

Article

Dignity Promotion and the Revenge of Honour

Security and Morality in Russia-West Relations

Jardar Nuland Østbø

Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, Norwegian Defence University College

Abstract

This article argues that the West's neoliberal 'dignity promotion' in other parts of the world is counter-productive and leads to the resurgence of a primordial culture of honour, a concept too often an ignored in international relations research. The author shows how the West has hijacked and neoliberalized the concept of dignity to include abstract notions of individual freedom and, above all, property rights and free trade. The concept of dignity is thus deprived of any social content. The strategy of dignity promotion, i.e. the effort to spread the idea of every individual's inherent, inalienable worth, is based on the conviction that this will lead to a more secure world. However, sociological and anthropological research on moral cultures and honour has shown that security shapes moral cultures, not the other way round. The rise of dignity culture in the modern West was possible only when security, including social security, was provided. Conversely, honour dominates in insecure environments and resurfaces quickly when security disappears. The case study is Russia, where radical neoliberal restructuring in the early 1990s led to an anarchic brutalization of society, giving rise to a widespread culture of honour in Russian politics. On another level, Western dignity promotion in the former Soviet Union, epitomized by its support for 'colour revolutions', is perceived as an affront threatening Russian security by damaging its reputation for resolve. Within the culture of honour, the only moral answer to this is aggressive counter-attack.

Keywords

moral cultures, honour, dignity, Russia, democracy promotion, international relations

How they hit you is not important. It's how you got up and fought back.
'Baron', a thief-in-law from the serial 'Banditskii Peterburg'

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, international relations have become increasingly moralistic. Historically, there have always been norms regulating inter-state behaviour. Some states have been violating these, some more than others. However, since the mid-seventeenth century, international relations have been based on the principle of state sovereignty. While never absolute, in the last three decades, this principle has come increasingly under assault. Where democrats and dictators alike were earlier, at least in principle, more or less free to do as they pleased domestically, dictators and authoritarians may now be persecuted in various ways for what international conventions define as human rights abuses. At the foundation of human rights lies the moral principle of human *dignity* – the inherent, inviolable, inalienable worth of every human being, regardless of nationality, gender, social position, wealth, and political orientation. Few would openly disagree that dignity is a good thing and that, for instance, genocide is a grave violation of human dignity. In fact, in the global discourse, it is impossible to argue against dignity. It has become *the* moral principle on which a universalist global ethics is being constructed.

However, what is often forgotten, is that 'dignity', as we know it today, for all its historical roots, is a recent phenomenon, shaped by the hegemonic interests of transnational capital and promoted by international financial structures such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the US State department. Challenged in the 1970s by (formal) decolonisation and developing nations' increasing demands for a new and more just economic world order, cast in moralistic language referring to dignity and human rights, the West was able to wrest back the initiative and shape the concept of dignity, refocusing it on free trade and individual rights to the exclusion of state sovereignty, social rights and economic equality.

This development gathered even more pace with the demise of Communism. Democracy, with an almost exclusive focus on property rights, individual rights of expression, the rule of law, and – above all – free trade, has become the only political system that can be defended on the grounds of dignity. International relations have become depoliticized, technocratized and moralized. Where earlier there was competition among nominally equal states, there is now a sharp divide between the upholders and the violators of human dignity. The unassailable morality of dignity lies at the basis of the thesis of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and of associated 'humanitarian interventions', Western support of 'colour revolutions', and the activities of human rights organizations such as Amnesty International. The focus of these organizations on individual, abstract rights such as the freedom of expression, thought and religion, ignoring questions of economic dominance

and social injustice, reproduces the individualistic version of dignity which serves the interests of transnational capital much better than other, more collectivist notions of dignity. In effect, economic regulation and welfare arrangements are seen as challenges to human dignity.

Following the neoliberal logic, there is no conflict between the interests of the US, the interests of transnational capital, and the interests of normal people worldwide – everyone, except dictators, wants people’s dignity to be respected. This vision is one of a world order based on free trade, which is more important than anything else, because it will allegedly bring prosperity and security to all. This neoliberal vision, once a crackpot intellectual theory (McGuigan 2014, 229), has now been adopted by international structures such as the UN. However, the argument is inconsistent: ‘first, it separates the social and the economic from the political sphere, and then it turns around and connects the two by claiming an affinity between democracy and free-market capitalism!’ (Robinson 1996, 54). We can extend this ‘coprophagic’ neoliberal argument to include morality and security: the morality of dignity must be promoted to include the entire world, because it will allegedly bring peace and security. In other words, the international society must bring dignity to people, otherwise, they will be living in insecurity. In this article, I take issue with this conviction, arguing that the world-wide promotion of dignity by Western structures is counter-productive: it creates nearly ideal conditions for the resurgence of the primordial, much less fragile moral culture of *honour*. To this effect, I apply theories of moral cultures, normally used to analyze specific societies or cultures, to international relations. Rather than seeing dignity as the unquestionable and universal good, I will see it as indicative of a particular moral culture resulting from specific material conditions. This dignity culture, as it is called, is most fruitfully contrasted with honour culture, with which it coexists and competes even in many modern societies.

I will show how theories of moral cultures, specifically the culture of honour and the culture of dignity, in their relationship to security, can add to the understanding of contemporary international relations. After outlining the theories of honour and dignity cultures and previous research on honour and security in international relations, I show how the USA has securitized dignity promotion. I situate dignity promotion in the context of democracy promotion, showing how dignity was ‘hijacked’ by the West, forced into a neoliberal straitjacket, and then presented as a universal and non-negotiable value. The problem, as I will show, is that the inversion of the morality-security nexus and the promotion of (neoliberal) dignity create conditions that are highly conducive to honour culture. The case study is the relationship between contemporary Russia and the West (represented by the USA, for the sake of delimitation). The Western-advised neoliberal reforms in post-Soviet Russia not only failed to spread dignity culture, but actually led to the strengthening of the latent honour culture. Focusing on the colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine as emblematic examples of dignity promotion in Russia’s neighbourhood, I demonstrate how this policy contributed to provoking an honour-based, aggressive response: revenge.

Honour and Dignity

Both honour and dignity are elusive concepts, perhaps especially in the West today. In everyday parlance as much as legalese, they are often used together or interchangeably. In Western mainstream cultures, ‘honour’ is used much less often today than a century ago. The concept has lost its original content and is regarded as an ‘ideological leftover’ (Berger 1970, 339). This change is so profound that most Westerners are shocked when encountering instances of honour-based violence in other cultures, such as in the Middle East, South Asia, or even among subcultures in the West (Kuldova 2019), often seeing them as examples of ‘senseless violence’. But while violence stemming from honour concerns can be easily condemned or deemed ‘irrational’ from the perspective of dignity, it is far from senseless judged by the standards of honour (Blok 2001, 103-14). From the perspective of the honour culture, it is a deeply moral response to affronts.

For the purpose of this article, the distinctions between different moral cultures, in particular the *honour cultures* and *dignity cultures*, recently and succinctly described and contrasted by Campbell and Manning (Campbell and Manning 2018, 2014) and Leung and Cohen (Leung and Cohen 2011), are particularly useful. *Honour* has meant and means different things in different cultures and at different times, and many scholars simply refrain from defining it. Campbell and Manning have offered a simple definition, seeing honour as ‘a kind of status attached to physical bravery and the unwillingness to be dominated by anyone’ (Campbell and Manning 2014, 712). In practical terms, that means, in the words of one of Cooney’s young informants from a US innercity: ‘Don’t be pushed around; if somebody insults, or hits you, or steals your property, don’t go to the police, get even. Hit back’ (Cooney 1998, 63). This concept is rooted in a strictly hierarchical view of society, where social life consists of transactions of honour and people are treated fundamentally differently depending on their status (Berger 1970, 340).

Honour has an internal dimension as well as an external one (Stewart 1994), which coexist in a state of constant dialogue and are difficult for the analyst to distinguish (Robinson 2006, 2; Leung and Cohen 2011, 510). However, it is the latter that is by far the most important. Even if one regards honour as an internal quality, it can only be estimated by judging from the outside – by the rest of society (O’Neill 1999, xii) or at least by one’s more narrow honour group (O’Neill 1999, 89; Bowman 2006, 249). One’s inner qualities do not matter unless they are displayed. Hence the honourable’s tendency to boast of their exploits (Campbell 2005, 145-6), their obsession with ‘respect’, and their readiness to respond violently to the slightest of insults (Cooney 1998). In honour cultures, one’s reputation must be guarded at all times, and it is a moral imperative to exact vengeance on someone that has offended you (Cohen et al. 1996). To insult is to engage in an act of dominance (Campbell and Manning 2018, 57). In this respect, insults are essentially tests – one cannot trust the words of a man who lets himself be dominated (Leung and Cohen 2011, 510). Conversely, by engaging in verbal aggression and insulting others, running the risk of violent retaliation, one can show bravery. If person A insults person B, B’s honour is diminished or destroyed until he responds

aggressively (Stewart 1994, 64). Hence, in cultures of honour, people are engaged in an eternal competition over status. Men are driven to fight both positively and negatively, that is both in order to win honour and in order to avoid dishonour or shame (Robinson 2006, 4). As Campbell put it, ‘two opposed heroes cannot touch one another without the victory of the one and the humiliation of the other’ (Campbell 2005, 147-8). Thus, honour is a scarce ‘resource’. Honour earned in the course of many years can be lost in a matter of seconds.

Dignity, on the other hand, refers to the inherent, inalienable worth of every human being, regardless of social status, gender, race, age, political opinion, property, or nationality (UN 1948). It is the hegemonic moral principle in mainstream cultures of the West, enshrined in international law, human rights conventions, and national legislation. Unlike honour, dignity emphasizes the internal (Leung and Cohen 2011, 509). By definition, dignity cannot be lost or gained, and there is therefore no competition over it (Ober 2012, 832). In this sense, the amount of dignity is infinite. Hence, the dignified are conflict-averse and far less sensitive to insult, a typical slogan being ‘sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me’ (Leung and Cohen 2011, 511). Serious offences are left to third parties, such as the court system and the law enforcement agencies, but minor ones are to be either tolerated or sorted out by way of negotiation (Campbell and Manning 2014, 713; 2018).

The Security-Morality Nexus

There is an intrinsic link between moral cultures and security (Robinson 2006, 2). In a sense, the culture of honour is a morality of insecurity, whereas the culture of dignity is a morality of security. By this I mean that the culture of honour evolved and continues to thrive in notoriously insecure environments, where the life and wellbeing of the individual and the group are under constant threat. For instance, honour culture tends to thrive in societies that are or historically have been dependent on herding. In such economies, the livestock can relatively easily be stolen if the herder has a reputation of being unable or unwilling to fight back (Nisbett and Cohen 1996). One’s livelihood depends on one’s livestock. With that gone, one would lose everything. Honour cultures can also live on, despite changes in the material conditions, since honourable behaviour has become socially beneficial and thus resistant to change long after the economic conditions conducive to honour cultures subsided or disappeared (Nisbett and Cohen 1996, 92-3). The ideals of honour become ingrained in one’s social identity, decoupled from economic survival, and perhaps paradoxically, consequently become much more impervious to change – they become associated with things a man ‘just does’ (Nisbett and Cohen 1996, 93). Long after one’s forefathers gave up herding, one may still completely lose one’s social standing after failing to live up to the standards of honour.

The moral culture of dignity rose to dominance only when basic security was provided for. Dignity relies on a ‘normal condition’ of peace, stability, and social security. Hence, it is no coincidence that dignity culture is widespread in safe areas,

where there is a functioning rule of law, where basic needs are met, and where there is at least a measure of income equality. By contrast, honour culture is primordial, it is the ‘default’ that prevails where the necessary conditions for dignity are absent or have disappeared, for instance in lawless environments or where the law enforcement is absent or dysfunctional (Leung and Cohen 2011, 510). As Pitt-Rivers put it:

Whenever the authority of law is questioned or ignored, the code of honor reemerges to allocate the right to precedence and dictate the principles of conduct: as among aristocracies and criminal underworlds, school boy and street corner societies, open frontiers and the closed communities where reigns ‘The Honorable Society,’ as the Mafia calls itself (Pitt-Rivers 1968, 510).

This is the case with poor neighbourhoods where people cannot rely on the justice system for conflict resolution. It does not necessarily mean that the police is not there, only that it is not relied on, for various reasons. Dignity culture is thus much more fragile than honour culture. For instance, in the modern US innercity, against the background of scarcity, state neglect and the lack of police accountability, honour culture has *resurfaced* (Nisbett and Cohen 1996, 90-1). In a conflict-prone environment with little hope of third-party mediation, it is a matter of survival to appear intimidating enough to deter adversaries from attacking you. This can be achieved by various means, for instance by possessing capabilities (weapons, size, fitness) or allies. But it also relies on posture and demeanour (Gambetta 2009). If one gains a reputation for being a pushover, one will inevitably be pushed around. If one lets minor insults go unpunished, more serious attacks will follow (Cooney 1998, 115-9; Cohen et al. 1996). Therefore, fighting back is better than shying away from fighting, even if one loses the fight at hand (Cooney 1998, 63). A reputation for being courageous (or even crazy) and willing to fight, no matter the odds, may be one’s best security guarantee (Gambetta 2009, 78; 82). It is logical then that those feeling insecure are also the most sensitive to insults (Robinson 2006, 2).

Previous Research on Honour in International Relations

There is an extensive literature on honour cultures that mostly deals with particular societies, such as the US South (Cohen et al. 1996; Nisbett and Cohen 1996; Wyatt-Brown 1983), the Mediterranean (Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers 2005; Pitt-Rivers 1965), the impoverished late capitalist US innercity (Cooney 1998; Anderson 1994), 19th century Britain and its revival of chivalric ideals (Girouard 1981) or early modern Muscovy (Kollmann 1999). Another strand takes a more philosophical and comparative perspective, emphasizing variations across both time and space (Stewart 1994; Appiah 2011; Blok 2001) or, most ambitiously, employs a historical and interdisciplinary study of the concept of honour as a harsh critique of the contemporary Western society (Bowman 2006). Leo Braudy, the literature

and film scholar, focuses on honour's role in masculinity and the relationship to violence (Braudy 2003). These works have produced insights that are useful for the study of international relations, too.

However, research on honour in international relations as such is scarcer. The very brief anthology *Honor among Nations* (Abrams 1998) is one exception, although by seeing honour as an intangible *interest*, the authors perhaps inadvertently relegate it to a less important role than it could have. In a series of historical case studies from the last three millennia, Robinson (Robinson 2006) analyzes how honour has influenced the causes, conduct, and ending of wars in the West. By looking at different aspects of the relationship between honour and war in all the cases: honour and virtue; honour as a cause of war; honour as a motivation for fighting; honours and rewards; honour and death; honour and the conduct of war; honour and the enemy; honour and the ending of war; and honour and women, Robinson shows how the concept of honour has changed through the centuries. Despite these changes and despite Western civilian life's recent turn away from the moral code of honour, war remains inseparable from honour (Robinson 2006, 1). O'Neill offers an original and refined theory of symbolism in international relations, demonstrating, based on game-theoretic models, how states use symbols to challenge other states' honour or defend one's own (O'Neill 1999). Combining realism and constructivism, he presents a nuanced approach to 'rationality' that is not bound by the shackles of traditional rational choice theory.

The prominent expert on Russian foreign policy, Andrei Tsygankov (Tsygankov 2015; Tsygankov 2012; Tsygankov and Tarver-Wahlquist 2009), has treated the subject of Russia's national honour at length. According to him, Russian foreign policy has to a great extent been guided by honour. Tsygankov operates with a definition of honour as a set of perceived moral obligations, which sometimes run counter to Russian national security concerns. Sensitive to historic variations, immensely rich in detail and well-grounded in theories of international relations, Tsygankov's argument nevertheless boils down to blaming other states for not sufficiently taking into account Russia's values and interests, and for underestimating or misunderstanding its national honour. Russia's leaders are by contrast, by and large, seen as acting in accordance with what they have, consciously or unconsciously, seen as its national honour. Tsygankov employs the notion of 'the Russian myth of honor', which he (without theorizing or even explaining what is meant by 'myth') sees as necessary to take into account when explaining Russia's foreign policy:

The Russian myth of honor has been established over the course of millennia. Rooted in Eastern Christianity, it came to include a distinctive concept of spiritual freedom and the ideal of a strong and socially protective state capable of defending its own subjects from abuses at home and threats from abroad. Over time, this notion of honor has also incorporated a component of state loyalty to those who shared the Russian idea of honor but lived

outside its borders. It is this combination of domestic institutions and commitments to cultural allies that has constituted the myth of honor, providing the state's international policy with a sense of purpose (Tsygankov 2012, 28).

Tsygankov's book and articles are valuable correctives to the realist accounts of Russia's foreign policy. However, being based on notions of chivalry and nobility emphasizing the internal aspect of Russia's honour, Tsygankov's work is strikingly lacking in its use of the rich scholarly literature on honour in individual societies. More to the point, the importance of displays of power and masculinity,¹ the centrality of reputation, and also precedence, are all but ignored, leaving the connection between security and morality incompletely explained at best. While perhaps more relevant to the tsarist period, Tsygankov's understanding of Russia's national honour can be accused of not taking into account O'Neill's observation that the kind of honour prevalent in the present world order is a *primitive* one (O'Neill 1999, 85), without the highly elaborate and ritualized aristocratic elements.

The relative lack of international relations studies dedicated to honour is surprising given the basic conditions of today's world (dis)order, most prominently the lack of a legitimate and powerful third party to mediate in conflicts. Such an anarchic, insecure environment is conducive to honour culture (Robinson 2006, 168). According to the prominent rational choice theorist Thomas Schelling, 'gang war and international war have a lot in common. [...] racketeers, as well as gangs of delinquents, engage in limited war, disarmament and disengagement, surprise attack, retaliation and threat of retaliation; they worry about "appeasement" and loss of face; and they make alliances and agreements with the same disability that nations are subject to – the inability to appeal to higher authority in the interest of contract enforcement' (Schelling [1960] 1980, 12). This he attributes to the lack of enforceable legal systems.

Honour Otherwise: Deterrence and Reputation for Resolve

The obsolescence of the concept of honour in late modern Western societies (Berger 1970) does not necessarily mean that the moral culture of honour has disappeared from the international arena. According to Robinson, honour 'clearly remains central to the waging of war. In this sense, nothing has changed since the age of Achilles. The desire to be a person of worth, to win a good reputation in the eyes of others, and to live up to one's own internal standards of honourable conduct, is as strong today. People continue to go to war to defend their honour; that honour still determines how they fight and the manner in which they treat their enemies' (Robinson 2006, 185). It can also be argued that the decrease in the use of the word 'honour' is mostly about a change of vocabulary (O'Neill 1999, xii) or semantic confusion (Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014). According to Bowman (Bowman 2006, 33-5), Western leaders, even if guided by a sense of honour, must justify wars in other terms. Consciously or unconsciously, they use concepts

¹ This was *inter alia*, criticized in a review (Bobroff 2015).

‘around’ honour when they could (and, in the not so distant past, would) have referred openly to speak of honour (O’Neill 1999, 103). They talk about displaying ‘will,’ ‘resolve,’ ‘strength,’ or ‘credibility,’ but the patterns of behaviour in this respect are not much different from when their predecessors would talk about honour (O’Neill 1999, xii, 85). Indeed, politicians often use such terms interchangeably (Tang 2005, 34).

Deterrence theory, especially in its early incarnation from the first decades of the Cold War (Schelling [1966] 2008; Schelling [1960] 1980; Snyder [1961] 2015; Jervis [1970] 1989), has been preoccupied with how to build and defend *reputation*, specifically a reputation for *resolve*.² For instance, we can recognize the logic of honour as described above in this passage: ‘A reputation for action is one of the few things worth fighting over. Few parts of the world are intrinsically worth the risk of serious war by themselves, especially when taken slice by slice, but defending them or running risks to protect them may preserve one’s commitments to action in other parts of the world and at later times’ (Schelling [1966] 2008, 124). The logic can be summarized as fighting today to avoid fighting tomorrow (Mercer 2010, 1; Sharman 2007, 23). Giving in in one situation may harm one’s reputation for resolve, and future challenges may follow, jeopardizing peace and security (Jervis 1979, 304).

This view has later been subject to sustained criticism (Mercer 2010; Hopf 1994; Press 2005), and other studies have shown how more benign types of reputation, for instance reputation for compliance with international regimes, can also be beneficial for states (Keohane 2005). However, despite pointing out the methodological challenges of studying politicians’ beliefs (Dafoe, Renshon, and Huth 2014), several scholars have argued that a concern about reputation remains an important motive for state leaders going to war (Lebow 2008, 2010; Huth 1997; Kagan 1995; Markey 1999; Snyder and Diesing 2015). Statesmen ‘often use the recent behavior of others as important sources of information’ (Jervis 1989, 14). The anarchic nature of the international system and the lack of knowledge about the adversary’s intentions and calculations creates insecurity: ‘The opponent *may* think that we will be weak in the future if we give in now; to be safe we must assume he will’ (Snyder and Diesing 2015, 188). This line of thought maintains a ‘cult of reputation’ among politicians, making them impervious to scholars’ objections (Tang 2005). This has tangible consequences. In handling separatism, for instance, governments with multiple existing or potential separatism issues are much more likely to act decisively against any such instance (Walter 2006).

² I deal here with *reputation for resolve*. Huth distinguishes between reputation for resolve and reputation for power (Huth 1997). Keohane focuses on the more benign reputation for compliance with international regimes, highlighting the possibility for cooperation (Keohane 2005). Tang develops a sophisticated understanding of reputation for resolve, distinguishing between bargaining reputation, which ‘derives solely from a state’s demonstrated will to run the risk of war during crisis’, i.e. right now; and behavioral reputation, which ‘is something that may count in the future’ (Tang 2005, 38-9).

Dignity and Security in International Relations

The role of dignity culture in international relations has not been studied in the same way as honour. The link between dignity and security is perhaps less obvious than the connection between honour and security. As already mentioned, the moral principle of dignity became dominant only in societies where basic security was guaranteed. It is surprising then that in mainstream Western political discourse dignity is seen as a condition for security. In US foreign policy of the last two decades, the human dignity of people abroad is recognized as a matter of US national security. To illustrate this, I will briefly outline the use of the concept of dignity in the US National Security Strategy.

The mission to promote dignity features prominently in US National Security Strategy (NSS) of various editions since George W. Bush's presidency. Democracy promotion was one of the cornerstones of Bill Clinton's foreign policy. However, in the seven editions of the National Security Strategy published by the Bill Clinton administration, dignity was either referred to in a soft tone, as for instance in 1995 '[t]he community of democratic nations is growing, enhancing the prospects for political stability, peaceful conflict resolution and greater dignity and hope for the people of the world', or not mentioned at all (1997, 1998, and 2001). This changed during the presidency of George W. Bush, who in his first NSS invoked strongly moralistic language: 'Some worry that it is somehow undiplomatic or impolite to speak the language of right and wrong. I disagree. Different circumstances require different methods, but not different moralities.' (NSS 2002, 3). The 2002 and 2006 strategies positioned championing 'aspirations for human dignity' as the first 'essential task' (NSS 2002, 1), and an entire chapter is dedicated to that enterprise. In the 2006 edition, whose introduction begins with the president's statement that 'America is at war', dignity is mentioned *before* the need to combat terrorist attacks. 'Liberty and justice' are presented as 'nonnegotiable demands of human dignity' (NSS 2006, 2). Here, it is also explicitly linked with past examples of regime change, such as in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Iraq.

In Barack Obama's two editions (2010 and 2015), the rhetoric on dignity was softened to refer to the need to 'promote dignity by providing basic needs' and to the power of the USA's example, even admitting that the pursuit of security had sometimes led to the compromise of its values (NSS 2010, 10, 39). Nevertheless, the moralistic tone was retained in emphasizing the need to uphold an American-led liberal world order 'that promotes global security and prosperity as well as the dignity and human rights of all peoples' (NSS 2015, i).

With the Donald Trump Administration's 2017 edition, dignity promotion was again made explicit and its deprivation directly linked to oppressive regimes. The world is described as a manichean battle between good and evil: 'While [the] challenges differ in nature and magnitude, they are fundamentally contests between those who value human dignity and freedom and those who oppress individuals and enforce uniformity' (NSS 2017, 2-3). Supporting 'with our words and actions, those who live under oppressive regimes and who seek freedom, individual dignity,

and the rule of law’ again became the foremost ‘priority action to advance American interests’. Under the heading ‘Advance American influence’, Trump was quoted: “Above all, we value the dignity of every human life, protect the rights of every person, and share the hope of every soul to live in freedom. That is who we are’ (NSS 2017, 37). In the same context, the strategy stated that ‘we may use diplomacy, sanctions, and other tools to isolate states and leaders who threaten our interests and whose actions run contrary to our values. We will not remain silent in the face of evil’ (NSS 2017, 42).

Democracy Promotion

What I have called ‘dignity promotion’ cannot be understood separately from democracy promotion. Democracy promotion can be defined as a direct or indirect attempt to alter the political system of a foreign state to bring it into accord with democratic institutional models (adapted from Pee and Schmidli 2018, 2). There are a range of tools that can be used, from supporting the development of democratic institutions, supporting democratic political forces, exerting diplomatic pressure, sanctions or the threat thereof, to using military force, including full-scale land invasion (Pee and Schmidli 2018, 2; Burnell 2013). We can also mention specifically political conditionality for membership in international organizations or economic support (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008). Since the establishment of the American republic, many of its leaders have been convinced that its political values deserved to be spread beyond its borders. At first, this tendency was present on the purely ideational level, then, from Woodrow Wilson on, more and more on the strategic level, before taking a more practical and operational form during the later Cold War (Bouchet 2015, 1-2). While the Cold War was fought under democratic slogans, the US was preoccupied less with democracy among its allies than with their loyalty and usefulness in the struggle against Communism. By Ronald Reagan’s last years at the helm, democracy promotion was integrated at ‘the level of strategy, organization, and tactics’ (Pee and Schmidli 2018, 4).

After the end of the Cold War, democracy promotion rose to become an important aim of American foreign policy (Cox, Ikenberry, and Inoguchi 2000; D’Anieri 2019). An important part of the justification of democracy promotion was the ‘democratic peace theory’, i.e. the idea that liberal democracies do not wage war against each other. The intellectual roots of the ‘democratic peace theory’ can be traced to Immanuel Kant’s idea of ‘perpetual peace’ between republics (Kant [1795] 1903). Beginning in the late seventies, there was a surge in academic studies dedicated to this theory and its corollary – democracy promotion, which became enormously influential. The democratic peace theory was and is remarkable in that it, at least on the surface, provided a universalist moral justification for pursuing American interests. What is good for the US was also believed to be good for the world. Hence, it appeared to resolve the tension between liberal idealism and realism in American foreign policy (D’Anieri 2019, 14).

The Neoliberal Hijacking and ‘Depoliticization’ of Dignity

According to Grodsky (Grodsky 2016), the quest for human dignity, widely understood as signifying both political and social rights, has been the main motivation for the rank and file participants in popular uprisings since the French Revolution.

Rooted in concepts of social justice and equality, human dignity is simultaneously political and economic in nature. It embodies rule-of-law, where everyone in society is held accountable to the same laws. But it also includes guarantees of equal opportunity and basic socioeconomic guarantees (Grodsky 2016, 4).

Only recently has (liberal) democracy become an indispensable part of their demands (Grodsky 2016). After the Second World War, and even more with the ‘third wave’ of democratization (Huntington 1993) that began in the mid-1970s and the fall of Communism, democracy has become the ‘only game in town’. Even manifestly authoritarian leaders hold regular multi-candidate and multi-party elections and use the language of democracy while following more or less sophisticated strategies of repression, co-optation, and (dis)information to ensure their own victory (Levitsky and Way 2010; Wilson 2005b; Horvath 2013). Oppositionists and rebels have a much greater chance of attracting attention and getting political and diplomatic support, financing, and training from the West if they use the slogans of democracy (Levitsky and Way 2010, 18) and – the notion of dignity.

The concept of dignity has often been used by political and civic activists as part of an anti-authoritarian agenda, for instance during the 2011 Arab Spring and in the ‘colour revolutions’ in the former Communist bloc. But whereas local revolutionary activists have most often focused on economic and social issues, the foreign cheerleaders of the rebellions, i.e. the US and Western countries, are most preoccupied not only with individual political rights, but most prominently with investment climate, privatization, deregulation, and rollback of welfare. Having gained power, the post-revolution authorities are faced with a double pressure: ‘As their people expect them to do more to make their lives better, the international community typically asks them to do less. Today’s pressures for democracy go hand in hand with pressures for neoliberal economic policies’ (Grodsky 2016, loc. 240-90). Western-dominated international financial structures such as the International Monetary Fund have, in return for desperately needed loans, been requiring neoliberal economic policies (austerity, market liberalization, tax reform, welfare cuts, privatization) (Babb and Carruthers 2008). These changes have in most cases proven disastrous to the citizens’ living standards (Harvey 2005), but are still presented as the only moral solution.

Dignity has become ‘the only morality in town,’ ostensibly universally valid and thus impossible to oppose. But the notion of dignity promoted by the West, Western-dominated structures, and the US, is a *neoliberal* one. Virtually emptied of any social content, it is subjected to the logics of the market. The rise to prominence of this understanding of dignity must be understood in the context of globaliza-

tion. US-led democracy promotion is inextricably linked to globalization (Robinson 1996, 4), the rise of ethical and moral dimension as a legitimate factor in international relations (Chandler 2006, 89), and the increasing prominence of human rights issues that corresponds exactly with the rising trajectory of neoliberalization (Harvey 2005, 176). Robinson views the ‘low-intensity democracy’ promoted by the US as ‘a structural feature of the new world order: it is a global political system corresponding to a global economy under the hegemony of a transnational elite which is the agent of transnational capital’ (Robinson 1996, 4). Dignity, in the presently dominant form, is the morality justifying this project.

The notion of every human being’s inherent, inalienable value sits well with classic liberalism and the idea of free markets, of law-abiding individuals pursuing their self-interest. According to the liberal maxim, as long as laws are observed, there is no contradiction between the pursuit of individual interest and the common good (Leung and Cohen 2011, 509). As Adam Smith wrote: ‘By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good’ (Smith [1776] 1977, 593-4). In fact, within certain limits, there is even a moral value in pursuing one’s own interest. According to John Stuart Mill, ‘[t]he only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs or impede their efforts to obtain it. [...] Mankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves than by compelling each to live as seems good to the rest’ (Mill [1859] 1998, 16). This ‘win-win’ logic fits the morality of dignity with its emphasis on either interest-driven compromise or resort to a third party in the case of serious disagreement, as opposed to the zero-sum game of the morality of honour.

Montesquieu praised the sphere of commerce for its ‘spirit of frugality, œconomy, moderation, labour, prudence, tranquility, order, and rule’ (De Montesquieu [1748] 1989, 86), which made possible the control of irrational, destructive, violent passions to the benefit of rationality and peace (Hirschmann 1977). Montesquieu developed this ‘sweet commerce thesis’ in the age of slave trade and colonial conquest. The devastating wars to follow should perhaps have been expected to eradicate the attractiveness of that idea, but it survived and was indeed revived in the thought of neoliberals such as Friedrich Hayek (Whyte 2019, 36-8). In the neoliberal perspective, the market makes for idyllic interaction based on mutually beneficial exchange between peaceful, self-interested equals, as opposed to the conflict-ridden, violent world of politics (Whyte 2019, 35). Politics is bad, trade is good. If everything would just be like the market, the early neoliberals reasoned, humanity would be much better off.

Contrary to popular belief, neoliberalism was a *moral* project from the very beginning. The ‘founding fathers’ of neoliberalism believed that the market needed not only a legal, but also a moral foundation. The competitive market was not merely the most efficient way of distributing resources; it was the most *moral* way to ensure

individual rights (Whyte 2019, 25-7). The morality of dignity occupies a central place in the neoliberal ideology. The founding statement of the Mont Pelerin Society, widely regarded as the manifesto of neoliberalism, starts in this way: ‘The central values of civilization are in danger. Over large stretches of the Earth’s surface the essential conditions of *human dignity and freedom* have already disappeared. In others they are under constant menace from the development of current tendencies of policy’ (The Mont Pelerin Society 1947, my emphasis).

This purported crisis threatening human dignity was, according to the neoliberals, caused by the post-World-War II rise of Keynesian economics and welfare programs. When the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was being drafted in the aftermath of the war, one of the main bones of contention was whether or to what extent one should include some sort of social dimension among the human rights. Among the UN delegates drafting the Declaration, there was a strong current that wanted to do just that. As indicated in their founding statement, the early neoliberals from the Mont Pelerin Society – who met at the same time – saw exactly this emphasis on social rights as the most serious *threat* to human dignity (Whyte 2019). To them, all talk of ‘freedom from want’, such as in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1941 ‘Four Freedoms’ speech, was tantamount to the demise of human rights (Whyte 2019, 166, 71). From the neoliberal perspective, while the drafters of the UDHR also dedicated themselves to human dignity, their commitment to social and economic rights would ultimately be its ruin’ (Whyte 2019, 181). One of the ‘founding fathers’, Ludwig von Mises, later characterized the attempt to define the minimum need for human existence as despotism, since it reduced their status to that of domestic animals, the material of ‘breeding and feeding’ (von Mises 1966, 242-3), robbing them of their dignity (Hill and Montag 2014, 327). The ultimate result of the debate among the UDHR drafters was that a social dimension *was* included in what is now Article 25. This was a compromise, though, as social and economic rights were detached from the political – the exploitation of labour and the division of labour was not addressed, and the social demands were reduced to ‘minimalist guarantees for the most needy’ (Whyte 2019, 182). While this was still far too much for the neoliberals’ preferences, the depoliticization of social rights was a victory.

Until the 1970s, notions of dignity and human rights were used in anticolonial and postcolonial struggles in the Third World. The pinnacle of this movement came in 1974, when the Group of 77 (of which many newly independent countries) issued a declaration of the principles of a New International Economic Order (NIEO), arguing for self-determination, sovereignty, control over natural resources, and the right of nationalization, and using the vocabulary of human rights. This represented a serious challenge to economic power relations, and, according to Simpson, caused ‘lots of hand-wringing in Washington, London, and other capitals’ (Simpson 2013, 252). US foreign policy had, until the 1970s, seen human rights as essentially a domestic concern, and Henry Kissinger (Secretary of

State 1973-77) was (and is) highly skeptical of the thought that human rights concerns should override the principle of sovereignty.

But the failures of the postcolonial states, epitomized by the brutality of Uganda's Idi Amin, opened new possibilities. In the words of the US Ambassador to the UN, Patrick Moynihan, 'human rights is our secret weapon' (quoted in Sargent 2014, 139). In the US, individualism was on the rise, bringing increasing (formal) recognition of every individual's dignity, regardless of race, sex, sexual orientation or physical abilities while at the same time giving the market forces more latitude (Borstelmann 2012). Prominent human rights theorist Louis Henkin lamented in 1974 that there was a 'crisis in human rights' due to their 'politicization', i.e. that they were used to argue for states' economic self-determination and sovereign equality. Human rights had to be depoliticized and 'neutral' and therefore focus on the rights and freedoms of the individual (Whyte 2019, 438-44). Henkin's version won through: In the course of the 1970s, human rights were rediscovered (Sargent 2014) and hijacked (Slaughter 2018) by the US and the Western world, but *presented* as universal. The 'belief in the complementarity of interests and values, free markets and human rights, was central to neoliberal attempts to develop a universal morality to support the global extension of a competitive market. For the neoliberals, unless individuals are free to pursue their own interests on the market, all talk of human rights is meaningless' (Whyte 2019, 444). This hijacking of dignity forms the moral foundation of the continuing neoliberal reforms imposed by the IMF, the World Bank, the US Treasury, and other Western-dominated structures as so-called Structural Adjustment Programs (Slaughter 2018, 757) that caught even more speed with the end of the Cold War. From the 1990s onwards, policymakers and commentators started treating the ethical and the moral dimension of international relations as a legitimate factor (Chandler 2006, 89). With the fall of Communism and the subsequent proclamation of liberal democracy as the 'end of history' (Fukuyama [1992] 2006), the purported universality of (neoliberal) dignity was further strengthened. Now, 'it really became possible to maintain that linking human rights to the global promotion of competitive markets represented the "depoliticisation" of human rights' (Whyte 2019, 443). Dignity promotion is thus part and parcel of the global neoliberal depoliticization and the construction of an allegedly universal moral good.

Against this background, it is of little surprise that even the NATO enlargement has become a profoundly moral project. NATO has increasingly come to regard and present itself as a community of values (Schimmelfennig 1998, 2003; Williams and Neumann 2000; Risse-Kappen 1996). The end of the Cold War 'not only does not terminate the Western community of values, it extends that community of values, it extends that community into Eastern Europe and, potentially, into even the successor states of the Soviet Union, creating a 'pacific federation' from Vladivostok [sic] to Berlin, San Francisco, and Tokyo' (Risse-Kappen 1996, 396). In the midst of the bombing campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999, NATO General Secretary Javier Solana held a speech entitled 'NATO as a community of values', where he stated:

The dignity of man is inviolable – and this principle is not confined to Germans alone. It applies to all people – including those in Kosovo – people who were deprived of their dignity, their homes, their country, even their identity. To restore their dignity, to enable them to return to their homes and live in peace – this is the primary goal of our actions [...] For behind the plight of the Kosovars there is even more at stake: the future of the project of Europe. The conflict between Belgrade and the rest of the international community is a conflict between two visions of Europe. One vision – Milosevic’s vision – is a Europe of ethnically pure states, a Europe of nationalism, authoritarianism and xenophobia (Solana 1999).

Here we see how a dichotomy between the moral and the immoral is constructed and upheld. Although this quote is perhaps an extreme example, it indicates clearly that NATO is not regarded ‘merely’ as a military alliance or even a community of values. Rather, it is the promoter and guardian of dignity, of the universally and unassailably good. Its adversaries are, consequently, immoral.

Post-Soviet Russian Political Moral Culture: On the Failure of Dignity

On the surface, it would perhaps appear that contemporary Russia belongs to the culture of dignity. Rooted in the values of the late-Soviet democratic movement and inspired by liberal democracies (Sakwa 2010), the Russian Constitution has enshrined dignity in Article 21: ‘Human dignity shall be protected by the State. Nothing may serve as a basis for its derogation’ (*The Constitution of the Russian Federation*). It is a fundamental right, mentioned as second after the right to life, before the right to freedom and personal immunity. Leon Aron, the director of Russian Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, an influential neoliberal think-tank, has described the fall of Communism as ‘a [m]oral and intellectual revolution [...] that] attempted to recover people’s dignity by constructing democratic citizenship rooted in economic and political liberty and personal responsibility’ (Aron 2012). However, things are a lot more complicated. In the late Communist period, Soviet citizens enjoyed basic economic security and relative equality, job security, access to welfare services, and, above all, predictability. In the early 1990s, the economy was subjected to a radical reform programme led by the fervent neoliberal converts Egor Gaidar and Anatolii Chubais, advised by Jeffrey Sachs’ infamous Harvard team and self-proclaimedly inspired by Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek. Initially, neoliberalism in Russia was even ‘purer’ than that of Reagan’s USA or Thatcher’s Britain (Oversloot 2006, 68).

But this brought the exact opposite of the vision of ‘sweet commerce’, namely the by now familiar reality of neoliberal ‘dignity’: Ordinary people gained unprecedented individual freedom in the neoliberal sense, but lost virtually all economic security. Crime levels soared. Market reforms, chaotic privatization, continuing

economic crisis, and general upheaval throughout the 1990s forced people into fighting for survival on a daily basis. The legal order collapsed, and cities were mired in inter-gang shoot-outs, with ‘violent entrepreneurs’ (Volkov 2002) fighting over the redistribution of assets. Needless to say, these conditions are conducive to the rise of honour culture. Physical toughness, loyalty, and a reputation for violence were always key active parts of the army and security services, on the streets, and not to mention in prisons, but in the anarchic 1990s Russia, this culture spread to larger segments of society. As Sergei Medvedev, the political scientist, observes,

[f]or a [Russian] man it is important to be the conqueror, the subjugator, to take what is yours by force – this is how you raise your self-esteem and earn the respect of others. The ability to demonstrate your strength is part of the behaviour of “the normal bloke” (muzhik): in your speech (the ability to use threats and insults); in all-male company [...]. It becomes vitally important to bend the person to your will, to humiliate [...] the object of your power relations in order to establish the social order (Medvedev 2019, 335).

Most importantly, this moral culture spread to political life. Vladimir Putin himself got firsthand experience with the harsh realities of the streets and backyards, growing up in a rough neighbourhood of Leningrad (Putin et al. 2000). Cutting his political teeth as an adviser and then deputy to the mayor of the renamed St Petersburg in the near-anarchic 1990s, one of his main responsibilities was to ‘liaise’ with the city’s most powerful organized crime group, the Tambovskaja, and its leader, Vladimir Kumarin (Barsukov), a.k.a. ‘the night governor’ (Dawisha 2015, 104-62). In one of the most influential journalistic accounts (in the West) of Putin’s life (Gessen 2012), Putin is portrayed as a thug, plain and simple. When he was being groomed as President Eltsin’s successor, his team knew how to exploit the honour culture of the Russian streets (*poniatiiia*, English: ‘understandings’). In their public relations strategies, *poniatiiia* language and gestures were actively though selectively used (Hill and Gaddy 2013; Gorham 2014; Wood 2016). From the very beginning, Putin himself posed as the hyper-masculine tough guy (Sperling 2014), infamously swearing to ‘[...] whack [the Chechen terrorists] in the outhouse’ (Putin [1999] 2009). This powerful signal to the electorate, to the Chechen separatists, as well as to his political rivals, encapsulates almost perfectly the building of a hyper-masculine reputation for violent resolve that is essential to honour culture. The honour culture of the streets became the language of power (Stephenson 2015). Also, rather than indiscriminately cracking down on the criminal networks, the state and law enforcement came to a tacit understanding with them, making it clear that the state was the ‘biggest gang in town’ (Galeotti 2018, loc. 4566). Post-Soviet Russian politics has reverted to a patronal order of informal, hierarchical loyalty networks (Hale 2015). Economic and political power have merged in a Limited Access Order (North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009), where political elites have divided the control of the economy between them.

Dignity, Colour Revolutions, and the Revenge of Honour

In addition to the above-mentioned domestic factors in Russia, we can mention the de facto anarchic character of international relations, which, as previously argued, is in itself conducive to honourable behaviour. We can also add the traditional Russian sense of geopolitical insecurity, traceable to its early state formations (Keenan 1986) as well as the historical memory of repeated foreign invasions, most prominently and recently by Nazi Germany. But the most important factor is arguably the Western dignity promotion after the fall of the Soviet Union, materializing most visibly as support of ‘colour revolutions’ against authoritarian regimes, most of which had been favourable to Russia. Following the neoliberal logic, the Western mainstream saw this as unobjectionable, regarding it as a logical continuation of the post-Cold War status quo and seeing no contradiction between the common good and Western interests. Russia, by contrast, in fighting against these changes, saw itself as defending the status quo against Western encroachment (D’Anieri 2019, 11-2), and its own reputation against the repeated offense of not being listened to.

In Georgia’s ‘Rose Revolution’ in 2003, dignity figured as an important slogan (Hash-Gonzalez 2012, 89-93). As leader of the opposition, Mikheil Saakashvili cleverly played on many people’s sense of being deprived of their dignity (Hash-Gonzalez 2012, 92). As president, he eagerly employed the language of dignity in international forums. For instance, in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in 2005, he stated:

For us, the greatest thing about the Rose Revolution was that it allowed us to reclaim our dignity – the dignity that is the foundation of our commitment to democracy. Sometimes it takes a revolution to remind us of that. I believe that that is what has enabled us to achieve so much over the last year and to surprise the sceptics (Saakashvili 2005).

Similarly, Nino Burjanadze, another opposition leader, stated in an interview: ‘We managed to show ourselves and the rest of the world that when it comes to personal dignity, we would react. We can tolerate a lot of things, poverty and so forth, but when it comes to our dignity, we cannot tolerate it’ (Karumidze and Wertsch 2005, 50). The post-revolution Prime Minister, Zurab Zhvania, reflected: ‘People are still in poverty and have the same economic problems and so on, but they now feel much, much stronger than before. It was like regaining dignity’ (Hash-Gonzalez 2012, 42).

In the run-up to the fraudulent presidential elections sparking Ukraine’s Orange Revolution in 2004-2005, the opposition’s Western-oriented candidate Viktor Yushchenko constantly talked about dignity and moral values (Wilson 2005a, 96). Soon after his election, Yushchenko spoke in the NATO-Ukraine Council, pledging to ‘protect the values of the Euro-Atlantic community’, stating that his speech was ‘the result of victory [...]’. Millions of Ukrainians went out in orange on In-

dependence Square in Kiev, on the streets and squares all around Ukraine, to protect the dignity and right to choose the future themselves' (Yushchenko 2005). In the Euromaidan uprising in 2013-2014 that toppled the corrupt authoritarian, Russia-leaning president Viktor Yanukovich in 2014, resulting in a firmly Western-oriented government, the rallying cry for dignity was prominent (Sviatnenko and Vinogradov 2014; Wynnyckyj 2019). The uprising was soon officially renamed 'The Revolution of Dignity', and President Petro Poroshenko instituted November 21st (the day the demonstrations started) as the Day of Dignity and Freedom, a public holiday (Interfax-Ukraine November 13, 2014). It is also emblematic that Western Ukrainian liberal nationalist intellectual Orest Drul' wrote a cursory etymological/philosophical study of the word *dignity* (*hidnist'*) where he characterized the uprising as stemming from the Ukrainian people's longing for Europe and for human dignity. Drul' contrasted the Ukrainian sense of *hidnist'*, understood as the inherent, equal, and infinite worth of every human being, with the Russian *dostoinstvo*, which, he argued, can even be used in the sense of 'the value of a banknote', i.e. something expendable and scalable (Drul' 2014).

These popular rebellions' message of dignity was supported by Western leaders. For instance, in the 2006 US National Security Strategy, the colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine are held up as success stories in the American quest to 'champion[...] human dignity'. The document even expresses hope for more such uprisings to take place 'across the Eurasian landmass' (NSS 2006, 2). Soon after the Orange Revolution, the US and Ukrainian presidents held a joint statement where they not only celebrated the victory of 'freedom and dignity in the face of tyranny, isolation and oppression', but also committed to 'work together to back reform, democracy, tolerance and respect for all communities, and peaceful resolution of conflicts in Georgia and Moldova, and to support the advance of freedom in countries such as Belarus and Cuba' (Yushchenko and Bush 2005). And at the height of the Euromaidan uprising, US Secretary of State John Kerry expressed the US' 'disgust with the decision of Ukrainian authorities to meet the peaceful protest in Kyiv's Maidan Square with riot police, bulldozers, and batons, rather than with respect for democratic rights and human dignity'.³ On the next day, his deputy Victoria Nuland famously visited the square, handing out cookies to the protesters, and declaring: 'I hope the people of Ukraine know that the U.S. stands with you in your search for justice, for human dignity and security for economic health, and the European future that you have chosen and deserve' (quoted by Grytsenko 2013).

As mentioned above, sensitivity to insult is an important trait of the honourable, especially among those feeling particularly insecure. Sergei Medvedev (Medvedev 2019, 268) has noted the extreme Russian touchiness in international relations, where even a lack of attention is taken as an insult. This sensitivity is a recurring theme in post-Soviet Russian foreign policy. En route to visit the US in March

³ 'Police Retreat from Kyiv City Hall.' 2013. RFE/RL, December 11. <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-protests-kyiv-talks/25195471.html>

1999, foreign minister Evgenii Primakov famously made a U-turn over the Atlantic when he was informed that NATO had decided to bomb Yugoslavia. Putin's arguably most iconic speeches – his 2007 'Munich speech' and his speech at the formal inclusion of Crimea and Sevastopol' in 2014 – are permeated by the sense of Russia being offended, denigrated, and feeling insecure. In 2007, he complained that 'Russia – we – are constantly being taught about democracy' (Putin 2007). Laying bare the Russian sense of insecurity, he declared that unipolarity 'is extremely dangerous. It results in the fact that no one feels safe. I want to emphasise this – no one feels safe! Because no one can feel that international law is like a stone wall that will protect them' (Putin 2007). In 2014, he explicitly mentioned the lack of attention to the Russian view, saying that the West has 'lied to us many times, made decisions behind our backs, placed us before an accomplished fact. This happened with NATO's expansion to the East, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure at our borders' (Putin 2014a). In the same speech, he described the Russian reaction to Crimea being 'handed over like a sack of potatoes' at Ukrainian independence: '[Russia] bowed down her head and resigned, swallowing the offence' (Putin 2014b).⁴

In Georgia in August 2008 and in Ukraine from 2014, Russia resorted to military aggression. In Georgia, regular Russian forces invaded the republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and briefly intruded into Tbilisi-controlled territory. In Ukraine, Russian special forces without insignia conducted an operation that ended with the formal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol'. In eastern Ukraine, the picture is more complex and the degree of Moscow's direct involvement has varied over time, but Russia's crucial role is hard to deny. In addition to the mentioned cases of more or less conventional military action, Russia is increasingly using 'asymmetric tools' against the West itself, such as hacker attacks and information warfare, most prominently against the 2016 American Presidential Elections, and other subversive operations, such as jamming of GPS signals during a major NATO exercise, and even, allegedly, offering bounties to the Taliban for killing US troops in Afghanistan.⁵ There are certainly many factors that led to this development, and, depending in particular on the authors' empirical focus and theoretical point of view, different explanations have been offered. Especially in the case of Ukraine, scholars have tended to focus on assigning blame, reaching often diametrically opposed conclusions. As D'Anieri (D'Anieri 2019, 5) points out, even excellent scholars have sometimes resorted to a simplistic blame game, with John Mearsheimer claiming that 'the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault' and Andrew Wilson stating that 'the Russians went ape'. Researchers have focused on either internal factors in Russia or in Ukraine, the international dynamics, including the security dilemma (where one state's drive for security is perceived as

⁴ Russian: 'Opustila golovu i smirilas', proglotila etu obidu'. My translation, as the official one does not capture the extent of denigration.

⁵ 'Top US spies brief Congress on Russia-Taliban intelligence.' *Al Jazeera*, July 2. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/top-spies-congress-russia-taliban-intelligence-200702193728749.html>

threatening by others) (for a good overview, see D’Anieri 2019, 4-7, especially 4-5n3).

My aim with this part of the article has not been to provide another alternative to these accounts. In fact, my analytical perspective is *complementary* to several of them. For instance, the Russian decision to annex Crimea can be seen as defensive (responding to the threat of Ukrainian NATO membership), offensive (maximizing Russian power) or mainly motivated by domestic power concerns (to strengthen the regime’s standing and reputation). Not only are all of these compatible with the logics of honour, but the honour factor can also serve as a conceptual link between them, connecting the domestic and foreign. From a perspective of neoclassical realism, D’Anieri emphasizes how ‘democratization became merged with geopolitics, repeatedly disrupting the status quo and putting a core value of the West at odds with Russia’s sense of its security’ (D’Anieri 2019, 8). As shown throughout this article, this is slightly imprecise: The West has put what it perceives to be the *universal value* of (neoliberal) dignity at odds with Russia’s sense of its security. Viewed through the lens of the morality of honour, Russia’s reputation was repeatedly offended, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, by the waves of NATO expansion, by the colour revolutions, most prominently those in Georgia and Ukraine, and by the sustained Western criticism of Russia’s human rights record. The increasing Western sense of representing and promoting the universally good adds to its ferocious missionary zeal in spreading these values and reinforces Russian fears and Russian counter-measures.

Conclusions

The strategic use of dignity promotion as a tool to improve security for the West and for the post-Soviet countries has failed to reach the aims. In the same way that democracy promotion has often become counter-productive to democracy, dignity promotion has become counter-productive to dignity. The Western obsolescence of the concept of honour and the associated one-eyed focus on the allegedly universal value of dignity have made Western promoters of neoliberal dignity ignorant of the basic fact, long recognized by anthropologists and sociologists studying individual societies, that basic security is a necessary precondition for the emergence of the morality of dignity, not the other way round. Since dignity is dependent on pre-existing security, including economic security, and also on a certain amount of equality, the promotion of neoliberal dignity has led to a resurgence of the honour culture it was supposed to replace and the authoritarianism and brutalization of public discourse and international relations it was supposed to prevent. In Russia, which was initially subjected to an extreme version of neoliberalism, honour culture spread from the streets to politics, shaping post-Soviet political culture and thus influencing Russian foreign policy. While the colour revolutions were manifestations of legitimate popular demands for dignity (including social rights), Russia perceived Western support of them as insults and provocations, acts of dominance, and hence damaging to Russian reputation; ultimately threats against Russian security. Russia’s reactions, while hardly chivalric and often in vio-

lation of international law, are perfectly logical in the perspective of the culture of honour reminiscent not of 18th and 19th century aristocracy, but of modern street gangs.

Most people want a version of dignity. Even the participants of Russian pro-Putin rallies have emphasized this (albeit with an emphasis on social rights, as opposed to the liberal opposition's emphasis on individual rights of expression, see Van'ke 2015). The aim of this article has not been to discredit courageous indigenous defenders of human rights or political activists standing up against authoritarians and dictators in the name of dignity. Nor do I intend to justify the honour-based Russian response. But unless we understand the dynamics of dignity promotion and honourable revenge, we cannot understand Russia's and other countries' apparently irrational and immoral behaviour in opposition to the promotion of dignity, the seemingly universal good. We may not like Russia's authoritarian and aggressive regime. But present-day Putinism is not the alternative to the neoliberal vision of 'sweet commerce'; it is in large part the consequence of the harsh *reality* of neoliberalism.

However well-intentioned, the selfless local activists and also international organizations such as Amnesty International, and whatever their successes in individual cases (the keyword here is, sadly, *individual*), the dignity promoted by the West today is impossible to separate from the rise of neoliberalism. However much we may dislike the violence of honour cultures, and however much we may prefer the morality of dignity, we cannot escape the fact that in many of the world's societies, and also in international relations, honour, often called by other names or closely related concepts, such as 'reputation' and 'deterrence', remains a guiding moral principle. Hence, it should be an analytic category for researchers, too. The insights anthropologists and sociologists have provided to the study of moral cultures, and the implications thereof, are too important for scholars of international relations to ignore. This article is a humble attempt to add to the valuable but still incomplete and little-known body of research dealing with honour, dignity, and security in international relations.

Author Bio

Jardar Østbo (PhD) is Associate Professor of Russian Studies at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies (IFS) at the Norwegian Defence University College in Oslo. He is leading the international research project RUSECOPOL (Russia's Politicized Economy, Elite Dynamics, and the Domestic-Foreign Policy Nexus), which is financed by the Research Council of Norway and the IFS.

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