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„Perception and Relative Power: Understanding Russian Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century "

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On my honour as a student of the Diplomatische Akademie Wien, I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on it.

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Introduction

Let us beware, in future, of wholly condemning an entire people and wholly exculpating others. Let us remember that the great moral issues, on which civilization is going to stand or fall, cut across all military and ideological borders, across peoples, classes, and regimes — across, in fact, the make-up of the human individual himself. No other people, as a whole, is our enemy. No people at all — not even ourselves — is entirely our friend.

George Kennan

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Following the end of the Second World War, George Kennan was extensively writing about how a healthy and long-lasting international order can only be built if the interests of different international actors are soberly assessed and well-known. It might be strange to find that the above-quoted lines come from the author considered to be the ideational creator of the United States' policy and strategy of "containment". However, Kennan also stressed how prejudice and laziness of thought might endanger peace and states' conduct of foreign policy. In *Russia and the West Under Lenin and Stalin*, Kennan devotes a chapter to the Treaty of Rapallo, signed between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922. Therein he details how the USSR, represented by its capable and workaholic Foreign Minister Georgi Chicherin (215-216), managed to persuade Germany to sign a bilateral treaty whereby the two parties mutually renounced "financial claims of all sorts" (220). All of this happened under the nose of French and British delegations. Following the conclusion of the treaty, the British and the French public were absolutely stupefied and appalled: a "call to the colours" was being talked about in France, whereas the British called the bilateral Soviet-German treaty 'an open defiance and studied insult to the Entente Powers' (221), forgetting that Russia was a member of the Entente Powers. The Rapallo Treaty demonstrated how the governments and delegations of Britain and France, by putting forth severe demands on Germany and by isolating the USSR, were not able – at that time – to create a stable international order. Instead, since the system's architects were not willing to accommodate the two revisionist powers, the two, not seeing any other way forward, came together in order to further their own interests.

In April 2019, Professor Tazha Varkey Paul presented his newest book, *Restraining Great Powers: Soft Balancing from Empires to the Global Era* at the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna. In the accompanying lecture, Paul touched upon the problem of integrating rising and resurging states into the existing international order and system. Fitting new or returning great powers into the system is not an easy task. Furthermore, as Paul stressed during the talk, these states have a poor record when it comes to changing the system peacefully since their rise has historically been accompanied by violent changes and war. Paul singled out China as the newest state with global aspirations, but he also referred repeatedly to the Russian Federation as a resurgent international actor.

Russia did truly undergo drastic changes in the last thirty years. The dissolution of the USSR, formalised in the 1991 Belovezha Accords, brought an end to one of the poles of the bipolar Cold War international system. Surprisingly, after the fall of the Soviet Union, no all-out war erupted between the former socialist republics, as was the case after the disintegration of Yugoslavia. There were conflicts such as the Tajikistani Civil War (1992-1997), but the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) is usually credited with preventing a more violent outcome.

Whereas the end of the twentieth century was not kind on Russia, the first years of the twenty-first century seemed like a new beginning. Having overcome the debilitating crises of the nineties, The Russian Federation seemed ready to re-emerge on the international stage under the strong leadership of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. Just like in the early stages of the Yeltsin and Kozyrev years, one of the highest priorities of the new Russian state was the establishment of friendly relations with the Western countries. It should therefore not come as a surprise that, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, President Putin extended his support for the anti-terrorist coalition and was the first foreign leader to offer his condolences to his American counterpart, George W. Bush. A further step in the improvement of Russo-Western relations was taken when, in 2002, Putin signed the “NATO-Russia Relations: A New Quality” document, a declaration through which Russia was granted privileged partnership status. For a time, it seemed that this security arrangement heralded an age of fruitful cooperation, as envisaged by Maxim Litvinov, former People’s Commissar of Foreign Affairs, who was working on establishing a

collective security framework encompassing both the USSR and the European Great Powers before the outbreak of the Second World War.

However, this brief détente eventually came to an end when Russia invaded Georgia in 2008. It is interesting to note that Russia and NATO continued their formal cooperation, even agreeing on making "the NATO-Russia Council a more efficient vehicle for cooperation". It was ultimately the Russian invasion and subsequent annexation of Crimea in 2014 which led to the termination of practical cooperation between Russia and NATO. Recent years have featured further proofs of Russian foreign policy's turn towards aggressiveness and assertiveness, such as the attack in Salisbury and the Kerch Strait clash in 2018. Professor Paul might have mentioned Russia as a resurging state which ought to be reintegrated into the international system, but General James N. Mattis explicitly identified Russia, together with China, as disruptive international actors, countries who "want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model".[1]

Is Russian foreign policy essentially and truly incompatible with that of Western countries? Winston Churchill once famously stated that "Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma". This quote is still relevant in the twenty-first century since the most recent actions of the Russian Federation preclude it from truly cooperating with Western countries. Whereas the annexation of Crimea was disapproved of by the European Union and the United States, the Russian public initially welcomed it as a positive and a justified act, the return of territory which was Russian since the times of Catherine the Great, but then needlessly 'gifted' to Ukraine by Nikita Khruschev in 1954. There was some opposition to the annexation: Andrei Zubov, a professor of philosophy at MGIMO, was fired over his stance on Crimea.[2] Churchill's quote implies different layers and levels of understanding Russia. My thesis hopes to reflect such a multi-layered understanding of Russia and its foreign policy by focusing on relative power and perception.

Professor Paul was just one of an increasing number of scholars who believe that we are slowly moving towards a multipolar international system. General Mattis stressed in his quoted letter of resignation that an international system marked by unipolarity is threatened by rising actors. In my opinion, the concept of relative power

[1] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-46644841
[2] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-professor-idUSBREA2N1BM20140324

is an excellent starting point for understanding contemporary Russian foreign policy because Russia is simultaneously powerful and weak, with the image of a "dwarf with an overgrown right arm" usually being used to illustrate its specific condition. The Russian economy reflects this duality as well: Russia was able to weather the different financial crises due to prudent monetary policy and former Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin's Stabilisation Fund initiative, which greatly bolstered Russian reserves. The reserves, according to *The Moscow Times*, are now approaching $500 billion and are reaching their highest level since 2014[3]; at the same time, Russia suffers from an overall decrease in manufacture and over-reliance on natural resources. Moreover, the sanctions regime imposed by Western countries specifically targets Russian economy by imposing restrictions on cold-weather drilling technology and on Russia's big banks by limiting their ability to access capital abroad. However, due to the state's ownership in companies which offer Russia a strategic advantage – Gazprom, big banks, *Rostec*, to name a few - the Russian Federation's relative power should not be underestimated, especially on a regional level. Moreover, Russia has shown that it has no qualms when it comes to the use of force in achieving both foreign and domestic policy goals. This is especially interesting in currently embattled areas such as Syria, even more so if we take into consideration that President Donald Trump has recently issued a withdrawal order for American forces in that country, which would leave behind only "residual ground forces". Conflicts in the Near Abroad, a Russian term for the territory of former Soviet republics, also show how Russia exerts its power beyond its borders. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is another example of a conflict in which Russia decided to intervene in order to achieve her foreign policy goal, i.e. to keep NATO outside of the region.

When it comes to the theory and methodology behind the concept of relative power, I will mostly rely on John J. Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, while occasionally referring to Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*. Mearsheimer argues therein that states must focus on power maximisation in order to achieve hegemony in an international system marked by anarchy and uncertainty of intentions (2001, 24-25; 32). Later on in the book, he makes a distinction between relative and absolute power: states motivated by the former are more sensitive to the

[3] https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/04/29/russias-april-reserves-hit-highest-level-since-2014-a65416

overall distribution of power and are always wary of how much power competing states gain, whereas states motivated by gains in absolute power only wish to accumulate power while being indifferent to other states' aims (2001, 44). In this book, Mearsheimer understands power almost exclusively in military terms. In the case of Russia and the USSR, a loss in absolute power translated into a loss in relative power. An example of this would be NATO's eastward expansion; loss in Russia's relative power vis-à-vis the West has precluded her from both prevention and retaliation. There was no Brezhnev Doctrine-style intervention at that time, but in 2014, the Russian Federation has shown that it still has teeth. Contemporary Russia has diversified its power portfolio with cyber-warfare, information control, and energy-access manipulation. Although a country with a traditionally high military expenditure, twenty-first century Russia is open to exploring other, non-kinetic avenues of military power. This part of the thesis will therefore look at how fluctuations in different aspects of power, be they military, economic, social, or 'soft power', affect the conduct of Russian foreign policy in the twenty-first century.

The second main concept that I will focus on is the perception of Russian foreign policy. I am not only interested in the actions of the Russian Federation, but also the discourse and the way in which it justifies and explains its foreign policy moves, which historical periods does it particularly refer to, which historical figures does it elevate or disparage. For example, Putin unveiled a statue of Alexander Solzhenitsyn in 2018 and held a speech in which he praised Solzhenitsyn's effort to reveal injustice and suffering in USSR.[4] The issue of perception was already put to the fore in Churchill's quote, but in order to truly see how Russian foreign policy is perceived, one must not only dive into what Russians write about themselves, but also into the discourse on Russia coming from the West. I believe that constructivism is the most useful theory of international relations when it comes to understanding perception. One of the pioneers of constructivism, Alexander Wendt, constantly refers to the relationship between the ego and alter, i.e. Russia and the West. According to Wendt, the second principle of constructivism is that "the meanings in terms of which action is organised [between different states, that is, the ego and alter] arise out of interaction" (1992, 403). The perception of Russian foreign policy, following this principle, is therefore formed not only by Russians, but also by non-Russians occupied with both

[4] https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-solzhenitsyn-true-patriot-centenary-birth/29650018.html

contemporary issues, as well as the history of the Russian state and lands. Another constructivist author on whose findings I would rely, as evident from the bibliography, is Andrei Tsygankov. In his book *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*, he approaches Russian foreign policy through the prism of social constructivism, an approach which is different from liberalism and realism in that it focuses on cultural contexts and meanings in which military and institutional constraints, or facilitators of state action, take place (2016, 14). Since the foreign policy of any country is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon, I believe that combining offensive realism with constructivism will offer a new and solid theoretical basis for understanding contemporary Russian foreign policy. In general, realism is often perceived as a static theory which is found lacking when it comes to predicting new developments in international politics. I hope to offset this flaw with constructivism's focus on dynamic identity-action relationship, cultural context, and ideational structure.

In order to facilitate my analysis of the perception of contemporary Russian foreign policy, I will frame it with the help of four traits of Russian political culture. These traits are by no means found exclusively in Russia, but there exists a scholarly consensus on the presence and historical prominence of these traits in different incarnations of the Russian state. These four traits can be found both in Russian and Western texts and sources.

The thesis will feature a chapter in which I will explore how messianism and victimhood influence Russian foreign policy. I wish to see whether Russian foreign policy is sometimes conducted solely on the basis of these two traits or are messianism and victimhood just useful rhetorical instruments which often belie a more pressing matter at hand, e.g. the debate on the withdrawal from the INF Treaty. Within this chapter, I would look at how messianism and victimhood came to be so prominent in contemporary Russia's discourse. It almost seems contradictory that such a large and powerful state puts so much emphasis on its vulnerabilities and insecurity, but, as seen from Foreign Minister Sergei Viktorovich Lavrov's 2016 article[5], the newest incarnation of the Russian states still relies heavily on the presence of an enemy at its Western border, i.e. NATO. In this chapter I would also rely on the works of Dmitri

[5] http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2124391?fbclid=IwAR3B-IPMBoHJMe9pfbvmvZnA4hpNWs7tSqky06tRx7hxVtRMFk3TI00DT5E

Trenin, the current director of the Carnegie Moscow Centre, who extensively writes and discusses the possibility of Russia escaping the burden of its history. In his book, *The End of Eurasia: Russia on the Border between Geopolitics and Globalization*, Trenin looked at the importance of borders and territory for the Russian state and concluded that the territory of the state has attained a sacred status throughout Russian history, with Russians strongly prejudiced against giving away land. This chapter will build on conclusions such as these in order to determine what kind of borders will the new(est) Russian identity require, and to find out to which extent messianism and victimhood are embedded in this new identity.

The third trait that will be discussed in the thesis is autocracy, which has a long history in Russia, hearkening back to the times of Ivan the Fourth and his *oprichiki*. The specific characteristic of Russian autocracy is its tendency to change into full-blown authoritarianism, as was the case under Stalin. Given that autocracy and authoritarianism are usually justified with security reasons, I wish to see whether Russian security is still contingent on a powerful autocratic leader acquiring as much power and land as possible. Is this just an atavistic trait retained from previous incarnations of the states and therefore irrelevant in the twenty-first century? In order to answer this question, I will analyse the structure of power around Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. Although Putin is the unavoidable centrepiece of this structure, this thesis is not primarily concerned with drawing-up a psychological profile of Russia's current president. I wish instead to take a broader look, in accordance with realist traditions, at autocracy in Russia in order to determine its advantages and disadvantages. Moreover, I will analyse how autocracy conditions the exercise of contemporary Russia's foreign policy goals. In order to do that, I will rely on the works of several authors: Ann Applebaum and Timothy Snyder, both vocal critics of Putin's regime, repeatedly criticise Putin and reveal the weaknesses of his government; Nathan Leites' seminal work *A Study of Bolshevism* will enable me to compare autocracy in two different incarnations of the Russian state; Mikhail Zygar, the former chief editor of the independent news network *Dozhd*, wrote several reports and books detailing the power networks within the Kremlin.

The fourth and final trait that I will be analysing is anti-Westernism. Does contemporary Russia adopt an *a priori* hostile stance towards Western countries and ideas? It does not seem so because we have seen that there were periods when the incum-

bent government was willing to cooperate on friendly terms with the West: the Yeltsin-Kozyrev years, as well as Putin's first presidential term (2000-2004). However, Russia is still not willing to completely adopt Western institutions and models. This chapter will explore contemporary anti-Westernism in order to see whether the current Russian state is inherently anti-Western or whether it is just a pragmatic tactic, played out for domestic and foreign policy purposes. In his book *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*, Timothy Snyder argues that pragmatical anti-Westernism is used as a smokescreen in order to mask the real threat – China. Reaching a definitive answer is complicated because Russia often adopts two-fold tactics: for example, the Nord Stream 2 project is in full swing, but, on the other hand, Russia launches cyber-attacks on Western countries while simultaneously welcoming events such as the Brexit.

In order to further my analysis of these four traits, I will rely on the works of several other prominent authors. I will extensively consult the works of Adam B. Ulam, George Kennan, Nathan Leites, and Richard Pipes. These are all renowned historians and political scientists who devoted their lives to studying different aspects of Russia and the Soviet Union. When it comes to Russian sources, I will mostly be relying on the works of Nikolay Berdyaev, Ivan Ilyin, and Yevgeny Primakov. Berdyaev's writings contain explicit references to all four traits analysed in this thesis; Ilyin seems to have made a return in contemporary Russia, with Putin even calling him his favourite philosopher; Primakov, both an academic and a statesman, left behind writings on a wide array of topics, from Stalin to NATO's eastward expansion. I have chosen these authors not only because their writings deal with messianism, victimhood, autocracy, and anti-Westernism, but also because their works enable us to look at the development of these traits over longer periods of Russian history. Although examples for reference will not be limited to any specific period, the choice of literature and authors shows that the expression of these four traits during the Soviet period is the most pertinent for this thesis.

Since this is a thesis combining historical analysis and political science, it is important to determine its scope. The main period analysed in the thesis will cover the span from 1999, when Vladimir Putin becoming the Prime Minister of Russia, until 2019. Being fully aware that President Putin is currently in his constitutionally dubious fourth term, I wish to deliver an analysis of Russian foreign policy which high-

lights some of its main characteristics over the last two decades, while simultaneously predicting and speculating what might occur towards the end of Putin's third term in 2024. In order to ease the understanding of twenty-first century Russian foreign policy, I will briefly summarise and analyse the 1990's in Russia. This decade presents an important formative period in the creation and consolidation of the contemporary Russian state. A historical analysis of the conditions and events which formed the minds of the current figures in power in Russia will enable us to better understand any future developments in Russia's foreign policy.

The fact that this thesis is based on a deductive approach does not mean that it seeks to merely ascribe the above-mentioned traits to specific events in Russia's history. Moreover, these are all abstract notions and it would be wrong to conclude that these are the main causes and drivers behind Russia's foreign policy. The main approach might be deductive, but I still want to test these traits against an empirical reality, instead of simply pigeon-holing historical events into abstract concepts.

The starting hypothesis of the thesis is that messianism, victimhood, autocracy, and anti-Westernism are still relevant concepts for analysing contemporary Russian foreign policy. Changes in Russia's relative power will be reflected in them, be it in a changing stance towards the West, framing foreign policy repercussions by using religious vocabulary, or in aggressive military behaviour in former spheres of influence. I wish to see whether Russia should be considered a twenty-first-century great power. I perceive relative power and perception as two useful concepts for explaining the so-called "soft" and "hard" bases of Russian foreign policy. Although the preconditions of power, regardless of their nature, function as the hard base, and perception of foreign policy functions as the soft base, these two bases complement each other and must therefore be observed and analysed together. Only a parallel analysis of these two concepts will enable us to fully grasp the complex phenomenon which is contemporary Russian foreign policy. By writing this thesis, I hope to contribute to a great body of scholarship on a country which has always presented a conundrum to the West but was and still is an unavoidable piece in the international system.

1) Russia's Relative Power in the Twenty-First Century

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The second decade of the twenty-first century has witnessed the return of a spectre many had thought buried: geopolitics. Having realised that the proclaimed "unipolar moment" of the United States had passed, scholars, journalists, and pundits repeatedly make claims that we are seeing a revival of geopolitics. The word itself has ominous connotations at odds with the predominant discourse of liberalism, i.e. connotations of fixed policy choices and strategies dictated by immutable factors. Images of cold and calculating statesmen – with Putin often being brought up as an example – are also associated with the word. Moreover, geopolitics also evokes a different time, when the defining trait of international politics was not cooperation, as symbolised by the two grand integration projects of the United Nations and the European Union, but competition. As a principle of international politics, competition never left, but was somewhat side-lined over the last few decades. The return of geopolitics and geopolitical thinking must therefore entail the larger and more prominent presence of competition, which will further translate into an increased pursuit of relative power.

Furthermore, the prevalence of cooperation over competition is a matter of perception. It has been pointed out that international relations theory is a discipline dominated and driven by Western authors and perspectives, that is, it "reflects political, ideological, and epistemological biases of Western or American culture" (Gunitsky & Tsygankov 2018, 386). Nevertheless, John Mearsheimer, an author from the West, castigated the assumption of "perpetual peace", which was popular in the 1990's and at the beginning of the 2000's. Going against the "reigning optimism" of the times, Mearsheimer astutely points out how the world was – and still is – full of potential hot-spots: even though the Soviet Union is gone, the U.S. still decided to maintain a strong troop presence in Europe, while the Sino-Taiwanese relations are still sore up until this day. In our time, we are witnessing many frozen conflicts, e.g. in Eastern Ukraine, Transnistria, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, which, without careful and prudent management, have the potential to (re)escalate into full-blown conflicts. I therefore agree with Mearsheimer when he says "that international politics has always been a ruthless and dangerous business, and it is likely to remain that way.

Although the intensity of their competition waxes and wanes, great powers fear each other and always compete with each other for power" (2001, 16).

In this chapter, I will utilise Mearsheimer's findings on relative power in order to ascertain whether Russia should be classified as a great power in the twenty-first century. The chapter will start with a theoretical overview of key concepts, followed by a brief historical addendum. I will then proceed to analyse and assess modern Russia's capabilities in accordance with the criteria laid out by Mearsheimer. Moreover, I will analyse how Russia augments what Mearsheimer calls "effective power" with cyber-warfare and "non-kinetic means" (Galeotti 2018, 3). I will end this chapter with a brief comment on the role of will and resolve in Russian foreign policy.

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Although I have previously mentioned that realism is seen as a somewhat static theory famously incapable of predicting new developments in international relations, the international system, as seen by offensive realism, is by no means static. The ultimate aim of states is to achieve hegemony at the expense of other competing states (Mearsheimer 2001). The corollary thereof is that there are no *status quo* powers; offensive realism ascribes an inherent dynamism to all international actors, who are always looking for ways to increase their own power, while precluding competitors from doing the same. Mearsheimer's definition of a great power is the following:

> Great powers are determined largely on the basis of their relative military capability. To qualify as a great power, a state must have sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world. The candidate need not have the capability to defeat the leading state, but it must have some reasonable prospect of turning the conflict into a war of attrition that leaves the dominant state seriously weakened, even if that dominant state ultimately wins the war. (2001, 19)

Furthermore, according to Mearsheimer, a modern great power must possess a nuclear deterrent, as well as the ability to survive a nuclear strike. This definition is true insofar one admits the central assumptions of offensive realism: a) there is a lack of a central authority above states; b) all states possess offensive capabilities, albeit to a different degree; c) states can never be absolutely sure about other states' intentions (Mearsheimer 2001, 17). However, the problem with this definition is that its main falsifiability criterion – a great power being tested in a "all-out conventional war"

– still has not been tested in the twenty-first century. That might be the reason behind Mearsheimer's decision to base most of his methodology on historical analysis and solving of historical conundrums. The development of nuclear weapons seems to have precluded traditional great power competition, now that the key international players acquired the capability to seriously weaken would-be aggressors. "Conventional" forces also had to adapt their combat doctrines in order to accommodate the devastating power of the atom. Moreover, "conventional" conflicts between two competing Cold War hegemons, the US and the USSR, did not arise; we instead bore witness to a number of proxy wars wherein the two main competitors avoided direct confrontation. In the twenty-first century, great powers predominantly opt for limited warfare, greatly limiting the amount of resources expended while restraining themselves from using nuclear armaments. Russia did this in Crimea by relying, among other things, on local dissidents and her own special forces. We have yet to see a modern great power or a super-power under full mobilisation, a twenty-first century *levée en masse*.

Russia entered the twenty-first century with a handicap. In the preceding years, the Russian Federation preoccupied itself with domestic consolidation following the dissolution of the USSR. Russian Federation became the successor state of the USSR, inheriting treaty obligations, taking up the entirety of the Soviet debt, while retaining two powerful foreign policy and strategy assets: Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal and its permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council.

Nevertheless, the dissolution of the USSR was a major blow in terms of Russia's potential and actual power. The former refers to a state's population and wealth, whereas the latter refers to a state's army, land, and naval forces (Mearsheimer 2001, 49). The financial turmoil of the nineties further debilitated Russia's potential power; it culminated in 1998 when Russia defaulted on state debts by introducing a unilateral moratorium on their payment. In addition to that, the banking system stopped working. A Russian professor provided me with an appropriate anecdote – she was a schoolgirl at the time, waiting to write a mathematics exam. When her teacher arrived, he told his pupils that he had just set up a bank of his own, and that exam answers will be provided to those whose parents make a deposit in his bank. With the waning hold of the Soviet systems of power and security, the thieves' world

(*воровской мир*) steadily increased its foothold in Russian society, contributing to the further “interpenetration of organised crime and politics” (Sakwa 1996, 71).

Such chaos was accompanied by a sharp decline in GDP (roughly 40%), steep fall in industrial production, and rapidly declining real incomes. In addition to that, Post-Soviet Russia was simultaneously going through a sweeping constitutional reform. The foundations of the constitution were presented: old Soviet institutions were replaced by the new bicameral legislature, with the lower chamber, the State Duma, being elected on a proportional basis, and the upper, the Federation Council, being made up of elected presidents of Russia’s republics and the heads of regional administrations (Sakwa 1996, 57).

All of the above led Yevgeny Primakov to conclude that the events of the 1990’s brought Russia down from her position as a world-class state (2018, 193-194). However, in Primakov’s opinion, the weakening of Russia and the end of the Cold War had already signalled a paradigm shift in international relations, in which the category of super-powers (*сверхдержавы*) would be rendered irrelevant, as the international system takes a turn towards multipolarity. Moreover, American financial supremacy and unipolarity had been inflicted a death blow (*смертельный удар*) by the 2008 financial crisis (Primakov 2018, 197).

The first decades of post-Soviet Russia demonstrate how a state’s loss of power will not only affect the international balance of power, but also its own identity, forcing it to rethink and re-legitimise itself. Whenever states undergo drastic changes, their leaders reach into the past for inspiration or emulation. One of Russia’s main problems was a major loss of land territory, on which fourteen other independent states were now situated. Russia could no longer be easily equated with Eurasia, i.e. the heartland of the world, at least not as easily as the Soviet Union was. It is therefore interesting to note that it is exactly Eurasia, that is, re-establishing Russian dominance over Eurasia, which is the most coveted goal of radical Russian thinkers such as Alexander Dugin and Alexander Prokhanov. The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), emulating the aims of the EU, might also been seen as an attempt of reclaiming Eurasia.

However, both Dugin and Prokhanov are radical figures who have had little to no influence on the conduct of modern Russia’s foreign policy. Vladimir Putin might

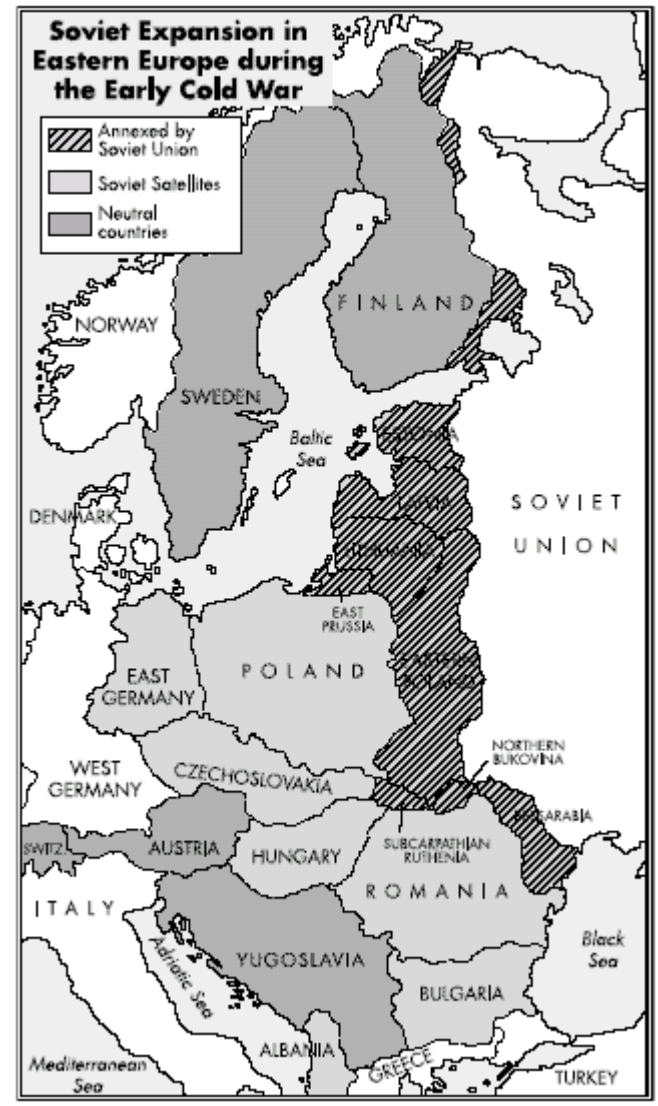
praise Prokhanov's work and ideas[6]; Alexander Dugin might be called 'Putin's Brain'[7]; it is, however, much more likely that the deed preceded the thought, i.e. that the main motivation behind a certain foreign policy decision – e.g. the invasion of Crimea – was not a stepping stone in the grand plan of establishing 'the Fifth Empire', but an action motivated by a practical concern, which in this case would be the boosting of Putin's domestic popularity ratings and establishing security hegemony on the Black Sea. Dugin and Prokhanov are by no means 'lodestars' guiding Putin's thinking and actions (Galeotti 2019, 67-70). Foreign policy is not a monocausal phenomenon which might be grasped if one finds a proper thinker whose ideas seemingly cut through the Gordian Knot of foreign policy motivation.

Having made a small digression into radical post-Soviet legitimizing ideologies, we can return to the aforementioned loss of territory, a pertinent practical problem because, historically, Russia has been relying on accumulating territory as a security strategy. It is often said that Russia's biggest geopolitical weakness is the fact that she is not an island. The country has never enjoyed the protection of the oceans, like the United States, or of the English Channel, like the United Kingdom. Great bodies of water are relevant defensive factors because even though they do not present a hindrance to transportation itself, they greatly reduce "an army's power projection capability" (Mearsheimer 2001, 100). Even though Russia was never a thallasocratic power, she did not ignore the importance of navies: one must only remember Peter the Great and his Azov Campaign, as well as his attempts to establish Russian naval presence in the Baltic Sea by bolstering shipbuilding in Archangelsk. There is also a famous saying attributed to Alexander the III, who proclaimed that "*У России есть только два союзника: её армия и флот*". The Russian Federation is currently developing its capabilities and capitalising on its sea presence in the Arctic, while simultaneously exploiting the environmental conditions brought about by global warming. Nothing embodies the supremacy of Russia in the Arctic better than its fleet of icebreakers, with the recently launched *Ural* representing the latest addition to *Rosatomflot*'s roster of mighty machines ploughing through the Arctic ice to make room for the highly profitable Northern Sea Route.

[6] https://www.timesofisrael.com/putin-praises-achievements-of-ultra-nationalist-anti-semitic-writer/
[7] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-03-31/putins-brain

Returning to the land, it is known that even since the time of the Muscovy, Russia has been trying to counteract her geopolitical weakness and make up for her lack of the “stopping power of water” by increasing her territorial possessions, which, with time, resulted in Russia becoming one of the strongest tellurocratic powers. Despite the newest developments in air, sea, and cyber-warfare, land power seems to stubbornly maintain its relevance in great power politics. It was the Soviet Army which was feared by the Western European countries during the Cold War. More importantly, armies are yet to be replaced as the main conquering military instruments; according to Mearsheimer, they are best suited for acquiring new land territory. Dmitri Trenin explains the interrelation of different state incarnations and their respective territorial possessions with the use of different models of explaining territorial acquisition. The “strategic borders” model (Trenin 2001, 56) reiterates the importance of obtaining crucial strategic possessions for the Russian state. These strategic areas and points have survived several incarnations of the state as they became a permanent part of the country’s national interest. As already mentioned, naval bases stationed on Crimea have ensured Russia’s strong strategic position on the Black Sea; Ukraine and Belarus have served as expansive land buffers whose purpose was to hinder and delay land assaults against the European parts of Russia, but also to provide easily traversable land routes for Russian armies moving in the opposite direction. For example, having renounced its claims for the territories of the Baltic states, Finland, Ukraine, Belarus, and the Kars Oblast in the Brest-Litovsk Agreement, the USSR made reclamation of these territories a strategic priority in the interwar years.

Map 1. Adapted from: Mearsheimer, John J. 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company.



The Russian Federation, however, was not able to implement this strategy. What was once the land empire of the Soviet Union was broken up into fifteen newly independent states, with some former socialist republics, such as the Baltic states, making integration with Western institutions a top foreign policy concern. After the events of Euromaidan, it was clear that large parts of the Ukrainian population desired a similar foreign policy. The EU-Georgia Association Agreement further demonstrates how former parts of the empire have attained a will of its own. However, losing territory, only to reclaim it later is nothing new for the Russian state: one only has to think of the aftermath of the Crimean War and the already mentioned Brest-Litovsk affair. Believing in Russia's phoenix-like capabilities was a sentiment shared by Ilyin: 'With

each attempt to divide Russia and after each disintegration it restores itself again by the mysterious ancient power of its spiritual identity' (Trenin 2001, 87). This 'phoenix model', however, "pays scant attention to the new developments, and unduly favours continuity over discontinuity" (Trenin 2001, 87). In the 1990's, the phoenix did not take off again.

Due to the former imperial possessions' pursuance of independent foreign policies, it is highly unlikely that Russia will manage to reclaim her former possessions, some of which are now firmly entrenched in Western international institutions. Changes in Russia's power, i.e. her potential and actual power, coupled with structural changes of the international system, further make this course of action highly unlikely. In the words of Dmitri Trenin, "Post-Soviet Russia has gone through one of the most stunning demilitarization processes in history" (Trenin 2011, 75), with its military presence in retreat from Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Cuba, and Vietnam. Trenin is an insightful author whose works put to the fore Russia's inability to transition from an empire into either a nation-state or a 'normal' great power. This inability has resulted in a "gulf between its [Russian] aspirations and capacities" (Sakwa 1996, 299). Trenin, however, argues in a direction opposite of Mearsheimer by claiming that military power is not the main determinant of a modern state's overall power; the benefits of economic, scientific, financial, and technological power now overshadow those of military power (Trenin 2011, 75). It is important to note that Trenin wrote these lines before the invasion of Crimea, an event during which Russia mobilised all of the above-mentioned avenues of power and demonstrated that military power cannot be completely replaced as a strategic variable.

Russian military policy underwent radical changes in the early 2000's. In contrast to the weak results of the 1990's, such as the questionable performance in the First Chechen War, the Russian military managed to end the Second Chechen War and to launch a relatively efficient, five-day offensive against Georgia in 2008. This year marks an important watershed moment and is often singled out as a crucial period in which the reforms of the Russian military began. The reforms, initiated by the then-Minister of Defense, Anatoly Serdyukov, eventually led to the replacement of the system of military districts originating in the 1870's with a system of four regional command centres and the transformation of the former headquarters of the army, navy, and air force into the elements of the General Staff (Trenin 2011, 76-77). This

watershed moment had the good fortune of coinciding with favourable economic conditions, when the price of oil was at an all-time high (Tooze 2018, 221), only to soon be counteracted by the 2008 financial crash. However, in spite of the economic crisis, “Russia in 2009 embarked on a multiyear rearmament programme”; moreover, the new rearmament programme was accompanied by a new doctrine which, for the first time, did not include plans for large conventional wars against NATO or China (Trenin 2011, 76), although one must acknowledge that Russia does have the nuclear capability to hold certain parts of Europe hostage.

Another factor of military power, according to Mearsheimer, is the population of a country. In this respect, Russia’s long-term prospects are declining. According to a demographic data sheet put together by the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (*РАНХиГС*), the Federal State Statistics Service (*Федеральная служба государственной статистики*), and the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, Russia’s population is facing a potential decline from 146 million inhabitants in 2018 to 131 million in 2050. The average population age estimates suggest an increase from 39,2 years in 2018, to 43, 9 in 2050. This is an estimated absolute loss for Russia, but, since the effective power of a state “is ultimately a function of its military forces and how they compare with the military forces of rival states” (Mearsheimer 2001, 59), one would have to assess the same trends for Russia’s rivals in the next few decades.

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The long-term population decline and cuts in military expenditure have, however, little relevance on a regional level, because Russia is still militarily more powerful than all of her bordering countries save the US and China. Russia’s “mobilizable wealth”, a term denoting the “economic resources a state has at its disposal to build military forces” (Mearsheimer 2001, 64), still overshadows the mobilizable wealth of other post-Soviet states. One should therefore look at most prominent instance in which contemporary Russia exercised its actual power – the 2014 invasion of Ukraine. The central topic of this part of the thesis is the role of “non-material factors” (Mearsheimer 2001, 61), such as strategy, intelligence, and resolve. These factors demonstrate that “power realities do not always reflect the hierarchy of wealth” (Mearsheimer 2001, 70), as Russia, by invading Crimea, managed to disrupt the

plans of the EU and NATO, who, according to Mearsheimer's criteria, should be much stronger international actors than Russia alone.

The whole conflict has an intricate pre-history; and I would like to briefly look at two instances in which one can observe the dynamics of relative power in action. The first of these happened in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, which did not spare Ukraine. The start of the crisis halted the credit flow, on which Ukraine had been relying since the 2004 revolution; the decline in global investment had a debilitating impact on Ukraine's steel exports; industrial output was falling at an annual rate of 34%. All of the above ultimately played a role in Ukraine's decision to approach the IMF and sign up for a $16.4 billion loan package (Tooze 2018, 237). This was a major impact for Ukraine's potential power, which was only made worse when a 2009 dispute with the Russians over unpaid gas bills led to the interruption of gas flows into Ukraine (Tooze 2018, 238). The second instance occurred during the so-called 'second dip' of the crisis, in 2013, when Ukraine was deciding between the EU and Russia. In this crucial moment, Western institutions had greater financial capabilities, but they failed to properly assess Ukraine's dire situation, whereas Russia was willing to mobilise a greater amount of its overall lower capabilities in order to wean off Ukraine from the West. The IMF offered a $5 billion loan while stipulating that $3 billion must be used to repay the 2008 loan. The EU was even more parsimonious with its offer of €610 million. Putin, on the other hand, made a more generous offer: "a gas contract on concessionary terms and a $15 billion loan" (Tooze 2018, 495), on the conditions that Ukraine joins the Eurasian Economic Union, and that the protests in Kiev are dispersed (Snyder 2019, 134). Yanukovych eventually accepted this offer. By successfully buying-off Yanukovych, Russia outmanoeuvred the West in one of the crucial geopolitical areas of interests for the both parties. Russia used its assets, namely gas exports, which, in the end, were more attractive than the EU's terms. In that specific instance, Russia did not manage to completely roll-back Western influence, but she did score a brief but significant victory.

Those were some of the most pertinent events preceding the 2014 invasion. It is interesting to note the adaptability of the Russian state when it comes to the type of power it chose to bear on Ukraine. One of the indicators of the Soviet Union decline was its inability to keep up with the technological developments and progress of the major Western economic powers (Mearsheimer 2001, 164). The majority of the cur-

rent Russian decision-makers started their careers in the declining Soviet Union and they have learned their lesson; one might say that they were excellent students since "the most remarkable element of Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine was the information war designed to undermine factuality while insisting on innocence" (Snyder 2019, 194). Conventional military forces were and are still deployed, but information- and cyber-warfare acted as effective force multipliers. Moreover, Russia sees conventional and information warfare, i.e. the kinetic and the non-kinetic as "interchangeable and mutually supporting" (Galeotti 2016, 291-292). The combination of the two reaffirmed that what Mearsheimer already observed in Russia's actions vis-à-vis Chechnya: even though it is much weaker than the USSR, the Russian Federation is nonetheless willing to fight a brutal war for the sake of its perceived vital interests (2001, 282). One of his other diagnoses, however, must be changed, for he, at the beginning of our millennium, assumed that Russia was too weak militarily to cause serious problems outside her own borders (2001, 283). The case of Crimea and South-Eastern Ukraine has demonstrated otherwise.

The game that Russia is playing in Ukraine might be a part of a wider approach called "strategic relativism" (Snyder 2019, 196), which is similar to Mearsheimer's idea of relative power gains. However, Russia had weakened Ukraine by precluding it from being integrated into Western institutions while inadvertently stoking Ukrainian nationalism to unprecedented heights. The strong role of information warfare demonstrates how Russia's aim was not only to weaken the Ukrainian state, but also to break the bonds of Ukrainian society. The aim of the Russian invasion of South-Eastern Ukraine reflects this: Moscow wanted Kiev to acknowledge Russian regional supremacy and to create controlled chaos (Galeotti 2016, 285) which could then be weaponised further. The bloody battles of the war, such as the January 2015 Russian offensives on the Donetsk airport and on the Debaltseve rail junction linking Donetsk and Luhansk, coupled with the supporting cyber warfare, reveal yet another attempt at changing the balance of power through non-Mearsheimerian methods. Carl von Clausewitz, the famous author of *On War* (*Vom Kriege*) defined war as "an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will" (*ein Akt der Gewalt, um den Gegner zur Erfüllung unseres Willens zu zwingen*) (2010, 3). Just like the Soviets who wanted to skip the bourgeoisie revolution and immediately start the proletarian one, modern Russian military leaders are exploring the possibility of technology replacing the

need for direct violence as the coercive element of war. The question is whether technology now enables one to directly target and assault the enemy's will to fight (Snyder 2019, 225). Relying on technology is also useful when it comes to mobilisation; Russian media's fictitious stories and reports of fascism and genocide in 'Novorossiya' have roused a number of volunteers to fight and die in South-Eastern Ukraine (Snyder 2019, 171). Furthermore, Dmitry Kiselev, the coordinator of Russia's international news agency and a popular TV-host, proclaimed that 'information war is now the main type of war' (Snyder 2019, 162). NATO has also recognised the growing importance of cyber-warfare, with it being recognised as a "domain of operations", on par with the domains of the land, air, and sea.[8] Russia has certainly proven itself capable in this respect. The 2007 wave of cyber-attacks in Estonia, characterised by bank blockades, spam-message swamping, and blocked news-agencies, was traced to Russian IP addresses, although it is not clear whether the Russian government was directly involved. Organised D.D.O.S. (distributed denial of service) cyber-attacks preceded the 2008 conflict with Georgia; the Georgian president lost control of his website, internet traffic was blocked, and news agencies were hacked (Snyder 2019, 80). Once again, attackers have been traced to Russian IP addresses, but no firm links to the Russian government have been established. Finally, one must mention the Russian interference in the most recent US elections, the true extent of which is still being investigated.

The information warfare campaign against Ukraine, however, is more complicated than the attacks on Estonia and Georgia. The country has suffered several cyber-offensives: in 2014, the Central Election Commission was hacked to display a false voting result, but the Ukrainians managed to spot the hack on time; in 2015, different Ukrainian media companies, together with the country's railway system and power grid, came under a cyber-attack; in 2016, hackers targeted Ukraine's railway, seaport authority, treasury, as well as the ministries of finance, infrastructure, and defence (Snyder 2019, 195). The key Russian players of the time – Vladimir Putin, Vladislav Surkov, Alexander Borodai, and Igor Girkin – all engaged in activities with the purpose of carrying out Russia's twofold strategy: they, be it through planned statements or propaganda pieces, staged an assault against factuality by denying that there was an ongoing invasion; and secondly, they repeatedly reiterated the

[8] https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_78170.htm

claim that Russia was innocent of any wrong-doing (Snyder 2019, 162). They have opened fronts both on the ground and in the ether. By opening the virtual front, Russia managed to circumvent some of its weaknesses while demonstrating its preparedness for twenty-first century warfare. Being aware that military operations are expensive, Moscow tries to target her adversaries' "will and ability to resist" (Galeotti 2016, 288) by launching political and information operations not only against Ukraine, but against the West in general.

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The last part of this chapter will explore the importance of resolve and will in determining Russia's relative power. Mearsheimer mentions "resolve" as one of the non-military factors which will influence a country's military performance and foreign policy. As illustrated previously with the buy-off of Yanukovych, Russia is more assertive and precise when it comes to defining her foreign policy goals. There was initially no consensus among Western powers when it came to the issue of Ukraine: there was talk in the United States about rallying forces for immediate aid to Kiev, but President Obama refused to escalate the situation; in Europe, in the meantime, military action was not even discussed (Tooze 2018, 488). Furthermore, motivated by commodity market concerns, the US chose not to put its full weight behind the punitive measures; albeit painful, the sanctions targeted individual persons and companies, such as Igor Sechin, the CEO of Rosneft, and did not fully exploit the structural weaknesses of Russian economy. The EU was also hesitant to impose measures which would distort the trade between itself and Russia. This might be traced to the strong economic and business connections nurtured by EU's most powerful member states and Russia: Germany is an important foreign trade partner for Russia[9]; Enel, one of Italy's largest power companies, is one of the few foreign companies with a strong presence and continuous investment in the Russian energy market; France, at the time, had two aircraft carriers on order from Russia (Tooze 2018, 499).

Following the invasion of Crimea, there has been a growing number of states within the EU advocating a tougher stance against Russia. These states lament "the EU's lack of resolve and the power capabilities needed to fend for its interests"

[9] https://russland.ahk.de/infothek/news/detail/deutsch-russischer-aussenhandel-von-januar-bis-april-2018-um-23-gestiegen/

(Bechev 2015, 341). However, one must take into consideration the structural differences between the EU and Russia which condition their respective foreign policies. The former is a global economic powerhouse, “a complex polity” whose most appealing foreign policy asset is its model of economic integration, whereas the latter is a post-imperial state which off-sets its economic weaknesses with strong military-coercive measures (Bechev 2015, 341).The two polities also rest upon and promulgate opposing legitimising narratives, but I will analyse and refer to those in the subsequent chapters. Moreover, Russia is a “sovereign actor”, who has the freedom to deploy all kinds of foreign policy instruments, but, most importantly, Russia is not skittish when it comes to the use of force; it actually “embraces military power as a paramount foreign policy instrument” (Bechev 2015, 343). On the other hand, the EU’s External Action Service (EEAS), as well as its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) are relatively new additions, whose competences are imprecisely defined and inadequate when dealing with a sovereign actor such as Russia. The CSDP is especially dubious due to the fact that Europe has, for almost all practical purposes, outsourced its security to NATO. The EU has no military presence in the post-Soviet states and is mostly present as an observer and peace facilitator in the Near Abroad (Bechev 2015, 343). The case of Ukraine has demonstrated that the attractiveness of economic models and rule of law is not enough to deter another “sovereign actor” such as Russia from deploying its military. Russia, in that respect, possesses a strong advantage over the EU.

Is Russia a twenty-first century great power? According to Mearsheimer’s criteria, the answer is yes. Russia is the regional hegemon with nuclear capabilities in the Near Abroad (*Ближний зарубеж*) who is able to mobilise both conventional forces and modern non-kinetic military instruments for the achieving foreign policy goals. Moreover, it skilfully exploited the EU’s weaknesses in the Ukraine conflict. This makes Russia an international actor whose interests and strategies must be taken into account by policy- and decision-makers.

2) Victimhood and Messianism

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At the beginning of his book *The Russian Idea* (*Русская идея*), Nikolay Berdyaev takes an unconventional approach to Russian history by stressing that he is interested in what the Creator had in mind when he created Russia, and not in what Russia had been empirically. Russians, in his eyes (2015, 5), are a people of extremes, who cause restlessness in the peoples of the West (*Это народ, вызывающий беспокойство народов Запада*); they are a people whose history is filled with terrible deeds and acts. This alone does not make them any different from other peoples who have suffered much, but, as Boris Kagarlitsky, notes, "the dramatic nature of Russian history stems from the fact that processes affecting all humanity have manifested themselves here in extreme and tragic form" (25).

It therefore comes as no surprise that the concept of victimhood was featured prominently in Russian foreign policy. The Russian Empire often justified its conquests by describing itself as a victim of other great powers who were just waiting to pounce on its territory. In my opinion, Russian foreign policy often relies on a specific dynamic: it portrays the Russian state as a victim of foreign forces, and by giving itself the status of a victim, the Russian state automatically sees its future actions as infallible and beyond the judgements of others.

Whether this is transformed into full-blown messianism is debatable, especially in twenty-first century Russia's foreign policy. Putin's foreign policy is often described through the concept of "great power pragmatism", which seemingly does not have an underlying ideology, and is only guided by considerations of Russian national interest. This might have been somewhat mellowed during Dmitri Medvedev's presidential stint but has returned in Putin's third term. The current incarnation of the Russian state, in my opinion, does not have a defined *mission civilisatrice*, but it does have a strong "notion of the historical mission of the Russian nation" (Ulam 1968, 5). In this chapter I will demonstrate how contemporary Russia employs victimhood and messianism in order to create a "narrative of its historical calling" (Chaudet, Parmentier, and Pélopides 2009, 78).

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In 1988, Joseph Brodsky, a Russian dissident and poet born in the Soviet Union, held a speech at the University of Michigan.[10] One of the topics of his speech was the issue of victimhood; Brodsky, even though exiled to the Russian north by the Soviet authorities, advised the young graduates to avoid seeing themselves as victims. The sweetness of proclaiming yourself a victim, he said, undermines a person's ability to change anything. He also added that the status of a victim "commands compassion, confers distinction, and whole nations and continents bask in the murk of mental discounts advertised as the victim's conscience". The poet proved his farsightedness, for the first leaders of the Russian federation, e.g. Boris Yeltsin, staunchly believed that Russia had suffered greatly in the Soviet Union, even though much of the Soviet economic system was structured in a way that would directly benefit the centre, i.e. Russia. This is not a Russian-specific phenomenon; similar sentiments were prevalent in Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990's, with every constituent republic's leaders screaming at great injustice, both real and imagined, which had been committed by the Yugoslav system against their respective republics. One can therefore see that victimhood was already present at the nascent moments of the Russian Federation.

I have previously mentioned Dugin and Prokhanov, together with their radical legitimising ideologies. In addition to these two figures, there exists another theoretical attempt to legitimise Russia's special status, and it is Lev Gumilev's philosophy of history. In a 2016 speech, Vladimir Putin explicitly referred to Gumilev's concept of "passionarity" (*пассионарность*).[11] Derived from the Latin word *passio*, the difficult-to-translate word refers to one's "capacity for suffering". Once again, the notion of sacrifice is put to the fore, but this time, it encompasses and refers to a whole people: the Russians. Charles Clover points out that passionarity is by no means a pacifist concept; he likens it to Machiavelli's martial spirit (*virtu*) and "the tribal solidarity of nomadic raiders of civilised cities". Gumilev, who himself was interred in a Norilsk gulag, started seeing "inspirational possibilities in repression" (Snyder 2019, 85). Some of his key concepts, e.g. the generation of human sociability through cosmic rays (Snyder 2019, 87), seem like pseudoscience; nevertheless, his writings have

[10] https://speakola.com/grad/joseph-brodsky-university-of-michigan-1988
[11] https://www.ft.com/content/ede1e5c6-e0c5-11e5-8d9b-e88a2a889797

managed to influence some figures who have had a major role in the invasion of Ukraine, such as Alexander Borodai. I wish to reiterate that Gumilev's passionarity, just like Dugin and Prokhanov's concepts, does not represent a master key for understanding Putin's mind or the motives behind Russia's foreign policy. What I would like to stress is that the presence of these thinkers' concepts and ideas in Kremlin's official statements points to a concerning turn in Russia's foreign policy, with the country now using radical legitimising narratives to give its aggressive foreign policy a pseudo-objective veneer of legitimacy.

I have once again briefly referred to the founding years of the Russian Federation in order to establish the presence of victimhood. However, in this chapter, I will focus mostly on the Russian narratives of messianism and victimhood following the invasion of Ukraine. I am choosing to do so because, in my opinion, this is the period in which we witness such narratives *in extremis*, which makes the search for its key elements easier.

First and foremost, Putin's stance towards Ukraine seems to echo that of the old tsarist policies, which denied the existence of an independent Ukraine (Ulam 1968, 18). Putin himself has become a crucial figure in the narrative of messianism and victimhood: he plays the role of a reincarnated Vladimir, whose conversion to Christianity in 988 "linked forever today's lands of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine" (Snyder 2019, 64). Furthermore, Crimea is "now venerated as the home of Russian Orthodoxy" (Galeotti 2016, 283), lending the peninsula not only the already described strategic importance, but symbolic as well. The ease with which the narrative brings together phenomena which are more than a millennium apart is a feature of a specific type of politics, one which Timothy Snyder dubbed the *politics of eternity*. "Eternity", according to Snyder, "places one nation at the centre of a cyclical story of victimhood" (2019,8). The past now lies beyond the grasp of history and is only useful as "a reservoir of symbols […] a source of images to be used to alter the present" (2019, 90). More than that, the past has become dangerous, and even the most basic forays into historical research[12] might draw the attention of the FSB if someone decides that they clash with the dominant narrative of victimhood, which, in this case, relies heavily on portraying the Soviet Union exclusively as an innocent victim of the

[12] https://www.rferl.org/a/long-under-attack-a-russian-history-essay-contest-now-draws-scrutiny-from-fsb/29983419.html

Nazi invasion. This “cult of the past” might be a feature shared by the Russian Federation and the Soviet Union, since USSR citizens were also inculcated by stories about the permanent threat coming from the West.

“The fantasy of an eternally innocent Russia” (Snyder 2019, 29) does not only require a figurehead like Putin, but also a dedicated team of political specialists who are willing and capable of promulgating Russia’s victimhood status. One such ‘team leader’ is Vladislav Surkov, often described as the Kremlin’s chief propagandist. Mikhail Zygar even called him ‘the grey cardinal’ of Russian politics (2016, xvi). Currently serving as President Putin’s adviser on Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Ukraine, with previous posts in the Alfa-Bank and Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s various advertisement departments, Surkov is a man whose *modus operandi* seems to rest on a single maxim: factuality is the enemy. His job is to distort facts and completely replace them with carefully constructed bits of propaganda. He is able to do so because occupied, and still does, unique positions of power: he was the head of public relations at *Pervyi Kanal*, Russia’s most important television channel at the time when “a true plurality representing various interests” was changed into “a false plurality where images differed but the message was the same” (Snyder 2019, 161). He is also extremely skilled at mythmaking, something that seems to be a highly sought-after skill in Russia: he rarely gives interviews, he funded pro-Kremlin youth groups in Russia, and he cultivated fake opposition parties. His position of power suffered a major blow in 2016, when a Ukrainian outfit calling themselves CyberJunta leaked a large number of emails purported to be from his office[13], but he has managed to recover since then. His ‘dark glass’ approach to factuality will most likely influence the Russian narrative on Ukraine in the years to come.

Russia’s propaganda strategy in Ukraine was further marked by what Snyder calls “implausible deniability” and “proclamation of innocence” (2019, 163-164). The former is a way of controlling the media narrative around Ukraine and shifting it in Russia’s favour. Once again, it is an assault against facts: even though news agencies had detailed reports proving that Russia had indeed invaded Ukraine, this did not matter; Putin was outright denying an invasion at the time when Russian troops were already in Ukraine. Both the Russian and the Western media knew that this was im-

[13] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/26/kremlin-puppet-masters-leaked-emails-vladislav-surkov-east-ukraine

plausible, but they fell into Putin's trap and focused on "what the Russian president chose to say about Ukraine" (Snyder 2019, 164). The latter part of the strategy reinforces the victimhood narrative by creating "an ambience of a television drama of heroic locals taking unusual measures against titanic American power" (Snyder 2019, 165). Russian soldiers wore no insignias or other identifying marks, which made it easier to portray them as heroic resistance fighters. Their enemy, however, would be defined by the Kremlin. Finally, it is interesting to note how Russian military tactics complement the narrative of victimhood: by portraying Russian soldiers as virtuous guerrilla fighters, Russia adopted the tactics of the weaker side, who, due to a lack of conventional forces, cannot afford themselves to launch a direct assault. I have already mentioned that Russia is by far the most powerful of all the Post-Soviet states, possessing the means and the capabilities for conventional warfare. In Ukraine, however, Russia adopted the tactics of the outgunned "in order to pretend to be weak" (Snyder 2019, 165) and to rebrand its invasion of Ukraine as a valorous defence of Russian victims.

I have recently had the opportunity to witness and experience official Russian discourse on Ukraine in a multilateral setting. During an OSCE Permanent Council meeting on the 6th of June 2019, one of the agenda items was the current situation in Ukraine. When the Permanent Representative of Ukraine, Ihor Prokopchuk, asked the Permanent Representative of Russia, Alexander Lukashevich, to explain the most recent shelling in Ukraine, the former responded by saying that it was the new Ukrainian government who was shelling its own citizens, adding afterwards that those responsible for the shelling must be located immediately. Ambassador Prokopchuk then accused the Russian representative of being unwilling to tackle specific issues of the engagement, while pointing out the folly of believing that Western sanctions are merely a punitive measure intended to prevent the Russians from exercising an independent foreign policy. The exchange went on, with Ambassador Lukashevich praising the Ukrainian "panegyric", and, not surprisingly, avoiding specific accusations which were brought up against Russia.

Another agenda item in the meeting was the recent defacing of a Soviet-era monument to Marshall Zhukov in Kharkiv. Ambassador Lukashevich attributed the deed to "Neo-Nazi" groups. It is interesting that he mentioned Nazism, because it, together with homophobia, figures prominently in Russia's twenty-first century narrative of

victimhood. Ivan Ilyin concluded that the Russian people will need a spiritual resurrection and renewal (*русскому народу необходимо духовное возрождение и обновление*) (2018, 393). The narrative of immaculate Russia, however, is a negative narrative which professes to offer the attainment of these two goals while often relying on the image of a Western fascist invader, who also threatens to 'infect' 'immaculate Russia' with homosexuality.

The cult of the Second World War, or as it is known in Russian, the Great Fatherland War (*Великая Отечественная Война*) had its roots in the Brezhnev era. It has survived well into the twenty-first century. However, the Russian triumph over the German invader led to an inability of the Russians to see themselves as fascists; "in the Russian language, it is practically a grammatical error to imagine that a Russian could be a fascist" (Snyder 2019, 146). Moreover, there is a high probability that any forces seriously criticising Russia will eventually be stuck with the label "Neo-fascist". Timothy Snyder calls the new Russian approach to fascism "schizo-fascism". His term refers to "actual fascists calling their opponents 'fascists', blaming the Holocaust on the Jews, [and] treating the Second World War as an argument for more violence" (2019, 145). The leaders of Ukraine have been called fascists, but even before the invasion of Crimea, Russian media jumped on the opportunity to vilify the Euromaidan for Russian audiences. The TV channel MTV warned of a 'homo-dictatorship' in Ukraine; Viktor Shestakov, writing for *Odna Rodina*, paraphrased Karl Marx when he wrote that a spectre is haunting the Euromaidan, "the spectre of homosexuality"; Foreign Minister Lavrov claimed that the true aggressors in Ukraine were "gay lobbyists who propagated with missionary insistence both inside their own countries and in relations with neighbours" (Snyder 2019, 132; 137).

Another group proselytising fascism and homophobia are the infamous Night Wolves. The group has moved from being a motorcycle gang to acting as an unofficial paramilitary unit of the Kremlin. Their public statements echo the most radical elements of the Russian victimhood narrative: members publicly renounce democracy while believing that they are waging a holy war in Russia's name; their leader, Alexander Zaldostanov, nicknamed 'the Surgeon', believed that "the slogan of the Russian war against Ukraine should be 'death to faggots'" (Snyder 140-141). Having ridden around Crimea, the Night Wolves are one of the many tireless mouthpieces of the grand victimhood narrative.

I have started this chapter by quoting a twentieth-century philosopher of history, only to end it with a quote from a leader of a motorcycle gang. Berdyaev and Zaldostanov might be seen as two diametrically opposed figure in the grand narrative of Russian history, but both were willing to put the empirical history of Russia to the side in order to look for something greater. Russia's "historical calling" is currently focused on the situation in Ukraine. However, the narrative of "historical calling" is mostly defined in negative terms, i.e. it suffers, as I already mentioned, from a distinct lack of positive elements that it could 'export abroad'. As Anne Applebaum put it, "instead of offering a positive vision, Russia promulgates nihilism" (2018, 29). The key figures of the Russian Federation are using radical theories, most of them being either borderline or outright fascist and antisemitic, in order to frame and justify their policy choices. One of Russia's major problems is the fact that the current power structure, which I will analyse in the next chapter, does not allow for any alternative narratives to emerge.

3) Autocracy

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Autocratic rulers have a long history in Russia. Ivan the Fourth and Peter the Great are one of the most famous examples of rulers known for imposing their will from above and for believing that they are the sole source of authority and legitimacy in Russia. The founding of St. Petersburg is a great example of an autocratic emperor realising his vision; Peter the Great decreed that the empire's new capital will be built in the Baltic marshlands, without giving a second thought to the lives of the serfs and workers involved in the building of the city. There is even an anecdote saying that when Emperor Paul I was asked who was the most important of his ministers, he answered: 'Whoever happens to be talking to me and only while he does!' (Ulam 1981, 10). The strong autocratic ruler follows the Russian state in its every incarnation. In "The Sources of Soviet Conduct", Kennan briefly sketched out how autocracy and authoritarianism seamlessly fall into the "Soviet concept of power" (8). More importantly, as a diplomat in the field, Kennan was well aware that the Soviet approach had both its weaknesses and strengths, although one must mention that Kennan himself had an authoritarian lean, stating at one point that the United States should 'go along the road which leads to constitutional change to the authoritarian state' (Snyder 2019, 69). Since the Party would suppress and quell any dissident sources suggesting democratic deliberation, this has resulted in an "apparatus of power" characterised by "an unshakeable stubbornness and steadfastness [of] orientation" (9). This apparatus was rarely constrained by concepts such as 'rule of law' since its purpose was to enable the autocrat to exercise his power and will in the most direct and immediate possible way. Truth, as already hinted at by Kennan, was malleable and secondary to ideology and political considerations. The logic of Soviet power, for example, dictated that Stalin had to be the *ultima ratio* behind every discovery and improvement. That is why he was often portrayed as a master tactician and strategist. In his article "Stalin as an Intellectual", Nathan Leites revealed how Stalin would refute specialists through tautologies used as 'evidence'; it seems that "words, for him [Stalin] somehow possess 'magical power', even in scientific discourse" (1953, 46; 53).

However, in spite of the power and authority that Stalin exercised, the autocratic nature of his power does not necessarily entail that he was the only actor behind So-

viet foreign policy of the time. Although Stalin ordered some of the most heinous crimes of the twentieth century, such as the deporting of whole peoples from the Caucasus and the sentencing of innocents during the Purges of 1936-1938, the authoritarian nature of his regime was behind the rapid mobilisation of resources which enabled breakthroughs in different spheres (Primakov 2018, 158-159). Moreover, as Primakov concludes, Stalin was definitely the person who bore the main responsibility for the Purges, but his authoritarian regime was filled with figures such as Nikita Khruschev, Lazar Kaganovich, Vycheslav Molotov, and Nikolai Yezhov, who "were nudging" (*подталкивали*) the Soviet leader in his intentions in order to show that they were his devoted followers (2018, 160).

Vladimir Putin's apparatus suffers from the same fate. From internet jokes to scholarly articles, Putin is often portrayed as an indomitable leader, "a master tactician" just like Stalin, who seems to know more than other national leader at any given point. His KGB background only adds to this mysterious aura. Luckily, the nimbus around Putin is slowly being dispelled. This chapter will therefore look at how autocracy is constituted in twenty-first century Russia, while drawing parallels, where applicable, with Soviet autocracy and authoritarianism. I will also devote special attention to events and phenomena which break the ubiquitous monolithic image of Putin as the 'Grand Executive'.

Professor Mark Galeotti adopts a polemical tone in his book *Putin: How the West Gets Him Wrong* by saying that the predominant perception of Putin in the West is skewed and unhelpful for understanding contemporary Russia. Instead of adopting a scholarly approach to analysing Putin, Galeotti's "primer" tackles the "straw-man arguments and oversimplifications" (2019, 4) which, according to him, dominate the public discourse and debate on the current Russian president. Although the contemporary Kremlin has not evolved much from imperial times in that "the real currency in Russia at the top level is not the rouble, nor even the dollar and the euro, but access to, and relationship with, the boss" (Galeotti 2019, 106), this shows us that it is better to think of Putin as the centre-piece or a figure-head of a power structure.

Such a view is also represented by Zygar in the book *All The Kremlin's Men*. The book charts not only Putin's rise to prominence, but the trajectories of Putin's closest allies, aides, and enemies: Vladislav Surkov, Putin's chief propagandist; Igor Sechin,

the current CEO of Rosneft and Putin's Petersburg/ Leningrad ally; and Alexander Navalny, a vocal opponent of Putin's regime. Zygar offers a compelling account of the highest echelons of the Kremlin. His account is useful for this thesis because it breaks the monolithic narrative of the Kremlin into a network of people with many divergent interests and goals, the achievement of which hangs on a single lynchpin: making sure that "the boss" is satisfied with their work.

The image of Putin as an all-knowing authoritarian leader clashes with the circumstances of his 'political birth'. Whereas he nowadays epitomises the strong executive, one must not forget that Putin did not rise to the highest political position in Russia completely by himself – he was also chosen. The end of the twentieth century had no figure such as Putin "the defender", "the imperialist", or "improviser" (Treisman 2016, 47); there was only Putin the director of the FSB, "a young unknown intelligence officer" (Zygar 2016, 9), who was the former right hand of St. Petersburg mayor Anatoly Sobchak, whose daughter, Ksenya Sobchak, ran as one of the pseudo-candidates in the latest Russian presidential elections. However, as Ilyin put it almost a century ago, *надо уметь иметь царя* – one, i.e. post-Communist Russia, must be able to have a tsar (2018, 392). It seems that one of the most decisive factors in choosing Putin as Yeltsin's successor was the latter's resemblance to Max Stierlitz, the protagonist of a series of Soviet spy novels (Snyder 2019, 44). The fictional Stierlitz worked as a spy in East Germany; it was also discovered – via a public opinion poll – that he was the most popular fictional hero of the times. It is ironic to note that the leader who is nowadays perceived as one of the most powerful men on Earth owes his post to his similarity to a fictional character.

The whole process of choosing and preparing Putin for succeeding Yeltsin became known as Operation Successor. As the undertaking has shown, the figures in the background, the so-called 'the grey cardinals', often exert a powerful influence on those in the political foreground. I have already mentioned Vladislav Surkov, who also played an important role in Operation Successor when he was serving as Yeltsin's deputy chief of staff (Snyder 2019, 44). It also fell to Surkov to justify two major autocratic turns of modern Russia: the state's takeover of television in 2002 and the abolition of regional governor elections in 2004. He justified both by claiming that Russia was not ready for "life in the conditions of modern democracy" (Snyder 2019, 46). Having already mentioned Surkov's relationship to factuality, we can now com-

pare it to the Bolshevik *modus operandi*, to which it is similar. “Communications outside or within the Party”, according to Nathan Leites, “should be decided upon on considerations of impact only” (1953, 123); truth is fairly low on their list of priorities. Moreover, all public statements have a political character, both for Bolsheviks and Surkov, i.e. the tongue is “wagged negatively” (1953, 123) for the purposes of achieving a political goal.

It is not enough to choose a future autocrat like Putin. In order for him to wield and exercise his power, it has to be institutionalised. The Presidential Administration, described as “the most powerful institution in Putin’s Russia, in effect his government-above-the-government” (Galeotti 2019, 11), is the administrative base of Putin’s power. However, before looking into how this administrative aspect of autocracy conditions the exercise of Russian foreign policy, one should briefly look at a trait of Russian state and society called ‘the system’ (*система*). Gleb Pavlovsky, Putin’s former advisor turned critic, defined the trait as “a style of exercising power that turns the country’s people into temporary operating resources, against their wills and in breach of their rights”, while also adding that the “sistema is a deep-seated facet of Russian culture that goes beyond politics and ideology, and it will persist long after Putin’s rule has ended” (2016, 4). Within the Sistema, the government informally calls upon the services of powerful individuals, different businesses, and any other party which might help the Kremlin implement its policies. The Sistema, to put it briefly, is the shadowy framework in which corruption thrives. As long as it is in place, any positive domestic changes will either be impossible to implement, or, by going through the Sistema, they will be rendered useless.

Coming back to the institution of the Presidential Administration, the first parallel that comes to one’s mind is that the institution is Putin’s personal court, and that those who work there are the newest generation of a class that the Bolsheviks wanted to topple – the gentry (*дворянство*) (Pipes 1961, 7). The underlying autocratic current under the different incarnations of the Russian state allows one to liken the Presidential Administration to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the Administration seems to be the institutional continuation and embodiment of Bolshevik doctrine, which states that “small groups of leaders are decisive in politics.” “Homogeneity and continuity of leadership”, as the doctrine further stipulates, “are necessary for success” (Leites 1953, 285). The similarity be-

tween the two bodies is strengthened by the fact that the Administration's main office is located in the same location as the office of the Central Committee. It is, once again, ironic to note that the Central Committee was a more democratic body, whose members were elected at a Party Congress (Shamiev & Mchedlidze 2018). The members of the Presidential Administration, conversely, are appointed by the President himself.

In terms of structure, the Administration is composed of two main parts. The first part consists of the Protocol and Organisation Directorate and the Press and Information Office: people who run the president's daily itineraries and organise his meetings and briefings. The second part is the so-called 'domestic policy bloc', whose purpose is to bring together expert management, domestic policy actors, bodies in charge of public policy and personnel issues, civic actors, and agencies for ICT development and communications infrastructure (Shamiev & Mchedlidze 2018). This might seem trivial at first, but one must not forget that in a country where the real currency, as already quoted, is your relationship with "the boss", having a position in these two offices enables one to exert a considerable influence on Russia's president. Moreover, if an institution is as powerful as this one, "the staffs on which modern executives come to depend [will] develop a momentum of their own" (Kissinger 1966, 509). In this case, the members of the PA start intruding into the domains of other agencies: e.g. they develop laws which are later submitted by the members of the Duma, as admitted by Vycheslav Volodin; the interests of the 'foreign bloc' of the Administration will clash with the interests of the Ministry of the Interior[14]. The Administration also influences foreign policy since it supervises the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

It is, however, not an all-powerful body. Just as individuals compete for a chance to influence Putin's decisions, so do the different agencies and governmental bodies. Russia's security agencies, the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), and the Federal Protection Service (FSO) – these agencies compete with each other, and with the Presidential Administration, for Vladimir Putin's attention and time. The competition is ruthless: for example, in 2003, the Federal Agency of Government Communications

[14] https://www.ridl.io/en/birds-of-a-feather-the-presidential-administration-of-russia/?fbclid=IwAR0PU_YTP8kPy5Ne3gFaV8pIzzg9FF2PyrsXzCkuLZhbgPpkGfGrcqtbUTE

and Information (FAPSI) was “eaten up by its rivals [and] divvied up between the FSB, FSO, and GRU” (Galeotti 2019, 37). When a certain agency finally gets to brief Putin, they quickly find out, in the words of a former Russian spy, ‘that you do not bring bad news to the tsar’s table’ (Galeotti 2019, 38). Executive briefings, already theatrical performances even in the most efficient of administrations and bureaucracies, suffer from the additional problem of fitting years of experts’ knowledge into the extremely limited windows of time at the executive’s disposal (Kissinger 1966, 510). The fact that the administrative apparatus at Putin’s disposal seemingly lacks the motivation to deliver its chief executive the most relevant data will greatly limit the efficiency of the autocrat. Briefings might therefore lead to Putin being misinformed on crucial issues as a result of a specific agency’s attempt to increase its power and relevance. Once again, this is not a Russia-specific phenomenon, but at Putin’s court, these problems are present in their extreme form. The main conclusion that one could draw from the above is that the image of Putin ‘the all-knowing’ is greatly undermined by the manner in which information is distributed to him.

The presence of the Presidential Administration also disrupts the work of the regular branches of government. For example, having received temporary diplomatic authority from Putin in the wake of the Malaysian Airlines crisis, Surkov, who officially occupies the prestigious position of a presidential aide, played a role on par with that of Foreign Minister Lavrov in negotiating the formal Donbas truce in 2015 (Pavlovsky 2016, 4), which led to Lavrov’s great dissatisfaction. Although Lavrov is considered a legend in diplomatic circles, and the Russians with whom I spoke in Moscow, from professors to students, were almost unanimous in their praise of him, the veteran diplomat seems to have little, if any say in Russia’s foreign policy following the invasion of Crimea in 2014. He “was not even invited to the meeting at which the decision to annex Crimea was made” (Galeotti 2019, 18). Furthermore, his role seems to have been reduced to that of Putin’s “personal ambassador” (Pavlovsky 2016,4) and envoy. The distinguishing characteristic of the Presidential Administration is, therefore, its existence as an institution whose actions directly undermine and annihilate institutionalism.

There is no doubt about Putin being the main autocratic influence behind what is called Russia’s ‘managed democracy’. However, there are more ingrained and long-standing connections between Russia and autocracy which are often overlooked by

researchers and critics who only look at Putin's actions. In this chapter, I analysed some of the structural elements of autocracy in twenty-first century Russia in order to demonstrate that combating autocracy, as the example of the Decembrists will show in the next chapter, is extremely difficult in Russia. Removing Putin would therefore barely begin to solve the problem of autocracy, because Russian governments do not seem to know how to consolidate power non-autocratically. Regardless of the reformers' or revolutionaries' intentions, the autocrat always emerges.

4) Anti-Westernism

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Regardless of the incarnation of the Russian state, one of the main issues of its foreign policy is its stance towards the West. Andrei Tsygankov offers a useful framework for understanding Russian foreign policy: based on historical continuity, he divides politicians and thinkers, from Ivan IV until Putin, into three distinct categories: Westernizers, Statists, and Civilizationists. Westernizers "placed emphasis on Russia's similarity with the West and viewed the West as the most viable and progressive civilization in the world" (2001, 4); Statists "have emphasised the state's ability to govern and preserve the social order" (2001, 5); and Civilisationists "have always seen Russian values as different from those of the West, and they have always attempted to spread Russian values abroad, outside the West" (2001, 7).

It is important to note that, in Tsygankov's chart (2001, 9), the relationship towards the West is a prominent feature for distinguishing between different periods of Russian foreign policy. For Westernisers, by definition, this relation is of utmost priority, regardless whether we are talking about the times of Alexander I, Pavel Milyukov, Mikhail Gorbachev, or Andrei Kozyrev. However, the West, while not so prominent, is a key variable in Statist and Civilizationist schools: Litvinov's concept of collective security entailed, in theory, close cooperation between the Great Powers of the West and the USSR; Gorchakov's "Concentration" policy was a result of Russia's defeat in the Crimean War; even for Civilizationists like Lenin, the West was the first place to which they turned their attention, and, in Lenin's case, the first place in which he believed that the pursuit of "world revolution" should be continued.

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Historical realities, however, defy smooth categorisation. I will use the example of the Decembrists to illustrate how a specific group aiming for political change of and in Russia might simultaneously hold a contradictory stance towards the West. Following the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, the discussion of the West, in this case of Europe, was quite a prominent topic in Russian public life. According to Neumann, the Decembrists belonged to one of the three currents of this debate; they were the "most visible of the constitutionalists", arguing that "political and economic models should be adopted from Europe and adapted to Russian conditions" (1996,

13-14). The Decembrists were predominantly young officers who had just returned from a victorious foray into Europe, where they 'caught' constitutionalism. Even though the Decembrist Uprising in 1825 failed, their actions forced the state to reinvent its claim for legitimacy, which resulted in the state's doctrine of 'official nationality' (Neumann 1996, 25), based on three pillars: autocracy, Orthodoxy, and nation-mindedness (*самодержавие*, *православие*, *народность*). The uprising also redefined "the parameters of [public] debate and clearly indicated the constraints on political action" (Neumann 1996, 19-20).

Compared to the Bolshevik leadership, who were professional revolutionaries, the Decembrists' planning capabilities and devotion to their cause seem rather underwhelming. Although they had several capable figures in their ranks or as allies – Count Mikhail Orlov, Serge Muraviev-Apostol, Mikhail Speransky (the tsar's adviser), and Pavel Ivanovich Pestel – the Decembrists were revolutionaries marked by undecidedness and hesitance. Adam Ulam compared them to Hamlet: "Just as there was something Hamlet-like about their emperor, so there was about this first generation of Russian revolutionaries" (1981, 17). They also failed to exploit the unrest in the wake of the Semyonovski Affair, when the famous regiment – one of Emperor Alexander I's favourites – refused to assemble following a humiliating and draconian punishment of a private by the regiment's commander, Colonel Shvartz (Ulam 1981, 22-23).

In my opinion, the hesitance of the Decembrists is a symptom of their inability to reconcile their constitutionalism with the interests of the Russian Empire. A major practical issue that occupied them was the treatment of the tsar during their theoretical *coup d'état*. The inculcated reverence that all Russian soldiers shared for the 'Sacred Person of the Emperor' made it difficult, if not impossible, for them to physically seize the tsar (Ulam 1981, 26). Even when they managed to overcome this issue, the Decembrists were faced with a dilemma that occupied the minds of all rulers who ever wanted to 'liberalise' Russia:

> Most fundamentally, the emperor's dilemma was similar to that of many of Russia's rulers down to the present: desirous of bestowing on their country free institutions, they would at some point recoil from the immensity apparent impossibility of the task. This point was reached often when it became *a question of surrendering or weakening autocratic power*. The very absence of free institutions in Russia meant that any genuine effort to emancipate society had to be a leap into the unknown, the end re-

sult of which might be not an orderly system of constitutional government but anarchy, an explosion of the pent-up popular grievances and aspirations which could destroy not only autocracy but also the unity and greatness of the Russian state. (Ulam 1981, 12; emphasis mine).

With this dilemma holding them back, the Decembrists were unable to carry out the tasks that they so passionately charted out and outlined in the meetings of various secret societies. Returning to Tsygankov's scheme, we can now see them as a fusion of Westernisers and Statists: they were inspired by Western ideas of constitutionalism, but the specific conditions of the Russian Empire mellowed their reforming zeal. Firstly, the European empires of that time would have exploited the chaos in the wake of their successful coup; secondly, the Decembrists simply could not imagine a tsarless Russia. The ideas that they brought back from Europe were simultaneously a source of inspiration and a starting point for new fears.

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In an inauguration speech marking the start of the 2018-2019 academic year at MGIMO, Foreign Minister Lavrov repeated the official Russian policy of viewing NATO as a Western politico-military construct who purpose is to facilitate aggressive expansion at the expense of the Russian Federation. Unlike Foreign Minister Lavrov, Andrey Kostin, President and Chairman of the Management Board of the VTB, did not coat his statements in diplomatic double-speak; following the conclusion of a Strategic Partnership Agreement with MGIMO[15], Kostin vibrantly exclaimed that both sides are now better suited to deal with 'Western bandits'.

Historically, however, Russia had no qualms about economic deals with 'Western bandits'. It was not just Western ideas that flowed into Russia, but Western capital as well. The prewar debt of tsarist Russia amounted to 3.8 billion rubles, with "eighty percent […] owned to France, much of it to small private investors who had purchased Tsarist treasury bonds" (Kennan 1961, 200). The infamous case of these bonds was only settled partially in 1997, when the Yeltsin agreed to pay out $400 million to the French government in yearly installments.[16] The Bolsheviks were the ones who decided not to pay the bonds owners, but they themselves soon realized that the fulfillment of their goals will require the acquisition of foreign capital. Following the adoption of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921, the Bolsheviks, who

[15] https://mgimo.ru/about/news/main/vtb/
[16] https://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/19/world/russia-redeeming-czar-s-bonds.html

had hitherto only viewed trade concessions as a political trump card against capitalist countries, made a pragmatic *volte face* as they approached the Western countries with the aim of establishing trade relations and acquiring credits, money, and capital (Kennan 1961, 182-183). Eventually, Russia got trade and recognition by and from the Western states, but she failed to receive long-term credits, which was eventually offset by short-term credits and the American Lend-Lease (Kennan 1961, 207).

Twenty-first century Russia, even in a post-2014 setting, still nurtures strong economic relations with the West. The EU is Russia's largest trading partner, as well as the largest investor in Russia. Sanctions have brought down the overall trade volume, but no other trading partner has overtaken the EU, even in spite of Russia's embargo on EU agricultural produce.[17]

One cannot therefore talk about the presence of anti-Westernism in economic terms. However, Russia is a country in which political concerns trump economic issues. Even though President Putin initially acted as a balancer "integrating creative impulses from supporters of liberal integration with the West with the urgings of those who defend the idea of Russia as a counter-balance to the West's 'unipolar' ambitions" (Tsygankov 2006, 1090), the subsequent invasions of Georgia and Ukraine shifted the political and legitimizing narrative towards a version of Russia which perceives the West as inimical and threatening. In addition to witnessing the all-too real conflict for Ukraine, we are also witnessing the clash of "two rival narratives" (Bechev 2015, 34), with the EU's narrative being characterized by "political, economic, and institutional transformation in line with its liberal democratic credo", and Russia's narrative being characterized by "traditionalism, religious values, nostalgia for the Soviet past and the historical myths of victimhood and resistance linking Russia to its neighbours" (Bechev 2015, 34).

Constructivists such as Tsygankov and Neumann repeatedly stress that Europe is the main 'Other' against which Russia defines itself. Emulating European institutions, but never fully implementing them is a well-known feature of Russian domestic policy. Constructivism's assumption that states have manifold identities, which arise through the interplay of "collective meaning that constitute the structures which organise our actions" (Wendt 1992, 397) facilitates the understanding of anti-

[17] http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/russia/

Westernism in Russia. Russia, as it is often put, is in Europe, but not of Europe; Neumann called Russia "Europe's pangolin", while adding that "being a pangolin which does not fit in is, however, still very much being a part of taxonomy, and a very important part at that" (1998, 46). We have seen that there is no such thing as economic anti-Westernism, but even on a "rival narrative" level, where the conflict is more pronounced, the situation is not clear-cut. For example, the already-mentioned radical narratives of Dugin predict and call for the decline and fall of a 'rotten' contemporary Europe, but, at the same time, Dugin praises Russia as 'True Europe', a country which is slowly but surely (re)embracing authoritarianism and "pre-Enlightenment and premodern values", while also being "a conservative great power which guards Europe's true Christian heritage against the False Europe of decadence and depravity to its West" (Neumann 2017). This is by no means an original contribution of Dugin's, as such line of reasoning was already presented in nineteenth-century Russia by thinkers who would become known as the Slavophiles. When faced with the prospect of Russia's modernisation, the Slavophiles objected to it by saying that "modernity was a threat to Russia [and that] modern Europe was a false Europe" (Neumann 2017). Moreover, the Slavophiles, just like the Russian propaganda attacks against Ukraine, quickly accused the West of sexual depravity and degeneracy. We can therefore see how one of the focal points of the "rival narratives" of Russia and Europe is the question of Europe as an integral part of the West. Even the most anti-Western narratives coming from Russia, such as Dugin's, cannot avoid putting Europe at the centre of Russia's efforts to emulate. It seems that being European or becoming 'True Europe' is a goal even for those who would like Russia to take its own special path.

Russia often looks for allies and partners in regions where anti-Western sentiments are either pronounced or where they are still in the background, but not forgotten. One such region, in spite of being relatively well-integrated into Western institutions, is Southeast Europe. The traditional link between not just Serbia and Russia, but also other Orthodox countries and entities in the region, such as Greece, Bulgaria, and Republika Srpska in Bosnia, has survived into the twenty-first century. Dimitar Bechev notes that Russia still has a powerful presence in the public sphere in Southeast Europe: books published in Serbia glorify Putin; Lukoil, the largest private-owned Russian oil company, is one of the main sponsors of the Serbian hand-

ball league; there is a strong Russian business presence in Greece (2017, 225-232). Moreover, the newfound pragmatism of the Russian Federation enables it to support groups across the political spectrum. Unlike the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation's support is not limited to far-left groups or parties (Bechev 2017, 233). As many authors argue, Southeast Europe is a region where Russia's soft power matters.

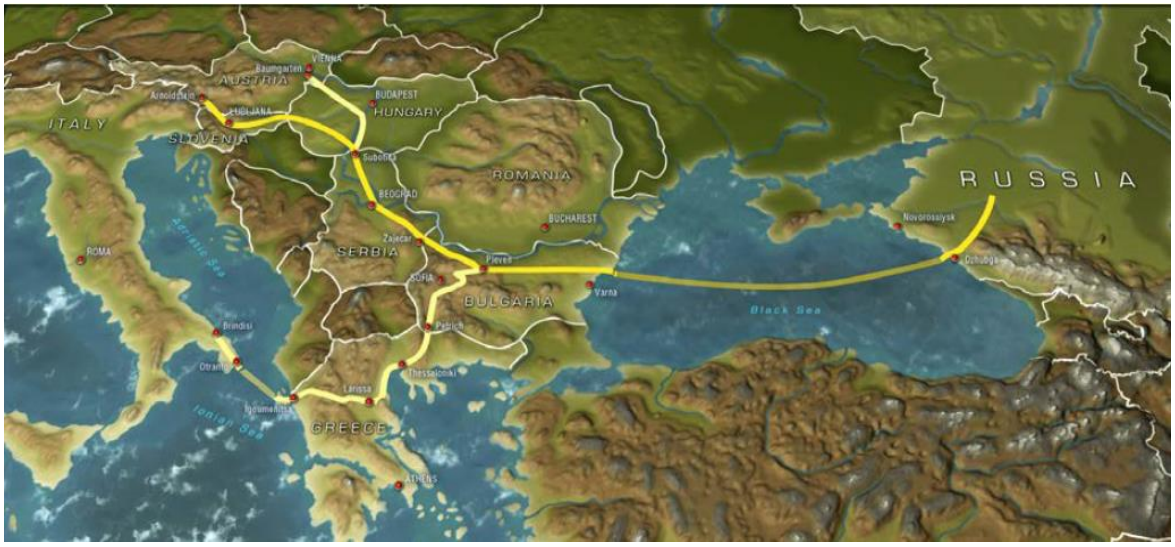
The Orthodox connection between Russia and Serbia has resulted in the two states being viewed as 'Orthodox brethren'. Although history has shown that Russia has aided Serbia on several occasions, most famously at the outbreak of the First World War, it has also shown that Serbian national interests have more often than not been dwarfed by those of Russia. Having asked for Russian help against the Ottomans in 1804, a Serbian delegation composed of three emissaries was given a negative answer and the following explanation by Foreign Minister Czartoryski: "Fine, but Serbia is far away from Russia, and we are friends with the Turks" (Petrovich 1956, 14). Furthermore, Ivo Andrić, the only Nobel laureate in literature from the territory of former Yugoslavia, revealed the often-misplaced hope of the Serbs in their 'Orthodox brethren'. In his novel *The Travnik Chronicle* (*Travnička hronika*), set in the Bosnian town of Travnik during the Napoleonic Wars, he notes how different ambassadors arrive in the town. The French and Austrian ambassadors arrive, but the Serbian population of Travnik eagerly awaits the ambassador of the Russian Empire, believing that he will simply smite all foreign forces. He never arrives. Finally, the media prominence of the 'Serbo-Russian brotherhood' contrasts with the space that the writers of *Внешняя политика России: 1991-2016*, a summary of the Russian Federation's foreign policy published by MGIMO, devoted to Serbo-Russian relations; a quarter of a century of bilateral relations with Serbia was summarised as a three-page-long subchapter in a book which has over five hundred pages (Torkunov 2017, 360-362).

Cooperation, often blown out of proportion by the respective domestic media, nevertheless exists between the two countries, with Russia remaining one of Serbia's principal foreign trade partners.[18] Neither is it limited to Serbia – Russia cooperates with most countries in the region. The rhetorical façade belies the crude opportunism (Bechev 2017, 5) of Russia's interaction with the countries of the region. In 2008, the governments of Serbia and Russia signed a framework agreement on

[18] http://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2019/Pdf/G20191143.pdf

energy cooperation: Gazprom was supposed to purchase a 51% stake in NIS, one of Serbia's largest companies while also taking over an underground gas storage facility; Serbia, in return received informal commitment that it would be included in the South Stream pipeline (Bechev 2017, 64-65).

Map 2. The South Stream Project. Adapted from: Varol, Tugce. 2013. *The Russian Foreign Energy Policy*.



As it is known, the whole project was stopped by the European Commission following Russia's invasion of Crimea. When that happened, the Serbian leadership was of the opinion that "the family silver had been sold on the cheap" (Bechev 2017, 66), and the Russians regretted the loss of a potentially highly influential energy vector.

Another question that one must ask when looking at Russia's foreign policy vis-à-vis Southeast Europe is whether the country can reap the benefits of its influence and historical links. This has become more difficult in the wake of the region's growing integration with the West. Another factor that limits Russia in the region is power projection: Russia suffers from limited agency in a region where it cannot directly bring to bear its greatest foreign policy: military force. However, we have seen that Russia is a country which is, in the long term, characterised by its belief in hard power (Bechev 2017, 179). The country is therefore still adamant on its security stake in the Black Sea as it "seeks to balance NATO militarily, upgrade security alliances, ramp up pressure on adversaries, and, to some extent, dilute EU enlargement" (Bechev 2017, 183).

*

In the foreign policy of the Russian Federation, NATO remains one of the crucial anti-Western catalysts. Yevgeny Primakov claimed that, with the dissolution of the USSR, the aim of NATO expansion somewhat changed; NATO's purpose was not longer to 'contain' (*сдержать*) Russia, but to weaken it and to make it more compliant when it comes to the issue of its national interests (*ослабить её, сделать Россию более сговорчивой, когда касается её национальных интересов*) (Primakov 2018, 358). He also recounts how he repeatedly stressed to his U.S. colleagues, namely Madeleine Albright and Strobe Talbott, that the inclusion of former Soviet Republic into NATO would present a clear red line (*красная черта*) for the Russian Federation. Primakov demonstrated his insightfulness when he predicted that offering NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia would not only antagonise Russia's relations with NATO and the United States, but also strengthen anti-Western and nationalistic sentiments, as well as the forces with corresponding sentiments within Russia (*это не только антагонизирует отношения России с США и НАТО, но усилить антизападные, националистические настроения и соответствующие таким настроениям силы внутры страны*) (Primakov 2018, 358).

NATO proponents argue in the opposite direction by saying that the decision to join institutions such as theirs is the right of every sovereign country. The NATO issue is not just about keeping the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Germans down; it is also – indirectly, one might add – about facilitating European integration. America is probably the best security guarantor Europe could wish for: The United States does not have hegemonic aspirations in Europe; even if it had any, "the stopping power of water" would greatly hinder its hegemonic tendencies. The example of Poland shows the benefits of NATO: as a country which has been divided several times during its history as a result of its location between two great powers, Russia and Germany, Poland benefits greatly from having a powerful security guarantor who is on a different continent. Although the disappearance of NATO would probably not precipitate an over-night return to nineteenth-century great power politics, it would greatly complicate the security situation and configurations in Europe.

Be that as it may, it seems that the current Russian government, as evidenced by Lavrov's speech, strongly believes that it must act as a converse military pole to NATO in order to counter its expansion. Russia might do that by diversifying its military capability portfolio, by exploiting cracks and rival interests between NATO members, and by trying to consolidate a military-bloc of her own. However, it seems that strategic considerations and military tactics overlook the fact that Russia is a country on a quest for respect and acknowledgement. Russia managed to recover from the dissolution of the USSR, but one must not forget that Russia is the only other country in the history of the world, together with the United States, who has the experience of being a superpower. One does not lose that worldview easily; and, as I already stressed, the crucial figures of Russian leadership have the experience of working for a superpower. They might have not experienced the zenith of Soviet power, but they still remember the prestige the state enjoyed in the bipolar system.

The quest for respect once again puts the issue of anti-Westernism to the fore. Even if the West might currently be portrayed as the antagonist and the enemy, Russia is nevertheless looking for its acknowledgement and respect. Not being acknowledged by an enemy is probably one of the worst insults one can suffer, and Russia still remembers how the United States intervened unilaterally, against Russia's wishes, in Kosovo. Putin bristled with rage when President Obama dismissed Russia as a 'regional power' in 2014, adding that Obama was 'disrespectful', further confirming that the "issue of respect is clearly central to his vision for his country's future" (Galeotti 2019, 44-45). The issue of respect and acknowledgement might explain why Putin publicly supports such radical figures as Dugin and Prokhanov: their respective theories entail abstract, long-term plans and predictions of Russian greatness onto which a politician like Putin might easily latch onto in order to improve his rhetorical impact and provide journalists with prime headline material, without committing himself to anything in the short term.

Even though Russia cannot match the United States in terms of economic or military power, she would not settle for being a junior partner in any joint security undertaking but would rather insist on "the principles of sovereignty and equality" (Gunitsky & Tsygankov 2018, 388). Whereas NATO sees itself as a defensive alliance, Russia only sees a hostile offensive construct which always deters her national interests; this prevailing perception was only augmented by the three major crises of Kosovo

(1999), Georgia (2008), and Ukraine (2014). If the perception of mutual relations is defined, as constructivists argue, “by historically enduring beliefs, […] repetitive social practice [and] self-other interactions” (Tsygankov 2018, 102), Western countries will then have to re-value and re-establish their manner of communicating with Russia without ostracising and humiliating her, while paying attention to the fact that they are still dealing with a believer in “hard power” who is not afraid to deploy military force. Another solution might be the creation of a stronger joint institutional framework, which would discourage the Russians from trying to go over or around NATO. Western states’ motivation for following such a path, however, is low; they would gain little from such an arrangement, since Russian proposals, such as the one coming from then-President Medvedev in 2008, often stress a state-centred arrangement (Tsygankov 2018, 106) in which weaker European states would be at a greater disadvantage.

To conclude, one can see that anti-Westernism, albeit a trait with a long historical presence in Russia, is by no means a static or immutable trait of Russian foreign policy. Given that Russia has had both periods of antagonism and cooperation with the West, it is better to think of anti-Westernism as a pendulum: there is a presence of core anti-Western beliefs which follow the different incarnations of the Russian state, but simultaneously, this core is being moved around by centripetal and centrifugal forces, that is, by domestic and foreign policy factors and decisions.

Conclusion

Before moving to the general conclusion, I would like to briefly summarise the chapters of the thesis.

In the first chapter, I analysed Russia's relative power, as well as the factors that determine it. I have concluded that Russia is a twenty-first-century great power enjoying asymmetric power advantages over its smaller neighbours. Moreover, I have noted the readiness with which Russia adopts information- and cyber-warfare tactics in Ukraine; this has enabled the Russian Federation to control the narrative around Ukraine and to outplay the EU on several occasions. Finally, I have demonstrated how Russia exploited the West's lack of unity, resolve, and alacrity in the Ukraine crisis.

By focusing on victimhood and messianism in the second chapter, I pointed out the irony of a powerful state relying on ongoing narratives in which it portrays itself as the perpetual victim. This chapter also demonstrated the how Russia weaponizes victimhood in the Ukraine conflict, and how it repeatedly tries to portray itself – the invader – as the party who has been wronged by Ukraine and the West.

The third chapter's focus was the autocratic nature of power in Russia. I wanted to stress how autocracy in Russia is not just the result of Putin being in power, but rather an almost-instinctive way in which different incarnations of the Russian state decide to consolidate power. By shedding some light on the Presidential Administration and the people around Putin, I wanted to dispel the narrative of Putin 'the Grand Executive', i.e. the sole driving force behind any major occurrence in Russian foreign policy.

Tackling anti-Westernism in the final chapter of the thesis enabled me to draw upon the conclusions of the previous chapter in order to better my understanding of what, at the first glance, should be the most straightforward trait to analyse, but is in reality the most dynamic of the four traits included in this thesis. The case of the Decembrists shows how ideas coming from Europe, even in the nineteenth century, presented both danger and hope for Russian would-be reformists and revolutionaries. By referring to selected economic policies, I wanted to point out how there is no such thing as economic anti-Westernism, with Russia being more than happy to co-

operate with Europe in that regard. Finally, anti-Westernism, as a trait of Russian foreign policy, should be understood as an ever-swinging pendulum, whose velocity is dictated by the needs of the current incarnation of the Russian state.

The over-arching aim of this thesis was to present a succinct synthesis of what, in my opinion, were the most pertinent episodes of Russian foreign policy in the twenty-first century. Even though the scope of the thesis prevented me from delving into greater details, I believe that I have succeeded in pointing out some of the more prevailing misperceptions of Russia.

The conundrum that Russia presents to the West rests on two major premises: that of Russia presenting a perennial security threat looming over Europe, and that of Russia being presented as an irresistible cultural riddle to the peoples of the West. Realism usually deals with the former, whereas constructivism tackles identity issues associated with the latter. I tried combining both with a historical approach in my thesis in order to avoid oversimplification and polarisation; on the one hand, presenting Russia as the eternal, non-European enemy ignores the periods of cooperation between Russia and the West, but, on the other hand, out of all European countries – among which I count Russia – the Russian Federation is the one who resists being integrated into any supra-national frameworks.

Understanding Russia and the forces of behind its foreign policy will, in my opinion, gain relevance in the coming years. We are moving towards a multipolar international system, and if the West does not understand, or worse, does not want to understand a future important actor such as Russia, it will only be repeating the myopia and irresponsible practices of France and Britain at Rapallo in 1922. In this case, the EU's preference for long-term solutions might lead to an improvement in relations with Russia in a world where the issue of Ukraine has been solved. However, even when and if the situation in Ukraine is resolved, all sides will have to keep both factors of continuity and change before their eyes in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of an exclusionary past.

By relying on the traits of victimhood, messianism, autocracy, and anti-Westernism, I wanted to demonstrate how the story of contemporary Russia is not the story of Vladimir Putin. We must avoid ascribing ultimate agency to Vladimir Putin; it is a dangerous and lazy habit which will preclude our understanding of a

Putin-less Russia in the future. He is simultaneously the most powerful actor in Russia and a figurehead of a structure and a government which has utilised him to increase its own power in Russia.

Russia, as a country of contrasts, remains a conundrum for the West. I prefer seeing the state as a challenge, both in security and intellectual terms. But a challenge nonetheless. Let us take it seriously.

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SUMMARY

The beginning of the twenty-first century is witnessing the weakening of the American ‘unipolar moment’ and the gradual shift of the international system towards multipolarity. The Russian Federation, a state whose capabilities and resolve were underestimated by the West, has in the meantime returned to the international stage. Moreover, Russia has demonstrated that it is not afraid to use force in order to attain its foreign policy goals. Even though it lagged behind in economic terms, Russia has succeeded in hindering Western interests in several region which it considers its own sphere of influence. This thesis combines the teachings of offensive realism and constructivism with a historical approach in order to ascertain contemporary Russia's strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, in addition to analysing the quality and preconditions of Russia’s power, the thesis places special emphasis on the perception of Russian foreign policy, which is analysed with the help of four traits found in Russian political culture: victimhood, messianism, autocracy, and anti-Westernism. The author has concluded that Russia should be considered a twenty-first century great power, and that the four above-mentioned traits are still relevant for the understanding of contemporary Russia’s foreign policy.

Keywords: Russia, power, perception, victimhood, messianism, autocracy, anti-Westernism, realism, constructivism

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Am Anfang des einundzwanzigsten Jahrhunderts konnte man die Schwächung des amerikanischen „unipolaren Momentes“ und die allmähliche Wende zur Multipolarität betrachten. Die Russische Föderation, ein Staat, dessen Fähigkeiten und Entschlossenheit stets unterschätzt wurden, hat sich inzwischen wieder auf der internationalen Bühne etabliert. Zudem hat Russland demonstriert, dass es nicht davor zurückschreckt, Gewalt zur Erreichung seiner außenpolitischen Ziele anzuwenden. Trotz schwächerer Wirtschaft ist es Russland gelungen, die Interessen des Westens in der Region, welche es für seine Einflusssphäre hält, zu vereiteln. Diese Masterarbeit verknüpft die Lehre des offensiven Realismus und des Konstruktivismus mit einem geschichtlichen Zugang, um die Schwächen und Stärken des zeitgenössischen Russlands zu ermitteln. Zusätzlich zur Analyse der Qualität und Ausgangsbedingungen der russischen Macht behandelt diese Masterarbeit die Wahrnehmung Russlands anhand von vier Merkmalen, welche in der politischen Kultur Russlands zu finden sind: Opfertum, Messianismus, Autokratie und Westenophobie. Gemäß den relevanten Kriterien sollte Russland für eine Großmacht gehalten werden. Die vier obengenannten Merkmale sind immer noch wichtig für das Verständnis der russischen Außenpolitik im einundzwanzigsten Jahrhundert.

Schlüsselwörter: Russland, Macht, Wahrnehmung, Opfertum, Messianismus, Autokratie, Westenophobie, Realismus, Konstruktivismus