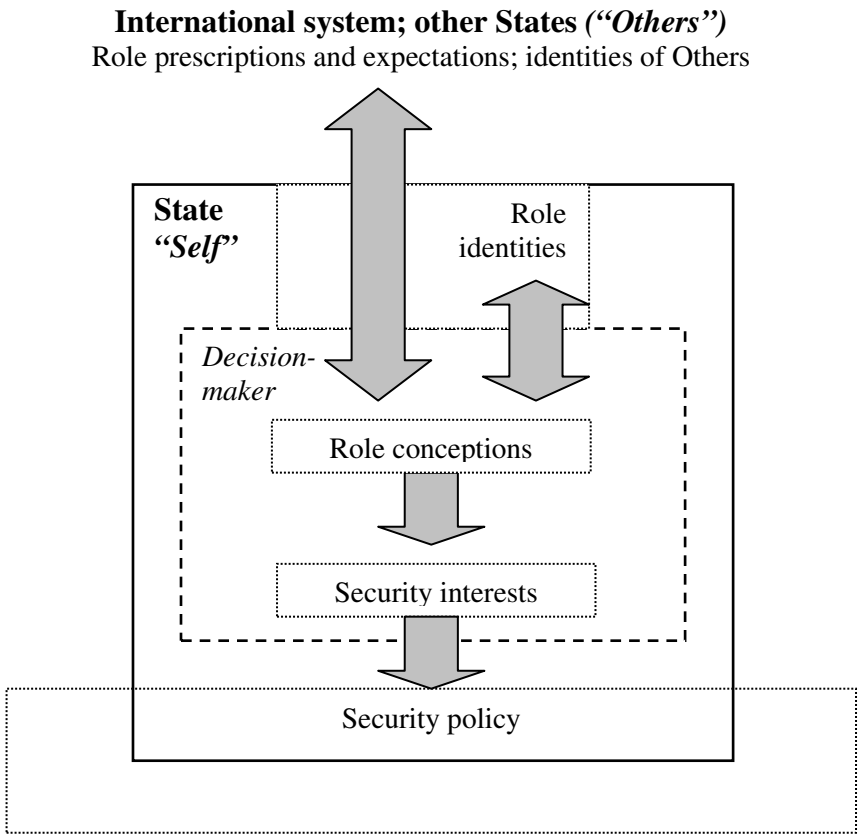
The concept of identity must also be treated carefully, as it can be used as an instrument by politicians, which explains the inconsistencies between declarations and policies. Therefore, not all "identities" are equally important in influencing behavior, as some of them are not truly internalized by actors.

Secondly, in spite of the division of the IR discipline into competing approaches, constructivist analyses of foreign and security policy have a clear precedent in cognitive and role theories, where individual ideas and beliefs are the link that explains how the different identities present in society affect specific policy decisions. This is also the case, often implicitly, of some of the recent studies on the influence of identities on national interests. However, there is no consensus on whose conceptions are the ones that have a real impact on policy: some limit them to the policy-making elite, while

others view decision-makers as members of domestic societies who draw on social ideas and beliefs in order to define national interests.

From my point of view, the concept of *role* is more relevant to the study of security than other types of "identity", as it includes the relational element which is the base of risk and threat perceptions. Therefore, I propose to take role identities as ideas that are present in society and define it in relation to others, but which only have an influence on security policy if they are adopted by individual decision-makers. As a result, by building on the common ground of both constructivist and traditional FPA approaches, the respective limitations of each model could be overcome. In Kolodziej's (2005:318) words, "rival schools should attempt to integrate the best of prevailing thoughts and practices to produce better models of security than presently exist to respond to the security needs of the world's diverse and divided peoples".

Fig. 4 The influence of role identities on security policy through decision-makers



Source: Elaborated by the author.

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Notes

[1] We have chosen the titles of those dissertations that referred to the influence of ideational factors in Russian foreign and/or security policy; these six results were obtained from the ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database, <http://proquest.umi.com> (accessed October 20, 2005). This is obviously a biased selection, as it only includes dissertations in the English language completed at North American universities. However, it is presented here as an illustrative example of the evolution of the conceptualization of Russian foreign and security policy as an object of study.

[2] Although this does not apply equally to North America and Europe, on the one hand, and to the different European countries, on the other.

[3] This paper has been prepared in the context of – but not corresponding to – my doctoral dissertation (Morales Hernández, 2007), which I am currently writing. Although undoubtedly modest and limited, this attempt at presenting my personal views on what identity is and how it may influence security would not, however, have been possible without the professors and researchers that have advised me in the past four years. My supervisor, Professor Antonio Marquina, has been a continued source of encouragement and constructive criticisms. In the UK, I have a debt with Dr. Mark Webber (Loughborough University), whose remarks have oriented me in critical moments; I also wish to thank Dr. Derek Averre and Dr. Stephen Webber (now at the University of Bristol), for their support during my recent stay at the University of Birmingham as a visiting researcher. That said, I claim full responsibility for any mistakes or inconsistencies in this text; any of them should be considered exclusively my own.

[4] This opinion is shared by Kolodziej (2005:262). On the different strands of constructivism, see Adler (2002:97-98).

[5] Wendt's well-known classification (1999:22-33), conceived to locate systemic IR theories along the holist-individualist and idealist-materialist axes, is applied here to a different level of analysis: foreign and security policy-making, i.e. the levels of the state and, within it, the individual decision-maker.

[6] Security policy has both an internal and external condition, being about protection from risks and threats originated both within and outside the state in question. If foreign policy is defined as "the process and resultants of human decision-making with reference to or having known consequences for foreign entities" (Hudson, 2005:2), only the *external* part of security policy is included into it.

[7] I distinguish between "threats" and "risks" by means of the presence or absence of an element of intentionality: *threats* are always voluntary, that is, the actors who cause them have a definite intention of harming others. On the other hand, *risks* do not have a will behind them, even though they may be as dangerous as threats. Examples of the former are terrorism or wars, while environmental degradation or economic collapse are instances of the latter. Naturally, if a risk is used purposefully by someone as a weapon against an enemy, it becomes a threat. See Marquina (2004:7).

[8] However, the ambiguity of the concept makes it too broad to use all its multiple meanings at the same time: given Europe's post-Cold War history – as well as space constraints in writing a book chapter,– taking identity in its ethnocultural meaning is a totally legitimate methodological choice.

[9] On this see Morozov (2004:2-6).

[10] See our comments on Mendras (1997) above.