Eating Identity: Theorizing the Everyday Foreign Policy Assemblage

ELIZAVETA GAUFMAN
University of Groningen—Research Centre for the Study of Democratic Cultures and Politics, Netherlands

While everyday high-level practices have become an important area of study in foreign policy research, the every day of every (wo)man has been overlooked both in theoretical and empirical conceptualizations. Building on feminist, sociological, and ethnographic research, this article argues that everyday foreign policy is an assemblage—a combination of physical and cultural practices that inhabit digital and bodily spaces. Following the feminist call to liberate international relations from the straitjacket of high politics, this article aims to contextualize foreign policy within daily practices of regular citizens, who enact foreign policy at home, at the supermarket, and online. In effect, everyday foreign policy is not just about discussing identity, it is also about embodying and literally eating it. This article focuses on the grassroots of foreign policy sanctions in Russia in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea.

Introduction

In the Soviet Union, with its numerous restrictions on freedom of expression, a particular phenomenon arose—kitchen talk (Ries 1997; Johnston 2006; Yurchak 2013), when ordinary Soviet citizens expressed their disagreement with the current political situation in the privacy of their own apartments. It was a manifestation of everyday international relations (IR) for Soviet citizens who could vent about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the shadow of spring onions growing in mayonnaise jars, on the windowsill, while drinking Indian “Elephant” tea. The Russian language internet (Runet) and Russian social media, in particular, have, for a long time, been regarded as an extension of this forum, a kind of “kitchen talk 2.0” (Lyytikäinen 2013) offering a much larger virtual discussion space for an extremely politicized community of Russian speakers. However, as was the case in Soviet kitchens, the digital fora present the possibility of “the major listening in,”1 and thus represent both a private and a public space (Morris 2005). Unsurprisingly, foreign policy is still an important part of those digital kitchen conversations (Koltsova and Bodrunova 2019) especially given high-profile events such as the annexation of Crimea.

Does it count as foreign policy as well? Classic IR scholarship would disagree and offer studies of foreign ministers and state leaders. Feminist scholarship, on the other hand, has always sought to liberate IR from the straitjacket of high politics, showing how the personal and the everyday shape global politics (Enloe 2014; Trojanowska 2015). Following this premise, it is important not to lose sight of both the personal and the everyday in the theoretical application as well. As Franklin (Franklin 2001) observed, “electronically mediated (re)articulations of the ‘public–private’ problematic [are] a (re)articulation of how the ‘personal is political’.” Given that today’s “everyday” is the digital (Weber 2013), this study aims to contextualize IR within daily practices of regular citizens, who repost memes, buy T-shirts adorned by Putin’s face, or secretly crave French cheese (Goode 2016). Thus, contrary to more conventional everyday political conceptualizations (Selmovic 2019), the everyday is theorized here as an assemblage of micropractices enmeshed between physical and digital spaces, inside and outside the body.

Kitchen is not an accidental example or space for everyday foreign policy action. Discourse and practices around food buying, preparing, and eating not only constitute a public–private intersection that occur on a daily basis, but also represent a substantial assemblage of matter, body, and discourse.

The article will first reflect on the theoretical intersections of IR and the literature on nationalism pertaining to grassroots agency in the foreign policy domain. Then it will propose a conceptualization for the discursive and practice-based aspects of everyday foreign policy. Finally, a case study of Russian sanctions against Western powers will be offered as an empirical illustration for this theoretical approach.

Conceptualizing Everyday Foreign Policy

Do ordinary people engage in foreign policy? Much of the literature in IR that discusses foreign policy and performance is related to diplomatic practices (Neumann 2002; Ringmar 2012; Urrestarazu 2015) and rituals (Hauerwas 2015), ranging from drinking a specific bitter herb as a sign of reconciliation (Wasonga 2009) to inviting facially disfigured war veterans to a peace treaty signing (Audsine-Rouzeau 1919). In any event, this body of literature usually focuses on the high politics of special events and individual acts that often transpire without the participation of the general populace. The population, though, has its own ways to shape and subvert state foreign policy decisions and unlike a signing of a peace treaty, regular citizens deal with foreign policy-related issues on a daily basis. This way, everyday foreign policy on the grassroots level becomes a popular mobilization phenomenon around the foreign policy discursive and practice context.

One of the main aims of this project is to create a dialogue between the literature on nationalism and IR with regard to performances of nationhood and grassroots responses to governmental foreign policy. As Allen Carlson has noted, with any exception, IR has not really engaged with the issue of nationalism or with the field of nationalism studies (Carlson 2019). I should note here that IR as a discipline has, in fact, dealt extensively with aspects of everyday foreign policy and practice, especially “everyday militarism.” There is also interest in ontological security studies on the everyday (Innes 2017; Vaughan-Williams and Pisani 2020); for instance, Solomon and Steele’s focus on the body, affect, and state leaders. Feminist scholarship, on the other hand, would disagree and offer studies of foreign ministers and state leaders. Feminist scholarship, on the other hand, has always sought to liberate IR from the straitjacket of high politics, showing how the personal and the everyday shape global politics (Enloe 2014; Trojanowska 2015). Following this premise, it is important not to lose sight of both the personal and the everyday in the theoretical application as well. As Franklin (Franklin 2001) observed, “electronically mediated (re)articulations of the ‘public–private’ problematic [are] a (re)articulation of how the ‘personal is political.’” Given that today’s “everyday” is the digital (Weber 2013), this study aims to contextualize IR within daily practices of regular citizens, who repost memes, buy T-shirts adorned by Putin’s face, or secretly crave French cheese (Goode 2016). Thus, contrary to more conventional everyday political conceptualizations (Selmovic 2019), the everyday is theorized here as an assemblage of micropractices enmeshed between physical and digital spaces, inside and outside the body.

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and emotions, including the everyday (Solomon and Steele 2017). An intersection with everyday nationalism literature and foreign policy would provide the space for this kind of study in broader conversations in IR.

“Banal nationalism” and “everyday nationalism” literature have already dealt with the issue of grassroots identity performance to a certain extent. Both are concerned with the ways that nationalism and nationhood are expressed in daily routines. Banal nationalism, most often associated with Michael Billig’s (1995) landmark work, focuses on the ways that the nation is reproduced in the daily lives of citizens. Even though banal nationalism has dealt with daily lives, including the topic of exclusion (Skey and Antonsich 2017), this body of scholarship does not make the connection between banal nationalism and its translation into banal foreign policy.

One step beyond banal nationalism, the everyday nationalism focuses on citizens’ agency (Knott 2015), not just in reproducing patriotic narratives, but also in subverting and challenging them. In the everyday approach to nationalism, people enact their identity through a number of actions ranging from gastro-nationalism (Ichijo 2020) to discursive practices (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). Recent research suggests the inclusion of embodied practices of nationalism into the repertoire of performance and consumption (Goode, Stroup, and Gaufman 2020). Indeed, the everyday approach to nationalism is probably the closest to the so-called practice turn in IR, where “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understandings” (Schatzki 2001). Given that everyday nationalism is in many ways a legitimacy-seeking exercise (McGlynn 2020), it is through informal practices and the (dis)junctures between state-constructed national narratives and quotidian practices (Polase et al. 2020) that it is possible to investigate how and whether state foreign policy is enacted by regular people.

This article, however, conceptualizes everyday policy through discursive and embodied practices that together constitute an everyday foreign policy assemblage. While the concept of assemblage might seem like an unnecessary complication of the theoretical framework, it offers several bridges between literatures and methodologies helpful for theorizing an everyday foreign policy.

Ontologically, assemblage theory is much closer to the social media-oriented rhizomatic nature of the digital everyday (Deleuze and Guattari 1988). Social media posts can travel from platform to platform, make it to national news, and dive back into social media. A meme making fun of a state leader is printed on a T-shirt or quoted in a comedy show and then retold by a Twitter-free grandparent. While there are users who possess greater social capital on social media platforms (so-called blue check marks), even a regular user with a meager following has the potential to go viral at any moment. Last, but not least, methodologically, assemblage theory allows one to map biological and cultural elements without reducing them to their constituent functions.

With bodies as focal points and assemblage theory’s study of microscaled politics and practices (Dittmer 2017), this approach helps create a more comprehensive theoretical framework that goes beyond existing approaches that tend to focus on specific (discursive) practices. Instead, this approach heeds the call to situate the body within the theoretical framework.

Feminist and postcolonial thoughts have always strived to reclaim the corporeal space in epistemology, “locat[ing] the body in the play of practices and in the texts that articulate them” (Epstein 2020). This is what this article envisions: situating the body at the heart of everyday foreign policy, in part through ingestion practices, as discussed above, and in part through (discursive) sexual intercourse. In some ways, it echoes Foucault’s biopolitics wherein he situated the body within governed medical, punitive, and intimate spaces. This article argues, however, that the everyday foreign policy is centered around the notions of hierarchy, with mating habits being critical tools of its enforcement (Foucault and Ewald 2003). It is not society that needs to be defended, it is the (metaphorical) body of the nation that needs to be on top. In other words, it is not about love or sex, rather, it is about establishing control and domination over other bodies and states that those bodies represent through a sexual act.

Feminist scholars of nationalism have discussed extensively the connections between gender, intercourse, and national identity (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989; McClintock 1995; Collins 1998; Nagel 1998; Mayer 2012), where women are often construed as biological producers of new members of national collectives as well as the reproducers of the boundaries of national groups through restrictions on sexual or marital relations.

The bodies associated with genders play an important role as metaphors for hierarchy. Moreover, feminizing language is extremely common as an insult on both grassroots and interstate levels (Tickner 1999; Berents 2020): whose button is bigger, whose national animal is more threatening, who is the boy, and who is the girl in the interstate relations? Through a patriarchal worldview lens, relationships are supposed to be defined by penetrational heterosexuality (Weeks 1996). To put it simply, a “girl” country is supposedly inferior to a “boy” country because the former does not have a penis. This logic still pervades foreign policy discourse, as well as social media where the foreign policy is discussed making it meaningful in the everyday foreign policy discourse and practice.

However, before identity could be eaten, it needs to be bought. Consumption and identity are very closely linked (Soper 2007; Trentmann 2007) with the citizen-consumer becoming a focus of academic research. The term “patriotic consumption” in this regard is particularly helpful (Gurova et al. 2017) as it not only describes mundane acts of buying, but also a plethora of choices from streetwear and food to self-performance on social networks that produce foreign policy assemblages on a grassroots level. The phenomenon of patriotic consumption is relatively new to Russia compared with the United States, where state symbols, for example, flags, are seen routinely displayed on houses and a general level of “patriotic religiosity” is quite high (Marvin and Ingle 1999; Kemmelmeier and Winter 2008). It is remarkable that patriotic consumption in Russia is not centered on state symbols as it is in the United States, rather it is almost exclusively focused on foreign policy decisions of a single man, who is also the focus of the (clothing) branding effort.

Marxian “commodity fetishism” would be another way of conceptualizing this attitude toward materiality, as patriotic consumption is essentially built around the fetishizing and reification of consumer goods (Pels, Hetherington, and Vandenbergh 2002) that become independent sources of attraction as stand-ins for great power status in the Russian case (Nexon and Neumann 2018). The fetishization of geopolitically significant (consumer) items is studied in a burgeoning body of research into “popular geopolitics” (Saunders and Strukov 2017) that investigates popular culture and politics, specifically focusing on “cultural producers” of films and video games. This article, in contrast, aims at examining the audience of these products,
that is, the personal performances and refractions of foreign policy. Indeed, state-sponsored popular culture (Tsipursky 2016), especially state-sponsored counter-culture (Cushman 1995), was a tried and tested tool in the Soviet Union—the precursors to Russian “troll factories,” where people type in pro-Kremlin comments as part of their job description.

The explosion of consumerism in post-Soviet Russia did not come from anywhere. Already in the post-Stalin era, satisfying material needs was no longer taboo (Crowley and Reid 2010; Tsipursky 2016), giving rise to a consumerist culture. After all, the power of matter and things in shaping the world is one of the key tenets of materialism (Golubev 2020), known to any student of history of the Soviet Union. As Kravets notes (Kravets 2012), popular politics are moving from the streets (where they were in the 1990s) back to the seeming privacy of the kitchen—often digital ones—while a perfunctory political consensus is mediated by the market, that is, consumerist practices. What makes the patriotic consumption remarkable in this respect is that patriotic content and framing of items make them agential in line with the new materialist ontology. With a sticker on a “sanctioned” cheese, the cheese becomes part of the assemblage that has to be analyzed within the foreign policy narrative.

**Eating Identity**

Although Levi-Strauss pointed out that food must not be only good to eat, but also good to think about (Lévi-Strauss 1969; Rappoport et al. 1992), it is surprising how little attention is paid to food and eating in mainstream IR, despite the fact that large portions of anthropology and ethnography are concerned with the way that humans connect food to rituals and practices (Mintz and Du Bois 2002; Probyn 2003). The Millennium article that discussed sensory politics and beer consumption (Saunders and Holland 2018) also considered a “visceral” connection and the important role of food and drink in identity construction (Probyn 2003; Johnston and Baumann 2014). However, previous studies rarely discuss the powerful links between food and memory (Feeley-Harnik 1995; Holtzman 2006), while this study adds a key analytical device of the assemblage and brings forward implications for foreign policy.

As Fischler notes (Fischler 1988), “the way any given human group eats, helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organization, and at the same time, both its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently.” The fact that some nations are often identified, nicknamed, and derided by the types of food they are supposedly consuming (Kraut, Frog, Sabra, Kaaskop, Beaner, Roast Beef, etc.) is further evidence that casual racism also feeds on the food–identity nexus.

Practices related to food consumption involve one of the most intimate bodily spaces (Caldwell 2014), and are thus more susceptible to emotive responses, with tastes and aromas acting as triggers to cultural memory (Korsmeyer 2002). Not surprisingly, food “nostalgia” (Duruz 1999) is a critical part of diasporic identity, whereby elements of traditional cuisine are not only craved and consumed, but are also actively mediated and discussed online (Holak 2014), creating a whole complex of offline and online biocultural assemblages. Arguably, a nostalgia that has a nutritional component would create a more comprehensive emotive response, given that food (intake) influences the brain through many more neurological pathways, including smell, taste, and touch, all of which have feedback loops to the memory. While words and actions trigger emotive responses, a combination of neurological pathways can be particularly effective.

The behavioral system of food consumption can be divided into two parts: the pre-swallowing element that may involve social activity and a post-swallowing that is related to the bodily biochemical pathways (Crotty 1993). While the fields of sociology, anthropology, and ethnography have explored extensively the pre-swallowing phase, they should also play a role within the IR practice turn. Scholars note that food intake plays an integral role in religious practices that also translate into political rituals (Marvin 1994; Marvin and Ingle 1999; Cowen 2006) thus making food (intake) intrinsically political. Feminist scholarship has also paid attention to the visceral politics of the everyday (Chaiken and Pliner 1987; Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2008) that includes the phenomenon of gendered eating or cooking (Swenson 2009; Dejmanee 2016) and disciplining the eating body (Mori, Chaiken, and Pliner 1987; Probyn 2003).

It is therefore surprising that in the context of the “everyday turn” in mainstream IR, food has been left off the table.

Combining all the elements discussed above, it becomes clear that when it comes to everyday IR, the experience is extremely embodied: either through (imagined) sexual practices or actual eating and drinking. At the same time, it is important to introduce an economic dimension most often expressed in consumerism. Last, but not least, as all these practices are constantly being discussed, everyday foreign policy becomes a (biocultural) assemblage, where embodied and discursive practices are entangled in visceral and rhetorical ways.

Assemblage theory provides an important intervention here, as it argues that elements of the assemblage cannot be reduced to their function within their assemblage (Anderson et al. 2012). It is not enough to patriotically (non)-consume, it is important to talk about it as well. It is important to imagine the act of domination and discuss it, but it is not necessary to practice it as long as it is being performed discursively. Moreover, the ascribing rupture principle typical for rhizomes is relevant for everyday foreign policy as well, where citizens can reappropriate previous discourse and practices. If in the 1930s, a state-sponsored Soviet campaign enacted by regular citizens was called “our answer to Chamberlain,” almost a century later it was “our answer to Obama” (Arkhipova, Radchenko, and Titkov 2017).

Within an assemblage flat ontology, I have also made use of the practice-theoretical approach to the narrative as a configuration device (Bueger and Gadinger 2018). After all, as a researcher, I have no way of accessing the practices in all their iterations. What we can constitute, however, is the narrative around them. Moreover, Bueger and Gadinger emphasize the fact that writing about practices is challenging and advocate for methodological creativity as well as ethnographic approaches when it comes to empirical research on practices. Indeed, qualitative research is a set of interpretative activities that does not necessarily privilege one methodological practice over another and is essentially predicated on a multimethod approach (Denzin and Lincoln 2008).

Using the narrative as a configuration device, this article identifies a state foreign policy and then traces its assemblage reverberations offline and on social media, across platforms and discourses. Specifically, this article identifies the most popular or viral posts on different social media popular within Runet that showcase the way the foreign policy in question is reinterpreted by the general population. As in the Russian context, it is not always possible to separate hired pro-Kremlin agents from free agents expressing genuine pro-Kremlin support, this article does
not seek to judge the authenticity of grassroots foreign policy performance. Rather, the paper concentrates on how practice and discourse factor into the narrative.

The example that I shall analyze in more detail is the case of the sanctions war between Russia and Western countries in 2014 following the annexation of Crimea and the downing of Malaysia Airlines flight 17 over eastern Ukraine. The introduction of the sanctions also determines the timeline of the sampling: starting from August 2014. Each popular social media platform (LiveJournal, Vkontakte, and Instagram) at the time was monitored for the most popular posts relating to the introduction of sanctions. At the same time, mainstream mass media were scraped for sanction-related content through the Integrum World Wide database of Russian mass media. Particular attention was given to local newspapers and not federal ones to ensure the geographical reach beyond the usual Moscow or St. Petersburg.

From State to Everyday Sanctions

After the annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the European Union and the United States imposed sanctions on a number of Russian politicians, businessmen, and companies (Moret and Shagina 2017). On August 6, 2014, President Putin signed into law a decree “on the application of certain special economic measures to ensure the security of the Russian Federation” that imposed a food embargo on produce from the European Union (EU), the United States, Canada, Norway, and Australia. The decree effectively halted the importation of meat and dairy products, fish, vegetables and fruits, nuts, and salt (Kommersant 2014). Later, the remaining European Economic Area (EEA) countries were added to the decree (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Albania), while seed material, fish fry, dietary supplements and vitamin complexes, lactose-free dairy products, and raw materials for the production of baby food were excluded from the list of banned products. A more significant change happened a year later: in 2015, Putin signed a decree, which stated that any banned agricultural produce entering the country was to be destroyed (Kremlin 2015): “in any available way, in compliance with the mandatory requirements provided by the legislation in the field of environmental protection.” In practice, the confiscated goods were bulldozed or burned. Rosselkhoznadzor, the official Russian federal service for veterinary and phytosanitary supervision and the government agency responsible for the destruction of the produce, reported in 2020 that they destroyed over 36,000 tons of sanctioned products over the course of five years (Rosselkhoznadzor 2020).

Economic sanctions, and specifically food embargoes, have been a popular device in the foreign policy arsenal (Rothschild 1975; Paarlberg 1982) even if they are sometimes referred to as a genocidal tool (Simons 1999). One can debate the effectiveness of economic sanctions (Pape 1998; Marinov 2005; Whitty, Kim, and Crick 2006), but they have nonetheless been popular in post-Soviet Russia due to the visceral and embodied nature of food and its cultural significance. As Culather notes (Cullather 2007), food lost its cultural character and evolved into a material instrument of statecraft. Indeed, food and the practices associated with it can be considered an assemblage on its own (Anderson et al. 2012; Thompson et al. 2020), as it is discussed, bought, prepared, eaten, and is often a part of mating rituals.

This is probably one of the reasons that the Soviet cooking “bible,” “The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food” (Kniga o vkusnoi I zдоровoi pische), survived several editions that reflected an ideological bent at the time. For instance, a 1952 edition published at the height of the battle against “cosmopolitism and kowtowing to the West” suddenly saw the disappearance of several European recipes, such as mulled wine or sandwiches (Kravetskiy 2014). No wonder that after the annexation of Crimea, buying and craving certain foods was seen not only as potentially unpatriotic, but also as an undesirable association with an elite, which enjoyed access to foreign, luxury goods beyond the means of many Russians.

While a large number of foodstuffs were not available, in popular opinion, foreign, imported, food has been consistently infused with fears and conspiracies often related to the survival of the nation (Arkhipova and Kirzyuk 2020). During the Soviet era, such conspiracies typically related to poisonings or were somehow meant to hinder Soviet agriculture, reminiscent of anti-Semitic conspiracies of the Middle Ages when Jews were accused of poisoning the wells (Donskis 1998). One of the most persistent urban myths is associated with the false claims that the spread of the Colorado potato beetle in the Soviet Union was due to American grain exporters intentionally infecting it with the pest in order to sabotage Soviet potato production (Arkhipova and Kirzyuk 2020). Arkhipova and Kirzyuk point out similar fears related to “poisoned gum,” “poisoned chocolate,” and “poisoned jeans” that were specifically brought in by the foreigners to the Soviet Union (Arkhipova and Kirzyuk 2020). The poisoning was not limited to foodstuffs, but most of the urban legends described by the authors had a significant bodily effect on the victim.

The tendency to attribute malicious intent behind foreign food imports did not stop after the breakup of the Soviet Union. In the wake of the 1990 US–Soviet trade agreement signed by Mikhail Gorbachev and George H.W. Bush, American frozen chicken legs started making their way into the Soviet Union. Humorously dubbed “Bush’s trotters” (nozki Busha), the chicken legs soon became very popular, but, at the same time, several conspiracies emerged: the chickens were pumped with excessive amounts of hormones and antibiotics and caused allergic reactions among the Russian population. “Trotters” were used as a leverage against the United States during Russia’s World Trade Organization (WTO) accession negotiations and were banned as part of the food embargo counter-sanctions in 2014.

In post-Soviet Russia, the population had already become familiar with “surgical strikes” of specific food sanctions proposed by the former Chief Sanitary Inspector, Gennady Onishchenko. They were officially imposed for health reasons but almost always came on the heels of political decisions taken by targeted countries—Georgian and Moldavian wines and dairy from Belarus were among those that suddenly no longer met the sanitary requirements of the Russian state at one point or another. These bans for “health reasons” earned Onishchenko the title “Okhrenishchenko” on social networks, which can be roughly translated as a person who [fucking] lost his mind. Such aspersions were usually met with a wink and an eye roll by a population that understood that food was just another victim of political games.

The decision to destroy the food as part of the sanctions battle of 2014 was met with predictable outrage. Cultural memory of famines across the former Soviet Union is still relatively strong. In Ukraine, The Holodomor, that is, the intentional starvation policy in Soviet Ukraine in 1932–1933, has even become a part of an official victimhood
and independence narrative. Younger generations of Russians were likely confronted with the cultural memory of famines in kindergartens and through their grandparents’ exhortations to finish their meals, because “we were forced to eat potato peels during the war” or not to eat too quickly as though you were from the “starving Volga region” (s golodaushchego Povol’ya). However, these post-memories might not be as immediate for younger Russians not used to empty supermarket shelves or bread lines, or any other lines for that matter (unless associated with an Apple product frenzy). Nonetheless, what can work to motivate Russia’s youth is a national security framing such as the one chosen by the Russian government when announcing the 2014 counter-sanctions.

This time food sanctions were not justified as a response to the “low hygiene standards” of the countries of origin, but rather were specifically aimed at reducing Russia’s dependence on Western countries by implementing the politics of “Importozameschenie” (import substitution). Russian officials promised citizens that they would bolster the productivity of Russian agriculture, ensuring a full supply of meat and other produce. Anastasia Kazun (Kazun 2016) has shown how sanctions received a massive amount of media coverage after their implementation, with food being the center of media and social media discussion. Moreover, the Levada Center for Public Opinion points out that the destruction of sanctioned produce was one of the most important issues for the Russian population in 2015 (Levada 2015) only behind the actual war in Eastern Ukraine, even though the majority of citizens were not in favor of food destruction.

**Everyday (Food) Sanctions**

Caldwell recounts that Russians have faced an “ours” versus “not ours” food conundrum since the 1990s (Caldwell 2014). Indeed, boycotts of Western products with the simultaneous praise for and conspicuous consumption of domestic products were presented both as a patriotic and as a forced measure given that some restaurant owners were not even sure what kind of products would be available to them apart from domestic ones (Saltykova 2014). At the same time, ordinary citizens on social media were making fun of the sanctions by posting demotivators featuring “real Russian hamburgers”—a piece of cheap dark bread with a kotleta (minced meat patty) on top, mocking food photography on Instagram with photographs of plain buckwheat, or recasting Soviet-era sobriety posters to admonish the citizen who “drank with Obama” (E1.ru 2014). The ambiguity of those memes (a “real Russian hamburger” can be interpreted both as pro- and anti-Kremlin) and their humorous content made their circulation easier and widespread among different population groups. McGlynn specifically emphasizes that resistance to Western symbols was amplified through the mainstream media and categorized as a grassroots phenomenon creating a sense of common identity (McGlynn 2020).

There were two broad categories among the Russian population in terms of their attitudes toward the sanctions: those who regretted the loss of their fancy imported foodstuffs and those who were happy to “stick it to the West” and consume homegrown alternatives. According to Levada (Levada 2015), 68 percent of the population were in favor of the food embargo in 2015. The governmental public opinion agency, FOM reported similar numbers (FOM 2019): 70 percent considered food counter-sanctions to have been the right decision in 2015, although this number declined to 56 percent in 2019. Given increased food prices due to the rouble’s depreciation, coupled with higher prices for imported product substitutes, the sanctions caused immediate hardship for median households even if they never bought Jamon or mozzarella. The latter were considered delicacies even before the sanctions and were mostly consumed in larger cities by the more affluent segments of the population. Therefore, the “moans for mascarpone” were regarded by the masses to be a problem for the elite and not for the common person. FOM's data reflect this perception: around 70 percent of Russians claim that the food embargo did not affect them in any way at all.

Once the TV reports of destroyed sanctioned foodstuffs came to light (RBC 2015), a number of bloggers expressed their indignation that the sanctioned produce was destroyed and not given to the poor. A Change.org petition that asked to redistribute the sanctioned produce among Russia’s vulnerable population (veterans, pensioners, disabled people, large families, victims of natural disasters, and others in need) instead of destroying it garnered over 500,000 signatures (Change.org 2015) but to no avail: the legislation has remained in place. Destruction of food in oppositional bloggers’ minds was also connected to the memory of the Great Patriotic War: the journalist Slava Rabinovich was outraged that President Putin, himself a native of Leningrad whose inhabitants survived a deadly siege that led to mass starvation between 1941 and 1943, would destroy food (Obozrevatel 2015). Similar comments surfaced in the comments sections of various news reports that described food burning (NovayaGazeta 2015). These comparisons show specifically how both viscerally and politically food has been conceptualized in the popular imagination.

State-sanctioned TV reports were backed by a pro-Kremlin movement’s “Khryushi” (piggies) sticker campaign when activists in T-Shirts emblazoned with the entreaty: “Eat Russian” descended upon Moscow supermarkets and labeled “sanctioned” produce with a sticker featuring an angry bear ripping a conflation of American and EU flags apart. This campaign was widely publicized on state television (Vesti.ru 2015) and print media (Kommersant 2015). What an American flag had to do with Swiss cheese—an unsanctioned product, as Switzerland is not an EU member—appears to have escaped the activists’ minds. At the same time, by labeling the supposedly sanctioned products, the activists created posthuman subjectivities that become parts of the everyday foreign policy assemblage. Regardless of whether regular people bought this cheese or not, they are confronted with this narrative and a choice as a consumer.

Somehow, the idea of foreign cheese seemed to overtake the whole sanction discourse. Whenever bloggers discussed sanctions, it was the availability of foreign cheese that came up the most often. The political scientist and journalist Sergey Medvedev even connected the prevalence of “cheese culture” to political stability in a given state (Medvedev 2016), reminding readers of Sorokin’s “Oprichnik Day” dystopian novel, where all foreign products were banned and the citizens could only choose from two versions of each type of produce, with only one type of cheese on offer.

Moreover, foreign cheese often assumed a life and agency of its own with people imagining how packs of camembert try to cross the Russian border illegally (Arkhipova, Radchenko, and Titkov 2017). It was most often cheese

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3 At the beginning of the sanctions, a Mayakovsky parody circulated widely on social media, where a “fifth column” was decrying the lack of mozzarella and mascarpone.
The Russian word for ass (popa) can officials. Often, social network users suggested “sticking different establishments in Russia that “banned the entry The public group featured a number of photographs of with 500,000 members, took sanctions rather personally. Vkontakte users, and specifically sub-politicians as American and European sanctions targeted custom of mirroring the sanctioning policy by banning shrimps, Brest avocado, Mogilev jamon, Myadel oysters, only Lukashenka in the [news] feed? Where are Belarusian country. As one of the Twitter users noted: “Why is there pineapple were related to the unrest in the neighboring and that the sudden shortages of shrimp, parmigiana, and pineapple were related to the unrest in the neighboring country. As one of the Twitter users noted: “Why is there only Lukashenka in the [news] feed? Where are Belarusian shrimps, Brest avocado, Mogilev jamon, Myadel oysters, the First Gomel Tram? Where is all this property of the Republic?”

Even though the counter-sanctions were related to food-stuffs, social network users tried to follow the diplomatic custom of mirroring the sanctioning policy by banning politicians as American and European sanctions targeted specific people as well. Vkontakte users, and specifically subscribers of Antimaidan, a pro-Kremlin foreign policy group with 500,000 members, took sanctions rather personally. The public group featured a number of photographs of different establishments in Russia that “banned the entry with Obamas” or refused service to Obama or other American officials. Often, social network users suggested “sticking sanctions up your own European,” playing on the consonance of the Russian word for ass (popa) and Europe (Europe), and at the same time painting Europe as being sodomized. The image above (Figure 1) is one of many examples featured in the Antimaidan group that specifically showcases the striving for subjectivity among the “patriots.” Refusing service to American officials in local cafes or hair salons helps perform foreign policy on a local level while venting frustration about the perceived mistreatment of Russia’s great power status. According to this image, John McCain, Barack Obama, and John Kerry will not be serviced by the Pererva train yard. This is one of the less offensive images posted in the group, showing how offline foreign policy performance made it online and how certain bodies were no longer welcome in Russia and its public spaces.

The Pererva train yard was not the only institution that wanted to sanction Obama. There was a flash mob around the country ranging from an Omsk newspaper to a cell phone shop in Volgograd and a TV news station in Kursk. Proposed measures varied: Obama was not allowed entry into certain establishments, barred from getting anesthesia, not permitted to feed an office hamster or pat a retriever (Blokont-Volgograd 2014; Suleimanov 2014; Melentyev 2015). Often the memes around sanctioning Obama were obviously tongue in cheek: after all, it is difficult that the American President at the time could not wait to visit Ust’-Izhevsk or that Michelle Obama lamented their daughters’ failed application to a university in Kaluga (Blokont-Volgograd 2014). These signs all over the country were obviously performative, but still a very significant manifestation of the everyday foreign policy: even by making fun of the Kremlin’s policy, the users still engaged with it and acknowledged its effect.

Another strategy to combat Western sanctions first surfaced offline and then made its way online via a post by one of the most popular LiveJournal bloggers: lj drugoi. On September 24, 2014, he republished photographs of a flash mob “Fashion response—no to sanctions” (Modnyi otvet—sankciyam net), where a fashion designer Anastasia Zadorina distributed T-shirts with “patriotic messages.” The “patriotic messages” included images of Russian rocket launchers “Topol” (SS-27 Sickle B) and “Iskander” (SS-26 Stone) that would “laugh” at the sanctions. The rocket launchers themselves are a clear reference to phallic prowess and gendered domination over the addressee. The post garnered a record of 1,397 comments. The readers quickly picked up on who the “Topols” and “Iskanders” were directed against: the country that stands out for the most frequently used words is the United States, blamed for a number of issues starting with the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan to the genocide of native Americans and the collapse of the Soviet Union. A large number of users converged on the topic that Iskanders and Topols constitute “nuclear bluff for internal use.” As usual in foreign policy discussions on Russian social networks, the argument veered toward discussing history, especially the Cold War and the USSR (which came up as one of the most frequently used words). The interesting part of the sanction discourse is that Europe barely came up in the comments, even though the bulk of Russian sanctions that actually affected the population were essentially related to food produced in the EU. Another popular LiveJournal post that was connected to Western and Russian sanctions showed remarkable signs of individual readiness for personal sanctions. However, this time it was much more cosmopolitan and encompassed nonconsumption of the produce from countries that failed to fall in line with Russian foreign policy regarding Ukraine, in this case Georgia and Ukraine proper. Georgia was in fact not for the first time a target of patriotic nonconsumption, as in 2006 when Georgian and Moldavian wines were banned from Russian markets “due to a high pesticide level” (Lenta.ru 2006), while social network users argued

**Figure 1.** October 24, 2014, Antimaidan group. Source: http://vk.com/antimaydan.

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4This type of cheese has been widely produced in Soviet Union since the 1960s and had previously been developed in the Varoslavl area of Russia. It is not particularly flavorful.
that the ban came on the heels of Georgia’s and Moldavia’s blocking of Russia’s entry into the WTO. Despite the fact that sanctions against Russia were proposed by the EU, most of the anti-sanction rhetoric is directed at the United States, Ukraine (chocolates produced by then Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko’s factory, Roshen) and Georgian wine. Moreover, Lj users were indignant about the notion of “society of consumption”—an age-old epithet usually bestowed upon the United States.

On the whole, most commentators agreed that sanctions were a necessary and inevitable way to deal with the West, mostly personified through the United States and President Obama. Europe was largely absent from the sanction discourse and despite the fact that food sanctions explicitly targeted EU countries, the perceived addressee was still an Atlantic (or Pacific) Ocean away. Some people on social networks sought to counter Western sanctions with an attempt to deny service to the American president or other American officials, who were hardly planning to visit train yards in Moscow. Conjugal order was not the most significant point of reference in the sanctions discourse apart from physical banishment of American officials from public spaces in Russia. The sexualization of everyday foreign policy revolved around the sexual assault of Western male foreign policy officials. In this case, consummating foreign policy was equated with metaphorical male rape.

Conclusion

I argued that everyday foreign policy should be theorized as an assemblage of micro-practices and discourses enmeshed across physical and digital spaces, inside and outside the body. This way, everyday foreign policy becomes a rhizomatic phenomenon, where both cultural and material elements are intertwined through physical and digital spaces and not a hierarchical consumption and/or mediation process.

Existing approaches, such as everyday nationalism or practice theory have given an important place to the subjectivity and agency of the regular people, but they do not conceptualize the multitude of micro-practices and discourses that constitute a narrative. Building on feminist, sociological, and ethnographic research, this article has argued that everyday foreign policy functions as an assemblage that inhabits digital and bodily spaces, thus making everyday foreign policy a popular mobilization phenomenon around key symbolic moments on the agenda.

Sanctions are an easy foreign policy tool to replicate on the everyday level. The fact that the Russian government consciously made a decision to ban foodstuffs that are also often considered luxury products in the popular imagination was supposed to invoke a deeper, more populist notion of national pride that is supposed to underpin Russian foreign policy. Moreover, when it comes to everyday foreign policy assemblages, practices and discourses surrounding food offer one of the most compelling examples, given that food occupies a prominent visceral part in the public imagination. It is therefore unsurprising that the Russian embargo and the subsequent food destruction policy captured Russian citizens’ attention. While parallels with famine were etched into the Russians’ collective memory, the autarkic discourse bound to nationalism sentiment quickly overtook many other considerations.

At the same time, it did not prevent Russian citizens from discursively excluding their imaginary Obama from train yards, restaurants, and hairdressers. This is also why a narrative approach is useful in mapping an assemblage: the very act of putting up a sign reading “no entry with Obamas” can be seen both as a discursive and a practice-oriented gesture, and carries practically no chance whatsoever of ever needing to be enforced. It was, however, important to showcase the supposedly big missiles and the way Russian sanctions would “screw up” American or European markets and officials. After all, imagining foreign policy in terms of intercourse is a time-honored tradition.

Acknowledgments

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ELIZAVETA GAUFMAN

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