

## Why Russia's Strategic Deception Is Popular

### THE CULTURAL APPEAL OF THE TRICKSTER

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Viatcheslav Morozov<sup>1</sup>  
*University of Tartu*

Xymena Kurowska<sup>2</sup>  
*Central European University  
& Aberystwyth University*

Anatoly Reshetnikov<sup>3</sup>  
*Webster University  
& Central European University*

Russia has often been accused of violating the norms of “civilized” international interaction. It has engaged in small-scale incidents such as violations of national airspace and aerial brinkmanship to cyber-attacks and major violent acts such as military interventions, territorial annexations, and assassinations. In some of these cases, Moscow might simply interpret the rules differently. In others, it might be deliberately wreaking havoc by imitating what it sees as illegitimate conduct by the West—most probably under the hopeful, long-term, aim of persuading the latter to negotiate on the “rules.” There is, however, one more reason why deliberate transgressions might appear legitimate both to the Russian public and to parts of the international audience. When facing the hegemonic West, Russia often behaves, to use an analogy, like a trickster peasant trying to deceive a powerful landlord. Identification with the peasant is an important component of Soviet cultural legacy. It can be mobilized as a source of foreign policy legitimacy in as much as there is a perception of inequality and unfairness inherent in the existing U.S.-centric international order.

Depicting the West as a powerful but dull master taken on by a roguish Russian underdog resonates with how an average Russian sees the world and lends a sense of national pride. This explains why many morally dubious actions might be seen as legitimate by domestic audiences. Moreover, in as much as perceptions of global injustice are common for postcolonial contexts, it is hardly surprising that Russia's conduct is often viewed as justified in many countries and regions outside the West.

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<sup>1</sup> [Viatcheslav Morozov](#) is Professor of EU-Russia Studies at University of Tartu, Estonia.

<sup>2</sup> Xymena Kurowska is Associate Professor at Central European University and Marie Curie Senior Research Fellow at Aberystwyth University.

<sup>3</sup> Anatoly Reshetnikov is Assistant Professor of International Relations at Webster University in Vienna and PhD Researcher and Lecturer at Central European University.

## **Strategic Deception and Popular Support**

Disagreements over the exact meaning of international norms have always stood at the center in Russia's relations with NATO countries and their key partners, but the real turning point came with the annexation of Crimea in 2014. From that moment on, the dominant view in the West is that Russia's attempts to justify its conduct are based on a deliberate misinterpretation of universal norms as well as on outright lies. Besides the Crimean example, accusations against Russia are brought in connection with events in eastern Ukraine (including the downing of flight MH17), interference in U.S. elections, cyber-attacks against Western targets, use of illegal performance enhancing drugs by Russian athletes, chemical attacks against the opposition in Syria, and a number of high-profile assassinations.

Each of these situations involves important nuances that need to be discussed in their own right. Without a doubt, they reflect fundamentally different interpretations of certain basic norms, and, first of all, the principle of sovereign equality. Russia strongly prefers political stability and continuity, refusing to accept popular sovereignty if it results from revolutions and other forms of street politics. Consequently, it accuses the United States and its allies of deliberately undermining sovereign statehood in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. For the Kremlin, Western rhetoric of democracy promotion is little more than a cover-up for geopolitical expansion. When the Russian leadership concluded that its protestations were in vain, it decided to follow suit by expanding its own spheres of influence in the South Caucasus, Ukraine, and Syria, as well as in the global media space. A message sent by the Kremlin was that even if Russian actions broke established norms, the violations only mirror earlier ones performed by the West. Consequently, in Moscow's view, the door is still open to negotiating a new set of rules on a more equitable basis.

The more hardline critics of Moscow would claim, in their turn, that all of these arguments are only there as smokescreens for a cynical strategy that involves deception and manipulation. It is hard to completely dismiss this critique: in a significant number of cases, well-documented facts on the ground contradict Russian explanations. Even more importantly, it is hard to believe that the Russian public always takes official stories at face value. The effectiveness of pro-government propaganda crucially depends on the willingness of audiences to believe a story, even if privately they would admit that the story is not entirely true. The most revealing case in this regard was the deployment of Russian troops to Crimea (in preparation for a sham referendum). Despite official denials, many people suspected that those "little green men" were Russian soldiers. When President Vladimir Putin acknowledged this fact in March 2015, it did not come as a shock to anyone.

Opinion polls, election results, and data on protest activity suggest that far from undermining the popularity of Putin's government, strategic deception is actually

popular with voters. This popularity is ensured not just by brainwashing, but by utilizing a range of subtler mechanisms, all of which exploit widespread Russian disappointment with politics and the resulting refusal to take a moral stance on political issues. When it comes to cultural factors, it is common to interpret these cynical attitudes as a manifestation of “double-think,” which was allegedly typical of the Soviet personality, and which indicates a certain continued survival of the *Homo Sovieticus*. This approach, however, does not specify the conditions for the survival of these legacies and, thus, does not tell us whether they could disappear in the future. There is a very short step from this explanation to the racist claim that *en masse*, Russians will never possess the public spirit required for a functioning civil society.

### **The Relatable Trickster and the Stumped Master**

Our way of approaching this puzzle consists in contextualizing the cultural explanation by looking at the specific elements that might make strategic deception legitimate in the eyes of someone who grew up in the Soviet Union or post-Soviet Russia. The archetypal figure that is the best fit for Russia’s behavior is the trickster—a character that skillfully violates rules and transgresses all sorts of boundaries, sometimes for no immediate reason.

As an archetype, the trickster is present in all cultures, traditional and modern, and in all parts of the world. However, in an [article](#) published nearly a decade ago, the literary scholar Mark Lipovetsky notes the outstanding prominence that this type reached early in the Soviet period. In contrast to pre-revolutionary literature and art, where the picaresque novel was a marginal genre, trickster images proliferated in Soviet culture. Many of them continue to enjoy enormous popularity: the long list, representing different epochs, includes such cultural symbols as [Ostap Bender](#) from novels by Ilya Ilf and Yevgeny Petrov, [Old Lady Operahat](#) created by Eduard Uspensky, and the flamboyant, sarcastic [Masyanya](#) from Oleg Kuvaev’s animated clips.

Lipovetsky links the popularity of the trickster with the specificity of the Soviet “closed society,” which did not quite fit Austrian-British philosopher Karl Popper’s ideal-type definition of this term. It allowed for a number of alternative styles and ways of life, in addition to the officially sanctioned. Soviet people were used to operating in multiple normative systems and to seeing any order as ambivalent, which made them receptive to the appeal of the trickster.

In our view, there is an additional explanation that helps to account for the adoption of the trickster model by Putin’s Russia in its interaction with the West. It has to do with the fact that according to the old official storyline, Soviet culture was created for the people and, ultimately, by the people. The strong identification with the oppressed masses ultimately elevated the figure of the commoner, and especially the peasant, to the center stage of cultural production.

Nineteenth-century Russian literature and art, created by the upper strata, sympathized with the peasant but did not identify with him. Equally powerful were the representations of the *muzhik* (Russian peasant) as uncivilized and dishonest, constantly looking for ways to take advantage of his noble masters. While the Soviet society was far from its own egalitarian ideal, the latter still defined its self-identity. As a result, the image of the unsophisticated but cunning peasant was embraced as representing popular wisdom and natural emancipatory instincts of the masses. One of the most characteristic examples of such identification is the image of [Nasreddin Hodja](#), a legendary thirteenth-century Seljuq wise man, popularized in the USSR by Leonid Solov'yev's dilogy and the films created on its basis (importantly, the first movie was released in 1943, at the peak of World War II).

Even more striking are [trickster motives](#) in popular representations of Vladimir Lenin, founder of the Soviet state. Propagandistic efforts to portray Lenin as "a man of the people" often emphasized his craftiness in dealing with the tsarist authorities. Thus, in a short story by Mikhail Zoshchenko, Lenin tricks prison guards by making an ink-pot from bread and writing his notes with milk instead of ink. When a guard questions him, the ink-pot is quickly eaten. This motive flourished in late Soviet underground folklore, where Lenin figures were presented as a cynical, witty character "with kind and cunning eyes."

The real Lenin was, of course, a complex personality and a politician whose actions were utterly pragmatic rather than mischievous. Likewise, the real Putin, or anyone in his circle, probably does not try to step into the shoes of a trickster peasant while planning the next foreign policy move. The Kremlin's policies are not in any way determined by the cultural background that we describe. Rather, what we argue is that it is important to understand this background as one of the reasons why these actions might be seen as legitimate by the domestic audience. As mentioned earlier, viewing the West as a powerful, dull master taken on by a roguish Russian leader resonates with how an average Russian sees the world and experiences some national pride.

The trickster is normally associated with liminality and transgression: this figure is always located on the border between culture and nature, natural and supernatural, formal world and the underworld and so on. This is exactly where today's Russia finds itself: it is an industrial society still struggling with underdevelopment, a European country but its belonging to Europe is constantly questioned, a state whose great power ambitions are far greater than its actual capabilities.

Rhetoric about Russia having "risen from its knees" notwithstanding, Putin's Russia still perceives itself as an underdog in its relations with the West. Its elites reap the benefits of globalization and have no particular desire to revolutionize the existing system. As illustrated by the earnest attempts to develop alternative normative and institutional orders (such as BRICS and the Russian World notion), Russia lacks the capacity to

transform the West-dominated international system. Destabilizing it from within is more affordable and addresses their concerns related to both security and status. Soviet cultural legacies are a rich resource in subverting the international order which, in Moscow's view, gives the West an unfair advantage.

This resource is not drawn upon in any explicit way: rather, it provides a cultural background shared by the ruling elites and the masses and ensuring the popular support of the Kremlin's foreign policy. Many people in the West are appalled at what they see as turning the rules upside down and playing "dirty" games with values which, it would have seemed, had been established once and forever as the sacred foundations of any civilized society. What they do not realize is that, with some careful manipulation, their shocked faces might be made to look like those of the bourgeois from the early Soviet caricatures, or of Stalin-time bureaucrats from the famous Ostap Bender movies.

Even hardline supporters of the regime are not completely deaf to the never-ending Western criticism of Moscow's actions. The lack of significant improvements in the standard of living over the last decade, combined with Western sanctions, might lead some loyal citizens to question the conduct of the authorities. One way to explain these problems away is to present the West as an enemy and to explicitly deny any wrongdoings. Mocking one's opponents and their values sometimes works well and finds reception with various anti-Western constituencies both at home and globally. It also enables one to shrug off issues, such as the sanctions, by adopting a posture of a skillful commoner capable of making his own things instead of importing sophisticated machinery from overseas.

*"Give Us the Engine!" (Cheremnykh, 1923)*



Russia's claim to once again represent the dispossessed and the oppressed of the world is of course totally fake: contemporary Russia is an integral part of the existing neo-liberal order, while its leaders are among the world's richest people. This, however, does

not diminish the appeal of this claim, even beyond Russia's borders. The support that Moscow's policies often enjoy among the populist forces, both on the left and on the right, is due in a large extent to the resonance between its trickster stance and the broader postcolonial agenda focused on real inequality and oppression.

Another disturbing observation is that, as Lipovetsky points out, the trickster's role is to lay bare the precarious nature of any established order. While the rules might appear self-evident to those comfortably situated in the core of the system, the trickster brings in a view from the margins, where no-one can safely assume that the outcomes will always be as prescribed.

*"Excuse me, comrade, I have all the moves written down!"*

*A Vasiuki Chess Club scene in the movie Twelve Chairs (1977)*



## Conclusion

While the main rationale for assuming the trickster role is domestic, its consequences, intended or not, could have an unsettling effect on the international system. The transgression—and the trickster's cunning ability to get away with it—makes clear that any norm is just a convention that is rooted in a specific historical experience, rather than in the divine or natural order of things. This destructive work is a necessary precondition for any future transformation of the international system that potentially could make it more inclusive. However, it is by no means guaranteed that the change is going to occur, let alone that it will be progressive.

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