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Sovereignism and Supranationalism in Russia

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Russia’s understanding of sovereignty is by and large characterized as traditional and restrictive. Thus, whereas the European Union (EU) and its Member States are seen as adhering to a ‘postmodern’, post-Westphalian, or post-sovereign view on sovereignty that includes the ‘sharing’ or ‘pooling’ of sovereignty at the supranational level, Russia is described as placing absolute importance on state sovereignty and consequently wary of forms of international cooperation that go beyond intergovernmentalism. This ‘modern-postmodern’ opposition has become the dominant lens through which the EU-Russia relationship dynamics are viewed by most Western commentators and policymakers but can be criticized on a number of accounts, not least of which the degree to which the EU remains rooted in very modern logics.

This paper further challenges this dichotomy by arguing that Russia’s engagement with supranational institutions is more substantial than often depicted. Indeed, Russia is a member of international organizations with supranational features such as the Council of Europe and the World Trade Organization (WTO), while its own regional integration project revolves at least in name around the creation of a ‘powerful, supranational union’ in the words of Vladimir Putin. Furthermore, the relationship between state sovereignty and in particular the national constitution on the one hand, and international law and court decisions on the other, is the object of a genuine debate in Russia amongst top officials, including the head of the Constitutional Court Valery Zor’kin and head of the Investigative Committee Alexander Bastrykin.

The tension that emerges from these discussions can be characterized as one between *sovereignism* – the veneration and indeed the ‘ideology’ of sovereignty – and *supranationalism* – the delegation of certain powers to a nominally independent supranational entity as well as the enforcement of rules through judicialized procedures and courts. Supranationalism is a concept mostly reserved for the study of the EU, but the aforementioned institutions are also clear instances of supranationalism and notably rely on supranational courts or judicial procedures such as the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and the dispute settlement mechanism of the WTO. Despite several controversies, Russia accepts the authority of these institutions and fully participates in the judicial procedures. The paper emphasizes and illustrates this often-neglected point, from which it draws two closely related conclusions.

First, it fits Russian debates on sovereignty in a broader European context, where the relation between the national and the supranational levels has become one of today’s central political issues. In particular, it likens the importance attached to sovereignty in the Russian context to other cases instead of seeing it as something idiosyncratic. Thus, sovereignism in France – where the term itself, *souverainisme*, in fact comes from – is a serious political force and is far from being limited to the political extremes, running through virtually all the major political parties. The referendum in the United Kingdom on the country’s membership of the EU is another clear-cut case of the salience of the sovereignism-supranationalism tension today. Lastly, the recent decision by the Russian Constitutional Court on refusing to implement a ruling by the ECtHR also has precedents in Europe, as both Germany and Italy have similarly emphasized their constitution’s supremacy over international courts.

Second, the paper argues that the opposition between a ‘modern’, sovereignty-oriented, and classically Westphalian Russia on the one hand, and a ‘postmodern’, post-sovereign, and post-Westphalian European Union on the other hand is much overstated. Russia accepts supranational principles and institutions to a certain degree, a fact that seems to disprove characterizations of Russia as a country that attaches supreme importance to its sovereignty. That is not to suggest that conceptualizations of sovereignty do not differ between Russia and certain other European countries, but rather that these differences are not qualitatively different. Moreover, it follows that the causes for the current turmoil in EU-Russia relations are to be sought for elsewhere than in supposedly differing understandings of concepts such as sovereignty.