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# **The strategic use of external threat in the shaping of Russian domestic and foreign policies**

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May 2022

Master's Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of International Affairs at the City College of New York

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## **Abstract**

The state of Russia has experienced multiple shifts during various phases of its development and, along with that, it has influenced the world of international diplomacy on a grand scale. From being the world's second superpower with huge military and political capabilities to becoming a disintegrated regional power, there definitely has been a certain degree of change which has impacted both the Russian political establishment as well as ordinary people. The slow process of the degradation of the "big empire" actually had its roots during Soviet times when the Soviet Union faced the Chernobyl catastrophe, the war in Afghanistan, the Perestroika period and the epoch of Velvet revolutions. The economy simply could not sustain these above mentioned challenges and resulted in the collapse of the USSR. Naturally, this had an immense impact on the people who knew their country as a great superpower all these years.

Putin's arrival to power had a profound impact on Russia's behavior both domestically as well as internationally. Moreover, it has brought Russia to become increasingly active on the international arena in comparison to how it used to be during Yeltsin's administration. This thesis will cover the roots of Putin's behavior, which lies in utilizing external threat as a main instrument for both domestic and foreign policies. Clearly, there is some kind of strategy involved which is very difficult for the West to understand. This thesis examines this strategy and whether it is a viable plan for Putin.

The methodology for this thesis is largely secondary sources of various authors, along with a significant number of newspaper articles. The latter is significant in this particular topic because it is in the process of developing and will be developing, taking into consideration current events on the border with Ukraine. In addition, a portion of statistical data will be presented, such as the population percentage, federal election results, demographics, and others.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

States in the modern world have a wide spectrum of capabilities pertaining to the execution of their foreign policy. This involves, among other things, utilizing both soft power and hard power. It is undoubtedly true that the use of hard power had lost some of its political normative aspects over the years, however, it did not perish completely. Nowadays, there are enormous consequences that come along with the implementation of hard power and that includes economic sanctions, embargo on international trade, seizure of contracts, breaking of the agreements, and complete political isolation. Besides all this, countries still launch military campaigns, threaten start wars capabilities and use weapons in order to achieve their strategic goals.

The state of Russia was always known for its significant presence on the world stage, especially starting with the period involving the Congress of Vienna and continuing on in the following years. All major global events did not leave Russia behind, and that also involved World War I, World War II, the change of imperial government, the Cold War, and the dissolution of the USSR. During all of these events Russia was always actively engaged in the use of both of soft power and hard power. If the former tended to be more rare in the past, the latter always was one of the key instruments of Russian political machine. That involved being an Allied member of the Triple Entente in World War I, Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939 and subsequent participation in World War II, the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the invasion of Afghanistan and providing military aid to Vietnam, Angola, Yemen, and other countries.

Interestingly enough, it appears that the past spirit of the Russian state in terms of using its hard power did not change after the dissolution of the USSR. The brightest example of that

would be the recent invasion of Ukraine<sup>12</sup>, the invasion of Georgia in 2008, participation in the civil war in Syria<sup>3</sup>, and the annexation of Crimea in 2014<sup>4</sup> with subsequent support of pro-Russian rebel groups. This long-term behavior of Russia reveals that there is indeed a pattern when it comes to Russia acting on the international stage, and moreover, this pattern represents a specific strategy. Every Russian leader always had a clear strategy with regards to his foreign policies; the difference is that times change and along with that change priorities, methods of execution, and views on particular matters. In this thesis, the main objective is identifying that pattern of current Russian political leadership and its strategy overall. Russia experienced changes during various periods, especially when it was under Communist rule, after the collapse of USSR, and the recent period, which is largely identifiable due to the Putin`s administration being in power since 1999. Therefore, it is vital to understand how the character of Russian policies was changing and adjusting over these periods and where Russian strategy stands now.

One of the key definitions used in this thesis is the concept of the threat, *per se*. Usually, this term indicates an external threat, where one country either creates an actual military threat (amassing troops at the border, violating airspace) or introduces a wide campaign of non-military

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<sup>1</sup> Hookway, James. "What's Happening in Ukraine? Why Russia Is Invading and What Putin Wants" *Wall street Journal*, updated March 03, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-russia-war-invasion-whats-happening-11646157211?page=2>

<sup>2</sup> Ramzy, Austin. "The Invasion of Ukraine: How Russia Attacked and What Happens Next" *New York Times*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/world/europe/why-russia-attacked-ukraine.html?searchResultPosition=9>

<sup>3</sup> DeYoung, Karen. "Russia's Syria intervention may force choice on Obama: Act or yield", *The Washington Post*, October 7, 2015. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/russias-syria-intervention-may-force-choice-on-obama-act-or-yield/2015/10/07/a88f9996-6d16-11e5-9bfe-e59f5e244f92\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/russias-syria-intervention-may-force-choice-on-obama-act-or-yield/2015/10/07/a88f9996-6d16-11e5-9bfe-e59f5e244f92_story.html)

<sup>4</sup> MacFarquhar, Neil. "Putin Contradicts Claims on Annexation of Crimea", *New York Times*, March 9, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/10/world/europe/putin-contrary-to-earlier-assertions-suggests-planning-to-seize-crimea-started-in-early-2014.html?searchResultPosition=2>

influence over another country. Both aspects were present in the threat perception by Russia, however the concept of external threat goes beyond that here. It has started mainly with Russia's long-term struggle with the United States during the Cold War. The Soviet leaders were running massive propaganda campaigns targeted at the general population mainly in order to address the people in showing them how significant of an enemy the United States of America is for the Soviet Union. Along with that, the elites addressed the pride and might (mostly military) of the USSR, claiming it to be a superpower, therefore the people of the Soviet Union lived their entire lives with a very high sense of pride in the USSR and with constant suspicions looking at other states. The result of this reached several generations, so when the Soviet Union collapsed it was a complete disaster for a big portion of the population of Russia. Isolated and with a collapsed ideology and political apparatus, Russia found itself on the verge of total collapse in the 1990s. This, however, changed drastically with Putin's rise to power.

Putin's administration is unique due to the contrast it has brought to the political life of Russia. While accepting the country under leaders who opposed the old Soviet governance and supported democracy, Putin continued the prior use of the external threat theory and brought the scale of influence over the masses on a more sophisticated level. Some sources claim he and his administration are distracting the general population with military victories and establishment of an enemy in order to gain the legacy and support of the people<sup>5</sup>. This thesis argues and uncovers evidence to prove that **the state of Russia is, in fact, utilizing the concept of external threat as the main driving force of both domestic as well as foreign policies**. Along with that, it is one of the policy instruments which together create a certain pattern and a strategy. Up until this day

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<sup>5</sup> Darden, Keith A. "Russian Revanche: External Threats & Regime Reactions." *Daedalus* (Cambridge, Mass.) 146.2 (2017): 128–141. Web.

there has been no solid academic analysis of the strategy of contemporary Russia. As a research question, this thesis addresses exactly that. The strategy exists for a specific goal and reason, therefore it is even more important to find out whether this new strategy of contemporary Russia is working for the country both domestically as well as globally. The research question for this thesis include: how does this strategy impact the Russian people? What are the influences on the economy, politics, demography, migration, human rights, on Russia`s relations between foreign partners, its stance in the region as a regional power?

Undoubtedly, the abundance of available sources on the Russian government and its foreign policy is vast, but not as vast as it might seem in the first place. In addition, Western scholars tend to not fully understand the country of Russia, per se, its traditions, lifestyle, and mentality. In order to understand the character of political shifts it is extremely important to understand Russia itself. For this purpose, the spectrum of sources used in this thesis will include Western sources, policy memos, news articles, Russian sources, scholarly articles, books by Western as well as Eastern scholars (Polish, Ukrainian, Czech, Estonian, Lithuanian, etc.; These are important perspectives to analyze due to their common past with Russia/Soviet Union and geographical proximity).



## Chapter Two: Literature review

The variety of sources for this thesis is substantially vast and includes various authors from different background, ranging from diplomats to researchers and Russian officials. The selection of sources is extensive, however these academic materials are the most significant for the research. The very first one, Lo, Bobo. *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era Reality, Illusion and Mythmaking* covers largely Yeltsin`s era with the difficult transitioning period from communism to democracy right after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This work is focused primarily on the decision making behind the adoption of policy and attempts to explain the mechanisms of Russian behavior. The Yeltsin era is substantial in understanding the pattern of Russian governance and perfectly explains the reasoning behind Russia`s foreign and domestic policies today. This period is also unique due to being transitional between the old communist government and the new course of politics implemented by Russia.<sup>6</sup>

*The New Russian Diplomacy*<sup>7</sup> gives a unique view of the new Russian foreign policy right at the dawn of Putin`s government. The book was written in 2002 which gives specific trends relevant to that time. This includes the aftermath of the Balkans conflict, the beginning phase of second Chechen war, the Kursk submarine tragedy and others. The book is also specialized in presenting the factors of modern Russian foreign policy behavior in order for Western readers to understand. Also, the author himself is an experienced Russian public servant who served in the capacity of Minister of Foreign Affairs and Chairman of the Russian Security

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<sup>6</sup> Lo, Bobo. *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion and Mythmaking*. Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2002, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403920058>.

<sup>7</sup> Ivanov, Igor. "The New Russian Diplomacy." *The New Russian Diplomacy*, Brookings Institution Press, 2004, pp. x-x, <https://doi.org/10.7864/j.ctt1280qg>.

Council. This source might be useful in analyzing the change in foreign policy between Yeltsin`s period and Putin`s stepping in.

Magda Leichtova`s book *Misunderstanding Russia : Russian Foreign Policy and the West*<sup>8</sup> explains the relations between Russia and the West through the prism of its foreign policies. This book focuses on research using the concepts of constructivism and orientalism. Also, there may be some interesting material with regards to Russian behavior because the book covers a wide spectrum of factors which shape foreign policy.

Allen Lynch`s book *The Soviet Study of International Relations*<sup>9</sup> focused on Soviet diplomacy during the height of the Cold War and covers systematic approach to foreign policy. Nuclear weapons are used as the instrument of diplomacy and the author covers a great portion on that. This book is more strategic and analyzes international relations in a world which is multipolar, remembering the United States and other players on the world stage.

Richard F. Staar`s 1987 publication *USSR Foreign Policies after Détente*,<sup>10</sup> written by a Stanford Russia expert provides a perspective on the Soviet foreign policies after Détente which was an important period of Cold War. This book is of great value as to how to provide an analysis of this specific phase of Russian foreign relations and provides great examples of figuring out the pattern. The author himself is an experienced diplomat and a strategist who served as the US ambassador at the Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions in Vienna from 1981 to 1983 which involved running the negotiations with the Warsaw Pact.

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<sup>8</sup> Leichtova, Magda. *Misunderstanding Russia: Russian Foreign Policy and the West*. Routledge, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315595634>.

<sup>9</sup> Lynch, Allen. *The Soviet study of international relations* / Allen Lynch Cambridge University Press Cambridge [Cambridgeshire] ; New York 1987  
<<http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/cam022/87000790.html>>

<sup>10</sup> Rev. ed. Stanford, Calif: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, 1987

Roy Allison's book, *Russia, the West, and Military Intervention*<sup>11</sup> focuses on the conflicts between the West and Russia which eventually led to either a military intervention or some other military measures. It is crucial in terms of understanding the pattern behind the key disputed territories or countries. In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia, in the '90s it was involved in the Balkans. Russia repeated its diplomacy by force also in 2014 with the Ukraine, recent involvement in Syria as well as Ukraine again in 2022.

John Van Oudenaren and Francis Conte's publication, *Understanding Soviet Foreign Policy*<sup>12</sup> covers Soviet diplomacy, however written by experts in defense as well as international relations. They introduce the two schools of Soviet diplomacy and explain them. In addition, they cover the tradition of change in Soviet diplomacy which is very useful to the thesis because these changes do shape Russian foreign policy overall. [footnote]

Leszek Buszynski's book, *Russian Foreign Policy after the Cold War*<sup>13</sup> covers more general topics regarding Russian foreign policy after the Cold War. It includes not just its relationships with the West, but also talks about Asia and sub-regionalism where it identifies Russia as a regional actor.

Mikhail Deliajin's article "Crimea: The First Step in Russia's Return to the World."<sup>14</sup> was written by a current State Duma and Putin's party member Mikhail Deliajin in which he touches upon the question of annexation of Crimea and provides his perspective as to what were the reasons for such a move by Russia and what that brought to the Russia and the world.

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<sup>11</sup> Allison, Roy. *Russia, the West, and Military Intervention*. First edition., Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Washington, D.C: Institute for National Strategic Studies, 1990

<sup>13</sup> Westport, Conn: Praeger, 1996

<sup>14</sup> *Russian social science review* 62.4-6 (2021): 323–348. Web

Hans Mouritzen and Anders Wivel's book, *Explaining Foreign Policy: International Diplomacy and the Russo-Georgian War*<sup>15</sup>. focuses not on Russia per se, but shows how a state can formulate a model for justifying the use of a full scale military action as part of its foreign policy. The Russo-Georgian war here is an example of that, however it offers insight into uncovering Russian perception of a foreign threat based on actions in Georgia and will answer a number of questions about further Russian military action in Ukraine, Moldova, Syria.

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<sup>15</sup> Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012.]

## Chapter 3: The Russian Strategy

### *Domestic Strategy*

The state of Russia has perpetrated different foreign policy and domestic strategies on the world stage over various periods of time. Beginning with the Peter the Great reign in 1721, Russia has quickly become one of the most significant global players in the world along with the Ottoman Empire, the British Empire, and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Along with its rivals, Russia had always enjoyed a vast access to resources, uneasy geographical terrain, and the multiculturalism of its population. By its enormous size, covering eleven time zones, it rapidly became the third largest empire in the world<sup>16</sup> and since then has maintained a relatively large influence on international politics. Even after the fall of the Russian Empire as a result of the Bolsheviks` ascending to power in 1917, the newly established Union of Soviet Socialist Republics became an enormous and powerful state with which other world players had to compromise and find proper methods of cooperation.

The great change to that centuries-long order came in as a result of the dissolution of the USSR when the second largest superpower in the world suddenly collapsed, leaving behind the largest nuclear arsenal in the world, thousands of factories, farms, institutions, and many unemployed people. Suddenly, the country that was the citadel of an alternative political ideology during the Cold War transformed into an increasingly poor Eurasian country where, in fact, Western countries had to provide humanitarian aid in order to keep the poverty at a reasonably regulated level. This was done specifically through the implementation of the

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<sup>16</sup> Taagepera, Rein (September 1997). "Expansion and Contraction Patterns of Large Polities: Context for Russia" (PDF). *International Studies Quarterly*. 41 (3): 492–502. doi:10.1111/0020-8833.00053. JSTOR 2600793. Archived (PDF) from the original on 7 July 2020. Retrieved 25 February 2022.

FREEDOM Support Act of 1992 with a full package of aid ranging from security to humanitarian needs. Particularly during the period of 1993-1999, The US food supply assistance played a major role in keeping Russia out of poverty since Russian farmers were not able to meet the country`s food requirements.<sup>17</sup> Such an economic situation was extremely dire for Russian citizens and was infuriating to those who perceived their country as a superpower. The former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once mentioned that Empires have no interest in operating within an international system; they aspire to be the international system.<sup>18</sup> In the case of Russia it always aspired to be the international system, and now these goals were far from that. President Yeltsin`s government focused on organizing closer and more friendly ties to the West which, however, brought a political climate of disillusionment within the Russian leadership with regards to the new economic and political reforms.<sup>19</sup> Instead, Russia wanted to drift away from appeasement with the West and pursue its own national interests. These changes came in with the rise of Vladimir Putin as a head of state.

One of the most unique phenomena regarding power in Russia is the unusual background of its leaders. Historically, Russia was governed by the Royal families such as Romanovs. However, with the emergence of the Soviet Union that custom disappeared. Instead, three institutions became the backbone of the country: the Party, the Army, and the KGB. The Party (CPSU) represented the greatest political power and was the driving force of policies. It made decisions on the strategic level and managed the whole state mechanism in every aspect. The

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<sup>17</sup> Tarnoff, Curt. "US Assistance to the former Soviet Union", *CRS Report for Congress*. Updated March 1, 2007. Accessed 17 February 2022. Accessed at: <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/RL32866.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Kissinger, Henry. *Diplomacy*. Simon & Schuster, 2011. P. 21

<sup>19</sup> Bluth, Christoph. "Arms Control and Nuclear Safety: The National and International Politics of Russia`s Nuclear Arsenal." *Government and Opposition* (London), vol. 30, no. 4, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 510–32, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.1995.tb00141.x>.

Army represented rather an instrument of the CPSU and served with the purpose of providing the external security of the USSR. The KGB, or more broadly, the Internal security apparatus played the role of controlling the population, defending the country`s ideological standing, and crushing the opposition. Not surprisingly, all of the leaders of the Soviet Union came in from either one of those three agencies. Moreover, this pattern became evident even after the fall of the Soviet Union. The majority of the Soviet leaders came to power by climbing the party career ladder, such as the Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Gorbachev. However, there is also a minority who came from the Internal security sector, such as Andropov. Vladimir Putin became the second leader to rise from the KGB apparatus and has been able to retain his control over the country for more than 20 years. Despite the fact that during Putin`s ascend to power the old Soviet government instruments had already collapsed, the division between the Party leaders and Internal security was still largely in place.

The difference between being an *apparatchik* and a professional intelligence officer rapidly influenced the character of governance and control in Russia. Party servicemen had seen the political course of the state through the prism of ideology and never fully understood the mechanism behind the government defense agencies or the Army simply because they were never a part of it. Putin, on the other hand, had a 15 year-long career in the KGB, including five years spent on assignment in the German Democratic Republic<sup>20</sup>. Thus, with the fall of the old system and lack of stability in the new one, Putin represented a new, hybrid group of people in the Moscow leadership. This group became known as *siloviki*<sup>21</sup>. *Siloviki* has a general meaning

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<sup>20</sup> Sakwa, Richard. *Putin: Russia's Choice*. Routledge, 2007, p. 1, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203931936>.

<sup>21</sup> Reddaway, Peter. *Russia's Domestic Security Wars: Putin's Use of Divide and Rule Against His Hardline Allies*. Springer International Publishing AG, 2018. P. 1.

of people who either were a part of the military, internal security, or police, or at least had some association with it. What makes them hybrid is the phenomenon of having various influential businessmen, lawyers, judges, and state servants joining their ranks in 1990s, such as Oleg Deripaska. Remarkably, Putin was able to find a balance between the two most influential and rival siloviki groups, Cherkesov-Zolotov and Sechin.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, he was able to find a compromise between the two and attain full control of them by appointing representatives of both clans to important government positions.

### ***Identity Crisis***

This firm and confident control over the state represented a clear avenue for Putin in terms of implementing his policies. By remembering how important the past glory of the Soviet Union has been for Russians, he decided to build on that and make it one of his key instruments with regards to his politics. In 2005, Vladimir Putin stated that the collapse of the Soviet Empire was “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.”<sup>23</sup> However, not only Putin, but majority of the population shares the same point of view. According to the Pew Research Center, roughly seven-in-ten people view the Soviet Union collapse as a bad thing.<sup>24</sup> That same study also concludes on how demographically divided are these views. In Russia, 78% of adults over 35 years old have a negative perception of the USSR collapse, while only 50% of adults 35 and under hold the same view. In comparison to Ukraine, only 40% of adults 35 and older see the

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<sup>22</sup> Reddaway, Peter. *Russia's Domestic Security Wars: Putin's Use of Divide and Rule Against His Hardline Allies*. Springer International Publishing AG, 2018. P. 91

<sup>23</sup> Author unknown. Putin: Soviet collapse a 'genuine tragedy'. *NBC News*. April 25, 2005. Retrieved from: <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7632057#.WSMDwPnythE>

<sup>24</sup> Masci, David. In Russia, nostalgia for Soviet Union and positive feelings about Stalin. *Pew Research Center*. June 29, 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/29/in-russia-nostalgia-for-soviet-union-and-positive-feelings-about-stalin/>



USSR breakup as a bad thing whereas only 20% under 35 agree with the same statement.<sup>25</sup> This clearly indicates the differences between views within society and between Russia and Ukraine. Therefore this explains the overall political course of action by each country. This admiration for the concept of a large empire with a huge significance on the world stage became a crucial instrument of the Russian government, utilizing this identity issue before the re-election periods.

Furthermore, a new phenomenon became popular starting in the 1990s which was mainly based on a sense of nostalgia for the Soviet Union. This phenomenon followed an increased use of the media, organization and remembrance of the Soviet holidays, prominent figures, and traditions (such as the 23<sup>rd</sup> February holiday). In 2004, a new TV channel emerged with the name Nostalgia which broadcasts old Soviet vintage shows, cartoons, movies, and talk shows (Such as the show with a name “Born in USSR”).<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that this channel not only functions within Russia itself but also expanded to other countries such as Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Israel, and even the United States. Such media source can quickly become a very dangerous propaganda weapon and be used both for internal as well as external strategies. By looking at the aforementioned examples, it is imperative to conclude that the collapse of the Soviet Union created a huge identity crisis within the Russian population.

This steady and gradual transition from the world`s second superpower to a regional power has transformed itself into forming a vast influence upon governmental policies as well as on the population as a whole. As a result, the Russian government has changed its political discourse into a defensive character. The defensive character has formed the basis for a campaign of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Kalinina, Ekaterina (2014). "Multiple Faces of the Nostalgia Channel in Russia". View: Journal of European Television History and Culture. 3 (5): 108–118

statements, policies, and strategy by promoting a collective reaction towards certain actions by the West and NATO. Most Russian state media and journalists widely covered and emphasized the issue of the Baltic states joining NATO. The media published James Baker's statement on NATO expansion,<sup>27</sup> 1962 Cuban crisis, the 2004 and 2013 Revolutions in Ukraine as threats to its national security and claimed they were abnormally financed and influenced by the West. Those steps undertaken by the West were, in Russia's view, offensive and expansionist. This set of examples represents a wide array of instruments with which Russian state media is widely known for utilizing, including the recent justification of Ukraine's invasion as "Denazification."<sup>28</sup> The Denazification narrative itself is also one of the key instruments which altogether shape the new Russian identity. Among other former Soviet republics, Russia uses the memory of the USSR which includes remembrance of the Great Patriotic War and the deeds of its heroes, a push for historical justice, and an emphasis on the negative outcomes of Nazi Germany's rule during World War II. As a result, this influence upon the Russian identity was crucial in Putin's successful political control of the country.

### ***The Russian World (Pan-Slavism)***

Another tool of Putin's strategy is the concept of unity based on the Russian language and Pan-Slavism. This idea represents the establishment of closer ties to people living abroad who either identify themselves as Russians or speak the Russian language. Furthermore, in the case of Ukraine and Belarus, the idea of unity on the basis of being Slavic peoples has grown since 2014. By doing this, Russia was able to vastly preserve its influence as a regional power and

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<sup>27</sup> Baker, Peter. "In Ukraine Conflict, Putin Relies on a Promise That Ultimately Wasn't". *The New York Times*. Jan 9, 2022

<sup>28</sup> Waxman, Olivia. Historians on What Putin Gets Wrong About 'Denazification' in Ukraine. *Time*, March 3, 2022

extend its soft power influence on its neighboring countries such as Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Georgia, and even Latvia where Russian language speakers comprise 37.2% of population.<sup>29</sup> The Russian World concept is closely intertwined with a nostalgic identity for the Soviet Union and includes many shared values which allegedly (in their view) shape overall regional sentiments. It includes, among other things, a monopolistic view about the USSR's role in World War II and the collective memory of the war; positive perceptions of Soviet prominent figures; relatively positive interpretation of Lenin and Stalin ("He [Stalin] found Russia working with wooden ploughs and left it with an atomic bomb"<sup>30</sup>); and a relatively negative perception of NATO and the West in general. Thus, when in 2014 the decommunization was at its peak in Ukraine which was followed by the destruction of Lenin's monuments across the country, Russia perceived it as an act of treason by Ukrainians for undermining the Soviet legacy. Furthermore, there were a lot of accusations towards Ukraine being ungrateful for the benefits which the USSR had given to the country: built roads, airports, cities, factories etc. Russian officials expressed serious concerns regarding the destruction of Lenin's monuments and called it "barbaric actions."<sup>31</sup>

The Russian World, however, goes far beyond angry statements by Russian officials regarding destroyed monuments. It's a well-organized campaign and a very effective instrument

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<sup>29</sup> "Latvian language is spoken by 62% of the population". Baltic News Network. September 26, 2013. Retrieved April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2022 <https://bnn-news.com/latvian-language-spoken-62-population-103604>

<sup>30</sup> Sherlock, Thomas. "Russian Politics and the Soviet Past: Reassessing Stalin and Stalinism under Vladimir Putin." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2016, pp. 45–59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48610433>. Accessed 2 May 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Taylor, Adam. Ukrainians keep pulling down Soviet statues. Now Russia is getting angry. *The Washington Post*. February 25, 2014. Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/02/25/ukrainians-keep-pulling-down-soviet-statues-now-russia-is-getting-angry/>

of Russian foreign policy. It also is a great part of the overall strategy. With time, the Russian government placed more emphasis on developing its instruments of soft power. The major shift in that process occurred after 2005 in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution, where Vladimir Putin realized Ukraine's president Viktor Yushchenko chose a political discourse rather friendly and promising towards the West. Quite surprisingly, as a result of these regional shifts, the Russian political leadership decided to raise the concept of the Russian World to strategic level and supported its planning within the administration of the president. In fact, it was largely influenced by top Russia's ideologist Vladislav Surkov.<sup>32</sup> During that phase, from 2004 to its peak in 2014, this idea grew in its magnitude which subsequently led to establishment of a full scale soft power mechanism, involving growing activity of its past instruments as well as formation of new ones: Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots living abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation (Rossotrudnichestvo); Russkiy Mir Foundation; Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund; and Russia Today (RT) TV channel. In Putin's view, the utilization of soft power proved effective in its ability to reach priority objectives without the involvement of the military.<sup>33</sup> In this case, however, one can conclude Putin failed entirely. Events such as the annexation of Crimea, involvement in the Donbass since 2014, and subsequent full scale invasion of Ukraine demonstrated the total opposite view of Russia's utilization of its soft power. It is important to note, however, that even though the strategy of promoting soft power was not able to directly reach its objectives, it still had a huge impact on targeted regions and provided enormous assistance to the Russian

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<sup>32</sup> Suslov, Mikhail. "Russian World: Russia's policy towards its diaspora" *Institut français des relations internationales*. July 2017. P. 22 Retrieved from:

<sup>33</sup> Feklyunina, Valentina. "Soft Power and Identity: Russia, Ukraine and the 'Russian World(s).'" *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 22, no. 4, SAGE Publications, 2016, pp. 773–96, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066115601200>.

government in some cases. It is primarily because of the use of soft power that Russia was able to attain such strong support in Crimea and to some degree in the Donbass region. By promoting the concepts of the Russian world and nostalgia for the immense USSR empire, a generation was raised in areas such as Crimea and Donbass with a very positive views of Russia, its past, its policy, and its people. Along with that, the people of Ukraine's eastern regions as well as Crimea had quite the opposite view regarding Ukraine's culture, traditions, history, and even independence. It should not necessarily involve the 2014 Crimean referendum or confirming that Crimeans are indeed happy with the annexation<sup>34</sup> in order to demonstrate the level of ideological gap. Instead, it is worthwhile to go far back in time. During the 1991 national Independence Referendum in Ukraine, in Crimea only 54.1% of its population supported the independence, which is the lowest approval rate among all other Ukrainian regions<sup>35</sup> with the Eastern Ukraine (Luhanska, Donetska, Dnipropetrovska, and Zaporizhia) to follow with 83%,<sup>36</sup> which is the second lowest result in the whole state. This subsequently shows the longevity and greater depth of the ideological difference between the same people and serves as a pretext to the further approval of Russia in the following years. One can also examine other factors to prove the vast ideological difference between Donbass/Crimea and the rest of the country. Any sociological survey with regards to certain topics can show how Soviet and Russian propaganda works and how it eventually divided a single national country. For example, the demographic statistics of

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<sup>34</sup> Toal, Gerard. "Six years and \$20 billion in Russian investment later, Crimeans are happy with Russian annexation" *The Washington Post*. March 18, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/03/18/six-years-20-billion-russian-investment-later-crimeans-are-happy-with-russian-annexation/>

<sup>35</sup> Potichnyj, Peter J. "The Referendum and Presidential Elections in Ukraine." *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes*, vol. 33, no. 2, 1991, pp. 123–38, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40869291>. Accessed 21 Apr. 2022.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

voters in the 2004 presidential elections illustrated that Crimea had 97% Russian speakers, Donetsk as 93% and Luhansk as 89%.<sup>37</sup> There could be a direct correlation between their views and the language they use, however other factors also include a vast ideological gap such as views on European integration, nationalism, remembrance of Soviet prominent figures, relations with Russia, whether they perceive Russian people as a “Brotherly people” etc. All of this, in fact, is the result of the *Russian World* policy differing in historical stages.

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<sup>37</sup> "Portrait of Yushchenko and Yanukovych electorates". *Analitik* (in Russian). Archived from the original on April 3, 2015. Retrieved April 17, 2022.

## **Chapter 4: Putin's Handling of the Russian Opposition**

The range of capabilities and instruments that the Russian government has used and continues to use to stay in power and silence the opposition are designated to reach certain objectives and overall represent the strategy of Russia both as a regional power and as a global power. One such objective is to remain as a major global power on the world stage. Based on prior actions such as the Russo-Georgian War, the involvement in Syria, economic as well as military assistance to Mali, and the annexation of Crimea, the Russian government actively uses military action and justifies it as self-defense. The end goal of this strategy relies on a couple of objectives: 1. To remain in power by utilizing the concept of external threat and therefore gain support from the population; 2. To achieve par with NATO regarding its geopolitical stance in world politics; 3. To expand its strategic significance in the world, especially the African continent; 4. And to reach significant commercial ties with China, Vietnam, Mali, Cambodia, and Iran. However, the Russian government not only created a plan to execute these objectives but also the means to defend this strategy from the opposition. Indeed, the opposition in Russia has suffered greatly from prison sentences, to losses of jobs, arrests, and even assassinations.

One perfect example of the Russian government implementing extreme measures towards its opposition is the case of Alexander Litvinenko. Having a life-long career in the KGB/FSB, Litvinenko often stepped up as a fierce opponent to the Russian government widely accusing it of corruption as well as having direct connections to organized crime. He used to be a crucial figure in Russian politics due to his investigations into accusations such as the connection of Putin to Semyon Mogilevich, organizing the Beslan school siege and 1999 apartment bombings in Buynaksk, Moscow, and Volgograd. He unquestionably became a personal enemy of Vladimir Putin since the majority of his conclusions regarding the allegations were centered on

Putin`s persona. He dedicated a large portion of these accusations to the issue of terrorism, stating that Russian security services had known about the plot to organize a terror attack on the Beslan school and probably even planned it themselves. The reasoning behind this was ostensibly through false media coverage to draw public attention to the issue of terrorism which would give Putin an avenue to expand the powers of law enforcement agencies.

Ella Kesayeva, an activist of the *Voice of Beslan* movement had supported this claim by driving public`s attention to the fact that many of the hostage takers used to be in government custody right before the incident<sup>38</sup>. Another case regarding terrorism was that Litvinenko accused KGB/FSB in supporting terrorism worldwide. He stated, in fact, that two of the Chechen terrorists who initiated a terrorist attack on a Moscow theatre in 2002 were FSB agents who were recruited by the organization to perpetrate the attack<sup>39</sup>. This claim of having Chechens organize the terrorist attack on FSB orders was extreme, however interestingly enough it was supported by other officials as well as activists. Former KGB Colonel Mikhail Trepashkin as well as politicians Ivan Rybkin and Alexander Khinshtein have shared similar views on the matter.<sup>40</sup> According to the book written by Litvinenko`s wife, a liberal Russian politician Sergei Yushenkov had picked up documents from Litvinenko with regards to the 2002 Moscow theatre attack perpetrator, Khanpasha Terkibaev, and later on passed it to investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya<sup>41</sup>. Yushenkov was assassinated on April 17, 2003, a couple of weeks after his

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<sup>38</sup> Kesayeva, Ella (20 November 2008). Террористы-агенты – Неизвестные подробности бесланской трагедии (in Russian). *Novaya Gazeta*. Archived from the original on 6 April 2010.

<sup>39</sup> Lazaredes, Nick (4 June 2003). "Terrorism takes front stage – Russia's theatre siege". *Dateline*. Archived from the original on 21 November 2008. Retrieved April 20, 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Politkovskaya, Anna. Russian Authorities Hedge Over Special Services Involvement In Moscow Theater Siege Archived 25 October 2007 at the Wayback Machine, *Novaya Gazeta*, 5 May 2003.

<sup>41</sup> Litvinenko, Marina. *Death of a Dissident: The Poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko and the Return of the KGB*, The Free Press (2007).



meeting with Litvinenko<sup>42</sup>. Politkovskaya was assassinated on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2006.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Litvinenko himself was assassinated as a result of Polonium 210 poisoning the same year<sup>44</sup>. This range of political assassinations clearly shows how widely the Russian government uses a method of physical elimination of its opposition. However, this era of political assassinations is still widely active even nowadays.

The cases of Litvinenko and Politkovskaya could be considered as outdated today, however Putin`s government is continuing this campaign by organizing more such actions. The 2015 assassination of Boris Nemtsov became one of the most outrageous incidents in recent years. Being a liberal politician and an opponent of Putin, Boris Nemtsov spent most of his political life in opposition and pushed for economic reforms. Specifically, the economic reforms adopted by him during his tenure as Nizhny Novgorod governor were highly regarded by Boris Yeltsin<sup>45</sup>. After the fall of the old socialist system, Nemtsov had pushed for the rapid privatization of former government installations, factories, farms, and other sources of production. In fact, he was considered as one of the most powerful opponents of the Putin administration. What differed Nemtsov from other Russian opposition leaders was his political conduct. He actively engaged in measures which totally opposed the typical Russian political agenda and this eventually brought him to the edge of conflict on a personal level. Nemtsov was the only Russian politician who supported and personally participated in the 2004 Orange

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<sup>42</sup> Wines, Michael. Liberal Russian Political Figure Slain on Moscow Street. *The New York Times*. April 17, 2003.

<sup>43</sup> Blinken, J Anthony. 15-Year Anniversary of the Murder of Anna Politkovskaya. *US Department of State*. October 7, 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Cowell, Alan. A Ruling in Alexander Litvinenko`s Poisoning, but No Justice. *The New York Times*. February 5, 2016.

<sup>45</sup> Makarychev, Andrey, et al. Boris Nemtsov and Russian Politics: Power and Resistance. *Ibidem Verlag*, 2018.

Revolution.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, he became an advisor to then president-elect Viktor Yushchenko. Rapidly, this cooperation gained a strong reaction from both Ukrainian and Russian sides. Surprisingly, some of the Ukrainian politicians like Oleg Tyagnybok have claimed that such a close relationship with a foreign political establishment could be considered as interference into Ukraine`s internal affairs. However, Nemtsov`s enthusiasm for supporting something totally opposed to the Russian government`s agenda didn`t end in 2004. After the Crimean crisis and the outset of the war in Eastern Ukraine, Nemtsov was a fierce opponent of Russian intervention in Ukraine which has made him a target of Russian senators as well as Putin himself. He strongly criticized the Russian foreign policy agenda on arming, financing, and providing propaganda to the so-called DNR and LNR republics in Eastern Ukraine. Not so long after the 2014 events, on 27 February 2015, he was shot dead on the Bolshoi Moskvoretsky Bridge.

The complexity of this crime as well as other political assassinations lies in the difficulty of having a professional investigation with unbiased results and the inability to formally prove that this incident was perpetrated on orders by the Russian government. The impossibility of foreign investigators as well as researchers to gain access to investigation materials creates a huge gap in gaining the truthful knowledge about these events. Legally, it is indeed true that the cases of Politkovskaya, Yushenkov, and Nemtsov could be reviewed and investigated only by using the Russian justice system. All of them were perpetrated on Russian territory and therefore became an internal Russian issue. In conjunction to that, it is hard to officially prove the Russian government`s connection to the aforementioned cases because Russia has always denied its role in such incidents. Therefore, the only way to prove Russia`s involvement in these affairs is by

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<sup>46</sup> Makarychev, Andrey, et al. *Boris Nemtsov and Russian Politics: Power and Resistance*. Ibidem Verlag, 2018. P. 38.

providing analysis on a case-by-case basis. By examining the methods of execution and the extreme frequency of these events, there are multiple reasons to believe there is indeed a connection between the number of opponents killed and Russian government actions. One should include a couple more factors to that equation: not only the number of opponents killed matters, but also the character of the execution, the targeting of the specific figures, and the political climate that existed during the incident. Based on that assessment, it appears that all of the above mentioned cases have a great deal in common. This includes the biography of each victim, the actions of the victim, and the time when assassinated. For example, both Politkovskaya and Litvinenko were assassinated for their extremely thorough investigations into the Russian government's actions related to corruption and terrorism which was one of the most prioritized topics in Russia at the time. Also, the mid-2000s reflect a specific political climate pertaining largely to Putin's agenda during the second Chechen war and extremism. By reporting war crimes of Russian soldiers or accusing FSB in financing terrorists, Politkovskaya and Litvinenko heavily undermined Putin's agenda along with his authority, respect, and approval ratings. Even though officially it is still impossible to conduct a fair investigation into whether Russian officials indeed executed those assassinations, it is clearly visible that there indeed is a pattern by the Russian government of handling opposition leaders. It is important to note that every such incident was thoroughly planned, supervised, executed by professionals and well calculated. Each of those incidents derived from Putin's intent and brought about a relative success in preserving his political power.

The case of Sergei Skripal has a very unique significance in this matter: As opposed to previous incidents (Except Litvinenko), it became extremely public, it was executed on foreign soil, and it had a profound impact on Russian voters. Putin purposely made the assassination of

Skripal so public because by doing so, he achieved an array of his objectives: 1. To capture the attention of the West and publicly prove their security failures; 2. To demonstrate to Russian voters his loyalty to the cause and to his agenda; 3. To build an image of a powerful leader in a country that is a global power, not just a regional power. Putin has reached all of those objectives and it has largely helped him in his political life. By doing so, he scared the West and gained the respect of his voters at home. By having two Russian individuals freely walking and poisoning another individual on British soil, he indeed proved the total failure of the British police and security services. It also provoked mistrust by British citizens towards their own government agencies. By including the intended level of unprofessionalism and negligence with which this operation was conducted, it is worthwhile to state that Putin's blow to the image of Britain and its security was quite significant. Surprisingly, the Skripal's assassination attempt took place two weeks before the 2018 presidential elections in which Putin won with an approval rate of 76.69%<sup>47</sup>. Such results clearly demonstrate that there is a connection between these incidents and the amelioration of Putin's political standing.

The phenomenon of fluctuating Putin's approval rating based on political actions became a pattern over time. That includes not only the Skripal case but also other incidents involving Russia. According to the research provided by the Levada Center in Moscow, Putin's approval rating after the invasion of Ukraine has increased from 69% in January 2022 to 83% in March 2022<sup>48</sup>. Such a large increase represents the sentiment of the Russian government and of the Russian people themselves. It clearly shows the overall approval of the invasion and military

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<sup>47</sup> Author Unknown. "Vote share in the presidential election in Russia in 2018". *Statista*. March 23, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/895684/russian-election-vote-share/>

<sup>48</sup> Nechepurenko, Ivan. "Faced with foreign pressure, Russians rally around Putin, poll shows". *The New York Times*. March 31, 2022.

action against a foreign and sovereign country. A very similar fluctuation is visible also in 2014. Putin`s approval rate went from 65% in January 2014 to 86% in June 2014<sup>49</sup> and stayed at the 80% mark further into 2018. That significant increase can be explained by the annexation of Crimea and involvement in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. Similarly to the previous conclusion, such high approval ratings after the 2014 military action represents the political sentiment of the majority of Russian voters.

The method of physical elimination (assassinations) is only one of the few instruments that the Russian government uses in order to silence its opposition. The Russian government for years has been targeting its opposition with prison sentences. The latest and most recent national scandal includes Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny who for years has confronted Putin on Russia`s political stage. He earned his reputation by revealing cases of corruption in the Russian government and since then has continuously worked in that realm. The example of Alexei Navalny demonstrates not only the imprisonment aspect but also a wide array of other methods used by the Russian government in relation to its opposition. Prior to his imprisonment, Putin`s government had tried all sorts of means to silence him. The Anti-Corruption Foundation established by him and dedicated to investigations of corruption in the Russian government was proclaimed extremist and banned by the Moscow City Court.<sup>50</sup> On attempts to run for the presidency, Navalny`s political party `Russia of the Future` often was either denied or removed from registration by the Russian Ministry of Justice in order to avoid the popular rise of a

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<sup>49</sup> Author unknown. "Do you approve of the activities of Vladimir Putin as the president (prime minister) of Russia?" *Statista*. April 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/896181/putin-approval-rating-russia/>

<sup>50</sup> "Russia Blacklists Navalny's Political and Activist Movements as 'Extremist'". *The Moscow Times*. 9 June 2021 Retrieved from: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/06/09/russia-blacklists-navalnys-political-and-activist-movements-as-extremist-a74159>.

potential political rival for Putin. The Russian state media channels as well as newspapers tended to avoid publishing articles and doing interviews with him, often to the point of not even mentioning his name,<sup>51</sup> After the lengthy confrontation and the use of soft measures, Navalny was poisoned with the same nerve agent that was used against Skripal.<sup>52</sup> This also demonstrates the pattern and connection to those incident. By closely looking at the political career of Navalny, the silencing techniques used by the Russian government become very clear. This includes censorship, artificial judicial actions, poisoning, and finally, imprisonment. Alexei Navalny is still imprisoned and received a new verdict by the judge which raised his prison time from 3 to 9 years.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Kazun, Anastasia. "To Cover or Not to Cover: Alexei Navalny in Russian Media." *International Area Studies Review*, vol. 22, no. 4, SAGE Publications, 2019, pp. 312–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2233865919846727>.

<sup>52</sup> Harding, Luke; Roth, Andrew (20 August 2020). "A cup of tea, then screams of agony: how Alexei Navalny was left fighting for his life," *The Guardian*. ISSN 0261-3077. Archived from the original on 20 August 2020. Retrieved May 9 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Troianovski, Anton. "Aleksei Navalny, Fiery Putin Critic, Is Handed a New, 9-Year Prison Sentence" *The New York Times*, March 2022.

## Chapter 5: Foreign Policy

Foreign policy for Russia is and always was one of its most significant priorities. In fact, during the Soviet era, this aspect reserved superiority even over its domestic policy. Soviet leaders had pushed for foreign military and humanitarian aid, sent advisors to various regions in the world, and expanded political influence. In those times, Soviet foreign policy was driven by the Communist ideology which encompassed the World Revolution. By the tenets of this Revolution, peoples of all countries would connect and free themselves from the oppression of capitalism. The ideology of Communism was a direct counter alternative to capitalism and Soviet leaders firmly believed in its superiority along with the advantages of a planned economy over free market. The bipolar division of the world based on its ideological discourse was so extensive and so in-depth that the effects of it are widely noticeable even nowadays. In order to understand the pattern of modern Russian foreign policy, it is significant to analyze tools and methods used by the Soviet Union.

As part of its agenda, the Soviet Union had as its goal to gain dominance in the world by following a robust and effective plan. That plan included the support of far-left movements around the world, the increase in diplomatic involvement with other state actors, the use of the direct military action, and developing strong psychological and ideological campaigns to influence those who were not yet a part of the Socialist camp. The presence of the Soviet Union as a permanent member of the UN Security Council has influenced the character of its decisions. Because the USSR possessed one of the largest nuclear arsenals in the world and its military might was considered to be one of the most powerful, a number of disagreements arose when it came to the solution of various international issues. The Vietnam war, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Cuban Missile crisis, and nuclear disarmament became hot topics for

discussion. The Soviet Union often utilized the practice of vetoing UN Security Council resolutions which resulted in a stalemate among the five permanent members. The focus of the UN often included armed conflicts in which the USSR tended to actively participate. The study of Soviet methods and tools with regards to its foreign policy has significance mainly because modern Russia tends to continue using all of the above techniques. Some of these techniques, in fact, became more frequent and sophisticated in their execution.

Carl von Clausewitz once mentioned that the war itself is not an independent activity but rather an act of rational policy<sup>54</sup>. In the case of the Soviet Union and later on Russia, this method was heavily used throughout various periods of time. Usually, the utilization of direct military action is effective in cases where other methods have not reached the desired objectives. Furthermore, The Soviet Union and Russia have always claimed to use its military force by justifying it as self-defense against a foreign threat. In 1956, the Soviet Union decided to use its military in order to suppress the Hungarian uprising<sup>55</sup>. Eventually, this decision became known globally as one of the bloodiest and cruelest events of the XXth century. It is important to note, however, that these military actions were performed against mostly civilian populations and not as an act of external war. The Soviet leadership had justified military action as a decision to eliminate an anti-democratic and anti-socialist “counter revolution”<sup>56</sup> which ultimately prevented Hungary from achieving prosperity and progress. To the rest of the world, however, it was a cruel and very aggressive means of handling the opposition. For the Soviet leadership it was

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<sup>54</sup> Howard, Michael Eliot. Clausewitz: On War. Library of Congress, 1997. P.17

<sup>55</sup> Lendvai, Paul, and Ann Major. “One Day That Shook the Communist World: The 1956 Hungarian Uprising and Its Legacy.” One Day That Shook the Communist World: The 1956 Hungarian Uprising and Its Legacy, Princeton University Press, 2010.

<sup>56</sup> Györkei, Jenő., and Miklós Horváth. Soviet Military Intervention in Hungary, 1956. Central European University Press, 1999. P. 141



important to take measures to curtail the uprising otherwise the consequences would have been strategic for them. Alternatively, if the Hungarian Revolution became a success, it would provoke other Socialist countries such as Poland and Bulgaria to overthrow their Communist governments. This narrative of being the liberators and defenders continuously served as a reason for the justification of military use. In 1968, the Soviet military has aggressively eliminated their opposition in Czechoslovakia by justifying it as the liberation and defense of Socialist ideals. Along with that, it is remarkable to note how the Soviet government had changed its narrative regarding the overall political situation in Czechoslovakia, starting when the opposition first became active. The TASS and other government news media agencies changed its narrative very slowly but steadily. This involved going from acknowledging that certain political moods were changing in Czechoslovakia to actively warning about a rising threat of Czechoslovakia fighting for its right to remain Socialist. The Soviet Union perceived this conflict as a strategic matter the same way as the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. For a better understanding of the Soviet narrative, it is worth analyzing the public media. After the CPSU held a Central Committee Plenum on July 17<sup>th</sup>, 1968, an article “Strengthening the Positions of Socialism and Peace” described a rising imbalance in CSSR largely due to the “increasing dynamism of world imperialism (mainly led by the United States) and its actions against socialist countries.”<sup>57</sup> It was a campaign directly blaming the West and the United States in particular over the rise of the opposition in Czechoslovakia. By doing so, The Soviet Union led its propaganda campaign targeted in the ideology of a constant foreign threat and the need to

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<sup>57</sup> Gordin, A. A. “Czechoslovakia in 1968: Soviet Propaganda and the Mood of Russia’s Provinces.” *Russian Studies in History*, vol. 49, no. 4, Routledge, 2011, pp. 18–33, <https://doi.org/10.2753/RSH1061-1983490401>.

counter it. These and other mass media sources do reflect the overall Soviet positioning on the global scale and indicate the character of its political discourse.

Modern-day Russia tends to use the same method of justifying its military action as an act of self-defense. In 2014, Russia has annexed the Ukrainian territory of the Crimean peninsula by using a full-scale invasion techniques during the moment when Ukraine was experiencing a complete destabilization in the aftermath of the Euromaidan Revolution. For many Ukrainian citizens it was a complete shock due to prior cultural proximity with Russia. However, it is important to analyze Putin`s rhetoric and explanations for making such decisions. He based his reasoning on a couple of claims: 1. The historical injustice of having Crimea under Ukrainian control for the last 60 years; this also involved identifying Crimea as solely Russian territory without acknowledging Tatars as a dominant ethnic group governing Crimea; 2. He emphasized the Western expansion of NATO and overall actions of Western countries with regards to rising military power along Russia`s borders;<sup>58</sup> and 3. He voiced the Russian concern over protecting Russia`s interests in the environment where the country is feeling cornered by the West. These points clearly identify the strategy by which Putin governs. Furthermore, such rhetoric clearly reflects the concept of a foreign threat. Yet back then (And continuously so now) Russia tended to view events in Crimea and Donbass as defensive action, not an interference into Ukraine`s affairs and annexation of a sovereign country`s territory. Putin`s speech on Tuesday, March 18, 2014, also displays his dishonesty and lies with regards to the idea of self-defense in his policy. In that speech, Putin said he did not have any intention to divide Ukraine further,<sup>59</sup> which turned out to be a complete lie. After a couple of months, Russia would start sending troops, advisors,

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<sup>58</sup> Lee Myers, Steven. "Putin Reclaims Crimea for Russia and Bitterly Denounces the West". *The New York Times*. March 18, 2014

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

and resources to the so-called LNR and DNR republics in the Donbass region. Besides that, 8 years later, Russia would launch a full-scale invasion against the entire Ukrainian territory<sup>60</sup>. These actions demonstrate a complete failure of the Russian government to remain a non-combatant actor and otherwise prove the aggressive nature of the Russian political agenda. By claiming its military actions to be defensive from a foreign threat, Russia expands militarily and uses all sorts of means in order to gain influence. Its presence has increased significantly by transitioning to the African and Asian continents since 2014 while also maintaining control in Eastern Europe. Syria is another example of Russian influence. By participating in the Syrian conflict, Russia competes with the United States militarily by justifying its actions as international assistance against the ISIL. Along with that, its presence has given Russia a wide influence over the Syrian state, established a good relationships with Bashar Al-Assad and secured its naval military base in Syria.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia had temporarily stopped its activity on the global stage due to its political destabilization at home. However, with the rise of Putin`s regime it restored the value of foreign policy and made it one of Russia`s key priorities. Interestingly enough, the means and execution methods of Russian foreign policy remain very similar to those of the late Soviet Union. One of the key instruments was providing foreign aid to countries across Africa and Asia. Back in the Soviet era, it involved political, economic, humanitarian, and educational aid to a wide array of states, especially in the Horn of Africa. From 1960 to 1991, more than 43,500 students from Sub- Saharan Africa completed their

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<sup>60</sup> Zinets, Natalia. "Missiles rain down around Ukraine" *Reuters*. February 24, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-orders-military-operations-ukraine-demands-kyiv-forces-surrender-2022-02-24/>

secondary education in the Soviet Union<sup>61</sup>. The purpose was targeting the next generation of leaders in Third World countries by educating the elites on the basis of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Along with that, it promoted political proximity to the Soviet Union in the long term and as a result of that serve to extend its foreign policy agenda. The new elites differed in their views from their respective former governments due to their education. Such a move represented the long-term strategy of gaining the significant strategic partners and expanding influence abroad. Besides the educational assistance and formation of long-term Soviet-friendly elites, the aid substantially was military oriented. Since 1954, about two-thirds of Moscow's \$47 billion commitment and three-fourths of its \$32 billion deliveries were dedicated to military needs.<sup>62</sup> Gradually, its military aid had outnumbered economic assistance 2.5 to 1, making the Soviet Union the second largest arms supplier after the United States<sup>63</sup>. It is valuable to note that Russia's current stance of military export continues to be high even today and still maintains second place in the world as an arms exporter. Russia currently exports arms to 45 countries in the world and has accounted for 20% of total global arms sales<sup>64</sup> with the majority exporting to Algeria, China, Egypt, India, and Vietnam. Based on these statistics, it is clearly visible how Russia has prioritized its military production complex in its strategy by using its vast accessibility to production means given to them by the Soviet Union. This strategy of becoming

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<sup>61</sup> Katsakioris, Constantin. "Creating a Socialist Intelligentsia: Soviet Educational Aid and Its Impact on Africa (1960-1991)." *Cahiers D'études Africaines*, vol. 57, no. 226 (2), EHESS, 2017, pp. 259–88, <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafricaines.20664>. P. 260

<sup>62</sup> Cooper, Orah, and Carol Fogarty. "Soviet Economic and Military Aid to the Less Developed Countries, 1954-78." *Soviet and Eastern European Foreign Trade*, vol. 21, no. 1/2/3, 1985, pp. 54–73. P. 55 JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27748827>. Accessed 18 May 2022.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* P. 55

<sup>64</sup> Bowen, Andrew. "Russian Arms Sales and Defense industry" *Congressional Research Service*. October 14, 2021. P.1; Retrieved from: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46937>

a primary arms supplier in the world is rationally building up Russian capital as well as expanding Russia's standing internationally. Putin's government prioritized the expansion of the armed forces with the goal of reaching the following objectives: 1. To transform from a regional power to become a global power; 2. To establish vast international relations with developing countries and gain strategic partners; 3. To generate long-term commercial relationships with new partners; 4. To counter the United States in the realm of defense industries. Needless to say, Russia has achieved all of those objectives. The overall perception of Russia since 2014 has greatly improved in comparison to the 1990s and Western countries now perceive Russia as a serious threat to their national security.

As an example of Russian technical and military skills, Russia has been able to meddle in the US federal elections<sup>65</sup> and frequently confronted American troops in Syria<sup>66</sup>. Such actions were impossible back in the 1990s simply because Russia didn't possess those capabilities and could not afford global military operations or the ability to influence the institutions of other countries. The sole fact of being able to perform actions of such magnitude prompts Western analysts to rethink perception of Russia. In addition, the significant expansion of Russia's influence in certain regions of the world such as Syria or the Central African Republic is an attempt to demonstrate Russia's transition from a regional power to a global power.

With regards to the establishment of strategic partners and commercial ties, Russia was able to gain long-term partners in the defense industry mainly including Russia's five major arms

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<sup>65</sup> Barnes, Julian. "Russian Interference in 2020 Included Influencing Trump Associates, Report Says" *The New York Times*. March 16, 2021. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/16/us/politics/election-interference-russia-2020-assessment.html>

<sup>66</sup> Detsch, Jack. "Russia runs US troops off the road in Syria". *Foreign Policy*. August 27, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/27/russia-run-united-states-troops-off-road-syria-conflict-united-nations/>

supply clients. By selling arms Russia directly creates competition with the United States in that realm. However, it has more commercial potential than the US supplies due to various reasons. First, the majority of Russia`s partners are developing countries which need weaponry of general tactical use. The number of developing countries exceeds the number of developed countries, therefore giving Russia a great portion of the market. Secondly, a majority of these countries will not (and don`t have to) spend more funds on weaponry because their needs simply do not correspond to buying sophisticated and expensive equipment. Being so, Russia provides more reasonable and, most importantly, cheaper option for arms supplies than the United States. Third, these countries are also Russia`s strategic partners in other areas, such as international trade and research. This prevents the US from advancing in those markets even if such intention ever existed.

The Soviets had their presence in Angola, Yemen, Vietnam, Somalia, and other countries. It also included deployment of military advisors, political advisors, medical personnel, logisticians, engineers, and combat troops, especially in Vietnam. By actively engaging in the world politics, modern-day Russia repeats the old pattern: since 2014, Russian private military companies such as the Wagner group deployed to at least 19 African nations.<sup>67</sup> However, the goal nowadays became slightly different from the one during the Cold War. If in the XXth century, Russian involvement overseas was based primarily on ideology, nowadays it also includes economic influence. One of the primary roles of Russian presence in African states is providing security to the leadership of African countries, advising them of political and military matters, and training the local troops. In exchange, Russia receives access to natural resources

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<sup>67</sup> Munasinghe, Sandun. "The World Needs to Pay Attention to Russia's Growing Influence in Africa". *Time*. April 4, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://time.com/6163624/russia-africa/>

and direct payments from respective governments. With time, this international cooperation has gained another form. During the Cold War, the USSR sent its direct personnel to perform duties, but today the Kremlin uses a unique type of entity – Private Military Companies (PMCs). This move allows the Russian government to reach its objectives and deny any connection between the state and those PMCs. The reason is they officially have no association to the Russian state and perform as a separate organization. However, the types of tasks performed by these groups tend to be very similar to the objectives of the Russian state. Moreover, its founders either have or had some connections to the Russian government and to Putin himself. Dmitry Utkin, the initial founder of the Wagner Group, was a Russian military officer in the past and occasionally met with Putin. Russian media news agency RBK has reported the Kremlin has officially acknowledged the presence of Wagner commander Utkin during one of the Putin`s receptions<sup>68</sup>. Another individual Yevgeny Prigozhin, who is also known under the alias “Putin`s Chef,”<sup>69</sup> is widely considered to be the owner of the Wagner Group and a close ally to Putin. Some sources indicate that gold mines in CAR granted to Wagner as payment for the security services were registered in his name<sup>70</sup>.

By employing Private Military Companies, selling arms to its allies, and providing security to partner nations, Russia was able to substantially increase its international influence. In some areas such as Mali, Russia was able to gain wide support from the population while having

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<sup>68</sup> Author Unknown. "Песков подтвердил присутствие Дмитрия Уткина на приеме в Кремле" [Peskov confirmed the presence of Dmitry Utkin at a reception in the Kremlin]. РБК (in Russian). Dec 15, 2016. Retrieved from:

<https://www.rbc.ru/politics/15/12/2016/585278bb9a7947efc948945b>

<sup>69</sup> MacFarquhar, Neil. “Yevgeny Prigozhin, Russian Oligarch Indicted by U.S., Is Known as ‘Putin’s Cook’”. *The New York Times*. Feb 16, 2018. Retrieved from:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/16/world/europe/prigozhin-russia-indictment-mueller.html>

<sup>70</sup> Munasinghe, Sandun. “The World Needs to Pay Attention to Russia's Growing Influence in Africa”. *Time*. April 4, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://time.com/6163624/russia-africa/>

French forces forced to withdraw completely. Russia actively utilizes past colonialism as an instrument to attract new partners among developing countries, the same way as the Soviet Union used to build relations with developing countries by emphasizing capitalist and colonialist oppression. In these cases, Russia, like the Soviet Union, was able to reach its objectives using similar strategies.



## Chapter 6: The legacy of ashes

Russia had come a long way in achieving its current global positioning by implementing a long-term strategy with the aim of restoring its past glory. Indeed, the state of Russia is unique due to its societal norms, customs, and a specific, centuries-long approach to international relations. Undoubtedly, it differs from other countries on the world stage by its methodology, access to resources, leadership style, and mentality. These differences eventually became Russia's burden by generating isolation instead of economic growth. The state of Russia is certainly familiar with the concept of isolation and its citizens widely remember it even today: the planned economy, the constant shortage of products and services, long lines for the purchase of basic commodities, inability to cross borders, and others. During the whole period of Soviet governance Russian citizens were victims of the experimental Communist form of economic development which their leaders thought might outperform capitalism. The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 had clearly proved it to be otherwise. However, these country dynamics represent the overall political mood within Russia and facilitate understanding Putin's strategies.

Based on a thorough analysis of Russia one can clearly identify the pattern the country has developed. Torn between civilizational self-identification as a great power and striving for equality with the Western World order,<sup>71</sup> Russia has endeavored to repeat the methods and instruments used by the Soviet Union. This process took a long time and is, in fact, so massive and powerful that it covers every aspect of Russian society. Furthermore, based on the research

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<sup>71</sup> Sakwa, Richard. "Russia's Identity: Between the 'Domestic' and the 'International.'" *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 63, no. 6, Routledge, 2011, pp. 957–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2011.585749>.

in this thesis, it is shown that all of the factors shaping this strategy are intertwined. It involves self-identification as a great power, propaganda, the use of military action, suppression of the opposition, vetoing of UN resolutions, and foreign aid. Overall, however, this strategy has failed. Based on a thorough analysis, it is evident that this strategy can be successful only in the short-term. The Soviet Union had in its essence resistance to the capitalist world by substituting capitalist means of development with the new, socialist-type of governance. In the short-term, some aspects of this agenda were, in fact, successful. However, in the long-term, it led to a collapse of the communist state.

The reasoning behind Russia's authoritarian leadership style and its conduct with regards to other countries on the world stage is directly correlated to the decades-long period of living under the Soviet rule. After the World War I, the CPSU developed a massive agenda for the formation and empowerment of the new system. It involved very strict rules, prohibiting everything that didn't correspond to the Communist agenda. Burned churches, massive executions of the intelligentsia, resettlement of persons, prison sentences for free speech or criticism of the state – all of this became the catalyst for development of a prolonged and powerful fear among the population which subsequently led to the alteration of every citizen's lifestyle per se. All nationalist or independence movements were either eliminated or sent to exile while new generations swiftly absorbed the ideals established by the Soviet state. With time, it has enabled the emergence of a citizenry whose set of ideals largely corresponded to the official agenda created by the government. In some former republics, this influence was of substantial magnitude, and Belarus is a perfect example of that. The current percentage of

Belarussians speaking the Belarussian language at home is around 10%<sup>72</sup>. The rest speak Russian on the daily basis. This indicates how effective and dominant the Soviet campaign has proved to be as well as demonstrates how harmful it could be for one`s own culture. In the case of Belarus, it was a complete domination and substitution of the country`s national attributes, language, and traditions. By becoming a minority inside its own state, Belarussians had faced a dilemma where unity becomes a question. The absorption of Soviet ideals had slowed Belarus for decades in terms of it`s identity. As a result of that, it had lost its potential to successfully execute its own strategy. Instead, it became a close ally state to Russia, having to agree with every Putin demand. As evidence, it was Lukashenko who allowed Russian forces to begin the Ukrainian offensive on February 24<sup>73</sup> and created the means for the Russian Federation to use Belarus as resupply location and major transportation hub.

Having been able to influence states in the region has proven to have a certain success in the short-term, however it is impossible for such a strategy to survive in the long term. Even though the Soviet Union and later on Russia was able to transform Belarus, some parts of Ukraine, Moldova (to a slight extent), and the central Asian republics of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have been able to retain their original identity. Even in the case of Belarus, the level of opposition had increased significantly in the latter years, indicating on the small but a steady

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<sup>72</sup> Barushka, Katerina. "After decades of Russian dominance, Belarus begins to reclaim its language". *The Guardian*. January 28, 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/28/-sp-russian-belarus-reclaims-language-belarusian#:~:text=Belarusian%20and%20Russian%20are%20both,day%2Dto%2Dday%20lives.>

<sup>73</sup> Coakley, Amanda. "Lukashenko Is Letting Putin Use Belarus to Attack Ukraine". *Foreign Policy*. February 24, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/24/russia-ukraine-war-belarus-chernobyl-lukashenko/>

development of change. The 2020 protests in Belarus demonstrate a perfect example of that.<sup>74</sup> Undoubtedly, it will take years to reach the same liberties as in other countries. However, it is also proof that these movements are not neutralized yet and could develop in the future. Nevertheless, on a strategic scale, Russia was able to reach a certain success. That success largely represented the establishment of the close economic relations with Vietnam, China, Iran, Syria, and others. Russia maintains the status of the second biggest arms supplier in the world, and eventually manufactured the self-perception of claiming to be a global power.

However, by invading Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Russia has undermined everything it strived for in the past decade. Just as in the case of the Soviet Union, by violating international law and the sovereignty of an independent country, Russia has once again placed itself in isolation. Access to Western markets, free and open borders, and the implementation of a market economy were major factors differing Russia from the Soviet Union. However, due to international sanctions this had proven to be catastrophic. Sergei Aleksashenko, the former deputy finance minister of Russia, called the international sanctions on Russia a “financial nuclear bomb.”<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, there is no sign that Russia plans a withdrawal of the troops or at least the willingness to negotiate for peace. As a result of that, Western nations primarily due to the EU, has called for a complete cut-off from energy partnerships with Russia. Indeed, the European Commission had announced its plan to reduce Russian energy imports by two-thirds

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<sup>74</sup> Hrydzin, Uladz. “Belarusians Protest Against Lukashenka's Run For Sixth Term As President”. *Radio Free Europe*. May 25, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-protests-politics/30632716.html>

<sup>75</sup> Davidson, Kate. “The West declares economic war on Russia” *Politico*. February 28, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/morning-money/2022/02/28/the-west-declares-economic-war-on-russia-00012208>

per year, and completely by 2030.<sup>76</sup> Some of the European countries like Poland, United Kingdom, and others have already stopped imports of Russian oil and gas completely. Interestingly enough, there are countries which are 90% and above dependent on Russian oil and gas and yet they have imposed a complete embargo on imports. The prime example is the Baltic states such as Lithuania.<sup>77</sup> Such bold moves have influenced the EU in reaching a comprehensive solution with regards to an energy embargo and rethinking its approach on any energy relationships with Russia. It is valuable to note that targeting the energy sector is absolutely critical for Russia since the energy sector remains its biggest, most important industry. By doing so, the EU switches the balance of power away from Russia which eventually would require Russia to transition to the Asian market. This pushback, however, has not ended solely as a trade embargo. Finland, along with Sweden, has announced its willingness to join NATO<sup>78</sup> which will offset the balance of power not just economically, but also politically and militarily. Clearly, Russia had a totally different plan; it anticipated equality with the West on the basis of balance of power. However, it is perfectly clear that by implementing its strategy, Russia eventually failed to achieve any condition it initially intended to reach. The biggest concern and foreign threat for Russia was NATO's expansion towards the East. By Finland expressing a desire to join NATO, Russia had worsened its own situation as a result of implementing its strategy. Moreover, this demonstrates clear evidence of the long-term ineffectiveness of the Russian strategy and the

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<sup>76</sup> Weise, Zia. "Commission plans to get EU off Russian gas before 2030". *Politico*. March 8, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.politico.eu/article/commission-plan-eu-russia-gas-2030/>

<sup>77</sup> Eddy, Melissa. "Lithuania says it has stopped importing gas from Russia." *The New York Times*. April 2, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/02/world/europe/lithuania-russia-gas.html>

<sup>78</sup> Lemola, Johanna. "Finland's president talks of 'a new era' as he launches its bid to join NATO." *The New York Times*. May 15, 2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/15/world/europe/finland-nato.html>

primary reason why it will never work. Hostility towards the West and the perception of international relations through the prism of an external foreign threat has resulted in isolating Russia even more than it was during the Soviet era.

Sometimes regional events are able to change the global balance of power. In the case of the recent conflict in Europe, it was exactly that. The world of international relations will never be the same after this conflict, solely due to the amount of geopolitical and strategic changes it has orchestrated. This geopolitical outcome would have been impossible to imagine prior to February 24, 2022. Yet nevertheless, these events have happened and will continue to shape the character of Europe.