



universität  
wien

# MASTER THESIS

Titel der Master Thesis / Title of the Master's Thesis

„ Motives behind Russian involvement in destabilisation  
of Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014)“

verfasst von / submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Advanced International Studies (M.A.I.S.)

Wien 2022 / Vienna 2022

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt  
Postgraduate programme code as it appears  
on the student record sheet:

A 992 940

Universitätslehrgang lt. Studienblatt  
Postgraduate programme as it appears on  
the  
student record sheet:

Internationale Studien / International Studies

Betreut von / Supervisor:

Professor Dr. Arthur R. Rachwald



diplomatische  
akademie wien  
Vienna School of International Studies  
École des Hautes Études Internationales de Vienne

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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.”

## **ABSTRACT**

This Thesis is an attempt to gain a deeper insight into the motives behind Russian involvement in destabilisation of Georgia and Ukraine. For the purposes of efficiency, a decision was made to limit discussion of the Ukrainian crisis to the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. The purpose of the Thesis is to explain Russian motives in detail, but at the same time to keep the research sample concise enough to provide a clear picture of the Russian involvement in destabilisation without diverting excessive attention to the description of current events, therefore, the Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022 is mentioned only when necessary to provide a broader context for actions of President Putin. The theory of offensive realism, as described by John Mearsheimer was used as a theoretical framework for the discussion. Deductive approach, as explained in the Methodology section, is central to the research. Multilingual approach is an important part of this Thesis and is used for the purpose of limiting errors that inevitably arise due to the linguistic barrier. Speeches produced by authorities in command of the Russian Federation, its chief diplomats and leaders of religious organisation are used to shed light on the political agenda of the Federation. Questionnaires are used to access sentiments and thoughts of Russian citizens. International Relations and Contemporary History are two major academic fields that helped craft this Thesis. The major findings of the Thesis are ways Kremlin is able to maintain control over the former-Soviet states by applying a combination of soft and hard

power tools, including weaponization of ideology and transform international organisations into manifestations of its power grasp.

## **ABSTRAKT (German translation)**

Diese Arbeit ist ein Versuch, einen tieferen Einblick in die Motive hinter der russischen Beteiligung an der Destabilisierung Georgiens und der Ukraine zu gewinnen. Aus Effizienzgründen wurde entschieden, die Diskussion der Ukraine-Krise auf die Annexion der Halbinsel Krim im Jahr 2014 zu beschränken. Ziel der Arbeit ist es, die russischen Motive im Detail zu erläutern, aber gleichzeitig die Forschungsstichprobe aufzubewahren knapp genug, um ein klares Bild der russischen Beteiligung an der Destabilisierung zu zeichnen, ohne übermäßige Aufmerksamkeit auf die Beschreibung aktueller Ereignisse zu lenken, daher wird der russisch-ukrainische Krieg von 2022 nur dann erwähnt, wenn es notwendig ist, um einen breiteren Kontext für die Handlungen von Präsident Putin zu schaffen. Als theoretischer Rahmen für die Diskussion diente die Theorie des offensiven Realismus, wie sie von John Mearsheimer beschrieben wurde. Der deduktive Ansatz, wie im Abschnitt Methodik erläutert, steht im Mittelpunkt der Forschung. Der mehrsprachige Ansatz ist ein wichtiger Bestandteil dieser Arbeit und dient dazu, Fehler zu begrenzen, die aufgrund der sprachlichen Barriere unvermeidlich auftreten. Reden der kommandierenden Behörden der Russischen Föderation, ihrer Chefdiplomaten und Führer religiöser Organisationen werden verwendet, um die politische Agenda der Föderation zu beleuchten. Fragebögen werden verwendet, um auf Gefühle und Gedanken russischer Bürger zuzugreifen. Internationale Beziehungen und Zeitgeschichte sind zwei wichtige akademische Bereiche, die zur Erstellung dieser Arbeit beigetragen haben. Die wichtigsten Ergebnisse der These sind Möglichkeiten,

wie der Kreml in der Lage ist, die Kontrolle über die ehemaligen sowjetischen Staaten aufrechtzuerhalten, indem er eine Kombination aus weichen und harten Machtinstrumenten anwendet, einschließlich der Bewaffnung der Ideologie, und die Umwandlung internationaler Organisationen in Manifestationen seiner Machtergreifung.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the 2000-s Russia has participated in the Georgian conflict of 2008 and the Ukrainian conflict of 2014. Both conflicts resulted in severe damage inflicted upon states' functioning, thousands of casualties and military force being used to undermine the territorial integrity of both states. Russia assumed the role of an aggressor during the five-day war in 2008 and the annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014. Ukraine and Georgia are states with a large number of Russian nationals and robust economic and social connections with the Federation. During the events of the five-day war, Russia justified its military intervention in the conflict as protection of Russian citizens in South Ossetia, however, its actions were disproportional in comparison to Georgia's attack on South Ossetia<sup>1</sup>. Ukraine was in the midst of the Civil War when Russia intervened, using the same reasons, it annexed the Crimean peninsula and contributed to further deterioration and destabilization of the state. This work analyses reasons behind actions of the Russian Federation, by utilising **two** academic fields – **International Relations** and **Contemporary History**, in order to understand the pattern of behaviour that Russia demonstrated over the course of the aforementioned events.

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<sup>1</sup> Vincent M. Artman (2013) Documenting Territory: Passportisation, Territory, and Exception in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, *Geopolitics*, 18:3, 682-704,

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Sotiriou (2019)<sup>2</sup>, among other theorists, suggests that at the root of the Georgian conflict was the dissatisfaction of South Ossetian nationals with policies Georgia proposed and nationalistic tension that tormented the region since the 1990-s. In his article ‘The Irreversibility of History’ an attempt to understand the causal mechanism that set the conflict into motion was made. The author describes Russia engaging in peace reinforcing operations, achieved by deploying troops to South Ossetia. He attributes peacekeeping and protection role to the Russian military and emphasizes that it acted out of the interest of autonomous states up until August of 2008, when its protection goal, coincided with a question of security dilemma, thus reducing Russia’s actions to a mere act of opportunism. The article is accurate in its description of Georgian inability to properly manage ethnic minorities, however, Sotiriou’s lack of focus on Russian political agenda and ideology might lead to a distortion of how one perceives the role of Russia in this crisis.

“Civilizational area shared among all peoples living here” is how Sergey Lavrov (2008)<sup>3</sup>, Russian Foreign Minister, refers to CIS countries, while also emphasizing how important it is so no one from outside could interfere by creating artificial obstacles for the

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<sup>2</sup> Sotiriou. (2019). The Irreversibility of History. The conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Problems of Post-Communism, 66(3), 172–185. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2017.1406310>

<sup>3</sup> Sergei Lavrov (2008) Speech by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S.V.Lavrov at MGIMO (U) MFA of Russia on the occasion of the beginning of the new academic year. Law and Security, Interregional public movement "For legal support of domestic producers", 3, 27-33. (in Russian) <https://elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=12230379&>

integration of former Soviet states. According to the speech from 2008, Lavrov is also convinced that opposition in Georgia was planted by “foreign patrons” of Saakashvili. He labels NATO-centrism as the main defect of the European defence system and advocates for the creation of a “truly inclusive” system of collective defence in the Euro-Atlantic region, construction of which was proposed by former President Dmitry Medvedev. In 2008 Russian political discourse was not concentrated on nationalistic aspect of the Georgian crisis, rather on geopolitical side of the issue. The Foreign Minister clearly states that unipolar world is a dangerous state of existence that should be ended. He saw “unipolar world” manifest itself in “anti-Russian provocations”, those including Tbilisi’s attack on South Ossetia. By analysing Minister Lavrov’s speech made in an almost immediate aftermath of the August events, one might conclude that Russia views Georgian conflict through the prism of Russia trying to reclaim its status of a superpower, while also being paranoid that its hegemonic aspirations would be hindered by NATO taking hold in its “near-abroad”. Russian actions during the “five-day war” may therefore be viewed not as mere opportunism, a case where security dilemma coincided with the necessity to protect the population of South Ossetia, but as a manifestation of premediated plan to reclaim once lost hegemony and reinforce the bipolar structure of the world politics.

David Matsaberidze<sup>4</sup> of Tbilisi State University also notes that the paranoia and militaristic expansion were inherited by modern Russia from its imperial past, thus making Putin hostage to the state-building templates of the past. He explains reasons behind

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<sup>4</sup> Matsaberidze, D. (2015). Russia vs. EU/US through Georgia and Ukraine. *Connections*, 14(2), 77–86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26326399>

Russian actions in its neighbourhood as a response to the humiliation the state suffered at the hand of the West after the Union dissolved, thus making a case of Russia not recognising itself as the new state, but rather a reincarnation of its predecessors. Therefore, one may assume that Russia will persist in trying to accumulate more power in attempts to match or even surpass the hegemon it once was.

Moreover, by drawing from examples of Georgian conflict and the annexation of Crimea, he describes Russia as a state prone to reactionism, thus stating that military actions the Federation took during those conflicts were a response to the West applying soft power to instigate a shift away from pro-Russian orientation of the former Soviet states. Matsaberidze in his argument on humiliation refers to Putin's speech to the Parliament made in 2014, in which the President made justifications for the annexation of the peninsula by recalling many promises broken by the West over the past decades, thus the author makes a point in Russian aggression being merely an act of revenge.

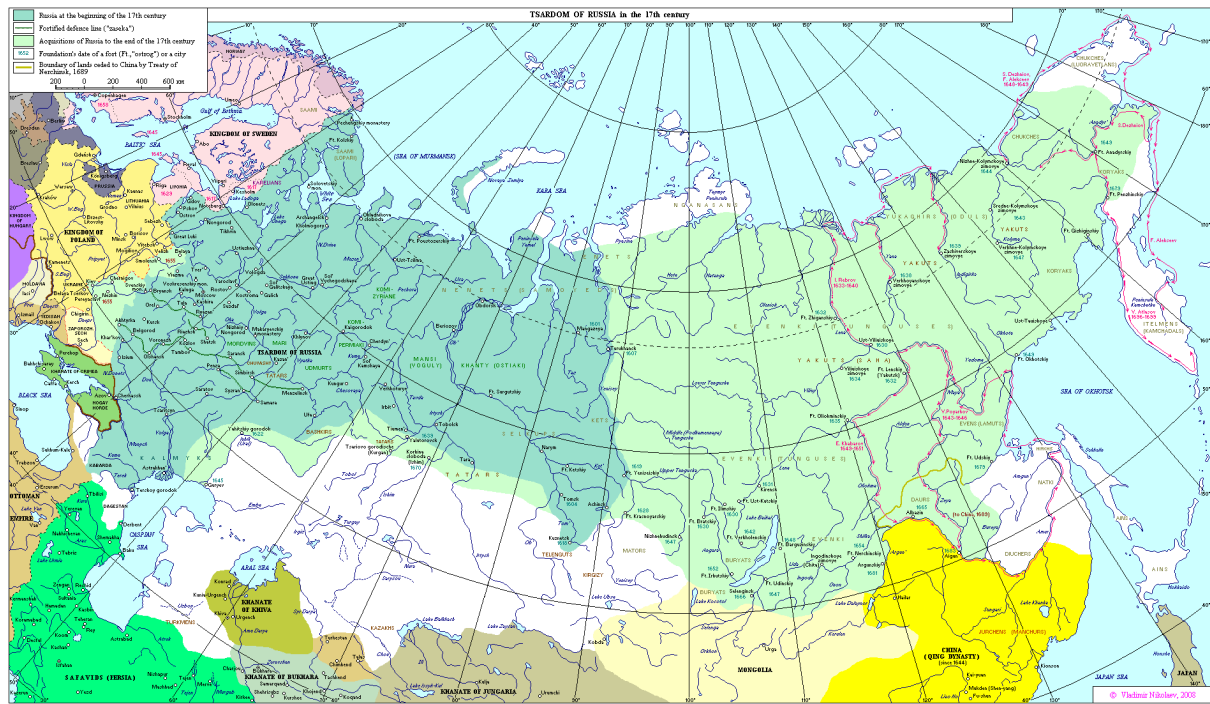
Dmitri Trenin (2009)<sup>5</sup> draws a more elaborate explanation regarding reasons behind Russian actions in the 'near abroad', than 'revenge for past humiliations'. He further develops the idea of Russia not being a new state that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but rather a continuation of the same entity that shed appendages it grew over the period of XX century expansion, thus reverting itself back to the tsarist form.

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<sup>5</sup> Trenin. (2009). Russia's Spheres of Interest, not Influence. The Washington Quarterly, 32(4), 3–22.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01636600903231089>



Furthermore, the author highlights territorial similarities Russia has with its pre-imperial stage of the XVII century.



[Map of Tsardom of Russia in the XVII century]<sup>6</sup>

Trenin views the collapse of the USSR as elites formally obviating the status of empire to survive social and economic hardships that the Union faced, after the dissolution, a transition mechanism from an empire to a union of independent states was adopted. At the time, this mechanism named the CIS promised to be a comfortable alternative, capable of maintaining the form of relations formed during the Soviet stage of Russia. However, CIS states were never properly used during the first decade of independence, eventually, this led the deterioration of initial plans making it near impossible to develop common economic space, external borders and a joint armed force.

<sup>6</sup> Vladimir Nikolaev (2008). Historical Maps of Russia. Edmaps.com The World on the map. <https://www.edmaps.com/html/russia.html>

Furthermore, NATO did not dissolve, rather proceeded to expand. There was a definite case of Moscow feeling humiliated, as the USA was not taking them seriously. Russia had seemingly lost its status of a hegemon for the first time in over two centuries. The decade ended with Yugoslavia being bombed for 72 days by NATO air forces, thus demonstrating Russia how democratic nations can engage in controversial activities by disguising them as a fight for human rights.

Over time, Russia's dissatisfaction with NATO encroaching on, what Russia claims to be, its spheres of influence, coupled with economic growth, gave Putin leverage necessary to revert Russia back to its former strength. First indications of Russia taking on a new course became evident when its political rhetoric started to revolve around the term coined by Anatoly Chubais – the 'liberal empire'. In research conducted by the Levada Analytical Center<sup>7</sup>, as of December 2021, 63% of Russians openly bewail the collapse of the Union and the feeling of post-imperial nostalgia is strong among population of different levels of economic prosperity. One may believe that politicians must have been spared of the post-imperial syndrome, however, in a series of interviews carried by the National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow, in a period between the Georgian and the Ukrainian conflict, the feeling of nostalgia and the desire to restore what was lost appears to be uniform for Deputies of the State Duma of both CP RF and United Russia alike. Interviewed deputies were convinced that the Belavezha accords were detrimental to the economic and political bond that was formed during the USSR's existence. Moreover, it was a general trend among responders to believe in Russia being a great power on which help

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<sup>7</sup> 'Nostalgia for the USSR', Levada-Center (2021), (in Russian) available at: <https://www.levada.ru/2021/12/24/nostalgia-po-sssr-3/>

many nations rely upon, coupled with a belief that one of the primal objectives of the US is to execute a plan that will lead to Russia's demise, as Americans are already "weaving a web of military bases" along Russian borders<sup>8</sup>. The aforementioned corresponds with Minister Lavrov's rhetoric and his accusations of Saakashvili being a vassal for the West.

An interesting aspect that is commonly ignored by scholarly articles is an issue of "passportisation". Yet passportisation can not only serve as a tool of determining the degree of interest the hegemon has in its neighbour, but may also drastically impact territorial integrity of the weaker state. Vincent Artman<sup>9</sup> discusses how Russia naturalised 90 percent of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia population, hence reigniting separatist movements and encroaching on Georgian territorial integrity. The sovereignty of Georgian state was challenged, as separatists of both regions felt tangible support of the Russian Federation, that enabled them to undertake a more radical actions, than if passportisation was never introduced. It may, therefore, be argued that passportisation had converted separatist states into islands of Russian influence inside Georgia long before the five-day war broke out.

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<sup>8</sup> Kasamara, & Sorokina, A. (2012). Imperial ambitions of Russians. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 45(3-4), 279–288. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2012.07.002>

<sup>9</sup> Vincent M. Artman (2013) Documenting Territory: Passportisation, Territory, and Exception in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, *Geopolitics*, 18:3, 682-704,

Scott Littlefield<sup>10</sup> adds to the discussion of passportisation by stating that Russia is interwoven with a concept of the state's greatness and geopolitical might, commonly referred to by Russians as 'derzhavnost'' to an extent that it is hard for one to assume that the passportisation is driven solely by a duty to protect Russian citizens outside the Federation borders. Furthermore, he agrees that separatists were given Russian passports for the sole purpose of reinforcing its influence in what it calls 'the near-abroad'. Since Russia re-emerged as a state in 1991, whenever a dilemma of choice arises between politics and human rights, politics always prevailed. When passports were initially granted to the people of breakaway states by the Russian Foreign Ministry (MID), creating a leverage of Russia over Georgia was always the primal goal. State interest and pride are cloaked in human rights and international law rhetoric. In 2008, to vest actions of military invasion that clearly constitute breach of international law with 'legitimacy', Russian leaders, including then-President Medvedev and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, invoke the Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, i.e. 'individual or collective self-defence' as well as the United Nations' 'responsibility to protect' principle, but in reality frozen conflict within territories that Russia deems to be its 'zones of influence', is the most effective tool of preventing former-Soviet states from becoming members of NATO and escaping Kremlin's grasp.

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<sup>10</sup> Littlefield. (2009). Citizenship, Identity and Foreign Policy: The Contradictions and Consequences of Russia's Passport Distribution in the Separatist Regions of Georgia. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61(8), 1461–1482. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130903134848>

Elias Gotz<sup>11</sup> states major powers use both hard and soft power tools to control states in their sphere of influence. The external pressure is described to be attempts of a smaller state, for instance the CIS member, to interact with the great power not in its geographical proximity. The regional hegemon will in that case utilise soft or hard power tools depending on the level of interaction and cooperation its neighbour has with a distant great power. When the state is obedient and loyal, and interaction with outside powers is minimal, external pressure is low, regional hegemon exercises soft-power tool to raise its level of influence through diplomatic means. If the level of external pressure is high, for instance Ukraine tries to distant itself from Russia by attempting joining NATO, the EU and a possibility of another hegemon having military presence on its territory arises, Russia, being the regional hegemon, will apply hard-power tools, ranging from military intervention to the annexation of a territory.

Grotz's article correlates with Mearsheimer's views on the reasons behind the annexation of Crimea<sup>12</sup>. Mearsheimer states that Washington should understand the logic guiding Russia through the Ukrainian crisis. The logic is purely Geopolitical, no great power, including America, would tolerate potential military presence of another great power in such proximity to its borders and on the region that is of a particular interest to it.

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<sup>11</sup> Gotz. (2016). Neorealism and Russia's Ukraine policy, 1991-present. *Contemporary Politics*, 22(3), 301–323. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201312>

<sup>12</sup> Mearsheimer. (2014). Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin. *Foreign Affairs* (New York, N.Y.), 93(5), 77–89.

Considering how prone Moscow is to believe in conspiracy theories, such reaction is expected, although unlawful.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

Russia lost not only its superpower status but also its position as a regional hegemon. Also, the country plunged into a decade-long economic and social crisis. It is, therefore, logical to ask, why instead of building stronger links with the newly independent neighbours and potentially Russia's allies, the country proceeded to antagonise and destabilise these states, namely Georgia and Ukraine?

In consequence, this Russian attempt to dominate its neighbours, the policy that became known as 'near-abroad' has not only increased international tensions around Russia and created another 'hostile encirclement' perception of Russia's immediate neighbourhood, but in addition this policy has harmful domestic consequences on Russia as well as on the countries trying to emerge out of centuries of Russian colonialism.

## **THEORY**

Theory of Offensive realism might be the most effective if applied to the subject of this work. The deterioration of bipolar structure maintained during the second half of the XX century rendered Russia incapable of maintaining the status it held on the international arena. Once it started regrowing military and economical might, it started chasing power

maximization. Fearful of the United States hindering its growth as a hegemon, Russia started applying pressure on republics of the 'near abroad' in order to eliminate potential threats and thwart any possibility of another hegemon building its 'bastion' in proximity to the Federation's borders<sup>13</sup>.

Theory of offensive realism, coined by John Mearsheimer and expanded upon in his book "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics", draws from the vast array of classic realist thinkers such as Kenneth Waltz and Hans Morgenthau, therefore, the theory is in essence realism, albeit modified. The world is ruled by no one but anarchy, hence the great powers seek comparative power maximisation to ensure survival. Multipolar system is a fertile ground for war and conflict, as the state that has enough resources is likely to pursue hegemony through violent means. The foregoing description of Russian foreign policies seem to coincide with the theory, moreover, after the USSR dissolved it was only a matter of time until Russia is capable to engage in a pursuit of lost hegemony. Mearsheimer's theory focuses on great powers due to the way such countries are capable of shaping and moulding not just local regions, but the world itself.

However, every theory has limitations to its explanatory power. To quote Mearsheimer "there is a price to pay for simplifying reality"<sup>14</sup>. Critique of theories rooted in realism is often centred on the dismissive attitude towards human factor and ideologies.

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<sup>13</sup> Mearsheimer. (2014). Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin. *Foreign Affairs* (New York, N.Y.), 93(5), 77–89.

<sup>14</sup> Mearsheimer. (2014). *The tragedy of great power politics* (Updated edition.). W.W. Norton & Company. Introduction. Chapter: The Virtues and Limits of Theory.

The author of this Thesis argues that in case of Russia ideologies are tools of power maximisation. Thus, whether the decision-making apparatus of the Russian Federation believes in the ideology they propagate or use it to cloak expansionism - is irrelevant, but actions and what they gain as a result are important, as the state that executes destabilisation of the neighbouring states acts by the dictum of offensive realism and gains more power. That being said, there is a degree of human factor that while not negating power maximisation, moderates means through which it is being pursued. As will be explained below, the security dilemma and its segment – dilemma of interpretation – determines the outcome. The great power, or the state that desires to be one, can ensure its survival, maximise its comparative powers and pursue hegemony through non-military means, or with physical violence being the last resort, unless the power believes that it is surrounded by enemies concerned only with its demise.

Kremlin officials see themselves to be encircled by enemies wishing to destroy the Federation either by military means, or by instigating “colour revolutions” in states that Russian officials deem their “near abroad” and even within Russia itself. They believe that the eventual goal of the “collective West” is to destroy Russia or overthrow the existing government and replace it with a puppet-regime. The security matters are therefore of utmost importance and paranoia of political elites creates makes them view their former allies as potential traitors, punishing them for deviating from pro-Russian course of action. The state consumed by paranoia and anxiety is more likely to resort to pre-emptive acts of violence, rather than soft power tools, in order to maximise its powers. Therefore, Russia led by a pacifist leader would still strive to acquire more power than it had before and is



unlikely to forego hegemonic aspirations, however, the bloodshed on the Federation's quest to hegemony is likely to decrease in comparison to Putin's Russia or Stalin's USSR.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The principal research approach of this study is deductive. The author of this work attempts to develop a hypotheses from a theory using a "top-down" approach. The Russian Federation is involved in destabilisation of Georgia and Ukraine. Under the theory of Offensive realism Russia prefers power maximisation over balance, therefore its chief aim is in undisputed regional hegemony. Never ending quest for power maximisation has its roots in fear for the state's security and survival, as Russia's perspective is that unless it dominates the region, enemies will weaken and destroy it. The research strategy, designed to test this hypothesis, involves examples of Russia's behaviour in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) as well as the data provided by the following sources:

- Primary sources are academic articles, speeches of government officials, journalistic insights, reports of research agencies and treaties.
- Multilingual approach is used to mitigate mistranslation and conduct fair analysis and interpretation of speeches, as well as to provide deeper insight into political rhetoric of the Russian Federation.

Important examples of multilingual approach are as follows:

- Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's speech given at MGIMO University. It has demonstrated position held by one of the major Russian politicians on the Russo-

Georgian War. “Anti-Russian provocations” is the way Minister Lavrov labelled tensions between Georgians and South Ossetians. Furthermore, “shared civilisational area” is how he refers to the CIS. The said language invokes almost neo-colonial connotations.

- President Vladimir Putin’s speech of 2005 given in Yerevan, when he has used term “civilised divorce” while describing the purpose of the CIS creation. He denied any greater plans Russia had for the Commonwealth, however, further research, coupled with Putin’s actions since then, demonstrate that the President is capable of manufacturing deliberately misleading claims.
- President Vladimir Putin’s essay titled “On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians”. The work of the President is not a historical study, but an amalgamation of presumably his thoughts on the matter of Russo-Ukrainian past, present and future relations. The style of his essay is deliberately informal. Putin is explicit in his dissatisfaction with what he deems encroachment on freedoms of Russian nationals in Ukraine. It is apparent that this work was produced in support of the concept transformed into ideological weapon by Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church – “ruskiy mir” (the Russian World). The concept is a justification of Russian expansionism and legitimisation of Vladimir Vladimirovich’s regime cloaked under protection of Russian culture abroad.
- Levada-Centre questionnaire that indicates the level of nostalgia Russian citizens experience towards the dissolution of the USSR. This questionnaire demonstrates not only cases of false-nostalgia, abundant among Russian citizens, but the way generation that lived in the USSR long for the lost empire.

- Speech by Patriarch Kirill at the opening ceremony of the Third Assembly of the Russian World. The speech demonstrates striking similarities of the Church and the state ideologies and provides insight into the aforementioned concept of the Russian World. Spoken only a year after the Georgian Conflict, the speech bears direct correlations with Foreign Minister Lavrov's speech on "civilisational unity" and maps countries that may be affected by the "russskiy mir" soft power tool.

## DISCUSSION

The dissolution of the USSR was finalised on December 26 1991, after the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union cast its votes, thus concluding the Union's existence. Shortly before the collapse Mikhail Gorbachev aided in achieving a ceasefire during the First South Ossetian War – a Georgian-Ossetian conflict that sparked as a result of nationalistic tension in the region. Tensions in another region – Abkhazia started around the same time, close to the Union's downfall, and culminated during the Sukhumi massacre of 1993. Moscow placed permanent 'peacekeeping forces' in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia<sup>15</sup>. Russian constant military presence has since served as a fuel to the conflict between Georgia and two states claiming autonomy.

Over time, Russian involvement in the region grew, and neither losing its place at the helm of the USSR, nor political turbulence of the 90-s shifted it from the course of becoming

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<sup>15</sup> Sotiriou. (2019). The Irreversibility of History. The conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Problems of Post-Communism, 66(3), 172–185. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2017.1406310>

bigger than just a conflict mediator. By 2008, Russia has gained enough military might to try to reclaim powers once almost lost. In August 2008, when the dormant conflict reignited and clashes between South Ossetian separatists and Georgian military led to President Mikheil Saakashvili's troops marching towards South Ossetian Tskhinvali, Russia reacted by not just expelling Georgia forces from the city, but advanced deep into Georgian territory, stopping just 55 kilometres from Tbilisi. Furthermore, the Russian army acted in alliance with Abkhaz troops, who managed to capture Kodori Valley, thus blocking Georgian retreat<sup>16</sup>.

Let nobody harbour any illusions about Georgia's guilt. It was Mikheil Saakashvili who gave command for rocket strikes on South Ossetian land. Later the President went on great length in lying to the international community and the well-oiled propaganda apparatus was distorting the war footage and claiming that infrastructure destroyed by Georgian forces in Tskhinvali was in fact Gori, at the time occupied by Russian military. Further confirmation came from reports of the OSCE monitors who witnessed that prior to the Russian involvement, Georgian artillery engaged in bombardments of civilian areas in South Ossetia<sup>17</sup>.

However, Russian officials are no less hypocritical in concealing true reasons for their intervention. Mikheil Saakashvili's actions, however wrong, are a by-product of Kremlin stirring the pot of nationalism in the state he was elected to protect. Not only they

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<sup>16</sup> Shchedrov. (2008). Abkhaz separatists strike disputed Georgia gorge. Reuters <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-abkhazia-kodori-idUSL932653720080809>

<sup>17</sup> Hewitt. (2013). *Discordant Neighbours*. BRILL. p. 251

provoked Georgia, by supporting separatists, but, as described above - reacted disproportionately. Seeds of Russian influence were planted long before Saakashvili's troops were deployed. Passportisation reengineered dynamics between Georgia and two breakaway territories, and military alliance Russia was able to form as a result of what it claims to be a "humanitarian" mission, sheds light on what the "protection myth" conceals – power maximisation.

Furthermore, one should caution those in haste to dismiss Saakashvili's desire to whitewash Georgian actions that preceded the war as merely an attempt to not be portrayed as an aggressor, that a context of his claims should be understood first. And this context is as follows: Georgia is a comparatively small, newly-independent country, however already torn by a century old strife. The hegemon, a former-superpower, is bordering Georgia. Having been its sovereign for 70 years, the hegemon, not willing to let the state go, plunged its hooks deep into the heart of the strife, by granting the populace of the conflicted land citizenship, thus solidifying separatist movements. The hegemon goes further, in providing separatists with military support<sup>18</sup>, and inciting them to act with greater confidence. After the Georgian leader makes a mistake reacting to provocations, Russia launches an attack described in the paragraph above and depicted on the attached map, thus overwhelming Georgian forces and placing the very existence of the state in jeopardy. One, therefore, should not be surprised that Georgian President tried every venue possible to gain American and European support. A common sense of self-preservation

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<sup>18</sup> Lunyka Adelina Pertiwi, & Wan Sharina Ramlah Wan A. A. Jaffri. (2019). Russia's Foreign Policy towards Crimean Separatism: Its Learning from Georgia-Russo War. *Malaysian Journal of International Relations*, 7(1), 88–102.

would make any leader in his position eager to obtain international support necessary to make the hegemon, that controlled its territories less than two decades prior to the war, leave. What is important for the purpose of this Thesis, is that Russia, in their invasion, was not motivated by Saakashvili's policies towards South Ossetians, but rather by his pro-Western political leaning. In the speech of Minister Lavrov, provided in the Literature Review chapter, the diplomat clearly confirms such statement, by labelling the Georgian President "Western vassal" and barely addressing the national question of breakaway states.



In March of 2015, Treaty on alliance and integration between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia was issued and signed, thus binding two states for the

duration of 25 years<sup>19</sup>. Article 2 of the Treaty is crucial to the understanding of the depth of the integration, as it expressly states that the contracting parties agreed to 'create a common space of defence and security' due to 'the current military-political situation in the region' (2015)<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore, in paragraph 2, the Russian Federation promises to defend and protect the border of South Ossetia and 'for this purpose, separate units of the Armed Forces and security agencies of the Republic of South Ossetia are to become part of the Armed Forces and security agencies of the Russian Federation'.

Crimean issue, despite on the surface being a recent conflict, dates back to 1950s. One may add that there is a legitimate argument to be made that Georgian conflict had its inception even earlier, during the formation of the USSR. It may be argued that it was a combination of Soviet habit of lumping territories together with little attention paid to the matters of national identity of the populace and totalitarian suppression of speech that lead to the build-up of tension and eventual eruption, once the concept of "Glasnost" was introduced into the Soviet political lexicon by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985<sup>21</sup>. However, for the absence of a particular date, the aforementioned description of the conflict in Georgian region starts when the nationalistic tensions morphed into acts of physical violence around the time of the Union collapse. Crimea, by contrast, became part of then-Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic upon discretion of the First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev in 1954. The politician, detested by Stalin loyalists for denouncing the Cult of the Individual, criticized by the Soviet elites of the time for impulsivity, and questioned by many for obviating

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<sup>19</sup> Treaty on alliance and integration between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia (2015). Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/4819>

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Kershaw. (2018). Roller-Coaster : Europe, 1950-2017 p. 323

punishment as an active participant of purges organized by his predecessor, has created an image of a man not to be taken seriously. The way modern Russian government tossed away his transfer of Crimea as a mere act of Khrushchev's impulsivity, give rise to an interesting question – whether the cession of the Peninsula would be as easily dismissed by Putin's administration, if done by someone more reputable, for instance, the First Secretary's predecessor, whom Vladimir Vladimirovich undeniably holds in higher regard and even mimics his fight against Nazism, albeit imaginable<sup>22</sup>. However, if one is to speculate on the matter, this thought experiment is unlikely to produce an outcome different from the event that took place between March and February of 2014. Khrushchev or not, passportisation coupled with destabilisation of Ukrainian territory, overwhelming majority of the population residing on the peninsula being Russian and strategic importance of the territory suggest that Crimean crisis was only a matter of time. Moreover, even before the annexation took place, Crimea was a dividing factor in the newly-independent Ukraine, with Western and Eastern Ukraine gravitating towards Europe and Russia respectively<sup>23</sup>.

The time came on 18 of March – the date of the annexation, the process was ratified by the State Duma shortly after Vladimir Putin's declaration of successful "Anschluss". This marked the second case of annexation in European history since the WWII, the first one was Cyprus annexation by Turkey<sup>24</sup>. South Ossetia and Abkhazia, despite being merged with

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<sup>22</sup> The Economist (2022). The Stalinisation of Russia. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2022/03/12/the-stalinisation-of-russia>

<sup>23</sup> Kershaw. (2018). Roller-Coaster : Europe, 1950-2017 p. 486

<sup>24</sup> Kershaw. (2018). Roller-Coaster : Europe, 1950-2017 p. 525



Russia to an extent that one may consider them de facto part of the Federation, are not officially annexed, two breakaway territories are recognised as independent states by Russia and a bundle of authoritarian regimes reliant on Kremlin's support for survival, such as, Venezuela, Syria, Nicaragua and Nauru<sup>25</sup>. Less than four months before the annexation, former President Yanukovych, before retreating into a permanent exile, managed to revoke the Association Agreement and lobbied for Ukrainian membership in the Russian-led Eurasian Customs Union. Yanukovych was long corrupted by Kremlin, however, if previously he attempted to at least imitate impartiality and to balance between Russia and the EU, his final actions in the role of Ukrainian president, exposed deeper bond with Moscow, than his electorate could bare. Protests broke out across country, attempts to suppress protestors only fueled the upheaval, turning it into the Civil War. The turning point was violent attempts to handle public unrest that captured the Independence Square (Maidan) in Kiev. Russian snipers were allegedly used to crush the opposition<sup>26</sup>. In the case of Ukraine, unlike in Georgia, crisis resulted in relations between Russia and the West almost reverting back to the state of the Cold War. The pro-EU government that came to power in the wake of the Civil War caused Russia to set in motion a cascade of military and strategic operations, including internationally unrecognised referendum among Crimean population, that involved a heavy presence of unidentifiable troops, known as 'vezhlyve liudi' ('the polite people'), which were later admitted by Putin himself to be Russian Forces. The main goal of the referendum was to justify and legitimise invasion and destabilisation. Moreover, while

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<sup>25</sup> TASS. (2018). Countries that recognized South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's independence. Russian News Agency.[https://tass.com/world/1007058?utm\\_source=google.com&utm\\_medium=organic&utm\\_campaign=google.com&utm\\_referrer=google.com](https://tass.com/world/1007058?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com)

<sup>26</sup> BBC (2015). Ukraine accuses Russia over Maidan 2014 killings. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31548896>

attempting legitimisation, high ranking Russian officials resorted to an outright deception and perversion of history. For instance, Sergei Naryshkin in his speech was falsely accusing Ukraine of annexing Crimea in 1991, an absurd statement considering that the Crimean Peninsula is a lawful part of Ukrainian territory since 1954<sup>27</sup>. The Crimean Peninsula is an especially important strategic place that besides possibility to accommodate a military base, grants its master control to the Black Sea and opens a portal to the Mediterranean Sea. Therefore, referring to Mearsheimer<sup>28</sup>, Russia, by annexing Crimea not only prevented NATO from creating strong ties with Ukraine but also took control over the place with immense strategical importance. As in the case of Georgia, protection of Russian nationals provided rhetorical smokescreen that is used by the Federation's officials to justify the annexation. Overall, the Kremlin not only contributed to the outbreak of the Civil War, but by annexing Crimea destabilised Ukraine and sowed panic and fear among former-Soviet and satellite states<sup>29</sup>. Further paragraphs will be dedicated to further examination of motives and motivations behind the Kremlin's actions.

The collapse of the Union and further humiliation of Russian state on the international arena has formed a deep seated yearning for 'the lost empire'. That later became cornerstone of Putin's presidency. He wants to create the country in its function as close to the USSR as possible without unifying with post-Soviet states territorially. The eventual goal is to assert Russian status of a superpower and achieve hegemony in the

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<sup>27</sup> Biersack, & O'Lear, S. (2014). The geopolitics of Russia's annexation of Crimea: narratives, identity, silences, and energy. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 55(3), 247–269.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2014.985241>

<sup>28</sup> Mearsheimer. (2014). Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin. *Foreign Affairs* (New York, N.Y.), 93(5), 77–89

<sup>29</sup> Kershaw. (2018). *Roller-Coaster : Europe, 1950-2017* p. 525

region it once occupied. Humiliation breeds a peculiar concept - Russian victimhood. The peculiarity of that concept lay in the way Russian politicians are capable of weaponizing it. Victimhood is used to justify trespassing on the territorial integrity of neighbouring states by claiming that the Federation is threatened by NATO expansion or to legitimise annexation of territories. For instance, justification for annexation of the Crimean Peninsula is rooted in the concept of Russia being a “victim” of Nikita Khrushchev’s transfer of Crimea in 1954 that the state propaganda deems unlawful and refusal to give Japan control over four islands of the Kurilian archipelago, Russian diplomats are trying to legitimise through the same concept of victimhood by evoking the fact that Japan has collaborated with Nazi Germany during the Second World War<sup>30</sup>.

The humiliation and NATO expansion have definitely played part in accelerating Russian ascend to the former position, however, one may argue that it would have happened anyway. The yearning for the power lost was there since the beginning, before the Yugoslav bombings and Saakashvili’s pro-Western government. As mentioned above, Trenin’s theory on Russia being the old state that got rid of imperial burden to survive economic calamity, if applied to this case reinforces the idea that Russia would act the same in any event. For the government that calls itself a liberal empire and a President whose legitimacy emanates from the trenches of Stalingrad<sup>31</sup>, are not likely to reside to the position Russia was rendered to in 1990-s. Theorists and questionaries point to the similar

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<sup>30</sup> RBC (2021). Zakharova responded to Japan's statements about the Kuril Islands, RBC news (in Russian) <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/602ee00f9a7947b568cdd591>

<sup>31</sup> Wood. (2011). Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and the Celebration of World War II in Russia. *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 38(2), 172–200. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187633211X591175>

conclusion, despite Mearsheimer's claim, the Ukrainian crisis and the Georgian War is ultimately Russia's fault, although the West has undeniably accelerated the process, the rekindling of Russian strive for hegemony and its desire to morph back into an empire was inevitable.

Annexation of selective territories is never off the table. Usually, once the neighbouring state makes its pro-Western position explicit, a combination of soft and hard powers is applied. Higher concentration of Russian-nationals is used as a leverage to achieve public approval. The 'protection myth' is used as a disguise to deescalate what in reality is an annexation. During Putin's presidency, Russian hegemonic aspirations were reignited. Enmity towards the West heightened. Putin made it clear that Russia is not to be disputed as a regional hegemon and countries that were once one with it under the Soviet flag were not allowed to ally with the West. Authoritarian nature of Putin's presidency can be explained by the fact that democracy never took hold in Russia. De jure, the country is a democracy, de facto, it is a quasi-democracy at best. Transition into the post-communistic era was, by all indications, shallow. A symbolic dawn of the Soviet empire and withering of communism marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall created expectations of the complete and total democratisation of the USSR. Those expectations were reassured by fervent rejection of communism and Westernisation of the "satellite" states of the Eastern Bloc and the following dissolution of the USSR. "The end of History" brought by a rapid spread of the liberal democracy was what many theorists and politicians envisioned. However, those expectations were unwarranted. One should not be quick to judge democratisation of the state by actions of the countries that were under its control – the satellite states. Nor should the fate of the empire be foretold by the actions of its former "colonies" – the member

states. It is only logical that satellite countries adopted a mode of governance different from the one imposed by the dominant state. As a matter of fact, former-communist states bred the variety of regimes and political systems larger than in any other region<sup>32</sup>. Assumptions and hopes, at the time, made by many, including Clinton's administration, that Russia could be successfully transitioned to a state of democracy were stillborn. One should bear in mind that the landmass referred to as Russia, is in fact a survived core of the rival superpower and the very force that held back democratisation and embodied the opposition to the spread of democracy. While Yeltsin's Russia was viewed as democracy in its inception, suffering from flaws soon to be overcome over the system's maturation, time proved that those flaws were not temporal and a few tenets of democracy that were able to develop were trampled by them. By the early 2000s, the general view was that the system is indeed authoritarian<sup>33</sup> with democracy being used mostly as a vehicle for authoritarianism to thrive.

One may argue that there are three intertwined factors that thwarted all hopes for democratic transition. The first being compromises made by those responsible for state reforms. Compromises made during the privatization helped "nomenklatura" not only to survive, but to remain a cast of people vested with immense influence<sup>34</sup>. This brings us to the second factor being the survival of old elites and, as a result, new members of political establishment infected by the old ideology. If the major reformer Anatoly Chubais refers to

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<sup>32</sup> Evans. (2011). The failure of democratization in Russia: A comparative perspective. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2(1), 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2010.10.001>

<sup>33</sup> Evans. (2011). The failure of democratization in Russia: A comparative perspective. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2(1), 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2010.10.001>

<sup>34</sup> Evans. (2011). The failure of democratization in Russia: A comparative perspective. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2(1), 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2010.10.001>

Russia as a liberal empire, one should not be surprised that the state's failure in distancing itself from the Soviet past goes far beyond simple rhetoric. The discussion of the Russian political metamorphosis or the lack of thereof underpins the last factor – Russia is a Soviet nuclei. The Soviet Empire, if one is to classify it as such, was a type of an empire where, despite being a de jure federation, power is concentrated in its core. The Union was never an entity consisting of equals. It was always assumed that power is to be held by the “strongman” and a group of elites who reside in the Kremlin. Institutions are strongest in the centre, ideology, propaganda and directions where the state should be heading emanates from it. Moreover, the regime was never enforced on the centre, yes, there was an internal strife and resistance when such regime was first adopted in the early XX century, however, it is different from a foreign power taking over and enforcing the regime. The sense of alienation was never fully overcome in the so-called “near-abroad”, but when it comes to Russia, the Soviet ideology was more relatable, as it came from within, invented, not imposed. As was mentioned above in the Literature Review section, Soviet identity and ideology penetrated deep within Russia, affecting not only people of the generation that lived in the USSR, but creating a feeling of false nostalgia even among those who has not lived then. The leader of the state being an adept and an avid supporter of such ideology is no doubt a significant contributor to the system's stagnation. Communism is not a central to the Soviet identity, one can observe striking similarities between the state and the empire. The image of a superpower and an empire trumps communism.

This brings us to one of the maxims of realism – “power maximisation”. Even in the immediate post-war era of late 1940s, when the Western world was consumed by the fear of spreading Communism, one man was concerned with power maximisation above

anything else, and that man was Joseph Stalin. The leader of the USSR was concerned chiefly with power and Communism was merely a tool Stalin branded his possessions with. Anxiety in the face of communism that became especially well pronounced in geographically removed America, manifesting in McCarthyian witch-hunts, was different in Europe, where the worry was more closely linked to the fear of imminent death at the hand of Soviet soldiers, rather than to the erosion of democratic institutions. It was therefore those closest to the Eastern bloc saw Stalin's true goal through the revolutionary mist of communism and that goal was power, not ideology. The way Tito's government in Yugoslavia was made an outcast for being feverishly obsessed with communism to the point that Stalin sensed threat to the USSR being the only true source of communism, demonstrates that nation-unifying ideology was of secondary importance to the General Secretary<sup>35</sup>. Putin, similarly, is concerned chiefly with expansion of his empire and power maximisation, while Russian nationalism and "russkiy mir" (Russian world) are tools he uses to achieve his goals.

Therefore one may assume that, although modern Russia was the Soviet nuclei, it in fact can be traced back to its "tsarist" past. "Derzhavnost'", or rather a search for it, is central, communism is just a novelty state adopted and then shed. The word derzhavnost' encompasses both concepts of being the great power and having such status respected and recognised by others. Derzhavnost' or derzhava is therefore a more accurate description of what modern Russia aims to achieve, while the term empire is still applicable and can be used interchangeably, derzhava does not necessarily presume that the controlled land will become a colony of the state, rather that it would fully acknowledge the dominance of the

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<sup>35</sup> Judt. (2010). *Postwar : a history of Europe since 1945*. Vintage. p.,139-140

hegemon, the word's lack of negative connotations with colonialism make it more suitable to be used by Russian diplomats as a substitute for "empire". Communism was used as an ideological weapon to help keep an empire intact, nowadays in a glue that Putin assumes should hold the modern Russian empire, or derzhava, together is the "russkiy mir". Thus the rivalry of Russia and the US persisted despite the change of system.

One may question true significance of the "russkiy mir" when applied to politics. Is this an actual soft-power tool, or does it fully grounded in the framework of Orthodoxy? Therefore, an examination of the concept and of agents that spread this concept should be made in order to avoid confusing politics with religion. Literally translated as the Russian World, the term refers to an intangible, semi-spiritual cohesion that bonds Russian nationals across the globe. This term is a bundle that unifies language, ethnic unity and orthodox Christianity. However, the way it is used by Moscow elites is far from benign. In essence, Russian world signifies the reach of the Kremlin's power. The stronger and more cohesive this world is, the bigger is the domain of the Kremlin's influence. Russian national unity was hijacked by Russian elites, and corrupted through propaganda. "Ruskiy mir" is an expression that became an important soft power tool. Therefore, to reinforce "russkiy mir" is not a goal that Moscow strives to achieve, nor is it a motive behind destabilisation of Georgia and Ukraine. "Russian world" is a weapon, a soft power tool, particularly effective in justifying encroachments on territorial integrity of the neighbouring states, legitimising annexation and inciting separatist movements inside the targeted region. The most explicit recent case when the "weapon" was applied is Crimea. Faith is at the heart of the concept,



hence it is sometimes referred to as the “Orthodox civilizational community”<sup>36</sup>. However, what the concept stands for is of little substance, more important is what it implies, and that is consolidation of socio-political isolationism, i.e. rejection of anything Western, including cultural values and democracy, and augmentation of control authoritarian elites have over the community.

The head of Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) – Patriarch Kirill of Moscow<sup>37</sup>, confirmed the foregoing interpretation of the concept in his speech of 2009, given during the opening of the Third Assembly of the Russian World. The concept was grounded as a legal entity – the Russkiy Mir Foundation in 2007, by Vladimir Vladimirovich himself<sup>38</sup>. The Patriarch identified globalisation as the main challenge to cultural and national identity. Concerned by the future prospect of the Russian World, he expressed a desire for it to be an important player on the international arena. The head of ROC, also one of the most powerful people of the Russian Federation, stated that containing the Russian World within the confines of the Federation is a sin. In his words, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus constitute the backbone of the Russian World, and while the Primate of the ROC made reservations in his speech by stating that the sovereignty should be respected, he still claimed that state borders does not exist in reality and lamented that sovereignty limits integration between states and their unification under the Russian World. The “ruskiy mir”, in the Hierarch’s words, is the civilizational area of people reposing on three main pillars: Russian Orthodox

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<sup>36</sup> Wawrzonek. (2014). Ukraine in the “Gray Zone” East European Politics and Societies, 28(4), 758–780. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325414543947>

<sup>37</sup> Press Service of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. (2009). Speech by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill at the Opening Ceremony of the Third Assembly of the Russian World. ROC. (in Russian) <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/928446.html>

<sup>38</sup> Wawrzonek. (2014). Ukraine in the “Gray Zone” East European Politics and Societies, 28(4), 758–780. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325414543947>

faith, Russian language and Russian culture. Despite Patriarch Kirill's attempts to distance the concept from foreign policies exercised by current President's administration, the bishop's words are strikingly similar to the "shared civilisational area" concept used by Minister Lavrov in his justification of the Russo-Georgian War<sup>39</sup>. The Foreign Minister drafts similar argument in portraying the outside world as the main challenge to integration and creating a paranoid image of the foreign agents trying to introduce discord into relationships between Russia and its allies.

Putin has famously produced an essay<sup>40</sup> that sheds light on his stance regarding the "Ukrainian question". The President, in vein similar to the Patriarch's, effectively negates historical differences that exist between Russian and Ukrainian people. It is therefore implied that the Russian World should engulf Ukraine, as in his words the two nations are, in fact, one. History of Russia and Ukraine is indeed interconnected. Cultural, linguistical similarities coupled with geographical proximity, blurred borders of the distant past and shared cultural and historical ancestor – Kievan Rus' contributed to the creation of historical and cultural bond that is hard to untangle. However, the two nations are by no measure – one, and Putin's claims are attempts to legitimise and normalise draconian policies of the Federation. Bishop Kirill, mentioned that "russkiy mir" does not limit itself to three Slavic states. Moldova and even Kazakhstan, which population is predominantly Muslim, were also

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<sup>39</sup> Sergei Lavrov (2008) Speech by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S.V.Lavrov at MGIMO (U) MFA of Russia on the occasion of the beginning of the new academic year. Law and Security, Interregional public movement "For legal support of domestic producers", 3, 27-33. (in Russian) <https://elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=12230379&>

<sup>40</sup> Putin. (2021). Article by Vladimir Putin "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians". (in Russian). Official Kremlin website. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>

labelled “children of the Russian Orthodox Church”<sup>41</sup>. Patriarch of all Rus’, according to Soviet archives, had ties with KGB<sup>42</sup>. His father, also a priest, baptised Putin in 1952<sup>43</sup>. The ROC has ties with the state reaching deep into the Soviet past. Since the Russian Federation is the state-successor of the USSR, or the Soviet Union itself sans “appendages”, satellites and reduced to its core, primarily due to the survival of nomenklatura and lack of reforms, the fact that the Church remained controlled by the state is not surprising. Albeit now that the religion is not sanctioned by the state, Moscow Patriarchate was able to ascend as close to its pre-Bolshevik might as super-presidential regime and secular constitution allows. In 2012, the Primate of the Russian Church referred to Putin’s presidency as a part of God’s miracle that salvaged Russia<sup>44</sup> and used his powers of a cleric to justify Russian aggression towards Ukraine<sup>45</sup>.

The territory marked as the ROC’s sphere of influence bears striking similarities to the pre-revolutionary, tsarist, Russia. Therefore, notable bishops as Father Euthymius refer to the organisation as the keeper and protector of “spiritual legacy of the Russian Empire”, as the Church is the only institution that not only survived the calamities of the XX century,

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<sup>41</sup> Press Service of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. (2009). Speech by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill at the Opening Ceremony of the Third Assembly of the Russian World. ROC. (in Russian) <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/928446.html>

<sup>42</sup> The Guardian. (2022). The Guardian view on the Russian Orthodox Church: betrayed by Putin’s patriarch. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/apr/03/the-guardian-view-on-the-russian-orthodox-church-betrayed-by-putins-patriarch>

<sup>43</sup> Netburn. (2022). A spiritual defence of the war in Ukraine? Putin’s patriarch is trying. Los Angeles Times. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-03-29/russian-orthodox-patriarch-offers-a-spiritual-defense-of-the-war-in-ukraine>

<sup>44</sup> Bryanski. (2012). Russian patriarch calls Putin era “miracle of God”. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-russia-putin-religion-idUKTRE81722Y20120208>

<sup>45</sup> Netburn. (2022). A spiritual defence of the war in Ukraine? Putin’s patriarch is trying. Los Angeles Times. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-03-29/russian-orthodox-patriarch-offers-a-spiritual-defense-of-the-war-in-ukraine>

but managed to maintain a certain degree of continuity. Therefore, in reintegrating states of the former USSR, the Patriarchate found way to continue tradition of the Russian empire<sup>46</sup>. According to Myroslav Marynovich the Russian World is the last viable ideology that still support “gathering of Russian lands”, and this ideology is of immense importance for the state that never transcended its own imperialism<sup>47</sup>. Spiritless and “rotting” West is often juxtaposed to Slavic civilisation. Liberalism and democracy are denounced as bringers of dehumanisation, and American idea of human rights is capable of reducing society to ruin. Key values are therefore invoked to ensure that the ideological foundation is solid. Those values, in Russian media, are referred to as “skrepy”. “Skrepy” is the spiritual glue or to be more precise – “spiritual braces”<sup>48</sup>, that proponents of Russkiy mir and those advocating for Soviet integration deem to be essential for holding, an otherwise fragile, state construction together. Arguably the strongest of those is a shared memory of the 4 year war and a victory in the year 1945. This memory is artificial for an overwhelming majority of people living nowadays on lands, once subjected to the Soviet rule. An artificial memory is “implanted”, rather than experienced, drop by drop seeping through oral history, media, written and visual artefacts of the historical event of a tremendous magnitude, into the collective conscious of people who were too young to comprehend or born too late to experience the event. The fact that the Union emerged victorious from the Great Patriotic War (Soviet war against Germany, 1941-1945), is a powerful vehicle to trigger a shared historical memory and simultaneously a source of Putin’s ideology. The way Putin managed

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<sup>46</sup> Wawrzonek. (2014). Ukraine in the “Gray Zone” East European Politics and Societies, 28(4), 758–780. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325414543947>

<sup>47</sup> Wawrzonek. (2014). Ukraine in the “Gray Zone” East European Politics and Societies, 28(4), 758–780. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325414543947>

<sup>48</sup> Tyushka. (2022). Weaponizing narrative: Russia contesting EUrope's liberal identity, power and hegemony. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 30(1), 115–135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2021.1883561>

to capitalised on the victory<sup>49</sup> he has not been a part of - is remarkable in a way of how effective he was in tying “russskiy mir” and Putinism together. Therefore, Russkiy mir is a powerful ideological weapon that can be used not only to enhance integration but to augment Putin’s power. The fact that the USSR was a Communist state that preached atheism, is, paradoxically, not a contradiction for the argument. As noted by Dimitry Pospelovsky, the war made Communism stronger, but the Orthodox Church it resurrected<sup>50</sup>. The landmark event of the war - the battle of Stalingrad, reversed the tide of war and breathed new life into religiosity, as the state recognised the need for religion as a stimulus and a soft power tool. Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that the USSR in its military triumph achieved also a “triumph of values”, thus breaking new ground for the Russian Orthodoxy. While Western values are often referred to as hostile to the “russskiy mir”, in a pre-annexation speech of Odessa’s Metropolitan, the cleric narrowed the enemy down to a single organisation – the North Atlantic alliance. NATO was denounced as hostile to the civilisational community unified under the roof of the Russian Orthodox Church<sup>51</sup>. This speech demonstrates weaponised concept of the Russian World applied beyond borders of the Russian Federation in a pre-Crimean world.

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<sup>49</sup> Wood. (2011). Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and the Celebration of World War II in Russia. *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 38(2), 172–200. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187633211X591175>

<sup>50</sup> Wawrzonek. (2014). Ukraine in the “Gray Zone” *East European Politics and Societies*, 28(4), 758–780. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325414543947>

<sup>51</sup> Wawrzonek. (2014). Ukraine in the “Gray Zone” *East European Politics and Societies*, 28(4), 758–780. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325414543947>

The foregoing description of the Georgian War demonstrates “operation” more violent and blunt than the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. When comparing Russian policies in support of local separatism, one might reach a conclusion that the Russian Federation was able to engineer a more subtle form of undermining territorial integrity of disobedient states, without transforming it into a full-scale military invasion. However, the Ukrainian War of 2022 demonstrates the opposite. As this conflict is ongoing, it will take some time before the fog of war will settle and a comprehensive analysis can be produced, therefore this Thesis will only refer to the War as a counterpoint to the Crimean argument. The mere fact that war of 2022 happened shows that there is something strange in the way Crimean crisis was approached.

Some theorists argue that this is a direct result of Russia’s political learning. Pertiwi and Jaffri<sup>52</sup>, state that the Russo-Georgian war led to metamorphosis of Russian destabilisation practices. Conventional war, through trial and observation, was replaced by Ambiguous Warfare, thus minimising bloodshed and shifting emphasis on strategy and accuracy, as opposed to the blunt force. Among people who lost their life to the “peaceful” annexation was Reshat Ahmetov<sup>53</sup>, whose death exposed struggles of Crimean Tatars, a minority that Russian government wishes to ignore, in general, the occupiers decidedly avoided using excessive force, otherwise more people would have fell victim to the

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<sup>52</sup> Lunyka Adelina Pertiwi, & Wan Sharina Ramlah Wan A. A. Jaffri. (2019). Russia's Foreign Policy towards Crimean Separatism: Its Learning from Georgia-Russo War. *Malaysian Journal of International Relations*, 7(1), 88–102.

<sup>53</sup> European Union External action. (2022). Eight Years On, War in Ukraine Brings Back Painful Memories of Crimea’s Invasion. The Diplomatic Service of the European Union. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eight-years-war-ukraine-brings-back-painful-memories-crimea-s-invasion\\_en#](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eight-years-war-ukraine-brings-back-painful-memories-crimea-s-invasion_en#)

annexation. Besides decreased casualties, and damages to the infrastructure, the supposed motivation was to minimise response from NATO and the EU.

The implication that Russian “belief” had changed in regard to the military warfare was made before the events of 2022. Now that there is evidence of Kremlin favouring military intervention as a tool of destabilisation, the annexation of Crimea might be viewed as an anomaly that does not indicate a shift in Kremlin’s approach to destabilisation. Although, an argument can be made that the Peninsula was annexed in an unlawful, but, for the most part, nonviolent way due to a number of reasons.

First reason behind the use of “little green men” as opposed to Georgian scenario can be explained through the aforementioned concept of “ruskiy mir” and the way this ideology affects different territories. In Ukraine, the grip of the Russian World is stronger than in Georgia. Patriarch Kirill himself referred to Ukraine, Belarus and Russia as being the main three components forming the backbone of the Russian World. He identified other countries as “children” of the Church, however only those three states are crucial to the functioning of the Russian World<sup>54</sup>. The influence of the Russian world is amplified by passportisation policies applied to Crimea before the war. Passportisation allows to “manufacture”<sup>55</sup> Russian nationals for the purpose of potential expansionism. If pro-Russian sentiments are already high, as they were in Crimea, through passportisation one can

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<sup>54</sup> Press Service of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. (2009). Speech by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill at the Opening Ceremony of the Third Assembly of the Russian World. ROC. (in Russian) <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/928446.html>

<sup>55</sup> Green. (2014). Editorial Comment: The Annexation of Crimea: Russia, Passportisation and the Protection of Nationals Revisited. *Journal on the Use of Force and International Law*, 1(1), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.5235/20531702.1.1.3>

significantly decrease the incentive for the local population to fight annexation and even generate conditions for locals to favour the Russian “Anschluss”. Therefore, Crimea is yet the most vivid example of “russskiy mir” concept application to geopolitics.

Secondly, the country was torn by the Civil War. The War for the inception of which Kremlin was responsible, at first by pressuring the Ukrainian government to distant itself from Europe, then by implementing draconian measures to suppress protestors and allegedly ordering mercenaries to shoot at civilians who gathered on the Maidan square<sup>56</sup>. Its military and financial support for Luhansk and Donetsk separatists<sup>57</sup> provided fuel for the calamity to continue. It is therefore, not surprising that Ukrainian military was not able to provide comprehensive response to Russian invasion, as its attention was consumed by the need to extinguish fires of revolution all over the country and preserve the state itself, and civilians influenced by passportisation backed “russskiy mir” propaganda, coupled with fear of having to live in a war-torn country, showed little resistance to the occupiers. Therefore, it is dubious that Crimean annexation was born out of the evolution of Moscow’s destabilisation practices, otherwise the invasion commenced on February 2022 would have taken a different form. It is probable that an overwhelming military force was not used in 2014, as the Crimea was deemed an easy target, in the light of aforementioned reasons. Georgia was not weakened by a civil war, thus a full scale invasion was applied. Ukraine, as a result, grew more resilient and capable of withstanding heavy bombardment of Moscow’s propaganda machine. Putin’s actions of 2014, strengthened Ukrainian nationalism,

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<sup>56</sup> BBC (2015). Ukraine accuses Russia over Maidan 2014 killings. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31548896>

<sup>57</sup> The Economist. (2014). Who the Ukrainian rebels are. <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2014/08/31/who-the-ukrainian-rebels-are>



reinforced people's identity, contrary to what Russian elites hoped to achieve. Thus, the Crimean model is only applicable when the resistance is minimal. To the territory not already ravaged by physical and ideological conflicts the more violent model of behaviour would be applied, as was demonstrated in 2008 and 2022.



Map of the Crimean Peninsula (2019).<sup>58</sup>

For the purpose of bringing clarity to the Thesis and assessing the role leader plays in formation of Russian foreign policies, one has to model a speculative situation where Putin is taken out of the equation. Through this thought experiment, the goal is to answer the question whether Russia is fully driven by Putin and his ambitions, or whether it would proceed to operate similarly without the authoritarian leader in command.

<sup>58</sup> The Economist. (2019). Crimea is still in limbo five years after Russia seized it. <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/06/08/crimea-is-still-in-limbo-five-years-after-russia-seized-it>

Russia is an old state because its leaders carry weight of the Soviet history on their shoulders and nomenklatura survived. However, 77 years passed since the Soviet flag was raised over Reichstag and Putin, as was already mentioned – had no input in the victory. Whether behaviour of the Russian state will be altered once people born after the Soviet collapse would come to rule the country remains to be seen. However, questionnaires show that the Soviet shadow loom large over even the Russian youth<sup>59</sup>, and Putin's example demonstrates that one does not have to be a direct participant of the historical event to have their personality altered by it. Current administration believes that their legitimacy was forged in the fires of the Second World War<sup>60</sup>, and it is unclear whether the upcoming generation of Russian leaders would be affected by the Soviet legacy. It might even be so that Putin have created his own legacy, and much like the Stalinism existed even after being denounced by Khrushchev, Putinism might become the next framework for Russian politicians. Therefore, if Putinism is indeed the future, the battle against the West would continue, isolationism would grow strong and we might find ourselves caught inside the same bipolar contraption that divided the World in XX century, something that might be a desirable outcome for political figures like Minister Lavrov<sup>61</sup>. Former-Soviet states would, in that event be always facing a threat of invasion and destabilisation, in the event that they would cease to obey Moscow.

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<sup>59</sup> 'Nostalgia for the USSR', Levada-Center (2021), (in Russian) available at: <https://www.levada.ru/2021/12/24/nostalgia-po-sssr-3/>

<sup>60</sup> Wood. (2011). Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and the Celebration of World War II in Russia. *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 38(2), 172–200. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187633211X591175>

<sup>61</sup> Sergei Lavrov (2008) Speech by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S.V.Lavrov at MGIMO (U) MFA of Russia on the occasion of the beginning of the new academic year. Law and Security, Interregional public movement "For legal support of domestic producers", 3, 27-33. (in Russian) <https://elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=12230379&>

Having said that, Russia after Putin might be different. Massive yearly demonstrations that rattle the regime's cage since the Bolotnaya protests almost yearly<sup>62 63</sup>, could mount into an overwhelming dissatisfaction with Putin's regime. The electorate that supports current president are mostly province-dwellers, with little to no access to alternative media sources, who are chiefly concerned with survival and are not affluent enough to be concerned with advancements of liberalism as is the opposition that formed in Moscow and Saint-Petersburg. However, sanctions that were imposed on Russia and potential of Europe breaking out of the Russian gas dependency cycle, might inflict such a heavy blow to Russian economy, that even the provinces would demand change. In that case, there might be a shift towards liberalism. Although, even liberal, a state of such immense resources as Russia will continue being a hegemon and pursue power-maximisation. However, in the event of a change of leadership Russian hegemony, while inescapable would be easier to bear, there are different ways of achieving hegemony and they do not necessarily include invasion of its former allies or annexation of territories. A policy of "scorched land" is an extreme current administration uses to leave the disobedient state in such a condition that it would become unattractive to any defence or political alliance that acts outside Russian control. In liberal Russia, hegemony might become economical, for instance, it might take shape of a renewed CIS that would obey conditions of a civilised divorce. Whether liberal Russia would be more tolerant towards its neighbours

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<sup>62</sup> Zverev., Ivanova. (2020). Hundreds protest in Moscow against reforms that may keep Putin in power. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-protests-idUSKCN24G2SF>

<sup>63</sup> Faulconbridge. (2022). More than 4,300 detained at anti-war protests in Russia. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/more-than-64-people-detained-anti-war-protests-russia-protest-monitor-2022-03-06/>

veering off the pro-Russian path and allowing a greater cooperation with the West is possible, however, since Russia is a hegemon, it is unlikely to distance itself completely from the affairs of neighbouring states, therefore, a certain degree of pressure will always be present, even in the event of a liberal Russia.

Therefore, one might reach a conclusion that the leader does not determine whether state will have hegemonic aspirations or not, however, the leader is important in deciding means through which the hegemony can be achieved, and the means can range from soft to hard power, from “russkiy mir” being a simple propaganda tool to it being used to justify annexation of foreign territories. Hegemony can be achieved through military and non-military means and current Kremlin leadership definitely believes in hard power to be the ultimate solution and soft power being a bedrock for hard power, a foundation that is built to justify and add legitimacy to military conquest and hard power utilisation. The role a leader plays is important to the development of the country and in formation of the goal to which the country is headed. Democracies are not foreign to the concept of power maximisation and the state being a democracy does not mean it is not obeying realism, however, the leader is crucial in determining path that the country will follow on its quest to security and power maximisation. Offensive realism is a framework that can be applied to any state, democratic or not, however, it is undeniable that Vladimir Putin has an effect on the degree of violence and aggression as well as on methods used by the Federation to reinstate itself as a superpower. Hegemony and survival in the anarchic world could have been obtained through less destructive methods under another leader. In a state where the

presidency is regarded by most as the only real institution<sup>64</sup>, influence of the leader or elites, as discussed by Evans<sup>65</sup>, could therefore be expanded outside the domestic policies into the international realm.

Security dilemma is a twofold structure consisting of a dilemma of interpretation and a dilemma of response<sup>66</sup>. In International relations a factor of unknown is considerable, true intentions of allies and adversaries are, for the most part, dubious, hence the state is presented with a dilemma of how to interpret actions of others and act accordingly. If the state, especially the one striving to reinstate itself in a status of one of the great powers, interprets actions of another actor as malevolent, there is a high possibility of the response being oppugnant. In case of Russia, self-preservation and power maximisation being the canvas on which states operate, coupled with personal perceptions of “strongman” ruling the state, one may surmise that a solution to a dilemma of response is predetermined. Russia operates in a paranoia infused state and pro-Western is generally equated with anti-Russian, hence any major political or economic agreement its neighbour will make with the European Union or NATO, would be automatically regarded by Putin’s government as an act of aggression and potential threat to Russian ascension to its pre-collapse might. The aforementioned reaction is not secluded to cases of international alliances, as noted by Trenin<sup>67</sup>, Kremlin perceives colour revolutions not as cases of public unrest caused by the

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<sup>64</sup> Shevtsova. (2012). Russia under Putin: Titanic looking for its iceberg? *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 45(3-4), 209–216. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2012.07.014>

<sup>65</sup> Evans. (2011). The failure of democratization in Russia: A comparative perspective. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2(1), 40–51. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2010.10.001>

<sup>66</sup> Sinkkonen. (2011). A security dilemma on the boundary line: an EU perspective to Georgian-Russian confrontation after the 2008 war. *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 11(3), 265–278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2011.589152>

<sup>67</sup> Trenin. (2009). Russia's Spheres of Interest, not Influence. *The Washington Quarterly*, 32(4), 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01636600903231089>

dissatisfaction with the ruling elites, but as a conspiracy designed by the USA for the purpose of weakening Russia or even engineering a revolution capable of destroying the Federation from within, so that its current government could be replaced, and the state transformed into American puppet regime. Hence Russia providing military support for South Ossetian separatists and the following annexation of the Crimean Peninsula constitutes its desire to suppress pro-Western movements and destabilise Georgia and Ukraine to an extent when they are no longer of any interest to NATO. It is unclear whether or not Putin believes in the self-righteous war with Western oppressors, or does he indeed believe that he is encircled by enemies wishing to destroy him, however, the issue of trust is palpable and is reflected in many speeches and ways the Federation operates.

Article 10 of the North Atlantic Treaty<sup>68</sup> grants member states powers to, by unanimous agreement, invite any European state to join the organisation. President Putin, through threats and violence, allowed Russia to strip member states of such powers, and establish control over the “open door” policy, thus creating obstacles to NATO expansion and subverting the functioning of the alliance. However, paradoxically, Putin’s actions, while capable of creating protracted delays in admitting new members, gave NATO strength and purpose it almost lost. This “vitamin injection” Putin administered to NATO, as put by the chairman of the Munich Security Conference<sup>69</sup>, had put an end to uncertainties and concerns that surrounded NATO since the Red Menace was dispelled 30 years ago. Seeds for the ongoing NATO revitalisation were planted by Russian forces during the “five day war”

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<sup>68</sup> North Atlantic Treaty art., 10, Apr. 4, 1949

<sup>69</sup> How Russia revived NATO; Geopolitics. (2022). The Economist (London), 52.

and the Ukrainian crisis that followed was the final blow to the post-war optimism. An argument can be made that Kremlin is the most potent agent capable of triggering NATO expansion and reinforcement. Just as the West consolidated under the threat of communism or Soviet hegemony, to be precise, transatlantic cooperation, similarly to Ukraine, will grow stronger under the threat of Russia's hegemony. Therefore, Putin's regime and the way this regime had manifested itself is Russia's true mortal enemy and NATO's greatest ally. Nothing and nobody was as effective in fostering the impetus for new members to join NATO as Putin's attempt to halt its expansion. Moreover, the more Russia used military force to coerce its neighbours into obedience the more pronounced NATO's goals and purpose became. The defence alliance has no incentive to exist in the absence of a threat, however, nowadays for the first time in three decades the defence alliance faced a tangible threat that may challenge its defence capabilities. Recent examples of historically neutral Finland and Sweden aiming to obtain NATO membership<sup>70</sup> further reinforces the argument that a self-proclaimed superpower threatening its neighbours with Communism or "Russian world" is capable of inducing governments with enough fear for the national security and state survival to consolidate the acting alliance for generations to come. Ian Kershaw<sup>71</sup> stated that anti-communistic and anti-Soviet sentiments not only consolidated states on the Western side of the barricades, but helped to reinforce and solidify Western liberal democracy. In the same vein anti-Kremlin sentiments that became pronounced especially well during the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian War, are likely to unify the West against what countries adjacent to Russia already perceive as a threat, thus producing

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<sup>70</sup> Henley. (2022). Finland and Sweden confirm intention to join NATO. Guardian.  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/15/finland-formally-confirms-intention-to-join-nato-russia>

<sup>71</sup> Kershaw. (2018). Roller-Coaster : Europe, 1950-2017. p. 49

results completely different than what is desired by Moscow elites. Moreover, Russian interference in affairs of sovereign states might become the force capable of producing a “tectonic shift” in the way NATO views itself. From the North Atlantic alliance, the organisation might transform into a global alliance of democratic countries. The assumption is not inconceivable, considering that there are already discussions to adopt a more global approach to security<sup>72</sup>.

Another tool of preventing neighbouring states from deviating from the Russian course is the Commonwealth of Independent States. The description of the CIS as an “empire to union” transition mechanism<sup>73</sup> that due to Russian inactivity in the 1990-s, crumbled, as member states achieved a level of independence that even the most loyal of them are unlikely to give up – is credible, however, the CIS has additional levels of complexity to it. Some may argue that Russia having no resources to maintain intended level of control over the CIS states, had to adopt new strategy, hence Putin’s rise to power constituted a new stage in Russia’s approach to the CIS, referring to the speech given in 2005, when Putin stated<sup>74</sup> that the CIS was constructed in order to execute the disintegration of the USSR in the most civilized manner. However, Gotz<sup>75</sup>, describes that the CIS never intended to be an aforementioned “civilized divorce”, but rather a mechanism of checks to the level of autonomy of the member states. Being a member of the CIS prohibits

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<sup>72</sup> Simon. (2022). The Madrid Strategic Concept and the future of NATO. NATO review. <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2022/06/02/the-madrid-strategic-concept-and-the-future-of-nato/index.html>

<sup>73</sup> Trenin. (2009). Russia's Spheres of Interest, not Influence. The Washington Quarterly, 32(4), 3–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01636600903231089>

<sup>74</sup> Putin (2005). “Putin: Nuzhno sohranit SNG”, RIA news (in Russian) <https://ria.ru/20050325/39572478.html>

<sup>75</sup> Gotz. (2016). Neorealism and Russia's Ukraine policy, 1991-present. Contemporary Politics, 22(3), 301–323. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201312>



the state from entering into military alliance or engaging in actions against other members. It would seem that both Trenin and Gotz are correct, as 'transition mechanism' and 'mechanism of checks' can be conceived simultaneously. It is unlikely that Russian policy-makers were certain that they would be able to sustain the level of influence after the collapse, hence it is feasible that if joint military and common economic space is impossible to achieve, they have at least designed a safety net and a supervisory mechanism that enabled them to if not control, then monitor other members' actions. From a historical perspective, the CIS bears resemblance to the Warsaw pact. After its creation in 1955 the Pact became an embodiment of Soviet-led Eastern bloc<sup>76</sup> and the manifestation of Soviet influence.

One might argue that in the history of modern Russia there were contradictions to the offensive realism theory, citing the example of Russia not reacting when former Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma signed a partnership agreement with NATO. However, the fact is that at the time Russia was incapable of applying the same level of pressure it did apply in 2014. Turbulent 90s took a toll on Russia, the state underwent multiple socio-economic and political crises as well as a decade-long Chechen war, 'state capacity'<sup>77</sup> is crucial when it comes to military and strategic action, as soon as Russia regained some of its powers, Ukraine paid a price for leaning to the West. Punishment can range from soft to hard power application, from diplomatic actions to sanctions and military intervention.

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<sup>76</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO declassified.  
[https://www.nato.int/cps/us/natohq/declassified\\_138294.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/us/natohq/declassified_138294.htm)

<sup>77</sup> Gotz. (2016). Neorealism and Russia's Ukraine policy, 1991-present. *Contemporary Politics*, 22(3), 301–323.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201312>

In a report issued by NATO Defence College<sup>78</sup> in the direct aftermath of the 2008 events, it was stated that Kremlin's action carried within itself a desire to emit a spectre of signals, with an overarching message being that Russia is back and from now on it will be re-establishing itself as a force to reckon with. The plan was for those signals to be decoded and interpreted differently by each state, for instance, a message to the West was that Russian state capacity now allows it to operate not only within the realm of energy supplies, but as a military force capable of overpowering the western-trained adversary. In post-Soviet republics, the signal was to be interpreted that Moscow will not tolerate any 'flirting' with the West and any such attempt will be punished. Any political tendencies that move former-Union states away from Russian orbit of influence, be that Ukraine wanting to become the EU member, or Georgian convergence with NATO or oil-rich states thinking of enhancing their trade with the West, for instance Azerbaijan that in 2008 was going to have elections in October.

Russia by all means strives to contain level of autonomy former-Union republics have, as examples of Georgia and Ukraine show, cooperation with the West is what tends to trigger military escalation, however, an economic endeavour capable of granting the state a level of prosperity and autonomy that will secure it from being directly influenced by Russia is also capable of inducing tension. Russian imperialism can be observed if one pays attention to how the Federation turns objects of primarily economic importance into tools of power maximization. The best example of this process is Gazprom. As the state waded

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<sup>78</sup> Monaghan, Andrew C. "The Russo-Georgian Conflict." NATO Defense College, 2008. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10323>.

through a decade long depression and the government assumed that not only survival, but prosperity was possible, regaining the power lost, became the main objective. This coupled with a keen interest the new leader expressed towards using energy resources for the interest of the state triggered a process of fusion of Gazprom with Kremlin to an extent where objectives of the President were almost indistinguishable from objectives of the Gazprom management.

Considering abundance of natural resources and necessity to distribute such resources, some might be inclined to believe that Russia has in fact shifted its focus from geopolitical influence to pursuit of purely commercial goals, as claimed by Poussenkova<sup>79</sup>. However, pipeline explosion could have been observed in Georgia two years before the conflict, and there is a little doubt that such explosion was a manifestation of Russian desire assert political pressure. In Ukraine, prices were raised after the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the government has explicitly stated that 'hostile-minded' regimes will not be supported, in 2009 then-President Dmitry Medvedev ordered to postpone payment of transit fees until it is known who the President would be. According to Orttung and Overland<sup>80</sup>, it is uncommon for Russia to use its energy to achieve purely political goals in countries of the European Union, however, it is also evident from the article that the Federation does not shy away from pressuring former-Soviet states, influencing their

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<sup>79</sup> Poussenkova. (2010). THE GLOBAL EXPANSION OF RUSSIA'S ENERGY GIANTS. *Journal of International Affairs* (New York), 63(2), 103–124.

<sup>80</sup> Orttung, & Overland, I. (2011). A limited toolbox: Explaining the constraints on Russia's foreign energy policy. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 2(1), 74–85. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2010.10.006>

elections and prolonging military presence on their soil, for instance, by prolonging lease on the military base in Sevastopol.

While pipelines are important in bringing revenue to the state, money is not a driving force in Russian foreign policy. August of 2008 did not happen because of oil, as a hegemon ailed with imperial fever, Russia values power over money and financial gain is not likely to be the driving motive behind policies and actions seeking to destabilise former allies. One may argue this statement by providing an example of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. However, Russian dissatisfaction with the pipeline was not based on concern for the market. The project has increased attention Europe and the USA pay to Georgia, since the connecting state is vested with strategic importance. Russia, when the BTC construction was still at the stage of planning, took a stance, that if Georgia withdrew from the project, Russia would in its turn, withdraw from Abkhazia, as the BTC pipeline was capable of making Georgia less dependent on Russian energy, increase Western involvement and weaken Russian influence in the region<sup>81</sup>.

The map<sup>82</sup> below that alongside the BTC pipeline, smaller, but nevertheless, strategically important Western Route Export Pipeline (WREP), commonly referred to as the Baku-Supsa pipeline, lies. On Georgian soil, it stretches to 375 km, covering more of the Georgian land than the BTCP. During the Russo-Georgian war, the pipeline was used as an

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<sup>81</sup> Carroll. (2012). The Cutting Edge of Accumulation: Neoliberal Risk Mitigation, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline and its Impact. *Antipode*, 44(2), 281–302. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2011.00891.x>

<sup>82</sup> Ninikelashvili (2015) GOGC- ensuring Energy Security of Georgia, Galt and Taggart. <http://gtarchive.georgiatoday.ge/news/1090/GOGC---Ensuring-Energy-Security-of-Georgia>

alternative route after the BTS pipeline was temporary rendered inoperable by Russian airstrikes in its vicinity.



In 2015 Georgia's Foreign Ministry declared that Russia through a process of 'borderisation' or 'creeping occupation' has moved internationally unrecognised borders of South Ossetia to Orchosani village in Georgia, thus engulfing a section of the Baku-Supsa pipeline<sup>83</sup>. Despite the aforementioned, the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic's (SOCAR) President Rovnag Abdullayev stated that Baku does not perceive the WREP pipeline as threatened, hence Georgia's re-routing proposals were disregarded. Furthermore, there were suggestions among analysts<sup>84</sup> that Baku's absence of reaction is motivated by understanding that Georgia is calling for pipeline diversion motivated by the need to gain

<sup>83</sup> Antidze. (2015). Georgia just accused Russia of slowly eating away its borders, Reuters, <https://www.businessinsider.com/georgia-accusing-russia-of-taking-territory-2015-7?r=US&IR=T>

<sup>84</sup> Shiryev. (2015). Threats to Georgian Pipeline Security: What is Moscow's Game?, Eurasia Daily Monitor, 12 (140). <https://jamestown.org/program/threats-to-georgian-pipeline-security-what-is-moscows-game/>

more attention and hence protection from the West. As mentioned above, oil disruptions were merely a signal through which Russia wanted to communicate its desire to become a 'great power' and regain control lost over the last decades. While Russia has undeniably uses its energy tools to influence other states, it almost never relies on it as a primary foreign policy tool and prefers military over economic intervention. Pipeline shut offs, manipulation with oil and gas prices is simply not what Russia considers effective action in the event of one of its neighbours adopting pro-Western stance. Russia understands that for a state with an open or frozen military conflict it is practically impossible to become a member of NATO. Under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty (1949)<sup>85</sup> an attack against one is an attack against all members, therefore, NATO in accepting Georgia or Ukraine would have to absorb the conflict as well.

Over the course of the discussion, an attempt to understand motives behind Russian actions was made and so far the future for post-Soviet states is grim. It is evident that Putin has manufactured his version of the "Brezhnev doctrine". The original "doctrine of limited sovereignty" was crafted in the aftermath of the Prague Spring. What the doctrine entails is strikingly similar to Putin's foreign policy. A socialist state, while technically free to decide its fate, is limited by the boundaries of pro-socialism. Thus, a state must not deviate from socialist political framework and shall at all times act in the common interest of the socialist commonwealth<sup>86</sup>. Similar degree of control Brezhnev had over the "socialist commonwealth", Putin is trying to achieve with former-Soviet states, by binding them under the modern-day Warsaw Pact – the CIS, or using a wide array of ideological and financial

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<sup>85</sup> The North Atlantic Treaty art.5, Apr. 4, 1949,  
[https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm)

<sup>86</sup> Kershaw. (2018). Roller-Coaster : Europe, 1950-2017. p. 334

tactics to control his neighbours. Soviet forces invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968, thus punishing it for deviating from the pro-Soviet course. Under “Putin’s doctrine” similar tactics are used to punish former allies for dissenting from the pro-Russian course.

One, therefore, should attempt to construct policy recommendations for the former members of the USSR. In so doing, the hope is not only to provide actionable advice for those in close proximity to the raging hegemon, but to gain a deeper insight into the Russian state. Former Soviet Union states are in many cases so deeply interconnected with the Russian Federation, that attempting to construct a detailed recommendation report on every policy that directly or indirectly deals with Russia, including numerous trade and military agreements made under the CIS is not feasible due to the physical constraints of this Thesis and ultimate irrelevance to the research question. Therefore, the scope of recommendations will be broad, dealing with the essence of inter-state relations, rather than addressing specific legal issues.

First of all, patience is a quality one must develop for the sake of dealing with the Russian question. Recent adjustments made to the Russian Constitution<sup>87</sup> allow Vladimir Vladimirovich to stay in power until 2036. The process, labelled “obnuleniyе” (zeroing) by the Russian media, has “erased” Putin’s previous years as the President, thus granting him with an ability to run for office as if he is a new candidate. However, despite Putin’s attempts to build an image of a “Teflon leader”, his policies, domestic and foreign, can be

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<sup>87</sup> Ivanov., Muhametshina. (2020). Zeroing the terms of Vladimir Putin is enshrined at the level of law. Vedomosti. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2020/11/17/847335-obnulenie-srokov>

best described by Arnold Toynbee phrase the “suicidal statecraft”<sup>88</sup>. Protests that periodically sparked in Russia since 2011 Bolotnaya square march were motivated by the lack of power rotation and unfair elections, thus creating a precedent for further upheavals, however, as was mentioned above, those protests were mostly led by progressive minority of Moscow and Saint-Petersburg, while Putin’s electorate consisting mostly of province-dwellers remained dormant. Nowadays, when sanctions imposed as a result of the Ukrainian War reached unprecedented highs, people of the provinces are likely to revolt, and if the economic situation continues to deteriorate, it would become increasingly difficult for Putin to hold power. One should keep in mind that Russia will operate by the doctrine of offensive realism even in the event of change in leadership, however, as mentioned above, the leader determines the degree of violence through which the hegemony is achieved, thus creating a possibility that if a more liberal leader replaces Putin, the degree of pressure applied on the post-Soviet states will not disappear completely, but may be lowered.

Second advice is to reinforce the state as an entity capable of protecting itself. In other words, ramping up production of weapons and formation of professional Armed Forces, something that most former-Soviet states are still reluctant to adopt. The benefits of such force should be considerably higher than that of an overgrown Russian army suffering from multiple breaches in the chain of command and unpreparedness, as is being demonstrated during the ongoing war in Ukraine<sup>89</sup>.

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<sup>88</sup> Shevtsova. (2012). Russia under Putin: Titanic looking for its iceberg? *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 45(3-4), 209–216. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2012.07.014>

<sup>89</sup> Jones., Rathbone., Sevastopulo. (2022). ‘A serious failure’: scale of Russia’s military blunders becomes clear. *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/90421972-2f1e-4871-a4c6-0a9e9257e9b0>



However, reinforcements of the state should be done in a covert fashion. The historical example of such act might be drawn from the work of Thucydides. In describing the path that led to the Peloponnesian War, he mentions deeds of Themistocles that allowed Athens not only to accumulate power, but keep it by being less vulnerable to Spartan invasion<sup>90</sup>. As the waves of Persian invasion succeeded and the remaining occupants returned to their turf, Athenians started to rebuild their fortifications. Sparta, fearful that such fortifications would render an already dominant sea-power virtually indestructible, sent an envoy to Athens with a proposition to forgo defence reinforcements as in the event of the future invasion fortified cities could be turned into Persian strongholds. Themistocles, understood that such proposition conceals Spartan paranoia that their hegemony could be challenged. Therefore, he ordered for walls to be built in secret, while he himself distracted Leotychides's government until his fellow delegates brought news that sufficient fortifications were erected. Only then the Athenian general and politician confronted the Spartan Assembly with a statement that Athens are fully capable to protect its own people and shall not be advised on the matters of security.

The aforementioned event might be considered an inception of the bipolar structure inside the Hellenic world and while it concerned two ancient superpowers, its lessons might be extrapolated to the XXI century politics. The major lesson is that the state that finds itself in a vulnerable position should not openly confront a more powerful neighbour until its

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<sup>90</sup> Warner, R. Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War. (1954). London: Penguin Books.

defence capabilities are sufficiently developed. Furthermore, defence mechanisms should be concealed from the neighbouring hegemon until fully operational. The technological capabilities of modern day espionage are incomparable to the primitive tools at the disposal of the Ancient Greeks, however, although the modernisation and improvements made to the armed forces cannot be fully concealed, what is important is the message such preparation send to the neighbouring hegemon. The aforementioned security dilemma and its subset – dilemma of interpretation is crucial to the given policy recommendation, thus an effort should be made for such military reinforcements not to be interpreted by Russia as a challenge to its hegemony. Thus, media coverage shall be minimised and propaganda tools should not be utilised. For instance, a transition from conscription-based army to a better equipped and more efficient professional army should not be branded as a desperate attempt to combat coercion tactics utilised by Russia, on the contrary, diplomats and state officials should make an effort to forge an image for such shift that is as distant from exercising offensive and defensive practices as possible. The proposition is to accommodate a civil perspective in order to brand such opposition. For instance, there has long been a concern that the conscription, practiced in the majority of the former-Soviet states, may harm higher education. Students, trying to avoid being drafted in a poorly monitored and bloated army of their homeland, often bribe their way into local universities, thus breeding corruption and potentially harming the state economy by producing generations of unqualified workforce. However, once students are not pressed by conscription, engaging in the act of corruption with the academic institution becomes purposeless, thus elevating the overall quality of such institutions and potentially creating a more competent workforce.

The aforementioned is a recommendation the state can adopt to cloak true intentions behind the formation of a professional army, although imperfect due to the degree of paranoia that Kremlin maintains when it comes to its foreign policies, might worth adopting as even if such policy fails on the military side of the issue, its civil advantages are still considerable. One should not expect military reinforcements to provide impenetrable shield from Russian aggression, nor should entertain hopes that strong army can help a former-Union state defeat Russia. Since the technology allowed for the possibility of Mutual Assured Destruction doctrine to be implemented, a scenario where a superpower can be defeated became near impossible to conceive. Nevertheless, wars are waged when the cost of such war is low, hence the higher the threshold for successful invasion is, the more likely that the aggressor would refrain from exercising hegemony through military means. A strong armed forces may serve as an effective deterrence force. However, the author of this Thesis does not propose for the deterrence capabilities to be based on nuclear potential. The aforementioned proposition for “covert” military reinforcements will be nullified by nuclear proliferation, due to the way atomic weapons can alarm not only the hegemon, but the international community, potentially impeding trust and creating a dangerous possibility for economic blockade for the country that became a nuclear power. Therefore a combination of political neutrality and military reinforcements might prove to be a viable strategy for neighbours of the Russian Federation. Political neutrality should be considered by republics of Central Asia, that fall outside NATO’s security umbrella, as the geographical location prevents them from joining an alliance strong enough to counter Russian aggression.

## SUMMARY

Theory of offensive realism may be used to describe the structure of Russian attitude towards its former allies. Apart from a brief period of severe economic crisis in the 1990s, Russia had always been vigilant towards neighbouring states who dare distant themselves from the hegemon. The influence may be seen in the Ukrainian and Georgian conflict.

It can be argued that Russia never ceases to apply pressure towards former Soviet states, no matter how close they are. The degree of pressure shifts from support (that helps form economic dependency) to economic sanctions and eventually - military interventions. It is evident that Russia regards Ukraine and Georgia, as well as all former Soviet Union countries, as its backyards – a zone where Russia possesses special interest and upon which it may exercise special powers. Russia wants to hinder advancements of NATO, as it carries interests of another hegemon – the United States. When a former Soviet state flirts with NATO, Kremlin's fear of being surrounded by powers loyal to another hegemon, forces it to undertake radical actions. Furthermore, Kremlin views most form of political unrest, including colour revolutions, in its 'near abroad' as a conspiracy conceived by the West to undermine Russian influence. The CIS is both the mechanism of smooth transition from an empire to a hegemon free from imperial burden, and a mechanism that allows to monitor the level of autonomy achieved by each member state, allowing for the disruption in their cooperation with outside powers. Another way of destabilizing states that wish to act independent of Kremlin, is supporting separatist tensions. For instance, Moscow helped to establish a ceasefire after a civil war broke in Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. As a result, permanent peacekeeping forces were placed in

self-proclaimed states. Russian constant military presence has since fuelled conflict between Georgia and two de facto states.

Kremlin actively uses ideology to lay foundation for its hegemony. “Russkiy mir” is an example of an ideological weapon. At the first glance benign, the concept of preserving Russian culture, language and faith, was perverted by Moscow’s elites and now maps the territory that Russia deems its sphere of influence. The concept can also be used to target lucrative and/or “problematic” regions such as Crimea. People of the peninsula, already torn in their identity, were subjected to propaganda manufactured by Putin’s administration and reinforced by the most powerful figure of the Russian Orthodox Church – Patriarch Kirill, whose connections with the state run deep into the Soviet past. The Primate of Moscow provided “spiritual” underpinning for Putin’s expansionism, by negating differences between Russians and Ukrainians, challenging territorial integrity of the state, ascribing divine characteristics to the President’s regime, praising his foreign policies and juxtaposing Putin’s Russia to “decadent” Western values and liberal democracy that he decries.

The Russian Federation is unlikely to face shortage of Russian citizens in need of “protection”. Russian nationals can be artificially created, “manufactured”, through passportisation. Vincent Artman<sup>91</sup> and Scott Littlefield<sup>92</sup> describe the way separatism was

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<sup>91</sup> Vincent M. Artman (2013) Documenting Territory: Passportisation, Territory, and Exception in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, *Geopolitics*, 18:3, 682-704,

<sup>92</sup> Littlefield. (2009). Citizenship, Identity and Foreign Policy: The Contradictions and Consequences of Russia's Passport Distribution in the Separatist Regions of Georgia. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 61(8), 1461–1482. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130903134848>

reinforced and fuelled through gradual process of naturalisation of local population in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, that reached 90 percent before the War of 2008. “Islands of Russian influence” spawned by Kremlin through passportisation long before Georgia and Ukraine were invaded and destabilised, proved that Moscow’s actions were premediated and are by no extent a result of a sudden patriotic impulse. In the 1990s Russia was held-back by its state capacity and was in such a political and economic turbulence, that it was unable to act as a hegemon, however, through naturalisation of certain territories, it was able to gain leverage that could be used once it is powerful enough. After Georgia was invaded a signal was send to the rest of the world, that Russia is on a quest of becoming a superpower and demand others to recognise it as one.

## **CONCLUSION**

Reasons behind Russia’s involvement in destabilization of Georgia and Ukraine are Geopolitical, Russia as a hegemon, cannot afford to lose its regional influence, hence it will resort to force if necessary to thwart its neighbours from leaning West. However, it also has special affinity to former members of the USSR, however, for Russia such connection only means that it must have special powers in the region, hence its reaction to one of the former members teaming up with the West, is especially fierce. Russia does not care about the deterioration of diplomatic relations with the former Soviet Union states, as it possesses leverages, military and financial, necessary to control its region. Through destabilization it can alienate disobedient state, thus making it not capable of becoming NATO or the EU member, and forcing it to maintain connections with the Federation.

This Thesis has taught me that Russia is an unreliable ally. As a state that strives to become a major hegemonic power of the Eurasian continent, it applies constant pressure on its neighbouring states through the use of international organisations like the CIS, that instead of enhancing mutually beneficial cooperation, acts as a mechanism of supervising states of the “near-abroad”. States situated in geographical proximity to the Russian Federation, especially former Soviet countries, naturally have a significant amount of Russian nationals in regions adjacent to the Federation borders. This creates opportunity for Russia engage in acts of destabilization, such as instigation of separatist movements, annexation and military occupation disguised under human rights rhetoric and various forms of ‘protection myths’.

It is undeniable that cultural and emotional bond exists, tying nations once subjected to the seven decades of the Soviet rule. Sentiments, often mixed with nostalgia and shared history, however unpleasant, are powerful ingredient capable of forging a civilisational area, consisting of people who shared struggles, victories, culture, and are now enjoying a certain sense of affinity. Those feelings were perverted and altered by Kremlin’s propaganda machine in order to produce a concept capable of justifying its expansionist policies. Corrupt clerics aided in providing spiritual foundation for Putin’s version of the “Russian World”. Crimea was the first successful case where the ideological instrument was used to ensure lack of resistance to the Moscow’s rule. However, the concept would not be as effective without the passportisation policies that provided Crimean population with financial cushion, thus minimising incentive to resist. “Russkiy mir” is not the end goal of Kremlin, there is no intention to build Russian civilisation, achieving subordination of the disobedient state is enough for Putin, it can be used to target vulnerable states, annex lands where

separatist tensions are high and make sure that the affected state is damaged enough to be incapable of forming alliances with “anti-Moscow” coalitions. While “ruskiy mir” supports the concept of “gathering Russian lands”, the state in jeopardy does not have to have a predominantly Russian population, to be Orthodox or even Christian. As Kremlin is capable of “manufacturing” Russian nationals and as the Russian World is a mere tool to justify destabilisation and power maximisation, only Putin decides in what part of the world, the “ruskiy mir” is in dire need of protection through what he claims to be “humanitarian action” or a “special military operation”.

My policy recommendation to states that are in clear and present danger of being invaded by the Federation if expansionism continues, is threefold. First, to reinforce their defensive capabilities. Second, to maintain political neutrality, if incapable to join alliance that can provide security umbrella from Russian aggression. The first two recommendations are encompassed by the final recommendation/quality – patience. Patience not just to passively wait for Putin’s regime to end, for as stated in the Discussion part of the Thesis – after Putin there might be Putinism, but patience in maintaining political neutrality and gradually augmenting military power until the state security mechanisms are sufficiently strong.

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