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Rogstad, Adrian

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Stigma Dynamics: Russia and the Crisis of Liberal Ordering

ADRIAN ROGSTAD

University of Groningen, The Netherlands

The concepts of stigma and stigmatization have recently made inroads into IR. However, scholarship on stigmatization has primarily focused on discrete instances of stigmatization and stigma management for the purposes of comparison. Less has been written about how the dynamics of stigmatization processes can alter over time as actors change stigma-management tactics and stigmatization varies in intensity, and the effect this may have on social norms. To that end, this article introduces a distinction between direct and diffuse forms of stigmatization that, when combined with different forms of stigma management, lead to changes in stigma dynamics over time. It applies this distinction to Russian stigma management vis-à-vis liberal international order, specifically the norms of democracy and human rights that constitute a “normal” for states to aspire to, any deviance from which requires stigma management. By outlining the interactive process of Russia’s stigma management in relation to these norms since the end of the Cold War, and the degrees of direct and diffuse stigmatization of Russia by the norms’ promoters, the article also seeks to make a contribution to work on the crisis of liberal international order, aligning itself with contributions focused on the co-constitution of order through processes of ordering. The article proposes that stigmatization is a constitutive mechanism of liberal ordering and that some of the explanation for the supposed crisis of liberal order is the alteration of international stigma dynamics.

Recently, se han hecho grandes avances en los conceptos de “estigma” y “estigmatización” en el ámbito de las RR. II. Sin embargo, los estudios sobre la estigmatización se centraron, principalmente, en casos de estigmatización aislados y en la gestión del estigma a efectos de comparación. Se ha escrito aún menos sobre cómo la dinámica de los procesos de estigmatización puede modificarse con el tiempo, a medida que los actores cambian las tácticas de gestión del estigma y la estigmatización varía en intensidad, y el efecto que esto puede tener en las normas sociales. Para ello, este artículo introduce una distinción entre las formas directas e indirectas de estigmatización que, al combinarse con diferentes tipos de gestión del estigma, producen cambios en la dinámica del estigma a lo largo del tiempo. Además, aplica esta distinción a la gestión rusa del estigma con respecto al orden internacional liberal; más precisamente, a las normas de la democracia y los derechos humanos que constituyen una “normalidad” a la que los Estados deben aspirar y cuya destitución requiere una gestión del estigma. Al esbozar el proceso interactivo de la gestión de la estigmatización de Rusia en relación con estas normas desde el final de la Guerra Fría, así como los grados de estigmatización directa e indirecta de Rusia por parte de los promotores de las normas, el artículo también pretende hacer una contribución a los trabajos sobre la crisis del orden internacional liberal. Para ello, se alinea con las contribuciones que se centran en la formación conjunta del orden a través de los procesos de ordenamiento. El artículo propone que la estigmatización es un mecanismo constitutivo del ordenamiento liberal, y que parte de la explicación de la supuesta crisis del orden liberal son los cambios en la dinámica del estigma internacional.

Les concepts de stigmate et de stigmatisation ont récemment fait incursion en RI. Cependant, les recherches sur la stigmatisation se sont principalement concentrées sur des cas distincts de stigmatisation et de gestion des stigmates à des fins de comparaison. Moins de travaux ont été publiés sur la façon dont les dynamiques des processus de stigmatisation peuvent évoluer au fil du temps tandis que les acteurs changent de tactiques de gestion des stigmates et que la stigmatisation varie en intensité ainsi que sur l’effet que cela peut avoir sur les normes sociales. Cet article introduit à cette fin une distinction entre les formes directes et les formes diffuses de stigmatisation qui, lorsqu’elles sont alliées à différentes formes de gestion des stigmates, mènent à des évolutions des dynamiques des stigmates au fil du temps. Il applique cette distinction à la gestion des stigmates russe vis-à-vis de l’ordre international liberal, en particulier des normes de démocratie et de droits de l’homme qui constituent une “normalité” à laquelle les États doivent aspirer et dont toute déviation nécessite une gestion des stigmates.

En décrivant le processus interactif de gestion des stigmates de la Russie par rapport à ces normes depuis la fin de la guerre froide et les degrés de stigmatisation directe et diffuse de la Russie par les promoteurs de ces normes, cet article cherche également à apporter une contribution aux travaux sur la crise de l’ordre international liberal en s’alignant sur les contributions axées sur la co-constitution de l’ordre par les processus d’établissement de l’ordre. Cet article propose l’idée selon laquelle la stigmatisation serait un mécanisme constitutif de l’établissement de l’ordre liberal et que la crise supposée de l’ordre liberal s’expliquerait en partie par la modification des dynamiques internationales des stigmates.

Introduction

The concepts of stigma and stigmatization have recently made inroads into IR, as part of the discipline’s growing embrace of sociological theories and concepts. Scholars drawing on Erving Goffman’s classic work and more recent sociological debates have shown how stigmatization is a necessary corollary to socialization, how norm promotion is inherently bound up within hierarchical ordering of international society into “normals” and “deviants,” the stigmatization of whose “abnormal” behavior can serve to reinforce the norms of society (Goffman 1963; Zarakol 2010, 2014; Adler-Nissen 2014b). From nineteenth-century Siam (Zarakol 2014) to the modern-day European Union (Adler-Nissen 2014a, 2014b), South Africa, and Israel (Hatuel-Radoshitzky and Janal 2021), and from nuclear weapons (Shamai 2015; Sauer and Reveraert 2018; Smetana 2019, 2020) to financial policy options (Chlwiero 2015), the concepts’ analytical and theoretical relevance have been demonstrated across a range of empirical phenomena central to modern international relations.

To date, scholarship on stigmatization has primarily focused on discrete instances of stigmatization and stigma management for the purposes of comparison. Less has been
written about how the dynamics of stigmatization processes can alter over time as actors change stigma-management tactics and stigmatization varies in intensity, and the effect this may have on social norms. To that end, this article introduces a distinction between direct and diffuse forms of stigmatization that, when combined with different forms of stigma management, lead to changes in stigma dynamics over time. It applies this distinction to Russian stigma management vis-à-vis liberal international order, specifically the norms of democracy and human rights that, it argued, constitute a "normal" for states to aspire to and any deviance from which requires stigma management. By outlining the interactive process of Russia’s stigma management in relation to these norms from the 1990s to the 2010s, and the degrees of direct and diffuse stigmatization of Russia by their promoters, the article also seeks to make a contribution to work on the crisis of liberal international order, aligning itself with contributions focused on the co-constitution of order through processes of ordering. Stigmatization, the article proposes, is a constitutive mechanism of liberal ordering, and some of the explanation for the supposed crisis of liberal order is the alteration of international stigma dynamics.

The argument proceeds in four sections. The first introduces the conceptual framework of stigmatization. It draws on Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall’s (2005) typology of power in international relations to make the distinction between direct and diffuse stigmatization, in order to add specificity to the ways in which stigmatization processes operate. It also lays out four stigma-management strategies available to stigmatized actors—stigma acceptance, stigma rejection, stigma evasion and counter-stigmatization—based on whether they accept: (1) the public understanding of stigma and (2) stigma’s application to themselves. The second section turns to the question of liberal order/ordering, highlighting the relational conception of ordering as a series of ongoing, co-constitutive processes. It is argued that stigmatization is a constitutive process of liberal ordering through the definition of liberal democracy as the “normal” for all states to conform or aspire to. The section also highlights two core features of this liberal “normal” that affect stigmatization processes: the supposedly voluntarist nature of its characteristics and the teleological assumption of liberal progress. The third section traces the stigma dynamics resulting from the combination of changing Russian stigma-management approaches, from acceptance of the liberal “normal” in the 1990s to rejection and counter-stigmatization in the 2010s, and changing levels of stigmatization of Russia for its breaches of liberal-democratic “normalcy,” from de-stigmatization and diffuse stigmatization in the 1990s to increasingly direct stigmatization in the 2010s. Finally, a fourth section builds from the case to consider what drives changes in stigma dynamics and whether these drivers are increasingly present in contemporary international society. The conclusion considers the potential implications of the argument for the future of liberal ordering.

Stigma Dynamics: Varieties of Stigmatization and Stigma Management

A stigma is a “special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype” that renders the attribute “deeply discrediting” and reduces its bearer “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” in the eyes of others (Goffman 1963, 3, 14). Stigmas are socially constructed through ongoing processes of labelling and stereotyping that mark certain attributes and behaviors as “normal” and others as discrediting, and the impositions of separation, discrimination, and status loss on actors associated with such discreditable attributes or behavior by an “audience of normals”: the group of individuals, states, etc., upholding “normal” behavior (Link and Phelan 2001; Adler-Nissen 2014). These audiences are fluid: as Goffman (1963, 163) put it, “stigma involves not so much a set of concrete individuals who can be separated into two piles, the stigmatized and the normal, as a pervasive two-role social process in which every individual participates in both roles, at least in some connections [sic] and in some phases of life.” For this process to work, everyone involved must to a certain extent have internalized (without necessarily accepting) the standards of “normality”: stigma only occurs “where there is some expectation on all sides that those in a given category should not only support a particular norm but also realize it” (Goffman 1963, 17). In this way, stigmatization (re)produces social order—its general purpose is to enlist “support for society among those who are not supported by it” by establishing dominant expectations of normal behavior (Goffman 1963, 164). When successful, stigmatization processes reinforce patterns of domination and exclusion that keep stigmatized actors “down” and simultaneously keep those following the norms (the “normals”) “in” (Phelan, Link, and Dovidio 2008).

Diffuse versus Direct Stigmatization

The stigmatization processes involved in promoting and enforcing the “normal” are not always or necessarily intentional or deliberate. As Ayşe Zarakol argues: “For a stigmatizing ... dynamic to emerge in a social system, there does not have to be a deliberate master plan of oppression … (although sometimes there are those as well)” (Zarakol 2010, 66–67). Thus, “while the exercise of stigma power can be brutally obvious,” for example through direct social or material sanctions on stigmatized states, “it is more generally hidden in processes that are just as potent, but less obviously linked to the interests of the stigmatizers” (Link and Phelan 2014, 30), such as the ongoing definitions of normality that tend to reinforce the power of dominant groups in society. A fruitful way of conceptualizing the difference between different forms of stigmatization is through Barnett and Duvall’s distinction, in their typology of different forms of power in international politics, between power that works through direct and diffuse social relations. Direct forms assume a shorter spatial and temporal distance between those on the exercising and receiving end of power, while diffuse forms acknowledge that power can operate through more “detached and mediated” connections, at a “physical, temporal, or social distance” (Barnett and Duvall 2005, 47–48). A similarly useful analytical distinction can be drawn between diffuse and direct stigmatization. Diffusely, the promotion of the “normal” occurs through multiple, interrelated processes establishing norms, standards, and “best practices” that states should follow. Some of these processes are driven by states, most notably the conditionality set for membership of international organizations such as the EU, the “democracy promotion” programs of the United States, conditions for development aid, etc. However, ordering processes do not just involve other states. Central to such processes are the multiple reports, standards, and rankings produced by international and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) covering fields such as human rights, press freedom, economic performance, and levels of democracy; rulings from international courts; assessment reports from election monitors; etc. Such actors
play a role with respect to stigmatized states and governments similar to the “professionals” Goffman highlighted with respect to stigmatized individuals, who find themselves “in an arena of detailed argument and discussion as to what [they] should think of themselves], … being simultaneously pushed in several directions by professionals who tell [them] what [they] should do and feel about what [they are and are not]” (Goffman 1963, 150). These “professionals” may not think of themselves as involved in stigmatization processes; for example, stigmatization is probably not a practice that most international criminal lawyers “spontaneously think of themselves as being engaged in,” even if the assignment of stigma to certain behaviors is the “actual goal of international criminal tribunals” (Mégret 2014, 287). Many are relatively weak actors such as NGOs, whose reports and recommendations are often not accompanied by overt practices of separation or discrimination, meaning they do not by themselves establish “a genuine system of social differentiation” (Adler-Nissen 2014b, 147). Still, the sum total of the multiple practices is the diffusion of standards that both can and do discredit actors. States and governments clearly care about the potentially stigmatizing effects of, for example, NGO reporting, as evidenced by the increasing repression and silencing in Russia and elsewhere of government-critical NGOs.

Direct stigmatization, on the other hand, denotes those instances when stigmatizing practices are clearly and explicitly directed at a single actor or group of actors, often with the openly stated aim of enforcing or reinforcing particular norms. Examples include the three cases cited by Rebecca Adler-Nissen (2014b): post-World War II Germany, Cuba under Fidel Castro and Austria while the far-right Freedom Party were in government in the early 2000s were directly stigmatized by, respectively, the victorious Allies, the United States, and the EU, with varying degrees of success. Direct stigmatization is similar to, but distinct from, othering. It involves the separation of an identified stigmatized actor from the “audience of normals” and thereby a social construction of identity differences similar to the self-other dynamic. However, particularly in the context of liberal ordering with its voluntarist characteristics (elaborated below), the difference is frequently framed in terms of the failure of the stigmatized to follow a form of “normal” behavior that is supposed to constitute the norm for the wider social order, and the stigmatized can (in theory) redeem themselves by correcting their behavior. It is thus as much about the contestation and reinforcement of a particular version of normality as the clarification and constitution of identity.

The stigmatization processes involved in ordering can be both direct and diffuse. Processes of labeling, stereotyping, separation, and status loss may occur sequentially, intentionally, and openly, but they need not to have the effect of stigmatization. Labels and stereotypes are not simply invented out of thin air by powerful actors but are rooted in and continually reproduced by long-standing discourses that keep stigmatization going. Status loss and discrimination can be direct and intentional but are equally often the result of a myriad unreflective actions. Stigmatization is relational and processual.

Stigma-Management Strategies and Their Effects

Given stigmatization’s relational, interactional nature, the process can be shaped in fundamental ways by the response of the stigmatized. In Goffman’s words, “stigma management is a general feature of society, a process occurring wherever there are identity norms” (Goffman 1963, 155). Those who fail to live up to such identity norms will frequently contest them. Four broad management strategies can be identified based on whether an actor accepts or challenges (1) the public understanding of stigma and (2) whether it applies to themselves. The strategies are summarized in table 1 (combining Meisenbach 2010; Adler-Nissen 2014b; Sauer and Reveraert 2018).

Depending on which stigma-management strategy actors pursue at any given moment and its level of success, the impact on the cohesion of the wider social order will vary. If an actor accepts both the public understanding of stigma and its application to self and seeks to “normalize,” like West Germany after World War II, the normative fabric of international society will be strengthened (Adler-Nissen 2014b, 156–60). This form of stigma acceptance or recognition will particularly contribute to successful ordering if the normalization is genuine, with thorough reforms to approximate the given “normal.” If an actor instead rejects its stigma, accepting the general understanding but arguing that it is not applicable to themselves, there may be a weakening of order owing to doubts and uncertainty being sown over whether the instances involved really constitute a deviation. Examples of such instances include Austria during its dispute with the EU over the Freedom Party’s inclusion in government, and South Korea’s denial that it was trying to control capital flows in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis (Adler-Nissen 2014b, 160–65; Chwieroth 2015, 58–62). While this may lead to “mutual embarrassment” (Adler-Nissen 2014b, 160) between normals and stigmatized in the particular situation and subtle shifts in expectations of normality, this form of stigma management does not challenge the overall understanding of stigma: the Austrians still recognized the stigma of being undemocratic and the South Koreans of limiting capital flows.

The two management strategies in the bottom quadrants of table 1 are more likely to undermine ordering. The first strategy, stigma evasion, refers to instances where actors accept that they have done something generally considered discreditable but seek to evade stigma by challenging the public understanding or otherwise reducing the offensiveness of what they have done, for example by claiming the act was unintentional, they were provoked, or it was for a higher cause (Meisenbach 2010, 282–83). This is the “yes, but is this really so bad?,” “the system made me do it!,” or “it was only a little war!” approach to stigma management. Through the acknowledgement that something discreditable has occurred it questions, rather than confronts, the expectations
of normality, but because it invites discussion of the general principle rather than just a particular instance (as in the case of stigma rejection), it may have a more corrosive effect on expectations of normality. Finally, counter-stigmatization is a more direct approach, involving a challenge of both stigma’s particular application and its general understanding, and frequently attempts to “discredit the dressers” by turning a stigma back at those accusing the stigmatized of discreditable behavior (Meisenbach 2010, 283–85). It can also involve simply wearing a supposed stigma as an emblem of pride, as with communist Cuba. Either way, it may lead to a more severe split in the social order between opposing camps (Adler-Nissen 2014b, 165–69; Goffman 1963, 137–39). Rather than seeking recognition from the “normals,” the stigmatized actor in this case identifies with other stigmatized actors and promotes an alternative conception of normality.

Two important things should be noted. First, these strategies are ideal types, stylized versions of reality and are not necessarily exhaustive. Any real-world stigma management is likely to feature elements of different ideal types at once rather than fit neatly and entirely into one box or the other, and as Xymena Kurowska and Anatoly Reshetnikov (2021) have shown, there are strategies such as “trickstery” that defy neat categorization attempts. Second, since it is impossible to ever know whether an actor has truly accepted or rejected a stigma without getting inside their heads, these strategies should be understood as “communication” strategies (Meisenbach 2010). They concern the sociological, often public, management and negotiation of stigma, in line with Goffman’s (1963, 11) original focus on social identity. Methodologically, when applying the concept to international relations, this means a focus on public discourse and practice rather than private thoughts and feelings is appropriate.

As noted in the introduction, the IR stigma literature has so far primarily focused on discrete instances of stigmatization and stigma management for the purposes of comparison or critique of particular concepts. For example, Adler-Nissen (2014b) uses her three discrete cases to illustrate the three different types of stigma management, and Zarakol (2014) argues that stigmatization rather than socialization has been the key mechanism to “hold the modern world together.” Less has been said about how the dynamics of stigmatization processes can alter over time as actors change stigma-management tactics and stigmatization becomes more or less direct/diffuse. Increased attention to these aspects can help to both tighten theorization of stigmatization and provide a theoretically informed means of unpacking empirical processes of ordering.

Stigmatization as a Constitutive Process of Liberal Ordering

In using Russia’s changing stigma management vis-à-vis certain liberal norms as its case study, this article also seeks to make a contribution to work on the so-called crisis of liberal international order. Stigmatization is a constitutive element of liberal order or, seen from a more relational perspective, processes of liberal ordering. In making this argument, the article aligns with literature on liberal order’s crisis that conceptualizes the order as a set of power-infused ordering processes emerging in, through and from the relational interactions between actors (e.g., Cooley and Nexon 2020; Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021; Tourinho 2021). This literature focuses on the co-constitution of international order, including through mechanisms and processes such as contestation and resistance from supposedly illiberal, often non-Western actors that are now frequently seen as a danger to the order. As argued by Marcos Tourinho, international order is in fact “continuously negotiated in a decentralized way, with various ‘liberal’, ‘Westphalian’, and other principles coexisting in permanent tension” (Tourinho 2021, 268). In this dynamic view, liberal international order is conceived as less consensual than it is often presented as and less dependent on the leadership of supposedly liberal Western actors who historically speaking have in fact not always been the key drivers of “liberal” principles. To take but one example, the development of the international human rights regime—a supposed cornerstone of the liberal order—owed as much to the work of lawyers, activists, and diplomats of the Global South as its Western advocates, and the United States has always been unwilling to endorse the full spectrum of human rights (Jensen 2016; Sikkink 2017). In Tourinho’s words, the mid-twentieth century “contributions of postcolonial Latin American, African, and Asian states made the global order more, not less, liberal” (Tourinho 2021, 268). Clearly, as the analysis below will show, this is not always the case—contestation can push developments in both liberal and illiberal directions (see, e.g., Cooley and Nexon 2020 on the gradual but accelerating “unravelling” of US hegemony as different dynamics reinforce each other). However, the theoretical point is that when order is seen as an unfolding, relational process rather than an entity linked inextricably to certain actors and institutions, it highlights that co-constitution and contestation are inherent in (liberal) order-making rather than an aberration in relationalism in IR more broadly, see e.g. Jackson and Nexon 1999, 2019; Qin 2018). When seen as “an open process of complex social relations in motion,” as Yaqing Qin (2010, 138) has conceptualized international society, an order is never fully settled or complete but always in a process of contestation and with fluid boundaries. These kinds of critical arguments have received increasing attention lately, even in what could be called “mainstream” accounts of liberal order, to the point where claiming that stigmatization is a constitutive process of liberal ordering is less and less controversial. As noted by David Lake, Lisa Martin, and Thomas Risse in their introduction to a recent special issue on liberal international order, traditional writing on the subject has tended to have certain “blind spots,” including the fact that states that fail to conform to dominant orders are “stigmatized and consigned to a lower status” and that norms “both constitute the order and discipline practice,” thus “stigmatizing norm violators” (Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021, 247–48; drawing on Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021). The processes are not “neutral” or inherently “good,” even when the norms in question, such as democracy and human rights, may be seen as normatively desirable. These kinds of dynamics create resentment and open up possibilities for contestation, thus dialectically “crea[t]ing the seeds of challenges” (Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021, 247).

Building on these kinds of observations, this article provides both a theoretical schematic of what this dialectical process looks like, through the focus on varieties of stigmatization and stigma management laid out above, and an empirical example in the form of an account of Russia’s changing stigma-management strategies vis-à-vis liberal ordering processes. Before turning to the Russian case, the next subsection elaborates on the empirical process of how the terms of liberal “normality” for states to aspire to (and,
simultaneously, what counts as “illiberal” behavior in need of justification) are constructed and reinforced.

**The Liberal “Normal”: Voluntarism and Progress**

One of the crucial ways in which processes of liberal ordering became dominant in post-Cold War international relations was through the establishment of liberal market democracy as the “normal,” common-sensical way to organize a state, any departure from which was a deviation that required justification and could lead to stigmatization, marking states as less than fully normal. This “normal” had many facets, and few states fulfilled them all. Goffman argued that in his time there was only one “complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height and a recent record in sports” (Goffman 1963, 153). Similarly, a “complete unblushing” state in contemporary international society would be a democratic, free-market capitalist state with an excellent human rights record, peaceful relations with other states, and a good record in providing certain basic levels of public services such as health, employment, and education for its citizens (and, perhaps, a recent record in sports). Such a state would perform what Christian Reus-Smit identified as the “moral purpose of the modern state”: “the augmentation of individuals’ purposes and potentialities” (Reus-Smit 1999, 123). It should also support the extension and protection of liberal principles and norms elsewhere, whether actively through liberal military intervention (a contested practice), support for civil society, or at least passively by welcoming liberal–democratic progress anywhere (on the rise of a more interventionist form of liberalism in post-Cold War international society alongside the “Charter Liberalism” of noninterference; see Simpson 2001). As these characteristics in their entirety applied to virtually no state, all states were potentially discréditable to some degree. Given space constraints, for the purposes of this article particular attention will be paid to the two characteristics most central to the liberal–democratic “normal”: democracy and human rights.

Two key features of the liberal “normal” and liberal ordering are particularly important for contemporary stigmatization dynamics: voluntarism and the central role of teleological thinking. First, the features of a “normal” liberal state are, in theory, voluntary. They are based on so-called acquired or inclusive rather than “inherent” or “exclusive” characteristics (Runelli 2007), which any state can in theory achieve. The “social closure mechanism” is individualist rather than collectivist (Keene 2013; Naylor 2019), with anyone supposedly able to be accepted if only they do “normal” things like have elections and respect human rights. What Goffman (1963, 14) described as the “tribal” stigmas of “race, nation and religion,” which are impossible or hard to change, have been replaced with stigmas based around “blemishes of character” such as “radical political behavior.” Unlike in previous hierarchies, a “normal” state no longer needs to be white, Christian, or European: a formerly authoritarian, repressive state can become democratic and human rights-promoting, a former socialist state can become capitalist, etc., thereby reducing their stigmas and approaching normality. This voluntarism forms a central part of dominant Western actors’ defense against accusations of neoimperialism in the promotion of standards (Keene 2013). However, in practice, what becomes accepted or labeled as democratic or authoritarian, capitalist or socialist, etc., is ultimately a political question. In such processes, old stereotypes often die hard, standards of normality are usually based on the (supposed) experience of the modern West, and deviations in the periphery are far more likely to be highlighted than those in the core (Zarakol 2010, 94). Second, the idea of liberal “normal” rests on the teleological assumption that liberal market democracy constitutes an ideal state toward which all states should be progressing. This is a core part of liberal ordering’s normative side—the “ought” that establishes an expectation that all states should be moving in a liberal direction even if not there yet and pushes them along that route.

These features of liberal ordering condition the kinds of stigmas that states may need to negotiate. The first is simply being “behind”: not liberal enough, not conforming to liberal–democratic behavior (yet). This kind of behavior is to be expected from states that are developing toward normality. As long as liberalizing policies are in place and states are moving in the right direction, this kind of diffuse stigma may thus be easier to negotiate and is unlikely by itself to lead to ostracization. A second, more serious, source of stigma arises from moving in the *wrong* direction, against progress, and/or openly questioning the common sense of liberal normality. This kind of stigma is harder to negotiate and likely to engender more direct forms of stigmatization.

Highlighting the stigmatizing dynamic constitutive of liberal ordering is intended primarily as an analytical move, not a normative one. As alluded to above, much work has rightly pointed out the historical and contemporary ambiguities pertaining to liberal order’s normative desirability, from liberalism’s entanglement with imperialism to its belligerence and the questionable commitment of supposedly core liberal actors to several liberal principles (e.g., Jahn 2005, 2013). While using the negatively loaded concept of stigmatization may suggest (and to some extent inevitably entail) a similar normative position, this article remains agnostic about whether or not liberal ordering is a “good” or “bad” thing in itself. The point is rather to highlight, in line with previous works (e.g., Epstein 2012; Zarakol 2014), that despite the tendency to think of liberal order and the spread of liberal norms in largely benign and consensual terms, through concepts such as socialization, there is always also a stigmatizing dynamic at play—“wherever there are identity norms” (Goffman 1963, 155)—with its own logics and potential ramifications.

The next section illustrates these kinds of dynamics with reference to liberal ordering by tracing the evolution of Russian stigma management from the stigma-accepting 1990s to the counter-stigmatizing 2010s. As will be seen, the more stigma management moves toward a rejection of the understanding of stigma itself, not just a specific application, the more social norms and ordering processes are likely to be undermined. Such stigma management is in turn likely to lead to more direct stigmatization by the defenders of the “normal,” but this does not necessarily lead to compliance, and can instead serve to push actors increasingly toward a “counter-audience” of supposed deviants, thereby contributing to an overall dynamic of disordering.

**Russia and Liberal Ordering: From De-Stigmatization and Stigma Acceptance to Direct Stigmatization and Counter-Stigmatization**

This section illustrates the dynamics described above through an analysis of the changing stigmatization and stigma-management strategies of Russia over time in relation to liberal ordering. The focus on Russia is not meant
to reinforce an argument that attributes the crisis of liberal order to the rise of “external,” illiberal actors. Rather than conceiving of Russia as innately illiberal or external to the order, this section demonstrates how processes of ordering are relational and interactive, based on the intersubjective negotiation of “normal” identities in international society as a whole.

Russia is an appropriate case for an analysis of processes of stigmatization in relation to liberal ordering, given its liminal status vis-à-vis the ordering processes’ core Western promoters and its position as one of the most prominent contesters of “universal” liberal norms (e.g., Clunan 2018; Bettiza and Lewis 2020; Schmitt 2020; Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021). While Russia has always formed an integral part of Europe’s constitutive “other,” it has oscillated between (at best) being deemed a semicivilized student who needs to learn Europe’s progressive ways and (at worst) a barbaric military danger to Europe (Neumann 1999; Morozov and Rumelli 2012). Contemporary stigmatization processes thus cannot be separated from long-standing, often racialized, labels and stereotypes: “half a millennium’s worth of representation of Russia as barbaric, Asiatic, and so on” (Neumann 1999, 112). The ambivalent feeling is highly mutual, with Russian domestic debates historically split over whether to embrace or separate from Europe and/or the West (Neumann 2016).

Moreover, in the post-Soviet period, stigmatization (rather than “othering”) is an appropriate lens for the Russian–Western relationship. During the Cold War, there was no expectation that the Soviet Union would realize liberal–democratic norms. After its collapse, however, the liberal “normal” became dominant, putting the expectation on post-communist states to “normalize” (however qualified this expectation may have been). Given that this “normal” had largely been defined against the Soviet, Communist, undemocratic, and illiberal “other” (Clark 2001, 1–11), Russia’s (and others’) very recent Soviet past was in itself an enduring source of stigma, seen as something that should be thoroughly left behind and an explanation for persistent deficiencies on the path toward liberal–democratic normality. For example, in the 1999–2000 Russian parliamentary and presidential elections, seen as the high point of Russian democratic development by contemporary observers, election monitors put any “lingering weaknesses” in Russian democracy down to “vestiges of Soviet-style thinking” (OSCE/ODIHR 2000b, 5; see also 2000a, 4). This demonstrates Goffman’s (1963, 19–20) point that a person or entity that overcomes stigma will usually not be seen as fully “normal” but rather as someone or something that had a stigma—a dry alcoholic, a post-Soviet country.

Two important caveats are in order. First, analyzing Russia as a stigmatized actor contesting processes of liberal ordering is in no way meant to condone or justify Russian actions, in the same way that linking stigmatization and liberal ordering is not meant to imply a normative stance. When managing its own stigmas from its liminal position in the international status hierarchy, the Russian government has frequently kicked both up and down, simultaneously counter-stigmatizing the West and stigmatizing and repressing vulnerable domestic groups and neighboring states. At no point has this been more visible than during its brutal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine (ongoing at the time of writing), which has both rightfully earned it pariah status as an aggressor internationally and ended any remaining semblance of free debate domestically. While this article does not deal specifically with the stigma of aggression (related more to the “Westphalian” principles mentioned by Tourinho than liberal ones, despite several overlaps), and thus does not cover events such as the annexation of Crimea, the increasingly confrontational dynamic in the fields of democracy and human rights also provides context for its more aggressive stance. Second, given space constraints it is not possible to give an exhaustive account of domestic Russian debates on how to manage the country’s stigmas. The focus is thus primarily on the dominant state position and the change in approach over time.

**The 1990s: De-Stigmatization, Diffuse Stigmatization, and Stigma Acceptance**

Throughout the 1990s, Russia fledgling liberal–capitalist democracy was deemed imperfect but moving in the right direction by most international observers. Dubbed “transitology” (closely related to the Political Science field of “transitology”; see Carothers 2002), this view held that dubiously democratic events such as President Boris Yeltsin’s re-election in 1996 were necessary evils on the road to liberal democracy (Treisman 2011, 60–61; Monaghan 2016). Despite his faults, Yeltsin was considered a true democrat and reformer at heart and a bulwark against a return to the Soviet past, as indicated by sympathetic statements by Western politicians during both the 1994–1996 Chechen War, highlighting Yeltsin’s commitment to democratic and market-oriented reforms, and upon his sudden retirement in 1999 (e.g., Clinton and Kohl 1995; Clinton 1999). Russia was partially “de-stigmatized” (Smetana 2020), invited to join clubs and organizations such as the G7 and the Council of Europe and cooperate with the EU and NATO, but still kept at arm’s length, for example by being denied entry to the economic side of the G7. There was thus also diffuse stigmatization, expressed through the view that Russia had to “catch up” with the liberal West after its years of Soviet aberration (see quotes from the 1999–2000 election cycle above).

This was accompanied by a dominant stigmatization strategy of stigma acceptance, with Yeltsin and his team broadly accepting that Russia should indeed become a “normal” liberal–democratic market economy, against more critical voices (Gaidar 2003). This view broadly persisted in the late 1990s despite the exit of many of the most eager “reformers” from government, increasing tensions with the West over issues such as the 1998–1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo and the 1998 Russian financial crisis indicating the potential pitfalls of an open economy in transition. Indeed, this stigma acceptance was evident even in President Vladimir Putin’s inauguration speech in 2000, in which he claimed the democratic turnover of power “proved that Russia is becoming a modern democratic state” and called on Russia to “guard what we have gained, … promote and protect democracy” (Putin 2000), thereby echoing international observers’ assessment of the 1999–2000 elections as “benchmarks” or “milestones” in Russia’s democratic development (Clinton 2000; U.S. Department of State 2000). This sort of teleological language demonstrates the aspect of liberal ordering discussed above, with liberal democracy as the end-state toward which all states were or should be traveling.

In sum, the 1990s’ mix of partial de-stigmatization, diffuse stigmatization, and stigma acceptance from Russian leaders meant that processes of liberal ordering and normative cohesion were reinforced. Russia’s actual liberal–democratic credentials may have been questionable—Yeltsin’s “mediatic spectacle” was arguably no more genuinely democratic than the “sterile technocratic administration” that would follow under Putin and Dmitry Medvedev in the 2000s.
The 2000s and “Sovereign Democracy”: Stigma Rejection and Counter-Stigmatization, Increasingly Direct Stigmatization

The 2000s saw a gradual change in the above dynamic, as Russia both became increasingly directly stigmatized for moving in the wrong direction in key areas and the Putin government moved toward a stigma-rejection strategy mixed with counter-stigmatization.

The prime example of the stigma-rejection approach was the idea of “sovereign democracy” that the Russian government promoted around the mid-2000s. This followed severe criticism of the 2003 parliamentary and 2004 presidential elections, in which Putin and his circle strengthened its grip on power and after which election observers emphasized how Russia’s democracy was no longer “real,” “true,” “meaningful,” or “genuine” (OSCE 2003; OSCE/ODIHR 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). The term sovereign democracy, coined by “political technologist” Vladislav Surkov, was never used explicitly by Putin, but components of the idea were expressed in several of his speeches, notably his annual address to Russia’s legislature in 2005 (Morozov 2008; see also Morris 2018). What makes it interesting from a stigma-management perspective was the assertion that Russia was still democratic but democratic in its own sovereign way: “The democratic road we have chosen is independent in nature, a road along which we move ahead, … taking into account our own specific internal circumstances” (Putin 2005). This echoed the teleological language mentioned above, but with the twist that the speed and specific path of the move toward the democratic telos was something for Russia to decide. The stigma of being undemocratic was thus acknowledged but not as applied to the Russian self—a stigma-rejection approach.

This denial of being undemocratic continued to be a feature of Russian official discourse despite increasingly authoritarian and sham-democratic practices, culminating in the 2020 vote on constitutional amendments that reset the clock on Putin’s presidential term limits, the poisoning of Alexei Navalny, the increasing repression surrounding the 2021 parliamentary elections, and the above-mentioned crackdown on dissent following the invasion of Ukraine. As a result, Russia was increasingly labeled as authoritarian. To hide and/or counter information about discreditable undemocratic behavior, the Russian government made sure that Western election monitors either were not allowed or had too restrictive a mandate to properly carry out their work, and funded alternative election monitors from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), who consistently reached the opposite conclusion to their Western counterparts as to the democratic legitimacy of elections across Eurasia (Cooley 2015). It is thus easy to be cynical about the Russian claim to be democratic in its own sovereign way. But, given that Putin’s legitimacy in the 2000s was primarily built on contrasting his rule’s supposed “stability” with the “democratic chaos” of the 1990s, it was noteworthy that he and his government kept referring to the idea of democracy, demonstrating its status as “normal” international behavior any deviation from which had to be justified and explained (Morozov 2008, 156). The relativization of democratic standards of this stigma-rejection approach almost certainly served to undermine the norm of democracy, but it was not a wholesale rejection of the norm.

Combined with this stigma-rejection approach related to Russia’s own democratic credentials, the 2000s also saw an increasing counter-stigmatization of what the Russian government deemed an “undemocratic” Western dominance of international relations and thus Western “double standards,” and its attempts to “teach” others about democracy. This was fueled primarily by irritation over Western encouragement of the early 2000s’ color revolutions, particularly the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the 2003 intervention in Iraq and subsequent attempts to justify it based on the supposed democratization of the country. As the Orange Revolution unfolded, Putin protested that Ukraine “does not need to be taught [about democracy]” (Putin 2004a). Seeking to discredit Western countries by drawing attention to their colonial legacy, he also stated that he did not “want a situation where you would have first class people able to live according to stable and democratic laws, while second class people get told by well-intentioned gentlemen in pith helmets what political course to follow” (Putin 2004b). This theme came out strongly in Putin’s infamous 2007 address to the Munich Security Conference. Lamenting the “unipolar world,” Putin argued that such a world “has nothing in common with democracy. Because … democracy is the power of the majority in light of the interests and opinions of the minority. Incidentally, [we] are constantly being taught about democracy. But for some reason those who teach us do not want to learn themselves” (Putin 2007). Casting Russia as part of a silent majority being “taught” by the dominant minority (i.e., the United States and EU) recalls Goffman’s original conception of in-group alignment, although in practice Russia had been reluctant to fully embrace its supposed in-group in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and other forums, instead seeking respect (if not recognition) from Western actors. This has changed post-2014 (Salzman 2019), but for now the message was one of “discrediting the disinstructors” (Meisenbach 2010), focusing on the West’s supposedly dubious democratic credentials to undermine claims about the normality of liberal democracy and the desirability of its spread. This would develop further in the 2010s.

The 2010s and “Traditional Values”: Direct Stigmatization and Counter-Stigmatization

In the past decade, Russian stigma management has become more proactive and confrontational, moving toward counter-stigmatization as the default option. This has happened concurrently with an increase in direct stigmatization of Russia, driven in part by its more confrontational forms of stigma management. This spiral of stigmatization and counter-stigmatization has contributed to the overall crisis of liberal ordering.

The central plank of Russia’s counter-stigmatization strategy has been the adoption and amplification by Putin and the Russian authorities of the existing narratives about foreign interference in Russian politics and the supposedly corrosive influence of the decadent, liberal West on “traditional values” in Russia and elsewhere. This started in earnest after Putin’s return to the presidency in 2011–2012 and the repression of antigovernment protests that accompanied the parliamentary and presidential elections in those years—protests that Putin accused Hillary Clinton and the US State Department of orchestrating after Clinton had publicly expressed her solidarity with the “Russian people” against its unaccountable leaders (Clinton 2011; Putin 2011). The law requiring NGOs receiving foreign funding to register as “foreign agents” was passed in July 2012 (it was since expanded to include individuals and media outlets, with its use intensifying rapidly in 2020–2021) and the federal
law “for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values” (dubbed the “gay propaganda law”) in June 2013, both prompting heavy international criticism (Bartenev 2017; Skibo 2017). In the 2012 judgment against the members of the feminist punk rock group Pussy Riot for staging a “punk prayer” in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior, the court noted that “feminism is incompatible with social relations in Russia that are historically based on a religious worldview” (Sharafutdinova 2014, 616). In speeches, Putin lambasted the “aggressive export” of Western secular, liberal values that had supposedly led to a “profound demographic and moral crisis” in the West—a “destruction of traditional values from above,” and claimed there were “more and more people in the world who support our position on defending traditional values,” thereby both wearing the supposed stigma of non-liberal values as an emblem of pride and invoking a “counter-audience” of conservative “normals” (Putin 2013a, 2013b; see also e.g. Barber and Foy 2019; Putin 2021). In the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), Russia (member from 2006 to 2016) and other like-minded states passed resolutions on “promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms through a better understanding of traditional values of humankind” and on the need to protect the family as “the natural and fundamental group of society,” subtly undermining the stigma of non-liberal values and making “traditional values” part of the human rights “normal,” against the opposition of mostly Western states (UN Human Rights Council 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015).

Understanding the “traditional values” campaign as a case of stigma management and counter-stigmatization allows us to see how identity management and norm contestation are deeply intertwined. Gulnaz Sharafutdinova has dubbed Russia’s conservative turn since 2012 a move from sovereign democracy to “sovereign morality” and emphasized the international resonance of this originally domestic agenda: “[w]hat was initially a domestic strategy turned into an internationally oriented discourse, as Putin took upon himself the mantle of the champion of conservative values worldwide” (Sharafutdinova 2014, 616). Russia’s new positioning gave it natural allies both in other governments opposed to gender equality, LGBT* (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) rights or the broader liberal rights agenda, and in conservative, nativist movements within the West opposed to their elites’ supposed “liberal social policies and multiculturalism” (Neumann 2016, 175), including far-right parties across Europe (Shekhovtsov 2017). In the same way that such parties positioned themselves domestically as the “true” protectors of “real” European (usually Christian, frequently national) values to reject or evade stigmas of racism, intolerance and backwardness, and counter-stigmatized national elites for supposedly failing to protect their “real” identities, Russia’s government positioned itself as the leader of a silent majority of “normals” against the “deviant” liberal West. In both cases, the actors seized on a stigma as an emblem of pride and counter-stigmatized the supposed “audience of normals,” thereby undermining normative cohesion and upsetting the processes of liberal ordering.

The result of this more confrontational form of stigma management for Russia has been decidedly mixed, bringing more rather than less opprobrium its way. Combined with inter alia its electoral interference and aggression in Ukraine, Russia’s promotion of “illiberal” values has led to it being singled out as perhaps the main threat to “Western democracy” and liberal order in liberal Western discourse. In line with the teleological aspect of liberal ordering mentioned earlier, the rejection of liberal “progress” in favor of an open embrace of traditional, conservative values has brought more direct stigmatization of Russia, bordering on “othering,” rather than simply diffuse stigmatization for being behind on its journey toward normality. However, the Russian government has seemed to care less and less about such stigmatization. Instead of accepting its stigmas and seeking to achieve “normality” as a liberal democratic country, it has chosen to double down on its conservative, sovereign path and seek recognition instead from the global, transnational audience of like-minded states, governments and populations similarly opposed to the liberal “normal,” including groups in the West.

The Causes of Changing Stigma Dynamics

This analysis has implications for a general account of stigma dynamics. Several questions arise, including whether the changes in stigma dynamics (primarily Russia’s changing stigma-management approach) were caused by factors “internal” or “external” to the stigmatization process, under what conditions different stigma-management approaches are likely to be adopted, and whether such conditions are becoming more or less prominent in contemporary international relations. While the article cannot provide conclusive answers to these questions based on the analysis of the Russian case alone, this section offers some initial responses and pointers for further research.

The most obvious external factors that could be the cause of a change in dynamics are, first, a change in material conditions and power balances and, second, changes at the domestic level. In the Russian case, the more confrontational forms of stigma management since around 2000 could simply be explained by the combination of the relatively Western-skeptic Putin’s ascent to power and the oil-fueled boom in the Russian economy in the 2000s, allowing for a more independent stance on the world stage. Similarly, one could discern a general pattern of Western actors de-stigmatizing a relatively materially weak Russia in the 1990s and increasingly directly stigmatizing a stronger Russia in the 2000s and 2010s. Factors such as these are clearly part of the story, but they cannot explain some key dynamics, for example, the Russian persistence with and ramping up of counter-stigmatization in the 2010s despite worsening economic times, or the relatively stronger stigmatization directed at Russia than, say, China, particularly in Europe (although here relative material proximity and events such as the Crimean annexation clearly play a role). Moreover, other examples, such as Cuba’s persistent counter-stigmatization of the United States and the broader capitalist world Adler-Nissen (2014b), suggest that actors’ choice of stigma-management approach is not simply a function of relative material power.

One factor common to the Cuban and Russian cases that almost certainly facilitates the choice of a counter-stigmatization strategy is the presence of a clear alternative “counter-audience.” For Cuba during the Cold War, this was both the communist “second world” and the more ideologically diverse but generally anti-imperialist “third world.” For the Russian leadership, it has increasingly become both anti-/illiberal governments around the world, as demonstrated by the UNHRC resolutions mentioned above, and like-minded movements on the domestic level across Europe and elsewhere. In the same way that the solidarity of counter-cultural movements in the past enabled individuals to mediate and mitigate their stigma, the strength in the numbers of illiberal movements and governments
(which have been on the rise in recent years) can provide a way for these actors to assert their own version of normality against a (real or perceived) dominant liberal “normal.” There is much debate about the ideological cohesion of illiberal movements such as the “New Right,” with some pointing to a relatively coherent “reactionary internationalism” constituted around identity inequalities (de Orellana and Michelsen 2019), which certainly fits with the Russian emphasis on “traditional” values (see also Keating and Kaczmarska 2019 on the attractiveness of this emphasis in certain circles). What a stigmatization lens helps to see is how ideological cohesion is not always necessary for a counter-audience to form—as Goffman notes, the process and its participants are fluid, with different actors being cast in different roles in different times and places. Either way, the existence of an increasing counter-audience asserting an alternative “normality” probably increases the likelihood of actors opposed to liberal norms adopting a counter-stigmatization approach.

This raises a final point, which is that there appears to be a certain internal logic to the stigma dynamic process that can lead to change without “external” factors intervening. The opportunity for contestation is to a large extent built into the stigmatization process, with all stigma-management approaches available to actors as strategies to pursue, at least in theory. A change in stigma-management approach can thus itself change the dynamic. There is also good reason to believe that stigmatization dynamics themselves can contribute to changes in stigma-management approaches—as noted above, there is an increasing realization in work on liberal order that the very processes of ordering themselves, of which stigmatization is constitutive, can have the “dialectical” effect of breeding resentment and resistance. In the Russian case, it certainly seems to be the case that the turn toward more confrontational stigma-management approaches in the 2000s and 2010s was fueled in large part by resentment, the perception that Russia was not being given its rightful due despite a decade of sometimes painful transformation toward the liberal–democratic “normal” and that the West did not itself live up to the norms it imposed on others. Whether this perception was justified or not is beside the point—once it became a social fact and helped fuel the turn toward stigma rejection and counter-stigmatization, it triggered increasingly direct stigmatization, which in turn was met with increased resentment. Such a “negative spiral” of stigmatization and counter-stigmatization is hard to break out of once underway, as even partial de-stigmatizing moves like the attempted “reset” in US-Russian relations under President Obama will have a hard time addressing all the built-up resentment.

If the analysis above is right, then it may indeed be that the conditions for more confrontational stigma-management strategies vis-à-vis liberal ordering are becoming more prominent in contemporary international relations. The larger the inter-/transnational illiberal “counter-audience” becomes, the more it may facilitate the adoption of counter-stigmatization, and the more counter-stigmatization is adopted, the more the dynamic changes toward a polarization between different versions of “normality.” Further research is needed in order to provide more robust findings on these points.

Conclusion

This article has made two contributions. Primarily, to the literature on stigma in international relations it has added a distinction between diffuse and direct stigmatization and a broader focus on stigma dynamics—the relational unfolding of stigmatization processes depending on the various approaches taken both by the stigmatized and by the “audience of normals.” Secondarily, to work on the crisis of liberal order it has provided an example of the kind of relational contestation of liberal ordering that is becoming more acknowledged in the literature, explored through the case of Russian stigma management vis-à-vis liberal norms since the 1990s. Together, the article has proposed that stigmatization is a constitutive dynamic of liberal ordering and that a focus on changing stigma dynamics can provide a fruitful way of conceptualizing the supposed crisis of liberal ordering, demonstrating how the contestation of liberal norms and institutions is inextricably linked to questions of identity and identity management and what it means to be a “normal” state in international society.

What does this mean for the future of liberal ordering? Seeing liberal ordering as a process shows how developments such as the crisis of liberal order are always relative, frequently gradual, and potentially open to reversal, bound up in ongoing processes of relative ordering and disordering. The increasing counter-stigmatization of liberal principles and positive identification of governments across the world with other “illiberals” is certainly contributing to the undermining of normative cohesion in international society, although it is notable that this opposition is primarily about particular parts of the liberal–democratic “normal” such as democracy and liberal human rights. While this article has focused on these two aspects and so cannot draw firm conclusions, there would seem to be far less contestation of its free-market capitalist component. The growth of an illiberal “counter-audience” through the 2000s and 2010s (from Hungary, Poland, and Russia to India, the Philippines, Brazil, and the United States) also suggests that it makes direct stigmatization over illiberal transgressions less likely to succeed in enforcing liberal norms, as there is a ready-made and visible alternative group for states to identify with, particularly if the analysis above about the role of a ready-made “counter-audience” is correct. Rather than a new dominant “normal” emerging, then, it is likely that different “normals” will co-exist uneasily, with stigmatization processes failing to enforce one or the other. Thus, while Zarakol (2014) is right that stigmatization can hold the world together, it can also make it fall apart when actors seek to manage their stigmas in more confrontational ways.

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