

## Book review

**Elizaveta GAUFMAN, *Everyday foreign policy: Performing and consuming the Russian nation after Crimea*. Manchester: MUP, 2023, 177 p.**

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Doi : 10.5077/journals/connexe.2024.e1702

Russia's 2022 full scale invasion of Ukraine initiated a vivid scholarly debate about the relevance of realist approaches to the study of the Russian foreign policy, especially through the lens of Russia's geopolitical interests (e.g., Kazharski 2022, McCallion 2023, Umland 2023). Since then, many academic publications on Russian foreign policy have claimed to "present alternatives to the mainstream realist view" (e.g., Christoffersen 2022).

Dr Elizaveta Gaufman's 2023 book, *Everyday Foreign Policy: Performing and consuming the Russian nation after Crimea*, is therefore timely. It is a fascinating post-structuralist analysis that allows us to gain a deeper understanding not only of Russian foreign policy but also of Russian society. The book covers the period from the annexation of Crimea to the start of the large-scale war. In line with her post-structuralist approach, Gaufman does not formulate research questions such as "Why did Russia stage a large-scale invasion of Ukraine?", that would imply identifying causes. Instead, Gaufman analyzes the ordinary Kremlin supporter's interpretation of the world and foreign policy to understand their discourse and actions. In this way she sheds light on the mutually constitutive relationship between the Kremlin's foreign policy and the Russians' perceptions of national identity. The book implicitly suggests some explanations for the large-scale aggression, because it shows that the growth of the Kremlin's rhetoric of "great power" after Crimea generally resonated well with Vladimir Putin's supporters.

By shifting focus away from the Kremlin, Putin and his foreign minister Sergey Lavrov and onto ordinary regime supporters, Gaufman makes the reader aware of the presence of a multitude of discourses on foreign policy in Russia and their links to identity. It is especially useful to deconstruct Russian foreign policy in a context where the Western media narrative of "Putin's aggressive foreign policy" dominates. On the one hand, the book shows the influence of state propaganda. On the other hand, it demonstrates that Kremlin supporters not only reproduce and reinterpret official foreign policy (and state-sponsored memes), but sometimes protest against or ignore them. The fact that ordinary citizens supportive of the Kremlin have some agency in their identity performance and the shaping of cultural norms dismantles the Western media narrative of an almighty Kremlin imposing its will on all Russians and, especially, on its naïve supporters.



The book argues that foreign policy is a co-produced phenomenon, even though an asymmetrical one in the context of an authoritarian regime like Russia's.

Empirically, the book is very useful for Western audiences because, among other things, it sheds light on cultural, racial, and gendered domination practices in the Russian context that are oftentimes distinct from Western practices. "Blackness" in the Russian context refers to different ethnicities than it does in the EU or the US, however it is still used to depict presumable inferiority in international relations. In the Russian context, according to Gaufman, domination is more often expressed in gendered discourse (e.g., a powerful "boy" country vs. an inferior "girl" or "gay" country).

Reading the book, I too became aware of some of these domination dimensions in Russian foreign policy. The book evoked in me a panoply of emotions, ranging from amusement to deep sadness. It might be related both to my positionality (as a Russian woman, married to a foreigner, a scholar, a mother, and someone considered "white" in the Russian context) and how well written the book is, with its memorable and sometimes grotesque examples such as songs praising Putin's masculinity. As such, Gaufman points out that in the film *Day of elections* (2007) a sung couplet [Частушка] laments that in one of the villages women were not able to climax and only Putin could help them.

Methodologically, Gaufman employs an interpretative multi-method mapping assemblage that highlights the discourse and practices, based on mapping and tracing of social media. It constitutes an alternative avenue to the study of autocracies that are closed for researchers. Gaufman interviewed twenty citizens of different ages and professions online and in Moscow and in one region prior to 2022. (The book draws on twelve of them.) But since the war, access to the Russian field became more difficult. It has become harder to organize interviews using an ethical approach that stipulates revealing the identity of the researcher, research purposes, and not endangering the interviewee. Scholars studying such regimes therefore face new challenges of only being able to study visible phenomenon.

Following the start of the full-scale invasion, there have been very few (so far) visible re-appropriations of pro-war symbolism by Russian society and the few of them have been performed by state employees as demonstrations of loyalty. Gaufman suggests avenues for studying this "invisible" phenomenon by looking at ordinary people's practices. When she presented her book at the Université Libre de Bruxelles in March 2024, she argued in favor of looking at what people read, watch, or type into online search engines. As such, she remarked, that the bestselling books in Russia since the 2022 invasion were Victor Frankl's concentration camp memoir, George Orwell's *1984*, Edit Eva Eger's *The choice*, detective novels, and psychology self-help books (Litres 2022), while personal cars with the "Z" (identified with support for the war) were often vandalized.

Theoretically, the book offers a new concept of "everyday foreign policy" which has the potential to become mainstream upon further theorization and empirical testing in other contexts. It brings the post-structuralist International Relations literature into dialogue with literature on banal/everyday nationalisms (Billig 1995, Clément 2021, Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008).

Gaufman theorizes “everyday” as an “assemblage of micro-practices and discourses enmeshed across physical and digital spaces, inside and outside the body” (p. 3, 8). And she defines “everyday foreign policy performances” as “discursive, consumerist, and carnal practices that together constitute an everyday foreign policy assemblage” (p. 8). Gaufman stresses the rhizomatic nature of the everyday foreign policy meaning that it does not have a hierarchy and evolves in all directions (as a rhizome). People have a choice about whether and how to express self-subjectivity and self-identity on a daily basis, whether it is in (imagined) choices of sexual partners, consumer products, food, or self-performance on social media. These practices are relational because they are performed in contrast to an (imagined) Other.

Gaufman’s analysis is structured around four self-performing practices: discussing, mating, eating, and consuming. She offers a good literature review on the “embodied practices” –mating, eating, and consuming– that are otherwise much less theorized in post-structuralism. Indeed, discourse is post-structuralism’s leading concept: through talking, subjects produce meanings. Gaufman (p. 15) conceptualizes the four practices as pieces of an assemblage with no hierarchy, “an entanglement in visceral and rhetorical ways of embodies and discursive practices”. Besides they can also be contradictory, for instance, a consuming practice can contradict the discourse about it. As such, amidst the Kremlin’s conflict with Turkey in 2015, pro-Kremlin citizens and Internet trolls made a commotion online about the necessity of cancelling vacations in Turkey, but ordinary citizens rarely cancelled them on their own will, and once the charter planes were reestablished, they travelled to Turkey as if nothing had happened.

The book suggests that an “everyday foreign policy” is reactionary to official foreign policy. One wonders if this has anything to do with the political regime type in Russia. The book would benefit from a discussion on “everyday foreign policy” by relating it to regime types. If applied to democracies, one would expect everyday foreign policy to be bottom-up, at least on some occasions.

Gaufman distinguishes six “memorable foreign policy events” to which ordinary citizens reacted. The chapters of the book are structured around these events, all of which occurred after the annexation of Crimea. Unfortunately, the annexation of Crimea –which sparked large patriotic consumption (e.g., buying clothes with national symbols) and approval on the part of a large strata of the Russian population– is mentioned but not analyzed per se as such an event.

The “memorable foreign policy-oriented events” are conceptualized as events of very different nature, ranging from classic foreign policy events (a large sports event, an interstate conflict), to events that presumably fall outside the direct influence of foreign policy (the pandemic, elections in another country), and to long-term developments (the state leader’s personality cult, militarization). How the salience of each type of event can be determined could be articulated more clearly. The reader gets the impression that the first type of event can be considered salient based on public opinion polls and that long-term developments gain their salience from visible practices (e.g. militarization visible in the proliferation of events using military apparel).

Gaufman also shows that sometimes everyday foreign policy patterns can re-emerge, but she does not reflect on the context that might help to explain this. For example, the production of enemies in response to sanctions seems to be universal, but the way they are produced are specific to cultural and social context. Does exposure to previous everyday foreign policy patterns (though books and films) make people more likely to reproduce them in new circumstances? Gaufman

also mentions elections (and other attributes of democracy) re-emerging as acts of foreign policy defense against the perceived western involvement in Russian politics. This seems to be specific to autocracies, while the way the elections are defended seems specific to cultural and social contexts. Overall, the book is a very stimulating read and will be of interest to both academics and ordinary readers.

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