The Variation in Russia’s Foreign Policy in Near Abroad After the Disintegration of the USSR

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THE VARIATION IN RUSSIA’S FOREIGN POLICY IN NEAR ABROAD AFTER THE DISINTEGRATION OF THE USSR

by

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A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2017
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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The variation in Russia’s foreign policy in Near Abroad

ABSTRACT

The variation in Russia’s foreign policy in Near Abroad after the disintegration of the USSR

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This master thesis sets out to explain the complex nature and variation in Russian foreign policy in Near Abroad states from the collapse of the USSR in December 1991 and the accession of Boris Yeltsin to the end of Vladimir Putin’s third term as President of the Russian Federation. I analyze Russian foreign policy through the lenses of cultural, external, domestic and institutional determinants. Due to the limit of the paper, I look at three “frozen” conflicts that Russia got involved into since the dissolution of the USSR – Transnistria (Moldova) in 1992, Abkhazia (Georgia) in 2008, Crimea (Ukraine) in 2014 (although there are more “frozen” conflicts: Nagorny Karabakh in Azerbaijan, for example). The goal is to assess what affects the dichotomies of continuity and change, consensus and conflict, and variation in making foreign policy decisions in regards neighboring states, specifically Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. My argument is that the change in understanding the role of Russia in the world among Russian political elite and the formation of a new strong national identity during Putin administration led to a variation in Russian foreign policy in solving different conflicts in the same region of near abroad countries from being passive and indecisive in 1992 when an understanding of Russia’s national identity was conflicted, to being an assertive and insistent as the idea of Russia’s role in the world has strengthened among Russian political elite.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Theories of international relations and Russian foreign policy

The purpose of this study is to find the answers to some questions regarding Russian foreign policy in Near Abroad states after the dissolution of the USSR. What explains the variation in the Russian Federations’ foreign policy toward the former Soviet successor states since the Soviet Union collapsed? What factors best explain its approach toward conflict-ridden areas like Moldova and Georgia? To comprehend an enormous amount of information regarding Russian foreign policy behavior and to find answers to the research question, it is important to analyze the Russian foreign policy approach through the lenses of the theories of international relations.

Since 1991 to 2016, Russia’s foreign policy towards its immediate neighbors has been a complicated one, with overlapping approaches that have varied from supportive to interventionary, from peaceful to violent. The Near Abroad refers to the fourteen countries that are not Russia but were once part of the Soviet Union, such as Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, that I use in this study as case studies to illustrate how Russian foreign policy has changed over the last twenty-five years in the region. When we examine the changes in Russian foreign policy from 1991-2016 through the theoretical lenses of realism, institutional liberalism, and constructivism, we find that the realist and liberal approaches undervalue norms such as state identity and memory, which assert powerful influence over domestic, foreign policy preferences.

One of the main theories of international relations that help us to frame states affairs is realism. As “classical” realists Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr argued, the primary objects of study are states, which they understood to be unitary actors, whose main goal was a
survival and maximizing power in an anarchic system of states. The goals pursued by these political actors are usually in conflict with goals of other political actors in the system since there are both expansionary and status quo states. Also, these goals are material, and the resolution of conflicts between actors is related to their material capabilities (Walt, 1998). Classical realists such as Hobbes, Niebuhr, and Morgenthau assigned egoism and power politics primarily to human nature, while neorealists focus on anarchy (Wendt, 1992). The neo-realism, or structural realism, discussed explicitly by Kenneth N. Waltz in “Theory of International Politics,” is seen as a major push forward of the classical realist theory as described by Hans Morgenthau and others (Schroeder, 1994). Waltz made two main assertions in regards international politics. The first assertion is that all states operate under structural constraints of anarchy, self-help, and balance of power. The second assertion is that all states are “like-units,” their primary function is to survive in a self-help world. What makes states different is their power position in relationship to each other. Thus, an international system that functions under conditions of anarchy forces states to concentrate its resources on security, and only after a certain level of security is reached, states can pursue other goals. States that do not follow rules of the system get punished by the system in the form of threat of attack and other serious consequences (Waltz, 1979). However, even in the anarchic world of international politics where the level of trust is low, and the level of uncertainty is high, cooperation is possible. As neo-realist would argue, this happens for the sake of security. Most of the time in the realist realm cooperation takes a form of either bandwagoning or balancing against an actual or potential hegemon. Bandwagoning is a strategy of joining the stronger side for the sake of protection and payoffs, even if it comes with some sacrifice of independency. On the other side, balancing is a strategy of joining alliances to protect themselves from a state or number of states which pose a threat (Walt, 1985). Neo-realist
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scholars argue what type cooperation between states happen more often, for example, Walt state that balancing between strong states happens more often and that even if weak states bandwagon sometimes, it does not affect the system of IR significantly (1985). On the other hand, Schroeder disagrees with Walt’s statement and argues that bandwagoning happens more often than balancing, providing examples of Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815), the Crimean War (1853-56), the First World War (1914-18), and the Second World War (1939-1945). Nevertheless, it is hard to distinguish the real motives of a state in joining the alliance: even if a state is bandwagoning for a profit, it would still make a claim that it is balancing (Schroeder, 1994).

As Russian-US relations faced challenges over issues such as NATO expansion and the NATO bombing in Kosovo, Russia reasserted itself at the expense of other former republics of the USSR. Realists believe that the national security comes first, and there are two potential kinds of threats: external and internal. In rationalist framework, Russia could suffer from external threats such as attempts to challenge the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation, blocking the integration in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and political instability in neighboring countries. Potential internal threats are inter-ethnic and regional conflicts, organized crime, economic decline, degradation of the environment, lack of information security. When Putin came to power at the end of 1999, his foreign policy approach combined the vision of realpolitik with an understanding of interdependence and international economic integration. Also, the issue of world order came back into the discussion as the US invaded Iraq.

While realism was one framework to understand Russian foreign policy in the 1990s, it certainly wasn’t the only one, because one also sees the growth of the use of liberal institutions at the same time, especially with economic organizations. According to MacFarlane (1999), the
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Russian government did not support the balance of power in international relations, and the realism was not the dominant approach in the way Russian political elite saw the future of the world, including Russia. While neorealism explains some aspects of international cooperation and states behavior in general, neo-liberal school of IR claims that realism is too static and does not account for a change and development in the international system (Schroeder, 1994). With its focus on the absolute gain as opposed to relative gains in realism, neoliberalism views interstate cooperation possible. Neoliberal scholars do not condemn the neorealist notion that states would pursue their national interests; neoliberalism emphasizes that cooperation is in the interest of states. Neoliberalist asks questions such as “How much a state is gaining from a cooperation compared to a state that is not cooperating?”, while neorealist asks questions such as “How much a state is gaining from cooperation compared to other states that are cooperating?”. Analyzing a question of variation Russia’s foreign policy in Near Abroad through the lenses of neoliberalism brings a deeper understanding of a possible interstate cooperation because the theory of neoliberal institutions emphasizes the importance of international government organizations (IGOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in promoting states’ collaboration on global issues that are truly a collective action dilemma. Actors create institutions to solve issues they encounter, and the institution’s character reflects those issues and how they are being faced. International institutions in the liberal theory enhance the cooperation between states by reducing transaction costs for creating and drafting agreements, uncertainty about states’ intentions, and monitoring for states’ compliance (Morrow, 2001). Binding agreements reached with an active involvement of IOs call for “general principles of obligation or diffuse reciprocity” (Mitchell & Hansel, 2007). Also, international organizations provide a forum for repeated interactions between states, which might make enforcement of international norms and rules easier. Repeated
interactions between actors in IR create a notion of the “shadows of the future” that makes enforcement of agreements easier, but striking the bargain harder because states are very careful about what agreement they claim a commitment to, since non-compliance would be costly in terms of a state reputation in the institution (Mitchell & Hanson, 2007).

However, liberalism might be perceived differently in different economic and social context. As Tsygankov and Tsygankov argue, Russian liberalism, although heavily influenced by American academia, is different from Western liberalism, and it asks questions such as 1) Which world order is emerging after the Cold War and which is the most preferable for Russia? 2) How are the state, its sovereignty, and national interests are affected in the era of globalization? 3) Which strategy should Russia adopt to adequately respond to the world’s new conditions and challenges? The debate between realists and liberalist was the most evident on issues of the CIS integration and European security (Tsygankov, 2010). Liberals argued that the main challenge for Russia was not integration or disintegration of the CIS, but rather a successful completion of democratic and economic reforms in the region. In regards to the European security, liberals argued that Russia should act towards strengthening multilateral institutions which would act as a guarantor towards the return of the balance of power politics. Realists disagreed with liberals about the nature of the post-Cold War world order and viewed NATO having offensive, rather than defensive intentions. As a result of the liberalist influence, the new leaders of Russia after the dissolution of the USSR had very high expectations about joining Western international organizations and expected high Western investments to help restructure the debt and stabilize the currency.

Although neorealism and neoliberalism differ in their emphasis on the importance of state’s relative gains vs. absolute gains, they are similar in taking a state’s identity and interests,
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as well as the structure of the system in which states operate, as exogenously given. Also, both neorealists and neoliberalists focus on how the behavior of agents generate an outcome. However, another theory that tries to explain international relations, constructivism, claims that the system of international relations and state’s interests are not static nor exogenously given, but instead depends on the intersubjective understanding and expectations of actors, as well as the “distribution” of knowledge, that forms meanings of the “self” and “others” (Wendt, 1992). It is collective meanings that constitute the structures which organize states’ actions. States obtain identities – relatively stable and role-specific understanding of themselves – by taking part in such collective meanings. Identities are therefore relational, and a state may have multiple identities. These identities are the basis of interests, which are defined in the process of defining situations. On the other hand, an institution is a relatively stable structure of identities and interests (Wendt, 1992). Institutions do not exist apart from actors’ ideas about how the world works, and they make sense only in the context of actors’ socialization and being part of collective knowledge. Constructivists argue that institutions are essentially cognitive concepts that do not exist apart from actors’ ideas about how the world operates. Moreover, they state that self-help and power politics are not basic features of anarchy, but institutions instead, and, thus, “anarchy is what states make of it” (Wendt, 1992). Therefore, constructivism – a theory that emphasizes the role of ideas and culture in explaining international relations – aims to explain fundamental blocks of both neorealism and neoliberalism, such as states’ interest, institutions, and the structure of relations. One can not disagree that such theory is very important and useful in answering baffling questions of the nature and character of international politics.

Although it might be difficult to separate actors’ material interests from ideas and culture, constructivists like Hall (1997) argue that the separation is not necessary. Hall quotes
Kratochwill: “it is the analogy to money that gives “power” purported explanatory force. But as we all know, money is not a thing but a shared convention”, and explains that the capacity of money to act as a mechanism for exchange is due to the agreement between parties using this mechanism. The social context of this agreement accounts for using money as a mechanism for economic exchange. Economic power resources might be applied to understand policy goals in the economic sphere, but the success of this move depends on a social convention. Also, Hall argues that “the utility of material power resources is indicated by the care with which actors labor to equip themselves with these resources” (1997). Material and Ideational factors do not need to be separated from each other, but may rather enrich each other in our understanding of the nature and complexity of the international system.

The scope of social constructivists is the full array of roles that ideational factors play in international politics; it is not limited to specified roles that based and tested on theoretical assumptions like in neorealist or neoliberalist research (Ruggie, 1998). Constructivist empirical research studying the relationship between principled beliefs and patterns on international outcome includes studies of cooperation on combating the climate change, cooperation on termination of apartheid, decolonization, the role of human rights in international politics, etc. In these cases, the empirical research aims to establish the impact of shared beliefs by epistemic communities on resolving particular policy problem, such as ozone depletion; explaining redefining states’ interests as in the case of antiballistic missile treaty; and describing operational content to general state interests, as at Bretton Woods. Ruggie argues that separating ideational impacts from institutional is a difficult task, but “that problem is not unique to the epistemic community literature” (1998).
Another important factor that needs to be taken into account, while thinking about testing constructivist ideas in social scientific terms, is that “causation” itself might be understood differently than in neorealistic or neoliberal settings. As Ruggie states, some ideational factors do not function causally in the same manner as state interests in neo-utilitarianist theories of international relations do: for example, the role of aspirations, the impact of legitimacy, and the power of rights - these factors are reasons for actions but not causes of actions (1998). “Reasons” and “causes” do not have the same causal capacity and should not be exchanged one for another, or measured in the same way. Therefore, constructivist theories of the role of ideas and culture in the international relations require a different approach than neoliberalist or neorealist theories, but it does not mean that constructivist research is impossible.

Neither realism, not institutional liberalism could explain the growing strength of the opposition to the new liberal government and the influence of the domestic opposition to the foreign policy approach. In addition, liberal storylines that tout universal principles of international law and territorial integrity tend to ignore predisposition of one to regard one’s own intentions and behavior as a positive force in the world (the US double-standards on characterizing Russia’s annexation of Crimea as outdated state aggression while ignoring the US violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq just a few years earlier; the US support of Israel’s occupation of Gaza, but condemning Russia’s support in Eastern Ukraine). Liberal institutionalism also systematically downplay, marginalize and ignore the situational, contextual, and spatial factors that may account for state behavior (Toal, 2017). For realists, on the other hand, the world consists of superpowers with real agency and smaller states as subordinate clients. An analysis of the deeper context reveals statements that contradict later policies adopted by Russia. Why Putin stated on May 17, 2002, that Ukraine joining NATO was “a matter for
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those two partners,” and on August 29, 2008, that “Crimea is not a disputed territory,” needs to be addressed.

Geopolitical culture, as described by Toal (2017), helps to address the weaknesses of realism and institutional liberalism. Toal defines geopolitical culture as state’s prevailing sense of identity, place, and mission in the world (2017). Thus, geopolitical culture is about the identity of the territorial entity, and the locational narrative it presents to itself and the world; it answers questions such as who are we, how do we survive, and how do we prosper. In other words, the geopolitical culture is made up of a series of understandings and perceptions about self and the other in the world and is part of the constructivist approach. The constructivist theory focuses on the identity as a dependent variable determinant by the historical, cultural, social and political context, towards the significant Other. The changing identity of the state together with dynamic national interests can explain phenomena that both realism and liberalism lack explanation of, such as the influence of domestic opposition on foreign policy course. Also, Tsygankov argues that both realists and liberals tend to emphasize one aspect of international system at the expense of others and that these two theories view Russian foreign policy through the lenses of Western culture and ignore Russia’s authentic history and system (2010). Neither realism nor liberalism is fully satisfactory in explaining the variation in Russia’s international strategy. Therefore, I choose constructivism as theoretical lenses through which I analyze the research question and based on which I construct my argument.

1.1. Overview of the foreign policy discourse during Yeltsin presidency vs. Putin presidency

In this section, I provide a brief overview of the Russian foreign policy since the collapse of the USSR through the lenses of theoretical approaches discussed above – realism, institutional liberalism, and constructivism. The aim of this section is to demonstrate that each
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approach has its strength and weaknesses, and explains best the Russian foreign policy discourse in particular set of circumstances.

The turmoil of the USSR’s dissolution and subsequent years of Yeltsin’s presidency provided a fertile ground for two contrasting tendencies within the Russian political elite. First, the desire for change, was reflected in a reform agenda that aimed not only to revolutionize thinking and practice in all spheres of Russian life but also to destroy the old Communist administrative structures - in only a few years, Russia’s firms were no longer state-owned, its people could own property and firms, its government relied on taxes for collecting revenue, and its currency was traded on foreign exchange markets (Desai, 2005). However, political, economic and societal reforms were more than just “basic goods,” necessary to provide Russia with fresh values and identity. Political elites were also motivated by the quest for political supremacy of the new over the old. Also, the matter was also personal for Boris Yeltsin. Throughout his presidency, Yeltsin retained a strong personal attitude towards the past and its representatives, one that influenced his whole approach to rule. It was not just Communism, its system and ideology, that was being targeted, but Communists as people. This combination of the ideological and the personal created an unusually fractious political environment, in which implementation of a demanding and controversial domestic reforms was undermined by conflicts between the executive and legislature, in addition to more “usual” problems for Russia like political corruption and lack of will.

In addition, the instability of the recent past stimulated a natural desire for order and predictability. The situation that Boris Yeltsin was left with after the Union’s dissolution in June 1991 was disastrous. Ever since the 1970s, the USSR had been losing its economic power at the world stage. GDP per capita was steadily declining, and living standards were falling (Aven,
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2013). According to the CIA World Factbook, by 1990, USSR’s GDP was less than half of the United States’. These negative tendencies got worse in the USSR’s final years, 1989 and 1990, during which the country witnessed declines in output, huge shortages and fears of a complete economic and political collapse. In 1989, the average citizen spent 40 – 68 hours a month standing in line, reflecting the difficulty to acquire even the most basic consumer goods in Russian markets. In April 1991, less than one in 8 respondents to an opinion poll said that they had recently seen meat in state stores, and less than one in 12 had seen butter. In fall 1991, CNN predicted widespread starvation for the coming winter, making the need for a drastic change in the economy all the more urgent (Aron, 2002). The rapid speed of events and uncertainty of the future fostered a yearning for a pause, in which to evaluate the developments and consolidate the changes that had happened, before moving on to the next set of challenges.

Yeltsin administration wanted to capitalise on the liberal momentum of Russian relations with the West, and advocated their idea of mutual interests with Western countries: Russia and the West are not two completely different or opposite identities, but rather, Russia is primarily a Eurocentric, if not completely European, power, and the similarities between the two should be in plurality, democratic rule, free market economy, and individualism. “Russia has from time immemorial been with Europe, and we must enter the European institutions, the Council of Europe and the common market, and we must also enter the political and economic unions…” Yeltsin declared in 1992 (Maitra, 2014). Realists argue that after a brief momentum of the liberal peace in the post-Cold War environment, Russian foreign policy slowly started to move back to its realist roots when Yevgeni Primakov replaced Kozyrev. Russia renewed its focus on relations with the formerly Soviet republics in Central Asia, emphasizing economic and security projects, and started developing strategic ties with China and India (Maitra, 2014). In January 1996, Yevgeni Primakov
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started pursuing the “pragmatic nationalist” and “Eurasianist” viewpoints, declaring that “Russia has been, and remains, a great power, and its policy toward the outside world should correspond to that status” and “Russia doesn’t have permanent enemies, but it does have permanent interests”.

On the other hand, the NATO expansion into the former East European Communist ex-Warsaw Pact countries, starting with Poland, led to a considerable unease among the Russian leadership. Maitra argues that the Russian leadership under Primakov charted the realist balancing route, and accepted the impossibility to avoid of the move, but not before guaranteeing a NATO-Russia joint council, that formally for the first time allowed Russia to have a voice in NATO deliberations (2014). Patterns of realism were noticeable in Russian foreign policy even during the Kozyrev era, though it became more significant during Primakov’s term as Foreign Minister. The Russian meddling during the Georgia-Abkhaz crisis of 1992-93, involvement in Tajikistan’s internal affairs, growing patrolling the Afghan border, and nuclear trade with Iran are best explained by the realist framework.

Vladimir Putin’s arrival as Prime Minister in 1999 restarted the economic reforms that began under Yeltsin and strengthened the controlled over oligarchs using the military and security elites. In the foreign policy realm, Putin supported the United States and made a massive pro-Western shift after 2001 (Maitra, 2014). Russia’s bandwagoning in the “War on Terror” got a great positive response from the West immediately. Following the Moscow theater hostage crisis and the Beslan school siege, that involved actions by Chechen terrorists, the disproportionate response from Russia drew criticized by the international community but got support from the US and Britain. Thus, the bandwagoning with the US and West helped Russia to use the narrative and agenda of the global war on terror to strengthen the domestic security apparatus, to put pressure
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on internal dissent, and create a new budget to an ambitious rearmament plan. Putin’s response to the Chechen terrorists also bolstered his image at home as a strong leader (Maitra, 2014).

The next phase in the Russia’s foreign policy discourse, which characterized by its renewed intention to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO), is best explained by the liberal institutionalist framework. Oil and gas exports and general trade increased because of the proper regulations, institutional changes, structural reforms, and policies, resulting in an unprecedented economic boom. As a result of a strong economy, the social welfare programs improved, as well as the general living conditions and wages of average Russians, following a period of chaotic post-Soviet experiments. In 2004 the economy recorded its sixth consecutive year of growth since the prolonged output collapse of 1989–98. For 2004 as a whole, GDP grew at a rate of 6.6%, compared with the 7.3% achieved in 2003. As a result, Russia maintained a high trade surplus and was able to meet its external debt repayments ahead of schedule. Inflation continued to decline and was projected at somewhat over 11% over the year. The state budget recorded its fifth successive surplus. Russia continued to accumulate foreign-currency reserves, which exceeded a year’s supply of merchandise imports. Simultaneously, sovereign foreign debt fell about GDP and was below a quarter of the national income. Therefore, the economy not only was growing robustly but also had high international liquidity, which made it more stable than at any other time since 1991 (Teague, 2004). The pride and prestige of being recognized as a great power were coming back. Realists argue that Russia was back on the world stage as a partner in the global “War Against Terror,” looking to legitimize the new role of a revived and revanchist great power and projecting power through economic and political–military means. As the relations with the US started to deteriorate after the US unilateral invasion of Iraq, Russia was seeking to ally itself with other western countries to balance the United States. However, that also changed after the advent of
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“color” revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine. The West started supporting the democratic change and transition in Russia’s neighboring countries, which were always a part of Russia’s perceived sphere of influence (Maitra, 2014). Also, the NATO enlargement processes largely estranged Russia and established a new dividing line which excluded Russia.

However, the Russian foreign policy could not be fully explained by realism only. Liberal institutionalism explains how post-Soviet authorities were challenged by a combination of civil society, local political forces, common people and international actors, human rights groups and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The former Soviet republics with a relatively liberal political environment, such as Georgia and Ukraine, had a developing civil society to use foreign assistance and an emerging independent media which, in turn, gave means to the opposition to organize and mobilize. As the relations with the West deteriorated, Russia started challenging agreements that were concluded in the 1990s when it was perceived as weak. In addition, the “rose revolution” in Georgia (November 2003-January 2004), the “orange revolution” in Ukraine (January 2005) and the “tulip revolution” in Kyrgyzstan (April 2005)—demonstrated the loss of Russia’s influence in these countries and changed the Russian foreign policy discourse in the region and in Russia-West relations. Institutional liberals argue that substantial Western support for the civil society and the Western-backed NGOs were instrumental in all the cases (Maitra, 2014). Also, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye said in the 1970s that “transnational relations may redistribute control from one state to another and benefit those governments at the center of transnational networks to the disadvantage of those in the periphery.” (Maitra, 2014).

At the Munich Conference of 2007, Putin demonstrated the new strategic and tactical foreign policy framework, which was far more cynical, threatening and offensive. Putin critiqued the United States on the issue of Iraq and missile defense, stating that Russia would plan to deal
The variation in Russia’s foreign policy in Near Abroad with these “threats” asymmetrically and effectively (Maitra, 2014). Within months from the Munich Conference, the long distance bomber patrols across the Atlantic were resumed. Putin announced on August 17, 2007, just after the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation’s (SCO’s) Peace Mission 2007, the restart on a permanent basis of long-distance patrol flights of the Russian Air Force Tu-95 and Tu-160 strategic bombers that had been suspended since 1992. Russia started to be increasingly assertive in dealing with its neighbors and intruding into their personal affairs, especially Ukraine and Georgia. Relations with Georgia especially worsened over the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which resulted in a Russo-Georgian war in 2008, when the Russian Army defeated the Georgians in five days and declared the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Crimea was annexed shortly after the pro-Western government in Ukraine came to power in February 2014.

Strong economic growth in recent gave Russia to increase its prestige on the international stage. Both Russia’s status as the primary provider of Europe’s gas and its growing economy helped make it an important global actor. Russia today has real resources. In August 2006, Russia paid off its Paris Club debt early, despite the penalties—a move that was perceived within the country as a reduction of Russia’s obligations to the West. Russia’s Stabilization Fund was restructured in 2008 into two parts: a Reserve Fund designed to bolster the federal budget as oil prices drop and a National Prosperity Fund for investments in public works, education, health care, and agriculture (“Russia’s Stabilization Fund Hits $121.7 Bln as of Jul. 1,” RIA Novosti, July 2, 2007). Not surprisingly, Russia’s most important foreign relationships reflect Russia’s patterns of trade. Liberal institutionalism argues that economic interdependence and global trade bolster state cooperation, but it fails to explain why Russian energy foreign policies were more often unsuccessful in countries of Near Abroad. Although the European countries are Russia’s most
important regional trading partner (see Figure 1), states of the former Soviet Union do play an important strategic role for Russia.

![Figure 1. Russian Exports and Imports by Region, 2006 (Source: Oliker et al., 2009).](image)

The countries on Russia’s borders are unquestionably important to Russia, but Russian policy in the region has not been universally effective. Belarus, Tajikistan, and Armenia have very close ties to Russia and support Moscow on many issues, but other neighbors have taken their own path since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The tensions that have resulted were manifested prominently in the Russo-Georgian armed conflict in August 2008 and Crimean annexation in 2014. The three Baltic states (Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia) have joined the EU and NATO. The reasons why it is so important for Russia to maintain influence in the region comes from Russia’s historical quest for prestige, its fundamental security concerns, and economic priorities. Long before the Soviet Union, these countries were part of Russia’s empire. Many Russians, therefore, see these countries as natural partners and allies that are crucial to Russia’s national interests. A Russia without significant influence in these countries is less of a descendant of Imperial and Soviet Russia and is thus less well aligned with Russians’ view of their nation and its global role.
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(Oliker et al., 2009). The Near Abroad countries are also important to Kremlin as trade partners. In order to sustain growth, Moscow has a clear interest in continuing normal trade relationships with its neighbors, including terminating subsidies for energy exports. Thus, Russia has dramatically increased in recent years the prices Gazprom charges Ukraine and Belarus for natural gas. This is also the region where Moscow has perhaps the strongest interest in controlling pipelines and energy flows to enhance its pricing power with its European customers and to ensure that supplies meet its domestic energy needs (Oliker et al., 2009).

There are two main concerns for Russia regarding security issues in the region. The first fear concerns “conflict spillover”: Russia’s long, porous southern borders increase the risk that any nearby violence would spread into Russia or demand Moscow’s involvement (Ivanov, 2004; Demurin, 2007; Delyagin, 2007). The second fear is about instability and subversion of armed violence, such as radicalism, a succession crisis, the failure of governments to maintain power—are viewed in Russia as dangerous in multiple ways. They are dangerous because they create uncertainties on territories that are a key interest to Moscow and because they could cause neighboring states to become hostile, and the mechanisms of instability could spread to Russia as well. While security issues fall into the category of realist theoretical framework, constructivism also finds it to be relevant. A geopolitical culture, as discussed earlier, is also about security and defense, about whom the state holds to be its enemies and the strategies it finds to be necessary to preserve its existence, identity and capacity to act (Toal, 2017).

Russia’s attempts to use energy as leverage to increase its influence more often than not failed in Near Abroad. For example, throughout the 1990s, Russia repeatedly threatened to cut off supplies of natural gas and oil to Ukraine as a punishment for Ukraine’s failure to pay for that gas. The threats were also a response to Ukrainian policy moves that Russia saw as hostile, especially
those efforts undertaken after independence by each successive Ukrainian government to build ties with the United States, the EU, and NATO. As a result of Crimean annexation and separatist conflict in Eastern Ukraine, Ukraine stopped buying gas from Russia, and pays a higher price for the same Russian gas but buys it from the West.

Georgia is not a crucial transit country for Russian gas or oil. However, as with Ukraine, Russia has failed to translate Georgia’s dependence on Russian energy into strategic gains. Although Kremlin’s relations with Georgia were not perfect when Eduard Shevardnadze was president, they have deteriorated further since Mikheil Saakashvili had come to power in the Rose Revolution. Saakashvili’s government had consistently pursued membership in NATO. Russia, in turn, aggravated the Georgian government by supporting Abkhazia and South Ossetia, breakaway regions within Georgia. Georgia accused of years the Russian military “peacekeeping” presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and intimidating Georgia through violations of Georgian airspace and other actions. Tensions increased in 2006 when Russia banned imports of Georgian wine and mineral water. Georgia then took into custody and expelled four Russian military officers, accusing them of spying. Russia retaliated by withdrawing its ambassador, imposing more economic sanctions, cutting transport links, and expelling Georgian nationals. Russians and South Ossetes exchanged escalatory behavior with the Georgians for three years leading up to the August 2008 war.

The Georgian effort to retake South Ossetia by force in August 2008 prompted a Russian invasion of the smaller country. In the energy sphere, Georgians have argued that frequent breaks in the pipeline that transports gas to Georgia have been intentional acts of sabotage on the part of Gazprom. The Georgian foreign minister described Gazprom price increases as a form of political pressure (Osborn, 2006.). During the 2008 conflict, Georgians accused Russia of targeting energy
pipelines - Russian jets targeted a key oil pipeline with over 50 missiles in one weekend in August 2008 (McElroy, 2008). Russian economic sanctions hurt Georgia. Russians had formerly been big customers of Georgian wine and mineral water - Georgian wine has been a popular item in Russia, accounting for about 90 percent of exports before the ban. The ban led to the closure of many vineyards. Since then, they have recovered as Georgia expanded sales to other markets, but at 23 million bottles in 2012 the vineyards were still far behind 57 million bottles exported in 2005 (Dzhindzhikhashvili & Heintz, 2013). Although many sanctions were eventually lifted, bilateral relations remained poor, and efforts to normalize relations were short-lived, Russia’s use of energy and other foreign policy instruments failed to force Saakashvili to back down in South Ossetia, culminating in August 2008 in armed conflict.

Similar to Georgia, Russia temporarily banned imports of Moldovan wine to demonstrate that Moscow was not happy with Moldova’s interest in improving its relations with the West (imports have now resumed). Moldova did not back down in the face of Russian pressure. Relations between Russia and Moldova have been tense because of Russia’s support for the autonomy of Transnistria, a region that is located in the eastern part of Moldova. Separatists in Transnistria have survived in part because of continued supplies of Russian natural gas and the presence of Russian soldiers (peacekeepers). Moldova, too, depends on Russia to fulfill almost all of its energy needs. Moreover, gas pipelines to Moldova go through Transnistria. When Russia stopped gas supplies to Moldova during an argument over price in the winter of 2005–2006, Moldova purchased gas from Ukraine and eventually negotiated a moderate price increase with Moscow. In early 2008, Moldova asked Russia to recognize Moldovan territorial sovereignty over Transnistria; in exchange, it promised to remain neutral and permanently forgo NATO membership (Rusnac, 2008). In April 2008, Moscow directed talks between the Moldovan
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president and Transnistria’s leader. These talks were seen by the OSCE as a potential progress in a formerly frozen process. Although these tendencies demonstrate that Moldova may have been more receptive to Kremlin pressure than Ukraine or Georgia, it is not obvious that energy is the reason. Rather, both countries seem to be engaged in a protracted negotiation over strategic issues (Peuch, 2008).

A review of the scholarly work since the collapse of the USSR in 1991 demonstrates an almost universal support among scholars of IR, foreign policy analysts and area study specialists that identity and ideational factors are key determinants for an understanding contemporary Russian foreign policy. For example, Henry Kissinger focuses on Russia's historical legacy and argues that Russian historical roots will “result in a missionary and imperial foreign policy orientation” (1994). Fukuyama believes that interests are related to the sustained level of economic growth, out of which a sense of nationalism emerges in Russia, which in turn guide Russian foreign policy; Wolfowitz states that country’s historical legacy is not necessarily its destiny, and that the discourse of Russia’s foreign policy depends on whom it is governed and how, the assumption that foreign policy of a democratic Russia would be completely different from autocratic Russia – therefore the West should have helped Russia to transition into democracy by fostering a strategic partnership and including it in expanded democratic security community (Sestanovich, 1994). However, at the time Putin took the office of the Prime Minister in 1999, there was still no agreement on Russia’s national identity in Russia. During the Cold War, the identity of the state was dictated by the Soviet empire and the ideology of the Communist Party. Identity and the state’s destination were guided by the conflict between East and West. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia was left in limbo with an uncertain sense of identity and the conflict among political elite
over the future direction of Russia. Without a fixed identity since 1992, Russia became chaotic in its internal and external affairs (Shearman, 2001).

This trend of an absentness of the national idea about Russia’s foreign policy and Russian identity in the world and the conflict between institutions of power had been reflected during the crisis in Transnistria (Pridnestrovie) in 1992. Due to tensions in emphasizing priorities in Russia’s foreign policy, there was not a united strategy of Russian government actions in Transnistria in 1992. By examining the events in Transnistria through the various theoretical approaches in the following chapter, I find that Russian foreign policy in Transnistria in 1992 reflected the search for “Russian identity” of the divided political institutions that were formed in Russia after the dissolution of the USSR. The absence of the consensus about Russia’s place in the world echoed in the indecisive and incoherent strategy of the Russian government that created a “frozen” conflict in the area for two decades.

Liberal institutionalists argue that the period after the collapse of the USSR was “transitional” for Russia, assuming that Russia was moving towards a liberal democracy and a market economy. Therefore, Russia had had an emerging identity of a democratic state that was linked to its new destination of a modern capitalist economy (Shearman, 2001). However, the problem with liberal institutionalists is that they ignore the history and culture of the state, and in their logic, all post-communist states would follow the same path of development, which is obviously contested in contemporary international relations. IR scholars studied heavily the influence of domestic factors on Russian foreign policy, and some studies highlight the political level rather than those related to material capabilities. A lot of attention was put to the examining of different institutional groups’ perceptions, from which competing foreign policy discourses have been identified (Shearman, 2001). Eventually “liberal westernizers” under Andrei Kozyrev
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were replaced by the administration of Yevgenii Primakov, who took a more assertive stance towards the West. The cultural-institutional context is important in the development of foreign policy and the construction of concepts of national interests. Shearman argues that it is important what type of institutions the state has and that depends on the politics of identity (2001). For example, even in the absence of a real threat to Russia, Russia took a strong anti-Western position after the Iraq invasion and NATO expansion. Studies have demonstrated after the examination of elites discourse, policy statements, and opinion polls, that the expansion of NATO is not perceived as a military threat in Russia (Shearman, 2001). Although the structure of the international system is not seen by constructivists as a determining factor in Russian foreign policy, international factors do help to shape state identities. Political leaders who create policies do respond to external international events, but they do so on the basis of their own perception of the strategic environment. Also, in comparison with the former USSR, now domestic politics play a much important role in defining the foreign policy since the political elite is no longer isolated from societal pressures. As in Robert Putnam’s concept of two-level games, Russia has to balance between the representation of domestic interests and consequences of foreign developments. For example, Yeltsin’s foreign policy approach towards the West had been complicated by the need to balance between domestic interests and the US, NATO, IMF policies. Shearman argues that interests are not simply a reflection of material capabilities, but are defined through complex processes of societal and political developments (2001).

My argument is that as an understanding of Russian national identity and national interests has been developed and strengthened together with the stable growth of national economy and reinforcing the statehood, Russia’s foreign policy changed from being indecisive and vague to assertive and insistent. Aggressive actions of Russian government in Georgia
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(2008) and Ukraine (2014) and clear violations of an international law, compared to an
indecisive strategy in Transnistria in 1992, demonstrate how change in understanding a national
identity and one’s place in the world lead to a variation in solving different conflicts in the same
region of near abroad countries. The aim of this master thesis is to compare and contrast how
different conditions in cultural, external, domestic and institutional spheres during Yeltsin and
Putin administrations led to formation of Russia’s national identity (or the absence of thereof)
and how that, in turn, influenced the change in Russia’s foreign policy in near abroad states.

1.2. Case studies of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine

An overview of the foreign policy course during Yeltsin and Putin's presidencies provided
above, allows one to trace a change in Russia’s attitude towards conducting foreign affairs. In
order to answer the research question which looks for an explanation of the variation in Russian
foreign policy over the last twenty-five years, I focus on Russian foreign policy towards Near
Abroad States – the region of the former Soviet Union – an understanding of thereof will
provide a lens to understand changes in Russian foreign policy over time. I specifically look at
Russia’s foreign policy behavior during “frozen conflicts” in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine.
There is also a “frozen conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. However, the involvement
of Russian military is indirect there, compared to direct involvement in Moldova, Georgia, and
Ukraine (Jackson, 2003). Therefore, due to the limit of the master thesis paper, I have to narrow
down my research to the Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine cases and look at the direct
involvement of Russian military into “frozen” conflicts in Near Abroad region. In all of these
three cases, ethnic conflicts began after the dissolution of the USSR, during the Yeltsin
administration, and continued well into Putin’s presidency. However, the foreign policy course
towards these countries and an attitude towards the involvement of Russian military into these
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regional conflicts were handled differently. In my master thesis, I analyze through the lenses of realism, institutional liberalism and constructivism the conditions in which Russian foreign policy in Near Abroad states evolved and changed over time. I argue that as an understanding and perception of the Russia’s national identity, national interests and Russia’s place in the world of international affairs became more coherent among the Russian political elite, so did change the foreign policy discourse towards the states Near Abroad and the strategy to solve conflicts in the region. This tendency is best explained by the constructivist approach. The case studies of Transnistria in 1992 vs. 2008, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 1994 vs. 2008 and Crimea in 1992 vs. 2014 provide evidence that proves my argument.

Chapter 2. Russian Foreign Policy under Boris Yeltsin.

2.1. Yeltsin’s foreign policy in the Near Abroad: cases of Moldova and Georgia

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin’s foreign policy got a lot of attention in the international arena and its domestic field due to its differentiation with the foreign policy of the USSR. In Russia, some people considered Yeltsin as a visionary; others saw him as a traitor because of his warmer relation with the West (Keller, 2000). The main goal of Yeltsin’s foreign policy was to create a non-threatening external environment in the relation with the Western countries in a situation of declining relative power for Russia. The Yeltsin administration foreign policy course can be described as “Westernization,” which was based on the idea that Russia and the West shared a common set of values and principles (UNSC; 1991; p.45). On his report to the UN Security Council in 1991, Yeltsin stated: “Russia regards the United States and the West not as mere partners but rather as allies” (UNSC; 1991; p.44). This new approach has reflected the

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1 As Selezneva (FAWN; 2003; p.10) states: “The new Russia ha[d] no imperial status. Its population ha[d] decreased by 110 million people. Fifteen independent states ha[d] replaced the former Soviet republics[...] . The Baltic countries did not join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) at all and look[ed] very firmly towards Western Europe”, among other situations which evidenced Russian decline.
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desire of a new Russian government to improve the relation with the West, especially the USA, beyond the past of confrontation. Within its regional context, the Yeltsin’s main goal was to keep its dominance in its “Near Abroad.” The term "Near Abroad" describes the fourteen other former Soviet republics that declared their independence by the time of the Soviet Union dissolution at the end of 1991, and where Russia have had a dominant position and promoted cooperation through the creation of the CIS-Commonwealth of Independent States seeking to re-establish or preserve Russian dominant position, in what was now called the old ‘Soviet geopolitical space’ (Lynch; 2010; p.165).

During Yeltsin’s first term as a president, a military conflict in Transnistria (Moldova) began in 1992. Although, it is important to mention that the roots of conflict in Transnistria go back to the end of 19th century when Russian Empire annexed Bessarabia that was previously a part of Ottoman Empire and was populated by Romanian-speaking people mainly at that time. The unification of Romania and Moldova occurred in 1918, and a special treaty in regards Bessarabia was signed by Romania, France, Italy, and Japan in October 1920. However, the Soviet Union expressed special interest in Bessarabia in the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, and in June 1940 invaded and occupied Bessarabia. At the same time, The Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was created. During Soviet times more than 500,000 Moldovans were deported to Siberia. The Soviet post-war economic policy was to develop western part of Moldova as an agricultural area, with military-related industry located in Transnistria.

The ethnic conflict and language question in Moldova reappeared again when the Soviet Union collapsed. On 31 August 1989, the Supreme Soviet of Moldova adopted three new language laws, making Moldovan the official language using Latin script, and acknowledging the unity of the Moldovan and Romanian language. Russian would be used as the language for inter-ethnic
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relations, and the Gagauz language was to be protected and developed and was to be the “official language” alongside Moldovan/Romanian and Russian in areas of Gagauz population. The use of other minority languages such as Ukrainian and Bulgarian was to be protected. The non-Moldovan/Romanian-speaking minorities of Moldova were against these changes to the language laws. Russian and Ukrainian groups staged mass meetings, strikes, and violent protests, as organizations to defend the use of the Russian language were established on the right bank (Edinstvo) and in Transnistria (the Union of Work Collectives). The Turkish-speaking Gagauzia in Southern Moldova also demanded national and cultural rights (Kramer, 2008). There were also talks in Chisinau about reunification with Romania, but the mostly Russian-speaking population of Transnistria resisted it. The clashes between Moldovans and Transnistrians took place in March 1992, followed by a declaration of a state of emergency on March 28. Around the same time, a force of 600 was created by the Gagauz, which conducted occasional raids on the government in Southern Moldova. Fighting between Moldovan and Transnistrian forces intensified again in May and June. The Transnistrian secessionist movement, headed by Igor Smirnov since 1991, has been dependent on the support of Moscow, including the continued deployment of the Russian Army’s operational group of 1,500 soldiers. These troops are the remainder of the Soviet 14th Guards Army (and later Russian 14th Army), which intervened on behalf of Smirnov against the Moldovan government in the war over Transnistria in 1991–92 (Kramer, 2008). After a peace agreement had been signed in July 1992, the Moldovan authorities began seeking the removal of Russia’s occupation forces from Transnistria.

Regarding foreign policy, from August 1991 to March 1992, Russia’s government comments on the topic were limited. The Russian political elite was in general sympathetic to the Transdnistrians because of their long-standing economic, political and ethnic connections with the
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regions. Jackson argues that because of these connections and because the Soviet Union just collapsed, early foreign policy debate was dominated by the nationalist idea of reuniting Russia with Transdnistria (Jackson, 2003). However, these debates seem to have had little impact on Russia’s official foreign policy. Rather, official policies were based on liberal westerner’s ideas of supporting Moldova’s new “democratic” government and territorial integrity. Supporting separatists was not an option for Yeltsin’s administration because it could jeopardize the relationship with the West, and perhaps even lead to separatists sparks inside Russia. However, in Moldova, the 14th Russian Army acted independently on a relatively small scale and armed and trained Transdniestrian troops.

From March 1992 to October 1992 Russia became military involved in the conflict for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly opposed the involvement in the conflict, but the Parliament supported this strategy; as a result, no official policy was drawn, and the 14th Army continued to support Transnistria. After another outbreak of fighting in July 1992, the cease-fire agreement was reached: a tripartite peacekeeping force, a territorial integrity of Moldova and gradual withdrawal of the 14th Army (Jackson, 2003).

From October 1992 to June 1996, parliament and media supported Transnistria vocally, and even the Ministry of Foreign Affairs changed its position and now argued for military involvement of Russia in the conflict. However, by 1996 the support of Russia’s military involvement in Moldova was tempered by its financial, humanitarian and legal costs.

In November 1999, shortly before Yeltsin resigned, the Russian government (with Putin as prime minister) formally agreed to remove all Russian troops from Transnistria, but Putin as president reneged on the commitment. Over the past few years, officials in Moscow have repeatedly indicated that Russian forces will stay for the indefinite future in Moldova as
“peacekeepers,” thus designating the wishes not only of the Moldovan government but also of the European community. Transnistria’s Russian-speaking population believes that its identity would be overtaken by the ethnic Moldovan majority and thus perceives the Russian military presence as protection. Moldova, in turn, states that Russian troops violate its territorial integrity and that Moscow has repeatedly refused any attempts to reach a compromise. For these reasons, many draw a parallel between this long-simmering “frozen conflict” in Transnistria and the ongoing situation in Crimea and Ukraine (ADST, 2016).

Georgia, another country that constitutes Near Abroad, similarly has faced secessionist movements from two regions throughout its twenty-five years post-Soviet history, the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The regions are situated in northern Georgia along the Russian border. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, several ethnic groups called for self-determination, threatening both the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia. Secessionist campaigns in Abkhazia and South Ossetia began at the end of the 1980s when the renewed rise of Georgian nationalism during Mikhail Gorbachev’s era of perestroika increased inter-ethnic tensions within the Soviet Republic. Both regions have been long suspicious of the Georgian state, fearing the loss of ethnic identity. These suspicions were intensified when Zviad Gamsakhurdia became the leader of the Georgian Supreme Soviet in 1990, predominantly on the basis of his support for the rights of Georgians, promoting under the slogan “Georgia for Georgians” (German, 2006). Georgian nationalism after the collapse of the USSR represented a second genocidal campaign against Ossetians in the Ossetian nationalist narrative, while the first genocide took place between 1918 – 1920: during this period Georgian government destroyed almost 40 Ossetian villages; almost 5,000 people perished, mostly displaced persons who died from starvation and illness. Around 20,000 to 35,000 Ossetians were forced to flee across mountains to get to North Ossetia (Toal, 2017). The
The variation in Russia’s foreign policy in Near Abroad compromise was a creation of a South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast on April 20, 1922 (although recognized as a separate ethnoterritorial region, this was a lesser status than Abkhazia and Adjara, both of which became Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics within Georgia). However, this was viewed as Soviet “occupation” by Georgian nationalists during the entire Soviet period, and once the USSR collapsed, South Ossetians were again viewed as “ungrateful guests” on historical Georgian soil (Toal, 2017). The violent conflict struck again on January 6-7, 1991, citizens were killed, property looted, and this pushed into another spiral of ethnic polarization and violence. The peace was reestablished on June 24, 1992, through the mechanism of a Joint Control Commission (consisting of OSCE, Georgian, Russian, North and South Ossetia representatives), and a peace agreement signed in Sochi between Shevardnadze (who had replaced Gamsakhurdia after a violent coup in January 1992) and Yeltsin. The Sochi agreement was limited and imperfect instrument for handling the conflict, but it created forum for a dialogue, and in the following decade a progress on certain issues was made: reliable electricity and water flow was restored, the trade between different parts of South Ossetia was restored, which provided livelihood for many South Ossetians. In the period from 1996 to 2001 ethnic tensions subsided. The Russian Federation provided salaries and pensions to South Ossetians under the control of local government, and a sizable number of South Ossetians acquired Russian passports under the terms of prevailing Russian citizenship law (Toal, 2017).

The situation in Abkhazia was different. The Republic was de facto independent in the 1920s before Stalin incorporated it into Georgia and supported ethnic Georgian migration into the region. As a result, by 1989 Abkhazians accounted only for 18% of the population, while ethnic Georgians constituted 46% in contrast to other regions where the Abkhazians were a majority. Gamsakhurdia pursued a more appeasing approach in relations with Abkhazia than with South
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Ossetia and avoided all-out war. Gamsakhurdia’s successor, Shevardnadze, was however far more confrontational and, with both sides refusing to find a compromise, the war began in 1992. The Georgian forces faced the defeat by the end of 1993 and the 1994 Moscow agreement formalized a ceasefire, that provided a legal basis for the introduction of a CIS peacekeeping force that included around 1,700 Russian peacekeepers, together with the establishment of a UN observer mission (UNOMIG) to monitor the agreement (German, 2006).

Regarding Russia’s foreign policy towards Georgia – Abkhaz conflict, there was not an official position on this issue acquired by the Russian government at the beginning of the conflict. While some members of Russian political elite favored the Abkhaz, the ties were not as strong as those with the Transdniestrians, who were mostly ethnic Russians (Jackson, 2003). However, the Abkhazians opposed the division of the USSR, and thus, received the vocal support of individuals in Russia who had the same goal. In contrast, the government of Georgia (similarly to the government of Moldova) was asserting its independence and trying to distance itself from its former ties, which was supported by many Russian politicians who shared the thinking of liberal westernism. On 28 August 1992, Boris Yeltsin issued “An Appeal from the Russian President to the Leadership of Georgia and Abkhazia” in which he proclaimed Russian support for the Georgian territorial integrity and promised to prevent Georgian army entering Abkhazia. As it was stated at that time in the Russian liberal newspaper Nezavisimaya Gazeta: “If we ourselves set such as example, we will have a moral right to exert pressure (but not through violence or the threat of violence) on behalf of Russian minorities and peoples like Gagauz, the Ossetians, and the Abkhaz.” However, Shevardnadze repudiated the negotiations, and a full-scale war has followed. A Russian-brokered agreement in May 1994 provided for the deployment of a peacekeeping
mission of CIS (in practice, wholly Russian) to monitor the security zone (King, 2015). Negotiations on Abkhazia’s final status, brokered by the UN, have continued since then.

Summarizing this section, we can argue that Russian official foreign policy was in line with the constructed by Yeltsin administration state liberal democratic “identity,” supporting the territorial integrity of Moldova and Georgia, and keeping a neutral position as a peacekeeper in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. I am going to take a closer look how a search for a national “identity,” domestic factors, institutions and external events affected Russia’s foreign policy discourse in Moldova and Georgia in the first decade after the dissolution of the USSR.

2.2. How the search for a new national identity affected the course of foreign policy

The new leaders of Russia supported the intellectual tradition of Westernism, which states that Russia is the part of the West and should integrate with Western economic and political institutions and that the main threats come from non-democratic states (Tsygankov, 2010). Therefore, the new government saw their country naturally as a part of Western civilization. They believed that the “authentic” identity of Russia had been hijacked by the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 and the Soviet system. Followers of Westernism intellectual tradition argued that during the time of Cold War Russia had acted against its “true” national identity and interests, and after the dissolution of the USSR, Russia finally had a chance to become a “normal” Western country. Andrei Kozyrev, who was the first foreign minister in Yeltsin administration from 1991-1996, was part of Westernism tradition, which also included Yegor Gaidar and Gennadi Burbulis, argued that the Soviet Union was a “wrongfully developed” country, not just “underdeveloped” one. This position has roots in the intellectual debates of the nineteenth century, when Westernist scholars argued that although Russia had its distinct national characteristics, nevertheless it would develop and go through the same stages of
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development as the West. The reason for such a linear worldview was that the West had been perceived as the only progressive civilization by the Westernism school of thought, and the only way for the world society to progress was to share democratic values and implementation of human rights as promoted by the Western civilization. Thus, the new leaders of Russia at the beginning of the 90s believed that main threats to Russia were coming not from the West but its economic backwardness and partnership with nondemocratic countries, especially with some of the former Soviet allies. The new foreign minister Kozyrev shared these ideas, and as other idealistic reformers promoted radical policies that would lift Russia up to the standards of Western countries within a short period (they were arguing it would take two-three years maximum), after which Russians would significantly improve their standards of life. Also, some members of the former party entered a private business after the fall of the USSR and wanted to obtain a private control over the former state property. Thus, the goals of idealistic reformers and former party members were in line: reformers advocated pro-Western capitalist reforms, while the former party members were trying to become a class of new capitalists. Therefore, the Westernist coalition under Yeltsin appeared to be in a position to act on its foreign policy beliefs.

The foreign minister Kozyrev advocated for a philosophy of integration with the West and its political, economic, and security institutions. Kozyrev believed that the very system of values in the country had to be changed – the priority of the individual and the free market over society and the state had to be accepted. Only by following that path Russia could achieve a natural integration with the West and the level of development the same as this of France, Germany or the United States within time frame of ten to twelve years (Tsygankov, 2010). The members of Westernism coalition argued that the new national interest of Russia was “in transforming Russia into a free, independent state, formalizing democratic institutions, setting up
an effective economy, guaranteeing the rights and freedoms of all Russians, making our people’s life rich both materially and spiritually.” The three key components of this new vision of national interest were an isolationist position the former Soviet states, a radical domestic economic reform, and membership in the Western international institutions (Tsygankov, 2010).

First, the new concept of national identity assumed that Russia’s relations with Western countries would take priority over the relationships with countries of the former Soviet Union. The new leaders of Russia argued that Russia suffered from unfair Soviet imperial burden – Russia had constantly to subsidize other republics using its resources. Therefore, the new government was looking in the direction of separation from the former republics culturally, politically and economically: the plan was to stop subsidizing ex-republics, as well as to withdraw Russian military and to rely more on help from international organizations, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), in solving possible conflicts in the region. This liberal Westernist concept of national identity and national interests significantly influenced the new foreign policy created in late 1992 and signed into law in April 1993. Thus, the foreign policy and strategy of the Russian government in solving the conflict Transnistria (Moldova) that started in 1992 was heavily affected by the new concept of national identity. I develop this argument furthermore in the last section of the first chapter where I analyze the conflict in Transnistria in details.

The Yeltsin administration promoted a path of radical economic reform – “shock therapy.” The plan was for Russia to transition into the capitalist economy fast and permanently. The idea was that in the post-Cold War world Russia should no longer worry about external threat and geopolitics, and instead focus on creation a modern political and economic system.
Yeltsin believed that the West would finally recognize Russia as “their own” and would be interested in investing resources in Russia’s transformation.

Integration with the West through joining international organizations was the second critical component of the foreign policy of the new Russian government. The plan was to obtain a full membership in such transatlantic economic and security institutions as the European Union, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), G-7, and so on. Yeltsin believed that Russia should no longer pursue its “greatness” but instead cooperate with the West on the variety of international issues by joining “the community of civilized nations.” Tsygankov argues that contrary to the realist assumption, the Yeltsin administration did not pursue this strategy out of the weakness of the country material capabilities because reformers’ idealistic worldview could be hardly linked to pragmatic calculations of a weakened superpower (2010). Instead, idealistic reformers used a collapse of the USSR as an opportunity to establish a new identity for Russia. However, not realists, not liberalists who acknowledged the impact of western ideas of modernization on Russian liberals, could have predicted or explained the strength of growing opposition in Russia to the Westernist course.

2.3. The impact of domestic factors on foreign policy-making

In spite of the democratic changes that occurred after the disintegration of the USSR, the President remained to play a key role in the process of foreign policy decision making through what was called the “parlor politics.” This centralization of the decision-making process was an inheritance from the Soviet era. Also, the president’s involvement in the design of the Russian foreign policy increased as warm relation with the West started to deteriorate. As Simmons described: “Moscow has not concealed its preoccupations about NATO’s enlargement toward
areas that are of particular strategic importance to Russia, namely the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, Ukraine, and the Transcaucasus. Implicit in this understanding is American political pressure to maintain the cleavage between NATO decision-making and the political initiatives of the European Union” (p.218). The increasing centralization of power in the President resulted in a weak institutionalization that can be seen even in the current times in Russian government (Simmons, 2008). Yeltsin’s foreign policy position could be considered pragmatic in the sense that it consisted mainly in “short-term decisions, grasping opportunities to achieve practical results, without considering the long-term consequences” (Fawn, 2003). One can differentiate between Yeltsin’s first and second terms about the government’s position on foreign policy. Between 1990 and 1996, Andrei Kozyrev was appointed as Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation. Kozyrev was one of the main executors of the Westernization process. On the contrary, the second period between 1996-1999, was defined by the resignation of Kozyrev and the designation of Evgeniy Primakov, who has been considered a part of anti-Western echelons of Russian establishment. Primakov’s foreign policy has been called the “policy of alternatives” (Fawn; 2003) and its main goal was to contain the advance of NATO in the Russia’s “Near Abroad.” This change in the foreign policy approach was determined by the pressure that Zhirinovsky’s Liberal Democratic Party together with the communist leaders put on Yeltsin, calling for an isolationist policy. Those actors interpreted the Yeltsin’s “Westernization” as Russian subservience to the USA, and expressed their concern on actions taken by NATO in Russia’s “traditional backyard.” The fact that “the new political elite of Russia consisted mostly of former communists who could not change their political philosophy and did not want to—the philosophy of confrontation with Western countries” raised a lot of critics especially during the first presidency of Yeltsin (1991-1996) (Fawn, 2003). Yeltsin also faced opposition to his foreign policy discourse on social grounds
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– as Fawn states: “the Soviet population was used to the idea of the Soviet Union being the strongest country, a social paradise whose historical mission it was to bring happiness to humanity” (Fawn, 2003). The public discontent with Yeltsin’s foreign policy was deepened by the role of media and increased even more due to the internal economic situation. The economic crisis included hyperinflation, the fall of GDP by 50%, a high unemployment rate and the deterioration of incomes and people’s living conditions. Also, “some aspects of the policies of the Western countries, such as the extension of NATO, the discriminatory policies of the IMF and the bombing of Belgrade in 1999, stimulated suspicious feelings towards Western countries among the population, and among the political and military elite” (Fawn, 2003).

2.4. Institutional constraints of Russian Federation and their impact on development of foreign policy in neighboring countries

In addition to Russia’s domestic problems and the West’s disengagement in helping Russia to transition to a democratic state and a modern capitalist economy, the rise of opposition towards the course of Westernism became possible because of the availability of various institutional channels. A historically dominant nationalist political culture and low centralized democratic system provided the opposition with some institutional advantages. An efficient use of institutions, such as parliament, media, and influential nongovernmental organizations, helped the opposition to the pro-Western government to advocate their position and sabotage Kozyrev’s foreign policy course. Parliament (the Supreme Soviet) played an especially significant role in confronting the Westernist course by formulating the concept of “enlightened imperialism” in the former Soviet region. This concept described the entire territory of the former USSR as the sphere of Russia’s vital interests. The members of parliament also criticized Kozyrev administration for one-sided pro-Western orientation and supported expressed a more diversified
foreign policy. An important agency with direct access to Yeltsin was Foreign Intelligence Service (FIS), managed by Primakov. Throughout 1992–1994, the FIS was supporting a more diverse foreign policy with an emphasis on the former Soviet area. Primakov was focusing on the economic and security issues within the area of former republics, and after the NATO’s expansion initiative argued for the Russia’s need to readjust its western course and eventually influenced Yeltsin. Primakov replaced Kozyrev as foreign minister in 1995 and announced that the relationship with former Soviet republics would be his priority (Tsygankov, 2010).

Other important government channels included the Presidential Administration and Security Council. The Presidential Administration argued that Russia should be a cultural bridge between Europe and Asia, and emphasized the need to defend the rights of ethnic Russians in the former Soviet republics. The Russian Security Council supported this view, and challenged Kozyrev’s position by drawing “Guidelines for the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation.” This document described Russia as a future world power, as a bridge between East and West, with specific interests in the “Near Abroad.”

Outside the state, the non-governmental organizations such as The Council for Foreign and Defense Policy and The Civic Union played a significant role in undermining the Kozyrev’s foreign policy course. The Council for Foreign and Defense Policy expressed some views of industrialists, businessmen, intellectuals, and mass opinion leaders. The council has emphasized the need for Russia’s more “Near Abroad”–oriented policies and pragmatism in relationships with the western countries. The Civic Union movement united voices critical of the Westernist discourse and advocated for Russia’s national interests defined regarding achieving a great power status in Eurasia. Interestingly, the Civic Union was working from inside the mainstream, slowly shifting the balance of power within the political elite. Both organizations aimed to re-
establish economic ties with former Soviet republics and worked closely with each other (Tsygankov, 2010).

2.5. How external conditions affected the course of foreign policy making towards Near Abroad states

The course of isolationism in Yeltsin’s official rhetoric in the first half of his term toward the former Soviet republics was a continuation of their Westernist beliefs. With a great desire to integrate with the West as fast as possible, the new administration did not want to carry a burden of former Soviet republics in assisting their transformation in case they wanted to pursue a similar goal. The new government argued that Russia suffered an enormous burden by subsidizing other republics instead of selling raw materials and natural resources to them by the market price. The government’s position was if Russia were to continue this path, it would have become a victim of its generosity. Also, the Yeltsin administration believed Russia also suffered politically and culturally during the time of the USSR, and that Russia should focus on rebuilding its identity in “civic and nonimperial” ways. This meant a formation of a civic Russian (rossiyskaya) nation, which would include all citizens of the Russian Federation regardless of their cultural and religious differences, rather than ethnic Russian (russkaya) nation (Tsygankov, 2010). This would mean that Russia would not to be responsible for the well-being of twenty-five to thirty million ethnic Russians—about 30 percent of the homeland Russians—who lived in the former Soviet republics outside Russia.

The Westernist foreign policy community in Russia supported the isolationist component towards Near Abroad in the country’s national interest and argued against Russia becoming a core in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The reasoning behind it is that a goal of entering the G-7 and moving from the periphery of the world economy to its core would be
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undermined by participating in CIS affairs as the main actor since these interests would contradict each other. Thus, liberals argued that Russia should “give up the CIS in favor of orientation toward Europe.” That view began to change in 1993 when Russia initiated the CIS Economic Union agreement, which aimed to develop a multilateral economic cooperation (Tsygankov, 2010).

In the security sphere, Russia’s isolationist course attempted to reduce to a minimum responsibility for maintaining order in the former Soviet region. Tsygankov argued that there were four specific goals that the new Russian government tried to accomplish after the dissolution of the USSR: the fastest possible withdrawal of Russian troops from outside Russia; the support of the control on the former Soviet troops by new governments in ex-republics; ignoring separatist movements on the territory of the former Soviet Union and keeping relations with the central governments; inviting international organizations to participate in settling conflicts in the post-Soviet region (2010). The Yeltsin’s administration tried to accomplish those goals until approximately mid1992. Yeltsin ordered the withdrawal of the military from Nagorno-Karabakh while asking for the deployment of NATO troops as a peacekeeping force there at the same time. When Chechnya proclaimed independence in November 1991, the military intervention was ruled out as a policy option. Yeltsin also did not initially oppose Ukraine’s taking control over the former Soviet military located on its territory. Neither did Russia show any concern over the status of ethnic Russians in former Soviet republics. The strategy only changed when military conflicts had a potential of spilling over to Russia. Thus, when the Moldova’s leadership had an intention to reunite with Romania in 1992, it triggered violent conflict in Transnistria, which gravitated to Russia economically and culturally. Moldova’s first effort to stop fighting was to involve the OSCE. However, it did not produce any
result promptly. To prevent the spread of violence and civil war, Russia intervened to stop the fighting and to negotiate a cease-fire and took a task of a peacekeeper in the region. The foreign minister Kozyrev at first condemned the army involvement, but he changed his mind and favored the intervention later in June, and that established the precedent for further interventions in Tajikistan, Georgia, and elsewhere. I analyze the conflict in Transnistria in details in the last section to provide evidence for my argument, which states that Russian foreign policy and strategy in solving the conflict in Transnistria has changed over the last twenty years as the Russian national interests changed, and the new concept of national identity has evolved.

Chapter 3

3.1. Putin’s foreign policy in the Near Abroad region: cases of Georgia and Ukraine

The end of the Yeltsin’s administration is characterized by a great economic depression, high level of street crime and violent fight among former party members – new oligarchs – for winning control over privatization of former state assets. With the assumption of Vladimir Putin as President in 2000, the portrayal of Russian greatness as a natural state of affairs became increasingly prominent within the official discourse. During Putin’s first term in office, Moscow sought to construct Russia as a great power that was a reliable, yet powerful, state that had embarked on an appropriate path of development after the chaotic 1990s. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001, the Kremlin sought discursively to construct Russia as a natural partner of Washington in the fight against terrorism. Putin’s first term has been widely seen as the ‘liberal’ era in Russian post-Communist politics, and the second term, with the 2004 Beslan massacre as a significant discursive turning point, as sharpening the rhetoric of the president (Angermuller, 2012).
However, this love affair with the West did not last long. Putin publicly opposed the Iraq invasion mission and the US unipolar strategy as a whole and claimed that Russia would veto any US-sponsored Security Council resolution that would authorize the use of force against Saddam Hussein. It was only one year since the beginning of the second phase, and yet, a renewed period of Russian bitterness towards the West began again, which is described by Spechler as the third phase in Putin’s foreign policy 2002-2003 (2010). The bitterness was soon transformed into outright hostility. The fourth phase (although Spechler’s analysis only covers Putin’s foreign policy acts till 2008, I argue that the phase of hostility has continued till now, 2017), was characterized by the growing Russian hostility beyond the US to include NATO and the European Union. By the year 2016, the relations between Russia and the West became as damaged as they had been during the last decade of the Cold War. Indeed, during this period Russia suspended its commitment to and considered withdrawing from post-Cold War East-West security institutions such as the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) and the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which could have happened in response to the US’s intention of deploying missile defence systems in Poland and the Czech Republic. Russia also started testing and displaying offensive weapons that could potentially penetrate the US national missile defense system. Putin kept criticizing the US and publicly accused the US of having intentions to create a division inside Europe, undermining international institutions, and instigating a nuclear arms race (Spechler, 2010). The Baltic countries went back to being a contentious issue as Russia claimed that if NATO were to extend to those countries, Russia would act accordingly. Spechler also argues that when the pro-democracy color revolutions began in countries like Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, Putin started to describe the Western plan as the one that seeks to install West-friendly regimes in the CIS to surround Russia and eventually
bring about regime change in the country itself. Therefore, he labeled human rights and pro-democracy Russian NGOs as instruments used by Western governments to channel funds to change the regime in Russia. Putin also took other actions to remove Western influence on the CIS: countries in the region that had any relations with the West were somehow punished by Russia.

The relationship between Russia and Georgia gradually escalated after the Rose revolution in 2003 and 2004 presidential election of Saakashvili, who focused on furthering democratic reforms and Georgia’s accession to NATO. Despite the efforts by the OSCE, UN, and EU to negotiate a peace settlement in Georgia’s breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the conflict remained stalled. On July 3, 2008, an Ossetian village police chief was killed by a bomb, and Dmitriy Sanakoyev – the head of the pro-Georgian ‘government’ in South Ossetia - escaped injury by a roadside mine. During that night both the Georgians and South Ossetians launched artillery attacks on each other’s villages and checkpoints killing and injuring dozens. The European Union, the OSCE and the Council of Europe (COE) urged both parties to resume peace talks. On July 21, 2008, the UN Security Council discussed the violation of Georgian airspace by the Russian military planes that occurred on the 8th of July. During the last week of July 2008, paramilitary forces from both sides escalated what had been an on-going and consistent level of moderate violence. On the morning of August 8th, the Georgian military decided to officially respond with military force, arguing that South Ossetian forces did not end their shelling of Georgian villages. Georgian troops soon controlled much of South Ossetia, including Tskhinvali (Henrikson, 2016). The Russian military, which had been steadily advancing into the breakaway regions, quickly responded to South Ossetia’s defense with a massive counter-attack, leading to five days of intense fighting throughout the region. Russian
warplanes destroyed Georgian airfields near the capital Tbilisi, recaptured Tskhinvali, occupied the bulk of South Ossetia, and reached its border with the rest of Georgia (Henrikson, 2016). On August 12, the Russian government announced that the aim of their military operation - coercing the Georgian side to peace - had been achieved and that the operation had been concluded. On August 26th, Russia formally issued a press release recognizing both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. In doing so, Russia justified its actions under the principle of the responsibility to protect Russian citizens, regardless of where they live. The Russian leadership, amongst other arguments, cited the ‘Kosovo precedent’ in response to the massive international critique of the decision to grant these break-away republics the status of independent states (Toal, 2008).

Much of Russia’s official discourse took the form of a response to the critique deriving from large segments of the international community and was thus dedicated to explaining Russia’s choices in the war context and thereby seeking to justify the military intervention and the post-war developments. It was even more important for the Russian leadership to promote Russian actions to the domestic audiences, to garner the necessary support for the war, the independence recognition and the permanence of the Russian military troops. The message presented to the Russian public was well perceived and the approval rates for both President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, lay at 83% and 88%, respectively, in September 2008, according to a survey by Russia’s main independent and most trustworthy polling agency, the Levada-Center.

The majority of the scholarly accounts of the 2008 war explain the outbreak of war as based on an inherently assertive Russian foreign policy that is a natural result of Russia’s aggressive and even expansionist tendencies. According to realist worldview, the survival of
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states must be guaranteed by promoting national interests and strengthening military capabilities (Dunne & Schimdt, 2008). War, from this viewpoint, is a legitimate instrument of statecraft. Moreover, states cannot rely on other states or international institutions to ensure their security. Russia’s self-help approach in this war and its sheer negligence of the international community clearly indicates the realist worldview of Kremlin. Second, the power struggle within Georgian politics and the nationalistic rhetoric of Saakashvili seem to have made things worse just before the war broke out. On the other hand, Putin’s frequent rhetoric regarding Russian identity had a manipulative impact on the escalation of the crisis.

In the constructivist framework, the Russo-Georgian war can be explained regarding Russia’s evolving image of great power, which involves concepts of compatriots and Russian World. This discourse was used by the Russian government to justify its military intervention in Georgia as merely protecting the Russian-speaking population and granting them “their inherent right to life and dignity.” The protection narrative thus drew on a language of legal concern and human rights, repeatedly mentioning Article 51 of the UN Charter to claim Russia’s responsibility to further people’s right to individual and collective self-defence, and the UN’s ‘responsibility to protect’ principle (R2P). References to international law were mainly aimed at international audiences due to the primary role of international law within international relations as well as to the general Russian population who would support the protection of its citizens and compatriots wherever they might be located. Claiming that Russia would be prepared to protect these people wherever they might be located, however, adds to the sense of insecurity in the countries along Russia’s borders that host a large number of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers. The usage of the compatriot concept arguably increased the sense of insecurity due to its vague definitional borders that allow for the protection of people in the neighboring countries.
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who have some looser affinity to Russia. As demonstrated later in this section, this concept can include all peoples who were once part of the former Soviet Union and used to justify military intervention in other countries of the former Soviet Union, such as Ukraine and annexation of Crimea.

Putin launched periodic “gas wars” (in 2006, 2008, and 2009) meant to strengthen Russia’s hold on Ukraine using energy-related blackmail. During the 2004 Orange Revolution, Moscow intervened in Ukrainian affairs by openly backing Viktor Yanukovych’s bid for the presidency. That is when it became evident that Ukraine had become Vladimir Putin’s personal project. He began treating Ukraine as a Russian domestic issue that he could exploit to strengthen his regime (Shevtsova, 2014). The right to control Crimea has been one of the factors adding to the ongoing tension between Russia and Ukraine. After Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the tension grew into a full-scale conflict between the two States, leading to Russia’s support of separatists in Eastern Ukraine.

Located south of the Kherson region in Ukraine and west of the Russian region of Kuban, Crimea is a peninsula on the northern coast of the Black Sea. A history of the area shows that Crimea has had relations with Russia for centuries. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, Crimea became a republic within the USSR. In 1954, it was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and became an autonomous republic within the newly independent Ukraine in 1991. In late 2013, Ukrainian President Yanukovich declined to sign a trade and cooperation agreement with the European Union. This decision resulted in massive and violent demonstrations in Kiev and other parts of Ukraine (Roslycky, 2015). As a result, in February of 2014, President Viktor Yanukovich was removed from office, and an interim government was put in place, which was not recognized by Russia. Shortly after, troops started appearing in
Crimea and seized control over the key military and governmental buildings as well as other strategic facilities. In March 2014, the Crimean status referendum asked the people of Crimea whether they wanted to join Russia or if they wanted to keep their status as part of Ukraine. The Supreme Council of Crimea stated that the referendum was in response to their stance that the new government in Kiev was illegitimate (Laurelle, 2015). Russia supported this referendum and the opinion of the Ukrainians who wanted to join Russia (in March 2014, 79 percent of Russian respondents said that they supported the integration into Russia of Ukrainian regions that requested this. Just a month later, in April, that figure had dropped to 58 percent. See www.levada.ru/06-05-2014/rossiyaneob-ukrainskih-sobytiyakh). After the referendum, the Supreme Council of Crimea and Sevastopol City Council declared independence of Crimea from Ukraine and requested to join Russia. On March 18, the Russian, Crimean, and Sevastapolian leadership signed the Treaty on the Adoption of the Republic of Crimea to Russia, making Crimea an official part of Russia. On March 24, Russian troops seized most of Ukraine’s bases in Crimea, and Ukrainian troops were transported from their base in Perevalne, Crimea. Russian President, Vladimir Putin, justified his events in Crimea as Russia’s moral duty to take care of Russian communities outside of territorial Russia and to respect Crimea’s desire to rejoin the motherland.

Norm-based constructivist and classical realist theory can be used to analyze the crisis between Russia and Ukraine, each theory giving different reasoning behind why the conflict started, and the implications that it has brought to the nations involved and the international community. Russia’s annexation of Crimea would be seen by realists as an assertion of power by Russia and an attempt to increase power in pursuit of self-interest. Classical realism affirms that states have an innate desire to dominate others and Russia is following that school of thought
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because they are allowing themselves to get into a conflict with Ukraine for the purpose of bringing Crimea under their wing and increasing their territorial power in the region. It could be argued that Russia seeks to expand their military and economic capabilities when the overall benefits outweigh the costs (Mearsheimer, 2013). The costs that Russia is facing are dampening its international reputation because many states are against Russia’s actions, but Russia is gaining more territorial power and expanding its power in the region nonetheless. Although Russia may continue to suffer economically from the withdrawal of foreign investment and reduced access to the European energy market, these costs must not outweigh the benefits that Russia gets from having Crimea as a member of its nation. Also, Crimea is of considerable value for the Russians because of its strategic location. Sevastopol, the peninsula’s main city, has a port that gives the Russian fleet direct access to the Black Sea, allowing the Russian fleet to maintain its presence in Eurasia (Cohen, 2014). A moral standard of realism is that a state’s primary interest is survival of itself, which requires power over those other states that may pose a threat. Therefore, the ultimate moral obligation of the state is to maintain power about those that would threaten the state’s existence and its citizens (Williams, 2004). In realist framework, Russia has seen the United States as a threat and is greatly against Ukraine having relations with the West. Russia’s growing insecurity could play a role in why Russia is working to increasing its power over surrounding nations. A realist would claim that Russia’s annexation of Crimea is to further Russia’s interests as a strong power in the international community and to deter others, such as the United States from thinking they can go against Russia. The realist theory would also state that President Putin believes that Western interests are to contain Russia’s influence internationally and use their power to increase their influence in the world. Putin did not want to take the chance of losing Ukraine to the US and all the strategic benefits that come from having
Crimea under its wing. Therefore, Russia chose to take charge in Crimea, preserving Russia’s interests in Ukraine and attempting to keep power in the region. Therefore the realist notion that states pursue security at all costs may be an explanation as to why Russia is pursuing power outside of its country.

In contrast to the realist thought that power is the most important in relations among nations, constructivist theory focuses more on the cultural and historical relations that Russia has with Ukraine. Constructivism’s claim that a state’s identity and subsequent actions and interests are shaped by social norms may be used to explain the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Putin has used the sense of Russian identity in Crimea to justify Russia’s annexation of the peninsula. For centuries, Crimea Province was part of the Russian Republic until it was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic by Nikita Khrushchev in 1954 (Laurelle, 2015). From a constructivist viewpoint, emotional associations to the territorial identity of a state influence how people understand policy choices. Putin argues that Crimea’s cultural links to Russia are stronger than they are to Ukraine and associated his actions in Crimea with emotional attachment and ideas of identity. Therefore, the idea of a strong Russian identity in Crimea may be used to help explain Russia’s interest in reclaiming it. Constructivists would look at Russia’s actions as identifying with the people living in Crimea and acting according to the historical identities that the people have with one another. President Putin has stated that the steps that were taken by the leadership of Crimea were based on the norms of international law and aimed to ensure the interests of the population of its people. Russia is stating that they have not committed wrongdoing because their act to allow Crimea to be a part of Russia was a proposal from another independent nation (Moiseev, 2015). Also, with more than a million Russian-speaking citizens residing in Crimea, Putin focused on the nationalistic and social feelings within Crimea to
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legitimize his claim. Putin said his action were protecting the Russian population from the insurgency that was arising in Ukraine (Tandilashvili, 2015). Constructivism affirms that a norm is when a sufficient number of agents accept and adhere to that norm. Therefore, Russia’s argument is that Russia is taking into account the expression of the will of the people in Crimea in the referendum of March 2014, adhering to international norms and rules. Russia argues that it conforms to international law, using its inalienable right to recognize a state and conclude an international treaty with the agreement of the two parties involved. Furthermore, according to the federal constitutional law of Russia, admission of a foreign state into the Russian Federation shall be affected by agreement of Russia and the interested state, valid in this instance (Gnillich, 2015). Russia has used the properties of norm-based constructivism to hold that their claim to Crimea is within the boundaries of international rules, even though states such as Georgia, the United States, and Ukraine appeal to the fact that Russia’s annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine are against international rules and norms.

Russia’s relationships with countries in the Near Abroad in the past decade have been increasingly influenced by Kremlin’s interpretation of history and perception of Russia’s place in the world. The concepts such compatriots, Russian World and Russian Civilization both have stimulated and framed Russia’s approach toward its policy in neighboring countries. As this perception of Russia’s mission in the world got strengthened among Russian political elite, the foreign policy discourse has become more assertive. Therefore, it is important to take into account constructivist analysis of Russian foreign policy for other actors to understand and predict Russia’s future foreign policy discourse. However, the driving forces behind the foreign policy changes that took place during the four phases were various, and it is relevant to analyze each of them because they are still the driving forces behind the changes that are occurring in
Putin’s third term. Even though, the particular weight that each force exerts might be different today than it was during Putin’s first and second term.

3.2. Establishing a new identity

Tsygankov argues that during Putin’s presidency, questions of identity, perceptions of the global environment, domestic political factors, and the interplay between institutional and individual actors have lost little of their importance as determinants of Russian foreign policy (2010). The debate about an identity had lost its intensity when compared to the Yeltsin period, and instead, Putin adopted a flexible approach to the issues of the cultural and civilizational place of Russia in the world. In particular, he has balanced a personal Eurocentrism by promoting relations and contacts with non-Western countries and regions. Putin conducted two-way visits, involving not only the major Western and non-Western powers but also several countries – North Korea, Cuba – which Yeltsin conspicuously ignored. Putin has also carefully tailored his messages to his audience. During his first term, when visiting Europe, Putin has spoken about the European integration; in relations with the CIS member-states, Putin focused on post-Soviet integration and common values and interests arising from a shared past and present; with China, the focus has turned to “strategic partnership” in a multipolar world. This application of identity has been accompanied by the political self-interest of the elite. Whereas under Yeltsin, rival groups kept fighting about their ideologies, it is a very different story in the circumstances of Putin’s near-complete dominance of domestic politics (Tsygankov, 2010). The conflict between opposing groups has been practically eliminated. This resulted in that identity has become less an active agent for influencing foreign policy discourse than a rationalizing device to be used to achieve “national interests.” These multiple identities now serve justifications for Kremlin’s increasing presence and participation in world affairs. Because one or the other identity can be
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“switched on” whenever it fits “national interests,” the Putin administration does not have to make definitive choices as to overall foreign policy orientation. Instead, it has chosen a form of civilizational universalism, of being all things to all people. This resulted in that Russia is at once “regional” and “global,” “normal” and “great power,” “integrated” yet also “special” and “different.”

3.3. How domestic factors influenced foreign policy discourse

Foreign and domestic policies are usually extremely interconnected. However, there has been a tension between domestic factors and foreign policy discourse in Russia during Putin administration (Sakwa, 2008). There was a growing concern about color revolutions in neighboring countries of Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, and fear that if those countries became democracies than Russia could get “contaminated” with democratic values as well (Mendras, 2015). Even though it could be questionable whether these factors are not domestic or not, and at the time of color revolutions Russia was at the peak of its economic growth and Putin had strong domestic support, it can be argued that the fear that the revolution could spread to Russia could have triggered a more aggressive foreign policy towards the West. Trenin (2009) argues that despite that Putin has been a strong leader; he does have to think about how private citizens feel. When the economic crisis hit hard, and ordinary Russians started feeling dissatisfied with the Putin administration in his third term as president, protests started spreading through the main Russian cities, which could not have been ignored by the government.

3.4. External conditions and its effects on Russia’s foreign policy

According to Spechler (2010), one of the most influential external conditions that forced Putin to change the course of foreign policy were the terrorist attacks of 9/11. After 9/11 Putin
changed his foreign policy orientation from a nationalist to a realist, because the attacks highlighted the terrible power of a common enemy – Al-Qaeda. Russia took advantage of its favorable geographical position and military strength to offer help to the US in its war on terror with hopes that the US would in turn respect Russian interests and politics. However, the US’ decision to invade Iraq in 2003 in the absence of the approval from the UN Security Council, was responsible for changing Russia’s foreign policy from a realist to a great power activist status (Spechler, 2010). Iraq invasion openly disregarded the respect for international law - one of Russia’s core foreign policy principles.

Also, the pro-democracy color revolutions that took place in the former Soviet republics of Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan from 2003 to 2005 also amounted to external conditions that influenced Russian foreign policy discourse. For Kremlin to see anti-Russian, pro-Western parties, to come to power in countries that Russia historically considered its “zone of influence,” was a great matter of concern. Also, the fact that Western governments openly supported the regime change in these countries led Putin to view the West attempting to cause an ultimate regime change in Russia (Spechler, 2010). Moreover, Bush administration’s announcement in January 2007 that it would deploy a missile defence system to Poland and the Czech Republic, the US intentions to admit Georgia and Ukraine into NATO, and its support of Georgia before and after the conflict with Russia, all added to the growing concerns that led Putin to adopt a more assertive anti-Western position (Kuchins & Zevelev, 2012, p.156).

Therefore, Putin has chosen a foreign policy course that was different from the course he pursued during his first two terms. However, Marcel De Haas (2010, p.21) argues that Putin had already been following an increasingly assertive foreign policy on the West in his second term.
De Haas states that the basis for that forceful foreign policy position was a mindset that saw Russia as a renascent great power. Huge increase in oil prices provided revenue for Moscow to reach this goal. As Russia became economically stronger, and the West experienced economic crisis and military failures, Moscow started posing itself like a great power once again. Putin strived to ensure that the West would never again neglect Russia as an internationally meaningless player (De Haas, 2010). Also, the Russian elites and ordinary people never accepted the idea of Russia as nothing more than a regional power. The reason why Russia accepted NATO’s eastward expansion in the early 1990s, was only out of economic weakness, and a position of a minor partner that should play by the Western rules, but is not able to shape them, could have never been accepted. As the economy recovered, and Russia paid its financial debt to the West, the Russian political elite strengthened the identity of Russia as a great power in their perception. As the West’s supremacy got relatively weaker, Putin took advantage of it and used it as a chance to reaffirm Russia’s status as a great power in the international arena.

3.5. Institutional factors and its impact on relations with countries of the former Soviet Union

The traditional Russian state symbols and institutions of power are the Russian Army, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the state security services the FSB and SVR. According to both the Church’s and the Russian State’s logic, Russia is the center of Orthodox civilization, a sphere of cultural, religious and historical influence that extends far beyond the borders of Russia. The Church has aimed to regain the old canonical territory which coincides with the territory of the former Soviet Union and has tried to be included in Russian foreign policy as much as possible, looking to influence “brothers” Slavic states such as Ukraine, Belarus, and others. The Church
has played a special role as the source of “spiritual fortification” for the Army and the state security services during Putin’s presidency, as well supported Kremlin’s opposition towards “foreign” human rights groups (Laurelle, 2008).

According to Laruelle, an important part of Putin’s foreign policy when he became president, was understanding and acknowledging the limits of Russia’s traditional hard power assets (the military, the geopolitical influence of the former Soviet Union) and to rebuild Russian power in terms of both economic modernization and Russia’s vast gas and oil resources, taking advantage of Near Abroad countries (2008). This direction led to the great transformations that happened in the institutional context. Compared to bureaucratic instability, the over-personalization of policy and politics, and Yeltsin’s divide-and-rule tactics created the environment for a sectionalized approach to international relations during the 1990s, current much calmer operating environment stimulated a foreign policy that is more centralized, coordinated and disciplined than at any time since the dissolution of the USSR. One of the reasons for this is an increased involvement of the security apparatus in the policy process. In addition, the focus of Putin’s administration shifted to stabilization and restoration and built around two slogans: the “vertical of power” and the “dictatorship of the law.” The Chechen conflict, especially the tragic events of the Dubrovka Theater hostage crisis in October 2002 and the Beslan school “massacre” in September 2004, caused the Putin administration to focus on the need for returning to a constitutional of the Russia Federation. Putin’s first mandate as president, therefore, focused on these issues. Putin’s second mandate (2004-2008) was more aggressive in both domestic and foreign policy. Putin essentially minimized all forms of non-Kremlin controlled NGO’s and consolidated his control over human rights groups and all forms of civil society that could challenge his regime (Laruelle, 2008).
During Putin’s presidency, due to his favorable relationship towards military, very strong links between Kremlin neo-nationalist ideology and the perception of the Russian army as a patriotic symbol have emerged. The Russian Army represents historical unity over and above ethnic, religious and regional differences, and represents state power. Military history played an important role, with the Soviet victories of WW2 as the natural focal point. There has been a vast use of various media as tools of propaganda to reify the state security apparatus, in particular, the FSB. Since 2000, the production of patriotic films has increased, especially movies and TV series showing FSB agents as heroes fighting Chechen terrorists, since it used a special “Patriotic Fund” set up by Moscow. Since 2009 the Education Ministry has been funding and promoting films and TV shows like this in the interests of fostering “ideas of humanism, spirituality, and other traditional values of the Russian peoples” (Laruelle, 2008). The Russian soldier, therefore, is perceived as a symbol of integrity and honesty, and waging of has been justified in the name of a “holy and eternal Russia.”

In conclusion about the period of Putin’s presidency, Russia has made efforts to restore its prestige in the world and its identity as a Great Power. At the beginning of his presidency in 2000, Putin tried to start fresh with the West, Moscow reevaluated its national objectives to cope with the constantly changing obstacles in international affairs, and aimed to adjust its foreign policy course accordingly. The record so far has been mixed. On the one hand, Russia has reasserted itself as an important global actor. On the other hand, Russian renaissance as a major European and Asian power has brought back Cold War memories to some of its neighbors and global competitors.

Putin has tried to take advantage of the opportunities offered by Russia’s strategic place in geopolitics. An elaboration of a closer relationship with CIS countries has been high on the
agenda since it is not only a matter of prestige for Moscow to keep a leading role among the post-Soviet countries but also a way to secure stability in its near abroad, where it has enormous national interests. The Caspian region plays an important role as a source of Russian wealth and serves one of the greater goals of Russian security policy - its economic development. The use of Caspian oil and gas and the control over the pipelines has justifiably been prioritized by the government, and any kind of penetration by other states and foreign industries in this important area has been violently rejected. The strict policy concerning energy prices was reflected in the energy-related disputes between Russia-Ukraine in 2006 and 2009, and with Belarus in 2004. This demonstrated that Russia is not willing to allow any neighboring state to take advantage of its geographic location and natural resources.

Relations with NATO remained difficult during the Putin presidency. Although Putin wanted to avoid isolation and sought a special relationship with NATO after the 9/11 attacks, the results were discouraging. The NATO-Russia Council (NRC) failed to hold a strong partnership and the expansion of NATO to Eastern Europe and its potential enlargement reaching the Russia’s Near Abroad provoked the negative reaction of Moscow in the form of war with Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, since the potential of participation of Ukraine and Georgia in the western security organization constitutes a red line for Putin. As Russia reestablished its identity as a Great Power, backed by the strengthened economy, its foreign policy actions became more aggressive. Kremlin has recovered its pride and is exercising once again classic Realpolitik to diminish Western influence in the former Soviet Union.

The West did not expect Russia to transform into such an assertive and forceful state that it was now when it declared their victory in the Cold War in 1991. In the last nine years, international community saw the Russian state invading Georgia and Ukraine, and annexing
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Crimea which was deemed as highly aggressive actions by the US and Western governments. Trying to come up with a response to Russia’s actions in its Near Abroad, has been so far unsuccessful due to a clear misunderstanding of Russian national and foreign policy identity by the West. It’s important to analyze and comprehend the historical development of one state’s policy patterns and the identities and meanings that it constructs through engagement with other actors, to understand why a state acts in a certain way.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In this master thesis, I analyzed the variation in Russian foreign policy in the Near Abroad since the collapse of the USSR, focusing on “frozen” conflicts that had a direct involvement of Russian military in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine. The Russian foreign policy discourse has been analyzed through the lenses of three main theoretical approaches in international relations: realism, institutional liberalism, and constructivism. While institutional liberalism fits best at explaining Russia’s foreign policy orientation during Boris Yeltsin’s first term as a president, showing new independent Russia’s intentions to integrate with the West through cooperation in the security and economic realms by joining international organizations, the realism is a adequate approach to understanding Russian foreign policy behavior when Vladimir Putin took the president office, and Russia acquired a more assertive position towards the conduct of US and European affairs. However, both institutional liberalism and realism fail to account for historical, cultural and domestic context, which provide a deeper understanding of variation in Russian foreign policy over the last twenty-five years in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine. I argued that as an understanding and perception of the Russia’s national identity, national interests and Russia’s place in the world of international affairs became more coherent among the Russian political elite, so did the Russian foreign policy vary in solving different conflicts in the same region of near abroad countries from
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being passive and indecisive in 1992-1994 in Moldova and Georgia, when an understanding of Russia’s national identity was conflicted during Yeltsin’s presidency, to being an assertive and insistent as the idea of Russia’s role in the world has strengthened among Russian political elite during the Putin administration. By examining the events through the various theoretical approaches in this paper, I found that Russian foreign policy in Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 1992-1994 reflected the search for “Russian identity” of the divided political institutions that were formed in Russia after the dissolution of the USSR. The absence of the consensus about Russia’s place in the world echoed in the indecisive and incoherent strategy of the Russian government that created a “frozen” conflicts in the region. Also, Russian official foreign policy in the 1992-1994 was in line with the constructed by Yeltsin administration state liberal democratic “identity,” supporting the territorial integrity of Moldova and Georgia. However, the discourse of Russian foreign policy in the Near Abroad has changed as the evolution of Russian state “identity” took a nationalistic turn during Putin’s presidency, and the concepts of compatriots, Russian World, and Russian Civilization were re-introduced among the political elite, and often used to justify military intervention in countries of the former Soviet Union in order to “protect” Russian-speaking population there, such as in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014. Although, the correlation is not causation, and it is not just the change in understanding among Russian political elite and ordinary citizens of Russia’s “national identity” and Russia’s place in the world that change the course of the foreign policy. There are also domestic factors, institutional constraints and external events that affect how the foreign policy is constructed. I analyzed these factors during both Yeltsin’s and Putin’s presidency to provide a deeper understanding of the context in which the sense of Russia’s identity has evolved, and the foreign policy has changed. The dynamics of the “frozen” conflicts discussed in this paper are far from being static, and there
The variation in Russia’s foreign policy in Near Abroad are still many open questions regarding the status of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Crimea, and Transnistria in international relations, but an understanding of the concept of national identity in Russia’s politics provides an additional insight to the situation in the region, and, perhaps, helps to predict Russia’s foreign policy behavior towards other countries in the Near Abroad.
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