

Perceiving Russia's intentions: the case of Latvia

PhD Toms Rostoks

National Defence Academy of Latvia, Latvia

toms.rostoks@mil.lv

This paper aims to address perceptions of Russia's intentions among Latvia's decision-makers working in the foreign and security policy sector in the wake of the military conflict in Ukraine in 2014-2015. The theoretical part of the paper discusses the growing body of academic literature which addresses the issue of how decision-makers form assessments of intentions of other states. The empirical part of the paper tests the improved model of how states perceive intentions of other states on the case of Latvia.

The theoretical part of the paper departs from the assumption that although there are claims that gauging other states' intentions is impossible, decision-makers have to engage in this exercise on a daily basis as part of their efforts to formulate a policy that would take into account the behavior of other states. Although correct assessment of others' intentions and prediction of others' behavior is virtually impossible to achieve, informed assessments can be made about how states assess intentions of other states and factors which usually influence formation of such assessments. This optimistic position has been taken up by a number of authors who claim that states can be successful in signalling their intentions to other states. Defensive realists claim that states are security-seekers rather than power-seekers (Waltz 1979). Rationalist approaches argue that states can succeed in communicating their intentions with the help of costly signals. James Fearon distinguishes between tied hands and sunk-costs strategies for signalling resolve (Fearon 1997). Charles Kupchan has argued that enemies can become friends when they manage to make it clear that they do not harbour hostile intentions (Kupchan, 2011). Democratic peace theorists have argued that liberal-democratic norms heavily influence threat perceptions of democratic leaders who are likely to perceive nondemocracies as threatening when they show signs of contempt for democratic processes of accommodation (Farnham 2003). Andrew Kydd has argued that democracies reveal their foreign policy motivations through their transparent political process (Kydd 1997, 117). Other studies have emphasized that political leaders frequently rely on their personal impressions when dealing with leaders of other countries (Hall and Yarhi-Milo 2012).

When are states likely to perceive intentions of others as threatening? The existing literature emphasizes the importance of five factors. Assessment of others' intentions has both tangible and intangible elements. The two tangible elements are capabilities and geographical proximity. With regard to capabilities, David Singer has written that "perception is a function of both estimated capability and estimated intent" (cited in Schweller 2006, 38). Intentions only become an important factor in the presence of certain capabilities to inflict harm. Geographical proximity, in turn, affects the possibility of projecting military power. It is easier to project military power over short distances. In his study of international crises Raymond Cohen argued that actors were predisposed to define situations as especially threatening if involved areas were "strategically and or emotionally of high priority and pressing relevance" (Cohen 1978, 96).

Assessment of less tangible elements of the template for determining intentions is considerably more complex. Three such elements can be identified. First, Raymond Cohen has identified infringement of accepted rules of behaviour as a key factor that signals hostile intentions (Cohen 1978, 100). Also, Dean Pruitt has written that "the sign from which an intention is inferred consists of stepping over a 'boundary' on a conceptual dimension" (cited in Cohen 1978, 100). Second,

intentions of others are likely to be perceived as hostile if prior relations have taken a turn for the worse. Third, threats are most likely to be perceived and acted upon if the observer feels especially vulnerable to opponent's tactics (Cohen 1978).

Although there does exist a sizable body of conceptual literature on perceptions of state intentions, there are still large gaps in terms of identifying the key factors that influence perceptions of others' intentions. The crisis in Ukraine compels to ask if there are additional factors that contribute to heightened threat perceptions. At least three such potential factors can be identified at this stage. First, opponents are likely to appear as threatening if they are seen as loss acceptant in a sense that they are willing to pursue their aims in the face of mounting costs. Second, opponents are likely to be seen as having hostile intentions if their domestic standing is so high that it allows them to engage in risky behavior without being constrained by domestic interest groups such as general public, mass media, economic interests, and political opponents. Third, opponents are likely to be seen as threatening and unreliable if they are caught conveying false information and promises. All in all, this study aims at synthesizing a theoretical model of how states perceive threatening intentions of other states and tests this model on the in-depth case-study of Latvia.

This study utilizes two types of sources as its empirical base. First, this study uses publicly available statements of political decision-makers. Second, this study employs a large number of face-to-face interviews with decision-makers and public officials who work in Latvia's foreign and security policy sector. The combination of publicly available sources and face-to-face in-depth interviews is promising allows to identify similarities and differences between key decision-makers in terms of whether they perceive Russia's intentions vis-à-vis Latvia as threatening and whether there are differences in assessment of Russia's intentions because different actors can have similar views of Russia, but for very different reasons. This study would trace threat perceptions of Latvia's decision-makers to particular behaviours of Russia and identify similarities and differences in terms of how Russia's intentions are perceived. By doing this, it would also provide a valuable addition to the already existing body of academic literature on state intentions.