

Did Fukuyama Get the Biggest Piece Right? The Effect of Ideology in the USSR and Russian Federation

Robert Jones



Francis Fukuyama's theory that ideology is the locus of social evolution and conflict was attacked by Fouad Ajami, who focused on the importance of material goods to the state, as opposed to immaterial goods like culture, religion, and ideology. Jones aims to prove that Russia has on several occasions upheld its ideology—even when doing so would not provide material benefit. In doing so, Jones backs up Fukuyama's claims.

In his paper *The End of History*, written in the midst of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Francis Fukuyama made the argument that history, or the social evolution of peoples around the globe, had effectively ended due to ideologies ceasing to competitively evolve. Fukuyama based this argument on the premise that political and economic liberalism had definitively shown itself to be the superior social ideology (Fukuyama). Samuel Huntington attacked this position in his book *The Clash of Civilizations*, claiming that Fukuyama had overstated the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Huntington then made the opposing claim that history would continue to evolve through clashes between meta-civilizations (Huntington 22). Fouad Ajami then attacked Huntington's argument in his article *The Summoning*, claiming that he had overstated the importance of immaterial forces within nations: religion, ideology, and culture. In that essay, Ajami claimed that smaller groups of peoples would engage in conflict, since the accounts of empirical secularism and modernism would overpower the immaterial forces that Huntington described (Ajami 2). While one

might be able to correctly argue against Huntington's civilizational thesis, Ajami erred by disputing the importance of immaterial forces over material ones. In doing so, Ajami effectively attempted to redact Fukuyama's central premise from the conversation. Despite Fukuyama himself saying that he overstated the magnitude of the end of the Cold War, Ajami's contribution removed the most important piece of the puzzle of globalization: that *ideology* is what drives social evolution and conflict between peoples, per the thought of G.W.F. Hegel.

This paper seeks to demonstrate that the locus of social evolution and conflict is ideology, in defense of Fukuyama's major premise from Ajami's incidental attack. It will do so by utilizing the case of Russia to illustrate how ideological evolution in Russia after the end of the Cold War did not follow a trajectory set by interactions aimed at material benefit, as Ajami predicted, but a trajectory set by the dominant ideology of the state. In order to provide proper depth, this paper will limit itself to three points of discussion concerning the Russian state. First, the changes in the behavior and policy of the

Russian state during the transition from the Soviet Union. Second, how twenty-first century Russian statecraft is based on ideology, not on what might bring the greatest material good of its people or the state. Finally, this paper will discuss recent Russian involvement in Syria.

Through the 1990s, the ideologies of the USSR and Russian Federation were more similar than one might expect. In 1990, after many reforms had been set into motion by Mikhail Gorbachev, law school students still preferred the shreds of the old way of doing things, and teachers who presented older ideas over professors who challenged the old guard of Soviet ideology (Lempert 641). Indeed, it would have been surprising if the Russian academic world changed radically after the fall of the Soviet Union, as non-Soviet ideas were considered taboo and were more or less non-existent (Fishman 194). Thus, the ideology of the Communist Party persisted in various political hold-outs well after 1991 (Fishman 201), and remnants of Communist thought, including anti-Western rhetoric and the importance of social controls, even persist to the present day (Fishman 202-203). This persistent immaterial ideology may help to explain why many Russian people look upon the state favorably, even though the state does not focus itself on pragmatic economic policy.

Likewise, the eventual changes that brought about the death of the USSR were ultimately instigated by changes in ideology which preceded changes in the market forces of the Russian state. Mikhail Gorbachev, in instituting the new policies of the USSR after his election in 1985, was in large part following his personal “new view of the world” (Brutents 79). In doing so, Gorbachev pursued radical, and even risky, change in foreign policy which was primarily focused on de-escalation and embracing the world community (Brutents 80). These changes were unexpected precisely because they were not necessarily forced by market forces or the foreign policy of other states: at the time, the Russian economy was growing and the US was not an overwhelming threat (Leon 64-70). Therefore, the facts run counter to a possible Marxist hypothesis that Gorbachev’s hand was forced by the market, and Ajami’s hypothesis of the pragmatic state. If Gorbachev were to act according to Ajami’s thesis,

then from the view of 1980s Soviet wisdom he should have maintained the status quo by attempting to increase the influence of Russia around the globe and within its sphere of influence. Yet he did not. The changes that brought about the death of the USSR were instigated by changes in the aims of Soviet ideology by Gorbachev and others. Thus, the facts demonstrate that the changes that catalyzed the fall of the USSR were made, to some extent, for the sake of ideology itself.

After the fall of the USSR, the Russian state has followed a path blazed by the ideology of the party in power. Changes that occurred were primarily a function of the state actively choosing to change its ideology, but this was usually driven with the ideology of the Russian elite. As the Russian state evolved, and continued to modify its economic systems, the ideology of the party in power was always the catalyst (Lempert 641).

But is the assertion that the transition from communism was driven by ideology slighting the slyness of state? In the 21st century has not Russia moved in some respects towards strengthening itself on the global stage for national benefit? To answer this question we will move into a discussion of Vladimir Putin’s statecraft in the instances of the 2014 Olympics and Russia’s annexation of Crimea, which may help us to diagnose what is happening with Russian military involvement in Syria.

Make no mistake: for Vladimir Putin the 2014 Sochi Olympics were about projecting soft-power—on a massive scale. More countries and athletes participated than in any previous Winter Olympics (Müller 628). And, on the face of things, hosting the Sochi Games was a materially pragmatic move. Putin recognized that Sochi was Russia’s chance to pursue two goals: showcasing a region as an extravagant getaway for tourists from within Russian and from other nations, and showing Russia’s muscle in the fields of “technology, infrastructure, leisure, and quality of life” (Müller 629). Indeed, it makes sense that Russia would want to broadcast a new, soft-power image to overshadow the preconceptions that have haunted it since the end of the Cold War. The Olympics were a perfect opportunity to showcase this soft-power, and to take advantage of the material benefits afforded by this soft-power projection

through tourism and trade.

Yet, the cost of the Sochi Games was so large that it outweighed any material benefit that has come to the state. With a bill of \$55 billion, Sochi was, by far, the most expensive Olympics ever, and it was funded almost entirely using public funds (Müller 629). In addition to this, the people in the area surrounding Sochi have seen little to no benefit from the Games. Most of the benefits promised to the residents of Sochi and the surrounding area have not manifested themselves (Müller 631). The Games did not live up to the hype that they would reinvigorate Sochi and put Russia back on the map as a tourist destination (Müller 654). Instead they were extremely costly, and at the expense of the Russian people. Yet even in the face of the extreme cost of the Games, and with the knowledge of the likely failure of the Games to provide material benefit to the Russian population, the Russian state depended on ideological rhetoric to justify celebrating the Games (Müller 652). At the point where Russia did not hold back in tempering the cost or the graft of the Games to pacify the population, there seems to be a preference for the symbolism of the Games internationally over any pragmatic benefit for Russia. Putin may have sold the Games to individuals within Russia as a material benefit, and even intended international soft power to bring trade and goods, but the vehicle necessarily had to be positive, international, immaterial perception.

Days after the end of Sochi Olympics, Russia made another major statecraft maneuver: aggression against Ukraine. Some may point to this examples and say, does not the annexation of Crimea and invasion into Eastern Ukraine demonstrate the slyness of the state? Russian president Vladimir Putin skillfully positioned Russia so that it could claim that Crimea had chosen to be a part of the Russian Federation (BBC News), correctly predicting that NATO would view an incursion to defend a small piece of the umbrella of its protection as too costly. Crimea was much more important to Russia than to the nations of NATO, and Putin almost certainly utilized this knowledge to inform his decision. In doing so, Putin contradicted much of the espoused ideology of peace and non-aggression of the 1990s, and made a pragmatic gambit that produced checkmate for the nations of NATO.

But what this narrative overlooks is that the move against Ukraine was actually extremely costly for Russia, and thus it was likely a symbolic move (and in turn, an ideological one) more than a pragmatic one. The West's eventual sanctions devastatingly rebutted an attempt to project geopolitical or economic power, if that was what Putin was aiming for. The ruble lost half of its value; Russian banks lost much of their liquidity; the Russian government's financial reserves decreased to the point where China offered to help (Kramer 9). Thus, painting Putin's Ukrainian gambit as geopolitical or economic does not attribute slyness to Putin at all. Instead, Putin's gambit makes much more sense if it is depicted as an ideological one.

Current Russian ideology centers on a deep sense of nationalism and shifting the power dynamic away from the US and the West, explicitly at the cost of the good of the Russian people. Scholars state that "Putin supporters, ...fed by and contribute to the Kremlin propaganda regarding Ukraine, have advocated employing similar economic weapons against the United States, even if the Russian people have to sacrifice material comforts" (Finch 190). This sort of polarized rhetoric and movements have become, to many, so out of touch with reality as to bring the state-of-mind of Vladimir Putin into question (Braun 34-42). But if Putin is of sound mind, scholars have hypothesized that Putin may be worrying about losing his grip on the Russian Federation, and thus is using nationalism and aggressive foreign policy as an effort to galvanize domestic support. Populations often feel it is their duty to support their political leaders if they believe their nation is at war. Thus, Russian are more likely to support Putin if Russia is "defending other peoples" in order to "restore peace." Putin has capitalized on this mindset by mass media and state television to espouse nationalistic ideology, to great effect. Putin is, and has always been, extremely popular within Russia, in large part because he has successfully used mass media to broadcast ideology. In sum, Putin has indicated that the immaterial ideology of nationalism may be at the core of his policy and possibly of his survival strategy (Kramer 12-13).

If this is true, then Ukraine is merely a pawn in Putin's ideological game—the fuel that Putin needs to consolidate support—rather than the ultimate power

play for expanding Russia's sphere of influence. While Putin may be acting pragmatically, ideology is the engine that makes his plan go. Thus Putin has chosen to control the immaterial, even at the cost of material benefit to his state. But above all, it is important to realize Putin's use of ideology has worked. Putin's political survival and continued support is a direct refutation of the pragmatic state thesis of Ajami's world. In addition, the fact that Putin's adoring "proletariat" cares not for the goods it has lost under Putin not only refutes the Marxist thesis, but refutes Ajami a second time: the people of Russia are answering the summoning of an immaterial ideology of nationalism.

The goals of the Sochi Olympics and aggression against Ukraine may actually help to predict what might happen in the most current manifestation of Russian ideology: military involvement in Syria. The Olympics informed us that Vladimir Putin is seeking to project power, particularly outside of Russia, but that he is not concerned with domestic financial cost. Instead, Putin may be attempting to consolidate domestic support by engaging in international conflict to encourage groupthink, again while throwing financial cost to the wind, as Russian aggression in Ukraine appears to indicate.

Does this preference for the immaterial over the material match up with the facts so far of Russian engagement in Syria? Yes. This is apparent when one considers that the material factors that might spur Russia onto involvement in Syria are largely absent. Unlike the US, which must maintain the ability to extract oil and do trade in the Middle East, Russia has vast resources of oil and has debatably the most access to natural resources in the world. While Syria is mildly close to Russia, and so it may be fairly high on Russia's priority list to have a government that is favorable towards Russia in Syria, this would seem to be outweighed by the sheer difficulty of waging "a land war in Asia," or anywhere. And, as is warranted through terrorist attacks against the US after the Gulf Wars, destabilizing a group that is hostile to one's nation does not necessarily guarantee national security. All of this seems to indicate that there is no direct material benefit for Russia to involvement in

Syria. So what is Putin's game here?

The answer, again, may be found in ideology. It is possible that Putin is trying to heighten nationalism further by engaging in another foreign conflict. But any impact this might have is likely non-unique if the Russian people recognized that Russia was already involved in a foreign conflict in Ukraine, or foreign conflict doesn't have any effect on domestic nationalism in the first place. Instead, Russia's involvement in Syria seems to reveal something very different about current Russian statecraft: Putin is trying to challenge US hegemony.

Putin is challenging US hegemony by projecting another locus of international military might, headquartered in Moscow. In the status quo, the US possesses hegemony over most of the face of the earth: the US spends a significant amount on defense, and utilizes it to project power over the entire globe through rhetoric and ideology that supports the US' allies (Telatar 41). At the point where few nations directly challenge US power (excluding China, Russia, and a few others) most countries are effectively under US hegemony, including Syria. In Syria, the US has used its power to complete air strikes against Bashar Al-Assad and DAESH¹ without any challenge; until now. For the first time since the beginning of the Iraq War, the US military is engaged militarily in the same area as another nation who is also attempting to project power outside of that nation's borders. And this fact is likely not lost on Russia. By creating an effective proxy war between the US and Russia, Russia is directly challenging US hegemony. Russia has made a deliberate choice to change the status quo.

Perhaps the aim for Russia in challenging the status quo is not to push the US out of Syria or an area directly, but to challenge the rhetoric and ideology that the US is the world hegemon. To do so would be extremely advantageous for Russia, as it might lead to more weapons deals with nations, more trade, and fewer serious threats to the Russian homeland as nations turn to Moscow as a center of power to the same degree as Washington. And if Russia can demonstrate that it is willing to follow through on its commitments to prop up Bashar Al-Assad, but the US reneges on its commitment to

¹ The term DAESH is used in order to not afford the "Islamic State" the legitimacy it might gain from such a title, or a similar one. Instead, DAESH is an Arabic acronym for the group, and is the common usage term in the Middle East.

protect the Syrian people from chemical weapons attacks or to contribute to the toppling of DAESH, then Russia will have effectively projected superior power in Syria, and succeeded in breaking US hegemony in Syria at the very least.

The narrative of challenging US hegemony, at least tangentially, seems to be born out in the status quo. While the US' policies of training fighters in Syria flounders, Russia bombs the very groups that the US supports (Reuters). Russia is supporting the very individual whom the US has said must be eliminated for there to be a real stabilization in Syria (Reuters). Russians know Turkey and the US are marginal allies, yet Russian planes infringed—likely deliberately—upon Turkish airspace during bombing raids this past week, even though the two nations are friendly with one another (Al Jazeera). All of these instances seems indicate that Russia's goal is primarily to fracture US hegemony in the region by demonstrating Russia's commitment to stand by its allies, which forces the US to do the same in order to maintain its hegemony. In doing so, Russia is using ideology to control the material; hegemonic gambits are inherently ideological. Syria is an ideological chessboard for two powers attempting to consolidate power. But their tools of choice are immaterial, not material.

Thus, the hypothesis of Putin using ideology to consolidate international and domestic support seems to be born out in Syria as well. In contrast to sly state or Marxist hypotheses, which would predict that Russia would pursue controlling the material factors in the conflict, or seek to bring material benefit to Russia, Putin is playing an ideological game with the US, which he hopes will break US hegemony in the process.

In conclusion, while the USSR and Russia have demonstrated an inclination to pragmatic decisions and the material benefit of the state, these decisions were primarily driven by a desire to uphold the ideology of the state or the government in power. Changes in governmental ideology preceded many of the major material moves, today nationalist ideology sets the tone for statecraft. Indeed, ideology is the central point of Russia's strategy in Syria. Thus, Ajami's thesis seems to misdiagnose the phenomena of the Russian state because it focuses too much

on the importance of material things to states and peoples, while Fukuyama's Hegelian diagnosis appears more fitting by the day.

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