

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Exeter		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 19 Politics and International Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Shaping Policy Debates and Improving Western Policy Responses to a Resurgent Russia		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2014-2019		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
David Lewis	Associate Professor in International Relations	2013-present
Catherine Owen	British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow	2017-2021
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2016-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p>A resurgent Russia has been identified by the UK and other Western governments as a major strategic challenge. Yet, informed analysis of Russian foreign policy has often been skewed by political positioning and polemical interventions. Lewis and Owens' research has challenged superficial interpretations of Russian foreign policy behaviour and encouraged new thinking among stakeholders and policymakers. This research has impacted UK/NATO defence and deterrence policy towards Russia by reaching high-level decision-makers in NATO, the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD), the US Department of Defense, and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). Lewis' two-year secondment to the FCDO has enabled him to make direct contributions to the policy-making process. In addition, Lewis and Owen have maintained dialogue with and influenced debate among foreign policy experts in Russia.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>Russian foreign policy is a high priority for the UK and NATO Allies, but remains poorly understood. The research of Lewis and Owen aimed to challenge stereotyped views and superficial analysis and provide a better understanding of the worldviews of Russian policy-makers. In particular, this research challenged a dominant Western analysis of Russian elites as simply pragmatic opportunists and kleptocrats, instead highlighting the important role of ideas and ideologies in foreign policy decision-making. By providing a deeper understanding of how Russian decision-makers viewed the world, this research identified different drivers of Russian foreign policy behaviour, requiring different policy responses.</p> <p>Lewis and Owen began this research with an ESRC-funded project on <i>Rising Powers and Conflict Management in Central Asia</i> (2012-2016), which explored how Russia and China challenged Western discourses and practices of conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Central Asia. Their research concluded that increased interaction between Russia, China and the West during the post-Cold War period did not result in a shared commitment to liberal norms of conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Instead, Russia successfully promoted its own set of counter-norms and illiberal practices (3.1). This was particularly evident in the fields of security and conflict, where Russia challenged dominant 'liberal' theories of conflict resolution and peacebuilding in a range of conflicts from Chechnya to Syria (3.2; 3.3).</p> <p>This research on peacebuilding demonstrated that Russian foreign policy was not simply driven by pragmatic <i>realpolitik</i> or opportunism, but by important ideational and normative</p>		

elements. Russian political thought was strongly influenced by twentieth-century anti-liberal philosophies that shaped the way Russian elites viewed the international order (3.4). Russian policy was an ideological challenge to liberalism, which President Putin famously declared to be 'obsolete'. The challenge from Russia to international norms was therefore more profound than often understood (3.1). These findings help to shape more effective responses to Russian policies that take into account this ideational challenge.

Alongside the importance of ideas, Lewis and Owen researched the geographic and spatial aspects of foreign policy. Russia's search for a sphere of influence has been at the root of wars in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) and is often cited as the fundamental difference between NATO and Russia in European security. But what Russian foreign policy thinkers understand by a Russian 'sphere of influence' is not well understood. Their research examined a range of spatial ideas, from concepts such as 'the Russian World' to geopolitical visions of a 'Greater Eurasia' (3.5). Lewis and Owen also researched Russia's 'Pivot to the East', and Russia's relations with China, including its interaction with China's Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia.

There were two important findings. First, these grand spatial visions proposed alternatives to Western ideas of international order, but were often subverted and reshaped not only by interaction with other powers – particularly China – but also by local practices (3.5; 3.6). Second, Russia's geopolitical imaginaries were not fixed, but always contested and evolving. These findings challenged historically determinist portrayals of Russia as an instinctively expansionist power that aimed to recreate its empire by military force. Instead, Russia's strategic goals evolved over time in response to local conditions and external factors. Russia also developed a much more complex range of non-military policy instruments – including ideology - to assert influence in Eurasia.

This research provided evidence for more effective Western policy responses to Russian foreign policy towards Eastern Europe and Eurasia. The research suggested that more effective policies should look beyond simply deterring military threats, and instead focus on developing a range of political, economic and diplomatic policy options to enhance state resilience in Eurasia and to respond effectively to changes in Russian thinking about its neighbourhood.

The research was conducted in 2014-2020 under the auspices of three major grant programmes:

1. An ESRC-funded project on *Rising Powers and Conflict Management in Central Asia* (2012-2016) (Heathershaw, Lewis and Owen);
2. *Understanding Russian Strategic Behaviour* (2018-2020). Research project in collaboration with RAND Corporation (US) and the George Marshall Centre (Germany), funded by the Russia Strategic Initiative (RSI), US Department of Defence (2018-2020) (Lewis);
3. British Academy postdoctoral award (2017-2021) (*Civic Participation from Discourse to Action in Non-Democracies: Russia and China in Comparative Perspective*) (Owen). Owen has spent time at the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA) in St Petersburg, Shaanxi Normal University in Xi'an and Fudan University in Shanghai.

### 3. References to the research

**3.1** Bettiza, Gregorio and **David G. Lewis**, 'Authoritarian Powers and Norm Contestation in the Liberal International Order: Theorizing the Power Politics of Ideas and Identity', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 5(4) (2020): 559–577, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz075>

**3.2** Lewis, David, John Heathershaw, and Nick Megoran, 'Illiberal peace? Authoritarian

modes of conflict management', *Cooperation and Conflict* 53(4) (2018): 486–506.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0010836718765902>

**3.3 Owen, Catherine**, Shairbek Juraev, **David Lewis** and John Heathershaw (eds) *Interrogating Illiberal Peace in Eurasia* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017). Available on request.

**3.4 Lewis, David G.**, *Russia's New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).  
 DOI:10.3366/edinburgh/9781474454766.001.0001

**3.3 Lewis, David G.**, 'Geopolitical imaginaries in Russian foreign policy: the evolution of "Greater Eurasia"', *Europe-Asia Studies* 70(10) (2018): 1612-1637.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1515348>

**3.4 J. Heathershaw, C. Owen, A. Cooley**, 'Centred discourse, decentred practice: the relational production of Russian and Chinese 'rising'power in Central Asia', *Third World Quarterly* 40 (8) (2019), 1440-1458. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2019.1627867>

#### 4. Details of the impact

The research agenda of Lewis and Owen forms the basis for three major strands of impact work on different aspects of Russian foreign policy, providing world-leading expertise on Russian foreign policy to high-level decision-makers in governments, international organisations and the military.

##### **1. Informing and Shaping UK Foreign and Defence Policy towards Russia through Co-Production**

Lewis is a recipient of an ESRC/AHRC Knowledge Exchange Fellowship (March 2019-February 2021), spending two years working on Russian foreign policy in the Eastern Research Group at the **Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**. He directly contributes to foreign policy thinking on Russia in UK government through research, briefings, involvement in internal debates and engagement in policy-making processes. Much of this work is confidential, but it provides Lewis with the opportunity to use his existing research directly in policy processes inside government. This includes work across Whitehall in different government departments, and time spent working with the UK embassy in Moscow (October 2019). Feedback from FCDO identified Lewis as 'a key source of advice for a range of cross-Whitehall customers' [5.1].

Lewis twice represented the FCDO in cross-Whitehall delegations participating in talks in Washington, and on visits to Tokyo and Taipei. Lewis spent two weeks in the British Embassy, Moscow in late 2019 providing Moscow Chancery team with extended access to his expertise and advice. The role also involved confidential briefing and policy advice to Allied governments and international organisations. An appraisal from the Head of the Eastern Research Group – FCDO, explained that '*His expertise has had a real impact on policy thinking within the FCO on Russia-related issues, and exemplifies the added-value that bringing in in-depth expertise from academia can offer to Whitehall*' [5.1].

##### **2. Impacting UK/NATO Defence and Deterrence Policy towards Russia**

Lewis played a leading role in policy-shaping projects with UK, US and NATO defence establishments, based on his wider research on Russian foreign and security policy.

(i) **Influencing US military thinking on Russia:** Lewis was Co-PI on *Understanding Russian Strategic Behaviour*, a three-year, \$1.2 million project in collaboration with RAND Corporation (US) and the George Marshall Centre (Germany), funded by the Russia

Strategic Initiative (RSI) of the US Department of Defence (2018-2020). The project provided policy advice and insights to US military officials in **European Command (EUCOM)** on Russian foreign and defence policy, through direct oral briefings, workshops and seminars, and a series of published policy briefings [5.2]. In feedback, a Colonel at the United States European Command wrote that '*Dr David Lewis has been co-PI on the project and has played a central role in producing policy-relevant analysis and ensuring that it has impact on practitioners and policy-makers.*' He also noted that '*Dr Lewis was invited to take on this role owing to his excellent research record on Russian security and foreign policy - the project drew on his expertise on Russian strategic culture, including the ideological and geographical drivers of Russian defense and security policy*' [5.3].

(ii) **Impacting UK defence strategy on Russia.** Lewis developed a new model for understanding Russian foreign policy for the UK MOD in an internal report entitled *The Three Russias: Modelling Russian Foreign Policy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* [5.4], developed in the Global Strategy Partnership (University of Exeter; RAND Corporation; Institute of International and Strategic Studies (London)). The policy model built on Lewis's existing research to develop a multi-dimensional understanding of Russian foreign policy requiring a complex suite of policy responses. Lewis used the model to challenge current UK deterrence policies during a one-day workshop (with a case-study on how to respond to Russian policy towards Ukraine) at the MOD's Development Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC), Shrivenham, in January 2019, with key policy-makers on Russia from MOD. Lewis and Owen followed up with a briefing provided to Main Building MOD on 1 April 2019, attended by senior MOD officials, 20 policy/military desk officers, and cross-Whitehall representatives. In feedback, MOD officials wrote that '*The Three Russias paper was a genuinely seminal piece of work for us*' [5.5] and provided a classified briefing in September 2020 to Lewis on how they had used the research to impact strategic thinking and develop their own internal models.

(iii) **Shaping NATO Policy towards Afghanistan:** Lewis is a member of an 8-person expert panel convened by the **NATO Communications and Information Agency (NCIA)**, which provides advice to NATO officials. Lewis has provided written briefings and attended biannual multi-day meetings at NATO Headquarters (SHAPE) in Mons, Belgium, to brief directly a group of senior commanders, led by Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) Gen. Scaparotti (2016-2019), and his successor as SACEUR (Gen. Wolters), and senior officers at Operation Resolution Support (Kabul), on policy towards Afghanistan.

As a result of briefings and reports by Lewis, NATO officials are better informed on Russian policy towards Afghanistan, on Russia's role in regional diplomacy around Afghanistan, the possible opportunities for engagement with Moscow on Afghanistan, and the broader need for NATO to develop a regional policy to facilitate the peace process. Since 2018, there has been a significant increase in engagement by Western governments with Russia on resolving the Afghan crisis. In feedback the Deputy Chief of Staff, NATO Strategic Development and Preparation, wrote that: '*Dr David Lewis has been pivotal in the RS-SAC work since 2016, servicing as the sole expert on Russia/Eurasia's direct impact on Afghanistan ... Lewis was selected for his position due to international profile of his research, his publications and his policy support to other organisations... The work of the RS-SAC project has been an important strand of independent analysis informing NATO's understanding and decision-taking about its missions in Afghanistan at the very highest levels of NATO military command*' [5.6].

### **3. Influencing Debate and Maintaining Dialogue with Russia**

Lewis and Owen's academic dialogue and collaborative research with expert and academic communities in Russia – and with their counterparts in China and Central Asia - informs and shapes policy debates internationally. They organised a series of international workshops in Moscow (2015) and Shanghai (2016) and invited senior academics from Russia and China to seminars with UK policy-makers and experts at Chatham House in July 2017 ('*Security*

*and Stability on the New Silk Road*') and in December 2019 (*Ever Closer Alliance? New Developments in Russia-China Relations*). These events informed wider impact activities: for example, Owen briefed German foreign ministry officials in September 2020 on Chinese policy in Central Asia and accessed a wider audience through the Foreign Policy Centre. Lewis published two major policy reports with the International Crisis Group on Russia and China [5.7].

The research of Lewis and Owen has also reached Russian government officials directly. In May 2018, Lewis and Owen held a Joint Workshop with the Institute of Public Administration (the premier civil service training college for Russian government officials) in St Petersburg on *Eurasian Integration and Regional Development*. Russian officials appreciated this as a rare opportunity to share research and policy debates with UK experts [5.8].

## 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

**5.1** Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office UK - *Letter detailing outcomes of Performance Appraisal, major work initiatives and feedback (June 2020)*

**5.2** US European Command/Marshall Center - Policy Briefs:

1. Russia's 'Strategic Deterrence' in Ukraine, April 2019
2. Strategic Culture and Geography: Russia's Southern Seas after Crimea, July 2019
3. Strategic Culture and Russia's "Pivot to the East": Russia, China and "Greater Eurasia, July 2019
4. Return to Kabul? Russian Policy in Afghanistan, June 2020
5. Russia as Peacebuilder? Russia's Coercive Mediation Strategy, June 2020

**5.3** US European Command - Testimonial letter from the United States European Command (EUCOM)

**5.4** DCDC 5.4 Internal Report: *The Three Russias: Modelling Russian Foreign Policy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. RAND Corporation/Development Concepts and Doctrine Centre

**5.5** MOD - Testimonial email from an MOD Official

**5.6** NATO - Testimonial letter from Deputy Chief of Staff Strategic Development and Preparation

**5.7** International Crisis Group policy reports:

1. *Central Asia's Silk Road Rivalries*. Europe and Central Asia Report 245, 27 July 2017;
2. *The Eurasian Economic Union: Power, Politics and Trade*. Europe and Central Asia Report No. 240, 20 July 2016

**5.8** RANEP: Testimonial email from a Professor at the Faculty of International Relations and Political Studies, RANEP (St Petersburg)