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Putin's foreign adventures – an examination of Russia's interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria

Master's thesis in Political Science

Supervisor: Sabrina Petra Ramet

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Kunnskap for en bedre verden

Abstract

This thesis examines the Russian motivation for its involvements in the war with Georgia in 2008, the war in Eastern Ukraine which began in 2014, and the Syrian war in which Russia has been involved since September 2015. Investigating the motivation behind these interventions is crucial to understanding why they occurred (and in the latter two cases are continuing), and what policies the international community could pursue to limit incentives for such behavior effectively. The thesis argues that Russia under Vladimir Putin is most likely showing signs of imperial aspirations through an information war and limited military interventions.

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Introduction

I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

– Winston Churchill, BBC broadcast, London 1 October 1939.

In Churchill's days, the problem was that there was so little information coming out of the Soviet Union, today the problem with Russia is the opposite. Since 2008, the Russian leadership has experienced a renaissance in its use of information as weaponry in combination with limited military interventions, and applied this strategy as one of its main tools in foreign policy. Kremlin-sanctioned cyber groups interfere in the operations of other countries through internet trolls, hacking of firms, official institutions and agencies, even meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the UK Brexit vote (Bogen, 2018, pp. 136-153; Snyder, 2018a, pp. 228-289). For the first time since World War II military forces have been used against a region belonging to another European state for the purpose of territorial expansion, as shown by the Russian annexation of Crimea (Eltchaninoff, 2018, p. 75). The need to understand Russian foreign policy has not declined in recent years, as the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine remain unresolved.

Since inheriting power in 1999, Vladimir Putin has been involved in four wars, three of them in foreign countries: The Second Chechen war in 1999, the Georgian war in 2008, the war in eastern Ukraine since 2014, and from 2015 the war in Syria. This thesis examines the Russian use of military force in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria asking the question:

What motivates Russia to apply military force against other countries?

Scholars from a variety of academic disciplines have sought to explain the motivation for the Russian use of force in foreign policy in recent years. Three different positions have emerged for which Elias Götz (2016) has applied the labels "revisionist Russia", "victim Russia", and "troublemaker Russia". Scholars embracing the first position like Motyl (2015) and Braun (2014), see Russia as an aggressive neo-imperialist power

that wants to overturn Europe's post-Cold War order. The second position has been embraced by scholars like Mearsheimer (2014b) and Shleifer and Treisman (2011) and sees Russia as a status-quo power that defends its geopolitical interests and honor. Scholars such as Applebaum (2018) and Shevtsova (2015) hold Russia as a troublemaker, whose ruling elite purposefully creates external conflicts to divert attention from any internal problems. These are not necessarily completely contradictory positions, as both Snyder (2018a) and Eltchaninoff (2018) combine different elements from all three positions in their arguments. Furthermore, there are good arguments and evidence set forth by the proponents of each position.

However, I have chosen to focus on the two first positions because of the practical limits of time and space in this thesis, leaving the remaining perspective open for other scholars to investigate. Furthermore, scholars who would pursue the theory that Russia is an international troublemaker would have to address a couple of inherent problems in the "troublemaker" position. The Putin regime has for years centralized power in the office of the president and effectively suppressed political opposition (Applebaum, 2018; Remington, 2016, pp. 1-82). This has allowed Putin and his allies to wield the state apparatus with great liberty, and the foreign policy of Russia must be understood in the context of that liberty. That is not to say that domestic factors do not affect foreign policy, after all, Putin himself likes to connect elements he does not like domestically to a foreign enemy. Nevertheless, the fact that Putin could casually admit that the election in 2012 was rigged after intense protests across Russia, and that Dmitry Medvedev even added that this was the case with all Russian elections, weakens the "troublemaker Russia" theory severely (Snyder, 2018a, p. 59). Another point is that the argument about the Kremlin being guided by approval ratings is questionable. For instance, even though the annexation of Crimea brought Putin's rating to over 80 percent, his ratings were over 60 percent prior to the annexation, which is exceptionally high by international standards (Götz, 2016). The Kremlin was therefore probably not feeling particularly weak at the time of the annexation, although it turned out to be rewarding measured in ratings. The need to divert attention, seems to be a secondary objective in Russian foreign policy.

This thesis uses four hypotheses which are derived from diverse theories in the field of international relations to explain the Russian use of force. The first and second

hypotheses are derived from realist theory, the third from social constructivism, and the fourth from the field of political psychology. By using different theories to develop hypotheses, I gain multiple theoretical perspectives on the cases, which hopefully will result in a rich and in-depth analysis. The first two hypotheses concern themselves with variables located on the international level such as geopolitics, distribution of wealth and power, and international prestige. The third and fourth hypotheses are focused mainly on Putin as a person and decision-maker. With the thesis touching on the group of people surrounding Putin, I have decided to omit any particular discussion of Russian political culture, history, philosophy, and state level variables.

The structure of the thesis is as follows: The first chapter lays out the strengths and weaknesses of case studies, how the data were collected and assessed, and how the thesis has benefited from these sources. The second chapter explains the ways of thought (Moses & Knutsen, 2012) used in this thesis, summarizing theories, ontologies, and their implications for the hypotheses from which they were derived. Thirdly, a chapter on Putin's life and journey to power provides the necessary background for hypotheses three and four, and the context needed for the analysis of the cases. The next three chapters are about the interventions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. The relevant timeline for Georgia and Ukraine starts with their independence in 1991, while I provide a short summary of Syria's history beginning with its independence from France, gained in 1945. The Ukrainian and Syrian cases are traced up until 2020, while the discussion of the Georgian case ends with the termination and immediate aftermath of the intervention in 2008. The reasons for this cutoff are the limits on this thesis in time and space, while the Ukrainian and Syrian conflicts are still continuing. Indeed, the Russian-Georgian war from 2008 lasted for five days, and produced a more or less stable outcome. The thesis ends with a summary and comparison of the cases and concludes that Russia under Putin is most likely showing signs of imperial aspirations.

On methods

This thesis is a qualitative multiple case study. The case study method is an appropriate tool to explore the research question at hand because of the

considerable benefits the approach offers when there is a need for a careful examination of details and context to uncover the mechanisms at play. According to Yin (2003, p. 4) case studies are particularly useful “[...] when the phenomenon under study is not readily distinguishable from its context.” Considering that the goal of the study is to investigate an underlying motivation, Yin’s description of utility is appropriate.

There are varying views among scholars as to what case studies are and what the term “case” actually entails. King, Keohane & Verba (1994, p. 53) argue that there should be a distinction between the terms “observation” and “case”. They point to the fact that, while case-study research rarely uses more than a handful of cases, the total number of observations is generally immense, which is why a distinction is needed between these terms. George and Bennett (2005, p. 17 fn.29) disagree, and argue that such a distinction could create unnecessary ambiguity. Yin (2003, p. 3) defines a case as a unit of analysis. The wars in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria are analyzed separately and compared to each other in order to investigate the relationship between motivation and action in Russian foreign policy. Or, as Jonathon Moses and Torbjørn Knutsen have put it:

Case-studies [...] are histories with a point. They are ‘cases of something’. The case under study is interesting, relevant or ‘in focus’ because of that ‘something’; because of a larger theoretical concern or a specific research project (Moses & Knutsen, 2012, p. 133).

Strengths and weaknesses of case studies

The main strength of a case study is its inclusion of the context surrounding the subject under study. The richness in context entails that the study should not rely on one single data collection method, but needs multiple sources of evidence to avoid false conclusions (Yin, 2003, p. 4). Secondly, the method offers the opportunity to reach a high level of conceptual validity, that is to identify and measure the indicators that best represent the concepts the researcher tries to measure (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 19). This is particularly useful when dealing with variables that are of great interest, but hard to measure due to their abstract nature such as power, motivation, democracy, and state strength (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 19). This is a strong argument for using a qualitative approach, as scholars relying exclusively on

statistical methods would have a hard time measuring such concepts due to the required detailed consideration of contextual factors (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 19). Thus, case studies have a better chance of picking up nuances and details that otherwise might be overlooked. While large N-studies are very useful for testing hypotheses, they can be less accurate than case studies in determining why they hold or not.

Biases in the selection of cases, cognitive bias, the problem of generalization, and deciding on what explanation fits best are challenges to consider when conducting case studies. Since Russia became a sovereign state in 1991, there have been three major conflicts in foreign territory where Russia has played an obvious part becoming militarily involved: Georgia, Ukraine and in Syria. Therefore, the selection bias problem is less relevant, as there are no other clear cases fitting the research question from which to choose¹. A researcher's cognitive bias refers to preliminary knowledge and positions on the topic under research which can cause the researcher to favor certain hypotheses or investigative methods over others, thereby potentially affecting the study. This problem is not unique to case studies, and the way to limit such biases in any research is to maintain transparency in data collection and in the analysis, and to critically evaluate the methods and results.

The generalization problem is the claim that because the explanations or results of a case study could be the result of unique or rare conditions, its findings cannot be generalized to other cases (George & Bennett, 2005, pp. 110-122; Van Evera, 1997, pp. 53-54). Van Evera argues that multiple case studies have two strengths that offset this weakness: "[...] tests performed with case studies are often strong, because the predictions tested are quite unique" (Van Evera, 1997, p. 54). These tests are strong because they set specific predictions made by a theory up against the collected empirical evidence. Ideally an eventual fulfillment of said predictions cannot be explained except by that theory. Secondly, a multiple case study can compare case conditions and results between cases and other studies, and use process tracing to ensure that case conditions actually lead to case outcomes (Van Evera, 1997, pp. 54-55).

¹ The wars in Chechnya were civil wars, as they happened on Russian territory.

The problem of deciding which explanation fits best is a serious challenge. In this thesis there are four hypotheses. The first two are deduced from realist theory, although with different emphasis, they share the same theoretical and ontological roots. Hypothesis 3 is deduced from social constructivism which has different ontological roots and thereby a different emphasis from the first two. The last hypothesis is developed from the discipline of political psychology, which offers a different perspective on the cause of political action from the previous three. The theoretical diversity allows and encourages a broad perspective and different angles from which to observe and analyze the phenomenon under study. However, this underlines the importance of having clear criteria for which evidence will support which hypothesis. George and Bennett's text (2005, p. 30) suggests looking for crucial cases, meaning instances where the evidence either strongly agrees or disagrees with the theories used in order to determine which hypothesis is the better fit. If there is ambiguity in the results it could still be possible to narrow down the most likely explanations, and if not, then the results should be reported as ambiguous.

A second important point is to strive for a clear presentation as to whether the hypotheses under question are complementary, competing, or indeterminate in explaining the cases (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 30). The two positions on Russian foreign policy in focus in this thesis, "victim Russia" and "revisionist Russia", share some conditions for explaining Russian behavior. For instance, NATO enlargement is not beneficial in the eyes of the Russian leadership according to either model, but the reasons why could be different, depending on the case. The hypotheses are designed to offer explanations that hopefully are able to distinguish between the motivations in the two positions. Hypothesis 1 is designed to be competing with the "revisionist Russia" position, and hypothesis 2 is designed to be competing with "victim Russia". With this design, the evidence would ideally weaken one position while strengthening the other, making it improbable for both of these two positions to be true at the same time. However, politics are often foggy and motivations may change during the unfolding of events or vary from case to case. Hypotheses 3 and 4 offer complementary theoretical statements to the first two hypotheses on Russian foreign policy, helping to differentiate between the hypothesized motivations, and identify relevant patterns and variables that otherwise could have been overlooked.

Collecting and using data

Document analysis as a research method has great advantages for case studies, especially for studies where other research methods are not available.

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material. Like other analytical methods in qualitative research, document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009, p. 27).

Documents in this sense are not limited to the interpretation of texts, but include also images that have been recorded without a researcher's intervention (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). Examples of documents in this sense are public records and reports, bills, press releases, speeches, credible journalistic pieces, and of course prior research, to name a few. These documents are subjected to analysis, which means that they are examined by the researcher who interprets them to extract data. "Document analysis yields data—excerpts, quotations, or entire passages—that are then organized into major themes, categories, and case examples specifically through content analysis" (Bowen, 2009, p. 28). If done right, document analysis could provide the researcher with information about the background context of a study, a way to discover further questions to be asked, supplementary data, a means for tracking change and development, and verification of other findings. The documents used in this study are speeches, press releases, prior academic work on the subject and theory, reports from credible news sources, and information provided on the relevant actors' institutional websites.

The data extracted from these sources are structured in accordance with a process-tracing method. Process-tracing can be defined as a method aimed at tracing the links between possible causes and observed outcomes (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 6). By examining the process and sequence of events in the cases in relation to the hypothesized explanations to the research question, it is possible to infer which possible explanations have the most traction. Furthermore, process-tracing contributes to reducing the risk of promoting false explanations or lacking

conclusions by creating order in the presentation of the data, and discovering other possible explanations (George & Bennett, 2005; Van Evera, 1997, pp. 51-52).

However, there is reason to be cautious with, and critical of, the process and the results when using document analysis and process-tracing. Documents are produced for purposes other than research, thus important information may be omitted from the document(s) under analysis. Or the document(s) may not provide a sufficient level of detail to allow the researcher to extract any considerable information. Some documents are unavailable to us either because they were lost or destroyed, are too costly to retrieve, or were even deliberately withheld (Bowen, 2009, p. 32). The selection of documents available may be biased, or they may be presented and written in a way designed to make someone or something appear in a certain way. For instance, if an organization is under investigation, the documents available are likely to be aligned with that organization's policies and influenced by the organization's communication strategy. Additionally, speeches could be made for the benefit of persons other than those present for them. If the researcher is aware of these limitations and acts accordingly by providing documentation showing the research procedure, construction, and the data collection, there are significant advantages to harvest from document analysis and process-tracing. Seen in a practical perspective, these methods are often less time-consuming and more cost-efficient than other research methods, as their use requires data selection instead of collection. Also, the researcher does not face the same danger of distorting the observed phenomenon in document analysis, since documents are 'non-reactive' (Bowen, 2009, p. 31)². For example, research on a person's behavior might be influenced if the subject knows that he or she is being observed, and thus changes his or her behavior. Document analysis is stable, in the sense that the presence of the researcher does not alter what is being studied.

The ways of thought

The hypotheses and theories used to investigate the research question come from two different traditions of thought within political science: naturalism and

² Previous research might have imbedded this problem, and thus influence the results gained from document studies.

constructivism. In order to state clearly what evidence will strengthen or weaken the hypotheses, it is necessary to briefly outline the way the traditions differ. I do not attempt a full exploration or explanation of either tradition, only a limited overview of commonalities and differences between them for the purpose of exploring the research question.

Ontology and epistemology of naturalism

The ontological and epistemological foundations of realist theory is grounded in a naturalistic view of science. This view of science is built on thoughts and perspectives developed by scholars such as David Hume, Francis Bacon, and John Locke (Moses & Knutsen, 2012, p. 29). Naturalist scientists view the world as consisting of independent particulars. There are interactions that behave in regular and patterned ways, and these phenomena can be observed, experienced, and ultimately understood by humans through their senses (Moses & Knutsen, 2012, p. 29). The naturalist epistemology defines a theory as a set of correlations that are logically or systematically related to another (Moses & Knutsen, 2012, p. 29). A theory is in this perspective a map of associations, from which knowledge can be developed and retrieved. This worldview is partly why proponents of realist theory claim its explanatory power must be judged by empirical evidence and not abstract concepts (Morgenthau, 2006, p. 4).

Offensive and defensive realism

This thesis uses the logic of realism as a resource to develop hypotheses as possible answers to the research question. The main tenet of structural realism is that the international system is anarchic in structure, meaning that there is no higher authority than the states themselves (Mearsheimer, 2014a, p. 31; Morgenthau, 2006, pp. 4-16; Waltz, 1979, pp. 102-107). Since the international system lacks a police officer or higher power to enforce rules and agreements, states are usually motivated to act in a self-helping way causing them to prioritize their self-interest above anything else (Mearsheimer, 2014a, p. 33; Taliaferro, 2001, p. 134). Some examples of structures are unipolar with one hegemon, bipolar with two great powers or regional hegemons, and multipolar with several great powers. What constitutes a great power is the

significant advantage it has compared to other states in terms of material power; in military capabilities and population, economy and so on.

Another frequent assumption in realist theory is that states are “rational actors”, but with different meanings attached to the term depending on the author. Mearsheimer (2014a, p. 31) argues that the term *rational actors* means that states are aware of their surroundings and think strategically about how to survive. Van Evera (1999, pp. 7, fn 11) leans on Robert Keohane’s summary of the ‘Realist paradigm’, which in essence argues that states carefully calculate costs and benefits of their actions under the condition of uncertainty and without the possibility to review all other alternatives. Waltz never mentions the rationality assumption in his *Theory of international politics* (1979). Instead of assuming rationality on the part of actors, Waltz emphasizes the process of selection that takes place in competitive systems, what state behavior is either rewarded or penalized by the system and other states, resulting in demise or progress (Waltz, 1979, pp. 92, 118; 1986, pp. 330-331; see also Mearsheimer & Booth, 2009, p. 242;).

This brief outline of how prominent realist scholars have dwelt on just one of the central assumptions shows how hard it is to develop a general theory of international politics. Realist theories vary in what they claim to explain; for instance, Waltz’s *Theory of international politics* (1979) is not a theory of foreign policy, as Waltz (1996) has stressed himself, but a theory of constraints on foreign policy and of the predicted price to be paid for ignoring them (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 7). As a theory, it is abstract and highly general, and thus ill-suited to explain the behavior of a single state as it cannot make sharp theoretical predications or offer concrete policy suggestions. Realist scholars have sought to address this issue by categorizing different types of realism within the realist tradition in order to have more precise theories with which to work (Taliaferro, 2001, pp. 132-136; Van Evera, 1999, pp. 7-11). This thesis uses two of these subcategories to develop different hypotheses based on the logic of realist theory. Van Evera (1999, pp. 10-11 fn 21) claims that there are two subcategories of realism which are easily distinguishable from one another: defensive realism which states that conquest is difficult and rarely successful, and that security is scarce; and offensive realism which states that conquest is viable and potentially profitable, and that security is abundant. In this

thesis, defensive realism is used to hypothesize the “victim Russia” position, and offensive realism to hypothesize the “revisionist Russia” position. The reason offensive and defensive realism view security differently, is that the two theories disagree on the implications of anarchy (Taliaferro, 2001, pp. 128-130). The former views security as abundant because of the lack of an authority to check aggression, which provides strong incentives for expansion. The latter views security as scarce because many of the means a state uses to increase its security decrease the security of other states. A defensive realist hypothesis should emphasize the insecurity raised by the scarcity of security. Hypothesis 1 seeks to capture the essence of this insecurity and explain the interventions as a consequence of it.

Hypothesis 1: The continued increase in the number of new members joining NATO and the associated increase in NATO’s influence since the end of the cold war has reached a point where Putin feels encouraged to use military force and covert operations in order to avoid encirclement and marginalization, which would compromise Russian security.

As security is a scarce commodity and conquest is an unattractive option in defensive realism, these military actions and covert operations under consideration should be acts of defense against the primary great power competitor the U.S. and by extension NATO. Encirclement is a term used to describe a situation where a state is surrounded by unfriendly or at least non-allied states. According to Klein (2019, chap. 2.1) the Kremlin has endeavored to create a buffer zone of states around Russia’s borders in order to minimize threats by state, and non-state actors, in principle not so unlike the Soviet Union. Kazakhstan and Mongolia are on this view a buffer against Afghanistan and China. Accordingly, the South Caucasus countries shield Russia against the U.S. and other NATO weapons and violent non-government groups based in the Middle East (Klein, 2019, chap 2.1). This buffer overlaps with a proclaimed “zone of interest”; a “near abroad”, in which the Kremlin claims a right of leadership including the right to set the rules for states within it in affairs relevant to Russian foreign interests such as membership in alliances (Klein, 2019, chapter 2.1; Medvedev, 2008; Safire, 1994). This zone is mainly concentrated in former Soviet territories, but in principle it could be extended to any territory that

has links to Russia, as the Russians claim often is justified through the status as a great power and through “historical links” (Klein, 2019, chpt 2.1).

The main difference between defensive and offensive realism is the understanding of security. Offensive realists argue that a state can ensure its security only by maximizing its power relative to that of other states in the international system, because states view each other’s offensive capabilities as potential threats (Mearsheimer, 2014a, pp. 30-54). Thus, offensive realists sharply disagree with their defensive counterparts as to what degree the international system limits offensive or revisionist behavior. They do however agree on the basics of great power politics, like the logic of zones of interests, material power such as military capabilities, and that great powers dictate the agenda in their vicinities (Mearsheimer, 2014a, p. 141). The logic of offensive realism is valid for a few states, namely those able to project power. To explain the foreign policy and behavior of small states such as Lesotho, Nauru, or Liechtenstein in terms of offensive realism would be unfair to the theory, while it makes sense to reference offensive intentions in explaining the politics and behavior of Napoleonic France or Nazi Germany. Without further comparison to Napoleonic France or Nazi Germany, the theory could be useful to explain the revisionist Russian position.

Hypothesis 2: The Russian leadership seeks to increase Russia’s relative power by weakening NATO, the EU, and the U.S., in order to regain a position as close as possible to the one enjoyed by the U.S.S.R. during the Cold War.

A viable objection to this hypothesis would be to raise the question if it is realistically even conceivable that contemporary Russia could aspire to increase its relative power in a decisive way, considering the vast disadvantage in power and number of allies compared to NATO and the U.S. According to Mearsheimer (2014a, p. 35), Great Powers rarely have the opportunity to become hegemonies, but only a misguided state would pass up the opportunity to achieve any form of hegemony. Regardless, Great Powers will still seek to amass as much power as they can, because they will be better off with more power anyway. Thus, according to the logic of offensive realism, we can expect the Kremlin to try to increase its relative power even if the possibility to become a regional hegemon is out of reach.

Critique of realism, and a constructivist approach to international relations

Constructivism stresses that our knowledge is framed and affected by history, society, ideas, and language (Moses & Knutsen, 2012, p. 199). A constructivist seeks to identify socially constructed patterns and regularities, including those that affect or even generate state behavior (Moses & Knutsen, 2012, p. 199). However, the constructivist tradition stresses the need to recognize that there is a big gap separating the natural and the social world (Moses & Knutsen, 2012, p. 170). While the former is governed by universal natural laws, the latter is governed by human perception and interpretation. On this view, the social world is what we make it (Onuf, 1989, pp. 33-52). Realist theory has therefore been criticized by scholars embracing this view of the social sciences for oversimplifying, or even being wrong in, the workings of states in international relations:

If states are irrational, or their self-interest is non-material, realism implodes. After all, the power of realism lies precisely in its claims about objective rationality and objective interests. Any concession to subjectivity (such as leaders who assess interests based on their historical memory, political culture, or ideology) opens the door to realism's theoretical antithesis - "idealism" - and its theoretical nightmare - "constructivism," which claims that rationalities and interests are "socially constructed" and, hence, fluid, unstable, and anything but objective (Motyl, 2015, p. 76).

Idealism shares the naturalist view of social sciences with realism, but emphasizes other aspects of politics than the material power structures and distribution of capabilities. Proponents of idealism would typically argue for the importance of strong international institutions and international law without neglecting the distribution of power and wealth, but claiming that there is more to international politics than realist scholars typically assume (Keohane, 1988, pp. 19-23; Ramet, 2016). Idealists also stress the desirability and feasibility, within some limits, of international cooperation – a point made already by Immanuel Kant in his *Perpetual Peace* (1795).

Constructivist and idealist criticism of realist theory takes shape along these lines. For instance, the idea of the distribution of military capabilities largely determining the balance of power between states makes little sense for a constructivist:

[...] 500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons, because the British are friends of the United States and the North Koreans

are not, and amity or enmity is a function of shared understandings. As students of world politics, neorealists would probably not disagree, but [for] theorists the example poses a big problem, since it completely eludes their materialist definition of structure. Material capabilities as such explains nothing; their effects presupposes structures of shared knowledge, which vary and which are not reducible to capabilities (Wendt, 1995, p. 73).

Wendt does not disregard the material aspect of how much damage nuclear weapons can do, thereby the threat they pose, but simply points out that the distribution of capabilities, five versus five hundred nuclear weapons, does not explain why the U.S. perceives North Korea as a threat while viewing the UK as an ally. This may be an obvious observation, but it exemplifies how the social bonds between states matters in foreign policy and international relations. Constructivism solves the problem of explaining such cases by viewing ideas and material aspects as complementary and connected influences in international relations (Wendt, 1999, pp. 110-113).

Identity-based conservatism and the politics of eternity

The identities and interests of people and states are shaped by the social structures of the international order as well as by the behavior of actors (Wendt, 1995, pp. 71-72). While realist scholars tend to focus on power structures and capabilities, a constructivist perspective offers that ideas themselves can be interests (Wendt, 1999, pp. 113-115). The individuals in positions of power are influenced by subjective ideas, visions, and ideologies that themselves are influenced by people's recollection of history, national culture, language, and society. By recognizing this, constructivists argue that there are different perceptions of the world and what it ought to be. Russian use of force can according to this perspective therefore be an act of the defense or effort to realize an idea or vision, or act in conformity with an ideology.

Hypothesis 3: Putin is committed to a conservative Russia. He seeks to promote his identity-based conservative ideology and protect Russia from the polluting materialism and decadence of the West.

Timothy Snyder argues in his book, *The road to unfreedom* (2018a, pp. 16-21), that the Russian leadership is engaging in "the politics of eternity", a view of politics and

history where the future is just more of the present. Politicians with this view of politics spread uncertainty about facts, about what is true, and even about the foundations of politics. They do so by changing the facts themselves or translating the facts into narratives where the ruling party is typically the victim of slander or conspiracy. One nation is in focus for these politicians, history is a political repetitive tale of returning enemies and threats, and the government cannot help society as a whole, only resist enemies. Crises and emotions flying high are welcome, as they provide the opportunity to distract the masses from any underlying structural problems. Snyder argues that Putin and Trump are examples of leaders who embody the politics of eternity (Snyder, 2018a, pp. 23-25). Snyder sees the Russian leadership as a group of oligarchs with Putin having the position of chief oligarch, who has adopted and later exported the politics of eternity in order to protect their legitimacy for governance and their wealth. However, even oligarchs need a philosophical foundation on which to build their ideology and to project their vision of the world.

Putin chose the Russian anti-Bolshevik philosopher Ivan Iljin (1883-1954) as one of his main philosophical guides (Snyder, 2018a, pp. 23-29). Iljin was an Orthodox Christian philosopher with fascist and anti-Semitic inclinations, and his thoughts have been revived and transformed in order support an oligarchy built on an artificial democracy, and the absence of free speech and political thought (Snyder, 2018a, p. 24). Fascism in Iljin's time in the 1920s-30s was characterized by praising willpower and violence over reason or law, promoting a cultish and charismatic leader with populist connections to the people, and globalization was seen as a conspiracy instead of a complex phenomenon encompassing both progress and problems (Snyder, 2018a, pp. 24-25). Iljin saw Russia as an innocent victim that had been attacked in various ways by the West over a thousand years, for instance by pushing communism on Russia (Snyder, 2018a, pp. 30-32). The fascist characteristics are very useful for an authoritarian ruler or oligarchy, as the leaders are not portrayed as thieves or oppressors, but as strong protectors of an innocent and victimized nation. Putin has taken several steps to revive and restore Iljin as an important Russian thinker. In 2005 he arranged for a new funeral in Moscow thereby obscuring the fact that Iljin died a forgotten man in Switzerland in 1954. In 2006, Putin started to quote Iljin in his annual speeches to the Duma and recovered Iljin's personal papers from

Michigan State University. In 2014, Iljin's political writings were distributed to government employees and members of the ruling political party United Russia (Snyder, 2018a, p. 26).

Putin's policies and quotations betray Iljin's influence in his praise of the Orthodox Church, tradition, and patriarchy. These institutions are important to contain and repress the "harmful" virtues of individualism, integration, the new, egalitarianism and truth (Snyder, 2018a, p. 27). The protection of innocent Russia takes in the form of creating scapegoats such as homosexuals for the country's alleged moral decay. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov claimed in 2011 that the Russian government had to take a stand against homosexuality to defend the innocence of Russia (Snyder, 2018b). At a global summit in Valdai 2013, Putin compared same-sex marriages to satanism and associated gay rights with a "Western model" that encompassed decadence and primitivism (Snyder, 2018b). In 2017, it became a federal offense in Russia to portray Putin as a gay clown. The protests for gay rights within Russia were thus connected to the manipulative enemy in the West by Russian authorities.

Michel Eltchaninoff argues in his book, *Inside the mind of Vladimir Putin* (2018, pp. 168-169), that Putin is exporting a form of "identity-based conservatism". This identity-based conservatism is based not only on Iljin's writings but also on the philosophy of conservative Russian thinkers Nikolay Berdyaev and Vladimir Solovyov, and "the Russian World". Identity-based Russian conservatism emphasizes the importance of fidelity to Christian roots and traditional values, but also the country's Soviet heritage in the form of patriotism. The Russian sacrifice and victory in World War II both entitles Russia certain rights in the mind of Russian leaders and is an important source of material to inspire Russian patriotism. In 2012, in his Victory day speech, Putin stated that "We have an immense moral right: to defend our position in a fundamental and lasting way. Because our country was the one subjected to the bulk of Nazi offensive [...] and it was our country [that] offered freedom to the peoples of the whole world" (as quoted in Eltchaninoff, 2018, p. 15).

The Russian world is an idea where the Russian language and culture are held up as something spiritual and almost holy, in order to create a borderless Russian identity

which can be used to legitimize the right for the Kremlin to defend Russian speakers everywhere (Eltchaninoff, 2018, pp. 157-163). In 2006 Putin stated that Russian “is not only the means of communication for the millions of people who speak it or know it. It is an encapsulation of our national spiritual wealth” (as quoted in Eltchaninoff, 2018, p. 160). The purpose of exporting Putin’s ideology is to influence the peoples of Europe to give him the political leadership of the continent through nationalistic right-wing populist takeovers of European states and divisive separatist movements (Eltchaninoff, 2018, pp. 157-169). In this sense, the Russian involvement in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria could be understood as moves intended promote Putin’s ideology and to halt the spreading of “Western decadence” which threatens the realization of his vision. The “Western decadence” is seen as a corruption of society where the blossoming of individual hedonism and the absence of traditional and religious values are causing a rotting of social structures, morality and decency. The symptoms of this “Western decadence”³ are acceptance of homosexuality, atheism, and cosmopolitanism, which is seen as a symptom of disorder and decay (Eltchaninoff, 2018, p. 157). Putin fears the consequences for his vision, ideology, and his Russian society if it should get further affected by the Western “decadence”.

Vladimir Putin the man, the KGB, the end of the cold war, and political psychology

Does it matter who leads a country? Does it matter what the leader of a country believes, and does the leader’s life experiences matter in shaping those beliefs? Most scholars in international relations whether they prefer constructivism, idealism, realism, or something entirely different, would probably agree that it mattered who headed the German Nazis in 1933 or the Bolshevik’s in 1917 Russia. They would also agree, I imagine, in that the life experiences and the people they surrounded themselves with to some degree shaped Adolf Hitler and Vladimir Lenin as the leaders they would become, and affected the policies they ended up pursuing. The same logic applies to Vladimir Putin. His upbringing in a world of Cold War, his time in the KGB and the world of espionage, and watching an empire fall before entering into politics at a time when Russia was recovering from the collapse of the Soviet

³ Throughout this paper, I use the term “Western decadence”. I have created it to be a representative term of one or more of the listed features, and it must be understood as an illustration, not an opinion about those values.

Union, were all influential events in the life of the current Russian President. Many of the people he knew from his early political career in St. Petersburg and the KGB, would later end up in his inner circle once he gained power (Pringle, 2001, pp. 552-553).

Political psychology scholars pick up on this logic, emphasizing that political processes and outcomes are shaped at least in part by the preferences, choices, and actions of individuals and groups (Mols & 'T Hart, 2018, p. 142). The same scholars do not necessarily deny the relevance of formal and informal institutions, political structures, culture, traditions, material power or other mainstream aspects of international politics. They do, however, reject accounts that implicitly or explicitly assert that these macro level factors alone largely determine what goes on in politics (Mols & 'T Hart, 2018, p. 142). Scholars who engage in political psychology emphasize the need to study the characteristics and relationships of individuals and groups empirically, in order to explain their political preferences, choices and actions. This should be done with due attention to context-specific group dynamics, which is the crucial difference between political psychology and perspectives such as rational choice theory or bureaucratic theory (Mols & 'T Hart, 2018, p. 143). Political psychology encompasses different approaches and focus, and I cannot hope to include them all in this thesis. The literature of political psychology will be useful in this thesis by underlining the insight that political elites are affected by their experiences and the social background and values of the people surrounding them. In the next chapter, an outline of Vladimir Putin's life, career as a KGB officer, journey to power, and years as president and prime minister in the period from 2000 to 2012 is summarized.

H4: Putin's experiences from the Cold War, career as an intelligence operative, and political career have shaped his perception of the West as Russia's eternal competitor and enemy. This West must be checked to allow for Russia to become a unique great power, which is Putin's vision.

Putin's life and journey to power

Keeping up appearances, and early years

Sometime in the late 60s or early 70s, a young man who was still in high school entered his local KGB office in Leningrad to apply for a job. The KGB officer in charge declined to hire the young man and instead advised him to attend the university and study law. That young man was Vladimir Putin, already eager to serve as a teenager for the prestigious secret service, the KGB (Herspring, 2007, p. 2). Or so the story goes. The published facts about Putin's career and life are most likely edited in accordance with the image Putin wishes to project; therefore, it is unlikely that all aspects of his life are available to us. There is no reason to believe that Putin does not understand the value of appearances. For instance, according to the Kremlin, the President has a relatively modest wage of 133000\$ a year and lives in a small apartment (Hanbury & Cain, 2018). However, thanks to leaked documents that emerged in the 2015 Panama papers scandal (see Hanbury & Cain, 2018), it became clear that Putin's real fortune may be considerably greater than his official salary suggests. His fortune was apparently hidden through proxy ownership. Reports have surfaced linking Putin to a gigantic \$1 billion "secret palace" built with illegally appropriated government funds, as well as ownership of private planes, helicopters, and yachts (Hanbury & Cain, 2018). Maybe it is a bit less sympathetic and less alluring to the average Russian citizen to have a materialistic-minded president who has a hidden and probably illegal fortune, than a modest, pragmatic and spartan-like president?

Some facts are known about Putin's life and career. He was born in 1952 in St. Petersburg, which city at the time was known as Leningrad. While in school he trained in judo and became the Leningrad judo champion in 1974 (Herspring, 2007, p. 2)⁴. Putin has described his experience with judo as a turning point in his life. In his autobiography he states: "If I hadn't gotten involved in sports, I'm not sure how my life would have turned out. It was sports that dragged me off the streets" (as quoted in Herspring, 2007, p. 2). In 1975 Putin graduated from Leningrad State University with a law degree, and he was finally recruited by the KGB. After completing his initial training in Moscow, he was assigned to the foreign intelligence department in

⁴ The events described in the following two sections are largely based on the account given by Herspring (2007, pp. 1-9).

Leningrad. His work entailed spying on foreigners and the Russians who had contact with them. After studying German, Putin was eventually posted in Dresden in the German Democratic Republic in 1985 (Gevorkjan, Timakova, & Kolesnikov, 2000, p. 67). During his five years there, Putin perfected his German and his two daughters were born. According to one German agent under Putin's control, Putin was no 'natural' in the field of espionage, but learned his craft quickly and effectively (Herspring, 2007, p. 2).

In 1989, Putin returned to Russia and became head of the "Foreign Section" at Leningrad State University. In that capacity Putin worked as an aid for Anatoly Sobchak, who was the university's rector and Putin's former law professor. Sobchak became a major force in Leningrad's political circles, and Putin followed him to work as his advisor on international affairs. Sobchak would eventually become mayor of Leningrad, and Putin became the chairman of the city's foreign relations committee. From that position Putin had responsibility for several reform programs, and impressed people in power who crossed paths with him with his administrative skills and his ability to get things done. In 1996, Sobchak failed to get re-elected amid allegations of corruption, and it appeared as if Putin's political career would end there. However, Putin's reputation as a "doer" and skilled administrator had reached Anatoly Chubais, a well-connected advisor to President Boris Yeltsin. Chubais got Putin a job working with Yeltsin's chief of staff, and as in St. Petersburg he continued to impress the people around him. By 1998, Putin had climbed the ladder to become head of the Federal Security Service (Federalnaia Sluzhba Bezopasnosti, or FSB), the heir to the KGB. Shortly thereafter, he was appointed head of the government body that coordinated all of Russia's security and intelligence ministries. Finally, on 9 August 1999, Yeltsin surprised the world by announcing that the yet unknown Putin was being appointed prime minister and designated successor. On 31 December, Yeltsin surprised the world again by resigning, making Putin interim president. On 26 March, 2000, Putin won the first round of the presidential election with 52 percent of the vote and became the second elected president of the Russian Federation.

As a professional with experience in roles as FSB-director and prime minister, Putin has been described by American former ambassador to Russia James F. Collins as an intelligent, exceptionally well-informed interlocutor (Collins, 2007, p. xii). As a

person, Collins describes Putin as a gracious host who listens carefully to his guests and as someone who has the ability to lighten their mood with his sense of humor, while at the same time not revealing much about himself. Putin was described by his former boss and professor, Anatoly Sobchak, as a “determined, even stubborn young man” (Herspring, 2007, p. 3). Herspring (2007, pp. 3-5) argues that Putin gives the impression that he believes that even the most difficult problem can be resolved, provided the decision-maker will follow through and take personal responsibility for the outcome. In addition, Herspring argues that Putin gives the impression of trying to be highly rational in his approach to dealing with issues, quoting a former KGB colleague of Putin: “He’s always in control of his emotions, keeping his cards close to his chest. He must have a weakness but I don’t know what it is” (2007, pp. 3-4). As a leader, Putin claims that he likes to be hands on. In his autobiography, Putin states that his initial response in dealing with the conflict in Chechnya was centralization of authority and improved coordination:

“I met with the top officials of the Ministry of Defense, the General Staff, and the Interior Ministry. We met almost every day—sometimes twice a day, morning and evening. And with a lot of fine tuning, the ministries were consolidated. The first thing I had to do was overcome the disarray among the ministries” (Herspring, 2007, p. 4).

Putin likes to appear to be pragmatic, non-ideological in the sense that he can use policies from both the left and the right of the political spectrum, and as a strong-man with a passion for the outdoors (Eltchaninoff, 2018, p. 3). Herspring connects Putin’s administrative and pragmatic way of leadership to his past in the KGB: “Putin’s style is also administrative, in that he expects the bureaucracy to implement his mandates, and his decisions tend to be of the gradual, incremental type that one would expect from someone who spent his life in an organization like the KGB” (Herspring, 2007, p. 4). The values and norms of the KGB may live on in the Russian president, and to some degree shape his perceptions and his own values, thereby his political thinking.

The Soviet Union and the KGB in Putin’s time

When Putin entered the ranks of the KGB in 1975, Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev (1906-1982) was the leader of the Soviet Union, and Yuri Vladimirovich Andropov (1914-1984) was head of the KGB. The Soviet Union was seeing the results of its long

build-up of its armed forces since the 60s in this period, as well as resisting the U.S. in Vietnam. By the time Putin joined the KGB in 1975, the Soviet Union had over 300 SS-18 medium-range missiles, each equipped with ten nuclear warheads (Suny, 2011, p. 450). The KGB also grew tremendously in size during this period; in 1982 it was bigger than Dzerzhinskiy's Cheka at the time of the Russian civil war or Nikolai Yezhov's NKVD in the late 1930s (Pringle, 2000, p. 195). The Soviet Union was at this time possibly equal to the U.S. measured in strategic military power (Suny, 2011, pp. 450-451).

Both Brezhnev and Andropov were conservatives in the Soviet context, who sought to secure the Soviet Union from dissidents and the foreign secret services believed to be running them (Pringle, 2000, pp. 193-197; Suny, 2011, pp. 447-460). The KGB was in this period locking dissidents in labor camps and mental asylums, and exiling dissidents, which in a Soviet context could be called "soft repression" (Suny, 2011, p. 459). A characteristic of this era was the "Fifth Directorate", which was a revival of Lavrenti Beria's old domestic subversion directorate. It was an entity directed at finding and dealing with dissidents in the intelligentsia, in religious circles, but also other individuals of interest (Pringle, 2000, pp. 195-196). The directorate was very effective. Through coercion and bribery its agents recruited a large number of informants in the clergy, intelligentsia and other relevant groups. As many as 11 million Soviet citizens may have been recruited as informants, one in every 18 adult citizen, including almost all of the Russian Orthodox bishops during this period (Pringle, 2000, p. 196).

The KGB exerted a major influence on Andropov, which he himself pointed out in his valedictory speech at the KGB headquarters in 1982: "Fifteen years, fifteen years—you cannot hide them away, they will always be with me and it seems also that you will always be with me" (Pringle, 2000, p. 198). Andropov was leaving the KGB to become the new leader of the Soviet Union following Brezhnev's death. In his short reign before dying of illness on 9 February 1984, Andropov sought to use the KGB to increase social and political discipline in the Soviet Union by reducing the corruption that had characterized Soviet institutions in Brezhnev's last years. Consequently, many KGB senior officials were moved into positions of power in the communist party, the police and various state departments (Pringle, 2000, pp. 198-199). Putin

started his KGB career in counterintelligence in Leningrad before he was transferred to the elite Foreign Intelligence Directorate and was thus exposed to both the culture of hunting enemies within the Soviet Union's borders and externally. The role of the KGB in this period was that of disciplinarian of Soviet society, as a spear tip against the alleged Western threat within the country and externally, and thus as one of the most important pillars of society. The influence of Putin's experience and relationship with the KGB is apparent in his choice of people to work for him, his focus on and his prioritization of the armed and secret services in funding and rhetoric, as well as his apparent perception of the West as an eternal competitor and enemy.

The New Russian state, and its challenges

After Yeltsin became the first elected Russian president in 1991, he would go on to push through a constitution setting up a political system where the real power rested with the office of the president, and left the parliament weak (Suny, 2011, p. 516). He would also implement radical economic reforms called "Shock therapy", to replace the old communist centralized and state dominant economic system with a capitalist market economy. This entailed large scale privatization of large state-owned companies, turning them into joint-stock companies. The system worked poorly, allowing those who knew the right people and the system to buy large shares in the new companies at fire-sale prices. These individuals became the first Russian oligarchs. They wound up in control of critical means of production and services, through their ownership of controlling shares of the Russian media, natural resources, manufacturing, and financial companies (Remington, 2016, p. 9). The oligarchs were thus able to demand and receive credit subsidies from the government, which would end up in Swiss bank accounts and foreign investments around the globe (Suny, 2011, p. 520). An example of this practice was the case of the president of LUKoil, who had no real assets in 1991, but increased his worth by \$2.4 billion by 1995 (Suny, 2011, p. 520). Corruption, crime, and bribery became part of the every-day affairs in Russia. One report prepared for Yeltsin in 1994 suggested that 70 to 80 percent of all business and banking were in some fashion controlled by criminal mafias (Suny, 2011, p. 520).

The Russian state Putin would inherit from Yeltsin in 1999 was a country with deep wounds. Domestically Putin had to solve several problems: the central authority was weakened after Yeltsin bought political support from regional politicians by granting them a high degree of autonomy, solving the unpopular war in Chechnya, revitalizing the economy from the collapse of the Rubel in 1998, and gaining at least some control over the oligarchs (Herspring, 2007, pp. 3-8). In foreign policy, Russia was still recovering from the Soviet collapse and the subsequent humiliations from the concessions made to the West. Putin showed his concern for Russia's situation as interim president, stating that "Russia is in the midst of one of the most difficult periods in its history. For the first time in the past 200-300 years, it is facing a real threat of sliding into the second, and possibly even third echelon of world states" (as quoted in Herspring, 2007, p. 1). The unspoken message of which echelon of world states Putin deems as appropriate for Russia would become clear in time.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, relations between the new Russian state and the West had been improving, but the new relationship was undoubtedly one in favor of the West. The Clinton and Bush administrations approached the new Russian Federation as a partner in the new world. The two US administrations invited Yeltsin to G7 meetings during their time in office, granted the new Russian state the old Soviet Union's permanent seat in the UN Security Council, and in 1994 Clinton pledged economic support to Russia at a summit in Vancouver (Suny, 2011, pp. 528-529). At the same time, the West oversaw a NATO expansion through granting memberships to East European countries, despite intense protests and opposition from Russian politicians (Suny, 2011, p. 529). The expansion unfolded in spite of the Russian desire to be the dictating force in the post-Soviet space. In 1993 Yeltsin indicated that Russia had to defend its interests in its backyard, and should be granted authority to do so by the international community:

Russia continues to have vital interests in the cessation of all armed conflict on the territory of the former USSR. Moreover, the world community is increasingly coming to realize our country's special responsibility in this difficult matter. I believe the time has come for authoritative international organizations, including the UN, to grant Russia special powers as guarantor of peace and stability in this region (as quoted in Suny, 2011, p. 528).

Reluctantly, Yeltsin signed an accord with NATO in May 1997 allowing membership expansion in Eastern Europe with some concessions to Russian security (Suny, 2011, p. 529). In 1999, the first previous members of the Warsaw Pact joined NATO: the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. In 2004, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia followed in the largest wave of NATO enlargement in history (NATO, 2018a).

Putin's first years in office - centralization and consolidation of power.

Putin's presidential campaign in 1999 was run by Dmitry Medvedev, a close ally of Putin who started working for him in 1990 and who would become first president (2008-2012) and then president of Russia (2012-2020). When Putin became president in 2000, he surrounded himself with two factions. Medvedev can be identified with the faction associated with the ideas of market reform and the rule of law; the other faction is based in the security agencies and includes several of Putin's old colleagues from the KGB (Remington, 2016, pp. 3-4). The latter faction is generally called "Siloviki" because the uniformed and non-uniformed security services are called "Silovye struktury" meaning force structures, and are associated with conservative, nationalist and statist ideas (Remington, 2016, p. 4). In 2000, five out of seven presidential appointees to head the new federal districts came from the "Silovye struktury" (Renz, 2006, p. 903). One example of an individual from the "Siloviki" faction was Sergei Ivanov, a former KGB officer who served as secretary of the Security Council, defense minister and deputy prime minister during the period from 1999 to 2008.

Putin's first presidential period began in 2000. He was reelected in 2004, and the years 2004-2008 were a period of centralizing and consolidation of power domestically. Putin accumulated a great deal of power through the office of the president by using classic power-consolidation tactics such as rewarding his supporters with lucrative posts in ministries and state enterprises, eliminating opposition centers of power, and launching new policy initiatives (Remington, 2016, p. 5). The president has the right to appoint executives across the country, command the armed forces into action without the consent of parliament, and issue decrees with the force of law (Remington, 2016, p. 20). These powers were mainly inherited

from the Yeltsin era, but they were strengthened and renewed by Putin in the endeavor to rebuild the power of the state. To Putin that meant making the state bureaucracy accountable to the top political leadership, strengthening the army, police, and security services, making parliament and courts predictable by taming them through fear or appointing friendly minded replacements for opponents, the media companies obedient through coercion, by takeovers by owners friendly to Putin or direct state control, and boosting the economy which has been highly reliant on revenues from the export of gas and oil (Remington, 2016, p. 6).

Putin had to confront the regional governors and oligarchs whom Yeltsin had embraced as allies, granting them a say in policy-making. The regional governors were weakened by the creation of new federal districts overseen by handpicked presidential appointees (five out of seven from the Siloviki) with the power to dismiss the governors for violations of the law (Remington, 2016, p. 9). The oligarchs were pressured by the persecution of two of the most prominent members, showing that no amount of money could guarantee their safety (Remington, 2016, p. 9). Months after being elected, Putin forced these two oligarchs, Boris Berezovsky (1946-2013) and Vladimir Gusinsky (b. 1952), to give up their ownership of television stations and other assets (Suny, 2011, p. 540). They both fled the country shortly after. In October 2003 the richest man in Russia, Mikhail Khodorkovsky (b. 1963), was arrested after threatening to sell his huge oil company Yukos to foreign investors, and after he had failed to heed Putin's order to the oligarchs to stay out of politics (Suny, 2011, p. 540). Khodorkovsky was convicted on charges of corruption and sent to a Siberian prison camp. Yukos was dismantled and various pieces of it ended up under state control. In 2013, Putin pardoned and released Khodorkovsky, who now lives in London.

Under Putin, political freedom has declined compared to the 90s, through strict control over the media, political parties, and close supervision of NGO's. Journalists critical of the regime run the risk of being detained, and several prominent critics of Putin have ended up murdered by unknown and uncaught assassins (Suny, 2011, p. 540). Leaders of political movements who directly oppose Putin are often arrested on trumped-up charges, their parties are denied permission to hold rallies, and so on (Remington, 2016, p. 18). Regional and national elections are manipulated by state

officials through unequal access to media coverage, rigged court decisions about the eligibility of candidates, and fraudulent vote counting (Remington, 2016, p. 19). By ensuring that the “right” people are elected to national and regional legislative bodies, Putin has been able to gain parliamentary support for his agenda. The appearance of a Russian democracy is important because of the legitimacy connected to the status of democracies in the current international order, and is in line with Iljin’s idea of a “controlled democracy” (Snyder, 2018a, p. 54). Secondly, the idea of a more or less undefined enemy who seeks to undermine and hurt Russia through propaganda and clandestine agents, makes it easier to establish a constant uncertainty in the Russian society about what is really true. In combination with the constant suppression of opposition this is the recipe for staying in power used by Putin in the spirit of the “Siloviki”.

Developments in Russian foreign policy 2000-2020

The period from 2000 until 2008 was a period of shifts between reproaching and opposing the West in Russian foreign policy. Putin inherited a freshly humiliated Russia after the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo, which was initiated without consulting Moscow. On 24 March, 1999, after receiving the news of the NATO bombing of Serbian forces in Kosovo, Russian foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov (1929-2015) turned his plane around in the mid-Atlantic, canceling a planned official visit to the U.S. in the process (Herspring & Rutland, 2007, p. 263). However, after the events on 11 September 2001, Putin was the first foreign leader to speak with President George W. Bush (b. 1946) and offer his condolences (O'Loughlin, Tuathail, & Kolossov, 2004, p. 3). Furthermore, the Kremlin permitted the U.S. to use air force facilities in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan for the attack on Afghanistan on the condition that their presence would be limited in duration and restricted in scope (Remington, 2016, pp. 257-258). On the other hand, the colored revolutions in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005 were seen as products of Western influence, and maybe even products of Western agents (Remington, 2016, p. 261). All three revolutions ousted fatigued former communist led regimes and replaced them with youthful and allegedly pro-democratic alternatives (Jones, 2012, p. 5).

Especially the Orange revolution in Ukraine was a humiliation for Putin and Russian foreign policy (Remington, 2016, pp. 261-265). In 2004, Putin supported at the time presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovich (b. 1950), who was a Russia-friendly politician with his main support from eastern Ukraine. His opposition was the pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko (b. 1954), who enjoyed U.S. support. After the election results ended in favor of Yanukovich, it was denounced by the Ukrainian opposition and the West on the grounds of election fraud. The situation ended with a new election after popular protests in several Ukrainian cities and bargaining between the candidates and their international partners. Yushchenko won the new election and became president, despite an assassination attempt on his life. During the campaign, Yushchenko was poisoned with a high dose of dioxin, the active ingredient in the powerful defoliant Agent Orange (Remington, 2016, p. 262). He recovered in time to continue his campaign, but the process left his face badly disfigured. According to Yushchenko, there were three men who could have poisoned him, and they had all fled to Russia. The Kremlin refused to extradite the main suspect, former Ukrainian intelligence officer Volodymyr Satsyuk, and refused to provide Russian-made dioxin for testing (Kyiv Post, 2009). Then in 2008, the war in Georgia started, and a new and firmer foreign policy would follow.

In May 2008, Putin stepped down as president in an constitutionally required break, and his loyal ally Medvedev became the third president of the Russian Federation. Medvedev appointed Putin as prime minister immediately after entering office. The appearances of a constitutional democracy were upheld, and the arrangement neatly kept Putin in a position of power. The relationship between the two was one of a patron and a client. Medvedev had followed Putin closely, mostly in staff jobs, through his career and through his time as president the political course did not change (Remington, 2016, p. 2). There is a good chance that Putin never really handed over the reins completely to Medvedev. Shortly after entering office, Medvedev proposed an extension to the presidential term to six years instead of four, leading to speculations that he was preparing the ground for Putin's return (Dyomkin, 2008). However, the two leaders were on different wavelengths on the UN Security Council resolution 1973, which led to the bombing of Libyan forces in March 2011. Putin said the resolution resembled "medieval calls for crusades", and Medvedev responded by calling Putin's statement for "unacceptable", and saying such words

could “lead to a clash of civilizations” (BBC, 2011). However, their apparent disagreement may have been a deliberate ruse, where Medvedev would appear as the liberal Westernizer and Putin as the strongman of Russian politics.

Medvedev was appointed prime minister after Putin resumed his role of president for his third term in 2012, this time for six years, a position he would keep until January 2020. While Putin was inaugurated in the Grand Kremlin Palace, riot police were suppressing the opposition protesting in the streets (Elder, 2012). The protests had been going on since December 2011, organized by the opposition that claimed that the election process was corrupt and fraudulent. Opposition leaders pointed to irregularities like that in Novosibirsk, where the total amount of votes was equal to 146% of the population in the region (Snyder, 2018a, p. 58). In his inaugural speech, Putin stressed the importance of respecting democratic values and freedom, and of Russia becoming a leader and center of gravity for the whole of Eurasia (Kremlin, 2012). Putin would later admit that the 2012 election in fact was fraudulent. Medvedev added that all the Russian elections had been fraudulent, indicating that winning the majority of votes in elections was not crucial to stay in power (Snyder, 2018a, p. 59).

Eltchaninoff (2018, p. 6) argues that Putin’s term began on a note of revenge against those protesting his return to power, domestically and abroad. During his second and third terms as president, 2012- 2018 and 2018-present, Russian foreign policy has included such dramatic events as the 2014 annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine, confronting the U.S. with an intervention in Syria in 2015, and meddling in the U.S. 2016 presidential election and the United Kingdom Brexit-vote (Eltchaninoff, 2018, p. 166). In 2017, the Russian press portrayed French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron (b. 1977) as the victim of a sexual predator (by his wife who is older than him) and supported his politically far-right electoral opponent Marie Le Pen (b. 1968) (Eltchaninoff, 2018, p. 164). The Kremlin also backed Angela Merkel’s electoral opponents and supported the Catalan secessionists agitating for independence following the unauthorized October referendum in 2017 (Eltchaninoff, 2018, p. 78). However, the first traces of a more assertive Russian foreign policy can be found in Georgia in 2008.

Georgia on the bear's mind



Map 1: Georgia (Britannica, 2008)

Partitioned Georgia

In December 1991, the Soviet Union broke down and 15 successor states emerged, Georgia among them. The transition from Soviet republics to sovereign states took different routes for the successors, the Baltic countries turned towards a Western democratic model and market economies, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan kept their old communist elites in national communist colors, Georgia experienced fissiparous tendencies (Suny, 2011, pp. 527-528). The leader of the reformist coalition “Round table – Free Georgia” and later Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1939-1993) attempted to create a Georgia exclusively for Georgians, neglecting the national minorities in the process and stoking ethnic-civil war (Cheterian, 2009, pp. 156-157; Suny, 2011, p. 528).

The divide between South Ossetia and Abkhazia on the one hand and the rest of Georgia on the other had deeper roots than the late 80s/early 90s, but they were intensified by conditions present shortly before and after the Soviet collapse. During these years, the Georgian nationalist movements' claim for national liberation grew in strength as the Soviet grip on the region loosened. Ossetians and Abkhazians along with other ethnic minorities were enjoying different degrees of autonomy under the Soviet Union from the rest of Georgia, and so they were not as prone to nationalism as was the rest of the country. On the contrary, they feared that the Georgian national movement would undermine the political, cultural and linguistic rights they already had, resulting in the two regions being in favor of preserving the Soviet state (Cheterian, 2009, p. 157). The Georgian national movement saw the two regions as KGB-puppets serving at the pleasure of Moscow. Tensions rose high and resulted in the 1991-92 South Ossetia War.

During the conflict, several followers of Gamsakhurdia turned against him and invited the former Communist Party chief Eduard Shevardnadze (1928-2014) to return to Georgia (Suny, 2011, p. 528). The war ended with a coup d'état resulting in the ousting of Gamsakhurdia by Shevardnadze and his allies; Shevardnadze became president in 1995 after a three-year period of heading a transitional government. Peace was reached through a Russian initiative for negotiations and a Russian peacekeeping force deployed to South Ossetia. At this point, the Georgian state was in turmoil, barely functioning with weak institutions and an ineffective system of government (Cheterian, 2009, pp. 166-167; Suny, 2011, p. 528).

Through the rest of the 90s the Shevardnadze government sought to rebuild and develop Georgia, but adopted ambivalent policies towards the de facto republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Cheterian, 2009, p. 157). Tbilisi considered Abkhazia to be the harder case of the two and the more important one strategically, believing that solving the Abkhazian case would make South-Ossetia an easier target (Cheterian, 2009, p. 157). On one level, the Georgian authorities signaled their readiness for peaceful negotiations to resolve the conflicts; on the other hand, a series of threats were made towards the two republics when they declined to negotiate. In Abkhazia Tbilisi supported attacks by proxy forces -- first in 1998

through the guerrilla groups White Legion and the Forest Brothers executing attacks in the Gali region located south east in Abkhazia near the Georgian border, and in 2001 when Chechen warlord Ruslan Gelayev attacked the town of Sukhumi near the Black Sea from the north-eastern mountain region Kodori Georgia. Both attacks were supported by the Georgian Interior Ministry (Cheterian, 2009, p. 158). These efforts failed to reunite the country, on the contrary Tbilisi ended up pushing the two republics further away from reunification. The situation remained a semi-stable stalemate until 2003.

The Rose Revolution and growing tensions

In November 2003, the former Soviet minister of foreign affairs Shevardnadze was in his eighth and last year as Georgian president. On 2 November Georgia held parliamentary elections, the next day several European organizations and observers claimed that the election had failed to meet international standards (Freedom House, 2018). The Georgian opposition united in claims for reelection and the ousting of Shevardnadze and his government. At the opening of the new session of parliament opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili (b. 1967) led a group of supporters bursting into the parliament with roses in their hands, interrupting a speech from Shevardnadze and forcing him to escape with his bodyguards (Baker & Glasser, 2003). From his residence in Tbilisi the president declared a state of emergency and started to mobilize the police and military. However, several military units refused to obey his orders, and by mid-November there were mass protests in several large cities across the country. Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov arranged a meeting between Shevardnadze and the opposition on the evening of 23th November, resulting in the president's resignation. Six weeks later in January 2004, Saakashvili was elected Georgian president unopposed with 96 percent of the votes (The Administration of the President of Georgia, 2015). The sudden political turnover was named the Rose Revolution, and was one of several "colored revolutions" happening at the time.

On entering office Saakashvili committed to a pro-Western foreign policy and declared European and Euro-Atlantic integration as his main priority (Rich, 2010, p. xvi). In his inaugural speech, Saakashvili was surrounded by Georgia's warrior saint St. George and the Georgian and European flags, framing his message in the

context of the Christian roots and European inheritance of the country (Jones, 2012, pp. 11-12). “Today, we have not raised the European flag by accident - this flag is Georgian flag as well, as far as it embodies our civilization, our culture, the essence of our history and perspective, and [our] vision of our future” (as quoted in Civil.ge, 2004). The speech probably landed well with the supporters of the Rose Revolution, but, for the already alienated minorities, the speech may have come across as another wave of Georgian nationalism. Furthermore, Saakashvili revealed his plans to strengthen the armed forces, a combination of messages which raised concern in Moscow and in the breakaway republics.

The armed forces became a priority in this period; the budget increased from 1% of GDP in 2004 to 8% in 2008, its manpower increased from 12,000 to 32,000 between 2003 and 2008, and the structure of the armed forces were built up to satisfy NATO-membership (Jones, 2012, pp. 9-11). The U.S. gave support to Georgia through increased military aid, and funding and organizing the training of four Georgian brigades by U.S. Marines. Officers were sent on exchange training programs in NATO countries including the UK, Germany, and Turkey, and Georgian forces received training and military hardware from Israel (Jones, 2012, p. 10). Georgia responded by supporting the U.S. invasion of Iraq with 2,000 soldiers (Cheterian, 2009, p. 159). Parallel to the military buildup several reforms to strengthen the central state authority were introduced. Among other reforms, Georgian authorities reduced the power of regional administrators, strengthened the oversight of the interior ministry, and implemented a policy of “Georgianization” through reforms such as a national university entrance exam in Georgian (Jones, 2012, pp. 9-11). A renewed Georgian patriotic emphasis was emerging, and with it a desire for territorial and political unification. Georgian government officials regularly announced that they would celebrate the next Christmas in Sukhumi or Tskhinvali, and Saakashvili himself was allegedly already planning military interventions against the wayward republics in 2005 (Jones, 2012, p. 11; Rohan, 2008).

Sizing Adjara

The first target for Saakashvili’s reconsolidation was the autonomous republic Adjara located in south-west Georgia. The republic is strategically important as it borders

Turkey to the south, and with it trade through the port of Batumi, which also contained a Russian army base. Adjara was at the time led by Aslan Abashidze, a Russia-friendly politician who ruled the republic as a medieval fiefdom (Gogia, 2004).

After the Rose Revolution and the election of Saakashvili, the sentiment for democratic change manifested itself in anti-Abashidze political movements inside Adjara. Abashidze accused Tbilisi for intentionally exporting the Rose Revolution to Adjara and was at the same time making frequent trips to Moscow, possibly seeking military assurances (Gogia, 2004). The situation escalated with various ultimatums being exchanged and military mobilization on both sides, and Saakashvili was in essence demanding political control over Adjara (Welt, 2010, pp. 69-70). Abashidze's forces destroyed the bridges which connected Adjara to the rest of Georgia, protests intensified and the armed supporters of Abashidze decided to abandon him (Oxford Analytica Daily Brief Service, 2004). Tbilisi then offered free passage and immunity for Abashidze and his family, the crisis ended when Abashidze fled with his family to Moscow aided by Russian Security Council Secretary Igor Ivanov⁵ on 5 May 2004 (Oxford Analytica Daily Brief Service, 2004).

Having succeeded in Adjara, the newly elected government in Tbilisi could concentrate on Abkhazia and South-Ossetia. The borders between Georgia and South Ossetia had been regulated through a ceasefire treaty and peace-keeping forces with personnel from South-Ossetia, Georgia and Russia since the end of the 1991-92 war (Welt, 2010, p. 69). Since then, a pattern of illegal black-market trade had developed in the region, with goods like flour and fuel originating from Russia finding its way into Georgia.

The anti-smuggling campaign and growing tensions in the break-away republics

In December 2003, the Georgian authorities started an anti-smuggling campaign which entailed raiding a flourmill, stopping trucks for inspection and destroying roads suspected of being used for illegal imports from Russia. The efforts were scaled back during the Adjara episode, finally ending in early May 2004. The anti-smuggling

⁵ Ivanov was replaced as foreign minister in February 2004 by Sergey Lavrov.

campaign led to the creation of at least 13 Georgian checkpoints, manned by armed Georgian police and “party activists”, whom Saakashvili described as “[...] people who want to make the country look decent” (Welt, 2010, p. 70). A secondary measure Tbilisi employed was raising the defense in ethnic Georgian villages inside South Ossetia, for instance by establishing a secure road to get men in those areas quickly (Welt, 2010, p. 79). These villages were located in a way that nearly surrounded Tskhinvali and threatened their main supply line from the north. South Ossetian forces were deployed to prevent Georgian forces from establishing their positions, leading up to skirmishes between the two forces (Welt, 2010, pp. 85-86). During the summer months of 2004 Georgia increased its troop numbers in the proximity of South Ossetia, followed by protests from both South Ossetian and Russian authorities. The Russian Foreign Ministry even warned Tbilisi of “the gravity of the situation now obtaining” and that Tbilisi would be held accountable for any “violence and bloodshed that might occur” (Welt, 2010, p. 81).

The anti-smuggling operation developed into a tense defensive military operation for Georgia, with Russia arming the South Ossetians and issuing serious warnings of what to expect if the situation should escalate (Welt, 2010, pp. 82-85). After several deaths in various skirmishes, Saakashvili withdrew all Georgian forces except the Georgian 500 soldiers contributing to the joint peace-keeping forces in August. The tensions were somewhat eased, and Georgia ended up consolidating some territorial control within South Ossetia (Welt, 2010, p. 92). Interstate cooperation occurred between Georgia and Russia following the de-escalation. In 2005, an agreement was reached between Tbilisi and Moscow to close the remaining Russian bases in Georgia, the last Russian troops and equipment left Batumi in Adjara in November 2007 (Antidze, 2007). However, tensions rose between Moscow and Tbilisi in early November 2007 after riot police were deployed against massive protests that erupted in Tbilisi following opposition allegations of government corruption (BBC, 2007). Saakashvili blamed Russian agents for whipping up the opposition leading to the riots (The Guardian, 2007).

The bear came through the tunnel

On 3 April 2008 there was a NATO summit in Bucharest where representatives of the NATO countries stated that Georgia and Ukraine would become NATO members (NATO, 2018c). The next step for the two countries would be to complete their Membership Action Plan (MAP) which included accomplishing agreed-upon requirements for entering in the alliance (NATO, 2018c). However, by the end of the summit the applications of both Georgia and Ukraine to join MAP were rejected, although the members still agreed that Georgia and Ukraine would become members of NATO (BBC, 2008; Cheterian, 2009, p. 162). Part of the reason might have been doubts about whether Ukraine and Georgia could reach the requirements for joining the alliance. Although there is no firm universal checklist for entering, there are a minimum of requirements that aspiring member states must satisfy. These include upholding democracy, making progress towards a market economy, having firm civilian control over the armed forces, and establishing their ability and willingness to contribute to NATO operations (NATO, 2018a; U.S. Department of State, 1997). The opposition from Moscow was probably disconcerting for some of the members as well.

On 5 April 2008, Putin was attending the NATO summit as Russian president for the first time. While he was there, he held a speech confronting and possibly warning against handing NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine, stating that it would compromise Russian security (Erlanger, 2005). However, Putin also praised president Bush for listening to Russian concerns regarding the planned deployment of missile defense systems to Europe. Attendees at the summit declared that Putin had denied that Russia had any imperial aspirations, and that Russia wanted cooperation in security issues like terrorism (Erlanger, 2005). It is possible that the praises of Bush was inserted as preparation for a planned meeting between the presidents a few days after the summit at a resort in Sochi. Putin's rhetoric changed drastically over the next few months.

In mid-June 2008 there was a skirmish between forces in Georgian villages and forces in Tskhinvali resulting in the death of one Ossetian (Welt, 2010, p. 92). The situation escalated further in early July, when an Ossetian head of police was killed in a bomb attack in suburban Tskhinvali. He had earlier been tagged by Georgian officials as the leader of an "illegal armed formation" (Welt, 2010, p. 92). A second

bomb attack killed the Georgia-backed “alternative” president of South Ossetia, who since 2006 had exercised authority over the Georgian controlled territory inside South Ossetia (Welt, 2010, p. 92). The two sides accused each other of killing “their” man, and skirmishes once again occurred between South Ossetian and Georgian forces.

The South Ossetian authorities started to evacuate women and children from Tskhinvali, and called for North Caucasus voluntaries to come to their aid. On 4 August, South Ossetian authorities issued an ultimatum demanding the drawback of all Georgian forces from South Ossetia, including the territories Georgia had occupied in 2004 (Welt, 2010, p. 94). South Ossetian leader Kokoiti announced that “we shall take the most decisive measures in order to resolve this problem for good” (as quoted in Welt, 2010, p. 94). On the afternoon of 6 August, South Ossetian forces engaged Georgian positions, possibly seeking to retake the territory they had occupied on heights southwest of Tskhinvali (Welt, 2010, p. 94). Late on 7 August, the Georgian forces began a massive artillery barrage against Tskhinvali, followed by tanks and armored vehicles entering the city (Cheterian, 2009, p. 159). Early on 8 August, Saakashvili announced that several regions in South Ossetia was already liberated (Cheterian, 2009, p. 159).

About seven hours after the Georgian assault on Tskhinvali, Russian armored troops started to pour through the Roki tunnel, located north in South Ossetia (Cheterian, 2009, p. 159). Faced with a greater enemy, Tbilisi announced that it would recall the 2000 Georgian troops stationed in Iraq to help repel the Russian forces. During the next 48 hours, Russian tanks engaged Georgian positions in and around Tskhinvali, while Russian air forces harassed Georgian supply lines (Cheterian, 2009, pp. 159-160). By 10 August, the Russian forces had successfully pushed Georgian forces out of Tskhinvali and executed several airstrikes on Georgian positions in other parts of the country resulting in heavy Georgian losses. In Abkhazia Russian troops supported local forces in attacking the Gori region, which was captured on 13 August. The Russian forces experienced a tremendous momentum and success; at one point Russian tanks were one hour from Tbilisi (Cheterian, 2009, p. 155).

On the 12 August, The conflict ended in a ceasefire-agreement due to the efforts of French President Nicholas Sarkozy, signed first by Georgian President Saakashvili and then by Russian President Medvedev (Cheterian, 2009, p. 160). Military operations were halted within the following five days. For Georgia, the five days of war resulted in the loss of billions of dollars in military investments and infrastructure, the previously gained territory in Abkhazia and in South Ossetia, and humiliation of its U.S. trained armed forces (Cheterian, 2009, pp. 166-167). Shortly after the ceasefire Russia recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, while most of the international community refused to follow suit. Moscow were joined exclusively by Venezuela, Nicaragua, and the republic of Nauru, all states with considerable ties to Russia (Eltchaninoff, 2018, p. 129).

Analysis

The five day conflict resulted in a Russian takeover of two Georgian regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russian authorities stated that they were intervening on humanitarian grounds very much like NATO's argument for intervening in Kosovo, claiming that the Georgian forces were killing civilians (Cheterian, 2009, pp. 160-161). Georgian authorities claimed they acted to confront South Ossetian aggression followed by a Russian invasion, suggesting that Russian forces invaded or were preparing with the intent to invade Georgian territory before the shelling of Tskhinvali (Cheterian, 2009, p. 161).

The Russian leadership had long-standing worries about Saakashvili's Western orientation, and about Georgia's military ties with the U.S. through military doctrines and instructors (Cheterian, 2009, p. 162; Hamilton, 2010, p. 225). After the Bucharest summit in 2008, the prospects of another NATO member in the post-Soviet space that shared a border with Russia⁶, was apparently too much for the Kremlin to swallow. The Russian leadership took the opportunity to demonstrate what it saw as Western hypocrisy by justifying the intervention on humanitarian grounds similar to the arguments used by NATO in Kosovo. By preemptively invading Georgia, and acknowledging South Ossetia and Abkhazia as sovereign states, the Kremlin

⁶ Russia already borders to five NATO members, of 14 bordering countries in total (NATO, 2018b).

succeeded in creating several speedbumps for Georgian ambitions to join NATO. The Georgian armed forces were humiliated by the effectiveness shown by the Russian forces leading to large Georgian losses, Saakashvili had to see previously gained territory from 2004 being lost, and the Georgian leadership had to recognize that having close ties with the U.S. was no guarantee of support in time of need. The gains from the military buildup were severely set back, as Georgia lost billions of dollars in investments in its armed forces and infrastructure (Cheterian, 2009, pp. 166-167).

If the Russian intervention was based on imperial ambitions, then why did the Kremlin decide not to push on and take control of Tbilisi when Russian tanks were one hour away (Cheterian, 2009, p. 155)? The cost and consequences of a prolonged war and international pressure were probably part of the explanation. The Kremlin could not be sure that NATO would sit idly by if the conflict escalated, Georgian forces were able to inflict some damage to the Russian forces having shot down at least ten aircraft, and Russian tanks proved to be vulnerable to hand-held rockets (Rich, 2010, p. xxii).

The financial crisis of 2007-08 also severely affected the Russian economy and may have decreased the willingness in the Kremlin to commit to a long and costly occupation. Russia had recent experiences from the wars in Chechnya and Afghanistan, where the latter had shown how much damage Western support to hard-fighting rebels could do to an occupation force. The acknowledgment of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as sovereign states by Russia ensured a foothold inside Georgia, which could be useful proxies for making trouble should Georgia intensify its efforts to join NATO. In hindsight, this seems to be the Kremlin's strategy to ensure that Georgia stays out of NATO. Between 2008 and 2020, the Kremlin has been engaging in close cooperation and partial integration between Russian and South Ossetian security forces, issuing double citizenship for South Ossetians and Abkhazians making them Russian citizens, giving military support through facilitating training, providing equipment and building Russian military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and contributing massively in funding the Abkhazian and South Ossetian civilian administrations (German, 2016, pp. 155-165).

The Russian intervention in Georgia was undertaken mostly to prevent Georgia from becoming a NATO member. There was no major Russian intervention after the Rose Revolution, even though it brought about democratic changes, and high public support for Saakashvili who was leaning to the West. The period leading up to the five-day war of 2008 was mainly one of limited meddling and concessions from the Kremlin, although despite rattling sabers during the troubles in 2004, the Kremlin closed military bases and allowed Saakashvili to regain control over Adjara. However, if Georgia had been left alone to join NATO and regain sovereignty over the territories of the wayward republics, it would have been a lot harder for Putin to reverse these changes.

The prospects of one more decadent NATO-state deploying U.S. troops on the Russian border and exporting the “Western decadence” to corrupt Russian culture and values, was probably not an alluring idea to Putin. The rhetoric employed by Putin at the Bucharest NATO summit and during the time surrounding the conflict suggests that he saw the U.S. as responsible for the war. Putin, who was prime minister at the time, stated in late August 2008 that the U.S. deliberately orchestrated the conflict to benefit one of the presidential candidates in the upcoming U.S. election (Sherman & Sussex, 2010, p. 1). At the summit in Bucharest, Putin had warned against handing NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine, as it would compromise Russia’s security. If Putin was the man really holding the reins under Medvedevs presidency, then the greatest accomplishment of Medvedevs presidency was really Putin’s victory. On 11 March 2011, this accomplishment became clear after an article in the Russian newspaper *Izvestiya* linked the war in Georgia to a broader perspective on Russian foreign policy: “[B]y securing victory and consolidating it by recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia resolutely returned to the table in the geopolitical game, where it had not had a seat for two decades” (as quoted in German, 2016). The way for Russia to be internationally recognized as a player to be reckoned with, was apparently by committing to firm and violent responses in foreign policy.

From Maidan to Crimea



Map 2: Ukraine (Britannica, 2020b)

Ukraine never had a unifying national post-Soviet revolution after 1991. The western parts of the country became a center for separatist nationalism, while the eastern regions to a large extent retained a Soviet identity (Suny, 2011, pp. 499-500). The new regime in Ukraine consisted of an old communist elite that accommodated itself to the new nationalist mood in much of the country.

Leonid Kravchuk was elected as the first president of the newly independent Ukraine. He was immediately put under pressure by both the U.S. and Russia to make arrangements for the old Soviet nuclear arsenal to be delivered to Russia for dismantling, and the Kremlin also wanted an arrangement for the Black Sea fleet located in Crimea (Suny, 2011, p. 527). During the 90s Ukraine experienced economic turmoil with inflation skyrocketing, and Kravchuk failed to manage the economic problems that followed. This lapse in economic management was exploited by a small number of old Soviet enterprise directors, who became the first Ukrainian oligarchs (Wilson, 2014, p. 42).

In 1994, one of the oligarchs' own, the former director of the giant missile factory at Dnipropetrovsk, Leonid Kuchma, became the second president of Ukraine. His presidency was one of state building and rewarding his fellow oligarchs, which entailed centralization of authority and power, a rise in corruption, and neglecting the construction of any form of grassroots democracy (Wilson, 2014, pp. 41-42). The Ukrainian oligarchs are not one consistent group; they have diverse and at times conflicting interests. When Kuchma was leaving office in 2004, the oligarchs in the Donbas region located in eastern Ukraine launched one of their own, former Prime Minister Yanukovich, as their presidential candidate. This split the oligarchs into factions, with the oligarchs who had their powerbase located in the central or western parts of the country fearing that the east would be prioritized if Yanukovich was elected (Wilson, 2014, p. 43). As Yanukovich was supported by the eastern oligarchs and Russia, the central and western oligarchs ended up supporting his electoral competitor Viktor Yushchenko, who was a pro-Western minded politician (Wilson, 2014, p. 15). This was the backdrop leading up to the Orange revolution in 2005, and part of the explanation why the coming conflict in 2014 included a vast variety of militias loyal to different oligarchs.

The Maidan protests

After losing the 2004 election to Viktor Yushchenko following the Orange Revolution, Viktor Yanukovich was elected president of Ukraine in 2010. On entering office he stated " The election was stolen from me five years ago, and I won't let it happen again" (as quoted in Wilson, 2014, p. 39). The newly elected president had longstanding ties to the Kremlin, which had contributed with \$500 billion to Yanukovich's election campaign in 2004, and had supplied the propaganda experts (known as political technologists in Russia) who had successfully meddled in the election in 2004 (Wilson, 2014, p. 46). Corruption rose steadily after Yanukovich entered into office in 2010, and power and wealth were divided between Ukrainian oligarchs and Yanukovich's relatives, a group known as "the family"⁷ (Wilson, 2014, p. 53).

⁷ Wilson (2014) uses the term "family" meaning both relatives and oligarchs in Yanukovich's inner circle.

In November 2013 Yanukovich abandoned a trade deal with the European Union, sparking fresh protests in the Maidan square in central Kiev, leading to protests being called the Euromaidan protests. Yanukovich was probably under high pressure from Moscow, as Putin had labeled the EU as “hostile and decadent” (Snyder, 2018a, p. 13). Instead of the EU deal, Yanukovich signed an “Action Plan” with Russia securing Ukraine debt relief and a lucrative gas deal, effectively closing the door on closer relations with the EU (Wilson, 2014, p. 79). The protests were largely organized through social media. The organizers were thus able to reach a high number of people very fast, leading to the protest growing at an impressive rate in both intensity and attention in international news coverage. At its peak, the protests had grown from a few hundred up to 100,000 people (Steinzova & Oliynyk, 2018). On 30 November 2013, Ukrainian security forces and riot police cracked down on protestors in the Maidan Square. The violence by the government was like fuel on fire for the protestors, who shared the security forces excessive violence on social media. The EU placed economic sanctions on Ukrainian leaders loyal to Yanukovich in response to the violence (Wilson, 2014, p. 202). The attempt to crush the protests with violence became a formula of failure for Yanukovich. In late February 2014, Yanukovich took what money he could and fled to Russia (Wilson, 2014, p. 126). The Ukrainian parliament voted for his ousting by a vote of 328 to 122, a result that Yanukovich called a coup (BBC, 2014).

Little green men in Crimea and Donbas

On 27 February 2014, sixty “little green men” armed with Kalashnikovs overthrew the Crimean local government. During the next 48 hours, additional “little green men” appeared on the Crimean Peninsula seizing the Sevastopol and Simferopol airports (Wilson, 2014, p. 111). They earned their nickname by clearly being military units without any insignias or identification, but they clearly spoke Russian. In fact, these were Russian troops numbering between approximately 30000 to 35000 soldiers (Wilson, 2014, p. 111). According to Russian government officials these were local “self-defense forces”, worried about alleged threats to Crimea’s Russian speakers from the new ‘ultranationalist’ government in Kiev (Schreck, 2019). However, the Kremlin shifted its stance in April 2014, when Putin admitted that “Of course, Russian servicemen did back up Crimean self-defense forces” (Wilson, 2014, p. 111). In

March 2014, a treaty was signed confirming the Russian annexation of Crimea, the first annexation as a consequence of military might since World War II (Kolsto, 2018). In the time since the annexation, Crimea has become one of the regions in Russia with legalized gambling, and crime and smuggling have become everyday affairs after a Chechen oligarch took control of business on the peninsula, (Wilson, 2014, p. 114).

After the fall of Yanukovych, his son and other members of the “family” fled to the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine, where Yanukovych had his upbringing. The Donbas is divided in to two “Oblasts”: Donetsk, home to the quite decent football club Shaktar Donetsk (Shaktar means miner (Wilson, 2014, p. 118)), and Luhansk. The region is full of steel, coal and chemical industries, a real Soviet industrial gem with all the ecological glamor that comes with that title⁸.

With the family on familiar turf, they started to organize resistance against Kiev. Supported by the “little green men” who organized local separatist militias and criminals, trouble rose steadily in the Donbas in early 2014. Militias started to form, and a protest rose in the city of Donetsk on 1 March led by “Father Frost”⁹ Pavel Gubarev, resulting in his election as “people’s mayor” (Wilson, 2014, p. 128). However, Gubarev was lacking public support and the backing of the political elites, the only exception was a slim minority of the political far-right in Donetsk, leading to his arrest five days after becoming “people’s mayor” (Wilson, 2014, p. 128). The methods fielded in Crimea did not work in the Donbas, a few armed men could not swing the region despite increasing support from the Kremlin. At one point busloads from Russia transporting so-called “Putin tourists” were sent in to boost the numbers in street rallies (Wilson, 2014, p. 128). However, there was never a real popular uprising in the Donbas. The Kremlin needed to change its tactics.

Taking control in the Donbas

On 26 February, Putin announced military exercises on the Ukrainian border. In quick succession the Russian parliament voted to approve any use of military force in

⁸ Eastern Ukraine has some of the worst pollution in Europe (Wilson, 2014, p. 118).

⁹ Gubarev allegedly worked as “Father Frost”, basically a Slavic Santa Claus. (Wilson, 2014, p. 128).

Ukraine by early March (Wilson, 2014, p. 129). These troops' activities in the coming conflict have later been labeled "hybrid warfare". The term refers to multiple actions and tactics, and cross between military and civilian assets. In Ukraine, it meant the use of conventional forces and special forces, but also propaganda and electronic warfare. Russian general Valery Gerasimov coined the term hybrid warfare, which he explained as follows: "The division between war and peace is erased. Wars are no longer declared, and when they occur, they commit to unusual patterns" (Bogen, 2018, p. 12). The goal of hybrid warfare is to create distortion, confusion, and fear in the enemy in order to complete the policy goals behind the war (Bogen, 2018, p. 13). The potential use of these forces was as important as their actual use in Ukraine. When the second attempt to take control in the Donbas started, the new government in Kiev was restrained from using too much force against the rebels in fear of provoking an actual Russian invasion.

The second attempt to take control over the Donbas was set in motion from 6 to 12 April. Forces tied to the family supported by Russian special forces acting as instructors took control over several administrative and public buildings, including police stations (Wilson, 2014, p. 129). The region steadily filled up with Russian nationalist volunteers directly transported from Russia. A "Donetsk People's Republic" emerged with Denis Pushilin as its leader. They copied the Crimea process of having a referendum scheduled for the 11th of May, even though they only controlled a string of towns and roads, far from the entire region (Wilson, 2014, p. 131). The local authorities agreed to proceed with the referendum, possibly because of pressure from the family. On the 11th of May, the separatist leaders reported high turnouts and a solid majority of votes for independence from the rest of Ukraine. The separatists did not have any coherent plan for organizing the region's independence, and the different groupings of oligarchs and local bosses throughout the region were not cooperating or led by a central authority. By mid-May, the Donbas was divided between rival factions and gangs with different agendas. Neighborhoods raided each other, towns were governed by different bosses, in one building it allegedly was the fifth floor versus the fourth floor (Wilson, 2014, p. 134). This fragmentation of the separatists made the strings intertwine for the Russian puppet masters, as the numbers of puppets and the length of the strings increased.

Kiev responds, and the war commences

On the 13th of April Kiev launched its “anti-terrorist operation”, an unfortunate name as it was the same name used by Yanukovych during the February uprising in Kiev (Wilson, 2014, p. 137). Also, “terrorist” was used as a label for all separatists, leaving any chance of nuances out of the equation. The operation was a failure in the sense that it did not revive Kiev’s sovereignty over the Donbas. On the contrary the operation strengthened the separatists as they gained equipment and weakened the Ukrainian army due to its desertions. The Ukrainian army was highly ineffective because of years of constant underfunding during the Yanukovych era, and Russian intelligence agency’s infiltration (Wilson, 2014, p. 137). The solution to this problem was the formation of militias to support the remnants of the army. These were formed from the base of people who had protested against Yanukovych, and by local oligarchs.

On 1 May a serious counterattack was initiated by Kiev, resulting in government control of the more rural western areas of Donbas. Fierce fighting continued over border crossings. On 26-27 May, twenty-six Ukrainians were killed in the “Battle of Donetsk Airport” (Wilson, 2014, p. 138). A new offensive on 1 July took Ukrainian forces even further inside the Donbas, the city of Slovyansk was retaken from the separatists. Russia responded to Kiev’s progress by replacing some of the leading puppets and introducing heavier weapons. On 13 July, about a hundred armored personnel carriers and other vehicles, probably including anti-air capabilities, and an additional 400 fighters crossed the border from Russia into Ukraine (Wilson, 2014, p. 140). This strategy resulted in several Ukrainian aircrafts and helicopters being shot down, as well as the Malaysian Airlines incident.

On 17 July, Malaysian Airlines flight 17 was shot down over Ukrainian airspace, resulting in the deaths of 298 civilians. Evidence points to the separatists and/or Russian forces as the launchers of the missile that brought down the plane (Wilson, 2014, pp. 140-141). On 16 July, the US joined the EU in intensifying economic sanctions targeting key Russian companies who were reliant on exports to be profitable, and conveniently owned by Putin’s friends (Wilson, 2014, p. 202). The Kremlin then launched a counteroffensive on 23-24 August. The counteroffensive

was of symbolic importance, as 24 August is the Ukrainian Independence Day. The Russian forces broke Ukrainian sieges of Donetsk and Luhansk, opening a larger border crossing from their occupied territories in the process. The Russian forces made no effort to hide their identity during this offensive. A new ceasefire was reached on 5 September, accepted by the new Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko on Russian terms (Wilson, 2014, p. 143).

During the years between 2015 and 2018, the war dissolved into a stalemate and international attention was shifted to Syria in 2015. In November 2018, the situation briefly flamed up when Russian forces seized three Ukrainian military vessels in the Azov sea (BBC, 2018). Russian forces also blocked the Kerch Strait with a tanker, effectively blocking Ukraine from entering the sea. This was in violation of a treaty between Ukraine and Russia from 2003, stating that the two countries shared territorial waters and the right to navigation in the Azov sea (BBC, 2018). President Poroshenko called for NATO support by requesting warships, and accused Putin of having imperial aspirations to make Ukraine a Russian colony (Wintour, 2018). The vessels, and the sailors who were detained with them, were released a year later (BBC, 2019a). In 2019, Poroshenko was replaced by Volodymyr Zelensky as president. By February 2020, the UN estimated 13,000-13,200 combat casualties and 29,000-30,000 injured civilians and combatants in the Russian-Ukrainian war (United Nations, 2020).

Analysis

The Euromaidan protests began after the Kremlin successfully pressured Kiev to abandon the EU's Eastern Partnership Program, first launched in 2009. The program included financial aid and closer integration with the EU for six countries in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus: Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, and Azerbaijan (Wilson, 2014, p. 2). The Kremlin views the expansion of EU relations as closely associated with NATO expansion, and therefore considers it a threat to Russian security and economic interests in the near abroad (Götz, 2016, p. 253). Furthermore, Ukraine had applied for membership in NATO, and was declared a future member by NATO countries at the summit in Bucharest in 2008 (NATO, 2018a). The Kremlin had voiced its concerns regarding further NATO expansion to

deaf Western ears in repeated warnings starting in the 90s up to the summit in Bucharest. The warning shot fired in Georgia in 2008 did not suffice apparently as deterrent, leading Putin to use military force after the ousting of his ally Yanukovich. The strategic interests were secured by annexing Crimea thereby guarantying the security of the Black Sea Fleet. The operations in the Donbas are a way to occupy and wear down the Ukrainian government, effectively preventing it from bringing Ukraine into NATO or the EU.

If the Putin regime has imperial aspirations, then any prospect of Ukraine as a NATO or EU member is unacceptable to Moscow, because of the implications for Russian security and relative power. The idea of further integration of the post-Soviet states with Russia has roots in the Kremlin going back two decades. In the late 90s some Russian politicians encouraged further integration along the lines of the 1996 Belarussian-Russian Union Treaty, but met with resistance from the other successor states (Suny, 2011, p. 543).

Russia under Putin has revived this idea in the form of a Eurasian Union which came to life in 2010 with Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus as founding members. Putin has stated that he sees the Eurasian Union as a competitor, and in time a replacement for the EU (Snyder, 2018a, pp. 90-91). This idea has its roots in the Russian world,¹⁰ and a Russian Ukraine is a central part of that vision (Snyder, 2018a, p. 104). Possibly because of international pressure, including economic sanctions, and the willingness of Ukrainian forces to combat Russian forces, the Kremlin has decided to keep the conflict frozen for now.

Crimea was not as heavily affected by the Euromaidan movement as other parts of Ukraine. There were certainly protests and the mobilization of pro-Maidan forces prior to the takeover by Russian supported forces, but these were ambivalent regarding the rest of Ukraine because of years of exploitation by Donbas mobsters (Wilson, 2014, pp. 108-110). A telling sign of the local mood towards the Euromaidan protests was the reception of members of the elite militia Berkut, who had fled after beating and killing protestors in Kiev on Yanukovich's orders. When their bus arrived

¹⁰ See «A constructivist approach to international relations» for more on The Russian world.

in Sevastopol on 22 February, they were welcomed as heroes by the waiting crowd (Wilson, 2014, p. 108). Some individuals in the crowd were even shouting “there should have been more”, meaning more dead in Kiev (Wilson, 2014, p. 108).

The annexation was most likely not a result of the spread of polluting materialism and decadence of the West to the peninsula, but was probably in part motivated by the protests in Kiev. The operations in the Donbas escalated when Kiev responded with its armed forces. Putin could not back down, as it would have compromised his vision of becoming the leader of a conservative Europe, making it imperative to stand his ground. By facilitating semi-independent areas in eastern Ukraine, Putin has created a buffer zone and given a broadside to the purported Western ‘decadence’ emerging in Kiev.

The annexation of Crimea was in part a response to the Euromaidan protests directly, and in part because of geopolitical strategic reasons. The colored revolutions in the early 2000s did not sit well with the Kremlin, and the Euromaidan protests were seen as another case of Western-instigated unrest to topple a Russian friendly regime. To legitimize the annexation, Putin claimed to be defending Russians and Russia’s interest from a fascist threat, invoking connotations to World War II known to Russians as the Second Great Patriotic War (Chalupa, 2014). In his speech to the Russian Federation on 18 March 2014, one day after the annexation was official, Putin made it clear that he had never considered the Western containment to have ended, and that its purpose was to keep Russia from becoming what it should be:

In short, we have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment, led in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, continues today. They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position, because we maintain it and because we call things like they are and do not engage in hypocrisy. But there is a limit to everything. And with Ukraine, our western partners have crossed the line, playing the bear and acting irresponsibly and unprofessionally (Putin, 2014).

In the same speech, Putin stated that Crimea had been “handed over as a sack of potatoes” in 1991, suggesting that he did not consider Ukrainian sovereignty over Crimea as legitimate (Putin, 2014). The situation was again the West’s fault, following the lines of the rhetoric used in regard to the war in Georgia.

Arabic spring and Russian winter in Syria



Map 3: Syria (Britannica, 2020a)

Syrian independence and a history of coups

The Syrian state gained its independence in 1945. It suffered from the same neglect of local culture, economic and political ties as the rest of the colonized world did from its patrons when independence and borders were in question. In the case of Syria, the borders were decided in France, as the latter had been granted a mandate by the League of Nations after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I (Phillips, 2017, p. 10). As a result, the people answering to the label “Syrian” were a mix of several religions and cultural affiliations.

The early Syrian state was not a stable or strong one. Between the years 1949 and 1970 there were eight successful military coups. In 1970, Hafez-al-Assad took power in the last successful coup and built an authoritarian system of government. Security and intelligence forces were used to strengthen and consolidate his regime. Oil prices rose drastically after 1973, which had a positive impact on the Syrian economy despite modest oil reserves. Also, following the six day war with Israel, the Arabic countries agreed to stay out of each other's beard (Phillips, 2017, p. 12). Even though this was only partly successful, it gave Assad fewer worries about foreign meddling from other powers in the region (Phillips, 2017, p. 12). Syria developed a "marriage of convenience" with the Soviet Union, thereby an insurance against Western intervention (Ramet, 1990, p. 87). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Syria endorsed the U.S. intervention in Kuwait in 1991 and sought to gain Western approval. At the same time, Syrian authorities sought to quietly maintain ties to Tehran and Saudi Arabia (Phillips, 2017, p. 13).

In June 2000, Hafez al-Assad died at age 69 and was succeeded by his son Bashar. Bashar al-Assad was elected president unopposed in a referendum at age 34. Those who had hoped that a young Western-educated president would lead to the abandonment of the authoritarian way of governing were disappointed. Assad the younger early on took an interesting approach to the U.S. Middle-Eastern policies of the 2000s. Opposing the Iraq invasion of 2003 prompted the U.S. to lead an international campaign against the Syrian engagement in Lebanon, resulting in Syrian drawback in 2005 and in diplomatic isolation from the West (Phillips, 2017, p. 15). Syria and Iran improved their relations after both countries experienced pressure from the U.S. The U.S. isolation policy failed, as Assad successfully courted Iran, Turkey, and Qatar, bringing Syria back in from the cold (Phillips, 2017, p. 15). Syrian relations with the West gradually improved until 2011, although there still were tensions between Syria and the U.S., and especially Israel. In 2008, Assad was invited to Paris for Bastille day. In 2010, the Obama administration approved the return of the U.S. ambassador to Syria, previously withdrawn by Bush.

Arabic Spring and rebellion

In 2011, the Arab Spring came to Syria. In early March, a group of teenagers were arrested in the southern city of Deraa for anti-regime graffiti. The graffiti slogans bore a resemblance to the slogans used in the protests in Egypt saying “doctor, your turn next” and “down with the regime” (Phillips, 2017, pp. 41-49). They were taken to Damascus and tortured, which was not an uncommon fate for dissidents. The arrests became the moment of ignition for the Syrian people, and by the end of March many Syrians joined the protests in the Arab Spring. Facilitated by social media, protests were organized easily, and as news spread fast the protests grew as a result. Not all Syrians joined in, some were supporting the regime for different reasons. Some tribes to the east supported Assad in an patron-client way, depending on whether the regime had supported them in the past or not (Phillips, 2017, p. 51). The economic reforms initiated by Assad worked out well for the urban middle-class, and probably was one of the reasons why central Damascus and Aleppo were relatively passive in 2011. Syrians working in the government received a pay increase on 1 April 2011, illustrating their economic incentive to support their employer. More importantly, the military as an institution stayed loyal to the regime.

The regime called the protestors “armed gangs”, to justify and legitimize its use of violence to quell them (Phillips, 2017, p. 53). The use of violence did not work out well. It seemed as if a protestor was killed by government forces, then two new protestors would take his place the next day. In what might have been a ploy to conquer and divide, Assad applied peaceful means to counter the protests. These were economic incentives, meeting with parents of arrested dissidents and tribal leaders, and offering concessions to ethnic groups like the long-oppressed Kurds (Phillips, 2017, pp. 54-55). None of these attempts nor the violence succeeded.

In the time that followed the early protests in the spring of 2011 the spiral of violence led to the evolution of the protests into rebellion. Anti-Assad militias started to form around the country during the summer of 2011, and the creation of the Free Syrian Army was conducted by former officers from the military. Several other groups were formed, often with radically different agendas. The UN tried to arrange for a ceasefire in 2012, but without success as the fighting never stopped; on the contrary it escalated. In 2013, 1,400 people lost their lives in a chemical weapons attack in Damascus (Phillips, 2017, pp. 168-169). The U.S. and its allies blamed the Assad-

regime, which was known to have a large stockpile of the weapons. The U.S. sent six destroyers to the eastern Mediterranean, threatening a missile strike. In the end that strike never happened, a Russia-mediated deal was struck to the end of Assad's peaceful surrender of the weapons under UN supervision (Phillips, 2017, p. 169).

The regime forces lost several pockets of territory to various rebel groups during the initial phase of the war between 2011 and 2014. In 2014 ISIL gained influence in Syria as they spread out of Iraq. U.S. president Barack Obama authorized the use of force against ISIL in Syria in 2014, thus creating a considerable military presence of mainly air and naval capabilities from an U.S.-led coalition of five Arab countries. Damascus never agreed to this coalition's forces operating within its borders, but did not have much choice. However, the presence of Western military forces and considerable losses for the government forces in the spring of 2015 resulted in a response from the Kremlin (Phillips, 2017, pp. 213-219).

Russia enters

In the summer of 2015 Russian forces established a forward air operational base outside of Syria's major port city Latakia (Phillips, 2017, p. 213). This entailed the building of new infrastructure and the upgrading of an old airfield to support Russian troops in Syria. This was the first time that Russian forces had been deployed beyond the borders of the old USSR since the end of the Cold War (Phillips, 2017, p. 213). At least 28 aircraft and up to 2,000 personnel were dispatched there, in addition to the Russian Black Sea fleet that was sent to the eastern Mediterranean (Phillips, 2017, p. 217).

Following the deployment, Russian air forces successfully targeted rebel positions, halting their advance and aiding regime-friendly forces in the process. By December 2015, the third largest city in Syria, Homs, was back under regime control after four years of fighting (BBC, 2019b). The Kremlin claimed to be targeting ISIS and other violent Islamic groups inside Syria, but was clearly coordinating its aerial operations with the regime's ground offensive in October against non-ISIS rebel forces (Phillips, 2017, p. 215). The Russian engagement accelerated the work for a diplomatic solution, resulting in an international meeting in late October 2015 in Vienna. Peace

talks followed, resulting in an UN resolution from the security council which included UN supervised democratic elections and reforms (Phillips, 2017, p. 225). However, the role of Assad remained unclear among the participants, and so no real peace was established.

Some groups with influence at the time in Syria were not invited to the talks, for instance the violent Islamic militia known as the Nusra Front, which made it hard to guarantee for the follow through of any results of the talks (Phillips, 2017, p. 226). However, a ceasefire of sorts was reached in late February 2016, which included a deal between Russian and American forces to not attack specific areas in Syria. The deal was conveniently made after the Russian-Syrian offensive had completed its initial military goals in Aleppo. The number of civilian casualties fell drastically for a time, and Putin surprisingly announced that his military objectives had been met, and that he would call back the main bulk of his forces (Phillips, 2017, pp. 227-230). However, shortly after this announcement, Russian forces were involved in another major assault against an ISIS position.

Throughout 2017 and 2018, the Assad Regime has made steadily progress re-conquering previously lost territory from ISIS and the rebel groups. ISIS was steadily dismantled as a force capable of controlling large territories by an international coalition, the Iraqi and Syrian armed forces, and a wide range of militias in Iraq and Syria. The new American president, Donald Trump, started his approach to Syria by launching missiles on a Syrian regime airbase in April 2017 as response to a new chemical weapons attack by regime forces. He also decided to continue to arm and train the Kurdish militia YPG as well as other militias considered to be friendly to the West (BBC, 2019b; Gordon & Schmitt, 2017).

The training and support for the Kurdish militia did not sit well with the leadership in Ankara, as the militia is described as a terrorist organization by Ankara. In 2019, president Trump shifted his stance on Syria, ordering a hasty withdrawal of American forces from northern Syria, leaving the Kurds exposed (Gibbons-Neff & Schmitt, 2019). Following the withdrawal, Turkish forces invaded and attacked the U.S. backed Kurdish forces in the region (BBC, 2019b). By early 2020, Turkish forces had ended up in direct confrontation with Syrian and Russian forces on several

occasions, making the situation even more volatile considering that Turkey has the second largest army in NATO (Tisdall, 2020). In 2018, the UN estimated that there were over 250,000 casualties and half the population, a total of roughly 18 million, were refugees as of 2018 either internally or abroad (NRK, 2018; Worldometers, 2018).

Analysis

In the case of Syria, there was no chance of the country becoming a NATO member or drawing closer to the EU at the time of the Arab spring in 2011. Its location is far away from the Russian border, and although Syria was an ally of the Soviet Union, the country is not located in the “Near Abroad”. However, after Western leaders in 2011 started to signal that international action was needed to stop the violence from the government forces, the Kremlin made it clear that it would block any UN Security Council resolutions regarding Syria. By 2019, Russia had cast 14 vetoes on resolutions regarding Syria, supported by China (Nichols, 2019).

The Kremlin does not trust UN resolutions. The Russian leadership clearly remembers that the no-fly zone resolution was used, in their eyes, in Libya to bomb Qaddafi out of office. Both Syria and Libya imported weapons from Russia at the time of Western intervention, and the economic loss of the ousting of Qaddafi alone was estimated to cost Russia six and a half billion dollars in export revenue (Kozhanov, 2016). In addition, popular uprisings that aim to end autocracy and push against democracy are not looked upon favorably in the Kremlin, as Putin tends to see them as products of Western agents.

Although Putin might not like Assad (Phillips, 2017, p. 219), keeping him in power gives Russia an airbase from which to operate in the region. The location of the airbase is next to Syria’s major port city, Latakia, opening a sea-to-land link there. If Putin has imperial aspirations, then a presence in the Middle-East is important to reestablish Russia as a world power, in that Russia lost its former allies Iraq and Egypt. A tendency to support this is the steady growth of arms exports to the Middle East since 2008, where even NATO country Turkey is on the delivery list, making Russia an important partner to several countries in the region (Kozhanov, 2016).

That being said, the relationship between Ankara and Moscow is a turbulent one. In November 2015, a Russian fighter was shot down near the border between Turkey and Syria by two Turkish fighters (Bach et al., 2018). Turkish officials claimed that the Russian fighter had been in their airspace. The pilots managed to eject but were killed by a rebel group upon landing in Syria. Then in March 2020, Russian and Turkish soldiers were patrolling a highway in northern Syria together as part of a ceasefire agreement (Aljazeera, 2020). Less than a month earlier, Turkish forces had been firing on Russian aircrafts over southern Idlib and Russian air forces had responded by attacking a Turkish convoy the next day, killing 33 Turkish soldiers (Tisdall, 2020).

The Arab Spring proved to be a defining moment in Syria. In the beginning the protests were directed by a liberal agenda. Protestors were people who were tired of the oppression and lack of freedom (Phillips, 2017, pp. 48-51). But after the war started, the rebellion became partly influenced by radical Islamic groups, with a very different agenda. The fragmentation of the rebellion, and introduction of radical Islamic factions undermined the liberal agenda. Therefore, it is not likely that Putin acted on the dangers of Western encroachment in the case of Syria. However, what certainly worried Putin about Syria was the prospect of a new Libya. Seeing the U.S. and its allies once again acting without a UN resolution, Putin may have decided to draw a line in the sands of Syria. With the U.S. drawback from the ground in Syria in 2019, Putin might harvest a precious victory if the Assad regime should be able to regain control over the country, effectively humiliating the West in the process.

Assessing the cases

The cases under consideration in this thesis are complex, they might not be explained fully by any one approach. I have used multiple theories supporting two different positions, "victim Russia" and "revisionist Russia", to find the nuances and answers to build my argument. My goal was to discover what motivates Russia to apply military force against other countries. In these three cases, the Georgian and Ukrainian cases share that they were gravitating towards inclusion in the EU and NATO prior to the Russian involvement. They both share a physical border with Russia, and both were included as constituent socialist republics in the USSR. The

case of Syria is quite different from those two cases, as the links to Russia are considerably vaguer, and the Near Abroad perspective does not apply. The cases have some similarities in how the situations on the ground developed, in that parts of the country intervention eventually ended up as buffer zones under Russian control and have stayed that way up to the time of writing. Syria too did have a popular uprising against an autocratic ruler as was the case in Ukraine and Georgia, and at least at the beginning liberal democratic tendencies appeared to be similar to the movements in the colored revolutions in the early 2000s and the 2014 Euromaidan. However, there are considerable differences. The wars in Ukraine and Syria have not ended at the time of writing, and show no signs of being over any time soon. The analysis of those two cases will probably change in time, as more data will be available. The war itself in Georgia was over in five days, but the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain under Russian influence and control. In Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia were de facto autonomous in many ways before the war in 2008, and the Rose Revolution did not appeal to them in the same way it did to other parts of Georgia. Several protestors in the Euromaidan came from the eastern regions in Ukraine (Wilson, 2014, pp. 73-74). In Syria, the regional differences have not been as clear a factor as in the two other cases. Russia intervened in order to defend the status quo regime, and the war in Syria includes a multitude of international actors in addition to Russia.

In the Georgian case the first and third hypotheses emerge as the most credible. A reunification of Georgia would have made it more likely for a Georgian NATO-membership to happen. A Russian tolerated NATO enlargement could have been received as signal by the rest of the Caucasus countries and others in the post-Soviet space that they were indeed free to choose their affiliations. The rapid response of the Russian forces suggests that the operation was preplanned, and therefore might have happened later on, if Saakashvili had not provided the opportunity with his offensive against Tskhinvali. Putin sent a message to the world by using Russian armed forces to pursue foreign policy goals, but there was no major shift in power in Russia's favor on an international scale. If the Russians harbored imperial ambitions at this point, they did not show it. The Rose Revolution carried multiple signs of the Western 'decadence' as cosmopolitanism in their reach out to the West and the introduction of Western-like institutions like multiparty democracy.

The West's response and pressure against Russia during the war, and the results from the summit in Bucharest earlier, did probably enforce Putin's perception of the hypocritical Western competitor.

In the case of Ukraine, the second hypothesis emerge as the most credible one. Yanukovych shut the door on the trade deal with EU before his ousting, and the willingness to admit more members into NATO had decreased in the West after the war in Georgia. Ukraine was therefore still a long way off from joining NATO at the time of the invasion. Even though the protestors managed to get rid of the Russia-friendly chief oligarch in Yanukovych, there was still a long way to go before a stable Western-oriented government could have been in place to once again seek closer relations with the West. Russia strengthened its position by securing the Black Sea fleet by annexing Crimea, and by destabilizing the Donbas, thereby occupying and undermining the government in Kiev. The Western 'decadence' that arose with the Maidan-protests was contained from reaching the Russian border. However, the response from the international community was different from its response to the Georgia war, with economic sanctions directly aimed at Putin' friends and key Russian export companies. The NATO countries has since the war in Ukraine started sharpened their efforts to strengthen NATO forces and their rhetoric against Russia.

In the case of Syria, the second hypothesis again emerges as the most credible. Syria did not have any ties to NATO or the EU, and there is no sense in arguing that Syria would fit under the term Near Abroad for Russia. The Assad regime would have become much weaker, and might even have been toppled in 2015 if Russia had sat on its hands. The experience from Libya and the prospects of losing its last ally in the region, probably affected the Kremlin's decision to intervene in Syria. The Arab spring did not produce changes in the direction of a Western-like democracy in Syria, but served as a spark igniting the rebellion. Even though partly moderate and liberal in the beginning, the rebellion forces are today fragmented and have different agendas. Russia has gained some strategic advantages from the intervention including a training field for its air- and special forces (Gibbons-Neff, 2016), access to a major port-city, and an airbase from which to operate in the region. More importantly, Russia has shown that it can and will support its allies and pursue its interests even with U.S. forces in the same sandbox. The U.S. withdrawal from

northern Syria was probably seen as a victory in the Kremlin, although it entailed a problematic relationship with Turkey. For Putin, this showed that not only could Russian forces compete with U.S. forces, they could win.

Conclusion

The pattern to observe in these three cases is marked by what seems to be a desire to counter the West. In all three cases, the Russian involvement has come after incidents that could have led to the country in question moving closer to the West. If seen in this context with an information war, Putin's rhetoric, and domestic development in Russia, there are definite signs of Putin's imperial aspirations at least since 2012. The new Russian empire will not be strengthened by massive force and blitzkrieg, but by slowly chipping away on the foundation of the liberal democratic state combined with limited use of force when needed. Undermining the legitimacy of elections by interfering and polarizing the public debate, while using the opportunity provided by the confusion to send small green men to conquer seems to be the strategy.

This thesis has identified some of the possible factors in the mix that explain the Russian use of force in later years. Only through sufficient knowledge presented in an accessible way can the information war be contained. If the Russian use of force is motivated by imperial aspirations, then it should be met with containment, but if the motivation is based on the "victim Russia" position, containment could work as an amplifier. Scholars should be mindful of suggesting policy.

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