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# **Neoclassical Realism and Russian Foreign Policy**

## **新古典現實主義與俄羅斯外交政策**

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## Abstract

This thesis aims at contributing to the debate on the motives and drivers of Russian foreign policy. It uses neoclassical realism as an enhanced research framework which combines systemic stimuli (independent variable) and unit-level intervening variables such as leader images and strategic culture. The work investigates the period from 1991 to 2014 with focus on two case studies, namely the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014. This two case studies use process-tracing method and historiography to test the effect of systemic and unit level factors on the Russian foreign policy.

The analysis has confirmed the main neoclassical realist expectation that an increase in the relative material power of the Russian Federation will lead to a corresponding expansion in the ambition and scope of Russian foreign policy activity. Although, especially the first case study showed, that the so called systemic modifiers, such as geography, restrictiveness/permissiveness and systemic clarity had significant effect on the decision to intervene in Georgia. The second hypothesis stating that, “President Putin chooses to frame, adjust, and modify strategic choices to reflect culturally acceptable preferences to maintain domestic political support” was also confirmed. The analysis has shown that both systemic stimuli and unit level intervening variables influenced the final decision to intervene in Georgia in 2008, and to annex Crimea in 2014. Overall, neoclassical realism proved to be enhanced and a useful framework for analyzing foreign policy of a state. But the author is fully aware that a further research is needed.

**Key Words:** Neoclassical realism, Russian foreign policy, Russo-Georgian War in 2008, Annexation of Crimea in 2014, Leader images, Strategic Culture

## 摘要

本論文旨在探討俄羅斯外交政策之動機與推動因素，文中以新古典現實主義做為研究架構，並結合了體系層次因素（自變項）及個體層次的中介變項（如：領導人形象和戰略文化）。本論文所探討之時間軸橫跨 1991 至 2014 年，重點著重於以下兩研究案例：2008 年南奧塞提亞戰爭及 2014 年克里米亞危機。針對此兩研究案例，作者使用「過程追蹤」和「歷史敘事」的研究方法，以驗證體系與個體層次因素對於俄羅斯外交政策的影響。

分析結果印證了新古典現實主義的主要假設：俄羅斯在相對物質權力提升的情況下，會同樣地擴大外交政策行動上的野心與版圖。雖然由第一個研究案例可得知，所謂的體系修正因素（如：地理位置、限制/允許因素、和體系明確性）對於俄羅斯介入喬治亞的決策有著重要的影響。而第二個假設提到，「總統普丁選擇設計、校正、調整策略上的選擇，反映文化上可接受的偏好，以維持國內的政治支持度」這個說法也已經被印證。本研究分析顯示，體系因素和個體層次中介變項對於 2008 年介入喬治亞及 2014 年併吞克里米亞的決策皆有影響。整體而言，當分析一個國家的外交政策時，新古典現實主義確實是個強而有力的架構，但作者也深知仍有進一步研究的必要。

**關鍵字：**新古典現實主義，俄羅斯外交政策，2008 年南奧塞提亞戰爭，2014 年克里米亞危機，領導者形象，戰略文化

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Research Background

In 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed, and its successor Russian Federation was born, hardly anyone believed that the so called “wounded bear” would ever pose any significant threat again. Russia proved this prediction to be wrong already in 2008 when it invaded the territory of a sovereign country for the first time in its history. The Russo-Georgian war has been identified as a crucial point in the development of Russian foreign policy (Van Herpen 2015). In 2014, when annexing Crimea, Russia showed to the World its capabilities and willingness to re-draw international borders and break several international laws to achieve its goals. All that in an unprecedented manner which surprised the entire international community. To understand Russian foreign policy in general and the present development between the Russian Federation and the West in particular, we need a comprehensive analysis based on an appropriate research framework. Therefore, this thesis seeks to explain the factors that influence Russian foreign policy under the Putin administration through the lenses of neoclassical realism. The author asks a research question: “How does neoclassical realism explain the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014?”

The end of the Cold war left Russia striped of its former Soviet satellites and wounded on its pride. The 1990s saw a chaotic transition from communism to a market-based economy. Still existing NATO and expanding European Union failed to accommodate Russia into a value-based, economic-security oriented and trustworthy framework of cooperation. It is not a secret that this period further traumatized the state which had been, not too long ago, a super power in a bipolar

system. All these factors have a profound influence on the present Putin's era characterized as a return of the great power politics (Mankoff 2009).

It is generally agreed that Russia's influence on the international stage is increasing, and its foreign policy behavior resonates throughout the international community. The relationship between the West<sup>1</sup> and the Russian Federation has been mostly turbulent, with several ups and downs, but never stable and fruitful. Unfortunately, the West has not been able to accommodate relations with Russia by setting up a platform for cooperation which would work effectively and for a longer period.

There are different views on the nature of Russian foreign policy. Some say that Russia's foreign policy has features of both consistency and change, but the problem is the West's misunderstanding of Russia (Kropatcheva 2012; Tsygankov 2016). In fact, the West has troubles to develop an effective strategy that would counter Russia's actions. The only shot in the dark is the economic sanctions, that may harm Russia but also divide the countries within NATO or the European Union. The result is a continuation of misunderstandings and inability to cooperate on nearly every issue that needs to be dealt with on the local or international level. Clear examples of this struggle are visible in the Syrian War or Ukrainian conflict. As a result, discussions over the nature of Russian foreign policy dominate the news, political debates and academic discourses.

Currently, there are several theories of international relations and foreign policy, which seek to explain foreign policy of states. The problem seems to be the deterministic limitation on either external or internal factors that those theories hold (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, the term "the West" refers to the member states of NATO and the European Union.



Rose (1998) made a distinction between the so called *Innenpolitik* theories of foreign policy, which focus exclusively on the domestic level variables, and the structural theories, which limit themselves only on analysis of the external (systemic) factors. Many argue that what we need is a theory or rather a model of explanation that reflects the enormous complexity of Russian state and its internal and external features (Kropatcheva 2012; Becker et al. 2016). As mentioned above, Russia is a re-emerging military and economic power, with an imperial history still ingrained in thinking of the Russian people. Besides of that, its size and geostrategic location between east and west offers many opportunities for either cooperation or confrontation.

This work uses neoclassical realism as a foreign policy research program to provide a comprehensive study of Russian foreign policy. Neoclassical realism is unique in many ways. It was built on the main assumptions of neorealism, thus the focus on systemic level variables, anarchical nature of international system and the balance of power. In addition, it incorporates unit level intervening variables, such as leader images and strategic culture. Because of the synthesis of systemic and state level variables it offers an opportunity to develop an enhanced model of foreign policy which is greatly needed.

## 1.2 Research Motivations and Purpose

This sub-section intends to depict the purpose and motivations that are behind the conduction of this work and explains why the author sees this kind of research interesting, motivational, original and amongst all important.

Discipline of International Relations is important mainly because it can explain causes and consequences of events happening in the real world. Ideally, provided explanations and causal logic of events do not stay only in books but find its relevance in the real decision-making

process. As mentioned in the previous section, this work seeks to explain Russian foreign policy through the lenses of neoclassical realism, and its practical implication will be a set of recommendations based on the research outcomes. These recommendations may enrich the present discussion regarding the nature of Russian foreign policy, but also show relevance of neoclassical realism as a theory of foreign policy.

The field of international relations is very contested and each researcher has an incredibly difficult task when undertaking his/her individual research. This high level of competitiveness creates a certain amount of motivation to succeed in every one of us. To start this research with outlining my personal motivations seems to be a reasonable first step.

To start with, the most prominent one, I would highlight, is the entire research process which I consider intellectually stimulating and challenging. The desire to solve unsolved problems plays its role. If an author wants to truly contribute to the topic under investigation, then every aspect of the research has its meaning and purpose. To define a research question, choose theory, generate hypotheses and test them on specified case studies is a complicated but rewarding task.

The proposed research has all these points; it employs theory which is empirically underdeveloped and needs further testing on carefully selected case studies. This presumption takes a researcher to unknown waters of theoretical and methodological dilemmas. Moreover, it creates space for expanding researcher's creativity and originality. To reach a conclusion, thus fulfil all the points that have been on the list, is a motivation on its own. The theory under testing has an ambition to become the leading framework amongst theories of foreign policy. Therefore, every new contribution strengthens both theoretical and practical foundation for the further research.

Regarding this thesis, the theory testing is not the sole purpose. To define a causal relationship between identified variables is the initial purpose. In addition, this research has a motivation to provide recommendations for international players (NATO, the EU) when dealing with Russia and simultaneously suggests possible areas of further research.

On a more personal note, the author enjoys the complexity and dynamics of international relations in general. Therefore, this master thesis should serve as a substantial training for the future work in this field.

A sum of the goals to be achieved:

- Provide a comprehensive analysis of Russian foreign policy through the empirical analysis of the two case studies.
- Test the usefulness of neoclassical realism as a theory of foreign policy
- Provide a set of recommendations for NATO/The EU when dealing with Russia
- Provide a set of recommendations for the future research in this area

### 1.3 Literature Review

Reviewing of the literature is an extremely important part of this research which intends to add a valuable contribution to the present debates over Russian foreign policy. This chapter starts with a section introducing inter-realist debate between classical realism and neorealism, where the focus is put on the applicability of these theories on the study of foreign policy. Then continues a section where neoclassical realism is introduced and the connection of its suitability

for an analysis of Russian foreign policy is established. Subsequently, the most relevant literature concerning Russian foreign policy is selected together with a short review of neoclassical realist literature on the topic. The final section develops a link between the reviewed literature and this study when generating a research question.

### 1.3.1 Classical Realism and Neorealism

Realism is a major theoretical school of thought in the field of international relations, yet its inter-paradigm debates create either convergent or divergent assumptions about the behavior of states within the international system (Donnelly 1998, Spirtas 1996). The purpose here is to point out both and further stress the features that define the broader school of realism. This task may seem to be irrelevant, since the thesis itself deals predominantly with the final product called neoclassical realism. Right the opposite is correct. There is an absolute necessity to set a theoretical background of a wider scope, to explain the relevance of neoclassical realism. The following paragraphs discuss the development of classical realism and neorealism, outline their core assumptions and set the path establishing neoclassical realism.

Classical Realism, same as Marxism and liberalism, is in general considered to be a philosophical attitude, not a single, unified theory, which proves or disproves hypotheses or set explanatory variables to examine events in the international system. Its main assumptions have been derived from philosophical texts dating back to the 5<sup>th</sup> century starting with Thucydides and Sun Tzu and continuing over thinkers as diverse as Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Carl von Clausewitz or Winston S. Churchill (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009, 16). Because of

this theoretical richness and rather cognitive understanding of human nature, its methodological approach is rather unspecified and does not fit in the laws of social science research.

Based on historical and sociological observations classical realists believe that power is the supreme objective of states, therefore power in combination with interests drive their behavior. Realism assumes that states calculate their options carefully when developing a strategy, therefore states are considered rational actors (Carr 1946, 7). Classical realism acknowledges the role of leaders and other domestic actors who shape foreign policy making in accordance with their individual motivations and ideological background (Morgenthau 1948). They seek to explain behavior of states in the international arena. This behavior is usually closely connected to a state or a group of states, which interact due to various factor. Here, the leaders encounter their struggle in shaping a specific foreign policy. These troubles lead scholars to investigate not only power distribution among states, but also other factors such as: history, geography, domestic society and strategic culture (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009, 16-17). Classical realism differentiates amongst state's relative status, it creates a rather suitable framework for analysis. Ascribing status to a state, for instance great powers, lesser great powers and small powers helps to track patterns of similar behavior amongst the same type of states. Grouping states per their relative status also helps to make better predictions about their foreign policy outcomes. Schweller (1998) uses this approach when explaining three power centers and their mutual balancing, where the two powers together must be able to defeat the third one to sustain the balance in the system. His work is neoclassical because he uses not only intervening domestic variables such as leader images and ideological background but also relative power capabilities in the multipolar system (Schweller 1998, 16-18). Furthermore, Schweller utilized classical realist ability to investigate motivations of states according to their ability and intention

to disrupt balance of power. He divides states into two groups according to their international ambitions, they can be either status quo or revisionist (Schweller 1998, 23-24).

Waltz (1979a) established the neorealist theory of international politics when with his major piece *Theory of International Politics*. Neorealism holds more unified expectations about the international system than classical realism does. It assumes that the international system is anarchic without a presence of higher authority and the distribution of capabilities is based on the zero-sum game (Ibid., 33). Even though, it is considered a founding work of neorealism, the first scholar who made an actual distinction between classical realism and neorealism was Ashley (1984). Ashley's sharp distinction had helped to establish not only a clearer theoretical framework separated from earlier, mostly philosophical works, but it also narrowed the theoretical discussion within Realism. Further development of offensive and defensive branch is just one example.

In contradiction with classical realism, neorealism is a theory of international relations, which holds very specific assumptions about state behavior in the international system. The most profound assumption in every neorealist branch is Waltz's third image theory of international politics, which expects that in the anarchic international system, states react mainly to the distribution of material capabilities (Waltz 1979a). This set of structural incentives on a systemic level generates similar results over time. Neorealism seeks to provide answers to the fundamental questions of international politics, such as the emergence of major wars, balancing behavior of states, alliance creation or the behavior in the bi-polar or multipolar world order (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009, 17, Mearsheimer 2001, Waltz 1979a, Walt 1990). The core neorealist assumption that the international system is anarchic, creates an expectation that under such a system, all actors, thus states, will behave similarly in a rational manner. Rationality

assumes that every state is aware of the insecure environment where its ultimate goal is to survive. States have several options how to assure their own security in the self-help system, where the balance of power changes constantly. To maintain this power equilibrium states should prefer relative rather than absolute gains when dealing with other states. This strategy helps to prevent potential rivals from gaining advantage created by cooperative agreements (Grieco 1988). If a state increases its military power, therefore upsets the status quo, then it almost naturally motivates the others to either balance against the rising power, or to seek a purposeful military alliance (Mearsheimer 2001, Walt 1990).

Taking all these assumptions in mind, neorealism is suitable to answer two kinds of situations. First, it deals with the relative stability of international system. More specifically, it can predict what type of structure is the most stable one. Deriving from Waltz's work, he argues that the bipolar distribution of power is the most solid and the least war prone environment (Mearsheimer 1990b, Waltz 1979a). They further agree that multipolar distribution of power, which is firmly balanced by regional hegemony and their allies, is also considered strong and stable, because the scattered polarity provides relatively enough space for several forms of balancing behavior, which can ease tensions if a sudden unbalance occurs (Mearsheimer 1990a, 2007, Walt 2000). The last form, and the least stable, is the opposite from the previous one, thus unbalanced multipolar system. Thanks to its inherent unpredictability and lack of evenly distributed power centers, the system is immensely war prone (Walt 2000, 100, Mearsheimer 1990a, b). Yes, there are realists within the structural branch of realism, who argue against the widely accepted assumptions. For instance, Gilpin (1983) consider the unipolar system the most stable one. He argues that it is not very likely to win a war against hegemon in its own realm (Ibid.). In other words, hegemon is the only one who poses the ability to adjust rules in the

international system to its own interest, therefore it would be nearly impossible for an emerging power to ultimately challenge the hegemon.

The second situation that structural realism seeks to answer concerns the very fundamental conditions of survival in the international arena. It predicts how states choose their escape strategies to survive. Neorealism offers a framework, which is externally driven by systemic forces. If we ask a crucial question, thus “How a state form its foreign policy?”. The answer derived from structural realism would be that states choose their foreign policy from a palette of options that are at certain time provided by international system. The so called “systemic stimuli” are defined as the only explanatory variable for foreign policy choices (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009, 15). Practically, there is no agent involved in structural realist analysis of foreign policy choices. Therefore, the general expectation is that states are first and foremost influenced by the external incentives and would behave and react accordingly to this development. (Waltz 1996, 56). Interstate (unit level) variables, namely leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations and domestic institutions play no role, because of the assumed superiority of systemic incentives (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 16).

Kenneth Waltz stated that structural realism is not a theory of foreign policy, but rather a theory of international outcomes (Waltz 1996, 54). He continues that neorealism has certain assumptions about the outcomes of state interactions, but it has by nature limited explanatory power, which can provide some general motivations and ambitions of states, but is insufficient for explaining behavior of states in substantial precision or detailed case studies (Waltz 1996, 54-56, Elman 1996). This leads us to the fundamental insufficiency of neorealism’s external determinism, which is by neoclassical realists regarded as Waltzian, over parsimonious approach (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009, 17-19). Sterling-Folker (1997) notes that structural



realism and neoclassical realism share the basic understanding of the international system, where the systemic incentives shape the way in which states interact. However, neoclassical realism disagrees with a fixed, nearly robotic transmission of the systemic incentives to the foreign policy responses (ibid., 155). In other words, it is suggested that in order to develop more comprehensive theory for analyzing events in the international system, we need a multi-level approach (Ibid., 156).

The entire discussion in this section is meant to be a theoretical justification for the argument that we need an enhanced theoretical framework for analyzing foreign policies of states. Depicting insufficiencies of theoretical models and at the same time addressing potential improvements seems to be a good way how to qualify a newly emerging theoretical framework for a practical use. The following section focuses further on neoclassical realism and its features.

### 1.3.2 Neoclassical Realism

This section stems directly from the previous one, which highlighted the core concepts behind classical realism and structural realism. Moreover, it depicted several problems in a successive manner, therefore prepared a path full of deficiencies which neoclassical realism seeks to vindicate in a new theoretical research framework. The following paragraphs define neoclassical realism as an enhanced research program suitable for analyzing foreign policy of states. The evolution and major features of neoclassical realism are displayed in a coherent and systematic manner.

Since the end of the Cold war, an increasing number of scholars have recognized that for an effective analysis of foreign policy in a more complex world, it is crucial to supplement the

system oriented explanations of international politics by more complex, less parsimonious and effective multilevel analytical framework.

Rose (1998) coined the term ‘neoclassical realism’ in a review of five works, which had incorporated the multilevel approach in their research in international relations (see also Wohlforth 1993, Zakaria 1999, Christensen 1996, Schweller 1998, Brown, Lynn-Jones, and Miller 1995). The proponents of this theory argue that the scope and aspiration of foreign policy of a state is initially motivated by its position in the international system and particularly by its relative material power. This makes it realist. They continue, nevertheless, that this systemic pressure caused by power distribution are too indirect and complex, therefore foreign policies of states are being made through intervening unit level variables. This makes them neoclassical (Rose 1998, 146).

Neoclassical realism sees foreign policy a state as a synthesis of international structure (independent variable) and unit level intervening variables at the state level ,which includes, especially leader’s perceptions and domestic state structure further influenced by strategic culture, state-society relations and domestic institutions (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 30, Zakaria 1999).

Both Schweller (1998) and Lobell (2009) argue that this added dimension of independent intervening variables at the state level brings the state back in, by opening the so called “black box”. This notion is associated with the unimportance of domestic level variables (neorealism). Classical realist scholars praised qualities as power, prestige, status, ideology or self-interest as inseparable when analyzing foreign policy behavior of a state. In other words, neoclassical realism takes classical features back and completely rejects the assumption that the only aim of a

state is its own security. More precisely, states strive to use their power to influence the structure of international system in their favor. Rose (1998, 146) compares the power assumption of neoclassical realism to the famous quote by Thucydides “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” (Hanson and Strassler 1998, 89). Simply put, states use all capabilities in their disposal to affect the outcomes in the system. This behavior, according to neoclassical realists, is mostly driven by national interest, rather than security concerns alone (Rose 1998).

In effect, neoclassical realist theorists strive to answer questions that conventional realist explanations are not able to respond to, that is, why do states operating under the same structural conditions craft different foreign policy, or conversely, why states with similar internal setting pursue divergent foreign policies under the same systemic environment (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009, 19-21)? These questions differ from structural realist type of questions in nature and scope which is significantly widened and enhanced for explanatory power. Waltz (1996, 56) argues that this effort to include so many variables in one framework goes against the parsimonious nature of realism, therefore he sees ineffective to create a unified theory of foreign policy. At this point, however, neoclassical realism does not possess a set of defining features that would ascribe to general determinism as structural realism does. Nevertheless, in the later works authors argue that neoclassical realism is not a single theory, but rather a theoretical framework, which has been developing ever since its inception in 1998 and strives to provide a set of tools which scholars can grasp and transform to models of explanation that can generate testable hypothesis with significant theoretical validity (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009, Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016). There are several contra arguments amongst neoclassical

realist scholars. The best way to understand the inter-theory discourse is to provide an outlook on specific models of explanation.

Starting with Lobell's "complex threat identification" model which assumes that the foreign policy executive (FPE) stands at the intersection between systemic incentives and domestic politics, therefore bares the responsibility of producing both foreign policy responses in the times of immediate crisis and grand strategy planning (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009, 34-35). Lobell argues that effective balancing behaviour against rising state is fundamentally influenced by the domestic level variable concerning the effective FPE coalition. In other words, if there is a strong consensus amongst FPE, then a state can generate a strong policy responses, because its actions are unconstrained by domestic FPE (Ibid., 35).

Another vital example is Taliaferro's "resource extraction" model dealing with the ability of state to extract and mobilize resources of a state in dangerous international setting (Taliaferro 2006). This model agrees with the Waltz's expectation that states over time emulate successful practices of other states, but looks at the problem from inside. He argues that the external conditions (threat) and internal ability to extract resources and mobilize them lead towards effective security guarantees. On the other hand, if a state lacks the ability to extract resources or it dwells in an environment that does not signify an imminent threat, then the state has potentially much lower ability to seek security in time of danger (ibid.).

These two models show neoclassical realist approaches to the study of foreign policy. It is not only important to understand that neoclassical realism can ask many important questions but it is also suitable to provide intuitive answers. All this is possible thanks to the methodological pluralism of neoclassical realism, which can be seen as the halfway point

between the practices of realism on the one hand, and liberalism, neo-institutionalism, and constructivism on the other (Pavlova et al. 2012).

### 1.3.3 Previous Research on Russian Foreign Policy

This section discusses the most important literature regarding Russian foreign policy with the focus on period since 2000 when Vladimir Putin has become the president of the Russian federation. A precisely defined time frame is an important feature for the analytical part where personality and perceptions of the president Putin play an important role.

The existing literature on Russian foreign policy could be easily defined as incredibly contested and competitive one. There is not a single universally accepted explanation of the motives that drive Russian foreign policy. The entire discourse is divided on camps which differ in their theoretical approach and the phenomenon they seek to answer. The literature in the following paragraphs is divided according to the explanatory variables that the authors use in their works.

Many authors agree that Russia's politics is based on very clear understanding of power politics (Romanova and Pavlova 2009, Leichtova 2014, Sakwa 2014, Hill et al. 2014, Mearsheimer 2014, Wieclawski 2011). Therefore, they argue that realism and its forms is a suitable research approach for analysing Russian foreign policy. It is also true that a significant part of the literature on Russian foreign policy is written from the realist perspective. Starting with Mearsheimer (2014), where the author argues that Russia has been completely rational when pursuing its foreign policy goals, because as a re-emerging great power it wants to extend

its influence in the region and eventually become a regional hegemon. Mearsheimer continues that the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the ongoing proxy war in Ukraine is a consequence of ill decisions made by the West. He sees NATO enlargement together with EU's liberal programs, such as the Eastern Partnership as provocative which has sparked Russia's aggression. Mearsheimer wrote several times that Putin is a "first-class strategist" who has the correct analytical judgement, based upon rational choice (McFaul, Sestanovich, and Mearsheimer 2014, 167). Walt (2016) also subscribes to this neorealist understanding of Russia's actions, when arguing that the West, and mostly the United States has been undertaking unnecessary steps (NATO enlargement) which have initiated Russia's aggression and assertiveness. Similarly, Bock (2015) and Rynning (2015) explain Russian increasing assertiveness in the region as a struggle for influence which has been driven either by balance of power or balance of threat. Both explanations give the causal primacy to the systemic variables and see Putin's policies strictly modelled by those external factors. Sakwa (2014) provides more comprehensive work searching for explanations for the annexation of Crimea and ongoing conflict in Ukraine. His historical analysis gives also primacy to external neorealism's explanations concluding that Russian foreign policy has been driven by long existing rejection of its legitimate geopolitical concerns by NATO (ibid., 254-256). More specific question, regarding the return of Great power politics asked Mankoff (2009) and Maitra (2014), both works stress increasing economic and socio-political issues that Russia faces at home and argue that in order to be able to systematically project its power and influence outside, it has to strengthen itself internally. Nevertheless, the neorealist argument of external competition with the US and its allies concludes their analyses.

It is right to say that neorealism provides a powerful tool for analyzing Russian foreign policy mainly because Russia itself has implemented realism as its main world view (Romanova 2012). On the other hand, many authors stress that because of an immense Russia's complexity, its history, geographic location, political structure and the role of the president, it would be a mistake to limit an analysis of Russian foreign policy only to the external factors (Hill et al. 2014, Motyl 2015).

The work of Van Harpen (2015), which is a well-researched and comprehensive one, hypothesizes that Russian foreign policy is based on a Putin's imperialist plan. The author clearly identifies the Putin's arrival to the Kremlin as a game changing event which set a tone ever since. Van Harpen suggests that both the Russo-Georgian war and the annexation of Crimea was part of an imperial plan which drives Russian foreign policy (ibid.).

Van Harpen's research opens a discussion regarding continuity and change thesis which has been widely analysed. Several scholars find both continuity and change in Russian foreign policy (Tsygankov 2016, Kropatcheva 2012, Thorun 2009, Pipes 2004). Although, their analyses differ in many ways, the important conclusion is, however, Russian foreign policy has a solid trajectory and a long-standing position on its foreign policy goals. Nonetheless, its immediate responses can deviate from this strategy because of the external factors, misperception, or sudden economic changes (Kropatcheva 2012, 38).

In contradiction, some argue that Putin does not have any strategy and his foreign policy is a gamble (Treisman 2016, Marten 2014). Treisman (2016) considered the implications of Putin's actions in Crimea on the domestic situation in Russia and concludes that Putin's strategy is a two-level game, which should increase his popularity in home, but the international

consequences, such as economic sanctions and isolation will only harm Russia in the future. Moreover, after Russia annexed Crimea, NATO member states have found a common strategy and strengthened military presence in the Baltics, an outcome which does not benefit Russia at all (Treisman 2016, 50). This opinion has resonated since 2008, when Russia intervened in the sovereign territory of Georgia and put itself on a path of “borderline personality” (Arias-King, De Arias, and De La Canal 2008). Frequent changes from cooperation and non-cooperation have resulted in the present state, where most policy-makers and researches agree that Russian foreign policy is very difficult to read and react to it.

Previous studies on Russian foreign policy have demonstrated, that the topic itself is incredibly complex. Independent variables that the authors have stressed vary from systemic ones such as balance of power/balance of threat to a unit level variables including Putin’s personality, historical experience and the role of identity or status. It would be impossible to base any serious analysis on simplistic explanations derived only from one category of independent variables. What we need, and what neoclassical realists argue, is an enhanced framework for an analysis. The following section examines the existing neoclassical literature and generates a research question.

#### 1.3.4 Neoclassical Realist Research on Russian Foreign Policy

There are only a few articles on Russian foreign policy from the neoclassical realist perspective so far. Nevertheless, even this thin collection of literature set a valuable cornerstone for further research.



Romanova and Pavlova (2009), were the first authors who linked Russian foreign policy with neoclassical realism. Their article starts with a historical narrative explaining the development of IR theories in the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. They agree on a generally accepted notion that realism is a dominant theory in Russia. As the article continues, the authors argue, that neoclassical realism in Russia has the ambition “to borrow creatively from structural, political economic and geo-political currents, depending on the issue in focus” (Romanova and Pavlova 2009, 164). Interestingly, they conclude the article with a prediction that realist scholars interested in Russian foreign policy will use neoclassical realism as an enhanced framework for analyses mainly because it offers them an opportunity to incorporate ideas from neo-institutionalism and constructivism while not challenging their insensitive approach towards norms and ideas (ibid., 164). Romanova (2012) continues the discussion but adds an important analysis of events that had happened in Russia since 2009. Romanova advanced the hypothesis that more intervening factors at a state level is needed to understand Russian foreign policy. This is mainly because of a rising internal economic struggle and with that connected search for influence and identity (Romanova 2012). At the end of the article Romanova argues that increasing inter-state tension creates more powerful civil society, which can eventually challenge Putin’s foreign policy strategy (ibid.). Therefore, neoclassical realism seems to be even more appropriate research framework to use.

Some scholars have already used neoclassical realism to answer specific research questions about Russian foreign policy. Kropatcheva (2012) wrote an article dealing with (in-)predictability and (non-)cooperation of Russian foreign policy towards the West. The author has applied a short comparative overview of the main foreign policy documents and the development of relations between Russia on the one side and NATO and the EU on the other to re-

conceptualize Russian foreign policy. Although the conclusion states that on the systemic/structural level, Russia's behavior is in line with realist thinking (influence seeking, power, power and security maximization), the internal subjective factors (leader perceptions, state-society relationship, prestige/status) shape the immediate foreign policy responses (Kropatcheva 2012, 38).

Another neoclassical realist study written by Becker, Cohen, Kushi and McManus (2016) focuses on the way of how Russia uses or rather misuses international norms when pursuing its self-interest. The study looks briefly at the Georgian war and how Russia's policy makers used responsibility to protect doctrine and the Kosovo precedent to justify its military invasion to the sovereign territory of Georgia. Then it more closely analyses the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and subsequently compares both cases. The authors conclude that Russia pursues its self-interest through strategies, which are not only based on a deployment of conventional forces, but rather on normative and economic strategies (Becker et al. 2016, 127). They maintain the position on the importance of structural factors on the behavior of a state, but at the same time highlight the need for an analysis of leader perception and state-society relations (ibid., 128)

Each of these influential studies has claimed that neoclassical realism has potential to add a valuable contribution to the present debate over Russian foreign policy. The authors also agree that neoclassical realism is an enhanced research program, which provides analysis with a higher explanatory power vis-à-vis structural realism or *innenpolitik* unit level theories (Romanova and Pavlova 2009, Pavlova et al. 2012, Rose 1998, Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009, Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, Becker et al. 2016). However, to the best of my knowledge no neoclassical realist study has focused on a rigorous analysis of Russian foreign policy under the Putin's administration including empirical case studies. As mentioned earlier, this study has the

ambition to contribute to the current discourse on the Russian foreign policy, for that reason, this thesis will cover the period of Putin's administration as a coherent time frame identified in the literature and focus on two empirical case studies, which are also considered as critical events that shaped the discourse. Therefore, based on the acquired knowledge from the previous literature on Russian foreign policy, this research will seek to answer the main research question: "How does neoclassical realism explain the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014?"

## Chapter 2 Research Design

This chapter addresses several terminological, theoretical and technical questions that need to be developed for conducting an academic research. It starts with a terminological part addressing the ontological and epistemological position of this work, which together forms the research paradigm. The importance of this section lies in the fact that neoclassical realists do not follow the strict, hard positivist approach typical for neorealist research. Then follows a discussion on theoretical propositions of neoclassical realism including its causal logic and explaining how the two selected hypotheses fit in the theory. A Subsequent section addresses independent and intervening variables which are central for constructing a neoclassical realist research design. It contains not only a thorough design of all the variables but also includes their operationalization, which will be used in the analytical part of the thesis. Then follows a discussion explaining methodology of this work with a particular focus on the appropriateness of

the case study approach. It also discusses research techniques applied in the analytical part. The final section of this chapter mentions the types of sources used for data gathering.

## 2.1 Philosophy of Knowledge

The very first thing that a researcher must establish before starting a research project is his/her ontological and epistemological position which together form a research paradigm. In general, ontology deals with the nature of reality. Translating this to the language of neoclassical realism, which is based on the positivist tradition, it is logical that this research will be guided by objective ontology. In other words, the author believes in an objective world out there, where theory testing, hypotheses proving/disproving and variables measuring is possible and where we gain our knowledge through careful observation and scientific experimentation (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 105). Nonetheless, it must be stated, that neoclassical realists do understand the limits of social science research. The fact that any research is effectively based on human subjectivity creates space for nuances in research results.

Unsurprisingly, neoclassical realism subscribes to the so called “soft positivism”, which is a modern and currently popular way of approaching research in the studies of international relations (Kropatcheva 2012, 31). Some scholars refer to it as “methodological pluralism”, which is essentially a mix of hard positivist/realist and post positivist/constructivist understandings of the world. Neoclassical realism tries to emulate this trend by incorporating both material/objective and cognitive/subjective explanatory variables into its analytical framework (ibid., 31). Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell (2016) provide an instruction of how to construct a research design in a neoclassical realist research. Therefore, this thesis’s epistemological position

is based on the neoclassical realist premise embracing soft positivism as summarized in the instruction.

We subscribe to a soft positivist epistemology, where we search for law-like generalizations across causes and test these generalizations with rigorous case-study analysis based on well-selected cases. The essence of this approach is that we can identify elements of comparability across at least somewhat similar cases. We may also generalize based on patterns that are verified through careful case-based analysis to inform predictions and generate policy relevant advice (ibid., 106).

This summary must be supplied by the fact that theories of international relations are probabilistic theories and therefore a theory attempts to explain as much of the dependent variable's variance as possible with the interference of the independent variables and intervening variables (ibid., 7). Thus, there is always possibility that other factors not included in the theory may influence outcomes of a research.

## 2.2 Theoretical Propositions

The purpose of this work is to test selected hypotheses on the two case studies and therefore to provide an empirically grounded answer to the main research question: “How does neoclassical realism explain the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014?”. As signaled in the literature review the author will follow the central empirical hypotheses of neoclassical realism based on the understanding of the so called “systemic stimuli”, thus “an increase in the relative material power will lead eventually to a

corresponding expansion in the ambition and scope of a country's foreign policy activity" (Rose 1998, 167). The expectation here is that a state is not primarily concerned with the balance of power in the entire international system, but it rather limits its main focus on one state or a group of states that are in its immediate proximity and can actually endanger the security of the state in question. This expectation limits the system wide balance of power to a specific dyadic relationship, here defined as the Russian Federation versus its immediate neighborhood (post-Soviet space) together with the states of NATO/The EU, commonly referred "the West". This independent variable, systemic stimuli, includes the developments, changes, and shifts that happen in the international arena; new coalitions might be built, new trends may be developed, and the share of relative power may rise. In other words, the independent variable demonstrates a relative position of Russia in the international system. The systemic assumption derived from structural realism is a subject to the working of independent-intervening variables at the unit level. A transition of systemic incentives is a subject to the so called "transition belt" which includes leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations and domestic institutions, which all play a role "in the selection and implementation of foreign policy responses to the international environment" (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 57-59). Figure 2.1 displays general neoclassical realist model of foreign policy.

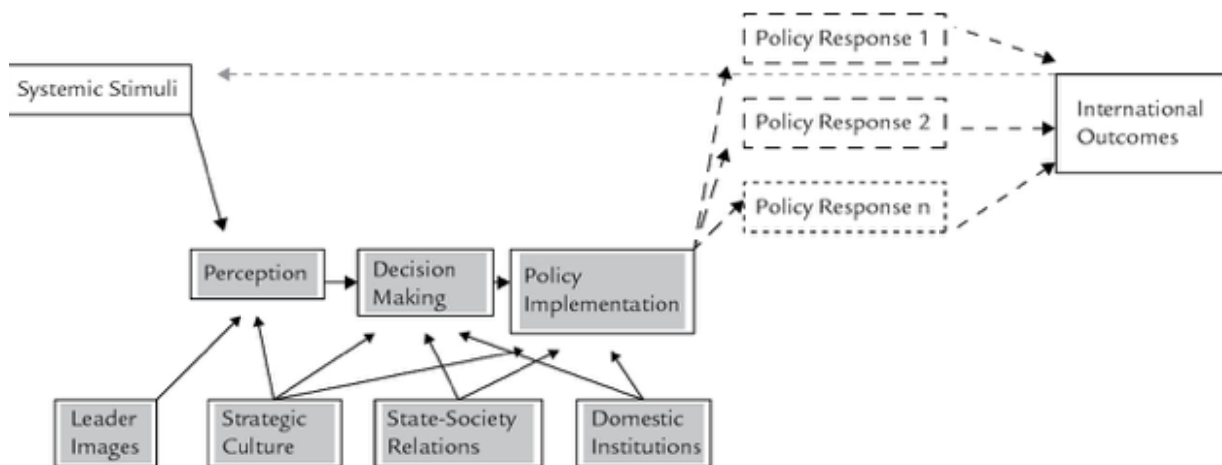


Figure 2.1 Neoclassical realist model of foreign policy

Source: Lobell et. al.,2016, 59

Although all the variables included in the general model are relevant for analysis, it is of utmost importance to specifically adjust this model for the current study. There are two reasons for that. First, there has been some criticism against neoclassical realism regarding the random selection of variables and this work is an example of a careful selection of variables based on the circumstances in which the causal chain of dependent and independent variables operates. Second, this work has certain scope of limitations and therefore the analytical mechanism must be both accurate and narrow.

The significance of systemic incentives for neoclassical realist analysis has been already discussed, but the selection of the intervening variables need further justification. There are two main reasons why *leader images* and *strategic culture* have been selected. First, the literature dealing with Russian foreign policy suggests that the role of Russian president is unprecedentedly strong and therefore, his perceptions, beliefs and personality matter significantly for an analysis of foreign policy outcomes (Kropatcheva 2012; Van Herpen 2015; Allison 2009). Second, Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell (2016, 94) identify patterns for selecting

intervening variables based on the degree of systemic clarity and the nature of strategic environment (see figure 2.2.). The degree of strategic environment refers to “the magnitude and imminence of threats and opportunities that a state faces” (ibid., 196). Since the presence of NATO is permanent and its enlargement and other policies have been perceived as threatening, it can be concluded that Russia’s strategic environment is restrictive. The degree of systemic clarity refers to “the degree to which the international system provides information about the nature of threats and opportunities, their time frame and the optimal policy choice to respond to them” (ibid., 94). NATO is a very transparent organization, whose military capabilities and expenditures are easy to estimate<sup>2</sup>. The alliance system in Europe is also easy to read for Russian decision makers. Therefore, it can be assumed that the degree of systemic clarity for Russia is very high. This specific constellation of restrictive environment and high degree of systemic clarity suggests that analytical primacy should be given to *leader images* and *strategic culture*.

Table 2.1 Intervening variable cluster by degree of systemic clarity and the nature of strategic environment

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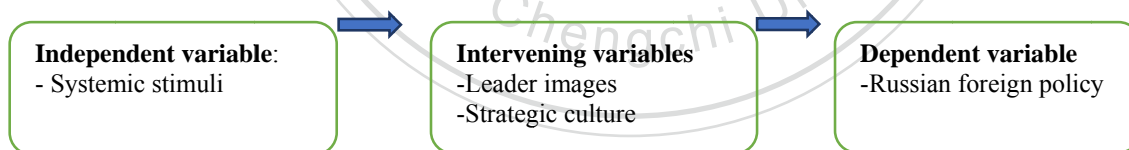
<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive dataset, please see (The Correlates of War 2012) or (SIPRI 2016)



		Degree of Systemic Clarity (High to Low)	
		High Clarity	Low Clarity
<b>Nature of Strategic Environment</b> (Restrictive to Permissive)	Restrictive Environment	<i>Leader images and Strategic culture</i>	<i>Leader images and Strategic culture</i>
	Permissive Environment	<i>Strategic culture, Domestic institutions, and State-society relations</i>	<i>Indeterminate—all four clusters could be relevant.</i>

Source: Lobell et. all., 2016, 94

The second hypothesis arises from the combination of intervening variables, namely leader images and strategic culture: “policy makers choose to frame, adjust, and modify strategic choices to reflect culturally acceptable preferences to maintain domestic political support” (Dueck 2008). The causal logic of neoclassical realism relevant for the present study is presented in figure 2.3.



Source: self-

compiled diagram based on neoclassical realist framework Figure 2.3 The Causal logic of neoclassical realism

A general formulation of the two hypotheses defined above must be adjusted to the present study.

**H1:** An increase in the relative material power of the Russian Federation will lead to a corresponding expansion in the ambition and scope of Russian foreign policy activity.

**H2:** President Putin chooses to frame, adjust, and modify strategic choices to reflect culturally acceptable preferences to maintain domestic political support.

This section outlined theoretical propositions derived from neoclassical realism and crafted a theoretical framework for analyzing Russian Foreign Policy. The argument underlining this research is: The analytical framework for analyzing Russian Foreign Policy must include not only systemic incentives but also domestic-level intervening forces, namely leader images and strategic culture.

## 2.3 Variables and Their Operationalization

The rationale behind selecting relevant variables for this study has been partly discussed during the theory construction in the previous section. The following part will expand the individual concepts and emphasize the analytical relevance which the selected variables poses. Furthermore, the theoretical development and operationalization of the variables in the analytical part will be explained. It is crucial to precisely define individual variables and set their scope to make the research framework clear and structurally reasonable.

### 2.3.1 Systemic Stimuli

A neoclassical realist research starts from an adequate analysis of the independent variable called “systemic stimuli”. This variable emerges from neorealist understanding of the international system, where the main units of analysis are sovereign states. This acceptance of the so called “Westphalian system” created in Western Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries defines the properties of the international system as we understand it today. Waltz (1979b) created a definition of an international system which is inspired by economic markets.

International-political systems, like economic markets, are formed by the coaction of self-regarding units. International structures are defined in terms of the primary political units of an era, be the city-states, empires, or nations. Structure emerges from the coexistence of states. No state intends to participate in the formation of a structure by which it and others will be constrained. International-political systems, like economic markets are individualist in origin, spontaneously generated, and unintended (Waltz 1979b).

Waltz’s definition of the system and structure holds that there is a very limited number of ordering principles that control the relationship among the units in any political system. Those principles are hierarchy and anarchy, and Waltz himself summed it up succinctly, “In anarchic realms, like units co-act. In hierarchic realms, like units interact” (Waltz 1979b). Since anarchy and hierarchy are constant, there is only one independent variable left in the Waltz’s balance of power theory, thus the relative distribution of capabilities among the units (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 38). At this point neoclassical realism holds different perspectives when comes to theory construction. The main objection proposed by neoclassical realists is that the Waltz’s

theory overlooks other systemic or unit level variables when analyzing the nature of the international system.

Snyder defined the so called “structural modifiers” as a state’s capacities that can “modify the effect of the more basic structural elements on the interaction process, but they are not interaction itself” (Snyder 1996, 169). Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell (2016, 39-42) build upon Snyder’s concept and go even further when expanding possible structural modifiers to geography, the rates of technological diffusion, strategic depth, and topographical barriers, or the lack thereof, can profoundly affect the security in a specific region or sub-region.

In their earlier book on neoclassical realism, Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro (2009) outlined two more important concepts regarding “clarity” and “permissive/restrictive” strategic environment.

The concept of clarity has three underlying components:

1. The degree to which threats and opportunities are readily discernible,
2. Whether the system provides information on the time horizon of threats and opportunities,
3. And whether the optimal policy options stand out or not.

The concept of permissive/restrictive strategic environment has one defining component, i.e. the imminence of a threat that a state faces. Both concepts pertain information, where clarity is defined by the quantity of information that the system provides, while the permissiveness or restrictiveness of strategic environment is defined by the content/subject of information (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009, 51). Both concepts share a methodological trouble, since neither

of them is exactly measurable, therefore falls in the category of soft positivism which has been already explained.

It stipulates that the independent variable (systemic stimuli) for this research will be measured in several factors, some in quantitative terms, some in qualitative. To outline this division, distribution of power will be measured through comprehensive index of Stockholm International Peace Research institute (SIPRI), which is the independent resource on global security. The index provides level of annual defense spending (as a percentage of GDP). Furthermore, GDP will be used as a statistical indicator of economic capabilities and the World Bank (WB) will provide the data. Other quantitative measures such as total population, number and structure of military and the size of territory will be comparatively assessed. This information will be gathered either from the WB or Correlates of War at the University of Michigan, which includes energy consumption, iron and steel production, military expenditure, military personnel, total population and urban population.

### 2.3.2 Leader Images

Leader images concerns one of the most important intervening variables that neoclassical realists put forward. It is the first intervening variable in this research that is going to be dealt with. Specific state such as the Russian Federation has been, since its inception, and even in its imperial history, represented by strong leaders who were involved in every aspect of the state. As signaled in the reviewed literature, the current president of the Russian Federation Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin is a central figure of every research done on the subject. Therefore, it is

more than understandable that Mr. Putin plays a principal role in this work as well. In the language of neoclassical realism, he is defined as a foreign policy executive (FPE). This role belongs to everyone who is in command of a state, thus possesses the capacity to affect perception of the incoming systemic stimuli. Be it the president, prime minister, key cabinet members, minister or even counsellors charged with the conduct of foreign and defense policies (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 61). Naturally, these decision makers have an unlimited access to private information and intelligence about foreign countries. This set of privileges makes them important for every researcher who wants to understand foreign policy behavior.

This work uses theoretical model of perception and misperception developed by Jervis (1988), where he outlines basic mechanism of how decision makers perceive, process, react to and further deal with information about foreign threats when information tends to be blur, incomplete or false. Jervis notes that every human being has a certain set of beliefs, expectations, values but also moral obligations which can be commonly referred as images. These images about the world are based on life experience and personal values which are very personalized and together create “core beliefs”. Jervis further adds that core beliefs define the world views that the person holds. In other words, all the information enter our minds are being processed and filtered through these core beliefs which later help to form responses in the form of an appropriate counter action (Jervis ,1988, 101-103).

This work intentionally uses denomination “leader images” instead leader perception or any other variant for the intervening variable because it is in line with the last work on neoclassical realism written by Ripsman et al. 2016, where the authors commonly use this naming in the research framework.

Operationalization of this intervening variable falls in the category of soft positivism where the elements of interpretivist research will be used. In order to understand Mr. Putin's world views, it is extremely important to look back through his career which had certainly modelled his core beliefs concerning the West, the international system, the post-soviet space, the Russian Federation and also his role as a leader of the re-emerging great power. Albeit this is in nature very subjective evaluation, it will be based on several sources, including biographies and movies, which include interviews. Then the focus will be put on the official documents, statements, speeches and interviews which together put Putin's opinions in a wider context. Even though Mr. Putin is the most significant person to focus on, there are many others, mainly ministers of foreign affairs and defense, who can supplement the president Putin's statements.

### 2.3.3 Strategic Culture

Strategic culture is the second intervening variable that has been incorporated in the causal equation. The analytical importance of strategic culture for this work is significant, mainly because it has a direct influence on the entire decision-making process starting with initial state's perception of the systemic stimuli to the actual policy implementation. To justify this claim, the following lines will briefly introduce the concept of strategic culture, its definition and analytical value for the neoclassical realist analysis of foreign policy.

Jack Snyder firstly introduced the term "strategic culture" in his 1977 report on Soviet and American nuclear strategies. Since that time, the concept has expanded either in importance and definitions. Snyder interprets strategic culture as "the sum of total ideas, conditional emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of national strategic

community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other with regard to strategy” (Snyder 1977, 5). Snyder’s definition is based on entrenched beliefs, world views and commonly accepted expectations of a society. Gray (1981) continues the behavioral line of defining strategic culture, “modes of thought and action with respect to force, derived from perception of national historical experience, aspiration for self-characterization, and from state-distinctive experiences” (ibid., 21). Some other authors focus more on organizational culture including military as a bureaucratic organization. Among them is for instance Jeffrey Legro (2013) who studied the relationship between military organization (military culture) on the development of the national security and foreign policies.

Alistair Iain Johnston (1995, 1998) made an important contribution when categorized the development of strategic culture. He defined three time periods in which the concept underwent several changes.

1. Late 1970s’ (Snyder’s period) was a reaction to game theory and rational actor model embedded in positivist theories (Realism, Liberalism).
2. 1980s’ saw a distinction between strategic culture and behavior, and effort to understand strategic postures of the superpowers (the U.S. and the Soviet Union) and their real intentions.
3. 1990s’ saw a new outlook on the strategic culture including a tendency to provide a more positivist analysis of the conflict in human affair and strategic culture vs. Realism/Liberalism.



Johnston himself is part of the third generation, which is also the most relevant for this work, and argues that his concept of strategic culture is falsifiable because of the measurable preference ranking and behavior. He defines strategic culture as a “limited, ranked set of grand-strategic preferences over actions that are consistent across the objects of analysis and persistent across time” (Johnston 1995, 37).

Charles Kupchan like Johnston belongs to the third generation of scholars dealing with strategic culture. He develops rather broad definition of strategic culture which includes deeply imbedded conceptions and notions of national security which are understood and accepted among elites and society as whole (Kupchan 1994). These widely accepted beliefs are enshrined in norms, and further developed through institutionalization and socialization. This process creates boundaries streamlining actions, policies and strategic choices that FPE chose. Kupchan argues that leaders may trap themselves in their previously introduced policies which have created certain strategic culture (strategic expectations) which could be in contradiction with newer strategic choices. This expectation is mainly relevant for rapidly rising or re-emerging powers that must adjust their behavior from less to more assertive one.

Similar argument accented by Dueck who argues that FPE will choose strategic choices that can be further adjusted, framed and modified according to culturally acceptable preferences to continue domestic political support (Dueck 2008). Dueck’s argument suggests that a careful analysis of strategic culture and FPE decision making can provide yet another view point on the continuity and change question.

In order to get the best of analytical value of strategic culture, this thesis will adjust the concept specifically to the historical development of the Russian Federation which goes beyond

the rein of Mr. Putin. Political, sociological, economic and cultural factors must be addressed, only then will the concept of strategic culture stand its promise of valuable analytical tool.

## 2.4 Methodology

Based on the argument made by Rose (1998, 154) about the use of case studies in analyzing neoclassical realist research, the thesis will use two case study to explain foreign policy decisions made in specific context in the specific period of time. The specific contexts are the selected case studies, thus the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014. The time period is defined by the start of Mr. Putin's presidency in 2000 up until the 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea. Nonetheless, to reach a comprehensive analysis of Russian strategic culture and leader images and to put the analyzed period into a wider perspective, the analytical part will address some key information dating back to the 1990s and even to the Soviet times when Vladimir Putin was a KGB agent in East Germany.

To investigate causal chains in specific cases, Lobell et al. (2016) suggest that the most appropriate strategy is the process-tracing method developed by George and Bennett (2005). This method is suitable for qualitative case study research which uses "causes-of-effect" approach to explain the causal mechanism between independent and dependent variables (Lobell et al., 2016, 108). George and Bennett (2005, 17) argue that the general method of process tracing "is to generate and analyze data on the causal mechanisms, or processes, events, actions, expectations, and other intervening variables, that link putative causes to observed effects." This definition sets expectations on the entire research process, where a researcher must identify whether the causal link is the result of the hypothesized variables and whether this relationship falls into the scope

of the theory under investigation. In other words, the process tracing method requires precision and systematic work with a lot of information.

This leads us to a question involving the choice of sources. In general, neoclassical realists agree that foreign policy analysis require researches to dig deep to acquire desired information, that no secondary historical sources can offer (Lobell et al., 2016, 132). It has been further recommended that only by approaching primary literature in the form of government documents, decision-maker interviews, memoir and speeches can we truly understand the reasons why decision makers choose the policies they did (Kropatcheva 2012, 32). Following these recommendations, this thesis will use primary sources with focus on the main foreign policy documents<sup>3</sup>, important speeches delivered by Russian decision-makers and various datasets, to obtain information on the identified intervening variables, and SIPRI, the World Bank and the Correlates of War for acquiring quantitative data economic and hard power capabilities. Of course, secondary literature in the literature review will also be used since it signifies a valuable source of information.

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, Foreign Policy Concepts (2000, 2008, 2013), National Security Concept (2000), Strategy of the National Security of the Russian Federation until 2020 (2009), and Military Doctrines (2000, 2010).

## Chapter 3 Russo-Georgian War in 2008

The previous chapters have established all theoretical and methodological necessities for analyzing the two case studies that this thesis seeks to investigate. The Russo-Georgian War in 2008 is the first case study of this thesis therefore the first test of the established hypotheses. This chapter consists of five main sections. First sub-chapter depicts the war itself, focuses on the progress of the conflict and discusses the results and consequences. Then follows three purely analytical sub-chapters. Second sub-chapter analyses Russia's position in the international system starting with an explanation of its geographical challenges. Then follows a brief analysis of the 1990s focusing on the foreign policy towards the West. After that continues a section depicting the rise of Russia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century including the main events that had influenced this process leading towards the Russo-Georgian war in 2008. Third sub-chapter analyses leader images which includes: Putin's personality, world views and foreign policy he pursued during his first and second presidential terms. Fourth sub-chapter discusses the role of strategic culture in the Russian foreign policy and how strategic culture influenced the decision making in the case of Russo-Georgian War. The last section concludes the chapter by providing a summary of the findings.

### 3.1 Overview of the War and Its Result and Consequences

The Russo-Georgian War lasted for five days from 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> August 2008. The belligerent sides were Georgia on one side and Russia, with the Russian-backed and by Georgia controlled republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia's intervention in South Ossetia and Abkhazia was its first full scale military conflict against another state in the post-cold war era.

And its consequences had a profound effect on the regional dynamics and future perception of Russia in the international system.

The war started as a result of a very tense period of escalation and several brief confrontations between the main actors. On August 7, 2008, Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili ordered Georgian army to the conflict zone in South Ossetia to enforce ceasefire, which had been broken by the South Ossetian separatists who were bombing Georgian villages (Makarychev 2008, 2). The Georgian army progressed swiftly and without difficulties to Tskhinvali, the de facto capital of South Ossetia and a separatist bastion. Russia responded almost immediately by accusing Georgia of aggression against South Ossetia and the next day, on 8 August executed a full-scale military operation (Ibid., 2). Moscow deployed around 40,000 forces to Georgia between August 7 and 12. The military was evenly divided on 20,000 in South Ossetia and 20,000 in Abkhazia and its total number exceeded the amount of Georgian troops more than three times (Asmus 2010, 165). Truly spectacular numbers concerning the fact that Russia called it a “peace enforcement” operation (Allison 2008). Olga Allenova wrote an article named “The First Peacekeeping War”, which reflects the official narratives of both sides (Allenova 2008). Initially, Georgia had secured Tskhinvali and successfully defended its peacekeepers in the area. On the other hand, it failed to deny access to the Russian army that was approaching the city through the Roki Tunnel, which is the only way connecting Russia and South Ossetia (Asmus 2010, 168). On 8 August, at around 16:00, two Russian tank columns had successfully passed the tunnel and headed towards Tskhinvali. It took less than an hour to reach the city, and around 17:00 they started shelling Georgian positions (Allenova 2008). Georgian troops had retreated from Tskhinvali by 10 August. Another strategically important cities were bombed and occupied. Amongst them a strategic city of Gori and a Black Sea port in the city of

Poti (Ibid.). Reported was also bombing of the capital of Tbilisi, but the reason was rather symbolic, since Russia did not intend to take control over the entire country. The second front was opened on 10 August, by the Abkhaz forces with a sea support from the Russian Black sea fleet. The goal was to secure the coast of Abkhazia and to push Georgian forces from the Kodori Valley (Preobrazhensky 2008). By 11 August, both goals had been achieved. Although the mission had been completed, Russian forces continued their advancement further into Georgian territory and captured several smaller cities, police stations and military bases (Ibid.). The reason for this extra adventurism, was probably propagandistic. Russia wanted to show its military superiority and to keep the officials in Tbilisi nervous (Van Herpen 2015, 221).

After five days of fighting on 12 August, Dmitry Medvedev made public statement that ended the “peace enforcement” operation in Georgia. He particularly stated that "The operation has achieved its goal, security for peacekeepers and civilians has been restored. The aggressor was punished, suffering huge losses" (Novosti 2008a). The EU had proposed a four-point peace plan which Medvedev, after minor adjustments, signed. Another agreement dealing with Russian withdrawal from Georgia was signed on 8 September (Dubnov 2008).

The immediate outcome of the was a recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by the Russian Federation. Russian President Medvedev signed the decision voted by the parliament on 26 August. International players such as the US, the EU and several international organizations including the OSCE and NATO condemned the recognition. But overall, Russia emerged as the true victor. It showed its resolve and regional superiority. Having defeated Georgia which was supported by the strongest actors in the international arena, especially the US, meant a lot for Russia’s confidence. Additionally, Russia stopped further eastern enlargement of NATO.

Many investigative reports have been produced since the end of the war, the general consensus has become that Georgia attacked South Ossetia first and then Russian response followed (Tagliavini 2009). This work does not try to dispute this consensus, but intends to focus on questions such as: “What were the main motives for Russia to intervene?” or “What systemic and unit level variables influenced Russian foreign policy on the way to the War?”. The following sub-chapters analyze external and internal variables defined by neoclassical realist framework to answer these questions.

### 3.2 Systemic Stimuli and the Russo-Georgian War

Although the Cold War was not a war in a traditional conventional sense its end has changed the balance in the international system more significantly than many bloody wars before. On December 26, 1991, when the Soviet Union definitively ceased to exist, a new state, the Russian Federation has emerged. This successor state of the former Soviet Union has emerged in a completely new environment. Russia has inherited not only the soviet legacy, geographical challenges, allies, enemies, but also military bases and embassies abroad.

The following four sub-sections analyze the path from the creation of the Russian Federation to the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 from a systemic point of view. The goal is to test the hypothesis derived from neoclassical realist expectations that, “An increase in the relative material power of the Russian Federation will lead to a corresponding expansion in the ambition and scope of Russian foreign policy activity.”

### 3.2.1 Geography – The Most Important Structural Modifier

Geography is an extremely important set of conditions in which a state must operate. Some states are geographically luckier than others but the most profound geographical feature is the power to shape a state's behavior in the international system. Russia and its predecessors have experienced the same defining characteristics, thus the indefensibility of its heartland (Stratford 2004). Political geographers defined the so called "invasion corridors", which Russia traditionally possess (Ibid.). The first is from the east where the steppes dominate the territory of an enormous size. Historically, these grasslands served as an invasion way to the Mongols. Nowadays, the territory of Kazakhstan and the other central-Asian republics lie in this geographic area. The second corridor is from the west called the North European Plain and again it represents large plains spreading from the Baltic states, over Belarus and Ukraine and continuing deeper to Europe through Poland. Adolf Hitler used this way when invading the Soviet Union in June 1941. At that time, the Nazis failed the operation Barbarossa because of an extreme cold and inhospitable weather, which is omnipresent at nearly 75% of the territory. The combination of these factors makes Russia relatively easy to invade but nearly impossible to conquer.

During the Cold war the Soviet Union achieved a perfect sphere of influence protecting its heartland from any outside aggression. This fortification in the form of the satellite states unified under the Warsaw Pact had provided the Soviet Union with a feeling of security. Unfortunately for the Soviets this safety indulgence did not come for free. On the contrary, maintaining influence in these countries was financially demanding, since many of them had to be subsidized. What is more, many domestic regimes had troubles to maintain the public



obedience (Hungarian revolution of 1956) or the government itself did not satisfy the Kremlin (Prague Spring of 1968). On the whole, it is not surprising that the management of the buffer states in combination with the centrally planned economy had been one of the reasons why the Soviet Union lost the war. And here comes the paradox; Russia seeks expansion to survive and prosper, but this strategy is impossible to maintain and the history has proved it many times.

### 3.2.2 The '90s – Decline and Chaos

On December 26, 1991, when the Soviet Union definitively ceased to exist, the Russian Federation has emerged as its direct successor. The newly formed state suffered immediate losses, such as: territory from 22.4 mils. sq. km to 17 mils. sq. km, population from 293 mils. to 148.6 mils., and GDP per capita from 3480 to 3090 US\$ (World Bank 2015). Figure 3.1. shows Russian GDP growth during the 90s. The economic decline is evident especially during the first half of the decade when newly initiated economic reforms had proved to be disastrous. In addition, the country had been literally robbed by the oligarch and corrupted politicians. A little improvement during 1996 and 1997 disappeared quickly due to the economic crisis in 1998. The end of the decade had brought an economic revival boosted by the rising prices of oil.

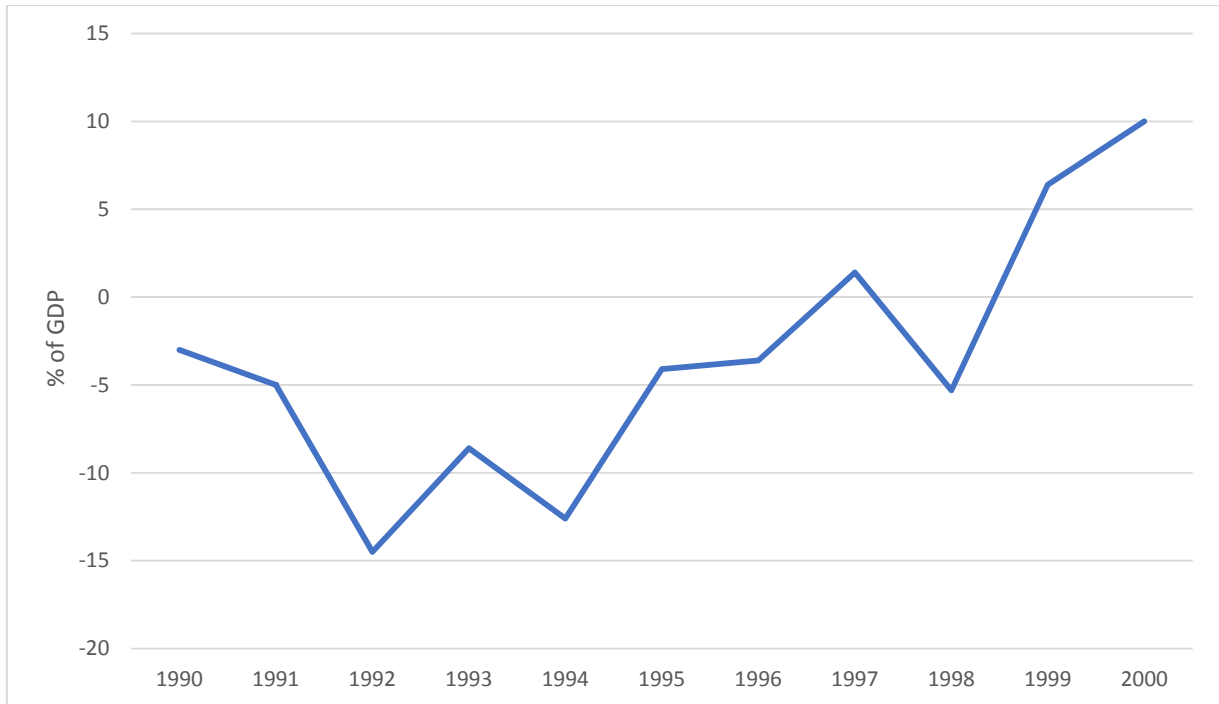


Figure 3.1 Russia, GDP Growth (Annual %)

Source: World Bank, 2015

Even though Russia still was the biggest country in the world, spreading over eleven time zones from Kaliningrad to Kamchatka and possessed the biggest nuclear arsenal in the world, its conventional military shrank from nearly five million to one million personnel between 1988 and 1994 and the military spending dropped nearly five times between 1990 and 1992. Figure 3.2. compares military spending of Russia and the US during the 90s. Although the U.S. military investments had declined significantly, the overall gap between the two countries had widen tremendously. Therefore, Russia's military potential vis-à-vis the US had lost its competitive ability for the entire decade.

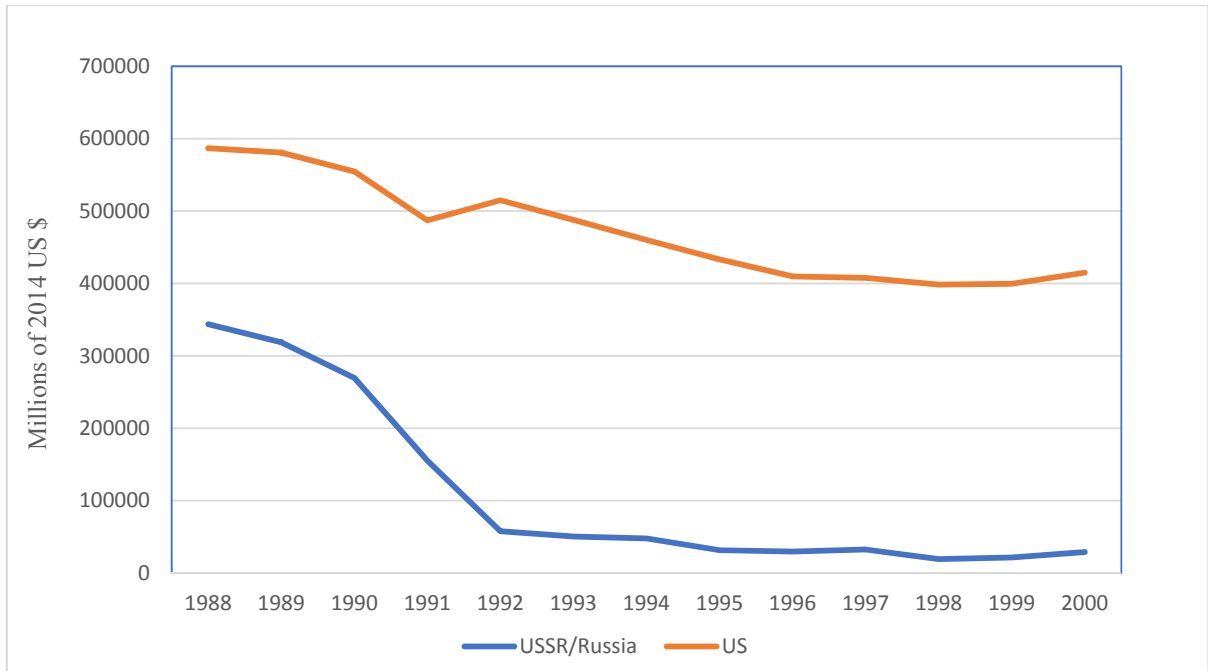


Figure 3.2 USSR/Russian and U.S. military spending 1988-2000

Source: SIPRI, 2012

In order to further contextualize the distribution of hard power in the world during the 90s, the CINC scores are used as a comprehensive dataset. Figure 3.3, displays a relative share of power based on the CINC scores. As explained before, CINC scores refer to a country's military expenditure, total number of military personnel, iron and steel production, urban population and total population. These six scores are combined into a final coefficient number which represents a state's share of hard power in the world.

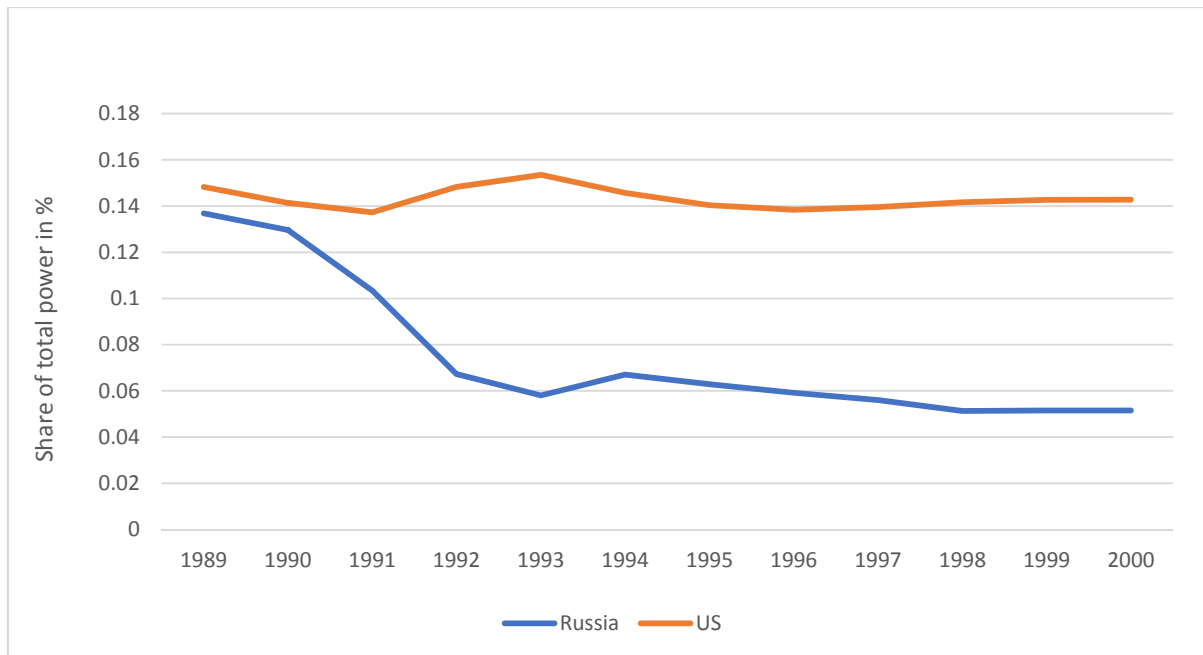


Figure 3.3 CINC scores of Russia and the US between 1989 - 2000

Source: Correlates of War, 2012

Figure 3.3. clearly shows how vast the gap between Russia and the US became immediately after the Cold war. Simply put, Russia's total share of power in the world halved between 1989 and 1993. On the other hand, the US had been able to sustain the downfall and by 1995 stabilized its power on 0.14%, which had not changed until the period's end. Russia was able to stop its rapid fall in 1993 and some improvement had continued until 1994. But after that what we can observe is once again a steady decline continuing until 1999-2000.

Inevitably, Russia lost many of its strategic bases and had to withdraw a substantial number of its military personnel from countries such as Mongolia, Afghanistan and Eastern Europe. The loss of a direct control over its sphere of influence was only one part of the post-soviet decline. The second, much less visible outcome was an internal struggle created by tensions amongst the president, the parliament and several interest groups including the oligarchs. But the most dissatisfied were the people who felt deteriorating living standards, an increasing

corruption and a deep dissatisfaction with the Yeltsin's inclination towards the western-style economic reforms and the enthusiasm towards joining NATO, which he expressed immediately in December 1991 (Johnson 1991). Yeltsin's initial foreign policy concerns focused on the former Soviet states and their inclusion in The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which was established in December 1991 and shortly after that included ten of fifteen former Soviet Republics. Ukraine and Turkmenistan agreed on an observation status whereas the Baltics states refused to join because of their inclination towards the West (Lo 2002, 73). In theory CIS provided a platform for addressing questions regarding regional cooperation, trade and security but also more sensitive issues such as the rights of Russian speaking population living outside Russia. In practice, however, the administration had almost no vision or a central idea about the future role of the organization (Ibid. 74.). A possible reason for this ambivalence was, perhaps, a very lukewarm and vague response from NATO whose members, mainly the US, did not send a clear message proposing a future intention of NATO in the region. A newly emerged North Atlantic Co-operation Council (NACC), a platform created by NATO with a purpose of bringing NATO member states together with former Soviet states and satellite states under the Warsaw Pact was the only response. From the NATO's perspective, the creation of NACC was a sufficient answer to Yeltsin's earlier inquiry. This relatively stable but not entirely intelligible situation changed in summer 1993 when the questions of NATO's enlargement firstly addressed the Polish president Lech Walesa during official meeting with President Yeltsin in Warsaw (Smith 2006, 53). Initially, the meeting brought only good outcomes, such as a joint statement including Poland's desire to join NATO and Yeltsin's surprisingly sympathetic understanding of these intentions. Immediately after the visit, the Polish Foreign Minister Krzysztof Skubiszewski said "If Poland joins NATO, the security of Europe will be strengthened" (Perlez 1993). His

Russian counterpart Mr. Kozyrev said that “Poland’s membership in NATO was not a good idea, because such a decision would anger Russian nationalists” (Ibid.). Nevertheless, he continued that, “Russia has no objections if NATO’s stance is not aggressive toward Russia” (Ibid.). Immediately after Poland, Yeltsin visited the Czech Republic where he was told again that the country’s security potential lied in accessing NATO. Yeltsin ended his Eastern-European tour in the capital of Slovakia, Bratislava, where the accession of NATO did not seem to be on the main agenda at that time. The initial impression after the three visits was that Russia, or at least the Russian president, accepted the decisions of the Eastern-European states to join the north-Atlantic security community. Surprisingly though, this impression had lasted just about two months until 1<sup>st</sup> October 1993, when President Yeltsin sent a letter to President Clinton and representatives of France, Germany and Britain. The content of the letter had clearly restated the position of the Russian President expressed in Warsaw earlier that year. From now, the Russian side has started to consider any NATO’s expansion into the Russia’s sphere of influence as a threatening act undermining European security (Cohen 1993). Furthermore, Yeltsin had insisted that Russia must play a role in the process of shaping a new security environment in the post-Cold war Europe (Ibid.).

The question is: why would have Yeltsin signed the Warsaw memorandum, if he had not been adamant about his position? There are several possible explanations including increasing tensions between Yeltsin and opponents of his reforms, growing pressure from his armed forces or a fear from a negative public response (Marples 2014, 306). In addition, Russian ministry of Foreign Affairs announced its negative position towards NATO’s enlargement immediately in early September 1993. The statement stressed that Russia was in favor of strengthening organizations such as the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and NACC both arrangements in which Russia had a

membership and influence. It is very clear that Russia wanted an equivalent position with the other great powers, anything else would have been unacceptable and potentially threatening for Russia's security. Some have argued that the dichotomy between the Foreign ministry and Yeltsin was an example of the Foreign policy freelancing of the later (Perlez, 1993).

Although the situation between Russia and NATO was unclear, the signals expressed by Yeltsin and his ministers during the last months of 1993 were obvious. Russia's status vis-à-vis the West needed an upgrade. This has resulted in a new program initiated by NATO called Partnership for Peace (PfP), which was officially launched in January 1994 during NATO summit in Brussels. The program was initially welcomed by Russia, but this enthusiasm did not last very long. Russia wanted a special partnership corresponding with its regional importance and ambitions, something that the PfP did not offer. What is more, Russia wanted an alternative to NATO membership, while the PfP looked more like a pre-accession framework for its members. This was not only undesirable for Russia but also threatening, since the PfP had a potential to directly challenge CIS (Smith, 2006, 59). After several rounds of negotiation and more than visible skepticism from the Russian side the Russian government had finally signed the PfP accession in June 1994.

Only a month later, president Clinton visited Poland, where he addressed the Polish parliament in Warsaw stressing the importance of NATO enlargement as the main guarantor of democracy and peace in Europe (Lo ,2002, 104). The situation between July and December had only further deteriorated and reached its peak during the CSCE summit in Budapest. Yeltsin accused NATO from splitting the continent again, arguing that there is no way for an outside state to veto NATO enlargement (Sciolino, 1994). By the end of 1994, it was apparent that

NATO and Russia had not found any stable and effective platform for cooperation. Besides of that, Russia decided to go to war with the breakaway Republic of Chechnya. Some argue that this step was a part of Yeltsin's diversionary strategy to shift the attention from the deteriorating domestic situation (Marples, 2014, 308).

No substantial development had happened until the autumn of 1995, when NATO and Russia started deploying its forces to Bosnia under the peace Implementation Force (IFOR) (Smith, 2006, 67). This operation has shown that Russia and NATO are actually able to cooperate and function together. Despite this success, any progress regarding the question of enlargement and security cooperation in Europe had not improved. It is also important to note that Russia was busy ending the war with Chechnya, which officially ended with signing an embarrassing peace treaty at the end of 1996. In addition, president Yeltsin's poor health prevented him from an active engagement in politics, therefore the then Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov oversaw the foreign affairs. He focused primarily on strengthening security guarantees with Russia's immediate neighbors, namely Belarus and Ukraine. Besides of that, significant attention had been devoted to the negotiations concerning a new platform for cooperation and discussion with NATO (Marples, 2014, 309). On 27 May 1997, during the NATO summit in Paris, a Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation was signed. Both sides agreed that "they will build together a lasting and inclusive peace in the Euro-Atlantic area on the principles of democracy and cooperative security" (NATO, 1997). In addition, the treaty states that "NATO and Russia do not consider each other as adversaries" (Ibid.). The treaty secured Russia a seat in Permanent Joint Council (PJC) that was charged with NATO's decision-making process (Marples, 2014, 309). There is no doubt that this institutionalized form of partnership had been the most ambitious one



since the end of the Cold War and in fact meant a “special partnership”. The PJC had created a bridge between Russia and the West which prevented Russia from segregation. Nevertheless, the framework did not help Russia to gain influence or an enhanced status.

In December 1997, the US together with France and Britain had increased its pressure on Iraq which latter resulted in air strikes. Primakov, who became the Prime minister in September 1998 reacted immediately by withdrawing diplomats from London and Washington. He further continued his disagreement with the US by proposing a Russia-China-India new alliance to balance world politics (Tsygankov, 2016, 9). Although the end of 1998 was turbulent and clearly affected by domestic financial and political crisis, some said that the partnership between Russia and NATO under the PJC had been a success (Klaiber, 1998). Nevertheless, the entire situation was about to change dramatically.

In retrospect, 1999 was a breaking year in the NATO-Russia relations. As the negotiations over the NATO enlargement progressed in the beginning of the year, the failure of the PCJ to prevent it was apparent (Smith, 1999b). Even more importantly though, the resolution made by NATO members to start air campaign against the Serbs over Kosovo in March 1999 has damaged the relationship profoundly. The first NATO’s post-Cold war enlargement on 12 March 1999, together with the unilateral intervention to Kosovo, without the UN mandate, sent two important messages to Russia. First, geopolitics is real and Russia had failed to secure neutrality of its former allies. Second, the US is the only superpower in the international system, which does not ask Russia for permissions. The second message is especially bitter, due to the fact that Russia had been trying to preserve its international influence in several structures (NACC, PFP, PJC, G8), and 1999 proved that none of them had worked. What is more, Russia was so

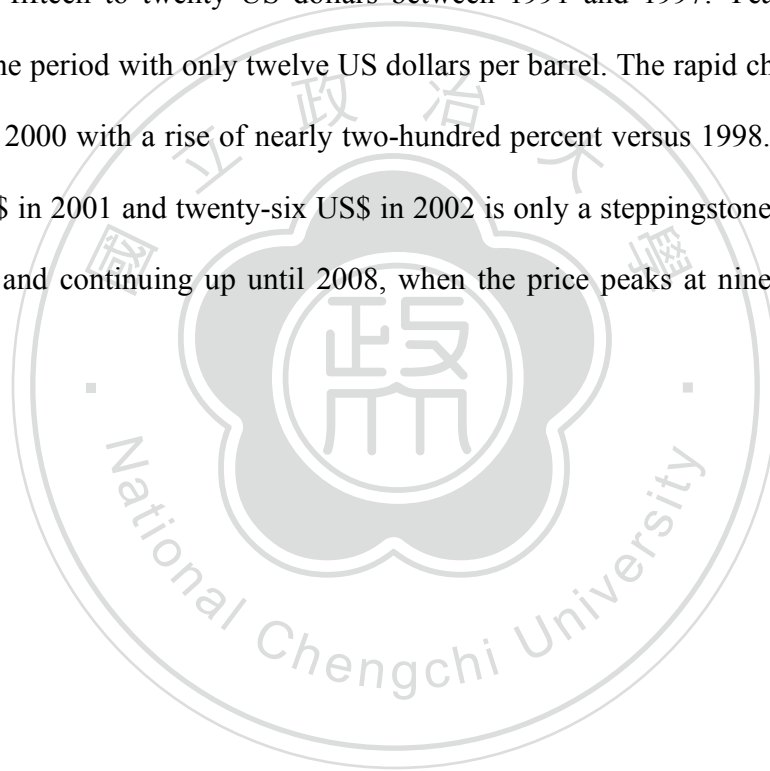
dependent on the financial aid receiving from the West and threatened by isolating itself that any counter-attack was unthinkable (Smith ,1999b, 6-7). Although Russia and NATO survived the crisis, there was no doubt that their mutual distrust was high and a prospect for future cooperation very low.

The end of the century concluded the first chapter of the Russian Federation written by Boris Yeltsin, who resigned on December 31, 1999. Yeltsin's era started with a pro-Western attitude focusing on engaging NATO, initiating liberal reforms and elevating Russia's status in the World. During his presidency, Russia's economy, military and international influence declined significantly. Some even agree that during the Yeltsin's era the country had been many times close to a full scale civil war (Jordan, 2004; Marples, 2014, 305). This inability to provide stability on both internal and external levels had created a feeling of chaos, weakness and humiliation. Something that was in the contradiction with the glory of the former Soviet Empire. For these and probably many more reasons, Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the Russian Federation, has been considered an unpopular and controversial president (Smith 1999a; Gidadhubli 2007).

### 3.2.3 The 21<sup>st</sup> Century - The Re-emergence of Russia

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century brought many game-changing events that have had a profound impact on the Russian Federation and the entire world. The following sections analyze the period between 2000 – 2008. It starts with several paragraphs displaying measurable indicators which tell us about the relative position of Russia in the international system. In order to put the numbers into a tangible perspective, the most important events including the 9/11

terrorist attack, Invasion to Iraq, enlargement of NATO and the EU, and Russia's inability to recover from the collapse of the Soviet Union had been apparent for the most of the 90s. This situation was about to change due to the rising oil prices during the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Russian economy is highly dependent on oil and gas exports, therefore any significant change in the prices for these commodities has a substantial effect on the economy of the state. Figure 3.4. illustrates the trends in crude oil prices between 1991 and 2008. The graph shows constant prices fluctuating from fifteen to twenty US dollars between 1991 and 1997. Year 1998 marks the lowest point in the period with only twelve US dollars per barrel. The rapid change starts in 1999 and continues to 2000 with a rise of nearly two-hundred percent versus 1998. A little decline to twenty-three US\$ in 2001 and twenty-six US\$ in 2002 is only a steppingstone for a massive rise starting in 2003 and continuing up until 2008, when the price peaks at ninety-five dollars per barrel.



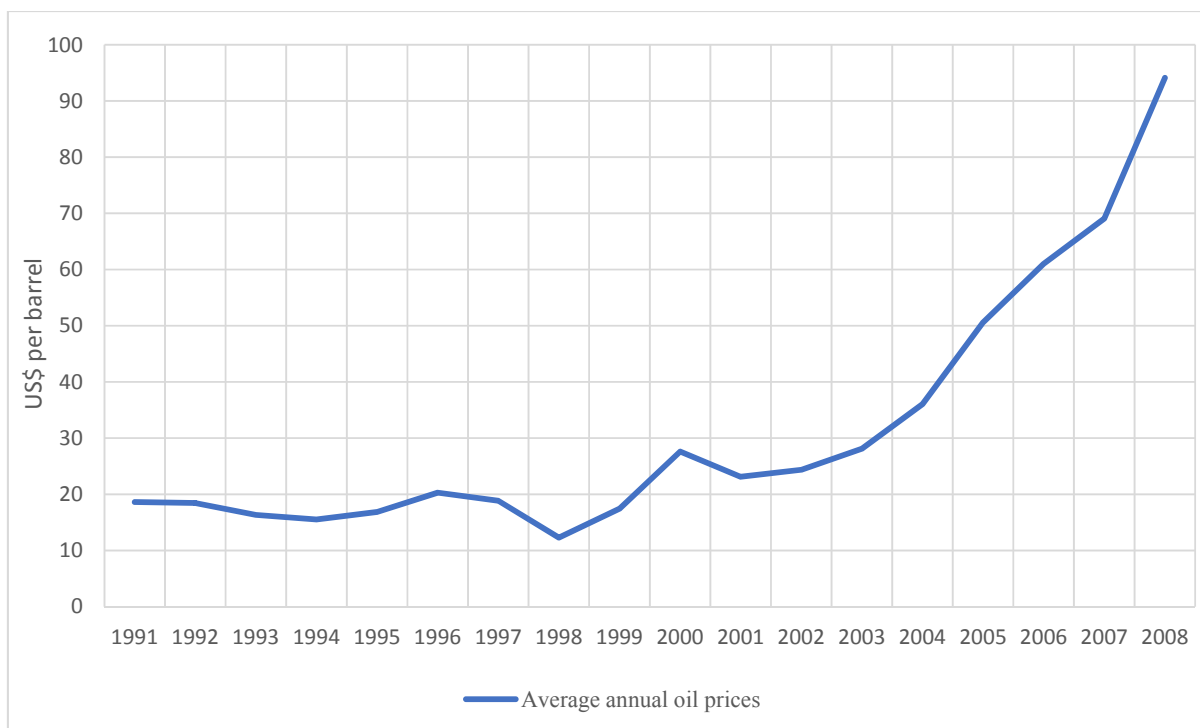


Figure 3.4 Average annual crude oil price between 1991-2008

Source: Statista, 2017

This unexpected development of high oil prices had allowed to keep increasing military expenditure that is typified in the figure 3.5. In comparison with the entire decade of the 90s, the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century was the first time in Russia's short history, when its military expenditure has started to increase continuously. By 2008, Russian military budget had nearly doubled from 28838 million US\$ to 56933 million US\$ (in 2014 prices). Truly impressive development considering the steep decline just a decade earlier.

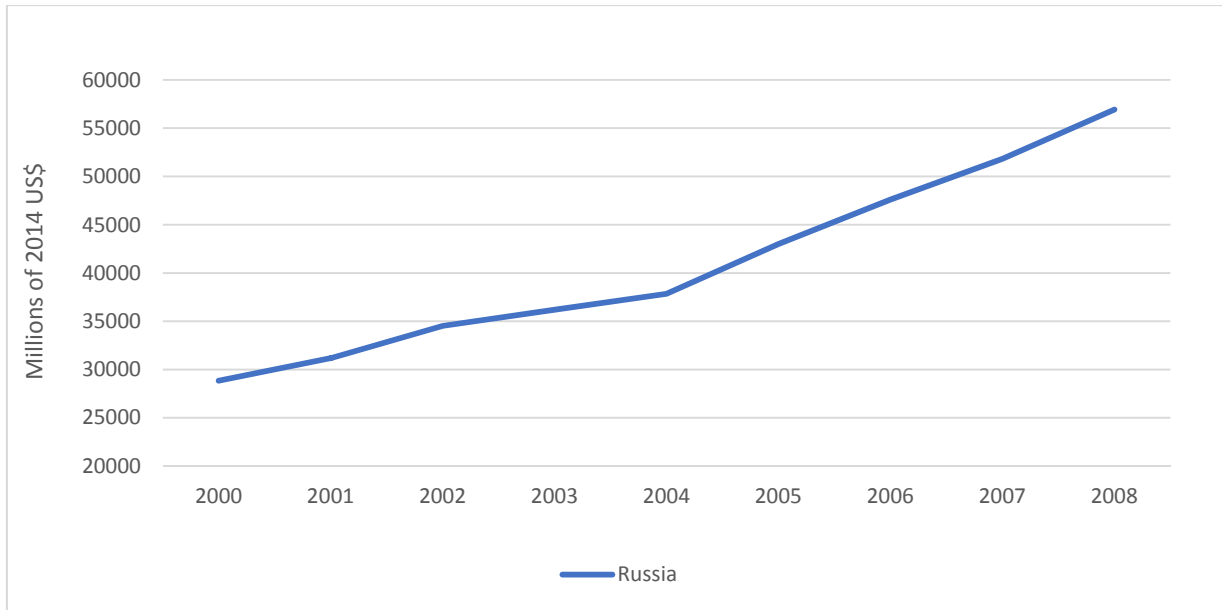


Figure 3.5 Russian Military Expenditure 2000-2008

Source: SIPRI, 2014

Nevertheless, the US military spending, driven by new threats of global terrorism and wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had increased even more in the same period. Figure 3.6. displays a comparison between Russian and US military spending. The gap between the two was some 39000 million US dollars in 2000. The difference had increased to 66200 million US dollars by 2008, which was, at that time, the biggest difference between the two in the entire history.

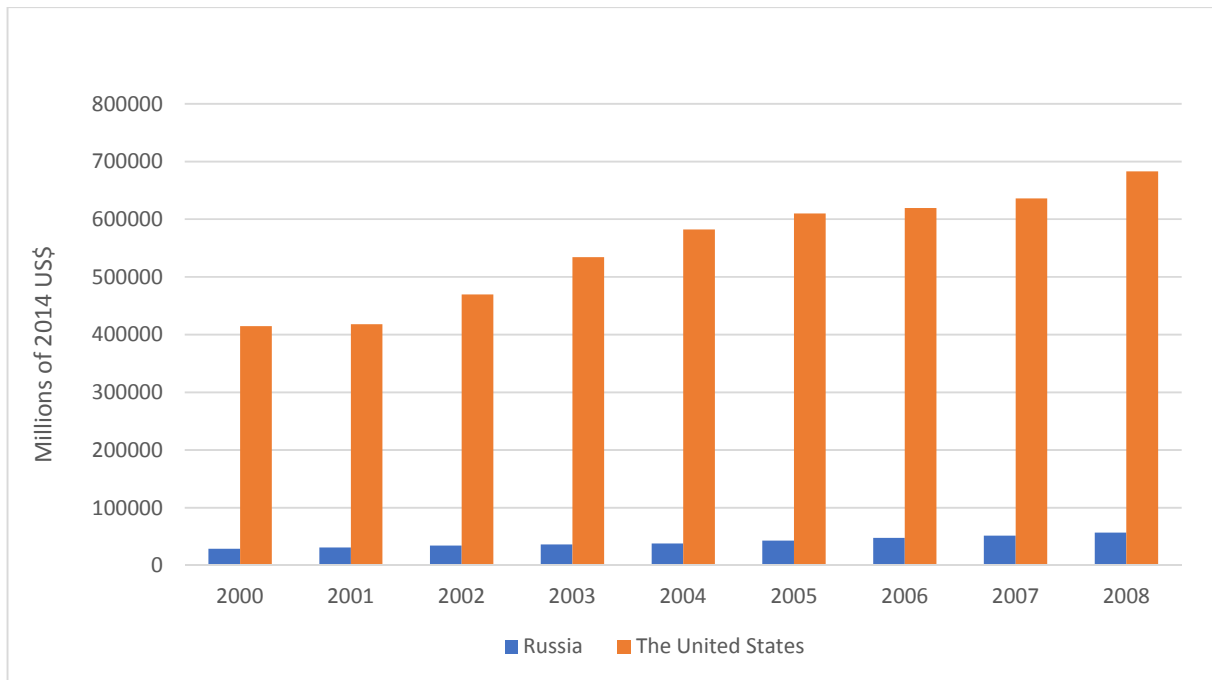


Figure 3.6 Russian and US military spending between 2000-2008

Source: SIPRI, 2014

Although military spending is a key indicator when analyzing development of relative power of a state, there are several measurable indicators which put the relative share of power into a context. For that reason, figure 3.7. displays CINC scores of Russia and the US between 2000-2008. It is immediately apparent that this period is relatively steady compared to the previous decade. Nevertheless, there were some events that had a profound influence on the balance in the international system. First, and the most important was the terrorist attack on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001. This single event has challenged the liberal world order defended by the US. The immediate reaction was a massive increase in military spending of the US (see Figure 3.6). This phenomenon is clearly visible from the graph, where the CINC value for the US rises significantly immediately after the president George W. Bush announced the War on terror in autumn 2001. The situation had been steady until 2004, when the US

military campaign in Iraq helped to increase the US CINC score once again. On the other hand, Russia, in the same time frame, had firstly stabilized its performance and towards 2005 slightly decreased. There are several reasons, mostly a comparatively lower population growth and continuing decline of the total number of military personnel. Although, the US score started to fall after 2005, the gap between the two was wider at the end of the period than in the beginning. In other words, CINC scores show that Russia's relative share of power in the world had declined, whereas the share of the US had risen by 2008.

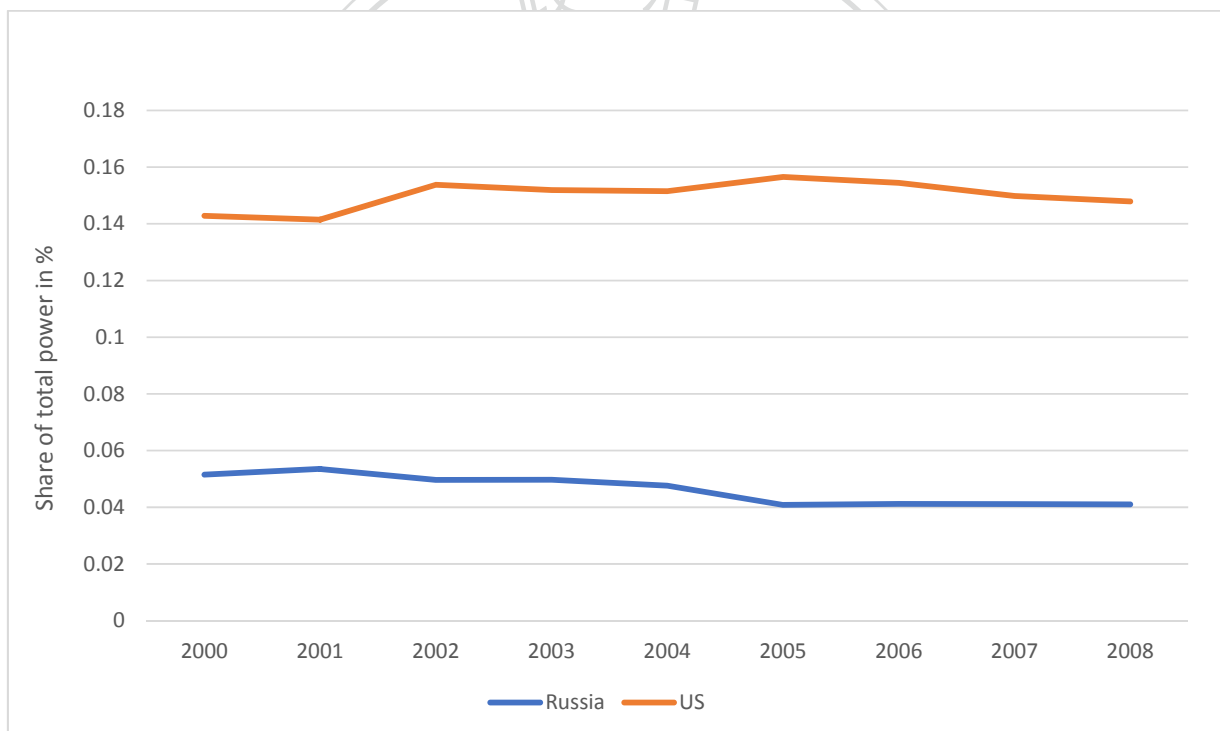


Figure 3.7 CINC score of Russia and the U.S. between 2000 – 2008

Source: Correlates of War, 2017

It has been already stressed that neoclassical realism focuses not only on balance of power amongst states in the international system. It also considers changes in alliance formation and geopolitical changes, which may cause significant changes in a relative position of a state in its region. For Russia, the single biggest challenge in its neighbourhood has been apparent since

the first post-cold war NATO enlargement round in 1999 when the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary entered the alliance. In order to balance the west and maintain its influence in the former soviet states, Russia had to strengthen its web of allies during the first years of new millennium. There were three main partnerships that had been negotiated by 2001.

First, *The Eurasian Economic Community* (EAEC) emerged in October 2000, when the representatives of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Russia signed the founding treaty. Initially, EAEC was created in order to repair the failure of CIS from which the new framework originated. According to the founding treaty the main goal of the community was “to promote the process of formation of the Customs Union and the Single Economic Space” (World Bank). The treaty was ratified in 2001, the original number of members increased to six in January 2006 when Uzbekistan joined. Three states – Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine had observer status. The idea of economic community had been primarily motivated by economic benefits of all its members however from Russia’s point of view the motivation was mainly political. Some argue that Russia was inspired by the model of European integration which had eventually resulted in spillover effect to a step-by-step political integration (Van Herpen 2015, 66).

Second, *The Collective Security Treaty Organization* (CSTO) has its roots in Collective Security Treaty which was established in 1992 by six CIS member states, namely: Russia, Belarus Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Armenia. This original six decided in 2002 to renew and further strengthen their military alliance. Uzbekistan joined later in 2006. The charter includes several similarities to NATO, such as a collective security guarantee. In addition, the member states are prohibited from joining another military alliance (Ibid., 68). The establishment



of CSTO was a visible signal for the West that Russia was not happy with its status within OSCE or NATO-Russia council. The CSTO representatives had tried many times to gain official recognition by NATO as an equal regional partner. Besides of that the CSTO had offered several plans for cooperation on various regional issues, principally Afghanistan (Witz 2014, 4). But NATO had never taken the CSTO as a potential partner for discussing regional security, because the Russian influence in the organization had been too strong. Therefore, NATO had rather cooperated with each member of the CSTO individually (Ibid., 4).

Third, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization* (SCO) was founded in 2001 in Shanghai by the representatives of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Similarly, as the previous two partnerships, the SCO emerged from its predecessor called the Shanghai Five (STO without Uzbekistan). Several countries such as Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, Mongolia and Pakistan have observer status. The SCO has very developed organizational structure and its progress is based on regular summits which set the pace and agenda. The spectrum of activities is also rather wide and besides cooperation on security, military and economic projects it also includes cultural exchange (Bailes et al. 2007, 7-9). The SCO shows clearly that Russia wanted to expand its ring of allies eastwards and simultaneously prevent NATO from projecting its influence in central Asia. In addition, Russia needed a framework for cooperation with China, which was a dominant Asian power. Nevertheless, this cooperation opened a way for China to increase its economic ties with Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states, which are crucial for Russia (Ambrosio 2008).

During the 2000-2008 period, Russia had played a dominant role in all three organizations but none of them had made substantial effect on the global or even regional level

by the end of the period. This outcome could be ascribed to several factors from which the most apparent was Russian dominance in these partnerships and with that connected internal disagreements. What is more, the overall ambitions were significantly limited by the refusal of NATO to acknowledge these organizations as its partners. In addition, Russia failed significantly already in the beginning of this period in one crucial way. Two countries, Ukraine and Georgia, which due to their geographic position play a pivotal role in Russian foreign policy and security architecture, have never been members of these organizations but only observers. The regional dynamics of the 90s and the apparent success of NATO and EU enlargement rounds had shown to the Ukrainians and the Georgians that there was a western alternative to Russian one. Although, the leadership in both countries had been pro-Russia, the people had shown their resolve to change this trend during 2003 and 2004 massive protests. First, the so-called Rose Revolution in Georgia was brought about by vast demonstrations against the rigged parliamentary elections and the President Eduard Shevardnadze. Eventually, Shevardnadze was dismissed and the leader of the protesters, Mikheil Saakashvili, had become the new President. This change had completely re-oriented the direction of Georgian foreign policy, which declared pro-Western orientation (Mitchell 2006, 671). Surprisingly, Putin initially supported regime change in Georgia, but he swiftly changed his opinion and criticized Saakashvili (Baev 2012, 100-101). The main problem was that from the Russian perspective, the revolution was initiated and financially supported by the West to spread its influence in the country and alienate Russia. In his latter interview, Putin stated that, “We see what tragic consequences the wave of so-called color revolution led to. For us this is a lesson and a warning” (Korsunskaya 2014). Logically, this change in attitude has had a negative impact on the Georgia-Russia relations ever since.

Second, and probably even more painful, was the political development in Ukraine between 2004 – 2005. A triggering point was similar to the situation in Georgia one year earlier, thus a massive corruption and election fraud. The protests were motivated by the result of the elections on 21 November 2004, when Viktor Yanukovich won over Viktor Yushchenko. The former candidate was widely supported by the then president Kuchma and President Putin. Yushchenko was considered as an unacceptable candidate for Russia, since his political program included possibility of European integration and NATO membership. Ultimately, the nationwide demonstrations succeeded and the elections had to be held again. Viktor Yushchenko was declared the winner and on 23 January 2005 became the president of Ukraine. His post-election statements included a declaration that the lease of two bays in the port of Sevastopol to Russia, which had an expiry date of 2017, would not be renewed (Marples 2014, 320). Not only had Russia lost its immediate influence in the highest circles of Ukrainian government, but the future prospect for including the country to its economic-military partnerships had vanished as well. It is accurate to state that at this point the Ukraine - Russian period of strained relations had begun.

The outcome of the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine were further amplified by the 2004 enlargement rounds of the EU<sup>4</sup> and NATO<sup>5</sup>. Significance of these two enlargements was the high number of newly admitted states, the eastward orientation and the fact that due to inclusion of the Baltics states, Russia and NATO have started to share one borderline again, for the first time since the end of the cold war. Another dimension of the EU enlargement was the subsequent introduction of the European neighborhood policy which focused on the countries surrounding Europe including Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Kazakhstan

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<sup>4</sup> EU enlargement included ten new member states: Cyprus, The Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia

<sup>5</sup> NATO enlargement included seven new member states: Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia

(Whitman and Wolff 2010, 3-5). In other words, NATO symbolized a security threat while the EU's programs based on economic incentives were understood by Russia as a dangerous form of soft power.

This already tense situation started to escalate quickly after March 2006, when the Georgian parliament had voted in favor of Saakashvili's proposal to start negotiations concerning Georgia's membership in NATO (Novosti, 2008b). Several confrontations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia together with many airspace provocations by Russian military planes between the two countries helped to escalate the situation (Karagiannis 2013, 79). Further escalation came in February 2008, when Kosovo declared its independence and the West endorsed this decision. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reacted swiftly by stating that, "the recognition of Kosovo's independence postulates a revision of generally accepted norms and principles of international law" and "could lead to an undermining of established rules and ethics for interaction between states" (Mineyev 2008, 1). This statement was a reference to the nervous situation between the triangle of Russia with its proxies (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) and Georgia. Many argue, however, that only after the Bucharest NATO summit in the beginning of April 2008, the hostility between Russia and Georgia started (Van Herpen 2015, 211, Karagiannis 2013, 79). The main reason was that Germany and France, two powerful members of NATO, refused to initiate a Membership Action Plan for Georgian and Ukraine during the summit. The reason was that the European powers were afraid of angering Russia, whose officials had previously stated that "pushing Georgia in NATO is a Red Line" (RT 2008) or for instance, Putin stated in April 2008: "The presence of a powerful military bloc on our borders, whose members are guided by Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, will be seen as a direct threat to our national security" (Ibid.).

The result of this disagreement between Germany and France on the one side and the U.S. on the other had effectively led towards a very ambiguous result. The Bucharest NATO summit declaration states that, “Ukraine and Georgia will become members of NATO” (NATO 2008), but it does not say when or under what conditions. The members of NATO showed their lack of commitment when dealing with Georgia on the one hand but also proved an intention of the U.S. to keep Georgia on track of accession to maintain the pro-western sentiment in the country. In other words, the U.S. tried to maintain its position in Georgia to balance the Russia’s regional ambitions. The immediate outcome of the Bucharest Summit offered a mixture of systemic signals that proved to be a triggering moment for Russia to increase its aggression towards its little neighbor (Cornell and Starr 2009, 126).

### 3.3 Leader Images - Putin’s Foreign Policy

This sub-chapter analyzes the first intervening variable, which is known as leader images. The expectation here is that the leader images are strong enough to modify the power of systemic incentives, therefore to influence the decision-making process when creating foreign policy of a state. It has been argued in the literature review that president Putin is the main part of foreign policy executive, therefore he is de facto creator of Russian foreign policy.

The chapter includes four sub-sections. First part reveals background of Vladimir Putin before he has become the Russian president. Then follows a conceptualization of Putin’s foreign policy including his speeches and major documents. This is all in the context of changing international system on the way to the Russo - Georgian War.

### 3.3.1. Vladimir Putin – From a KGB Chekist to President

Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin was born in Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) on October 7, 1952. His father was a conscript in the Soviet army and his mother worked in a factory. Putin himself describes his family and early life as average and ordinary (Putin 2017). Ever since his childhood, Putin has been a passionate sportsman. When he was 12 he started practicing martial arts, namely judo and sambo. This was the time when the young boy realized that he wanted to achieve something. His performance in school, in sports and later in the Young Pioneer Organization, was excellent. Even at this young age, Putin's motivation to achieve recognition was unusual. At age 18, Putin became a law student at Leningrad State University. This new, highly competitive and challenging environment motivated Putin to pursue his very best. After obtaining degree in 1975, Putin continued his studies at KGB (Soviet security agency) School in Moscow. At that time, Putin was adamant about his future career in the state's security agency. "My perception of the KGB was based on the idealistic stories I heard about intelligence", Putin recalls. Among his first assignments as a KGB agent was monitoring foreigners arriving in Leningrad. He was soon offered an opportunity to undergo a training required for a foreign mission. In September 1984, Putin moved to the Red Banner Institute, which was a preparation center for KGB agents. He went through a demanding physical training which prepared him for his assignment in Dresden, in the German Democratic Republic (Marples 2014, 312). Putin was well suited and qualified for this job because of his knowledge of German language, which he had learned at school.

During his five-year service in Dresden, Putin had truly developed the so called ‘checkist mentality’<sup>6</sup>, which refers to the absolute control of KGB over society. Robert Coalson wrote that “the checkists see themselves as the nearly messianic saviors of Russia from a raft of internal and external enemies” (Coalson 2007). Yevgenia Albats has argued that “the Checkists consider themselves completely above the law” (Albats and Fitzpatrick 1994, 325). And Karen Dawisha has noted that Putin and other former agents share a “state first” mind-set. Clearly, the Checkists were highly determined, organized people with a strong belief in their missions. Therefore, the end of the 1980s accompanied with the policies of Perestroika and the eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union meant a great deal of dissatisfaction, frustration and humiliation for the Checkists.

Putin left East Germany during 1990 and returned to St Petersburg, where he became Deputy Rector for International Affairs at Leningrad State University. Soon after that Putin got together with his former university professor Anatoly Sobchak, who had become mayor of St Petersburg, and was seeking for somebody who was familiar with European affairs and knew the languages in order to work on foreign economic relations. In addition, St Petersburg was known as “the Gangster Capital of Russia” and Sobchak needed somebody to manage affairs that he could not officially handle (Belkovsky, 2016). Owing to his KGB career, loyalty and high working temper, Putin was well-qualified for the job. It is important to note that Putin’s political career has started at that very moment and has not stopped until today.

Putin would soon be Deputy Major of the city and very importantly a chair of the committee on foreign economic relations. After the fall of the Soviet Union the agricultural production had fallen significantly and Russian cities including St Petersburg had problems with

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<sup>6</sup> The term ‘checkist’ comes from the Russian abbreviation ChK, or Extraordinary Commission, which was the original secret police organization.

food shortages. Putin oversaw a program organizing exchanges of raw materials for money, which were then used for buying food. The program had one problem, the food had never arrived and the people started to protest. Later investigations showed that the companies exporting raw materials, which had been set up by Putin and run by his friends, had sold goods for millions of Rubbles. Sobchak dismissed all the allegations against Putin and accused several companies and bureaucrats from intentional campaign against his deputy and himself. Although the money was not found, one of the investigators Andrew Zikov said that according to his investigation money laundering had been committed and the money flew to holiday resorts in Spain and elsewhere. Nevertheless, Putin did not go to prison, his career took the opposite direction.

By 1996, Putin and his family moved to Moscow where he became Deputy Chief of the Presidential Property Management Directorate. Similarly, as earlier in his life, this was only the first step in his rise on the Kremlin. Putin was even able to help his mentor Sobchak to escape the country after the lost elections and subsequent prosecution in 1996 (Marples 2014, 313). His loyalty brought him attention from Pavel Borodin, director of Kremlin's property department, who offered him position in the Presidential Administration in Moscow. A year later, in May 1998, Putin became First Deputy Chief of Staff of the President Executive Office and later that year, he was appointed Director of the Federal Security Service (Ibid., 313-314). A position where he cooperated with friends he had met during his service in KGB. In addition, from March 1999, he was in charge of the Security Council of the Russian Federation. Putin rose to an influential, reliable and loyal man, with a strong background, which had influenced Yeltsin to elevate Putin to the position of Prime Minister. In his biography, Putin recalls that he was 'a prime minister with prospects' (Putin 2017). Although Yeltsin did not promise Putin presidency, it is very likely, that he had considered Putin as the right successor for some time. There is a



combination of three facts supporting this assumption. First, Yeltsin's declining health in combination with his unpopularity amongst various parties within Russia had made him very vulnerable. Second, Putin had showed his qualities to manage internal affairs in the time of instability. Third, he had proved to be extremely loyal to his boss. Karen Dawisha argued that Yeltsin bet his post-presidency life on Putin mostly because of the strong allegiance and loyalty to Sobchak. The only problem was that Putin, an unknown official, had to win an election.

In September 1999, only a month after Putin became the Prime Minister, something unprecedented had happened. Four attacks carried out on apartment buildings in the Russian cities of Moscow, Volgograd and Buynaksk, during which 293 died and more than a thousand people were injured, had given Putin an opportunity to present himself as resolute and strong leader. Putin had immediately ascribed the attacks to Chechen Terrorists led by Shamil Basayev. On September 22, Putin ordered the air bombing on Grozny, the capital of the Chechen Republic, which started the beginning of the Second Chechen War.

Several investigators, authors, academics but also the Chechen authorities assert that the bombings were organized by the FSB to accomplish two goals (Bruce Ware 2005, Knight 2000, Satter 2016, Van Herpen 2015). First, to start a rally around the flag effect which would gain public support for the war. Second, to increase Putin's popularity before the elections. Although, it is not in the capacity of this work to judge whether the bombings were or were not organized by the FSB, the fact is that the bombing had de facto given a pretext to war. Moreover, Putin's approval rating had sky rocketed from 45% in August to 83% in December 1999 (Levada Center 2017). Putin's condemnation of terrorism and the brutal crackdown on the Chechens had helped him to gain trust and popularity of the Russians.

Putin became acting president in December 1999, when Boris Yeltsin Resigned. The elections were scheduled on March 2000. The pre-election period had been completely distracted by the war and the opponent candidates had failed to focus the attention on economic, social or political issues. Therefore, on 26 March 2000, Vladimir Putin was elected the President of the Russian Federation. Although, he distanced himself from his predecessor, he had also agreed that Yeltsin and his family must be protected from any form of prosecution. This step proved Putin's loyalty and symbolically closed the Yeltsin's era.

The immediate aftermath of the Kosovo crisis and first NATO enlargement round together with change in the Russian leadership had created very demoralized and resigned climate within Russia. Putin knew that his initial steps must be focused on chaotic domestic situation, which was at that time almost constantly depressing with a little hope for improvement in the close future. Therefore, Putin moved quickly to elevate central authority vis-à-vis Russia regions (Marples 2014, 314). This step gave him direct control through his 'district representatives'. Second problem were the oligarchs, who had caused many crises when fighting against the government during the 90s. Putin could not afford anyone powerful in his way. Examples of oil barons Berezovsky and Khodorkovsky, who ended up in exile or imprisoned show how serious and determined Putin was. When dealing with the oligarchs, Putin also sought political partners. He chose a newly emerged faction called Unified Russia which eventually won the 2003 parliamentary election. This situation gave Putin full control over the parliament (Ibid., 320). The confirmation of his successful centralization of power came a year later, when Putin was re-elected for a second term as a president.

### 3.3.2 Putin's Foreign Policy - Pragmatism then Assertiveness

The aim of this section is to present and analyze the fundamental official documents of Russian foreign policy issued in the investigated period. The following paragraphs focus on the perception of the international system from the state documents and try to identify the progress from Putin's initial views in 2000 up until the Russo-Georgian War. The analyzed documents are: The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (2000) and the National Security Concept of the Russian Federation (2000).

Development of foreign policy during this period had reflected the internal political situation and the international events, notably: Kosovo Crisis, NATO enlargement, September 11 terrorist attack, the Color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine and several summits and high-level meetings. In addition, economic situation and domestic support are considered as leverage to external events.

The end of Yeltsin's administration and start of Putin's could be described as a work in progress. Putin was, at that time, comparatively unexperienced in the highest circles of decision making. The result was that the immediate steps in his new position were rather careful and focused on consolidation and reorganization of already existent patterns of foreign policy. In other words, rather than creating unprecedented changes, Putin had focused on renewing of old frameworks and partnerships, for instance; The EAEC, The CSTO and The SCO (all described in sub-chapter 3.1.3.). Bobo Lo uses term 'securitization' of foreign policy when referring to this period. Lo defines securitization as, "the interplay between overtly security objectives and economic interests" (Lo 2002, 158). In the western understanding, this would be a balanced foreign policy. Whereas in Russian strategic context, this equals, as Lo continues, "to the

intensification of ‘geopoliticizing’ trends, whereby the pursuit of nominally economic objectives becomes the engine for projecting strategic influence and, more ambitiously Russia’s revival as a great power” (Lo 2002, 159). Pavel Tsygankov defines this initial period of Putin’s foreign policy as ‘pragmatic cooperation’, which is essentially a mixture of old Statist influences (Soviet times, Primakov) with newer, more open Westernist (Tsygankov 2016, 137). As an example serves *Millennium Manifesto* in which Putin stressed patriotism, political stability, a strong state built upon economic modernization and social solidarity together with increased security (Putin 1999) . On the other hand, one of the statements in his biography depicts his Westernist world-view poetically, “Russia is a very diverse country, but we are part of Western European Culture. No matter where our people live, in the Far East or in the south, we are Europeans... We will fight to keep our geographical and spiritual position. And if they push us away, then we’ll be forced to find allies and friends. What else can we do?” (Putin et al. 2000, 169).

In 2000, these ideas were imprinted in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. The document starts with the priorities including: territorial integrity, support for international law, creation of suitable conditions for the economic development, protection of the rights of all Russians living abroad, then to create a zone of allied states along its borders and to build a positive image of Russia in the international system. Importantly, there is no mention of the period of the 90s or the fall of the Soviet Union. From this perspective, the concept is more independent, determined and optimistic. It is, therefore, a first attempt to establish Russia as an ambitious and unified state on the international scene. The combination of words ‘zone of allied states’ refers to partnerships of more states, rather than a state to state relations. This only highlights the fact that even under Putin, the importance of the states surrounding Russia is of key interest. The concept also highlights the importance of the UN as the main decision-making

body in the international system. Translated to practice, Russia says that military interventions without the consensus of the UN security council would potentially lead to destabilization. It is clear that this part refers to the NATO military campaign during Kosovo war. The significance of the UN mandate for any action is further supported by the idea of mutual cooperation and dialogue that the concept mentions quite a few times.

An interesting part of the document rotates around the questions of the future ways of the Russian foreign policy. The concept mentions so called 'vectors' that are determined by the country's Eurasian nature. It also identifies the US as the main counterpart and criticizes its 'unilateralism', which practically prevents Russia from being an equal partner. The ideal position for Russia, would be a new world order describing as a system where the UN, G8, and other groupings such as BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) control, form and guide the international system and the rules within. This strong orientation towards the other emerging great powers such as India, China or Brazil has an economic dimension, which stems from the consequences of the 1998 financial crisis. Further on, the document also mentions Europe and more specifically the EU as its major economic partner. Interestingly, the EU is usually associated with trade and business in general. In more political terms, Europe is usually divided on four parts, namely; Western Europe, Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltic states and the Balkan states. Each group has different association for Russia. Western European countries, such as Germany, France and the UK are considered as relatively strong in either economic or military terms. Central and Eastern European states symbolize not long ago allies under the Warsaw pact and not that distant neighbors. The Baltic states are still sensitive topic, since a high number of Russian speaking minority still lives there. In addition, they were part of the Soviet Union and share geographical border with Russia. And the last group, the Balkan states, have developed in a

problematic region, where Russia stresses the importance of international cooperation, especially the UN, NATO and the EU in resolving the long-lasting disputes. Another clear reference to the Kosovo crisis which, at that time, resulted in the unilateral operation of NATO and practically showed that Russia has no equal say vis-a-vis the West. Overall, Europe is an important vector in the 2000 Foreign Policy Concept, but the highest attention has the states of Western Europe due to their economic strength and the Baltic states, due to their Russian speaking minority and strategic geographic position.

The second document is the Concept of National Security, also issued in 2000. Both document reflect the same international situation, therefore they are complementary in many ways, such as the link between economic and security goals. The document is rather ambitious when stating that, “Russia is one of the world's largest countries, with a long history and rich cultural traditions. Despite the complicated international situation and internal problems, it continues to objectively play an important role in world processes, in view of its considerable economic, research-technical and military potential and unique situation on the Eurasian continent” (NSC 2000). The Security Concept tries to describe what is Russian national interest. Something that had been very intangible to define during the Yeltsin’s era. The document’s definition of state’s interest is, “combination of balanced interests of the individual, society and the state in economic, domestic-political, social, international, military, informational, border, ecological and other spheres” (NSC 2000). The document pays significant attention to the international threats to the national security. Some of the points are:

- the striving of individual states and inter-state associations to lower the role of the existing mechanisms of ensuring international security, above all the UN and the OSCE;

- the danger of weakening the political, economic and military influence of Russia in the world;
- the strengthening of military-political blocs and unions, above all the eastward enlargement of NATO;
- the possible appearance of foreign military bases and large military contingents in direct proximity to the Russian borders;
- the proliferation of mass destruction weapons and their delivery vehicles;
- the weakening of the integration processes in the Commonwealth of Independent States.

According to both documents issued in 2000, the continuation of geographical sensitiveness and certain aversion towards the enlargement of NATO is central to Russian security. Also, the Russia's self-perception as an established global power is evident, therefore it considers any attack against its status as a serious threat to national security.

Putin's pragmatic, self-confident and ambitious foreign policy was apparent during his first presidential term and fully corresponded with the official foreign policy and national security documents that were issued during the first year of his presidency. Putin's approval rating had risen from 70% in March 2000, to 82% in March 2004 (Levada center 2017). His popularity was outcome of several factors, such as: rising living standards, distance from the Yeltsin's regime and 'putinism', a term associated with Putin's cult of a strongman. Additionally, Putin had been extremely active in foreign policy, especially after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. His strong focus on negotiating new economic partnerships with the U.S. and European countries had helped Russia to elevate its international status and simultaneously boosted domestic

economy. At that time, Putin symbolized that Russia was heading in the right direction compared with the previous decade. Another opinion pool supports this statement, in March 2000, only 27% of the Russians saw Russia heading in the good direction, this number had doubled to 54% by 2004 (Levada center, 2017). Due to all the domestic support, Vladimir Putin was re-elected president of the Russian Federation in March 2004.

It did not take long, however, and by 2005 the situation had changed rather dramatically. Events such as, the invasion of Iraq, NATO and EU enlargements, the Color Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, the U.S. military presence in central Asia and the fact that Russia's status had been constantly undermined by the U.S. unilateralism, made Putin to change his foreign policy from pragmatic cooperation to one of assertiveness. Recent economic boom supported by high oil prices and strong domestic support, gave Putin incentives to 'play hard'.

Putin reflected his view during his Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation in April 2005. Putin famously stated that, "the demise of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" (Putin 2005). The speech included very strong language about the Soviet collapse to that day. It was part of his attempt to stress the importance of Russian territorial integrity and sovereignty. He stated that, "Russia is a free nation and our place in the modern world will be defined only by how successful and strong we are" (Ibid.).

Also in 2005, Russia started to test its regional strength and influence. The target countries were, by no coincidence, Ukraine and Georgia, two countries that had recently underwent democratic revolutions. In December 2005, Russian gas giant Gazprom intensified its dispute with Ukraine over the price for gas. Many observers saw this conflict as a Kremlin's



punishment to the new government in Ukraine (Loza et al. 2006). At the same time, relations between Russia and Georgia started to deteriorate as well. The tensions increased in December 2006, after Georgia imprisoned four members of Russian, who were accused of espionage. Russia punished Georgia severely by imposing economic and political sanctions (Wegren and Herspring 2009, 235-236).

Putin's new foreign policy approach was internationalized during 2007. First important event was the Munich conference on Security Policy, where Putin clearly expressed his dissatisfaction with the situation in the international system. He started his speech with an unprecedented criticism of the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE), which was, at that time, being negotiated. Simply put, Putin condemned the conditions of the treaty and accused NATO of putting forces on Russia's borders (Putin 2007). Then he targeted directly the US, "One state, the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way by imposing its policies on other nations" (Putin 2007). In other words, Putin criticized the US unilateralism in world politics, which fundamentally threatened Russian interest.

Second instance was the issuance of the new Foreign Ministry report named "A Review of the Russian Federation's Foreign Policy", on 27 March 2007. First and foremost, the document symbolized a clear change of foreign policy attitude, from pragmatism to assertiveness. Central point of the document was a condemnation of the US unilateralism. Therefore, the document highlighted the idea of multi-polarity based on "a more equitable distribution of resources for influence and economic growth," (Review of Foreign Policy 2007) which could be translated as the cornerstone for stronger, internationally more visible and assertive Russia. In addition, the report particularly stressed that Russia is ready to actively influence international

development in its favor. But at the same time, it did not refuse the position of the US as the sole superpower (Ibid).

Only three months later, in July 2007, president Putin signed the decree in which he announced the suspension of the CFE treaty by December 12, 2007. Hereby Putin confirmed his previous criticism of the treaty during the Munich Summit and also showed his seriousness about the situation. The treaty was one of the linchpins of the global security and its main purpose was to “eliminate the capacity of launching a surprise attack” (Graham Jr and LaVera 2011, 593). This gesture should have been read as; “Russia is ready to use its army”, but surprisingly, it was not. The leaders of the West were probably still adjusted to the empty threats that Russia used to make during the 90s. But they did not realize that at that time, Russia was a different state with different ambitions.

### 3.4 What Culture? What Strategy?

Strategic culture is a set of characteristics of a state that has evolved over time. These characteristics differ significantly, since each state experience the outside world from a unique perspective. This chapter has already mentioned several key features that form strategic culture, for instance; geography, historic memories and development or changes in the international system. This sub-chapter discusses these features and identifies changes in strategic culture of the Russian Federation. Then explains what impact did strategic culture have on the Russo-Georgian War.

Russia's rich and turbulent history in combination with geographical settings have created a unique strategic culture based on strong militarization and authoritarian leadership. It has been argued earlier that Russia's geostrategic location is very vulnerable to foreign invasions. Therefore, it is logical, that Russia feels secure only if its neighborhood is under direct control of Russian army, as it had been during the Cold war. In any other case, the paranoid feeling of insecurity rises.

During the Soviet times, strategic culture had been guided by ideological settings of Communism. This situation changed significantly during the 1990s, when the three so called "keepers" had disappeared:

1. Communist ideology;
2. Zone of protection in the form of the members of the Warsaw pact;
3. Massive army.

In addition to these three points, the period of the 90s had had a degrading effect on several aspects of Russia's previous glory. Its international status fell and the major enemy, the US, has become the world's single superpower. On the other hand, the most important aspect of Russia's security, the nuclear deterrent, have persisted. This situation put Russia in the position, where it had to search for its new identity and purpose.

Based on the previous analysis mapping the progress of systemic stimuli during the 90s and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in combination with the change of leadership in 2000, it can be assumed that a fundamental shift had taken place in Russian strategic culture. Due to the

rise of oil prices and pragmatic foreign policy during the first presidential term of Vladimir Putin, it is argued that the economy had come to be considered as an increasingly important pillar of the Russian power. Some argue that economy had become even more important than the military (except the nuclear deterrent) (Eitelhuber 2009, 21). Putin reflected this new perception of economic importance in the 2000 Foreign Policy Concept. Mankoff elaborated on this shift by stating that Putin ideal strategy is: “seeking economic expansion and stability at home and using the benefits for strategic purposes” (Mankoff 2007, 130-131).

Putin had gained an immense amount of popularity during his first presidential term. David Marples argued that, “Putin created a link between the Soviet past and the Russian state, a connection that had been abruptly severed by Yeltsin” (Marples 2014, 313). This work argues that Putin created something much more powerful and influential than a connection with the Soviet era. He has established a cult of Putin, so called “Putinism”. A strongman, often exemplified by posters, dolls and shirtless photos on the horse back. A leader who is confident in front of the camera and always serious and professional. An experienced man, who had spent most of his life working for the state, uncorrupted and loyal. And importantly, always holding a position that Russia should re-establish its position of a major world power (Ibid., 314).

It is true, however, that Putin had a great deal of luck, when simultaneously with his rise, the most important commodity for Russia, oil, become more and more profitable. Nevertheless, Putin had utilized this advantage by prioritizing economic partnerships, such as EAEC. Moreover, Putin tried to establish new partnerships with states, that had not been previously traditional allies, such as China. The desirable outcome should have been the ability to re-create or re-shape the world order created by the American unilateralism.

As the time progressed closer to 2008, the West and the U.S. in particular, had symbolized Russia's significant other who had completely misunderstood it. The West had not been able to recognize Russia's desire to be an equal player in the international arena. What is more, the West had continued to target Russian Achilles' heel – Georgia, Ukraine and the neighborhood in general. Something that Putin called the “Red line” (Saradzhyan 2014).

To sum up, Russian strategic culture went through dramatic distortion after the fall of the Soviet Union. During the 90s, the West got used to weak and non-assertive Russia, which had troubles to define its purpose, identity and direction in the international relations. This attitude did not change during the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but Russia changed a lot, and as Russia's economic potential increased the foreign policy attitude became assertive. This, in combination with strong domestic support, fostered by Putinism and regional military superiority, had created conditions under which a choice of military intervention happened to be real.

### 3.5 Conclusion – Explaining Russia's Decision to Intervene in South Ossetia

This section sums up the finding of chapter three. These findings are presented in a form of points relating to each sub-chapter. Then, the findings are graphically organized in a neoclassical realist framework. Also, the main research question is answered and the verity or falsity of the hypotheses is discussed.

Systemic stimuli – Independent variable

Neoclassical realism considers a number of systemic incentives that influence the foreign policy of a state including: systemic modifiers (geography and threat perception) and relative material capabilities, which need to be understood in a contextual manner. The analysis of systemic stimuli showed that:

- Russia's security is first and foremost influenced by its geographic position, therefore NATO enlargement poses the biggest threat
- The U.S. was preoccupied with its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, for that reason it did not consider Georgia as its main point of interest.
- NATO members showed low commitment to Georgia during the negotiations of the accession plans.
- Although Russia's share of total power in the World declined, its economic boom in combination with increasing military spending and growing GDP led towards ambitious and eventually assertive foreign policy.

The tested hypothesis: "An increase in the relative material power of the Russian Federation will lead to a corresponding expansion in the ambition and scope of Russian foreign policy activity". It was confirmed.

#### Leader images and Strategic culture - Intervening variables

Neoclassical realism expects that leader images and strategic culture have an effect on foreign policy outcomes. Since these intervening variables are very difficult to measure, the analysis used the so called "process tracing" method to find defining characteristics of leader images and strategic culture. The analyses focused on: the Putin's rise to power, the official foreign policy documents, speeches and statements, and conclude with the following points:

- Putin's first priority is the state (Chekist mentality)
- Putin saw the collapse of the Soviet Union from the first line and considers it, "the biggest geopolitical tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century", therefore his main goal is to return Russia its former glory.
- He created image of a strongman – "putinism". This term gave him a strong domestic support, but also created expectations on his foreign policy to become more assertive.

The tested hypothesis: "President Putin chooses to frame, adjust, and modify strategic choices to reflect culturally acceptable preferences to maintain domestic political support". It was confirmed.

The author of this work argues that systemic incentives had been the major reason why the Russian Federation decided to intervene in Georgia, but the intervening variables have significantly influenced the assertive direction of Russian foreign policy which paved the way to the conflict.

## Chapter 4 Crimean Crisis in 2014

This chapter focuses on the second case study of this work. For a clear orientation and easier comparison between the sub-chapters and the results, this chapter progresses identically as the previous one. The first sub-chapter starts with an overview of the case study and highlights the development, main events, results and consequences of the case. Then follows analysis of the systemic stimuli between 2008 and 2014. Third sub-chapter depicts the progress in the foreign policy formulation and attitudes created by the foreign policy executives, namely the presidents Medvedev and Putin. Next sub-chapter maps the specification of strategic culture in relation to the post-2008 environment and focuses on the strategic choices that President Putin chose when intervening in Crimean Peninsula. The very last sub-chapter concludes the second case study and provides the final findings.

### 4.1 Overview of the Crimean Crisis its Results and Consequences

Although the main focus of this work is on the military action in Crimean Peninsula and its subsequent annexation by the Russian Federation, this sub-chapter includes a prelude to the conflict, which started in November 2013, when Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. Events that followed had unfolded quickly into massive protests in Kiev, the capital of Ukraine. The protesters demanded change in the pro-Russian direction and re-evaluation of the Western oriented direction including the signing of the Association treaty. At this point, Ukraine found itself between two great powers pulling in opposite directions. On one side the European Union, which through its Eastern



Partnership offered a new Association treaty and on the other side Russia, re-emerging super power with strong regional influence and historical ties to Ukraine. In addition, Ukraine belongs among a few countries that, for Russia, constitute geographically crucial buffer zone. The trick was that Putin had offered a deal that under the then circumstances could not have been refused. Specifically, Putin gave Ukraine a generous reduction in energy prices and pledged to buy US\$ 15 billion worth of Ukrainian bonds (Walker 2013). Considering the fact that Ukraine went through a severe recession and internal problems, Putin's offer simply outweighed the European association agreement, which was based on the lack of commitment from the EU's side (Whitman and Wolff 2010, 13). In the meantime, the political pressure from the opposition and the protesters, who were in favour of the European Association plan, intensified and eventually erupted in skirmishes and street clashes in Kiev and other cities. On 21 February, after more than two months of political crisis a deal was signed between Yanukovich and the opposition to form a temporary government including representatives of the opposition and hold early election. Importantly, some of the EU states, such as Germany, France and Poland had mediated in the crises and helped to negotiate the conditions. Their aim was to avert further escalation of the violence and maintain pro-EU support in Ukraine. Notwithstanding, the deal failed when Yanukovich, under dubious circumstances, left the country to Russia. Subsequently, the transition parliament removed Yanukovich from office and the opposition seized power. Due to the tendency to form a pro-European government the opposition failed to invite pro-Russian factions from the eastern part of Ukraine and Crimea. On 27 February 2014, as a symbol of anti-Russian trends, the government tried, but failed, to pass a bill changing the official status of Russian language in Ukraine.

The situation in Kiev had been closely followed by the people and representatives of

Crimea. Already in January 2014, the Sevastopol city council announced a possible rise of extremism in the city and called for creation of “people’s militia” (Amos 2014). The government in Crimea was under the control of Yanukovich’s Party of Regions, but had respected the deal signed between Yanukovich and the opposition. When Yanukovich had left the country and the opposition formed so called “interim”, anti-Russian government, which tried to pass the already mentioned bill concerning the status of Russian language, the Crimean prime minister Mozhukov supported the new government and pledged respect for their decisions (Interfax 2014). Responses to the Ukrainian government had differed throughout Crimea. In the city of Simferopol, pro-Ukrainian government supporters demanded resignation of the Crimean parliament. Whereas in Sevastopol, a massive opposition against the Ukrainian government was formed. The participants were chanting pro-Russian slogans and waving Russian flags (Amos 2014). The events had turned tense on 25 February, when aggressive mob of protesters gathered in front of the Crimean parliament and required a referendum on Crimea’s independence (Ibid). The protests and clashes between the supporters and the opponents of the referendum had continued until 27 of February, when Russian special forces captured the buildings of Crimean Council and Ministerial Council in Simferopol (Higgins and Erlanger 2014). At the same time the Crimean parliament discussed the emergency situation and eventually voted for its dissolution. Moreover, the parliament replaced the pro-Ukrainian Prime Minister Mozhukov with a pro-Russian Sergey Aksyonov. Simultaneously, the parliamentary building was occupied by the inglorious “green man”. Some reports state that it was the presence of these irregular forces that made the ministers to vote in favour of Aksyonov and parliament resignation (Interfax-Ukraine 2014). At that time, an increasing number of these irregular forces were present at important checkpoints connecting Crimea with Ukraine. It was not clear who they represented, since their

uniforms were ambiguous and resembled several organizations (Galeotti 2015). But within hours, their work had effectively caused a separation of Crimea from Ukraine. This situation had been further ensured by the newly elected unofficial pro-Moscow Prime Minister of Crimea Aksyonov, who asked Vladimir Putin for help to ensure peace and public order (Lowen 2014). On 1 March 2014, just one day after the call from Aksyonov, Russian troops stationed in the Crimean naval base in Sevastopol supported by forces from the Russian territory had started to execute a military intervention in Ukraine. The next day, on 2 March, the Russian army achieved a complete control over the territory of Crimea (Yoon, Krasnolutska, and Choursina 2014). It is very important to note that at this very moment, nobody at least on the Ukrainian or Western side, had expected, that Crimea would be soon annexed by Russia. Major difficulty for the observers of the situation was the fact that Russian forces had operated without badges marking their affiliation. Two days later, on 4 March, the Ukrainian government reported that there were not only personnel of Russian Black Sea Fleet<sup>7</sup> in Crimea but also illegal forces of Russian ground and air forces (Stewart 2014). This fact meant a clear violation of internationally valid agreements between Ukraine and Russia. Reports and other materials proving that those forces were Russian grew, but either President Putin or Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov fleered these accusations and refused them categorically (Chappell 2014).

On March 6, the referendum date changed from 30 March to 16 March and also the central question of the referendum changed. Importantly, there was no “status quo” option, the choices were either acceptance under Russia or restoration of the 1992 Crimean constitution<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Black Sea Fleet Naval Air Force of the Russian Federation was stationed legally in Crimea (Sevastopol military base) under the agreement between Ukraine and the Russian Federation.

<sup>8</sup> Crimea's 1992 constitution was adopted during a feverish round of devolution in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Soviet Union, and abolished shortly afterwards. It refers to the Republic of Crimea as a 'Soviet state' and describes it as a sovereign entity.

with Ukraine, which Ukraine ruled out of the table (Balmforth 2014). The official results of the referendum were announced on 17 March, reporting that 95% of the participants voted for Russian annexation of Crimea. Even though, Ukrainian government pronounced the referendum unconstitutional, therefore illegal, the results were quickly recognized by Russia. From a “de facto” perspective, this was the last step that concluded the Crimean question. Unlike in South Ossetia and Abkhazia six years earlier, Russia achieved its goal without firing a single shot.

After few weeks later when Russia solidified its position in Crimea and the results of the referendum were generally accepted on a domestic level (not outside), the Russian leaders officially confirmed that the irregular forces in Crimea had been, actually, Russian soldiers (Putin 2014, RT 2014). Putin justified Kremlin’s strategy of covert military operation by stating that the reason was, “to ensure proper conditions for the people of Crimea to be able to freely express their will” (Putin 2014). In other words, Putin confirmed Ukraine’s accusations of breaching international treaties and illegal annexation of another state’s sovereign territory.

The following sub-chapters will analyze the systemic incentives, Russia’s position in the international system, foreign policy attitudes of the foreign policy executives and Russian strategic culture, in order to deeply analyze the Crimean crisis in a wider context.

## 4.2 Systemic Stimuli Leading Towards the Crimean Crisis

The aim of this sub-chapter is to chart systemic changes and material development of Russia in the period between 2008 and 2014. This analysis is crucial for defining Russia’s relative position in the international system. In order to reach a highly objective image of Russia’s development, several areas of interest are investigated, amongst them: the CINC index, military spending, GDP growth, development of oil prices, changes in alliance system and other

significant events, which had profound effect on the structure of international system. The US has been, for a long time, Russia's main competitor in many areas, including; trade, politics and security. Therefore, the US is used for comparison in measures concerning a total share of power, and military expenditure.

Figure 4.1 displays CINC scores of Russia and the US between 2008 and 2012. Unfortunately, the CINC official data for after 2012 are not available. Unlike the period of 90s or even the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this time frame was very stable and did not register any significant drop or rise. Nevertheless, certain trend is apparent, namely the declining tendency of the US since 2010. One easily identifiable reason behind that is the election of Barack Obama as US president and with that connected change of foreign policy. Concepts such as 'reset', 'pivot' or 'withdrawal' had symbolized Obama's strategic approach based on liberal values and strategic patience. There are also other reasons for soft, but gradual decline of the US, namely a rapid rise of newly industrialized countries such as China, India and/or Brazil. Importantly, Russia had been able to keep its scores adamantly in a horizontal line. Therefore, the gap between the US and Russia had shrank for nearly 10% comparing the scores in 2008 and 2012.

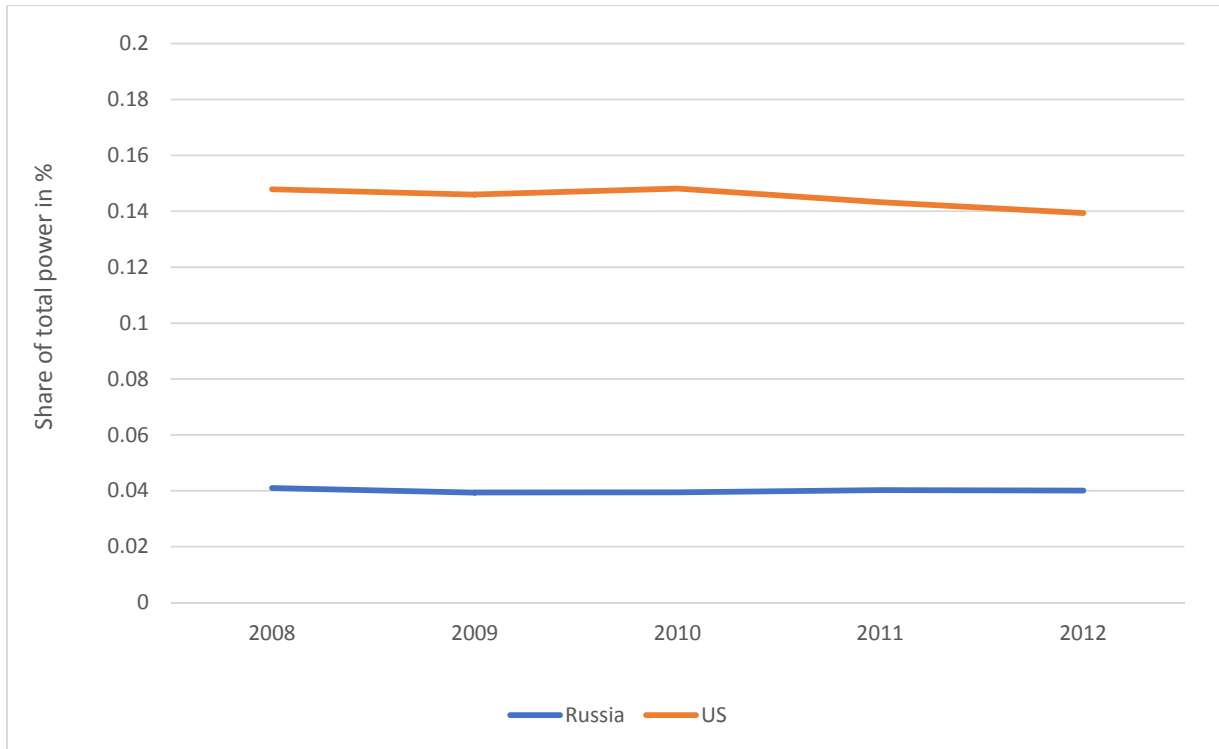


Figure 4.1 CINC scores of Russia and the US between 2008 - 2012

Source: Correlates of War 2014

Figure 4.2. shows very similar development, which compares Russian and U.S. military spending in the period between 2008 and 2014. The scores presented in the figure coincide nearly perfectly with the results provided by the CINC. A simple reason explains this fact. Military spending had been the most influential parameter amongst the CINC scores, therefore any increase or decrease in military spending would move the CINC accordingly. The U.S. military expenditure had risen significantly until 2010, when it reached its peak. Again, the reason is mainly the new strategic approach of the Obama's administration. Years 2011 – 2014 saw a successive decline. Unlike the U.S., Russia had maintained its expenditure until 2011, and then started a steep increase (see Figure 4.3. for a better image). The differences between Russia and the U.S. during the period were: US\$ 62600 millions in 2008, US\$ 69700 millions in 2010, US\$ 52500 millions in 2014. That is to say that the gap between the two had declined by US\$

990m (17%) by 2014 (SIPRI 2015). The lowest disparity since the rapid US militarization after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001.

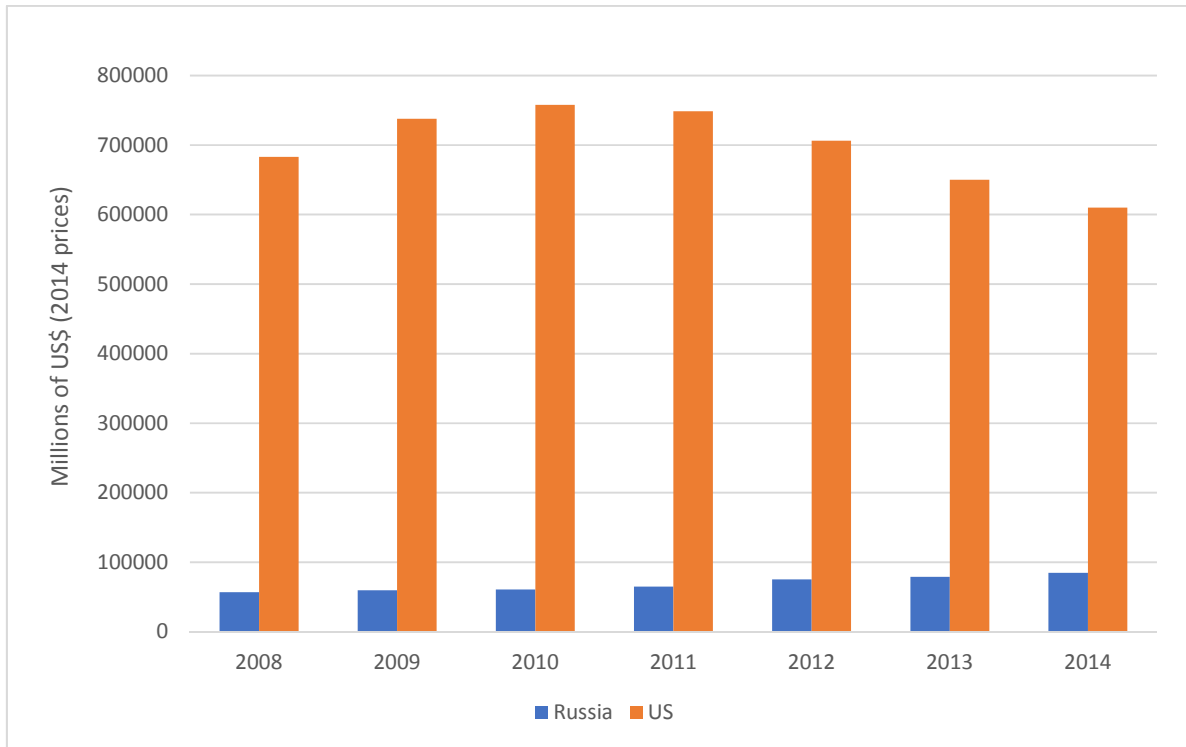


Figure 4.2 Russian and US military Spending between 2008-2014 (in 2014 USD prices)

Source: SIPRI, 2015

The figure 4.3. supplements the previous analysis of Russian military spending by more transparent record. It is of utmost importance to stress the fact that Russia had increase its military budget by US\$ 27764 millions (48%) by 2014. That is an unprecedented increase considering the short time of seven years. It can be stated that this growth had confirmed Russian regional military superiority and its status of re-emerging great power.

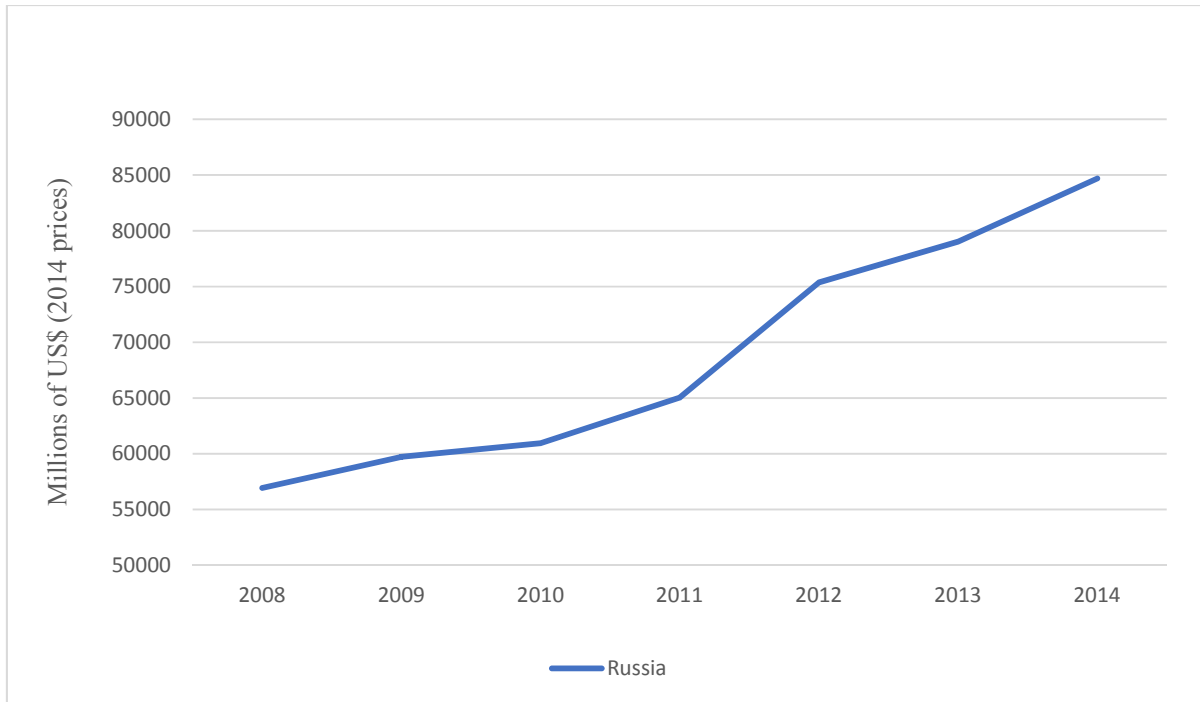


Figure 4.3 Russian Military Expenditure 2008-2014 (Millions of US\$, 2014 prices)

Source: SIPRI, 2016

Although Russian military strength improved, the economic situation did not develop quite that well. Right in the beginning of the period, the world was hit by the Global financial crisis of 2008. Literally every economic aspect suffered by this unexpected tragedy. Global trading commodities fell immediately, including oil. Figure 4.4. shows evolution of oil prices in the analyzed interval. Fortunately, the sharp decline lasted until 2010 when the prices had returned back to the pre-crisis situation. Surprisingly, the years 2011 and 2012 saw a continuation of the ascending trend when the price reached US\$ 109 per barrel, the highest number in the entire oil era. Then followed a slight drop to US\$ 96 per barrel in 2014. It could be argued that high oil prices were the reason for increased military spending in the years after the crises.



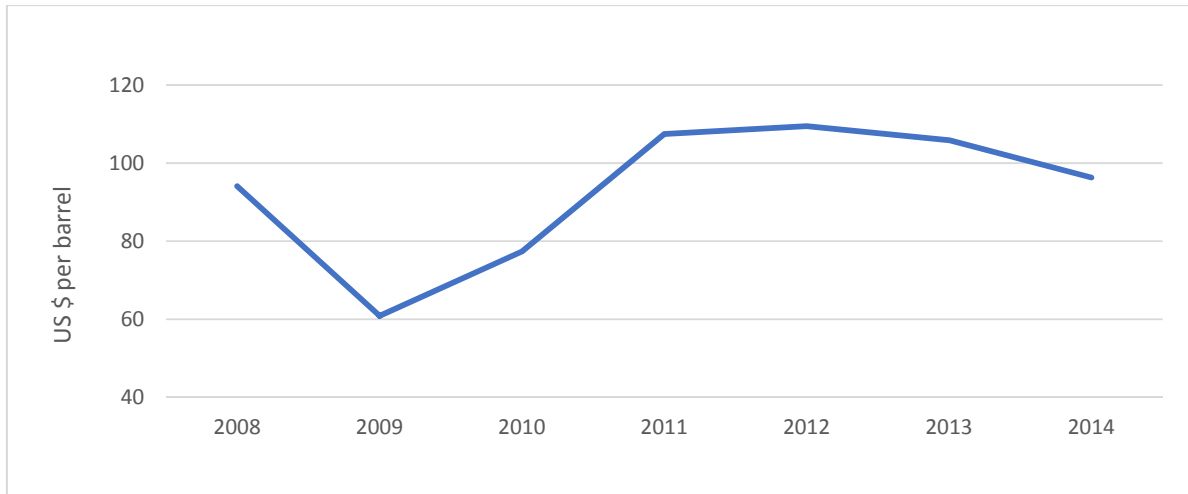


Figure 4.4 Average annual crude oil price between 2008-2014

Source: Statista, 2017

The following Figure 4.5 depicts Russian GDP growth between 2008-2014 and also shows two important features. First, it shows how hard the financial crisis hit Russia. A leap from 4,5% growth in 2007-2008 to a free fall of -8% in 2009 is tremendous. Second, it demonstrates the lack of diversification in Russian economy and with that connected Russian dependence on oil. The two figures (4.4. and 4.5) provide a graphic proof of this fact, a shape resembling the radix is not a coincidence.

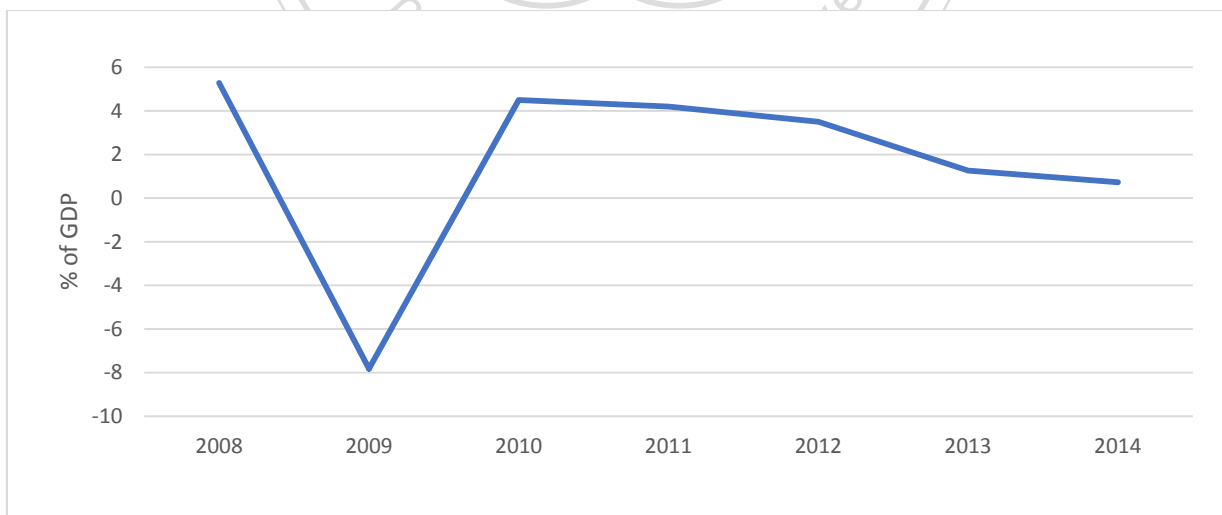


Figure 4.5 Russia, GDP Growth 2008-2014 (Annual %)

Source: World Bank, 2015

The above analyzed material factors need to be put into a wider perspective of development on regional and global level. The Russo-Georgian war in August 2008 had concluded about three years long period of Russian assertive foreign policy, which Vladimir Putin set in 2005. Not only gained Russia recognition of a great power but also prevented NATO from expansion in its immediate neighborhood. These two goals, highlighted many times by Vladimir Putin, had been achieved. Moreover, regional balance of power shifted in Russia's favor and the West's monopoly on the use of force was seriously challenged. In addition, the global financial crisis disclosed the West's economic vulnerability and gave an opportunity to newly industrialized states such as, China, India or Brazil to equalize influence of the U.S. or Europe.

Due to the outcomes of the financial crisis, new American leadership decided to “reset” relations with Russia. This only confirmed the inability of the West to punish Russia for the war in Georgia. Moreover, the U.S. started to take Russia seriously, probably for the first time since the end of the Cold war. This change of the U.S. approach mitigated Russia's fear from NATO's enlargement and simultaneously gave more space to focus on the post-soviet region. Nonetheless, Russia stayed skeptical about the planned NATO missile defense system (MDS) in Europe, thus most of the debates over the security situation in Europe gravitated around this topic. Neither this issue prevented the main European players, namely Germany and France from improving relations with Moscow. This improvement resulted in establishing EU-Russia Political and Security Committee as a framework for addressing strategic questions on the continent (Europa 2010).

The most important area of interest stayed still in the post-Soviet space. Russia planned to utilize its success in Georgia by strengthening relations with the post-revolutionary states, namely Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan and also intended to foster regional cooperation with states such as: Armenia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, through economic stabilization following the financial crisis. Trade and economic interests had been crucial during the entire period. It explains why Russia put so much effort in establishing Eurasian Custom Union in the beginning of 2010, then Eurasian Economic Space in 2012 and finally Eurasian Economic Union in 2014. The importance of establishing a regionally strong community of geopolitically important states was a crucial goal. From this perspective, Russia and the EU had become natural competitors. Either Russia and The EU had focused on countries that surround their borders. Ukraine had become in the center of Russia's attention immediately after its entrance in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009. Russia considered this step dangerous and potentially fatal, because it saw the EaP as an EU pre-accession framework. Although the EU representatives had many times stated that the EaP and entire European Neighborhood Policy does not offer the "golden carrot" of membership, it was obvious that the association plans based on political conditionality were going to pull the country in the western direction (Whitman and Wolff 2010, 13). This geopolitical issue stimulated by economic interest had become a powerful incentive for Russian regional activity.

Increasing activity had also occurred in the security partnerships such as CSTO and STO, seeing several meetings and military exercises. Paradoxically, the aftermath of the war in Georgia had produced not only improvement in the security situation in the region, but also several setbacks. For instance, Uzbekistan suspended its membership in the CSTO in June 2012. It was a result of several disputes between Russia and Uzbekistan whose leaders saw Russia's position too dominant and hegemonic. Some other states in central Asia had also minor problems

with Russia but more or less accepted their positions. Not only dissatisfaction among Russia's allies, but also other threats had undermined the stability in the region. Amongst those significant were: rise of new terrorist organizations and increasing number of organized attacks, the Arab spring and the subsequent civil war in Syria, the instability in Afghanistan, and proliferation of organized criminal groups.

Overall, the period between 2008-2014 brought many systemic incentives that had significantly influenced Russia's position in the international system. First of all, the global financial crisis hit Russia hard and its consequences were apparent throughout the entire period. On the other hand, the crises helped to shift the epicenter of global power eastwards. This fact, was further supported by the Obama administration. The outcome was an increase in Russia's global power share vis-à-vis the United States. Russia has, therefore, utilized its goals from the pre-2008 period and achieved regional dominance and the status of great power, which had eventually led towards high confidence and assertiveness.

### 4.3 Leader Images

This sub-chapter aims at presenting and analyzing the fundamental official documents of Russian foreign policy issued in the investigated period. The following paragraphs focus on the perception of the international system described in the documents and try to identify the progress and tendencies that evolved during the period between 2008-2014. The analyzed documents are: The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (2008 and 2013), National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2020. The findings are reflected with a wider context of events that had led towards the Crimean crises.

Neoclassical realism uses term “foreign policy executive” (FPE), which is essential in analyzing intervening variables on unit/state level. This work identified FPE during literature review, where a general consensus predetermines Vladimir Putin to be the key figure of Russian foreign policy. Importantly though, Putin had been replaced by Dmitry Medvedev as a Prime Minister between May 2008 and May 2012. Therefore, his statements are used in the process tracing. Nevertheless, this work holds an assumption that even during Medvedev’s presidency, Vladimir Putin was, de facto, the creator of Russian foreign policy. At least, it is believed that Russian foreign policy, during the Medvedev’s term, had not contradicted Putin’s views.

The first document to analyze is the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2008. This document is included in the analysis for two simple reasons. First, it provides a valuable source of foreign policy priorities developed during the peak of Russian assertive attitude. Second, there will be an interesting comparison of priorities between this document and the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2020, which was issued in 2009.

Similarly, as the previous foreign policy documents, this one also comprises of four sections: general information, Russia and the modern world, priorities of foreign policy and regional priorities. The following paragraphs concerning this very document will progress in accordance with the defined areas.

The very first section including general information gives a tone to the entire document. It is immediately apparent that the new concept is again more ambitious than the previous ones. The very first lines state that Russia has achieved many goals which significantly increased its position in the international system, therefore a new document setting new goals and priorities has been highly required. Until 2008, all concepts had stated that the aim of Russia was to re-

emerge as the global power. This document considers it done. The introductory paragraph is also apparent that economic growth and modernization will play an important role in the entire concept. Interestingly, it seems that Russia plans to expand its interest further abroad and target newly industrialized states such as China, India and Brazil rather than intensify its interest in Europe or the CIS region.

Section dealing with Russia in the modern world shows a surprising development and presents a new approach of explaining its priorities. The document clearly aims on bringing closer the domestic priorities and foreign policy goals. It particularly states that, “Russia’s international role is determined by its domestic priorities” (Foreign Policy Document 2008). The other points referring to the Russia in the modern world criticize the U.S. unilateralism, something that has been condemned repeatedly since the War in Kosovo. One of the ways how to limit unilateralism of the US is to strengthen partnerships with emerging powers (China, India, Brazil), and this point is addressed in more sections. In addition, it further stresses the importance of the UN as an ‘international judge’. Although, the U.S. unilateral policies are criticized, it does not rule out the possibility of cooperation. In fact, the document puts the importance of improving relations with the West very high. The author’s impression is that Russia wants, more than anything, an official recognition of its abilities to create, not just accept, the international affairs. On one hand, the document ushers Russia as a great power, on the other hand it sees a lack of confirmation of this fact from outside, especially from the United States.

Plenty of adjustments appears in the section dealing with priorities of foreign policy. While the previous concepts usually provided a “shopping list” with defined priorities the 2008 version is much more specific and comprehensive. Yet again the focus is devoted to the

formation of a new world order, which would be based on shared visions of the West and East. In this matter, the concept expands the group of influential international bodies (the UN, the G8) by BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China). These groups should deepen their agendas in areas such as global terrorism and failed states (which are havens for the terrorists). New and important area of priorities includes, “importance of economic diversification”. It has become even more apparent that in the modern, interdependent and quickly changing world, it is extremely dangerous for any state to be dependent on one source of income.

Regional priorities have not changed much. The reason is embedded in the geographical conditions which are permanent. Russia will always be insecure about its neighborhood, especially in times when two most powerful organizations in the World, namely NATO (military strength) and the EU (economic strength), expand closer and closer to Russian borders. Although this claustrophobic sentiment is apparent, because Russia has been and will be critical towards any future enlargements, this concept does not evaluate the U.S. – Russia relationship in any particular way. It rather generally states the importance of mutual understanding, respect and addresses possible areas of cooperation (already mentioned containment of terrorism etc.). The overall impression from the document is based on the fact that Russia has started to consider itself as a great power. It does not put itself in the position of a spectator state, Russia is seeing itself as a creator of order.

In May 2009, the Russian Federation issued the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2020. This document has an incredible analytical value, since it was first strategic document that Russia issued after the Russia-Georgian war in 2008. The document updates its older version from 2000 and sets national security strategy for a long time ahead. This

format confirms that Russia feels the significance of its achievement in Georgia. Now, Russia is in position to set long time priorities. Additionally, the concept serves as a mirror to the previously analyzed foreign policy concept from 2008. Even though, the concepts should address different areas of priority, in reality, they are mutually inclusive.

The document starts with listing the areas of interest. Amongst those accented are: The Middle East, Central Asia and East Asia; maritime areas such as the Arctic, the Barents Sea, the Caspian Sea; and areas of high tensions and instability, such as Iraq, Afghanistan, the Korean Peninsula; and several African countries including Libya or Somalia. The document highlights areas or specific states whose internal problems (failed state, highly militarized state) could potentially affect larger geographic area. It does not, however, focus specifically on the post-soviet region, as for instance, Foreign policy documents tend to do. These defined areas of interests are often called “the vectors”. According to the document, Russian security strategy should be viewed as a path with certain benchmarks, which need to be prioritized in accordance with international development. This approach shows elements of Putin’s earlier pragmatic world view.

On the other hand, some areas are very specific. Especially the one referring to the regional rules. Russia secures the right to use its military in the event of a regional conflict, which could directly endanger Russia’s security or could potentially evolve in either a full-scale war or a protracted conflict. This reservation is obviously a legacy of Russo-Georgian war. With this clause, Russia appoints itself to the role of regional 911 and also shows how confident has become.

Unlike the previous security strategies, this one stresses the importance of economic



diversification, an example of pragmatic approach reacting on current situation influenced by the financial crisis. Prioritization of economic goals appeared in the 2008 foreign policy concept, but at that time, nobody had expected that the outcome of the financial crisis would hit the global economy so much. For illustration, Russian GDP growth was -8% in 2009, perhaps one of the weakest performances in the world. Based on that fact, the call of economic diversification has arrived a bit late. Nevertheless, its future importance will be crucial.

From the previously analyzed document on Foreign Policy strategy (2008) was apparent that Russia tried to emphasize the role of society on foreign policy. The document has established a link between the two. Interestingly, the document on National Security Strategy continues in this trend. More specifically, the document tries to establish a positive link between the people and the military service. In chapter four, the author mentioned that Putin has re-established the link between the Soviet past and the Russian state, something that had been spoiled during the 90s. And now, both analyzed documents show how this process works in practice. Simply put, a partnership between the state and its people is now a crucial point for achieving national security interests.

To sum up, the National Security Strategy until 2020 has three important messages: First, is the confirmation of Russia's status of regionally superior and internationally great power; Second, the prioritization of economic activities, including diversification of economy as and solidification of regional economic partnerships; and Third, further effort to intertwine the people and the state, especially in military matters.

Evaluating both documents, it has to be said that they are very optimistic, considering the severe consequences of the financial crisis on Russia's economy. This positive attitude had

changed by September 2009, when president Medvedev wrote the article called “Go, Russia!”, in which he critically evaluated Russian economic situation. He stressed primarily the dependency on oil and structural issues rooted in the inability to modernize (Medvedev 2009). In addition, he pointed out the problem of ever present corruption and fragile democracy (Ibid.). Economic modernization was a focal point of Medvedev’s foreign policy. He was a strong proponent of the so called “modernization alliances” (Shevtsova 2010). This concept was one of the cornerstones in the previously analyzed documents of 2008 and 2009. The idea is based on an exploitation of economic opportunities primarily with Western states or organizations (the U.S., the EU) but also non-Western states, such as China, India, Brazil. This strategy has two basic goal: First, to challenge the U.S. unilateralism through an active engagement in several economic agreements and frameworks; and Second, to solidify and modernize the economy as the means for achieving security goals.

Additionally, Medvedev intensively supported regional economic cooperation where the main focus was on improving Russia’s relations with its neighbors. The war in Georgia made Russia a much more confident regional actor, mainly because of the fact, that the West had not found a way of punishing Russia for its actions. That only boosted Russia’s confidence, and even during peak of the economic crisis, Russia was able to utilize its economic and diplomatic influence in the post-Soviet space. Significant development had happened in Ukraine, where the revolution had not brought desired change in the form of democratic renaissance. A pro-Russian government was re-established and Russia was able to negotiate a new deal concerning the lease of the Sevastopol military base for another 25 years (Harding 2010), just one of the examples where Russia used economic incentives in a form of reduction of gas prices for regional security assurance (Ibid.). As discussed earlier, at that time, during 2010-2011, Russia was able to harness

high oil prices for its economic recovery and simultaneously pushed for regional economic partnerships. First major success came in 2010, with the establishment of the Custom Union including three members, Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

The problem was, that both ideas of modernization alliances and regional priority had a dividing effect on Russian public sphere. The group of statisticians saw this idea as extremely pro-western and challenging Russian economic sovereignty and independence. On the other hand, the Westernizers supported the idea but pushed for a further integration (Tsygankov 2016, 214). This struggle over the new direction in Russian foreign policy had harmful effect on the perception on Russian politics as such. Medvedev's approval rating dropped from 83% in 2008 to 62% in September 2011 (Levada Center 2017). The problem was clear, Medvedev had exhausted his potential to effectively utilize the gains that Russia made during the economic boom and the period of high assertiveness. This was, in Putin's view, a threatening situation, since his interest partly dependent on Medvedev's ability to rule. Arguably, this was one of the motivations why Putin, in September 2011, announced his decision to run for the presidency.

The immediate reaction on Putin's decision to run for the presidency had brought a wave of negative reaction. At that time, Putin's approval ratings balanced around 66%, which had been one of the lowest scores since his first candidacy in 1999 (Levada Center 2017). Putin's aggressive and populist campaign had ignited the biggest protest since the fall of the Soviet Union (Sandford 2011). What is more, the campaign attacked Vladimir Putin personally. The protesters made fun of his previously admired masculine image and the so called "putinism" was a symbol of rigged democracy and authoritarian rule (Ibid.). The opposition made several mistakes that Putin maximally exploited in his favor. First of all, he accused the U.S. and

specifically Hillary Clinton for supporting the opposition protesters and allying with them (Elder 2011). Then he went on and accused the protesters from being xenophobic and ultra nationalist, therefore a threat for Russian modern state (Gutterman and Bryanski 2011). Putin had partly succeeded in averting opposition momentum and on 7 May 2012 returned as the President of the Russian Federation. His inauguration speech was more powerful than ever before (Roxburgh 2013, 22). He addressed several issues, but the most important message was, that: “The world has seen Russia risen”, and now the Russian Federation, gained the status of the “leader and center of gravity for the whole of Eurasia” (Kremlin, 2012). Putin created a feeling of nostalgia, starting with his first inauguration in 2000, when he had promised that Russia would rise from its knees. And now, twelve years later, he claimed it and called for even continuation of this trend (Ibid.). Even though, he had never experienced such a strong opposition before, he certainly knew how to gain support through attention. He needed to acquire even more backing, therefore appointed the previous president Dmitry Medvedev as the Prime Minister.

Since the very beginning of his third presidential term, Putin has dramatically changed the course of Russian Foreign and domestic policy. First of all, he needed to justify his re-election by vilifying the protesters. He took a hard stand and marked the protesters as the enemies of traditional Russian values. Putin took the personal assaults against him way too personally and the first year of his third term spent with fighting domestic opposition (Balyev 2012). What is more, the government expelled the US agency for International Development and charged that it was attempting to “influence political processes” and formed protests (Ibid.). Then came new law on treason and law against “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations” and several others. Putin’s message was targeted directly to the opposition and the groups which he considered potentially challenging to the Russian traditional values.

In April, President Putin introduced his new Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2013. The document fits in the same format as the earlier versions in 2000 and 2008. What is apparent from the start is the focus on Russia's pragmatism, independence, sovereignty and diplomatic efforts. The concept is even more clearer about the structure of the international system. Now, the monopoly of the U.S. on shaping the global trends is gone and the rise of multilateralism in the hands of newly industrialized states, commonly named as the BRIC, has arrived. Although, the BRIC or the SCO are still highly important platforms for pursuing Russia's interest, the relationship with China has lower priority than in the earlier documents. Perhaps, the Kremlin sees China's rise threatening, particularly in the Central Asia region.

The document uses the concept of patriotism as a unifying element, or better, as a bridge between the state and the people. The earlier concepts had highlighted several links, such as a positive relation towards the army (Security Strategy until 2020) or foreign policy goals based on strong domestic performance (Foreign Policy Concept 2008). But this new approach glorifying patriotism was not meant to be just a unifying factor in foreign policy, but rather a dividing domestic constituent, which would blame those who go against Putin, therefore against the state.

Further on, the document addresses traditional areas such as alliance priorities. Interesting is the stand point towards NATO, which is not entirely negative. Yes, the document criticizes earlier expansions to the east and the recent build-up of the European missile defense system, which Russia sees as a potential threat to its security. But the language used does not indicate worsening trend in the relationship. This could not be said about the views on the EU. Due to the Russian interest in creating regionally strong economic community, the EU as the main economic power, is assessed rather negatively. The problem is rising incredulity towards

the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and one of its initiatives, namely the Eastern Partnership. This framework of cooperation works on political conditionality and economic incentives offered by the EU in exchange for democratic, economic and other reforms. The clash of interest is mainly in Ukraine, but also in Georgia, Armenia or Azerbaijan (Whitman and Wolff 2010). The EU is still the most important trading partner for Russia, and simultaneously Russia could not tolerate the rising influence, especially in Ukraine, since it considers economic security and cooperation as the way of achieving national security. Here is direct clash between Russia and the EU. In addition, the document mentions rather unsatisfying development with the U.K. and Germany, two leading European powers.

The most innovative section is article 20, which depicts Russia's use of "soft power" something that had not been addressed before. Russia wants to utilize its economic and cultural assets in order to boost its influence in several regional or even non-regional states.

Overall, the document is a continuation of Putin's assertive approach from years before the Russo-Georgian war. It uses traditionally well-known characteristics of Russian foreign policy and reflects them with Russia's strong regional and international position. Nevertheless, it also addresses areas such as economic cooperation, or regional security architecture, namely the creation of missile defense system in Europe as highly unsettling. From this perspective, the massive protests that erupted in Ukraine on November 20 and 21, 2013, were a direct threat towards Russia's interest to avert the Ukraine's western direction.

#### 4.4. Strategic Culture

Chapter three includes a general assessment of Russian strategic culture, depicting the role of geography, historic memories and development or changes in the international system.

This sub-chapter continues with the assessment of Russian strategic culture during the Putin's era. The aim is on analyzing the progress of strategic culture after the Russo-Georgian war.

Based on the analysis of the international system and leader images, the author argues that this period between 2008 and 2014 saw four important events that had an impact on the development of Russian strategic culture.

First, the Russo-Georgian war itself. It was a confirmation of re-emergence of Russia as a great power in the international system and regionally superior actor. In addition, the war had concluded Putin's ambitions and promises he made in the beginning of his first presidential term. At that time in August 2008, Putin's approval rating was 88%, the highest in the history.

Second, the financial crisis had fully emerged after the war and its consequences were dire. Even before the crisis started, Putin had highlighted the importance of economic modernization and creation of partnerships based on economic benefits. The effect of the crisis had even more amplified the necessity of economic cooperation. All three official documents issued by the Russian Federation in this period stress that economic modernization and construction of new economic networks is a primary goal in achieving national security. In other words, the role of economy in Russian strategic culture had evolved from economic modernization to prioritization of economy as means to achieve national security.

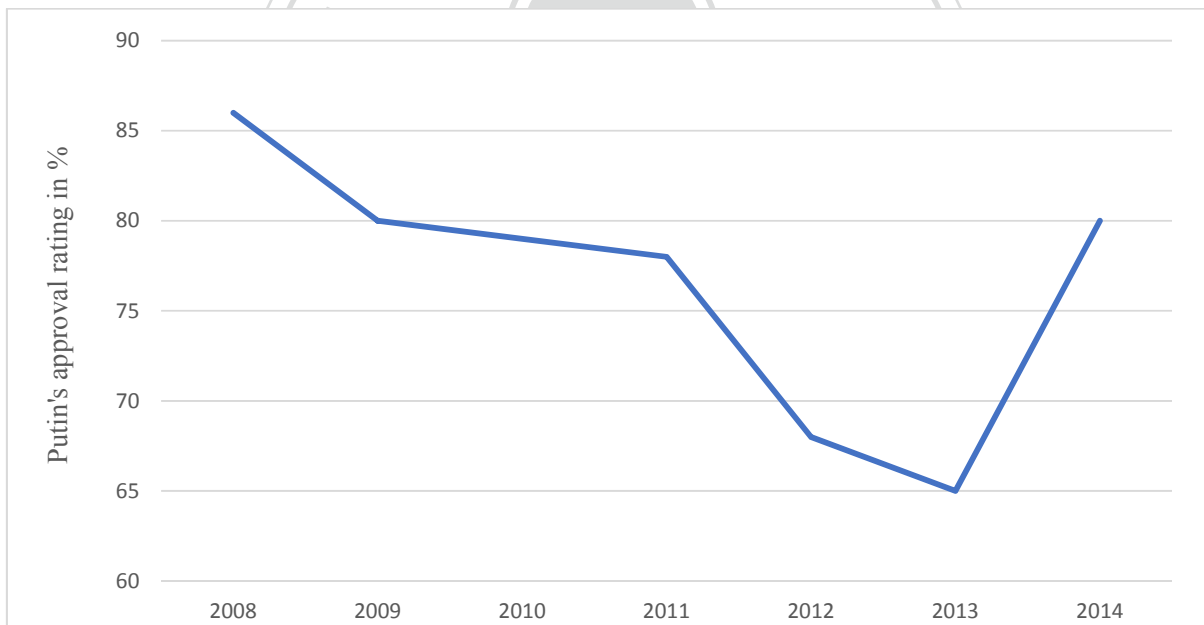
Third, one of the effects of the financial crisis, was the relative decline of the U.S. as the sole hegemon in the international arena. For Russia, this fact had even more supported its regional and international ambitions. The document on National Security Strategy includes a section on Russia's right to militarily intervene in its immediate neighborhood in case of a perception of a threat to its national security.

Fourth, the re-election of Vladimir Putin as the President of the Russian Federation. This event had brought back Putin's strong style of a leadership. He crushed domestic opposition and returned back in history to 2000 when he firstly solidifies his rule. Although, Putin had faced several threats from the opposition and the biggest protests since the end of Soviet Union, he managed to re-establish his position as a strong leader. The author argues that during his inauguration speech, Putin tried to re-establish the link with his successful period before 2008. The period during which he re-created the connection between modern Russia and old Soviet glory. This was supported by his vision of patriotism. He tried to intertwine the state and the people through several organizations, including Russian orthodox church, the military and youth organizations.

For all the aforementioned points the author argues that Russian strategic culture, during the analyzed period, further strengthened its foundation from the first two Putin's presidential terms. The most visible is the prioritization of economy in national security strategy and with that connected regional assertiveness towards the key partners. When the crisis in Ukraine showed that the pro-Western tendencies were stronger than Russia's soft power incentives and that the country would follow the western path of increased economic cooperation with Europe and would initiate another liberal reform, at that point, Russia interest was in unacceptable danger. Vladimir Putin could not afford to watch a success of liberal demonstrations, since this sentiment was still alive in Russia. So, in order to protect Russia from similar demonstrations and simultaneously solidify Russian position in the region, in other words, Vladimir Putin was partly forced by his own strategic culture, to annex Crimea.



As a supplement, Figure 4.6. show, how Putin's approval rating skyrocketed immediately after the annexation. It is true that realism expects rational behavior of the actors, so from this perspective, some would say that Putin's decision to annex Crimea was contra productive, because of the consequences in the form of severe economic sanctions and military build-up in the countries that surround Russia. But from the perspective of strategic culture, Putin had to intervene, otherwise, it is very likely that he would be facing protests back home, relations with the EU would have probably even more deteriorated and Ukraine would have been much closer to NATO or the EU membership, something that is not on the table right now.



4.6 Putin's approval rating 2008-2014

Source: (Levada-Centre 2017)

## 4.5. Conclusion – Explaining Russia’s decision to annex Crimea

This sub-chapter presents the findings of chapter four and discusses its relevance for the present study. These findings are presented in a form of points relating to each sub-chapter. Also, the main research question is answered and the verity or falsity of the hypotheses is discussed.

### Systemic Stimuli – Independent variable

- The financial crisis in 2008 together with new U.S. administration caused decline of the United States as the sole super power.
- Russia’s military capabilities increased vis-à-vis the U.S. in the analyzed period
- Russia had improved its regional influence through several economic and military frameworks, such as The Eurasian Economic Space including the Custom Union, and the increased activity within CSTO and STO (regionally dominant actor).
- Russia perceived both NATO, with antimissile ballistic system, and the EU, with Eastern Partnership, as threats to its national interest and security.

The tested hypothesis: “An increase in the relative material power of the Russian Federation will lead to a corresponding expansion in the ambition and scope of Russian foreign policy activity”. It was confirmed.

### Leader images and Strategic Culture – Intervening variables

- Neoclassical realism expects that leader images and strategic culture have an effect on foreign policy outcomes. Since these intervening variables are very difficult to

measure, the analysis used the so called “process tracing” method to find defining characteristics of leader images and strategic culture. The analyses focused on: the official foreign policy documents issued during the analyzed period, speeches and statements, and concludes with the following points:

The first two points are constants that had not changed over time.

- Putin’s first priority is the state (Checkist mentality)
- Putin saw the collapse of the Soviet Union from the first line and considers it, “the biggest geopolitical tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century”, therefore his main goal is to return Russia its former glory.
- Prioritization of economic interests as means to secure national interest in the region, led towards change of perception of the EU. In this period, the EU had become the biggest regional competitor.
- Decreasing domestic support had to be compensated by a more assertive foreign policy.
- Vladimir Putin has become a “victim” of his own image that he created during the first two presidential terms.

The tested hypothesis: “President Putin chooses to frame, adjust, and modify strategic choices to reflect culturally acceptable preferences to maintain domestic political support”. It was confirmed.

The research question: “How does neoclassical realism explain the Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014?”

Answer: The author of this work argues that systemic stimuli had influenced Russia's assertiveness in the region. The development in the international system favored Russia's relative power vis-à-vis its biggest competitors. Therefore, Russia's increasing assertiveness based on regional superiority had made the option of annexation possible. The second argument is that Putin had to intervene, because he had become a victim of his own cult he created during the first two terms of his presidency. Had not he annexed Crimea, he would have faced domestic protests, possible worsening of domestic situation and further confrontation with NATO and the EU. Vladimir Putin's world views in combination with strategic culture, he created a decade ago, had crucial effect on the decision to annex Crimea.

## Chapter 5 Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to explain Russian foreign policy through the lenses of Neoclassical realism. More specifically, it has attempted to systematically analyze the relevance of this contemporary theory and its main propositions on the two selected case studies, namely: The Russo-Georgian War in 2008 and the Annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014.

First chapter of this work establishes Neoclassical Realism as a progressive approach for Foreign policy analysis, which incorporates second image variables and, based on current debates, argues that this approach might have significant explanatory power in analyzing foreign policy of states. The literature review dives deeper in the intra-realist debate and concludes that from a theoretical perspective, neoclassical realism is an enhanced form of neorealism supported

by domestic level variables, which are important for understanding the foreign policies of states. In addition, the literature review discusses previous works on Russian foreign policy and concludes, that the majority of works analyzing Russian foreign policy has been written from the perspective of offensive realism or other innenpolitik theories, such as liberalism. The literature review also identifies a few works that have been written on Russian foreign policy up to date. But neither of them provides a comprehensive analysis of Russian foreign policy. The focus is usually on a short time frame, including maximum of one case study or an analysis of a general trend. The last part of the literature review has generated two testable hypotheses developed from neoclassical realist expectations. First hypothesis is based on the general neoclassical realist prediction about state's behavior in the international system: An increase in the relative material power of the Russian Federation will lead to a corresponding expansion in the ambition and scope of Russian foreign policy activity. The second hypothesis is based on the combination of intervening variables, namely leader images and strategic culture, and predicts that: President Putin chooses to frame, adjust, and modify strategic choices to reflect culturally acceptable preferences to maintain domestic political support.

The analysis of the Russo-Georgian war showed the historic importance of the transition from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation. The entire decade of the 90s had a crippling effect on Russia's position in the international system, and also had a negative effect on Russian strategic culture which had lost its defining characteristics, such as the emphasis on strong economy, and military assertiveness in its region. The analysis of Putin's world views showed two things. First, Vladimir Putin has a checkist mentality, which means that the state is always first. Second, Putin witnessed the humiliation, which brought the fall of the Soviet Union. Therefore, his life-long goal is to elevate Russia to its former glory and re-establish it as the

world superpower. How does neoclassical realism explain the War in Georgia? Considering the geography, historic memories, the crippling period of the 90s, Putin's checkist world views, the fact that Russia had been underestimated and constantly threaten by NATO enlargement and by the U.S. unilateralism especially (The Kosovo Crisis, the intervention to Iraq), it is obvious that the level of frustration was tremendous. On the other hand, the period between 2000-2008 when Russia, due to the high oil prices and an enormous domestic support caused by "putinism", increased its material capabilities and economic performance that resulted in Putin's assertive foreign policy. Then we understand that the possibility of Georgia accessing NATO meant an unacceptable scenario for Russia. The conditions to intervene in South Ossetia and Abkhazia were favorable, since Russia had known, that the West was not unified over the commitments to Georgia, the U.S. was preoccupied with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and Europe was concerned with the unfolding economic crisis. Russia intervened in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, to stop Georgia's accession to NATO, and to say stop to further humiliation from the West. Only by considering all the aforementioned reasons, the decision to intervene in Georgia can be fully understood. The first case study confirmed both hypotheses.

The second case study, Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 found itself in completely different setting. The question is, how does neoclassical realism explain the decision to annex Crimea? Russia had confirmed its status as a re-emerging great power with a military superiority in its region. In addition, the outcome of the financial crisis showed the vulnerability of the West and new administration in Washington had softened its approach towards Russia. This situation had resolved in relative increase of material capability of Russia vis-à-vis the United States. As would neoclassical realist predict, this relative rise also resulted in the Russia's increased foreign policy assertiveness. Russia tried to strengthen its economic ties with its neighbors to use

economic cooperation as means for achieving national security. This led towards a direct confrontation with the EU, which was using its political conditionality and economic incentives in Ukraine to make it more western oriented. At that time, in 2014, Russia had been already regionally superior state with high ambitions and much better military than six years ago. From the analysis of the case, it seems to be probable that the West did not expect that Russia would have intended to annex Crimea. That is only a confirmation of the West's misunderstanding of Russia. This analysis concludes, that in 2014, Russia was materially capable, self-confident, but frustrated country. Even though it considered itself a great and influential power that can shape events in the international system, this status had been constantly denied by the West and its direct interest had been confronted by both NATO and the EU. The annexation of Crimea came during high tensions that had been present ever since 2012, when the then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin announced his candidacy for the presidency. From the Putin's perspective, the annexation of Crimea was a tool for achieving three things. First, re-gaining domestic support and solidifying his strong position. Second, preventing Ukraine from further "westernization" and securing the strategically positioned military base in Crimea. Third, establishing new image of Russia on the international stage. The results of the second case study have also confirmed both hypothesis.

Neoclassical realism proved to be a useful approach for analyzing Russian foreign policy. Its explanatory power and theoretical richness has shown a potential to provide a thorough analysis of foreign policy of a state. It is always easy to point out one cause for a particular effect. And it is true that there is usually one significant cause. But after looking at the problem from a wider perspective, it is very likely that more than just one cause need to be analyzed in order to sufficiently explain the final effect. The author believes that the world is getting more and more

interconnected and the number of causes rises accordingly with this increasing complexity. Therefore, a comprehensive framework for analyzing foreign policy of states is crucial.

On the other hand, it is incredibly difficult to balance between the chosen variables and to objectively evaluate the process leading towards the analyzed outcome. Neoclassical realism does not intend to produce law-like generalization, but rather focuses on case-to-case original analysis which put analyzed case study/studies in a wider perspective of systemic independent variable and unit level intervening variables.

Neoclassical realism is still an underdeveloped approach and most of the works focus on the big historical events or the relationship between superpowers. This work suggests shifting focus on smaller cases, from all around the world to find similarities across different case studies. This could generate new variations of neoclassical realist approaches. It would be interesting to analyze foreign policies of small states in dangerous regions, especially those fighting for their survival. This type of analysis could show how strategic culture develops and how the leader images influence potential balancing/bandaging or neutrality.

This work concludes with several recommendations for the Western leaders when dealing with Russia. Based on the experience from Georgia and Ukraine, it is absolutely crucial to stay united in the areas regarding NATO enlargement, security strategy, economic sanctions or any other issue which requires absolute credibility. Russia is a regionally dominant power and it must be taken seriously. To include Russia in as many partnerships as possible is always a good choice. The history showed, that ignorance, refusal and lack of commitment makes Russia frustrated and an assertive state. It is incredibly difficult to approach Russia but policy areas regarding terrorism or trade should have unifying effect.



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