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THESIS

**WHY DID THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION
ANNEX THE CRIMEAN PENINSULA AND INVADE
THE DONBAS IN EASTERN UKRAINE IN 2014?**

by

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September 2020

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**WHY DID THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION ANNEX THE CRIMEAN PENINSULA
AND INVADE THE DONBAS IN EASTERN UKRAINE IN 2014?**

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ABSTRACT

The research discusses Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and seeks to find the explanatory answer to this question: Why did the Russian Federation illegally annex the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine and invade Donbas in 2014? The thesis studies and evaluates Russia's hostilities toward Ukraine within the lenses of three hypothetical explanations—realist, constructivist, and regime survival—in two case studies: 1) annexation of the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine and 2) invasion of Ukraine's Donbas regions. The study finds that despite both cases occurring sequentially, the causal factors that prompted Russia toward aggression in Crimea and Donbas are different. The thesis argues that material factors are important and stay in the background of Russia's decisions in both cases. They were not necessarily the most significant aspect in the case of Crimea's annexation, but they were a factor in the case of Donbas's invasion. However, cultural and ideational factors mattered most in both case studies. Besides, the research points out the importance of considering Russia's internal domestic factors, which refer to the Kremlin's regime survival. The latter has more explanatory power in the case of Crimea's annexation. Consequently, the understanding of Russia's motives in both case studies provides important background for the further development of Ukraine-Russia relations and sheds light on the prospects of conflict termination between two states.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

A2/AD	Anti-access/Area-denial
AA	Association Agreement
BSF	Black Sea Fleet
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area
DPR	People's Republic of Donetsk
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
LPR	People's Republic of Luhansk
MAP	Membership Action Plan
MDS	Missile Defense System
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
RF	Russian Federation
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic
SIT	Social Identity Theory
TCG	Trilateral Contact Group
UN	United Nations
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

In March 2014, during the outbreak of the pro-democratic revolution in Ukraine, the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine, occupying the Crimean Peninsula and invading the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine. These actions shocked Western governments. Ukraine suddenly became a subject for hot debate among Western academics, diplomats, regional specialists and subject-matter experts. Russia's aggressive actions triggered Western European countries and members of the North-Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to recalibrate their strategies from threat reduction and reassurance of Russia to reinforcement of Western defenses and deterrence of Russia. Russia's tactics and techniques became a subject for major debates in world security platforms. At the same time, at the political level decision-makers remained concerned about the motives and goals of Russia's armed engagements in Ukraine.

The question of why the Russian leadership invaded Ukraine became the subject of major debate in scholarly and policy circles, as experts sought explanations for the Kremlin's aggressive action. Building from this literature, this thesis seeks to find the most comprehensive answer to the question: Why did the Russian Federation annex the Crimean Peninsula and invade the Donbas in eastern Ukraine in 2014? The research will evaluate Russia's aggressive actions towards Ukraine through the lens of three theoretical approaches, realism, constructivism and regime survival. Realists anticipate the use of military power to gain geostrategic benefits based on a rational calculation of costs and benefits; constructivists focus on status-seeking explanation grounded on perceived threats to identity; and domestic politics explanations concentrates on internal politics, arguing in the Russian case that preservation of the regime's domestic rule is the driving force behind Russia's foreign behavior.

The research will investigate the reasons for the Russian leadership's decisions in two case studies: 1) the conquest and annexation of Crimean Peninsula in 2014; and 2) the invasion of separate eastern Ukrainian territories within Donetsk and Luhansk

administrative regions, resulting in the emergence of Russian-backed quasi-republics. The thesis will focus on an empirical evaluation of proposed hypothetical explanations derived from the IR theories mentioned above. Identifying the strongest argument will help to highlight the potential for future Russian aggressive actions as well as help inform policy responses to resolve the conflict.

B. SIGNIFICANCE

Understanding the causes of Russian President Vladimir Putin's decisions to occupy Crimea and invading the Donbas is crucial to anticipate whether similar choices will be taken in the future regarding other states, especially those which share with Russia common post-Soviet history. Comprehension of what lessons Ukraine offers should be seen as a key to determining what measures the West might take to prevent such aggressive behavior in the future.¹ For Ukrainian policymakers, finding comprehensive answers to the question of why Russia occupied Crimea and invaded Donbas is of particular importance. Understanding Putin's motives will help Ukrainian leaders identify Russia's subsequent plans and probable moves and the prospects for conflict resolution and termination. Revealing the causes of Russian aggression will allow Kyiv to take appropriate measures to build effective foreign policy strategy to protect the state's sovereignty and integrity from further escalations.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

Russia's occupation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas in 2014 have prompted scholars, policy-makers and analysts to look for the explanation of why it happened and what was the driving force for Russia's aggressive actions. When seeking explanations of the logic of Kremlin's actions regarding Ukraine, it is evident that before 2014, the topic did not receive much attention from scholars and was viewed mainly through the prism of

¹ Daniel Treisman, "Why Putin Took Crimea," August 21, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2016-04-18/why-russian-president-putin-took-crimea-from-ukraine>.

relations between Russia and the West.² However, the emergence of the Ukraine-Russia conflict triggered efforts to discover the roots of Russia's decisions.

In explaining Russia's foreign policy decisions regarding Ukraine in 2014, there is considerable diversity in approaches. A number of works propose multi-causal explanations of Russia's aggressive actions against Ukraine.³ Some scholars do not promote any theoretical explanations and consider Putin's decision to annex Crimea and invade Donbas as improvisation.⁴ These explanations vary in whether they emphasize the systemic level-of-analysis, with its emphasis on the material structure of international politics, or the state or domestic level-of-analysis, which emphasizes factors internal to states as causes of their external behavior.⁵ By and large, however, scholars focus on material power, security, ideas, identities, domestic popularity, domestic elite interests, and regime popularity and survival to explain Russia's behavior. These factors can be grouped under three broad theoretical frameworks—realism, constructivism and regime survival—that seek to explain the Kremlin's actions.

1. Realist Explanations

Realists' view of the international system is pessimistic. They view states as self-interested units that seek power to assure security.⁶ States' interests are driven by the desire

² Taras Kuzio, *Putin's War against Ukraine: Revolution, Nationalism, and Crime* (Toronto: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017); Taras Kuzio and Paul J D'Anieri, *The Sources of Russia's Great Power Politics: Ukraine and the Challenge to the European Order* (Bristol, England: E-International Relations, 2018), <https://www.e-ir.info/publication/the-sources-of-russias-great-power-politics-ukraine-and-the-challenge-to-the-european-order/>.

³ Kuzio and D'Anieri, *The Sources of Russia's Great Power Politics*; H. Reisinger and A. Golts, "Russia's Hybrid Warfare" (NATO Defense College, 2014), JSTOR: 128, www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10268; Tor Bukkvoll, "Why Putin Went to War: Ideology, Interests and Decision-Making in the Russian Use of Force in Crimea and Donbas," *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 267–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201310>; Luigi Scazzieri, "Europe, Russia and the Ukraine Crisis: The Dynamics of Coercion," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 3 (April 16, 2017): 392–416, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2016.1265509>.and others.

⁴ Daniel Treisman, ed., *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin's Russia* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2018): 278.

⁵ J. David Singer, "The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations," *World Politics* 14, no. 1 (October 1961): 82–83, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009557>.

⁶ Stephen M. Walt, "International Relations: One World, Many Theories," *Foreign Policy*, no. 110 (1998): 31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1149275>.

to dominate or not be dominated by others. In this regard, realists focus on the material distribution of power among states.⁷ Classical realists, such as Hans J. Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, and others, align state behavior in the international arena with the selfish nature of human beings who pursue their national interests.⁸ In other words, classical realism emphasizes human nature as a cause of both insecurity and war.

Neorealists, in contrast to classical realists, ignore human nature and are concentrated on the effects of the international system, where anarchy itself remains the driving force causing states to compete with each other in achieving security.⁹ State actions to acquire military power in order to increase its security cause insecurity in other states, thereby creating a security dilemma. The dilemma emerges when other states respond in kind, leading to tension and arms races, even when neither side wants it.¹⁰ Kenneth Waltz assumes that for neorealism security remains the paramount state interest, and power is only a tool to maintain security. According to him, neorealists view the international system through the prism of great powers, who seek to survive using their own means.¹¹ Stephen Walt argues that this condition would lead weaker states to balance against or bandwagon with more powerful rivals.¹²

Concerning the use of power, neorealists are split into two camps, offensive realists and defensive realists. The former ignores the status quo in favor of hegemony and stresses that the security can be achieved by preventing rivals from gaining power, even if such

⁷ Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth W. Thompson, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Brief ed (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993): 4–16; Note: Classical realists: Reinhold Niebuhr, Henry Kissinger, Arnold Wolfers, and others.

⁸ Walt, 31.

⁹ Walt, 31.

¹⁰ Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 167–174, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009958>.

¹¹ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001): 37.

¹² Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security* 9, no. 4 (1985): 4–5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538540>.

actions could lead to war.¹³ Aggression and expansion are the expected behaviors of great powers, according to offensive realism. Defensive realism holds that states are driven by survival, therefore they concentrate their power on preserving the status quo.¹⁴ Balancing each other's power—including through warfare—rather than expansion is the expected behavior of great powers.

Many explanations of Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas highlight certain realist factors. In terms of decision-making, realist scholars see Ukraine within the framework of relations between Russia and the West. Stephen Walt noted that from the realist point of view, Ukraine's pro-western course was likely to provoke Moscow's aggression.¹⁵ John Mearsheimer suggests that Western expansion eastward imperiled Russian security. He argues that Russia's decision to annex Crimea and invade Donbas is the result of "larger [Western/NATO] strategy to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and integrate it into the West."¹⁶ Walter Mead calls Russia a revisionist state, which is not satisfied with the post-Cold War status quo and explains Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine as a desire "to reassemble as much of the Soviet Union as it can."¹⁷ Dmitri Trenin suggests that the Ukrainian crisis erupted as the result of "the failure to achieve an acceptable post-Cold War settlement...between the West and Russia."¹⁸ Moreover, David Svarin believes that, besides NATO enlargement, Ukraine's crisis emerged due to

¹³ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Updated edition, The Norton Series in World Politics (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014): 31–32; Note: Offensive realists: John Mearsheimer, Eric Labs, Colin Gray, Keir Lieber, and others.

¹⁴ Kenneth Neal Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reissued (Long Grove, Ill: Waveland Press, 2010): 126–127; Note: Defensive realists: Robert Jervis, Stephen Van Evera, Stephen Walt, and others.

¹⁵ Stephen M. Walt, "What Would a Realist World Have Looked Like?," *Foreign Policy*, January 8, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/08/what-would-a-realist-world-have-looked-like-iraq-syria-iran-obama-bush-clinton/>.

¹⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2014): 77–89.

¹⁷ Walter Russell Mead, "The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3 (2014): 74–75.

¹⁸ Dmitri Trenin, "The Ukraine Crisis and the Resumption of Great-Power Rivalry" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014), 14, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13067.

European Union (EU) initiatives regarding the extension of its security and economic architecture to eastern Europe.¹⁹

Many realists look at Russia's decisions to occupy Crimea and invade Donbas through the lens of Russia's geostrategic considerations. Gomar Toma assumes that Crimea was annexed to increase the defensive and offensive potential of the Kremlin, and to serve as a good stronghold for force projection in the Black Sea and the Middle East areas.²⁰ Donbas in this framework could be seen as platform to assure logistical connection with Crimea.²¹ Other scholars, such as Michael Kofman and Natalia Bekiarova, suggest that the invasion of Donbas prevents Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic integration, and subsequently allows Russia to influence Kyiv's foreign policy decisions by controlling conflict intensity.²²

In sum, the literature shows that the actions of the West and the anarchic character of international system should be taken into consideration in explaining Russia's aggressive actions, not just the classical realist assumption that Russian leaders' nature is inherently aggressive or revisionist. Structural realism can offer more precise explanations than classical realism in this sense. Offensive realists would argue that Russia transgressed against Ukraine because of its desire to protect its regional hegemony over Eastern Slavic nations, simultaneously assuring its geostrategic dominance in the areas of its interest, rather than NATO's and the West's. Defensive realists suggest that NATO and Western expansion is evidence of a threat to Russia's security and the Cold War status quo with Europe divided into Soviet and U.S. spheres of influence.

¹⁹ David Svarin, "The Construction of 'Geopolitical Spaces' in Russian Foreign Policy Discourse before and after the Ukraine Crisis," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7, no. 2 (July 2016): 135–136, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2015.11.002>.

²⁰ Gomar Toma, "'Posledstviya roskola mezhdyy Rossiei i Zapadom' [The consequences of the split between Russia and the West]," *"Rossiia v Globalnoi Politike" [Russia in Global Politics]*, June 1, 2015, <https://globalaffairs.ru/number/Posledstviya-raskola-mezhdu-Rossiei-i-Zapadom-17496>.

²¹ Konstantin Skorkin, "Putin's Game Plan in Ukraine," April 22, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2019-02-07/putins-game-plan-ukraine>; Krushelnycky Askold, "Putin's Bridge to Nowhere," *Atlantic Council*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putin-s-bridge-to-nowhere/>.

²² Michael Kofman, "Through a Glass Darkly:" (American Enterprise Institute, 2017), JSTOR: 3–4, www.jstor.org/stable/resrep03302; Natalia Bekiarova, "The Growing Military Activity In The Black Sea Region As A Security Threat," *Impact Strategic* 62, no. 1 (2017): 45–46.

At the same time, the question of why Russia would be willing to risk its relationship with the West over Ukraine remains unclear in realist accounts. The argument regarding NATO and Western expansion to Russia's borders, which has been going on for over a decade, is an insufficient answer. In this regard, Alexander Motyl argues that realists do not seek to explain what states' interests actually are. They ignore the place of ideology, common history and culture in Ukraine-Russia relations.²³ In addition, Kari Roberts emphasizes the importance of Putin's narrative that underlines the connection of Russia's identity with Ukraine.²⁴ Moreover, realists make decisions based on cost-benefit calculus, and should choose the course of action with the least costs and/or most benefits. Yet it is unclear what the net benefits to Russia are of its aggression against Ukraine. Either Putin miscalculated or the decisions were made based upon a different calculus, one defined by status or domestic politics, rather than material costs and benefits. Considering these counterarguments, constructivist and domestic politics explanations may fill the holes in realist explanations of Russia's decisions to occupy Crimea and invade Donbas.

2. Constructivism and Status-Seeking

Constructivists consider that states' behavior in the international arena is socially constructed, rather than defined by anarchy and material power or human nature. They argue that not only material power but also ideas, norms, and identities play significant roles in international relations. Alexander Wendt presented the basic principles of constructivism as follows: "the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature."²⁵

Constructivists think that identities and interests become important factors shaping a state's behavior. Ted Hopf assumes that the identities of states are varying and "likely

²³ A.J. Motyl, "The Surrealism of Realism: Misreading the War in Ukraine" 177 (January 1, 2015): 77–78.

²⁴ Kari Roberts, "Understanding Putin: The Politics of Identity and Geopolitics in Russian Foreign Policy Discourse," *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 72, no. 1 (March 2017): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702017692609>.

²⁵ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations 67 (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1.

depend on the historical, cultural, political, and social context.”²⁶ Interests are seen as central variables, rather than givens as in realism. This implies a range of possible state’s actions, which are constrained by mutually created social structures, practices, norms, not only material factors.²⁷ In foreign policy decisions, the behavior among states depends on their perceptions of each other’s identities and interests. Understanding these variables can help to explain states’ foreign policy decisions regarding each other.²⁸

In respect to Russia, the proponents of constructivism claim that culture and history are two of the main contributors shaping its identity as a great power, underlining its status and prestige. Therefore, the protection of great power status forms Russia’s core interest and plays an important role in the formation of its sense of security as well as the Kremlin’s foreign policy decisions.²⁹

Regarding Ukraine, Roberts argues that Russian President Putin sees Russia’s identity as linked to its neighbors due to a common post-Soviet history and culture, where the protection of such cultural and historical relationships becomes a part of Russia’s national interests.³⁰ Bobo Lo and others claim that such ideational bonds take their roots from the times of Kyivan Rus’ and occupy a central place in the formation of Russia’s nationalism, which unavoidably influences Russian views of Ukraine. Moreover, interpretation of Kremlin’s narrative, makes it clear that Putin does not see Ukraine as a sovereign and independent state and consider it as a part of the “greater Russian world”.³¹

²⁶ Ted Hopf, “The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory,” *International Security* 23, no. 1 (July 1998): 177, <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.23.1.171>.

²⁷ Hopf, 177–179.

²⁸ Hopf, 193.

²⁹ Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, “Status Seekers : Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy,” *International Security* 34, no. 4 (2010): 91–92; Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Vladimir Putin’s Vision of Russia as a Normal Great Power,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 21, no. 2 (January 2005): 133–134, <https://doi.org/10.2747/1060-586X.21.2.132>; Anne L. Clunan, “Russia’s Pursuit of Great Power Status and Security,” Ch. 1 in Roger Kanet, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 5. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351181242>.

³⁰ Kari Roberts, “Understanding Putin: The Politics of Identity and Geopolitics in Russian Foreign Policy Discourse,” *International Journal: Canada’s Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 72, no. 1 (March 2017): 46–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702017692609>.

³¹ Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder* (London: Washington, D.C.: Chatham House ; Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 107; Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Richard Sakwa, *Ukraine and Russia: People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives*, 2016, 118.

The scholarly literature on Russia's great power status suggests two constructivist approaches that are useful in explaining Putin's decision to annex Crimea and invade Donbas in 2014. The first is based on social identity theory, proposed by Larson and Shevchenko. They argue that "the role of identity and the desire for recognition are key elements" motivating Russia's behavior, thus an external threat to Russia's identity, rather than relative power, shapes its foreign policy strategy.³² In this respect, Western lack of regard for Russia's perceived status as regional hegemon prompts Russian anger and competition with the West over effective control of Ukraine. In this light, the Kremlin treats Ukraine's pro-Western orientation as Western denial of Russia's status, influence and identity as great European power with special privileges in the former Soviet republics. In response to NATO or Western policies to extend their influence over Ukraine and undermine Russia's status there, the Kremlin's decided to annex Crimea and intervene in eastern Ukraine in 2014.³³

The second constructivist explanation is rooted in the domestic politics of great power identity. Steven Ward argues that status denial can cause a sense of "status immobility" in a rising power, which in turn empowers proponents of radically revisionist and nationalist foreign policy.³⁴ In relation to Russia, Anne Clunan emphasizes the particular role of domestic elites who may push state's leaders towards foreign policy decisions to protect its great power status.³⁵ In this regard, the occupation of Crimea and the invasion of Donbas can be seen as Putin's intention to satisfy domestic status ambitions

³² Larson and Shevchenko, "Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy," 93–94.

³³ Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, "Russia Says No: Power, Status, and Emotions in Foreign Policy," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 47, no. 3–4 (December 1, 2014): 269–79, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2014.09.003>.

³⁴ Steven Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 33–34, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316856444>.

³⁵ Anne L. Clunan, "Historical Aspirations and the Domestic Politics of Russia's Pursuit of International Status," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 47, no. 3–4 (December 1, 2014): 281–90, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2014.09.002>, 287–288.

and Russia's identity, which sees Ukraine as an integral part of Russian historical heritage and might.³⁶

In sum, both constructivist approaches argue that Russia's desire to protect its status as a great power constitute the major part of its interest, and these interests are substantially based on tight ideational connections with neighboring countries. Constructivists would suggest that Russia's decision to annex Crimea and invade Donbas showed to what extent Putin considered Ukraine as a battleground in his efforts either to protect Russian status from the threat of Western domination in the former Soviet space or to satisfy domestic elites' status aspirations.³⁷

Such constructivist explanations can fill the gaps in realist explanations in respect to Russia's interest to protect its identity and status. However, constructivist argument regarding Russia's quest for status and prestige also faces limitations. Constructivists (and realists) are unable to explain why Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, rather than earlier. Ukraine was recognized by Russia as an independent and sovereign state in 1991 with respect to its borders and territorial integrity. Trenin argues that Moscow became concerned about Ukraine's westward orientation since the 2004 Orange Revolution. These concerns reached their critical point in 2008, when Kyiv requested NATO to join its Membership Action Plan (MAP), and NATO responded through the Bucharest Summit joint communiqué that Ukraine would "one day" join the alliance.³⁸ Other explanations of Putin's aggressive decisions point to their impact on Russia's domestic population and Putin's regime. These decisions may be better explained through the prism of Kremlin's attempts to preserve Putin's power and popularity, rather than elite support, especially after the anti-regime protests over the course of 2011 – 2013.

³⁶ Valentina Feklyunina, "Soft Power and Identity: Russia, Ukraine and the 'Russian World(s),'", *European Journal of International Relations* 22, no. 4 (December 2016): 783–784, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066115601200>.

³⁷ Roberts, "Understanding Putin.", 50.

³⁸ Dmitri Trenin, "The Ukraine Crisis And The Resumption Of Great-Power Rivalry" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014): 11, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13067.

3. Domestic Politics Explanation

Many scholars of international relations consider that states' foreign policy decisions may be driven by domestic political factors. Economic stagnation, rise of corruption, dissatisfaction with the level of wealth, and fear of social unrest push regimes to unprecedented actions aimed at self-preservation. Aleksandar Matovski argues that "security and economic crises are the most robust predictors of both the rise of electoral authoritarian regimes and their durability."³⁹ In respect to Russia, scholars see authoritarianism as a source of Kremlin's desire to stay in power to any means, where Kremlin's foreign policy decisions in many ways can be seen as extension of domestic policy.⁴⁰

The domestic politics of Russian foreign policy literature suggests that explaining Putin's decisions to occupy Crimea and invade Donbas were aimed to preserve the domestic mass bases of his power. Matovski argues that creating an external crisis is an effective way to convince the domestic masses that Putin's strongman authoritarian regime is the best alternative able to deal with all troubles. He contends that the manufactured image of strong leadership—the "strongman"—requires that the autocrat to act as a strong leader, even when that may not be rational; "fears of political instability and weakness of state authority" cause the population to respond positively to such the strongman image and react to manufactured external crisis as evidence of the strong man's effective policy.⁴¹ To support his argument, Matovski uses the example of the correlation between Russia's annexation of Crimea and the sharp rise in the Putin's public approval ratings where the

³⁹ Aleksandar Matovski, "Popular Dictators: Crises, Popular Opinion and the Rise of Electoral Authoritarianism" (2020), chap. 5.

⁴⁰ Elias Götz, "Putin, the State, and War: The Causes of Russia's Near Abroad Assertion Revisited," *International Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (May 10, 2016): 234, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viw009>; David J. Kramer, "Situation in Ukraine." (Testimony before the Canadian House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, April 7, 2014), <https://freedomhouse.org/article/david-j-kramer-situation-ukraine>.

⁴¹ Matovski, "Popular Dictators: Crises, Popular Opinion and the Rise of Electoral Authoritarianism," chap. 5.

external crisis yielded mass satisfaction.⁴² This conclusion can be additionally supported by Putin's approval ratings when Russia went on war with Georgia in 2008.⁴³

Some scholars see in Russia's aggressive action in Ukraine the indicators of the diversionary war theory. Lilia Shevtsova suggests that the creation of the Ukraine's crisis distracted the attention of the Russian population from their internal problems.⁴⁴ In other words, the external crisis allowed Russia to deflect its population's attentions from domestic failures, thereby creating the "rally around the flag" effect.⁴⁵ One more domestic politics argument derives from Putin's fear that pro-democratic revolutions could lead to regime change. Paul D'Anieri and Vladimir Kara-Murza state that Russia's invasion of Ukraine could be triggered by Kremlin's fear of revolutionary movements that could shift from Ukraine to Russia.⁴⁶ Roy Allison argues that the Kremlin's actions were taken "to shield Russia itself from the potential spillover effects...to authoritarian rule in Russia".⁴⁷

It is important to note that most of the literature regarding domestic explanations of Kremlin's decisions concerns the annexation of Crimea. Scholars have paid less attention to the invasion of Donbas in regard to the imperative of regime survival. Probably this can be explained by much more symbolic historical value of Crimea for Russian population rather than the Donbas. Furthermore, despite persuasive arguments and statistical data, the domestic politics explanation still raises the question of whether Putin's regime was really threatened and needed urgent measures to be preserved. His popularity among Russian population has never dropped below 60% for a last two decades; moreover, currently in

⁴² Matovski, chap. 5.

⁴³ Adam Taylor, "Analysis | Is There a Link between Putin's Approval Rating and Aggressive Russian Foreign Policy?," *Washington Post*, November 26, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2018/11/26/is-there-link-between-putins-approval-rating-aggressive-russian-foreign-policy/>.

⁴⁴ Lilia Shevtsova, "The Kremlin Is Winning," *The American Interest*, February 12, 2015, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/02/12/the-kremlin-is-winning/>.

⁴⁵ Tobias Theiler, "The Microfoundations of Diversionary Conflict," *Security Studies* 27, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 318–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1386941>; Götz, "Putin, the State, and War: The Causes of Russia's Near Abroad Assertion Revisited," 234.

⁴⁶ Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa, *Ukraine and Russia*; Vladimir V. Kara-Murza, "Russia and the Baltics: Once Friend, Now Foe," *World Affairs* 177, no. 5 (2015): 16–23.

⁴⁷ Roy Allison, "Russian 'Deniable' Intervention in Ukraine: How and Why Russia Broke the Rules," *International Affairs* 90, no. 6 (November 2014): 1289, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12170>.

Russia there is no strong opposition or political rival to challenge Putin. Thus, these issues will be considered while evaluating the credibility of domestic politics explanations.

The review undertaken of the scholarly literature on Russian aggression against Ukraine reveals that many works dedicated to the explanation of Russia's occupation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas look at these cases simultaneously, or are merely limited to the Crimean case. However, the possible explanations of the Kremlin's decision vary between the Crimea and Donbas cases. One of the main distinctions between the cases is that the annexation of Crimea is regarded as accomplished fact; the conflict in Donbas is still ongoing and Russia does not seek its termination. In other words, Crimea is not a subject for bargaining for Russia, in contrast to Donbas. The question of why Russia accepted Crimea as a part of the state and have not done the same with Donbas signals that the Russia's leadership decisions in those two cases likely had different motives. Therefore, it is important to draw the line between the Crimea and Donbas cases and study them separately.

D. HYPOTHESIS

The literature explored above showed that the major theoretical explanations for both cases—annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas—include factors highlighted in structural realist, constructivist, and domestic politics theoretical frameworks. The analysis of such factors will help to shape the hypotheses regarding the causes of Russia's actions. This will clarify which explanation has the most explanatory power. As it is seen from the preliminary analyses, theories explaining Russia's decision to annex Crimea and invade Donbas in 2014 do not necessarily offer competing explanations. Every explanation makes a significant contribution to a better understanding of Russia's motives in taking aggressive foreign policy decisions. The scholarly literature analyzes numerous variables that impacted Russia's decisions to use force in Ukraine, including material power, ideology, and domestic policy factors. The analysis of such aspects derives three hypotheses which will guide the thesis in identifying the cause of Putin's decisions—to annex Crimea and invade Donbas in 2014.

Hypothesis 1 (Realism): Putin acted as a realist in annexing Crimea and occupying Donbas. Realists would expect Russia's foreign policy decisions to be motivated by the state's power and security interests in response to the probable threat imposed by the Western democratic states and NATO. In this case, Ukraine is seen as a subsidiary part of Western/NATO relations with Russia. The structural realist theoretical framework suggests that Russia is concentrated on the consolidation of material power to secure itself against external threats in the anarchic international system.

Hypothesis 1a: Defensive realists would suggest that Moscow became deeply concerned about its security as Western economic and security institutions opened the pathway for Russia's neighbors to join. In this view, Russia sought to balance against NATO and the EU and Ukraine to prevent Ukraine's leaders from seeking entry into these organizations. Russian leaders perceived such Ukrainian actions as efforts to bandwagon with the EU and NATO against Russia. Russia considered NATO's presence near its borders, in particular, as an imminent threat to its security and territorial sovereignty. As a result of rational calculation of how to best ensure its security, Moscow chose to use invasion and de facto occupation of Ukraine to forestall the latter's incorporation into Western security and economic institutions.

Hypothesis 1b: Offensive realists would suggest that Russia is seeking security through hegemony in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics. It occupied Crimea and invaded Donbas to reassure its security by obtaining geostrategic dominance in the area, therefore weakening its potential Western rivals' force projection and military advantages. In the long-term perspective, Crimea would be used as a militarized zone to project Russia's power in the Black Sea, Mediterranean Sea and Middle East; its insurgency in the Donbas would be seen as tool to deny Ukraine an independent foreign policy and effectively prevent it from joining NATO and the EU; this would deter West and NATO from coming closer to Russia's borders. In addition, Russian activities in the Donbas would be viewed as Russia's military capacity through serving as a training ground for Russia's military, special and law-enforcement forces.

Hypothesis 2 (Constructivism): Constructivists would argue that Putin annexed Crimea and occupied Donbas as a means to protect its identity as hegemon over eastern

Slavs and former Soviet republics and a European great power. In this view, psychological and ideational motives prompt Russian leaders to assert its status in the countries and regions deemed most essential to its great-power identity. This identity, which requires a status as a great power, is argued to determine Russia's national interest and the state's foreign policy decisions. Inherent in Russia's identity as a great power is rights and privileges in what Russian elites deem its exclusive sphere of influence: the former Soviet republics other than the Baltic states. Dominance over Ukraine and Belarus is argued to be central to Russia's great power identity, as both countries are intertwined with Russia's development as an empire and great power. In this regard, the external factor of the Western lack of recognition of Russia as a great power, as well as internal factors of elites pushing Russia to regain or reshape its great power status, drive Russian leaders to assert Russia's great power status in Ukraine and elsewhere, using force and other means. To make the broad constructivist expectation clearer, the hypothesis is subdivided into the following subsections.

Hypothesis 2a: Western/NATO attempts to facilitate Ukraine's Euro or Euro-Atlantic integration are expected to be viewed as a threat to Russia's status and identity as a great European power. Russia felt offended by the West, which denied its status as a great power. In this case, the external status hierarchy and Russia's perceived place in it are key factors shaping Russian behavior. Western lack of recognition or respect generated a threat to Russia's status, therefore provoked the Kremlin to assert its great power status through aggression against Ukraine.

Hypothesis 2b: Domestic elites' aspirations for great power status constrain Russia's leaders' foreign policy behavior. When external events, such as the expansion of NATO, the European Union and changes in the orientation of governments in Ukraine, and/or internal leadership failures threaten those status aspirations, Russian leaders act abroad to demonstrate that they are upholding Russia's great power status to these elites. The Kremlin's annexation of Crimea and war in the Donbas, in this view, are necessary to ensure that domestic elites support Putin and his regime. Acting to protect Russia's great power status in Ukraine from external threat thereby upholds the state's identity and the elite's status ambitions.

Hypothesis 3 (Regime survival): According to Matovski's theory of authoritarian legitimacy, Putin is expected to have annexed Crimea and occupied Donbas to preserve his power. In this view, Kremlin's aggressive decisions are treated as an extension of Kremlin's domestic policy of ensuring regime survival from probable threat. After traumatic periods of instability, masses prefer a "strongman" to restore stability and prevent a return to crisis. Popular dictators become victims of their own "strongman" image, which requires them to act accordingly in order to shore up domestic mass support for their rule. Putin's self-created image of a strong leader caused him to manufacture the crisis in Ukraine. Such actions are necessary to convince the domestic masses that the current regime is the only alternative that can deal effectively with emerging domestic crises and troubles in a neighboring state. In effect, this view expects that the Kremlin would use Russian-orchestrated aggression in Ukraine and elsewhere to demonstrate Putin's capability to counter Western pro-democracy "subversion" of Russia's rights in its sphere of influence and deliver the restoration of order and protect the rights of "Russian compatriots" abroad.

None of the hypothesis are likely to fully explain the Putin's decisions to impose aggression against Ukraine; evaluation of each explanation, however, will help to identify the forces that were most important in causing Russia's leaders to invade Ukraine.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This thesis will analyze two separated cases—Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas—that occurred sequentially in 2014 to explain Russia's foreign policy decisions. The research is designed to identify the causes of Russia's leadership decisions to aggress against Ukraine. Preliminary analyses showed that many scholarly works study both events simultaneously through the same theoretical prisms, but closer inspection indicates that despite some similarities in causal factors, the implications of each theory differ in the two cases. Therefore, Russia's occupation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas will be studied as separate cases.

The goal of this research is to use the empirical data of both case studies to evaluate the explanatory power of the theoretical propositions outlined above. The thesis will apply

the method of structured, focused comparison to both cases and use the Kremlin's decisions to annex Crimea and invade Donbas as separate dependent variables.⁴⁸ The thesis will evaluate each hypothesis in each of the two cases. It will use inferential analysis of Russia's decisions to determine which of the theories is able to explain best the outcomes in both cases. The thesis will identify, summarize and assess the causal factors of each theoretical framework as independent variables, and their role in the articulation of Russia's decisions regarding Crimea and Donbas. Finally, this research will help to extract and evaluate from each explanation what can be expected with respect to the possibility of Russia's aggression in the future.

The research will use primary and secondary sources in the Russian, Ukrainian, and English languages, official statements and opinions of public officials, government documents and policies, press and media releases, articles, columns, and interviews with state officials and subject-matter experts.

F. THESIS OVERVIEW

Thesis is organized in five chapters. Chapter I provides the general overview and significance of the research question, introduces the case studies, research design and hypotheses based on the possible explanations of Kremlin's decisions regarding Ukraine in 2014. Chapter II introduces the case studies, lay out the theoretical framework of each of three explanations in more detail. It will highlight factors and indicators inherent in the structural realist, constructivist and authoritarian legitimacy theoretical frameworks, and identify the independent variables to be evaluated in respect to each of the two case studies within subsequent chapters. Chapter III describes the history of Ukraine and Crimea under different rules. Chapter IV highlights the relations between Ukraine and NATO/EU as well as Russia's factor in this relations. The Chapter emphasizes on the events that could generated Russia's perception of threat to its security, status or regime. In addition, it briefly discusses the revolution of dignity in Ukraine (2014) and lays the introduction of the case studies. Chapter V constitutes the case study of Russia's decision to occupy

⁴⁸ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, BCSIA Studies in International Security (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005), 67–68.

Crimean Peninsula. It analyzes the empirical record of Russian decision-making to evaluate to the theoretical frameworks established in Chapter II. Following the same logic, in Chapter VI the case study of Russia's decision to invade Donbas is empirically evaluated. In conclusion, Chapter VII analyzes the findings from Chapters V and VI and summarize which of the theoretical causes of Russia's decisions to aggress against Ukraine in 2014 have the most explanatory weight. It also assesses the consequences for Russia of its actions, the prospects for conflict termination between Ukraine and Russia in light of the causes and consequences of Russia's aggression. Finally, Chapter VII provides recommendations regarding bilateral relations between Russian Federation and Ukraine.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In explaining Russia's foreign policy decisions regarding Ukraine in 2014, there is considerable diversity in approaches. These explanations vary in whether they emphasize the systemic level-of-analysis, with its emphasis on the material structure of international politics, or the state or domestic level-of-analysis, which emphasizes factors internal to states as causes of their external behavior.⁴⁹ By and large, scholars focus on a variety of factors—material power, security, ideas, identities, domestic popularity, domestic elite interests, and regime popularity and survival—to explain Russia's behavior. These factors can be grouped under three broad theoretical frameworks—realism, constructivism, and regime survival—that seek to explain the Kremlin's actions.

This subsection explores the scholarly literature on realism, constructivism, and regime survival, and is used to highlight the indicators related to a specific theoretical framework. The factors derived from each theory are used to evaluate the empirical knowledge about Russia's decisions regarding Crimea and Donbas. Table 1, compiled from multiple sources on theories of international relations, highlights hypothetical criteria by which the subsequent analysis evaluates Russia's behavior through its aggressive actions in Crimea and Donbas. The chart helps to determine observable behavioral patterns anticipated by realist, constructivist, or regime-survival approaches in explaining the state's decisions. At the same time, this will enable assessment of which theoretical explanation has more explanatory power. Lastly, the theoretical framework subsection outlines what the world should expect from the state's behavior if it acts as realist, constructivist, or regime survival power.

A. STRUCTURAL REALISM (NEOREALISM)

According to structural realists, states' paramount interest is survival. They agree on the assumption that the international system has an anarchic structure and its structural

⁴⁹ David Singer, "The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations," 82–83.

restrictions shape states' behavior.⁵⁰ Structural realism cannot make predictions about foreign policy behavior of a certain state at a specific time. Instead it explains patterns of international outcomes—conflicts, wars, acts of aggression, arms races, international cooperation, and others—that result from the interaction of two or more actors in the international system.⁵¹ Neorealists concentrate on the distribution of material power among states and traditionally focus on relations between great powers. However, some studies show that great powers impose their influence over less powerful neighboring states. For example, in seeking security they may restrain the foreign-policy autonomy of smaller neighbors or act to protect communication lines and trade routes in their proximity and keep access to strategically important places near their borders.⁵²

Neorealism is represented by two schools—offensive realism and defensive realism. Both theories are pessimistic about the character of international relations, but they differ about how states can survive in anarchy and the role of security and power in it.⁵³ In general offensive realism sees the world as a dangerous environment, and defensive—as a competitive one.⁵⁴ These affiliations help explain the differences between the two approaches.

1. Defensive Realism

Defensive realism holds as states are seeking to survive they concentrate their efforts on preserving the status quo. To do so, states are interested in maximizing relative security, and not relative power. Defensive realists conceive power as a tool to gain more

⁵⁰ L. Feng, "The Typologies of Realism," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 112, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pol006>.

⁵¹ Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, "Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited," *International Security* 25, no. 3 (2000): 133.

⁵² Elias Götz, "Neorealism and Russia's Ukraine Policy, 1991–Present," *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 301–2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201312>.

⁵³ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 121; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 31–32.

⁵⁴ Eric J. Hamilton and Brian C. Rathbun, "Scarce Differences: Toward a Material and Systemic Foundation for Offensive and Defensive Realism," *Security Studies* 22, no. 3 (July 2013): 439, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2013.816125>.

security.⁵⁵ For defensive realists the international system is benign with plentiful security and “does not necessarily generate intense conflict and war” but these outcomes are possible under conditions of security dilemma or if irrational actor violates the status quo.⁵⁶ Proponents of the theory stress that weaker states are more likely to balance against or bandwagon with more powerful ones to reassure their security.⁵⁷ Scholars argue that states' expansion reduces their security as it threatens other states and provokes them to create an opposing coalition.⁵⁸

Defensive realism considers the security dilemma—a condition when one state, in seeking to enhance its own security, accumulates power resources and thereby reduces the sense of security of other states in the system—as its “theoretical linchpin”. It makes possible genuine cooperation between states for the long-term perspective.⁵⁹ The security dilemma may cause states to fear each other's intentions and relative power. States may pursue strategies to ensure their security, but unintentionally create a war-causing spiral of mutual hostility or conflict.⁶⁰ Defensive realists theory anticipates that rational states may respond aggressively to external threats in case of imminent danger to their security; a necessity to suppress the growth of those who can gain an edge in power; or when irrational actors with “defective domestic political systems” pursue expansionist strategies, violate status quo, and therefore provoke other states to react. In this case, defensive realism

⁵⁵ Kenneth Neal Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reissued (Long Grove, Ill: Waveland Press, 2010): 126–127; Note: Defensive realists: Robert Jervis, Stephen Van Evera, Stephen Walt, and others.

⁵⁶ Michael E. Brown, Seam M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller, eds., *Offense, Defense, and War*, An International Security Reader (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004), xiii; Gideon Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (October 1998): 149, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100007814>.

⁵⁷ Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power.”

⁵⁸ Jack L. Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*, 2. print, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994), 21–23.

⁵⁹ Shiping Tang, “The Security Dilemma: A Conceptual Analysis,” *Security Studies* 18, no. 3 (September 18, 2009): 588, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410903133050>.

⁶⁰ Jack Snyder and Keir A. Lieber, “Defensive Realism and the ‘New’ History of World War I,” *International Security* 33, no. 1 (2008): 182; Taliaferro, “Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited,” 129.

neglects the security dilemma and relies on unit-level factors to explain the state's aggression, conflict, and warfare.⁶¹

In terms of decisions, defensive realism considers that states rely on a rational calculation of how to best ensure their security. Based on a cost-and-benefits evaluation, states may turn to aggression to prevent a status-quo violation. Hence, if the costs outweigh the benefits internationally, states' aggressive actions are considered to be a miscalculation.

2. Offensive Realism

Offensive realism suggests that states ignore the status quo until they reach regional hegemony and domination within the international system. Scholars argue that for offensive realists, security is scarce in the international system. States try to achieve it by maximizing relative power, hence international competition becomes “war likely”.⁶² John Mearsheimer suggests that anarchy compels states to improve their relative power and seek for opportunities to weaken potential adversaries in order to survive, even if such actions could lead to war. He argues that anarchy creates in every state a permanent sense of fear that other states will use force to harm or conquer it, hence all states prone to act aggressively even when pursuing security.⁶³ Offensive realism disregards states' internal (domestic) characteristics and considers all states to behave similarly under the pressure of the international system. This theory suggests that states' relative capabilities and external environment have a direct impact on states' foreign policy and shape the ways they behave in pursuing own interests.⁶⁴

Offensive realism expects states to pursue frequent internationally driven “expansionist policies because their leaders mistakenly believe that aggression is the only way to make their states secure.”⁶⁵ A state that possesses more power is likely to act more hostile because of its capacity and incentive to do so. At the same time, before undertaking

⁶¹ Taliaferro, “Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited,” 152.

⁶² Brown, Lynn-Jones, and Miller, *Offense, Defense, and War*, xiii.

⁶³ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 2014, 31–33.

⁶⁴ Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” 149.

⁶⁵ Taliaferro, “Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited,” 129.

aggression, states will evaluate the costs and risks of their actions and probable benefits. Offensive realists consider that if costs outweigh the benefits, states' expansion can be postponed to a more suitable moment and may have an opportunistic character.⁶⁶ Offensive realists also believe that the permanent condition of fear and mistrust between states can lead to a security dilemma.⁶⁷ According to Mearsheimer, the security dilemma "reflects the basic logic for offensive realists" and makes war unavoidable. In such a way states tend to improve their security by diminishing the security of other states.⁶⁸

Realist scholars connect the study and practice of "geopolitics" mainly with offensive realism, therefore arguing that geopolitics possess an essential role in the state's quest for survival. Offensive realism holds that access to and control of land, strategic sea, river passages, and natural resources provide more opportunities for economic growth and development of military capabilities, therefore facilitate a state's domination of others.⁶⁹

B. CONSTRUCTIVISM AND STATUS-SEEKING

Constructivists view states' behavior in the international arena as socially constructed rather than influenced by human nature or distribution of material power. They discount the anarchic nature of the international system and focus on the analysis of ideational factors. These factors include culture, history, norms, ideas and knowledge. Constructivists stress the particular role of "collectively shared ideas and understanding on social life" in shaping states' identities and interests, which have a direct impact on international relations and the consequences of anarchy.⁷⁰ Finnemore and Sikkink see constructivism through the lenses of the following assumptions: "human interaction is shaped by ideational factors, not solely by material ones;" ideational factors are the most

⁶⁶ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 2014, 36–37.

⁶⁷ Taliaferro, "Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited," 128.

⁶⁸ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 2014, 35–36.

⁶⁹ Hamilton and Rathbun, "Scarce Differences," 452–53; Peter Toft, "John J. Mearsheimer: An Offensive Realist between Geopolitics and Power," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 8, no. 4 (December 2005): 388, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.jird.1800065>.

⁷⁰ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 4, no. 1 (June 2001): 392, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.4.1.391>.

significant and broadly shared in the society as “intersubjective beliefs”; finally, these beliefs identify the actors’ identities and interests.⁷¹ Constructivism does not make predictions about political outcomes. Therefore, it can shed light on explanations of political behavior through the better understanding of the state’s identities and answering the questions of “who the relevant actors are, what they want, and what the content of social structures might be.”⁷²

Constructivists place identity at the center of the approach. They argue that “state identities are constructed within the social environment of international and domestic politics.”⁷³ In this regard, Alexander Wendt argues that a state’s identity is based not only on its self-understanding (subjective character). It also depends on whether this identity is recognized by the other states and has intersubjective character.⁷⁴ Ted Hopf claims that identities of states are varying and “likely depend on historical, cultural, political, and social context”.⁷⁵ The theory makes it clear that states form their own identity and the way they perceive other actors results from the influence of a variety of ideational factors throughout history.

Constructivists consider the state's identity to form the basis of its national interest. Identity consequently shapes states’ behavior in the international environment.⁷⁶ Jutta Weldes argues that the national interest is socially constructed phenomenon. She stresses the particular role of state officials and elites in its formation.⁷⁷ In the area of security studies, the proponents of constructivism believe that states can use force for different purposes, placing ideational variables upfront. In this regard, Haas points out the

⁷¹ Finnemore and Sikkink, 329–93.

⁷² Finnemore and Sikkink, 393; Hopf, “The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory,” 175.

⁷³ Finnemore and Sikkink, “Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics,” 399.

⁷⁴ Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics,” *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 398.

⁷⁵ Hopf, “The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory,” 176.

⁷⁶ Hopf, 175.

⁷⁷ Jutta Weldes, “Constructing National Interests,” *European Journal of International Relations* 2, no. 3 (September 1996): 281–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066196002003001>.

importance of considering the “degree of ideological difference” between actors and its role in states leaders' perception of a threat they pose to one another and shaping national interests. He considers ideological variables as central to the great powers' foreign policy behavior over the last two centuries, where culture and history are two of the main contributors determining states' identity as that of a great power.⁷⁸

Constructivist theory stresses the particular role of “status” in shaping states' beliefs and self-esteem.⁷⁹ Steven Ward summarizes that status remains an important variable to specific domestic groups and elites as it helps to improve their material wealth and security, as well as helps to generate their pride and recognition. In addition, he underlines that status is important for the state leaders as its improvement helps to enhance the leader's domestic legitimacy.⁸⁰ Any threat to the state's status would cause negative emotions like shame, anger, or frustration. These then instigate states to protect their identity-driven national interests and status and downplay costs from such aggression. Such an outcome is particularly visible in the behavior of great powers. The protection of their status as a great power forms these states' core interest. Great power status plays an important role in the formation of the sense of their security and foreign policy decisions.⁸¹

In respect to Russia, this thesis uses two constructivist approaches to explain Putin's decision to annex Crimea and invade Donbas in 2014. The first is proposed by Larson and Schevchenko and based on social identity theory, is driven largely by external actors' recognition of a state's identity as a great power. This externally oriented approach stresses

⁷⁸ Mark L. Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, 1789–1989* (Cornell University Press, 2005), 4–5, 24, www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctv5rf04m.

⁷⁹ Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, “Status Seekers : Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy,” *International Security* 34, no. 4 (2010): 91–92; Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Vladimir Putin's Vision of Russia as a Normal Great Power,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 21, no. 2 (January 2005): 133–134, <https://doi.org/10.2747/1060-586X.21.2.132>; Anne L. Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia's Resurgence* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

⁸⁰ Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*, 36–38.

⁸¹ Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, “Status Seekers : Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy,” *International Security* 34, no. 4 (2010): 91–92; Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Vladimir Putin's Vision of Russia as a Normal Great Power,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 21, no. 2 (January 2005): 133–134, <https://doi.org/10.2747/1060-586X.21.2.132>; Anne L. Clunan, “Russia's Pursuit of Great Power Status and Security,” Ch. 1 in Roger Kanet, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 5. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351181242>.

that “the role of identity and the desire for recognition are key elements” in motivating the state's foreign policy behavior.⁸² The second constructivist explanation is based on Steven Ward's theory of “status immobility” and refers to the domestic politics of great power identity.⁸³ It is an internally driven explanation.

1. Social Identity Theory: Externally Oriented Status-Seeking

Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko formed their theoretical approach in explaining the state's foreign policy behavior based on Social Identity Theory (SIT). SIT is rooted in social psychology; it holds that people form their identity from membership in different social groups. The SIT can be applied to states and provide an understanding of the role status plays in international politics.⁸⁴ Scholars argue that states may improve their relative status in the international arena through implementing identity management strategies such as social mobility, social competition, or social creativity. Social mobility holds that the state may enhance its status by joining the higher-status group (e.g. to obtain great power status). Social competition entails acquiring and mobilizing resources to equal or displace the higher-ranked states. Finally, social creativity anticipates achieving supremacy in a different ranking system or another area, one that emphasizes a state's uniqueness and superiority from dominant powers.⁸⁵

Larson and Shevchenko anticipate that multiple features on which state can be evaluated to achieve greater status. In contrary to realism, possession of superior military capabilities does not necessarily bring the states a greater status or guarantee them respect or acceptance to the elite club. The status of great power requires certain approval from other states in the international community.⁸⁶ Based on these assumptions, the theoretical expectations of SIT anticipates that status-seeking state has to take on the required markers

⁸² Larson and Shevchenko, “Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy,” 93–94.

⁸³ Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*, 33–34.

⁸⁴ Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, “Shortcut to Greatness: The New Thinking and the Revolution in Soviet Foreign Policy,” *International Organization* 57, no. 1 (2003): 91, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818303571028>.

⁸⁵ Larson and Shevchenko, “Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy,” 66–67; Larson and Shevchenko, “Russia Says No,” 270; Larson and Shevchenko, “Shortcut to Greatness,” 78–79.

⁸⁶ Larson and Shevchenko, “Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy,” 69.

of status to be accepted into the higher-ranking club. However, if states do not or fail to acquire the required material attributes and values to meet the desired expectations, their admission to the high-ranking club and great-power status would be denied, their interests, and aspirations ignored. Therefore, in some cases, states would shift to the strategy of social creativity to promote their dominance in alternative spheres. In other cases, frustration caused by such denial and indifference can be treated as disrespect and injustice to their status aspirations and encourage states to turn to competitive and assertive behavior.⁸⁷

Continued disrespect and negligence can be treated by the state as an external threat to its identity and encroachment on its interest. This then can trigger the status-seeking state's aggressive foreign policy reaction aimed to right the situation to the desired status hierarchy. This aggression can have an extensive character, "motivating retaliatory action on an occasion far removed from the original provocation".⁸⁸

2. Status Immobility: Internally Driven Status-Seeking

The second constructivist explanation is based on Steven Ward's concept of "status immobility". It builds from SIT, but is rooted more in the domestic politics of great power identity than the explanation above. The theory stresses the particular importance of domestic political elites in the formation of the state's identity as a great power and in inclining state's leaders towards foreign policy decisions to protect its status.⁸⁹ In this regard members of the political elite "develop [their] aspirations based on common historical memories" and are motivated by the constant need for collective self-esteem and recognition. Consequently, they form a national self-image that generates the ideas about the "country's political purpose and international status".⁹⁰ Great power status is a national

⁸⁷ Larson and Shevchenko, 75–76.

⁸⁸ Larson and Shevchenko, "Russia Says No," 271.

⁸⁹ Ward, *Status, and the Challenge of Rising Powers*, 42.

⁹⁰ Anne L. Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia's Resurgence: Aspirations, Identity, and Security Interests* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 10–11.

self-image based on the historical aspirations of the elites and can be shaped via identity management strategies.⁹¹

Steven Ward suggests that a country's status can be considered as the source of a non-instrumental demand for revolt against status quo order, and a political resource that influences the "domestic contest over foreign policy".⁹² The state's quest for international status and recognition takes the form of policies foisted on leaders by domestic elites aimed at obtaining higher status ambitions.⁹³ Sometimes the lack of external recognition or denial of these ambitions by other states may convince the groups and individuals within the rising state that their aspirations are incompatible with the international order. In this case, rising powers seem to face the condition of "status immobility"—the belief that the state's status ambitions have been blocked. Status immobility activates domestic political forces that push state leaders towards "radical revisionism" that includes a policy rejecting the existing status quo order.⁹⁴ In such a case "hardliners," represented by radical revisionists and nationalists, gain advantage over moderate incumbents in a domestic contest over shaping the state's foreign policy.⁹⁵

The theory would expect that domestic hardliners, in case of dissatisfaction of their status ambitions, attempt to log roll state leaders towards aggressive foreign policy decisions against status quo rules, norms, and institutions. Leaders take on more aggressive foreign policies to maintain his or her legitimacy and position in a hardliner-dominated political arena.

C. DOMESTIC POLITICS EXPLANATION

Domestic explanations of the state's foreign policy decisions may be rooted in multiple domestic political factors. In this regard, economic stagnation, a rise of corruption,

⁹¹ Clunan, "Historical Aspirations and the Domestic Politics of Russia's Pursuit of International Status," 282.

⁹² Ward, *Status, and the Challenge of Rising Powers*, 4.

⁹³ Ward, 3–4.

⁹⁴ Ward, 11.

⁹⁵ Ward, 33–34.

dissatisfaction with the level of wealth may provoke internal social unrest with the threat to overturn the regime. Such fears push regimes towards actions aimed to reassure its preservation and sustainability. The authoritarianism itself is seen as a driver for regime intention to stay in power at any means including through aggressive foreign policy decisions.

1. Theory of Authoritarian Legitimacy

In his theory of authoritarian legitimacy, Aleksandar Matovski argues that electoral authoritarian regimes tend to create an image of a “strongman” savior who is “uniquely capable” of reversing the state's foreign and domestic threats.⁹⁶ Such strongman authoritarian leaders tend to achieve regime stability via mass persuasion rather than coercion. In this regard, such persuasion would work under the following conditions: the country has recently undergone acute political, economic and/or security crises; the population consequently has considerable “fears of political instability and weakness of state authority;” it accepts the rise of electoral authoritarianism as a necessary condition for restoring the state's order and stability; the idea that an electoral authoritarian regime led by a “strong man” is the best government dominates society, especially when it is “backed up by traumatic memories of turmoil and injustice under alternative orders”; and availability of specific mechanisms that turn popular anxieties into a “persistent electoral advantage for these regimes.”⁹⁷ Such a notion does not directly produce an authoritarian regime but gives them the rise by “molding and taking advantage of mass opinion.”⁹⁸

One more important aspect of characterizing the theory lays in the creation of an external crisis. Matovski expects strongmen regimes to escalate crises and use other diversionary tactics to defuse dissatisfaction and protest among their citizens. This approach is an effective way to convince the domestic masses that the current strongman authoritarian regime is the best alternative able to deal with all troubles. In this regard,

⁹⁶ Aleksandar Matovski, *Popular Dictators: Crises, Popular Opinion, and the Rise of Electoral Authoritarianism*. Book Manuscript, 2020, chap. 5., 1.

⁹⁷ Matovski, 2–4.

⁹⁸ Matovski, 2–3.

Matovski contends that the manufactured image of strong leadership requires that the autocrat to act as a strong leader, even when that may not be rational; “fears of political instability and weakness of state authority” cause the population to respond positively to such the strongman image and react to the manufactured external crisis as evidence of the strongman’s effective policy.⁹⁹ As such, strong men leaders can become captured by their own image, and be forced to create external crises to bolster the perception that only they can properly handle them. Such a combination may be reflected in a regime's popular approval ratings, where external crisis and autocrat's reaction to it satisfy the domestic population. However, such an approach may have only a temporary "rally-around-the-flag" effect. This may then push the leader into a constant search of new activities of how to win domestic approval and therefore stay in power.

The theory suggests that as long as the state's population remains preoccupied with stability, the electoral authoritarian leader with an established strongman image can maintain his or her power through the ballot box, disregarding his poor results in key areas like the economy, anti-corruption policies, and others. At the same time, in case of threat to his regime, which can be reflected in popular dissatisfaction of the leader or his government, in order to maintain power, authoritarian leaders have to keep or manufacture instability or external crisis. Such a technique may help the regime to divert popular attention from aggravating domestic problems, divide the opposition, justify its policies, and hence to preserve its legitimacy and power.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Matovski, 3.

¹⁰⁰ Aleksandar Matovski, “It’s the Stability, Stupid! How the Quest to Restore Order After the Soviet Collapse Shaped Russian Popular Opinion,” *Comparative Politics* 50, no. 3 (April 1, 2018): 367–68, <https://doi.org/10.5129/001041518822704926>.

Table 1. Theoretical framework

Theory	Structural Realism		Constructivism		Regime survival
	Offensive realism	Defensive realism	Social Identity Theory	Status Immobility	Authoritarian legitimacy
Argument	State is self-interested and due to the anarchic characteristic of international system used to compete for survival by maximizing relative power.	State is self-interested and due to the anarchic characteristic of international system used to compete for survival by maximizing security.	Desire for status and recognition constitute the key elements of states' interests and play important role in shaping state's foreign policy behavior. States use various modes to gain the recognition from other countries and have the propensity for aggression in case denial of their status aspirations	The denial of state's status ambitions can cause a sense of "status immobility"—the belief that state's status ambitions are obscured. This activates domestic political elites to push state leaders to "radical revisionism" and aggression aimed to protect state's status through aggressive foreign policy decisions	In order to stay in power, state leader creates a self-image of a "strongman" which is used to shore up domestic mass support of his rule. Manufactured external crisis are used to convince the people that the strongman leader is the only alternative capable to resolve all domestic and international troubles.
Level-of-analyzes	Systemic	Systemic	States	Internal	Internal
Interest	Hegemony	Security.	Status attainment.	Status recognition.	Regime survival.
Behavior indicators and drivers	- State is more pessimistic and sees the international system as dangerous environment which always provides incentives for expansion - State seeks regional hegemony and therefore may pursue aggressive foreign policy decisions - State seeks to maximize relative power and looks for the opportunities to weaken its rivals - State has permanent condition of fear to be conquered, therefore considers aggression as the	- State is more optimistic and sees the international system as competitive environment which provides incentives for expansion only under certain circumstances - State seeks to maintain status quo; it may balance against or bandwagon with other states to preserve own security - Under the condition of security dilemma state may aggress to weaken potential rivals due to the spiral rising of tension and fear that threaten its security	- State seeks to improve its status in international arena through implementing identity management strategies - State's status requires approval from other states in international community - State tends to competitive or assertive behavior in case of other states denial to recognize its status ambitions and aspirations - Continuous denial of state's status ambitions may cause its extended aggression which may last beyond the initially triggering factors	- State domestic elites participate in the formations of state's identity and status and push leaders towards its protection - State leaders may be inclined towards aggressive foreign policy decisions to satisfy the status ambitions of the domestic political forces and therefore increase own legitimacy - Dissatisfaction of the domestic elites' status ambitions empowers radical revisionists and nationalists to revolt against status quo rules, norms and institutions	- Authoritarian leader manufactures the image of a strongman to achieve own regime stability via mass persuasion rather than coercion - A strongman image requires autocrat to act accordingly to convince own population that he is the only alternative capable to deal with all domestic and international threats - Autocrat may set up an external crisis to convince domestic population to respond to his strongman image as evidence of his effective policy and positively

Indicators	Structural Realism		Constructivism		Regime survival
	Offensive realism	Defensive realism	Social Identity Theory	Status Immobility	Authoritarian legitimacy
	only way to reassure its security - Under the condition of security dilemma state prefers to aggress because rivals are getting stronger; in such a way state increases its security by decreasing the security of others - States may aggress to win its geopolitical and geostrategic position	- State may ignore security dilemma and aggress if irrational actor violates the status quo (bandwagon with rivals)		and force state leaders to aggress	react to autocrat's policies including external aggression - Population, under the fear of instability and backed by the traumatic memories from previous regimes prefer a strongman to restore stability and prevent return to crisis - Autocratic leaders may set up international crisis as a preemptive measure to avert domestic public discontent in case of threat to the regime -
Foreign policy decision-making patterns	Rationality. State leaders make decisions based on rational choice, cost and benefits calculus to increase power	Rationality. State leaders make decisions based on rational choice, cost and benefits calculus to increase security	Psychology. - State acts to improve its status and to be recognized by others - State leaders neglect costs and may act aggressively to protect its status	Psychology. State leaders neglect costs and may act aggressively to satisfy domestic elites' status ambitions	Rationality. Autocrat creates external crisis to improve his strongman image and preserve the regime
Aggression triggers	- Fear and mistrust between states - Emergence of the opportunity to weaken the rivals or gain geostrategic dominance	- Other states violate status quo - Other states bandwagon with rivals	External threat to state's identity and disrespect to its interests motivates states to react	Internal domestic political forces/elites (radical revisionists and nationalists) motivate state leaders to react to satisfy their status ambitions	Fear of internal threat to the regime motivate state leader to aggression

III. INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY OF UKRAINE AND CRIMEA

In 2014 Russia overturned the status quo in Europe and provoked the biggest European security crisis since the end of the Cold War. The Russian Federation annexed the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol from Ukraine. Later that year it intervened in Ukraine's east. These actions were grave violations of fundamental rules and principles of international law, bilateral and multilateral agreements. More striking is the fact that the Russian Federation conducted its aggressive actions being a UN Security Council permanent member. Kremlin neglected the principles of the Charter of the United Nations. Besides, it infringed on the obligations of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 to respect the territorial integrity of the European states, and Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances of 1994 which guaranteed the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.¹⁰¹

Ukraine's path towards independence was complicated, winding from the fundaments of ancient Kyivan Rus to modern sovereign Ukraine. This chapter provides the historical background of Ukraine and Crimea. First, it focuses on the historical factors that led to the subdivision of Ukraine between western and eastern spheres of influence, and Ukraine's development under different rulers. Second, the chapter provides the history of Crimea and gives the overview of the changes of its status throughout the history. It discusses the status of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) and its role in Ukraine-Russia relations. In addition, it discusses Russia's policies of Russification and how they impacted demographical changes of the Crimean Peninsula as well as Ukraine itself.

A. UKRAINE AND CRIMEA: A LONG WAY TO FREEDOM

Ukraine is a young state located in the middle of Europe. The country got its independence in 1991 as the result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Ukraine has a specific geopolitical location which throughout history served as a gate between the East

¹⁰¹ David S. Yost, "The Budapest Memorandum and the Russia-Ukraine Crisis" (University of Texas, National Security Network, June 10, 2018), 5–6.

and the West. Throughout its entire history, Ukraine suffered significant watershed periods which identified its further formation and development. The state became subdivided between two different worlds—the west and the east. Under the influence of history, the state could find enough power to reunite. However, the centuries of different experiences under the western and eastern rule have a great echo in Ukraine’s contemporary statehood.

1. Brief History of Ukraine: Subdivision and Reunion

Since prehistoric times the territories of modern Ukraine included three geographical zones. The Black Sea coast was under the control of Mediterranean Sea powers. The open steppe, from the east through the south of Ukraine to the Danube River, formed a natural gateway from Central Asia to Europe for successive waves of nomadic tribes.¹⁰² Areas of central and western Ukraine were inhabited by rural population—tribes of Eastern Slavs—and were connected to northern and central Europe by waterways. During the 7th and 8th centuries, Eastern Slavs continued to spread eastwards and northwards and inhabited the vast territories of contemporary Ukraine, Belarus, and the western part of Russia. These territories served as a crossroads between east and west. They served as zones of frequent military conflicts and were characterized by highly dynamic cultural transmission.¹⁰³

Starting from the 9th century, the Ukrainian lands became the center of Kyivan Rus—political conglomerate with its capital in Kyiv.¹⁰⁴ In 862, the Rurik dynasty became the ruling elite in Kyivan Rus. The city of Kyiv obtained the name “mother of Russian cities.”¹⁰⁵ An important event in the history of Kyivan Rus was her conversion to Christianity in 988 by the Duke Volodymyr. He was converted to Christianity in the city of Chersonese located on the Crimean Peninsula, which at that time was under the control of the Byzantine Empire. The Ruthenians—name derived from ‘Rus’ and used to call the inhabitants of the Kyivan Rus and later the Eastern Slavs up until the late 18–19 century—

¹⁰² Orest Subtelny, *Ukraine: A History*, 4th ed (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 11–15.

¹⁰³ Subtelny, 21.

¹⁰⁴ Subtelny, 22.

¹⁰⁵ Subtelny, 27.

adopted the Byzantine version of Christianity, which determined the civilizational affiliation of the Ukrainian lands for future millennia.¹⁰⁶ During the 10th and early 11th centuries, the territory of the state expanded by subjugating the neighboring East Slavic, Baltic, and Finno-Ugric tribes to Kyiv. Kyivan Rus became the largest state in Europe. Its borders stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea, and from the river Oka to the Carpathians (see Figure. 1).¹⁰⁷

Figure. 1 Kyivan Rus in the 11th century.¹⁰⁸



The city of Kyiv was an important political and cultural center of Eastern Europe and the core of orthodox Christianity. Churches and monasteries start to emerge throughout

¹⁰⁶ Subtelny, 31–33.

¹⁰⁷ Subtelny, 29–31, 34.

¹⁰⁸ Source: Paul R. Magocsi and Geoffrey J. Matthews, *Ukraine, a Historical Atlas* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

the city making Kyiv a religious capital of Kyivan Rus. Besides, they promoted education and literacy among the population.¹⁰⁹

During the 11th through 12th centuries, Kyivan Rus suffered significant internal feudal fragmentation. Finally, in the 13th century, the Mongol conquest significantly reduced Kyiv's power. Therefore, main centers of power moved from Kyiv to the west—cities of Halych and Volodymyr; and to the northeast, river Oka—Volodymyr-Suzdal principality.¹¹⁰ The former became influenced by the Western European cultures and was constantly seeking for help from Catholic Europe in withstanding with the Golden Horde.¹¹¹ The latter was under the direct subordination of the Golden Horde as autonomic principality. Later, it became the basis of the Muscovite principality (Moskoviya) which subsequently evolved into the Grand Duchy of Moscow and Russian Empire.¹¹² This point marks the inception of the division of Ukrainian lands between two spheres of influence—West and East. It also is a subject of huge debate between Ukrainian and Russian historians about the succession of the Kyivan Rus.¹¹³

Between the 14th and 19th centuries, Ukrainian lands were part of different states. The northern, western and central parts (including Kyiv) were under the control of Lithuania and Poland (since 1569 Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth). Under Polish rule, two social groups represented the Ukrainian population—peasants and members of the Greek Catholic clergy. Ukrainian nobility in Poland was relatively weak, and had limited access to political power and other privileges.¹¹⁴ In addition, the Ukrainian population (including nobility) became a subject of Polonization—imposition of the Polish culture, in

¹⁰⁹ Subtelny, *Ukraine*, 51–52.

¹¹⁰ Subtelny, 37–39.

¹¹¹ Subtelny, 62–63.

¹¹² Georgij Vladimirovič Vernadskij, *A History of Russia*, 6. rev. ed., 7. print, Yale Paperbound 43 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1975), 16–18.

¹¹³ Edward D. Wynot, “The Impact of Mykhailo Hrushevsky on the History of Russia, Poland, and the Eastern Slavs,” *The History Teacher* 20, no. 3 (May 1987): 351–52, <https://doi.org/10.2307/493124>.

¹¹⁴ Daniel Stone, *The Polish-Lithuanian State, 1386–1795*, History of East Central Europe, v. 4 (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 225.

particular Polish language--to the non-Polish population on the territories controlled by Poland.¹¹⁵

Ukrainians frequently were a subject of oppression by Polish landlords. Because of that, during 1648–1654 Ukrainian nobleman Bohdan Khmelnytsky held mass uprising against Polish rulers. As the result, he liberated a significant part of Central Ukraine and formed there a Cossack Hetmanate—Ukrainian ruling body over own territory (see Figure 2).

Figure. 2 The campaigns of Khmelnytsky.¹¹⁶



Eastern parts of Ukrainian lands (including contemporary Donbas) were under the control of the Golden Horde and after its broke-up under the Moscow kingdom (since 1721

¹¹⁵ Subtelny, *Ukraine*, 215; Stone, *The Polish-Lithuanian State, 1386–1795*, 45–46.

¹¹⁶ Source: Subtelny, *Ukraine*, 130.

Russian Empire).¹¹⁷ In 1654 to counterbalance the Poles, Khmelnytsky concluded the Pereyaslav Agreements with Moscow, therefore establishing Hetmanate's autonomy under the tsarist rule.¹¹⁸ However, in 1667 Russian and Poles behind Ukraine's back signed the Treaty of Andrusovo (see Figure. 3). In fact, the treaty divided Hetmanate between Moscow and Warsaw along the Dnieper River that runs through Kyiv. Poles recognized the tsarist dominion over the Left-bank Ukraine—territory on the east side of the Dnieper river. Russians agreed to the return under Polish control the Right-bank Ukraine—west side of the Dnieper river. Kyiv was supposed to stay under Moscow for two years, after it had to be returned to Poland.¹¹⁹

In contrast to Poles, tsarists rule allowed Ukrainian nobility to exercise governmental rule in its lands. However, in the 18th century, the Russian Empire imposed the policies to reduce Ukraine's autonomy and establish full control over its territory. In 1764 Russian Empress Catherine the Great liquidated the Hetmanate and centralized power over Ukraine. Later, according to Catherine's "Charter to the Nobility", Ukrainian elites were satisfied by being equalized with the Russian elites in the exchange to reduce Ukrainian autonomy.¹²⁰ In parallel, Catherine launched the program of mass russification. It reached its full force in the 19th century when, after the fall of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1795, Russian Empire acquired northern and some of the western parts of Ukrainian land which were Polonized before (see Figure. 3). Russification included step-by-step measures to strengthen Russia's national, political, and linguistic positions in Ukraine. The aim was to transform the Ukrainian lands into culturally "genuinely Russian land."¹²¹ Left-bank Ukraine was under Russian rule for a relatively long time and faced all these processes before the 19th century. In the Right-bank Ukraine the empire rulers closed non-Russian schools, educational establishments, and centers. They banned non-Russian book-publishing. The new language of instruction at schools became only Russian. The

¹¹⁷ Subtelny, 252–55.

¹¹⁸ Subtelny, 134–35.

¹¹⁹ Subtelny, 146.

¹²⁰ Subtelny, 172–73.

¹²¹ Subtelny, 210.

use of Ukrainian language in public offices became prohibited. According to the policy, any non-Russian who supposed to enter any bureaucracy should be Russified. Russians turned Kyiv into a bastion of Russian culture and the main stronghold of the imperial army. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the Ukrainian indigenous population in the Russian Empire was referred to as Little Russians or Malorossy.¹²² Finally, the Russian emperor's protégés resumed a campaign launched by Catherine to convert all Greek Catholics into Orthodoxy.¹²³

After the dissolution of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, some of Ukraine's western lands were incorporated into the Austro-Hungarian Empire (see Figure. 3).¹²⁴ In contrast to the Russian and Polish policies the subsequent Hapsburg rule in western Ukraine—namely the area of Galicia—and its reforms in the 19th century significantly changed the situation. In 1848 during the outbreak of the wave of liberal revolutions in Europe, the representatives of the Ukrainian liberal bourgeoisie, intellectual elites and the Ukrainian clergy established the Ukrainian political organization “Supreme Ruthenian Council” in Lviv. It acted generally from a loyal position in relation to the Austrian monarchy.¹²⁵ This organization advocated transformation of Eastern Galicia into a separate province with the territorial autonomy, spread of the Ukrainian language, education and literature, permission for Ukrainians to hold public offices, and equate the Ukrainian clergy with the Catholic.¹²⁶ As the result, peasants became protected by law, obtained certain rights, and became treated equally as other classes. Children obtained access to primary and higher education. In some areas, elementary school programs included classes in native Ukrainian language. Universities and seminaries started to appear in large western Ukrainian cities. The Austro-Hungarian rule brought back the Western Ukrainians the faded feeling of national identity.¹²⁷

¹²² Subtelny, 201.

¹²³ Subtelny, 211.

¹²⁴ Subtelny, 81, 241.

¹²⁵ Subtelny, 313–14.

¹²⁶ Subtelny, 315, 321–27.

¹²⁷ Subtelny, 216–19.

Figure. 3 Ukrainian lands in 18th–19th centuries.¹²⁸



The peculiarity of the imperial era was that Ukrainians lived in two very different political systems. From 1667, the Left-bank Ukraine was under the rule of Moscow, and most of the Ukrainian lands on the right bank of the Dnieper remained under the influence of Poland. The Ukrainian identity in both western and eastern Ukraine became significantly reduced under the Imperial rules.

However, the situation with Western Ukrainians changed dramatically in the 19th century under Austrian rule. Its policy has allowed western Ukrainians to re-establish Ukrainian national identity and culture. In contrast, Russian rulers in eastern Ukraine

¹²⁸ Source: Ishaan Tharoor and Gene Thorp, “How Ukraine Became Ukraine, in 7 Maps,” *Washington Post*, March 9, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/03/09/maps-how-ukraine-became-ukraine/>.

worked on their extermination. These parallel courses of Ukraine's development consequently had a significant impact on the state's modern history.

In the 20th century, the western and eastern parts of Ukraine simultaneously started their quest for independence. Following the collapse of the Russian Empire and seizure of power by Bolsheviks in November 1917, the Ukrainian elite proclaimed the formation of the Ukrainian People's Republic with the capital in Kyiv the following January. At the same time, in October 1918, after the fall of the Austrian Empire, the western Ukrainians established the Western Ukrainian People's Republic with the capital in Lviv. On January 22, 1919, the two parts of Ukraine—Western and Eastern—finally became reunited. The new state proclaimed its independence and preserved the name as the Ukrainian People's Republic keeping Kyiv as a capital.¹²⁹

However, the Bolsheviks opposed Ukraine's aspirations for independence and on January 6, 1919, created a puppet state—the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic—with the center in Kharkiv and launched a war to regain control over Ukrainian lands. Simultaneously, for the same reasons, Poland attacked western Ukraine.¹³⁰ The conflict ended in 1921 with Ukraine's subdivision. The Bolsheviks established Soviet control in Central, Eastern and Southern Ukraine. Poland obtained sovereignty over western Ukrainian lands—Galicia and Volyn.¹³¹

On December 30, 1922, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, together with the other Bolshevik republics of Russia, Belarus, and the Caucasus, formed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).¹³²

2. History of Crimea and Changes of Its Status

Between 15th and 18th centuries the Southern steppe of Ukraine, including the Crimean Peninsula, was under the rule of the Crimean Khanate. The Khanate emerged as

¹²⁹ Subtelny, *Ukraine*, 361–62.

¹³⁰ Subtelny, 367.

¹³¹ Subtelny, 375–77.

¹³² Subtelny, 383–84.

the result of the breakup of the Golden Horde reportedly between 1421 and 1441, and throughout its history had strong cultural and political ties with the Ottoman Empire.¹³³ These relations became formalized by the 1478 treaty according to which the Ottomans extended their authority over the Khanate. According to the agreement, the Crimean Khan was responsible for the internal politics and military domain of the Khanate, the Ottoman sultan regulated the Khanate's foreign policy and relied on the Khanate's support of his military campaigns.¹³⁴ Crimean Tatars constantly participated in Ottoman military expeditions against neighbors and distant adversaries. Such conditions significantly affected the interests of the Russian Empire, whose southern borders suffered regular incursions.¹³⁵ Consequently, Russia, seeking to secure its southern territories and gain access to the Black Sea, began its quest for the Crimea.

The takeover of the Crimean Peninsula became one of the most important foreign policy tasks of the Russian Empire in the 18th century. In 1783, Russia under the rule of the empress Catherine II unilaterally annexed the Crimean Peninsula and subsequently made it as a part of *Tavricheskaya oblast'* [the total area included a considerable piece of contemporary Ukraine's territory]. The following year in Crimean Sevastopol, Russia began to build a naval base for its Black Sea Fleet.¹³⁶ The Ottoman Empire agreed on Russia's formal accession of the Crimea only after its defeat in the Russo-Turkish War of 1787–1792 and the signing of the Treaty of Jassy in 1792.¹³⁷

The annexation of Crimea gave the Russian Empire significant military, political and geostrategic benefits. Its control of the peninsula allowed Russia to reassure its own security and tranquility in southern borders and provided dominance in the Black Sea, also facilitated further expansion in the Caucasus, created the platform for encroachment on the

¹³³ Alan W. Fisher, *The Russian Annexation of the Crimea, 1772–1783* (Cambridge [Eng]: University Press, 1970), 2–4.

¹³⁴ Alan W. Fisher, *The Crimean Tatars*, 1. paperback print, Hoover Press Publication 166 (Stanford, Calif: Hoover Inst. Press, 1987), 4–13.

¹³⁵ Fisher, *The Russian Annexation of the Crimea, 1772–1783*, 15–16.

¹³⁶ Fisher, 139–42.

¹³⁷ Gábor Ágoston and Bruce Alan Masters, *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire* (New York, NY: Facts On File, 2009), 297–98, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10315311>.

southern-eastern parts of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.¹³⁸ As a result, the Russian Empire came into direct contact with the great European powers, and became able to project its force and influence in Balkans.¹³⁹ Additionally, the annexation of Crimea possessed a symbolic and religious importance for the Empire. It allowed Catherine “to earn greater glory than previous Russian rulers by succeeding where they failed” and restore Russian control over the city of Chersonese—the place where the Prince [knyaz] of Kyivan Rus’ Vladimir embraced Christianity and considered by Russians as a cradle of Russian Orthodoxy.¹⁴⁰

However, between 1853 and 1856 Crimea became the main theater of the Crimean War. The war broke out between Russia and the alliance of Ottoman Empire, England, France and Sardinia. It began as a conflict between the great powers over maintaining the balance of power in Europe. The precondition of war rooted to the period of 1848–1849 when western and central Europe became affected by the wave of liberal revolutions.¹⁴¹ Hugh Seton-Watson argues that Russia being a member of “Holy Alliance”—a coalition of Prussia, Austria and Russia, established in Paris in 1815 to constrain the liberal movements in Europe emerged in the midst of French Revolution—behaved as “‘gendarme of Europe’ and commander-in-chief of all the reactionary forces...against the forces of liberty.”¹⁴² Russia’s involvement in suppression of revolutionary movements in central Europe especially in Hungary and Romania increased its prestige and reinforced Russian Tsar’s Nicholas I self-confidence. Seton-Watson writes that “Russian primacy had turned into Russian domination” in Europe.¹⁴³ Such success made Russian Tsar keen to advance Russian interests in the Ottoman empire who was suffering a times of weakness.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁸ Fisher, *The Russian Annexation of the Crimea, 1772–1783*, 156–57.

¹³⁹ Ágoston and Masters, *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, 91–94.

¹⁴⁰ Andreas Schönle, “Garden of the Empire: Catherine’s Appropriation of the Crimea,” *Slavic Review* 60, no. 1 (2001): 1–2, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2697641>.

¹⁴¹ Hugh Seton-Watson, *The Russian Empire, 1801–1917*, Oxford History of Modern Europe (Oxford [England] : New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1990), 311–15.

¹⁴² Seton-Watson, 321.

¹⁴³ Seton-Watson, 327.

¹⁴⁴ Seton-Watson, 327–31.

In July 1853 Russia seized the Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia (nowadays parts of Rumania) which were controlled by the Ottoman empire. In October 1853, soliciting the support of Britain and France, the Ottomans declared war on Russia.¹⁴⁵ Britain particularly feared that Russia's seizure of Turkey would affect their interests in the eastern Mediterranean.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, from the geopolitical standpoint, alliance intended to stop the Russian attempt to expand into the Balkans and to gain control over the Straits of Bosphorus, Dardanelles and the Mediterranean trade routes.¹⁴⁷ France entered the war to raise Napoleon's status and prestige, who felt himself humiliated by Russia. His negative sentiments were caused by the disputes between rulers of both states over the status and privileges for Orthodox and Catholics in holy places of Jerusalem. In addition, Napoleon's adverse attitudes were fueled by the Nicholas's refusal to treat him equally as other European monarchs after taking power as the result of the revolution.¹⁴⁸

In September 1854 alliance forces attacked Crimea—a symbol of Russian military glory and a main harbor of its naval power in Sevastopol.¹⁴⁹ Simultaneously, the military clashes between Russian and alliance's forces took place in Baltics, Balkans and Caucuses. In September 1855, the alliance forces took Sevastopol. Despite the heroic defense of the city that lasted 11 months, the Russian troops became defeated.¹⁵⁰ The war ended on March 30, 1856 by the signature of the Treaty of Paris.¹⁵¹ The war showed how far Russia was behind the advanced military, medical, communication and logistics technologies of the Western countries. Despite the defeat in the Crimean War, Russia's regime preserved its power. However, Russia's prestige and influence in Europe became significantly undermined.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁵ Seton-Watson, 317–19.

¹⁴⁶ Seton-Watson, 319.

¹⁴⁷ Subtelny, *Ukraine*, 252.

¹⁴⁸ Seton-Watson, *The Russian Empire, 1801–1917*, 317.

¹⁴⁹ Seton-Watson, 324–25.

¹⁵⁰ Seton-Watson, 328–29.

¹⁵¹ Seton-Watson, 430.

¹⁵² Seton-Watson, 431–35.

After the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 Crimean Tatars tried to establish their independent state in the peninsula. However, Bolsheviks crushed their attempts.¹⁵³ In October 1921, the communists allowed the creation the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic under the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR).¹⁵⁴ In 1945 the autonomous status of the Crimea was abolished and the entity became incorporated to the RSFSR as the Crimean oblast'. The fate of the Crimean Tatars is covered later in the chapter.

a. *The Crimea's transition to Ukraine*

In 1954 the Crimea region was transferred under the jurisdiction of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (Ukrainian SSR). The transition itself possessed a full set of economic, political, and administrative reasons. It was formalized by a Decree of the Supreme Council of the Soviet Union. Both, the Decree and the revealed records from the Meeting of the Presidium of the Supreme Council stated that the transition was done due to the "territorial proximity of Crimea to Ukraine, commonalities of their economies, and close agricultural and cultural ties between the Crimean oblast' and the Ukrainian SSR".¹⁵⁵ The second reason named the transition as a noble act of Russian people to Ukrainian people to emphasize the friendship between nations and commemorate the 300th anniversary of the Pereyaslav Agreements—treaty of reunification of Ukraine with Russia.¹⁵⁶ Analysts explain that the economic basis of this decision was the "government's hope to simplify the administration of large infrastructure projects". It included the building of the Southern-Crimean Canal, that reassured water supply from the Dnieper to Crimea, and the necessity to facilitate the development of the agricultural sector in the peninsula.¹⁵⁷ Some scholars provide the political reasons for the transitions, such as Khrushchev's

¹⁵³ Fisher, *The Crimean Tatars*, 119–20.

¹⁵⁴ Colby Howard and Ruslan Pukhov, eds., *Brothers Armed: Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine*, Second edition (Minneapolis: East View Press, 2015), 2.

¹⁵⁵ Mark Kramer, "Why Did Russia Give Away Crimea Sixty Years Ago?," Wilson Center, accessed May 12, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/why-did-russia-give-away-crimea-sixty-years-ago>.

¹⁵⁶ Kramer.

¹⁵⁷ Howard and Pukhov, *Brothers Armed*, 4.

attempt “to shift the balance of power in Ukraine in his favor” or win the support of the Ukrainian local elites and gain additional credibility to his power in Moscow.¹⁵⁸

b. Demographical changes in Crimea

In the first half of the 18th century the population of Crimea was about 460 thousand. Approximately 92 percent of this number were the Crimean Tatars.¹⁵⁹ Since the Crimea was annexed by the Russian Empire in 1783 its demographical composition underwent significant changes. The policy of the Russian Empress Catherine the Great in respect to the Crimean Tatars was quite tolerant. She allowed the indigenous population to enjoy the same duties and privileges as the Russian population. Those who refused to accept Russian citizenship were allowed to move to the Ottoman Empire.¹⁶⁰ Simultaneously, Catherine launched the policy of Russification against Tatars who still remained in the peninsula. It included changing the Tatar names to Russian, implementing Russian administrative system and encouraging the movement of Slavs and non-Muslim population to the Crimea.¹⁶¹

However, afterward, during the Tsarist era, Russians considered Crimean Tatars as a source of potential threat and instability for the regime. The imperial government imposed coercion on Tatars therefore forcing their migration out of the peninsula. In particular, in 1812 the Russian rulers pursued the policy of further expulsion of Tatars fearing their unreliability in the face of the Napoleon’s incursion.¹⁶² In the aftermath of the Crimean

¹⁵⁸ Kramer, “Why Did Russia Give Away Crimea Sixty Years Ago?”; Howard and Pukhov, *Brothers Armed*, 4.

¹⁵⁹ Jaroslav Vodarskii, Ol’ga Eliseeva, and Vladimir Kabuzan, *Naselenie Kryma v Kontse XVIII-Kontse XX Vekov: Chislenost’, Razmeshchenie, Etnicheskii Sostav* (Moskva: Institut rossiiskoi istorii Rossiiskoi Akademii Nauk, 2003); “Naseleniye Kryma — Krymologiya [Population of Crimea - Krymology],” Krymology, accessed August 4, 2020, http://krymology.info/index.php/%D0%9D%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B5_%D0%9A%D1%80%D1%8B%D0%BC%D0%B0.

¹⁶⁰ Fisher, *The Russian Annexation of the Crimea, 1772–1783*, 139.

¹⁶¹ Igor Davydov, “The Crimean Tatars and Their Influence on the ‘triangle of Conflict’ Russia-Crimea-Ukraine” (Master Thesis, Monterey, CA, Naval Postgraduate School, 2008), 52–53, <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/4255>.

¹⁶² Davydov, 53; Donald Rayfield, “Dormant Claims,” *TLS, the Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5797 (2014): 15.

War Russian government labeled Tatars as traitors accusing them in collaboration with the Ottomans and their allies during the fight against Russia.¹⁶³

Therefore, by the end of the 19th century, the density of the Tatar population in Crimea became relatively reduced. Alan Fisher writes that in 1850 their number was estimated as 275 thousand.¹⁶⁴ According to the 1897 census, Tatars constituted only 13.6 percent of the population and not exceeded 200 thousand.¹⁶⁵ Such conditions created much room for other non-Muslim population to settle in the Peninsula.¹⁶⁶

During Soviet rule, the Crimean Tatars became a subject of mass oppression. In 1921 the Soviet secret service *Cheka* exterminated about 60 thousand dissidents due to the potential threat to the regime.¹⁶⁷ About 150 thousand Crimean Tatars were killed or forced to leave the Crimea during the famines in 1921–22 and 1931–33 caused by communists policies of collectivization.¹⁶⁸ As of 1939, the number of Crimean indigenous populations constituted 19.4 percent (in contrast Russians made up 49.6 percent).¹⁶⁹ In addition, the Soviet policies of russification had a detrimental impact on the Tatars' cultural, historic, linguistic, and scientific heritage.¹⁷⁰

After World War II, Stalin's regime accused Tatars of collaborating with Nazi Germany. In 1944, as the result of Stalin's policies of ethnic cleansing, the Soviet government deported around 180 thousand Tatars from the peninsula. These people were re-settled in Central Asian republics and Russian Siberia and had no right to leave their

¹⁶³ Brian Glyn Williams, "Hijra and Forced Migration from Nineteenth-Century Russia to the Ottoman Empire: A Critical Analysis of the Great Tatar Emigration of 1860–1861," *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 41, no. 41/1 (January 1, 2000): 80, <https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.39>.

¹⁶⁴ Fisher, *The Crimean Tatars*, 89.

¹⁶⁵ Fisher, 189; Howard and Pukhov, *Brothers Armed*, 1.

¹⁶⁶ Fisher, *The Russian Annexation of the Crimea, 1772–1783*, 147.

¹⁶⁷ Fisher, *The Crimean Tatars*, 132.

¹⁶⁸ Fisher, 136–38, 143–45.

¹⁶⁹ Howard and Pukhov, *Brothers Armed*, 2.

¹⁷⁰ Fisher, *The Crimean Tatars*, 145–49.

new places of residence.¹⁷¹ Thousands of people who resisted the deportation or were accused in the collaboration with German troops were shot on site.¹⁷² After the death of Stalin in 1956, the Supreme Council of the Soviet Union lifted restrictions on rights of Crimean Tatars to travel within the Soviet Union and settle in other parts of the country. However, they still had no right to come back to their homeland in the Crimea.¹⁷³

The Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union rehabilitated the Crimean Tatars in 1967. They only began to return to Crimea in 1989, however, after the Supreme Soviet issued the decree “On recognizing as illegal and criminal the persecutions of the people subjected to forced resettlement, and on ensuring their rights.”¹⁷⁴

The results of the 1989 census showed only 38 thousands of Crimean Tatars (1.9 percent of population) lived in Crimea.¹⁷⁵ As of 1994, about 260 thousand Crimean Tatars had returned to their homeland. According to independent Ukraine's first census (2001), the number of Crimean Tatars in Crimea was 243 thousand people (12 percent). By contrast, ethnic Russians in the Crimea Peninsula at that time exceeded 1.1 million (58 percent) and Ukrainians numbered 492 thousand (24.3 percent).¹⁷⁶

In 1991, following the return of the Crimean Tatars back to their land, discussion about the status of the Crimea became renovated. In January 1991 the population of Crimea held referendum where 93 percent of voters supported the restoration of the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.¹⁷⁷ In February 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the

¹⁷¹ Anastasia Bezverkha, “Reinstating Social Borders between the Slavic Majority and the Tatar Population of Crimea: Media Representation of the Contested Memory of the Crimean Tatars’ Deportation,” *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 32, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 127, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2015.1066699>.

¹⁷² Brian Glyn Williams, “The Hidden Ethnic Cleansing of Muslims in the Soviet Union: The Exile and Repatriation of the Crimean Tatars,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 37, no. 3 (2002): 332.

¹⁷³ Fisher, *The Crimean Tatars*, 174; Howard and Pukhov, *Brothers Armed*, 3.

¹⁷⁴ Howard and Pukhov, *Brothers Armed*, 3.

¹⁷⁵ “About Number and Composition Population of UKRAINE,” All-Ukrainian population census’ 2001 data, December 17, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20111217151026/http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/results/general/nationality/>.

¹⁷⁶ “General Results of the Census | National Composition of Population.”

¹⁷⁷ Howard and Pukhov, *Brothers Armed*, 8.

Ukrainian SSR responded to the referendum by granting Crimea the autonomy status within the USSR.¹⁷⁸

c. Ukraine-Russia disputes over Crimea and status of the Black Sea Fleet

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union Crimea became a subject of regular political turbulence between Moscow and Kyiv. In 1991, by signing Belovezhskaya Pushcha accords, which signified the end of the Soviet Union, Russia accepted Ukraine's borders including Crimea. However, in May 1992 and July 1993, the Russian parliament passed several controversial resolutions. By the first resolution, it declared the 1954 Decree of Crimea's transition to Ukraine as "null and void from the moment of adoption". In the second decree, it gave the city of Sevastopol Russian federal status.¹⁷⁹ While commenting the Crimea's annexation in 2014, some Russian political officials and commentators stated that Crimea's transition to Ukraine was illegal or unconstitutional.¹⁸⁰ However, as Mark Kramer noted "the transfer [of Crimea to Ukraine] did occur in accordance with the rules [of the Soviet Union legal system] in effect at the time".¹⁸¹ Furthermore, he continues, that the Russian Federation accepted Ukraine's borders with Crimea and was bound to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and integrity in multiple legal acts aside from Belovezhskaya Pushcha accords.¹⁸² Among them is Budapest Memorandum as of 1994 that finalized the Ukraine's non-nuclear status in exchange for its integrity and security guarantees; and the bilateral Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership. The agreement was signed on May 31, 1997, to stabilize Ukraine-Russian relations and reassure reciprocal protection of each other's "ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious originality of national minorities on their territory".¹⁸³

¹⁷⁸ Howard and Pukhov, 8.

¹⁷⁹ Howard and Pukhov, 6–7, 11.

¹⁸⁰ "Podarok Ot Moskvyy [Gift from Moscow]," News and Opinions, Lenta.ru, March 6, 2018, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2018/03/06/krymih/>.

¹⁸¹ Kramer, "Why Did Russia Give Away Crimea Sixty Years Ago?"

¹⁸² Kramer.

¹⁸³ Kramer; Spencer Kimball, "Bound by Treaty: Russia, Ukraine and Crimea," DW, March 11, 2014, <https://www.dw.com/en/bound-by-treaty-russia-ukraine-and-crimea/a-17487632>.

Pro-Russian political forces in Crimea gave additional impetus to Ukraine-Russian discourse over Crimea. They, as well as Russian elites, took an active part in the preservation of pro-Russian sentiments in the peninsula. The former instigated the separatism and Crimea's insolation from Ukraine. For example, Howard and Pukhov argue that in 1994 elected President of Crimea Yuri Meshkov advocated building closer ties and expanding direct cooperation with Russia in a ways ranging "from moving the clocks to Moscow time to establishing special allied relations with Russia, and possibly even becoming part of Russia at some point in the future".¹⁸⁴ Russian elites (especially Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov) supported the implementation of Russian educational, cultural, infrastructural, and other programs, therefore reinforcing Russia's influence throughout the peninsula.¹⁸⁵

Another contentious issue between Russia and Ukraine after the breakup of the Soviet Union became the question of the BSF stationed in Crimea. For Russia, the preservation of its military presence in Crimea had strong military, historical, political and geostrategic significance. Some argue that fleet could help to deter the Crimea Tatars from their aspirations for independence and destabilization of internal order. Also, it facilitated the reinforcement of the pro-Russian sentiments among the Crimean population.¹⁸⁶ Others saw Russia's interest in projecting the force in the Black Sea area, balancing the West and NATO, preventing active Turkish involvement in Crimea, as well as reassure Russia's "patronage" over its near-abroad states.¹⁸⁷

Ukraine-Russia disagreements over the status and deployment of the BSF center on two major disputes. The first occurred after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In 1992 both Russia and Ukraine officially issued their claims over the fleet.¹⁸⁸ After almost five years of disagreements and negotiations on May 28, 1997, the states signed the final accord,

¹⁸⁴ Howard and Pukhov, *Brothers Armed*, 12.

¹⁸⁵ Howard and Pukhov, 11–14.

¹⁸⁶ Davydov, "The Crimean Tatars and Their Influence on the 'triangle of Conflict' Russia-Crimea-Ukraine," 65.

¹⁸⁷ Davydov, 65–67.

¹⁸⁸ Howard and Pukhov, *Brothers Armed*, 17.

which specified the status of the Russian BSF in Ukraine. The two sides agreed to equally split the hardware giving Russia the right to buy the part of Ukrainian's share. The document allowed the Russian fleet to use various military facilities in Crimea for 20 years' term and bound Russia's military personnel to respect Ukraine's sovereignty, its laws and guarantee non-interference into Ukraine's internal affairs. In addition, Russia was allowed to deploy Russian naval vessels without a nuclear weapon, up to 25 thousands of servicemen.¹⁸⁹ Generally, the division of the BSF itself was closely connected with the right to control the Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, which possessed for Russia additional historic and symbolic meaning of imperial glory and fame.

The second dispute emerged in 2005 when the Ukrainian government announced its intention not to renew the BSF agreement after its expiration in 2017. Such a decision was caused by the frequent Russia's violations of accord's provisions that could subsequently threaten Ukraine's sovereignty.¹⁹⁰ Eventually, in 2010 Ukrainian President Yanukovich extended the term of Russian BSF's stay in Crimea for another 25 years. Ultimately, the agreement was denounced by the Russian Federation after it annexed Crimea in 2014.¹⁹¹

B. CONCLUSION

Over its long history, Ukrainian land was divided between west and east. Right-bank Ukraine was under the influence of Western empires, and Left-bank Ukraine was under the control of the Russian Empire. The division significantly affected the social, political, cultural, and linguistic development of the Ukrainian population. The West and the East of Ukraine merged into one state at the beginning of the 20th century. Then, Ukraine continued its history as part of the USSR and in 1954 incorporated Crimea.

¹⁸⁹ Davydov, "The Crimean Tatars and Their Influence on the 'triangle of Conflict' Russia-Crimea-Ukraine," 70.

¹⁹⁰ Deborah Sanders, *Ukraine after the Orange Revolution: Can It Complete Military Transformation and Join the U.S.-Lead War on Terrorism?* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2006), 28.

¹⁹¹ Howard and Pukhov, *Brothers Armed*, 19.

At the same time, it is evident that throughout the history Moscow pursued the policies of Russification in Ukraine's territory. Such approaches significantly undermined Ukrainian identity, especially in the eastern part of the country. In Crimea, first tsarist, then Soviet repressive policies against Crimean indigenous population—Crimean Tatars—ended up in their forceful displacement from the Peninsula. The latter, led to the extermination of their culture and identity and therefore to the substantial demographical changes of the Peninsula. Tatars obtained the opportunity to return to their native land only in 1989.

Finally, in 1991 Ukrainian and Crimean people formed a single nation under the sovereign and independent state—Ukraine. Since that moment, the factor of Russia emerged in Ukraine's agenda. Moscow continuously interfered into Ukraine's domestic and foreign affairs therefore generating certain turbulences. First, there was the dispute over the BSF. Then, Russia became an important player in shaping Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Finally, the relations between states ended up with armed hostilities, as the next chapters will detail.

IV. UKRAINE-RUSSIA-WEST TRIANGLE AND INTRODUCTION OF THE CASE STUDIES

After Ukraine achieved its independence in 1991, the country tried to forge its path as a sovereign state while looking to build close relations with the Western institutions, including the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Ukraine's quest for Euro-integration and self-identification has a long history; Russia has constantly disapproved of these intentions. The Kremlin has been implementing measures to retain its control over Ukraine since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Since 2004, Ukraine became an important factor in Russia's relations with the West. Preservation of Ukraine under the Kremlin's umbrella became an important part of Russia's foreign policy. The latter triggers a logical question, as to why control over Ukraine is so important for Moscow. On the one hand, the possible answers lie precisely in the understanding of the fears and threats perceived by the Kremlin over the loss of Ukraine from its sphere of influence. On the other, Ukraine itself can be seen as a tool for the Kremlin's regime to reassure its domestic politics. In any case, the analyses of the key events in the relations between Ukraine, the West, and Russia helps us to understand the probable nature of Russia's fears which lie in the security, status, or regime survival domains.

This chapter discusses the history of Ukraine's aspirations for Euro and Euro-Atlantic integration and its relations with the Western institutions. It also highlights the role of Russia in building these relations. Besides, the chapter touches significant aspects of Russia-West relations, which in turn could affect Ukraine, first examining NATO and then EU relations with Ukraine. Next, it brings the reader to the Ukrainian revolutionary events of 2013–2014 that led to Russia's aggression in Ukraine in 2014. Finally, it introduces the two case studies: Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and Sevastopol, and its invasion of Donbas. It provides the rationale for explaining these two as separate cases and gives the historical background of the Ukraine-Russia conflict for a better understanding of the cases.

A. BRIEF OVERVIEW OF UKRAINE-RUSSIA-WEST'S RELATIONS AND EMERGENCE OF THE CONFLICT

When considering the Russian Federation's policy with respect to Ukraine it is necessary to take into account the importance of the geopolitical factors in Russian discourse. The works of Russian scholars devoted to geopolitical issues shaped many different concepts of Russian geostrategy. They mainly included elements of Western theories. However, the Russian academic elite reached a high level in their research, which subsequently formed the basis for formal consolidation of Russia's geopolitical priorities.

Dolenko et al. argue that the geopolitical factor in Russia's domestic and foreign policies began to manifest itself in the early 1990s.¹⁹² Since 1992, the Russian Foreign Policy Concept reflects the geopolitical priorities of Russia, divided according to regional characteristics. In total, the Concept highlights seven key priorities. The first one highlights the importance of Russia's cooperation with the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).¹⁹³ At the same time, the authors note that Russia considers all the post-Soviet space states, except for the Baltic countries, as a part of a single civilization "united by the post-Soviet cultural code" therefore combining geostrategic factors with ideational one.¹⁹⁴

A decade later, the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation of 2013 highlights Russia's geopolitical and economic interests. It determines the state's role, status, and behavior not only in the Eurasian region but in the global international environment. The document considers the priority task of forming the Eurasian Economic Union in the CIS; preserving Russia's leading role in its relations with the post-Soviet States; maintaining its status as an active player in the political and economic life of its 'near abroad states'; as well as stressing of Russia's particular part in conflict resolutions

¹⁹² Dmitry V. Dolenko et al., "The Geopolitical Factor in Russian Policy," *Izvestia of Saratov University. New Series. Series: Sociology. Politology* 18, no. 4 (2018): 447, <https://doi.org/10.18500/1818-9601-2018-18-4-445-449>.

¹⁹³ Dolenko et al., 447.

¹⁹⁴ Dolenko et al., 447.

in the CIS.¹⁹⁵ A special place in the document occupies the importance of building relations with Ukraine. Russia sees Ukraine as a priority partner in the CIS, therefore targeting its foreign policy towards Ukraine's deepened integration into the Eurasian community.¹⁹⁶

Control over Ukraine is vital to Russia. From a geopolitical position, Ukraine holds a vast border territory that Russia regarded as a springboard from possible military intervention by the Western powers. Historically, the ethnoterritorial borders of Ukraine were drawn by the Soviets. They considered Ukraine as an intermediate area defending the Soviet Union from the West.¹⁹⁷ Ukraine besides served as a linking bridge between Russia and EU in economic terms. Russian gas pipelines that provide the Europe with energy resources pass through Ukraine. Therefore, for many of Russia's elites the need to control Ukraine was seen as a "pillar of stability and power" in Russia.¹⁹⁸

As the previous chapter demonstrates, Russia's involvement in Ukraine's affairs has a long history. In the late 1990s, it became particularly apparent. Russia has constantly interfered in Ukraine's political and economic life and sought to steer Ukraine's foreign policy choices. Former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Steven Pifer succinctly summarizes Ukraine's dilemma: "striking the right balance between relations with the West and relations with Russia has always been Ukraine's central foreign policy challenge. Ukraine's leaders have sought to have it both ways: to grow relations with the United States, European Union, and NATO while also trying to maintain a stable relationship with Russia."¹⁹⁹ Russia has continuously lobbied and sponsored political forces and elites who would be loyal to the Kremlin. At that time, pro-Russian political forces dominated Ukraine's political environment. In addition, Ukraine's major economic domains, including the

¹⁹⁵ "Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii [The concept of foreign policy of the Russian Federation]" (Electronic Fund of Legal and Regulatory Technical Documentation, March 1, 2013), <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/499003797>.

¹⁹⁶ "Kontseptsiya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii [The concept of foreign policy of the Russian Federation]."

¹⁹⁷ Andrei Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Last Stand: The Sources of Russia's Ukraine Policy," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 4 (July 4, 2015): 287–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2015.1005903>.

¹⁹⁸ Tsygankov, 288.

¹⁹⁹ Steven Pifer, "Ukraine's Perpetual East-West Balancing Act," *Brookings* (blog), February 28, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2014/02/28/ukraines-perpetual-east-west-balancing-act/>.

energy, metallurgic, and heavy industrial spheres, reveal a close and interdependent relationship between Ukraine's business elites and Russian oligarchs. Although, at that time Ukraine started to demonstrate its intentions to build close cooperation with the Western countries and institutions.²⁰⁰

In 2004 the Orange Revolution took place. Mass protests against fraudulent elections that had put pro-Russian leaders back into office in Kyiv led to their resignation and Ukrainian President Yanukovich's flight to Russia. Consequently, reelections brought pro-Western democratic leaders into Ukraine's government. That period marked the first popular attempt to get the country away from the Kremlin's orbit.

Russia's reaction to pro-democratic revolutionary events in Ukraine was quite negative. The Kremlin continuously blamed Western democracies for instigating the regime change in Ukraine. Russian media were highlighting the factors and features of the Orange Revolution that could prove its artificiality. Their narrative was focused on Ukraine's strategic importance to the West and the latter's intention to expand its influence in Eastern Europe.²⁰¹

Ukraine's newly elected President Viktor Yushenko from the very first days in office declared Ukraine's Euro and Euro-Atlantic integration as a new course for the state's development.²⁰² Ukraine's warming ties with the EU and NATO became another point of Moscow's concern about the new government.²⁰³ Dmitri Trenin stated that the Kremlin

²⁰⁰ Olexiy Haran and Maria Zolkina, "Ukraine's Long Road to European Integration," Policy memo (PONARS Eurasia, February 18, 2014), 1–2, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/ukraine%E2%80%99s-long-road-european-integration>.

²⁰¹ I. Gridina and V. Ivanchenko, "'Pomarancheva revolyutsiya' v Ukrayini v zasobakh masovoyi informatsiyi SSHA ta Rosiys'koyi Federatsiyi ["Orange Revolution" in Ukraine in the media of the United States and the Russian Federation]," *Historical and political science research*, 2014.

²⁰² Volodymyr Savchenko, "The Puzzle of NATO-Ukraine Relations: The Importance of Images in Ukraine's Bid for NATO Membership" (Monterey, CA, Naval Postgraduate School, 2007), 23–24, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a467357.pdf>.

²⁰³ Cory Welt, "Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy" (Congressional Research Service, September 19, 2019), 8, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45008.pdf>.

perceived Kyiv's new course as an anti-Russian conspiracy between Ukraine and the West.²⁰⁴

Ukraine was not the only case of pro-democratic upheaval at that period. Russia saw the hand of the West in changes of regime and geopolitical orientation in Georgia (2003) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) and failed revolutions in Belarus (2006) and Moldova (2009). The Kremlin treated pro-democratic revolutions in post-Soviet space as a direct intrusion into Russia's so-called "near abroad." Moscow has used this concept since the 1990s to justify its hegemony concerning post-Soviet states on Russia's periphery.²⁰⁵ Therefore, any Euro or Euro-Atlantic integration of any of the former Soviet satellites Russia perceived as a sign of humiliation to its status and additionally generated Moscow's security concerns. Particularly, the Kremlin was wary of U.S. political influence and feared that Washington would use the post-Soviet states as a bridgehead for U.S. military pressure on Russia.²⁰⁶

1. Ukraine–NATO Relations and Russia

In 1995 NATO reconsidered its political relevance that was dominant during the Cold War era and published its Study on Enlargement eastwards. The Alliance opened its door to post-communist countries including those who were members of the Soviet Block or Warsaw Pact.²⁰⁷ Russia's leaders, while initially not opposed to these plans, however, soon saw such an approach as a part of the West's campaign to undermine Russia's security and as an intervention in places that had significant strategic importance to Russia.²⁰⁸ Successive rounds of enlargement brought the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary into the Alliance in 1999, followed in 2004 with the accession of Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, in 2009 of Albania and Bulgaria, in 2017 of

²⁰⁴ Dmitri Trenin, *Post-Imperium: Evraziyskaya Istorii* (Moskva: Rosspen (Rossiiskaya politicheskaya entsiklopediya), 2012), 61.

²⁰⁵ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia Leaves the West," *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 4 (2006): 91–92, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20032043>.

²⁰⁶ Trenin, *Post-Imperium*, 61.

²⁰⁷ Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine* (The MIT Press, 2015), 133–34, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt17kk7hq>.

²⁰⁸ Menon and Rumer, 134.

Montenegro, and in 2020 of North Macedonia.²⁰⁹ Today, the view of the Russian expert Prokhor Trebin is typical of the Russian elite: NATO is Russia's most dangerous adversary in terms of its military potential.²¹⁰ He continues that the source of threats to Russia's national security is the Collective West. In addition to the United States, the Collective West's core includes Great Britain, Canada, Poland, Norway, and the Baltic countries. Ukraine's location between Russia's borders and representatives of the Collective West constitutes the critical security issue in Russia's southwest direction.²¹¹

Ukraine-NATO relations formally started in 1994 under the President Leonid Kravchuk, when parties signed the Partnership for Peace Framework Document.²¹² Between 1994 and 2004 Ukraine's foreign policy behavior under President Leonid Kuchma had a multi-vector character and included the practices of balancing between Russia and the West.²¹³ However, during his rule, he managed to bring Ukraine closer to the Euro-Atlantic community disregarding Russia's concerns. In 1997 he signed a NATO-Ukrainian Charter on a Distinctive Partnership. The same year Ukraine established diplomatic relations with NATO.²¹⁴ Later, in 2000 Ukraine's Parliament ratified the NATO Partnership for Peace Status of Force Agreement. In May 2002, President Kuchma announced Ukraine's goal to join the Alliance. Subsequently, the following year Ukraine's Parliament adopted a "Law on Fundamentals of National Security in Ukraine," which identified Ukraine's NATO and the EU memberships as the state's goals..²¹⁵ In addition, it

²⁰⁹ "Enlargement," Official Page, NATO, accessed August 20, 2020, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49212.htm.

²¹⁰ Prokhor Trebin, "(Ne)opredelennost' bezopasnosti [safety (Un)certainty]," *Russia in Global Affairs* 6 (November 22, 2018), <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/neopredelennost-bezopasnosti/>.

²¹¹ Trebin.

²¹² "Signatures of Partnership for Peace Framework Document," Official Page, NATO, March 27, 2020, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_82584.htm.

²¹³ Savchenko, "The Puzzle of NATO-Ukraine Relations," 23.

²¹⁴ "Relations with Ukraine," Official Page, NATO, accessed August 20, 2020, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_37750.htm.

²¹⁵ Haran and Zolkina, "Ukraine's Long Road to European Integration," 1–2; "Relations with Ukraine."

adopted the legal act of establishing democratic civilian control over military and security forces.²¹⁶

In 2005, under President Yushchenko's rule, Ukraine's relations with the Alliance obtained a new impetus. In April that year, the parties launched the 'intensified dialogue' which was aimed to facilitate Ukraine's institutional reforms as necessary preconditions to joining the Alliance in the future.²¹⁷

This period was characterized by the rising tension between Kyiv and Moscow. In particular, in 2006 two states became involved in the first gas dispute that resulted in Moscow's termination of gas supply to Europe. Russia blamed Ukraine for stealing the gas destined for European countries which were transited via the territory of Ukraine. In turn, Ukraine accused Russia for overpricing its gas supplies allocated for Ukraine.²¹⁸

One more significant dispute between the states emerged around the status of Russia's BSF deployed in Crimea. In 2006 Ukraine announced that it would raise lease price for Russia in retaliation to Moscow's increase of gas prices for Ukraine. However, in 2009 President Yushchenko announced that Ukraine would not extend the lease of Crimean naval facilities for Russia's BSF.²¹⁹ This decision anticipated Russia to leave all Crimean's naval facilities till 2017. At that moment Russia used diplomatic and economic pressure on Ukraine including cutting off the energy supply to Ukraine in winter 2009. However, the question was temporarily resolved in 2010 when president Yanukovich signed Kharkiv Accords extending BSF stay in Ukraine for another 25 years.

In 2008 Ukraine and Georgia applied to join NATO MAP—a mechanism for acquiring full membership. Russia reacted negatively to the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of

²¹⁶ Adriana Lins de Albuquerque and Jakob Hedenskog, "Ukraine: A Defence Sector Reform Assessment" (Stockholm: Swedish Armed Forces, December 2015), 25, file:///C:/Users/Prosperity/Downloads/FOIR4157SE.pdf.

²¹⁷ "NATO Launches 'Intensified Dialogue' with Ukraine," Official Page, NATO, April 21, 2005, <https://www.nato.int/docu/update/2005/04-april/e0421b.htm>.

²¹⁸ "Ukraine Gas Row Hits EU Supplies," News and Analytics, BBC News, January 1, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4573572.stm>.

²¹⁹ Anders Aslund, "Crimea and Punishment," Analytics and Opinions, *Foreign Policy* (blog), December 2009, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/12/18/crimea-and-punishment/>.

both states. At that moment, Kyiv's and Tbilisi's relations with Moscow were already tense. Ukraine had disputes with Russia around the Russian BSF in Crimea and gas issues. Georgia could not tolerate Moscow's interference into its domestic affairs dealing with South Ossetia and Abkhazia—Georgian separatist enclaves, claiming their separation from Georgia since the 1990s. In April 2008 during the NATO Summit in Bucharest, both states were denied admission to the Plan as the result of Vladimir Putin's direct interference.²²⁰ Russia considered this decision as a victory. However, the Alliance's Summit Declaration that Ukraine and Georgia would "one day" join NATO revived Russia's fears that the West preserved its intentions to move deeper into Russia's backyard.²²¹ In response, Putin threatened to target nuclear weapons on Ukraine and warned that Kyiv will lose Crimea and its eastern regions in case state joins NATO.²²²

In the case of Georgia, the consequences of Russia's dissatisfaction with the country's foreign policy course became more dramatic. In 2008 relations between Tbilisi and Moscow reached the edge of the diplomatic crisis, especially after the latter officially announced its direct support to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The crisis subsequently escalated into Russia's military invasion of Georgia in August 2008.²²³ Experts explain Russia's actions in Georgia in two ways: the first is related to Russia's security, where Moscow reacted by force to NATO enlargement, in particular, Georgia's aspirations to join the Alliance;²²⁴ the second explanation indirectly looks at the issue through the lenses of Russia's status and interests, where "Russia is using the [South Ossetia and Abkhazia] to

²²⁰ Trenin, *Post-Imperium*, 55.

²²¹ Trenin, 55.

²²² "Transcript of Annual Big Press Conference," Official Page, President of Russia, February 14, 2008, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24835>; Mihail Zyigar, *Vsya kremlevskaya rat'*. *Kratkaya istoriya sovremennoy Rossii [The whole Kremlin army. A brief history of modern Russia]* (Folio, 2016), 110.

²²³ Andrew Osborn and Marc Champion, "Smoldering Feud, Then War," *Wall Street Journal*, August 17, 2008, sec. News, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB121884450978145997>.

²²⁴ Ekaterina Chertkova, "The Georgian Crisis and U.S.-Russian Relations" (Thesis, St. Louis, Missouri, Washington University in St. Louis, 2011), 79–80, <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1532&context=etd>.

retaliate [against the West] for the...recognition of the independence of Kosovo in the Balkans, which the Kremlin fiercely opposed.”²²⁵

The West’s reaction to Russia’s aggression in Georgia was weak. It was mainly limited by the diplomatic condemnations of the Kremlin’s actions and did not impose any harm on Russia. Behind the scene, Western officials commented on the EU’s reluctance to enact sanctions on Moscow as an unwillingness of some of the European states to risk “mutually beneficial relations with Moscow” especially in economic and energy domains, given many European states’ dependence on Russian energy supplies.²²⁶

The problem of NATO enlargement was quite vital for the Russian Federation and was a subject of Moscow’s concerns for a long time. Stephen Walt stated that “open-ended NATO expansion has done more to poison [Western] relations with Russia than any other single Western policy”.²²⁷ Moscow’s narrative in this regard was oriented in blaming the West for violating the status quo in Europe and emphasizing that NATO’s and the U.S. actions impose a direct threat to Russia’s security.²²⁸

Despite the role of Ukraine and Georgia in Russia’s relations with NATO, additional fuel to the fire was added by Washington’s decision in 2007 to place air-defense missile systems in Poland and the Czech Republic as a part of the European Interceptor Site (EIS) project.²²⁹ In response, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev in 2008 promised to place Russian short-range missiles in Russia’s European enclave Kaliningrad located between Poland and Lithuania.²³⁰

²²⁵ Christian Lowe, “Russia Tightens Ties with Georgian Rebel Areas,” News and Analytics, Reuters, April 16, 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL1644289>.

²²⁶ Mark Tran, Julian Borger, and Ian Traynor, “EU Threatens Sanctions against Russia,” *The Guardian*, August 28, 2008, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/28/eu.russia>.

²²⁷ Stephen M. Walt, “Why Arming Kiev Is a Really, Really Bad Idea,” *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed May 25, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/09/how-not-to-save-ukraine-arming-kiev-is-a-bad-idea/>.

²²⁸ Kimberly Marten, “NATO Enlargement: Evaluating Its Consequences in Russia,” *International Politics* 57, no. 3 (June 2020): 402, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00233-9>.

²²⁹ Trenin, *Post-Imperium*, 54–55; Mark Mardell, “Europe Diary: Missile Defence,” News and Analytics, BBC Home, June 1, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/6704669.stm>.

²³⁰ Ellen Barry and Sophia Kishkovsky, “Russia Warns of Missile Deployment,” *The New York Times*, November 5, 2008, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/06/world/europe/06russia.html>.

However, in 2009 Russia's relations with the West faced some improvement, even disregarding Moscow's assertiveness in Georgia back in August 2008. On March 6, 2009, the U.S.-Russia agreed to "reset" their relations under the Obama Administration.²³¹ Between 2009 and 2012 the cooperation between the two states in the military and security sphere was relatively productive. Sides signed the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START agreement) in terms of nuclear arms reduction. Additionally, Russia once again allowed US military forces and supplies to pass through its airspace on the way to Afghanistan. In turn, Washington canceled its EIS project in Poland and the Czech Republic. This decision was welcomed by Moscow.²³²

Besides, the situation became more favorable in Russia's eastern Western flank. In 2010 pro-Russian political forces took power in Ukraine. Viktor Yanukovych won the country's Presidential elections and brought Ukraine back under Russia's influence. As noted earlier, in 2010 Yanukovych extended the term for the basing of Russia's Black Sea Fleet in Crimea. He appointed Russian citizens to key positions in Ukraine's government, including in the security and defense sectors. Yanukovych also constrained Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic course, proclaiming its non-bloc status.²³³ His policy is also reflected in the country's security and military potential. Between 2010 and 2013, during his rule, Ukraine sold its arms, amounting to \$3.23 billion.²³⁴ State's military expenditures decreased from 1.9 to 1.6 percent of the state's GDP and constituted about \$2 billion in the-- year preceding Russian aggression.²³⁵ Consequently, according to Ukraine's military officials, in March 2014 Ukraine entered the war with Russia only with 6 thousand combat-ready troops. The

²³¹ Simon Shuster, "U.S.-Russia Relations: In Need of a New Reset," *Time*, March 16, 2010, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1971651,00.html>.

²³² Peter Baker, "White House Scraps Bush's Approach to Missile Shield," *The New York Times*, September 17, 2009, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/18/world/europe/18shield.html>.

²³³ "Ukraine Abandons NATO Ambitions," News and Analytics, BBC News, June 3, 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/news/10229626>.

²³⁴ SIPRI Database, "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database," Statistics, SIPRI, August 13, 2020, http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php.

²³⁵ SIPRI Database, "SIPRI Military Expenditure Database," Analytics, SIPRI, 2019, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

military units were manned for 20 percent and equipped for 60 percent by old and non-maintained armament.²³⁶

At the same time, between 2010 and 2013 the security environment in Europe was relatively stable. In terms of military balance between NATO and Russia, the statistical data show, that the military expenditures of NATO states in Europe were gradually reduced between 2010 and 2015 and decreased from \$278.6 billion (1.7 percent of average GDP) to \$255.8 billion (1.45 percent of average GDP) in 2010 constant prices and exchange rates.²³⁷ The same tendency was observed in the U.S., whose military expenditures diminished from \$772 billion in 2010 (5.29 percent of GDP) to \$593.5 billion in 2015 (3.59 percent of GDP) in 2010 constant prices and exchange rates.²³⁸ In addition to military expenditures, NATO reduced its military personnel from 3,5 million in 2010 to 3,1 million in 2015.²³⁹ Besides, in terms of military capabilities between 2010 and 2013 European states—Germany, France, UK, Italy, and Spain—cut their number of aircraft and maritime assets for more than 33 percent; the number of tanks became reduced for 75 percent.²⁴⁰

In contrast, Russia's military expenditures have grown significantly since 2000. "It increased by 30 percent in real terms between 2010 and 2019 and by 175 percent between 2000 and 2019."²⁴¹ Russia has undertaken a massive modernization program for the armed and security forces.²⁴² Military spending between 2010 and 2013 rose from \$49.2 billion (3.6 percent of GDP) to \$63.8 billion (3.8 percent of GDP) in 2018 constant prices and

²³⁶ Lins de Albuquerque and Hedenskog, "Ukraine: A Defence Sector Reform Assessment," 19–20.

²³⁷ NATO Press and Media, "Defence Expenditures of NATO Countries (2009-2016)," Communiqué, Press Release (Brussels: NATO, July 4, 2016), 4–5, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_07/20160704_160704-pr2016-116.pdf.

²³⁸ NATO Press and Media, 4–5.

²³⁹ NATO Press and Media, 7.

²⁴⁰ Niall McCarthy, "Infographic: Nato Capability Reductions & Cost Cutting. A Step Too Far?," Statistics, Statista Infographics, December 12, 2014, <https://www.statista.com/chart/3058/armed-forces-reductions/>.

²⁴¹ Siemon Wezerman, "Russia's Military Spending: Frequently Asked Questions," Analytics, SIPRI, April 27, 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-backgrounder/2020/russias-military-spending-frequently-asked-questions>.

²⁴² Roger E. Kanet, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security*, 1st ed. (Routledge: Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY, [2019]: Routledge, 2019), 100–101, 147–49, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351181242>.

exchange rates, which is not a significant difference in terms of GDP share. Comparatively, between 2014 and 2016 its military expenditures increased from \$68.4 billion (4.1 percent of GDP) to \$79.0 billion (5.5 percent of GDP) in 2018 constant prices and exchange rates.²⁴³ The latter period corresponds to the Russian aggression in Ukraine. However, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Russia increased its military expenditures within the framework of military modernization programs launched in 2011.²⁴⁴ Programs anticipated modernization of 70 percent of Russia's military equipment between 2011 and 2020.²⁴⁵ At the same time, the number of active-duty military personnel in Russia became reduced from 1 million in 2010 to 771 thousand in 2015.²⁴⁶

In general, between 1999 and 2013 the relations between Russia and NATO (particularly the U.S.) were not only limited by Russia's discourse around a perceptible Western threat to Russia's security. Scholars argue, that in addition to Western policies allowing NATO to include the former members of the Warsaw Pact or disputes around air-defense systems, the Alliance's military actions in Yugoslavia (1999), Iraq (2003) or Libya (2011) when it neglected to gain Moscow's consent, was a direct threat to Russia's overseas interests and its great power status. Larson and Shevchenko stated, that these points additionally alienated Russia from the West, and contributed to "the end of the strategic partnership between Russia and the West for many Russian elites."²⁴⁷

2. Ukraine–EU Relations and Russia

At the same time, in the economic sphere, Ukraine continued its course towards maintaining warm relations with the European community and deeper integration into the

²⁴³ Wezerman, "Russia's Military Spending: Frequently Asked Questions."

²⁴⁴ Wezerman.

²⁴⁵ Andrew Bowen, "Russian Armed Forces: Capabilities" (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, June 30, 2020), 1, <https://news.usni.org/2020/07/07/report-to-congress-on-capabilities-of-russian-armed-forces>.

²⁴⁶ "Chapter Nine: Country Comparisons – Commitments, Force Levels and Economics," *The Military Balance* 110, no. 1 (February 2010): 463, <https://doi.org/10.1080/04597220903545882>; "Chapter Ten Country Comparisons – Commitments, Force Levels and Economics," *The Military Balance* 115, no. 1 (January 2015): 485, <https://doi.org/10.1080/04597222.2015.996366>.

²⁴⁷ Larson and Shevchenko, "Russia Says No," 272.

European institution. The cooperation between Kyiv and Brussels became formally established in 1994 after the signing of a bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. The document initiated collaboration on a wide range of political, trade, economic, and humanitarian issues. In 1998 President Kuchma approved “Strategy for Ukraine’s Integration into the EU.” The document anticipated first Ukraine’s “association” with the EU, and subsequently gaining full membership. That decision was supported by the Parliament in 2003²⁴⁸

In early 2005, President of Ukraine Viktor Yushchenko immediately after his election declared Ukraine’s EU integration as a strategic goal during his presidency.²⁴⁹ The policies of the new pro-European government in Kyiv impacted some of Russia’s critical interests. This led to turbulence in Ukraine’s relationship with Russia. The discord between the two states included Ukraine-Russian gas disputes in 2006 and 2009. In both cases, Russia cut off the transit gas supply to Ukraine that significantly affected other European states dependent on Russian gas. Moscow accused Kyiv of refusal to pay its debts for gas. Kyiv in its turn blamed Moscow on price overvaluation.²⁵⁰

In May 2009 Ukraine joined the Eastern Partnership initiative with the EU. The format included deeper trade and economic cooperation between EU members and six post-Soviet states. After the Presidential elections in 2010, Yanukovich’s administration signaled that Ukraine’s integration to the EU remained among the state’s priorities.²⁵¹ In addition, in July 2010 President Yanukovich signed the law regulating state’s foreign policy highlighting Ukraine’s aspirations for EU membership as one of the main foreign policy principles.²⁵²

²⁴⁸ Haran and Zolkina, “Ukraine’s Long Road to European Integration,” 1–2.

²⁴⁹ “Yushchenko to Launch Ukraine’s Bid to Join EU,” News and Analytics, Euractiv, January 20, 2005, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/med-south/news/yushchenko-to-launch-ukraine-s-bid-to-join-eu/>.

²⁵⁰ “Ukraine Gas Row Hits EU Supplies”; Simon Pirani et al., *The Russo-Ukrainian Gas Dispute of January 2009: A Comprehensive Assessment* (Oxford: Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, 2009), 12–14.

²⁵¹ “Integration into EU Unchanged Priority of Ukraine’s Policy, Says Foreign Minister,” KyivPost, May 15, 2010, <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/content/ukraine-politics/integration-into-eu-unchanged-priority-of-ukraines-66824.html>.

²⁵² “On the Principles of Domestic and Foreign Policy,” Legislation database, Official web-portal of the Parliament of Ukraine, July 1, 2010, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/go/2411-17>.

In March 2012 Ukraine reached a key point in its Euro-integration aspirations when received the opportunity to join an Association Agreement (AA) and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) with EU. During 2010–2012 Russia did not openly raise its concerns regarding Ukraine-EU cooperation. However, in 2013, when the negotiations about Ukraine's join the AA and DCFTA reached the active phase, Moscow activated its efforts to draw Kyiv into the Customs Union—Russia-led free trade zone with Belarus and Kazakhstan. In February that year, the European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighborhood Policy Stefan Fule stated, that the EU would not sign AA and DCTFA with Ukraine in case it entered the Customs Union.²⁵³ In response, Putin's economic advisor Sergei Glazyev warned that Ukraine would lose the chance to join the Customs Union in case of joining AA and DCFTA with the EU.²⁵⁴

The relative advantage of Ukrainian membership in the EU becomes clearer through consideration of the opportunity costs of joining the Customs Union or the EU. Menon and Rumer argue that the main visible benefit for Ukraine from joining the Customs Union would be the opportunity to buy Russia's gas at a lower price. According to the assessment, conducted in November 2011 by the Institute for Economic Research and Policy, Ukraine's participation in Customs Union with Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan in the medium-term perspective would decrease the level of welfare in Ukraine by 0.5 percent; and in the long-term perspective by 3.7 percent. The advantages for Ukraine from the Customs Union would be quite limited. It was mainly explained by the fact that in 2011 Ukraine "already enjoyed free trade preferences with CIS states."²⁵⁵ In contrast, Ukraine's participation in EU-led DCFTA would increase the state's welfare by 4.3% in the medium-

²⁵³ Olzhas Auzerov, "Reform Quickly or Lose Deals, EU Tells Ukraine," News and Analytics, Reuters, February 7, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-eu-ukraine-idUKBRE9160UL20130207>.

²⁵⁴ "Customs Union May Withdraw from FTA with Ukraine If Kyiv Signs Association Agreement with EU," News and Opinions, Interfax-Ukraine, August 21, 2013, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/164903.html>.

²⁵⁵ Veronika Movchan and Ricardo Giucci, "Quantitative Assessment of Ukraine's Regional Integration Options: DCFTA with European Union vs. Customs Union with Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan," Policy paper (Berlin/Kyiv: Institute for Economic Research and Policy Consulting, November 2011), 16, http://www.beratergruppe-ukraine.de/download/Beraterpapiere/2011/PP_05_2011_en.pdf.

term perspective, and 11.8 percent in the long-term perspective.²⁵⁶ Ukraine's participation in EU-led DCFTA would give Kyiv access to "the largest market in the world with 753 million customers and a GDP of €14 trillion."²⁵⁷

However, for a long time, Russia was the main trading partner of Ukraine. For example, in 2010 total export/import value between the two states reached about \$35,5 billion.²⁵⁸ In 2013, the total Ukraine's export/import value with Russia was 38 b USD. Russia occupied 23 percent of Ukraine's export and 30 percent of its import, being Ukraine's first trade partner in both domains. In turn, the same year Ukraine's shares in Russia's economy constituted 5 percent (10th place) of Russia's export and 2.89 percent (4th place) of its import.²⁵⁹ Ukraine's trade with the EU in 2013 was about 36.8 b EUR.²⁶⁰ In contrast, Russia's trade with the EU that year constituted about €314 billion making Moscow the third most important trade partner for the EU.²⁶¹ Besides, throughout 2008–2018 Russia remained a constant leader in supplying energy resources to the European states. Specifically, in 2013, Russia occupied 39 percent of the European gas market.²⁶² For example, Russia's share in domestic gas consumption of the Baltic state and Finland constituted 100 percent; Austria, 62 percent; Poland, 57 percent; Germany, 46 percent; Italy, 34 percent.²⁶³

²⁵⁶ Movchan and Giucci, 2.

²⁵⁷ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 51, 76.

²⁵⁸ World Integrated Trade Solution, "Ukraine | Trade Summary," Statistics, World Bank, 2020, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/UKR/Year/2010/Summary>.

²⁵⁹ World Integrated Trade Solution.

²⁶⁰ "Ukraine-EU - International Trade in Goods Statistics," Statistics, Eurostat, March 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Ukraine-EU_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics.

²⁶¹ "Russia-EU – International Trade in Goods Statistics," Statistics, Eurostat, March 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Russia-EU_%E2%80%93_international_trade_in_goods_statistics.

²⁶² "Energy Production and Imports," Statistics, Eurostat, June 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Energy_production_and_imports.

²⁶³ Dave Jones, Manon Dufour, and Jonathan Gaventa, "Europe's Declining Gas Demand: Trends and Facts on European Gas Consumption," June 2015, 9, https://www.europeangashub.com/wp-content/uploads/attach_482.pdf.

Russia treated the EU Eastern Partnership (EaP) free-trade programs as a contributing factor to the threat of Russia's long-term effort to build its trade bloc that included Ukraine.²⁶⁴ In a material sense, Moscow saw Kyiv's close cooperation with the EU as a loss of Ukraine as a trading partner. Also, the Kremlin, considered that redirecting Ukraine's trade via the EU would injure Russia's economy and undermine its national manufacturer. In this regard, the Kremlin feared that European goods imported to Ukraine could be smuggled to Russia without paying taxes in case two states would also share a free-trade zone. In a deeper sense, Putin perceived the EU-Ukraine economic cooperation as the loss of Russia's influence over Ukraine.²⁶⁵ In the long run, Russia could foresee Ukraine's success in implementing the EaP as a precondition to joining the European Union and a halfway into NATO membership.²⁶⁶

In November 2013, Ukraine was expected to sign AA and DCFTA with the EU. However, before signing the agreements at the EU Eastern Partnership Summit in Lithuania, Ukrainian President Yanukovich had a secret meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin.²⁶⁷ As a result, Yanukovich suspended Ukraine's agreement on economic cooperation with the EU.²⁶⁸ Instead, he agreed to Russia's conditions to join the Eurasian Economic Union—Russia's economic alternative to the EU that includes Belarus and Kazakhstan—as well as to accept extensive financial assistance from the Kremlin.²⁶⁹

3. Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity and Russia

Yanukovich's decisions provoked waves of mass protests in Ukraine's capital on November 21, 2013, marking the beginning of Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity, otherwise

²⁶⁴ Kuzio and D'Anieri, *The Sources of Russia's Great Power Politics*, 14.

²⁶⁵ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 114–16.

²⁶⁶ Elias Götz, "Russia, the West, and the Ukraine Crisis: Three Contending Perspectives," *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 253, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201313>; Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 117–18.

²⁶⁷ Oksana Grytsenko and Ian Traynor, "Ukraine U-Turn on Europe Pact Was Agreed with Vladimir Putin," *The Guardian*, November 26, 2013, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/26/ukraine-u-turn-eu-pact-putin>.

²⁶⁸ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 51–52.

²⁶⁹ Welt, "Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy," 8–9.

known as the Euromaidan. Protestors demanded that Yanukovych keep the pro-European course of the country and give up the state's dependence from Russia. Eventually, demonstrations covered the major territory of the country and resulted in mass violence followed by over one hundred civilian casualties. On February 21, 2014, the pro-Western opposition in parliament and the government reached a compromise agreement to mitigate the conflict; however, the protestors rejected its provisions, as it did not meet their main demands for Yanukovych to resign.²⁷⁰ That same night, President Yanukovych unexpectedly left Ukraine and fled to Russia.²⁷¹ In light of these circumstances, on February 22 the Ukrainian Parliament officially removed Viktor Yanukovych from the position of President of Ukraine. It also announced the date of new presidential elections to be held on May 25, 2014. This point marked the end of the Yanukovych era, symbolizing the beginning of a new chapter in Ukraine's history.²⁷²

Yanukovych's ouster and the scale of political transformation in Ukraine were breathtaking for the Kremlin. Russian leaders refused to accept the revolutionary changes in Ukraine and perceived the fall of the Yanukovych regime as orchestrated by the West.²⁷³ The presence of Western foreign officials—Polish, French, and German foreign ministers—in Kyiv during the protests and their mediation in the negotiation process between government and opposition strengthened the Kremlin's belief about Western involvement in triggering the revolutionary movement. The publication of leaked telephone conversations between U.S. senior officials, who were discussing the composition of the post-Yanukovych government and future U.S. foreign policy prospects in Ukraine, provided additional grounds for the Kremlin's convictions.²⁷⁴

²⁷⁰ Yuriy Shveda and Joung Ho Park, "Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity: The Dynamics of Euromaidan," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7, no. 1 (January 2016): 88, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euras.2015.10.007>.

²⁷¹ Shveda and Park, 88.

²⁷² "Ukraine MPs Vote to Oust President," News and Analytics, BBC News, February 22, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26304842>; Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 81.

²⁷³ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 82.

²⁷⁴ "Transcript of Leaked U.S. Ukraine Call," News and Analytics, BBC News, February 7, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26079957>.

For Russia, the victory of pro-Western political forces in Kyiv indicated the loss of Ukraine from the Kremlin's sphere of influence. Besides, the revolutionary movements in Ukraine could generate fears inside the Kremlin in the sense that the revolutionary spirit of Ukraine could spill over to Russia, therefore threatening Putin's regime. The West's open support of Ukraine's Revolution triggered the Kremlin's fresh memory of protests in Moscow's Bolonaya Square in 2011–2012 against Putin's reelections for the third term. At that moment, the Kremlin feared for its regime and consequently blamed the U.S. in manufacturing Russian revolts.²⁷⁵

Consequently, following Yanukovich's ouster, Moscow refused to accept the legitimacy of the newly appointed temporary government and considered Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity against the corrupt authoritarian regime as an "extra-constitutional coup" against the legitimate leader.²⁷⁶ The Kremlin used a huge set of political, diplomatic, and informational measures to undermine the legitimacy of Ukraine's interim authorities. They treated Ukraine's acting President Oleksandr Turchynov as illegitimate and refused to cooperate with him in mitigation of the raising turmoil in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.²⁷⁷ The Kremlin manufactured an imagined myths of "fascism" and "repressions against Russian-speakers" in Ukraine to propagate the distrust towards pro-democratic revolution in the country both domestically and internationally.²⁷⁸ Such an outcome of the Ukrainian crisis created the opportunity for the Russian leadership to take actions that subsequently evolved into the full-scale Ukraine-Russia war.

²⁷⁵ Gutterman Steve and Bryanski Gleb, "Putin Says U.S. Stoked Russian Protests," News and Analytics, Reuters, December 8, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-idUSTRE7B610S20111208>.

²⁷⁶ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, x.

²⁷⁷ Yanina Sokolova, *Oleksandr Turchynov u Randevu z Yaninoyu Sokolovoyi [Oleksandr Turchynov in Rendezvous with Yanina Sokolova]*, Interview (YouTube: 5 Channel, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2102vcTFDA4>.

²⁷⁸ Alya Shandra, "The Surkov Leaks: The Inner Workings of Russia's Hybrid War in Ukraine," July 16, 2019, 81 <https://rusi.org/publication/occasional-papers/surkov-leaks-inner-workings-russias-hybrid-war-ukraine>.

B. INTRODUCTION OF THE CASE STUDIES

Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and invasion of Donbas occurred sequentially. Even though these two events have commonalities in tactics and techniques of Russia's intervention, and are typically studied as one event, it is important to look at them separately. Multiple factors suggest that Russia's leaders pursued different motives while making these aggressive decisions. These major differences are rooted in Russia's historical and national interests concerning Crimea and Donbas; significant differences can also be observed in the character of military operations, Russian leadership's rhetoric, and the outcome in both cases.

To begin with, Crimea and Donbas possess different historical meaning for Russia. Moscow claims its continuous historical connection with Crimea. This claim refers to the tsarist era, as discussed above, when the Russian Empire acquired the peninsula with subsidiary territories as the result of 18th-century Russo-Ottoman Wars (Treaty of Jassy 1792).²⁷⁹ Russia's leaders, as well as its elites, see Crimea's transfer to Ukraine in 1954 as an injustice. They emphasize that the peninsula and city of Sevastopol have a stronger affinity with Russia than Ukraine.²⁸⁰ In contrast, Donbas did not have a recent history of being a part of Russia.²⁸¹ However, Russian orchestrators of the aggression invoke history to justify the escalation of the conflict and instigation of the separatism in Ukraine. This historical mythmaking takes the form of the *Novorossiia* (New Russia) project.²⁸² The notion of *Novorossiia* is rooted in the 18th century and refers to the regions north of the Black Sea, formerly part of the Ottoman Empire, that Russia concurred during its wars with Turkey between 1768–1774. The areas grouped under the *Novorossiia* included the current territories of Ukrainian Odesa, Mykolaiv, Kirovograd, Dnepropetrovsk, Kherson,

²⁷⁹ Ágoston and Masters, *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, 298.

²⁸⁰ Howard and Pukhov, *Brothers Armed*, 5.

²⁸¹ Serhy Yekelchuk, *The Conflict in Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know*, What Everyone Needs to Know (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 145.

²⁸² During the Tsarist era, the name “*Novorossiia*” was attributed to the area that covered some parts of contemporary eastern and southeastern Ukraine.

Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk regions.²⁸³ This concept has failed to take hold due to the lack of historical justification, practical inconsistency, and lack of popular support in eastern and south-eastern Ukraine.²⁸⁴

In both cases, the Russian Federation relied on local separatism as an effective tool to create disorder. Stoking separatism initially started as a counterbalance to the pro-Western revolutionary movement and later created enough grounds for direct forceful intervention.²⁸⁵ Russia has justified its aggression in Ukraine as necessary to protect the Russian-speaking population. Indeed, due to Soviet assimilation and forced-displacement programs, Russians became the ethnic majority in Crimea in contrast to Donbas where Ukrainian ethnicity is predominant.²⁸⁶ However, the majority of the population in these districts were not openly seeking separation from Ukraine.²⁸⁷

In terms of military operations and the use of force, Russia's occupation of Crimea was quick and decisive. The Kremlin was prepared to use all available means to seize the Crimea.²⁸⁸ Russia's intervention in Donbas has become protracted and can be split into three phases. They are characterized by different sets of Russian personnel used to reinforce the separatists. In the first phase, Russia used the *Russian Spetznaz*, or special forces. The second phase saw the deployment of Russian "volunteers," along with armament and military equipment. The influx of Russian regular troops characterizes the third phase.²⁸⁹

²⁸³ Marlene Laruelle, "The Three Colors of Novorossiya, or the Russian Nationalist Mythmaking of the Ukrainian Crisis," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2015.1023004>.

²⁸⁴ John O'Loughlin, Gerard Toal, and Vladimir Kolosov, "The Rise and Fall of 'Novorossiya': Examining Support for a Separatist Geopolitical Imaginary in Southeast Ukraine," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 2 (March 4, 2017): 126, 140–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2016.1146452>.

²⁸⁵ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 82–83.

²⁸⁶ Yekelchuk, *The Conflict in Ukraine*, 145.

²⁸⁷ John O'Loughlin and Gerard Toal, "The Crimea Conundrum: Legitimacy and Public Opinion after Annexation," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 60, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 6–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2019.1593873>; O'Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov, "The Rise and Fall of 'Novorossiya'."

²⁸⁸ Vladimir Solovyov, "Prezident" [*The President*], Documentary, 2015, <https://m.russia.tv/brand/59329/#brand-content>.

²⁸⁹ Nikolay Mitrokhin, "Infiltration, Instruction, Invasion Russia's War in Ukraine," *Osteuropa* 64 (August 1, 2014): 220–21.

Crimea, including the troops and navy stationed there, has been a staging area for Soviet and Russian offensive operations in southern Europe and Eastern Mediterranean. From a military standpoint, the Crimean Peninsula gives Russia significant military and geostrategic advantages. The Peninsula gives Russia robust capabilities to enforce its anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) strategy that Moscow launched in 2008 to deter the consequences of NATO's expansion eastwards.²⁹⁰ Considering that NATO states significantly rely on aviation in their operations, the concept is designed to establish the large exclusion zones along the border with Baltic states, in the Black Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Arctic. In case of crisis, Moscow is able to use these zones to block the airspace in areas close to Russia's borders and severely restrict the movement of adversary's naval and ground forces.²⁹¹ Expanded naval facilities in Crimea give Moscow important leverage to project force in Balkans and Mediterranean and conduct military operations in the Middle East.²⁹² In turn, the Soviet-era nuclear facilities located in Crimea create possibilities for the re-nuclearization of the peninsula.²⁹³ Additionally, Russia can use its military forces deployed in Crimea to control the geopolitical orientation of Ukraine.²⁹⁴

At the same time, the Peninsula has a strong logistical and infrastructural dependence on Ukraine. About 85 percent of fresh water, electricity, and supplies come to Crimea from Ukraine's mainland. These issues generate certain vulnerabilities of Crimea. In this context, Donbas, or at least part of it, is militarily important to reassure logistical connections, energy, and water supplies necessary to maintain the Crimean peninsula's

²⁹⁰ Kanet, *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security*, 259, 262.

²⁹¹ Loic Burton, "Bubble Trouble: Russia's A2/AD Capabilities," Analytics and Opinions, *Foreign Policy Blogs* (blog), October 25, 2016, 2, <https://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2016/10/25/bubble-trouble-russia-a2-ad/>.

²⁹² Stephen Blank, "Russia's Push to the South—A Net Assessment of the Geopolitical Developments in the Black Sea Region Since the Start of 2014," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11, no. 183 (October 16, 2014), <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-push-to-the-south-a-net-assessment-of-the-geopolitical-developments-in-the-black-sea-region-since-the-start-of-2014/>.

²⁹³ "United Nations | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases," Meeting Coverage, Seventy-Fourth Session, 41st Meeting (UN General Assembly: United Nations, December 9, 2019), <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/ga12223.doc.htm>.

²⁹⁴ Kofman, "Through a Glass Darkly:" 3.

vital activities. In addition, Donbas has become a deterrence “grey zone” for Russia on the outskirts of its borders.²⁹⁵ This zone serves as a training range for the Russian military and provides room for maneuver in case the further military invasion of Ukraine is necessary.²⁹⁶

Finally, the occupation of Crimea and Sevastopol ended with their integration into the Russian Federation and is marked as a “closed issue” for Putin. Moscow’s policies and its narrative confirm that Russia does not see Crimea as a subject for discussion. In the broader sense, it makes the role of Crimea limited in some theoretical explanations. Incorporating Crimea Russia loses a mechanism for keeping Ukraine under control. Therefore, this function is now dedicated to the Donbas. An additional motive for the Kremlin’s invasion of Donbas derives from its intention to shift Ukraine’s and international community’s attention from Crimea’s annexation. Therefore, the unleashing a war in the Donbas and keeping it in the active phase serves as a distracting mechanism from Crimea’s annexation or leverage of pressure on both the West and Ukraine to convince them to recognize the annexation in exchange for peaceful Donbas. Here the armed conflict has an uncertain future, and the likeliest perspective is that it will devolve into a *frozen conflict* scenario like in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transnistria.

1. The Crimean Peninsula in Russia’s Discourse

Opinions, convictions, and reasons why Russia annexed Crimea in Russia varied. Some Russian elites pursued business interests, others had ideological reasons. Nationalists and ultra-right circles advocated imperialist ambitions and the restoration of Russia’s status as a great power. Some politicians—especially hardliners—both loyal to Putin and his opponents, held the same opinion. Representatives of military circles and security forces promoted the opinion of Crimea’s geostrategic importance and the status of the Black Sea

²⁹⁵ Stacie Pettyjohn and Becca Wasser, *Competing in the Grey Zone: Russian Tactics and Western Responses* (Place of publication not identified: RAND Corporation, 2020), 1–2, 10, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2700/RR2791/RAND_RR2791.pdf.

²⁹⁶ Roman Grinyov, “Rozviduval’ni dani pro pidrozdily 1-ho ta 2-ho Armiys’kykh Korpusiv RF na okupovanomu Donbasi [Intelligence data on units of the 1st and 2nd Army Corps of the Russian Federation in the occupied Donbass],” Analytics, InformNapalm.org, July 13, 2020, <https://informnapalm.org/ua/donbas-1-2-ak/>; *Trenuvannya Na Ukrayins’kykh Biytsyakh: Na Donbas Prybula Cherhova Partiya Rosiys’kykh Kursantiv [Training on Ukrainian Fighters: The next Portion of the Russian Cadets Arrived to Donbass]* (YouTube: 5 Channel, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRpQvu358Nc>.

Fleet, as well as a threat to Russia's security from NATO. They argued that Russia chose to use force in Ukraine to strengthen its geopolitical position in front of a potential adversary—the Western European and NATO countries—or to achieve hegemony in the post-Soviet space.²⁹⁷ For instance, people close to Oleg Beloventsev—the Russia official responsible for the operation in Crimea—mentioned that in military circles Russia's security considerations to oppose NATO constituted a weighty argument in the decision-making process.²⁹⁸ Others did not hide their hostility towards the West and saw the Crimea's annexation as a forceful response to the threat to Russia's great power status and demonstration that Russia does not forgive humiliations.

In this regard, Putin himself referred to Crimea “as a very important factor in regional stability.”²⁹⁹ Besides, in his address marking the Crimea's incorporation to Russian Federations, Putin stated, that

And this strategic territory [Crimea] should be part of strong and stable sovereignty, which today can only be Russian. Otherwise, dear friends (I am addressing both Ukraine and Russia), you and we — the Russians and the Ukrainians — could lose Crimea completely, and that could happen in the near historical perspective. Please think about it.

Let me note too that we have already heard declarations from Kyiv about Ukraine soon joining NATO. What would this have meant for Crimea and Sevastopol in the future? It would have meant that NATO's navy would be right there in this city of Russia's military glory, and this would create not an illusory but a perfectly real threat to the whole of southern Russia.³⁰⁰

He continued:

²⁹⁷ A. Soldatov and Michael Rochlitz, “The Siloviki in Russian Politics,” in *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin's Russia*, 2018, 94–95.

²⁹⁸ Dmitri Gordon, *Kto i kak pomog Putinu ukrast' Krim. Dokumental'noe rassledovanie [Who and how helped Putin to seize Crimea. Documentary investigation]*, Interview (YouTube: Dmitri Gordon, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TbgMK7nJ2LE&fbclid=IwAR1Ur8bsUI_hquW47lBX1MEafLvS7tl4qdmNGQuuJWpnuSXJmMJvDoBmYw.

²⁹⁹ “Vladimir Putin Addressed State Duma Deputies, Federation Council Members, Heads of Russian Regions and Civil Society Representatives in the Kremlin,” President of Russia, March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

³⁰⁰ “Vladimir Putin Addressed State Duma.”

For all the internal processes within the organization, NATO remains a military alliance, and we are against having a military alliance making itself at home right in our backyard or in our historic territory.³⁰¹

Moreover, a significant part of the political and cultural elites supported the annexation, considering it as a restoration of historical justice.³⁰² Moscow hopes that the international community will accept annexation over time. Also, the Russian political establishment, including those who did not support aggression, admits that likely Russia will never give Crimea back to Ukraine.³⁰³ Besides, at the time of writing this work, the option of accepting the annexation of Crimea by Ukraine in exchange for resolving the conflict in the Donbas was dominating the media environment, however, it was declined by Kyiv.³⁰⁴

2. Ukraine and Donbas in Russia's Discourse

In the Russian informational environment, there are different visions of why the Kremlin decided to invade Ukraine. Nationalists or adherents of neo-Eurasianist politics see Ukraine in terms of implementation of the neo-Eurasianist theory of nationalist and Russophile Alexander Dugin.³⁰⁵ According to the theory of neo-Eurasianism, Russia is seen not as a colonizing empire, but as a civilization that goes beyond its administrative borders. From this point of view, the Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are part of a single civilization—the *Russian World*. Neo-Eurasianists believe that the division of the Russian World into separate states is artificial and the main threat to its existence comes

³⁰¹ “Vladimir Putin Addressed State Duma.”

³⁰² “Kashin: Krym, konechno zhe, nash. On vseгда byl nespravedlivoy poterey [Kashin: Crimea, of course, is ours. It was always an unjust loss.],” *Analytics and Opinions, Gordonua*, June 10, 2015, <https://gordonua.com/news/crimea/kashin-krym-konechno-zhe-nash-on-vsegda-byl-nespravedlivoy-poterey-84568.html>.

³⁰³ Dmitri Gordon, *Aleksey Venediktov. “GORDON” (2019) [Alexey Venediktov. GORDON (2019)]*, Interview (YouTube: Dmitri Gordon, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCs5Zp3HYcM>.

³⁰⁴ Bermet Talant, “Zelensky Promises Not to Trade Crimea for Peace in Donbas | KyivPost - Ukraine's Global Voice,” *KyivPost*, February 26, 2020, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/zelensky-promises-not-to-trade-crimea-for-peace-in-donbas.html>.

³⁰⁵ Kirill Kalinin, “Neo-Eurasianism and the Russian Elite: The Irrelevance of Aleksandr Dugin's Geopolitics,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 5–6 (November 2, 2019): 461, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1663050>.

from the West.³⁰⁶ The theory can be considered the most common in Russia's vision of geopolitical expansion and holds that Ukraine can exist only as a “sanitary cordon” between Russia and the West.³⁰⁷ Dugin stated that “[T]he existence of Ukraine in the current borders and with its current status as a ‘sovereign state’ is no less than a monstrous blow to Russia’s geopolitical security.”³⁰⁸ Dugin insists on a hasty solution to the Ukrainian question—by expansion—as it determines the success of the entire Eurasian project. At the same time, he admits that due to ethnic and cultural differences, Russia has to absorb the eastern part of Ukraine, establish there Novorossiia, and abandon the dominance over some Western Ukrainian regions—Galicia and Transcarpathia.³⁰⁹ Regarding Crimea, he advocated giving the Peninsula a special status and ensuring maximum autonomy with direct strategic control of Moscow due to its significant geostrategic location.³¹⁰

These neo-Eurasian ideas are widely shared by the proponents of far-right nationalism and neo-imperialism in Russia, including but not limited to the members of non-governmental organizations like the Izborskii Club or even Russia’s think tanks like the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS). The former propound the ideas of political Orthodoxy, Russian chauvinism, and neo-imperialism.³¹¹ The latter was created in 1992 and until 2009 was part of the Russian intelligence service. As of 2014, the institute was headed by General (ret.) Leonid Reshetnikov. The organization provides its analytical works directly to the Administration of the President of Russia.³¹²

In March 2015, at that time, Deputy Head of RISS Tamara Guzenkova stated that since 2004, in dealing with the West, Russia has been constantly stressing that Ukraine,

³⁰⁶ Kuzio and D’Anieri, *The Sources of Russia’s Great Power Politics*, 16.

³⁰⁷ A. Dugin, *Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia: English Translation* (Independently Published, 2017), 219, <https://books.google.com/books?id=wSNAtAEACAAJ>.

³⁰⁸ Dugin, 215.

³⁰⁹ Dugin, 215.

³¹⁰ Dugin, 217.

³¹¹ Marlène Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism: Imaginaries, Doctrines, and Political Battlefields*, Media, Culture and Social Change in Asia, Volume 61 (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 139.

³¹² “About,” Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, accessed July 13, 2020, <https://en.riss.ru/about/>.

Georgia, and Moldova are participants in other integration projects apart from the West. She summarized that despite these warnings the West continuously ignored Russia's position.³¹³ From that period, there has been a change in Russia's foreign policy. Moscow started to form the Eurasian space as an alternative to the West. The post-Soviet states were integral parts of these integration processes and belonged to Russia's sphere of "privileged interests" and "exclusive rights."³¹⁴ Obviously, following Putin's narrative, the whole of Ukraine was granted there a significant role.³¹⁵

Concerning Donbas, more realist points of view were shared by the experts from the Russian influential think tank the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy (CFDP). They consider that Russia delivered a preemptive strike to the West with its aggression in Ukraine.³¹⁶ The Kremlin stopped the West's further expansion into Ukraine, and other countries and territories, vital for Russia's security and interests.³¹⁷ In the major part of their official reports, CFDP experts insist that in Ukraine, "Russia averted a great war in Europe," which could emerge due to the dragging Ukraine into NATO.³¹⁸ They also indicate, indirectly referring Donbas that it is beneficial for Russia to have a formally incorporated into Ukraine but semi-independent regions in a condition of a frozen conflict with protracted character.³¹⁹

³¹³ Tamara Guzenkova, "My vstupayem v period zakata ES [We are entering the sunset period of the EU]," Analytics and Opinions, RISS, March 16, 2015, <https://riss.ru/smi/11059/>.

³¹⁴ "Dmitry Medvedev's Interview with Russian Television Channels," Official Page, President of Russia, August 31, 2008, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/1276>.

³¹⁵ Putin, Interview with German TV channel ARD.

³¹⁶ Sergei Karaganov and Fyodor Lukyanov, "Strategiya Dlya Rossii Rossiyskaya Vneshnyaya Politika: Konets 2010-kh — Nachalo 2020-kh Godov [Strategy for Russia Russian Foreign Policy: the End of 2010s - the Beginning of the 2020s]" (Moscow: The Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, May 23, 2016), 21, http://svop.ru/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/тезисы_23мая_sm.pdf.

³¹⁷ Karaganov and Lukyanov, 21.

³¹⁸ Sergei Karaganov and Dmitry Suslov, "Zashchita Mira, Zemli, Svobody Vyboru Dlya Vsekh Stran: Novyye Idei Dlya Vneshney Politiki Rossii [Protecting Peace, Earth, Freedom of Choice For All Countries: New Ideas For Russian Foreign Policy]" (Moscow: High School of Economics, April 17, 2020), 30, http://svop.ru/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Доклад_Новые-идеи-для-внешней-политики-России.pdf; Karaganov and Lukyanov, "Strategiya Dlya Rossii Rossiyskaya Vneshnyaya Politika: Konets 2010-kh — Nachalo 2020-kh Godov [Strategy for Russia Russian Foreign Policy: the End of 2010s - the Beginning of the 2020s]," 20–21.

³¹⁹ Karaganov and Lukyanov, "Strategiya Dlya Rossii Rossiyskaya Vneshnyaya Politika: Konets 2010-kh — Nachalo 2020-kh Godov [Strategy for Russia Russian Foreign Policy: the End of 2010s - the Beginning of the 2020s]."

However, the narrative of Russia's officials regarding Donbas is very deliberate. For the domestic public, its propaganda portrays Russian leaders as peacekeepers that are intended to save the people of Donbas from Ukrainian coercive rule. For the international environment, they blame the West in its influence on Kyiv which therefore accelerates the conflict in Donbas.³²⁰

C. CASE STUDY OVERVIEW AND TIMELINE

1. Russia's Annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and City of Sevastopol

The extensive presence in Crimea of the Russian Black Sea Fleet, as well as a large percentage of the population loyal to Russia made the Kremlin's decision to start its invasion of Ukraine from the peninsula quite logical. The apparent alert of a probable Russian intervention to Crimea appeared on February 20, 2014. On that day the Speaker of the Supreme Council of Crimea, Vladimir Konstantinov, was in Moscow. He announced the possibility of secession of Crimea from Ukraine and welcomed Moscow's intervention into Ukraine's internal affairs.³²¹ Three days later, on February 23, pro-Russian separatists started demonstrations in Crimea. These led to skirmishes with the pro-Ukrainian demonstrators in the streets of Simferopol. Taking advantage of the turmoil on February 27, Russian special forces seized Crimean government buildings in Simferopol. That night, the Crimean parliament's web portal announced that lawmakers had appointed new Crimean leadership and voted to hold a referendum on independence from Ukraine.³²² During the next few days, Russian troops seized governmental buildings, objects of critical infrastructure, and besieged Ukraine's military facilities stationed on the peninsula. On March 1st, the President Putin got authorization from Russian parliament to use force

³²⁰ Shandra, "The Surkov Leaks," 79–80.

³²¹ Adam Taylor, "The Battle for Kiev May Well Be over, but Is the Battle for Crimea about to Begin?," *Washington Post*, February 22, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/02/22/the-battle-for-kiev-may-well-be-over-but-is-the-battle-for-crimea-about-to-begin/>.

³²² "How the Separatists Delivered Crimea to Moscow," News and Analytics, Reuters, March 13, 2014, <https://in.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-russia-aksonov-idINL6N0M93AH20140313>.

against Ukraine “to protect Russian interests,” marking the date when the Ukrainian government lost its control over Crimea.³²³

On March 16, Russia conducted a direct referendum in Crimea where voters had a choice only between joining Russia or obtaining independence from Ukraine.³²⁴ Russia and its local separatists were widely spreading the ideas of a “fascist coup” taking place in Kyiv; they trumpeted the necessity to protect the Russian-speaking population from far-right Ukrainian radicalism to justify Russia’s military intervention in Crimea. Ukraine and the West maintain that the referendum was illegitimate. Besides, the process of the referendum and its results were quite controversial, as it showed a significant percentage of votes in favor of Russia, suggesting that the referendum was not conducted in a free and fair manner.³²⁵ In two days Russian President Vladimir Putin signed the “treaty of accession” formalizing incorporation into the Russian Federation of Crimea as a republic and the city of Sevastopol as a federal district.³²⁶ Much of the International community strongly condemned Russia’s occupational actions. Furthermore, the UN General Assembly adopted the resolution, with one hundred countries voting in favor, declaring the Russian-backed referendum in Crimea as illegal and affirming Ukraine’s territorial integrity.³²⁷ Eventually, Russian armed formations stormed Ukrainian military bases and seized Ukrainian Navy vessels deployed in the Crimean Peninsula. On March 26, Russia’s Chief of Defense announced that the Russian armed forces succeeded to subjugate all Ukrainian military facilities in Crimea.³²⁸

³²³ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 83; “Ukraine Crisis: Timeline,” News and Analytics, BBC News, November 13, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26248275>.

³²⁴ “How the Separatists Delivered Crimea to Moscow.”

³²⁵ O’Loughlin and Toal, “The Crimea Conundrum,” 8; Ian Birrell, “Crimea’s Referendum Was a Sham Display of Democracy,” *The Guardian*, March 17, 2014, sec. Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/mar/17/crimea-referendum-sham-display-democracy-ukraine>.

³²⁶ O’Loughlin and Toal, “The Crimea Conundrum,” 7.

³²⁷ “UN Declares Crimea Vote Illegal,” News and Analytics, BBC News, March 27, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26776416>.

³²⁸ Steven Pifer, “Ukraine, Russia and the U.S. Policy Response,” *Brookings* (blog), June 5, 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/ukraine-russia-and-the-u-s-policy-response/>; “Russian Flag on All Crimea Military Sites,” SBS News, accessed April 18, 2020, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/russian-flag-on-all-crimea-military-sites>.

2. Russia's Invasion of Donbas

Yanukovych's removal from the Presidential Office and his retreat to Russia triggered waves of pro-Russian protests in the eastern and southeastern regions of Ukraine. Most of the protesters were local Ukrainians, but there is evidence of the presence of Russian citizens participating in the demonstrations as instigators and agitators.³²⁹ Russia used the rhetoric of *Novorossiya* (New Russia) to justify the invasion, establish separatist-controlled enclaves, and create an "alternative political geography" for eastern and southeastern Ukraine.³³⁰ The strategy included the consolidation of massive troops on Ukraine's borders, recruiting and dispatching armed combatants and weaponry to eastern Ukraine, and the use of special forces and mercenaries to seize government buildings and suppress pro-Ukrainian opposition.³³¹ During March and April of 2014 anti-Ukrainian protesters and armed separatists took over government buildings in major cities in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. They demanded separation from Ukraine and alliance with Russia.³³² In April 2014, the pro-Russian separatists proclaimed the creation of the People's Republic of Donetsk (DPR), the People's Republic of Luhansk (LPR), and Novorossiya as a confederated Union of these two People's Republics.³³³ On May 11, 2014 leaders of self-proclaimed DPR and LPR held illegal "referendums" and subsequently declared themselves as "independent states" from Ukraine.³³⁴

In response to the insurgency in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, Ukraine's government launched an "anti-terrorist operation" aimed at regaining government control over occupied territories. The operation was conducted by the Ukrainian army and volunteer battalions that became a part of Ukraine's National Guard.³³⁵ At the same time,

³²⁹ Michael Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, Research Report, RR-1498-A (Santa Monica, Calif: Rand Corporation, 2017), 33–34.

³³⁰ O'Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov, "The Rise and Fall of 'Novorossiya,'" 125.

³³¹ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 85; Andrew Higgins and David M. Herszenhorn, "U.S. and NATO Warn Russia Against Further Intervention in Ukraine," *The New York Times*, April 8, 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/09/world/europe/russia-ukraine-unrest.html>.

³³² Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, 34–35.

³³³ O'Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov, "The Rise and Fall of 'Novorossiya,'" 125.

³³⁴ O'Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov, 125.

³³⁵ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, xi.

the Russian Federation was supplying the armed insurgency in eastern Ukraine with mechanized equipment, armored vehicles, tanks, artillery, air-defense assets, and other advanced munitions.³³⁶ A critical point in Russia's involvement in Donbas came on July 17, 2014, when the Malaysian Airlines flight (MH-17) was shot down over the airspace of eastern Ukraine, killing all 298 passengers on board.³³⁷ The aircraft was targeted by a surface-to-air-missile complex *Buk-M1*. This weapons system belongs to the 53rd Russian Kursk Anti-aircraft Brigade and was operated by a professional Russian military crew.³³⁸

Over the summer of 2014, Ukraine's military gained some success in pushing Russian proxies out of Ukraine's territory. In response, Russia launched an offensive operation that subsequently changed the character of conflict by transferring it into full-scale inter-state warfare. The operation was accompanied by massive cross-border artillery shelling of Ukraine's army positions from Russia's territory.³³⁹ Russia's invasion of Ukraine with its regular troops cost Ukraine's government forces severe losses and allowed the DPR and LPR to expand their control over Donbas territory. Major defeats of Ukrainian forces where Russian regular troops reportedly were involved included the battles for Ilovaisk (August-September 2014), Donetsk Airport (September 2014–January 2015), and Debaltseve (January-February 2015).³⁴⁰

After the Ukrainian Presidential elections in May 2014, the new government sought to use diplomacy to stop the violence in Donbas. These efforts became structured around two sets of measures known as the Minsk agreements, signed in 2014 and 2015 by the

³³⁶ Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, 44.

³³⁷ Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 122.

³³⁸ "MH17 Missile 'Owned by Russian Brigade,'" News and Analytics, BBC News, May 24, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44235402>; Pieter van Huis, "Identifying the Separatists Linked to the Downing of MH17" (The Bellingcat Investigation, June 19, 2019), <https://www.bellingcat.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/a-birdie-is-flying-towards-you.pdf>.

³³⁹ Julian Borger and Eliot Higgins, "Russia Shelled Ukrainians from within Its Own Territory, Says Study," *The Guardian*, February 17, 2015, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/17/russia-shelled-ukrainians-from-within-its-own-territory-says-study>; Amanda Macias, "Proof That Russia Shelled Ukrainian Troops and Took Control of the Rebel-Held Border," *Business Insider*, accessed April 19, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/proof-that-russia-shelled-ukrainian-troops-and-took-control-of-the-rebel-held-border-2015-2>.

³⁴⁰ Welt, "Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy," 11; Kofman et al., *Lessons from Russia's Operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine*, 46.

members of the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine (TCG). The latter includes representatives of Ukraine, Russia, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and de-facto the members of self-proclaimed DPR and LPR. In addition, the international group known as the Normandy Four, which includes German, French, Ukrainian, and Russian political stakeholders, has participated in Ukraine's peace-seeking processes.

The first package of Minsk agreements was signed by the TCG in September 2014. It included a 12-point agreement known as the Minsk Protocol and a follow-on Memorandum. The documents outlined de-escalation measures, including a bilateral ceasefire, area demilitarization, and their monitoring and verification by an OSCE Special Monitoring Mission; withdrawal of illegal armed formations and military equipment from Ukraine's territory; decentralization of power in Donetsk and Luhansk regions, giving them a separate status; and other measures.³⁴¹ However, the Minsk Protocol failed to achieve a diplomatic resolution of the conflict. In February 2015 the leaders of the Normandy Four states met in Minsk to negotiate another solution to mitigate the conflict. After 16 hours of talks, they agreed on a new package of measures known as Minsk-II.³⁴² This package was a more detailed version of the previous agreements and included specific timelines.³⁴³ However, many of the Minsk-II measures remain unfulfilled to date. In 2015 and 2016, two additional Normandy-Four format meetings failed to produce significant results in conflict resolution.

In 2019, newly elected Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyi attempted to renovate the Normandy-Four meetings to resolve the Donbas conflict. On December 9, French President Emmanuel Macron hosted German, Ukrainian, and Russian leaders to negotiate further steps to resolve the war in Donbas. This meeting facilitated some success

³⁴¹ "Protocol on the Results of Consultations of the Trilateral Contact Group" (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, September 5, 2014), <https://www.osce.org/home/123257>; "Memorandum on Fulfilment of the Provisions of the Protocol on the Results of Consultations of the Trilateral Contact Group" (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, September 19, 2014), <https://www.osce.org/cio/123808>.

³⁴² "Leaders Agree Ukraine Peace Roadmap," News and Analytics, BBC News, February 12, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31435812>.

³⁴³ Welt, "Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy," 14.

in a hostage exchange, establishment of new disengagement areas, and implementations of humanitarian and demining programs.³⁴⁴ Despite these agreements, the violence in Donbas continues. At the time of February 2020, according to the UN report, the number of conflict-related casualties in Donbas ranges between 41,000 and 44,000. This number includes 13,000–13,200 killed (an estimated 3,350 Ukrainian civilians, 4,100 Ukrainian forces and 5,650 separatist formations); likewise, an estimated 29,000–31,000 people were injured (numbers for Ukrainian civilians range from 7,000–9,000, those for Ukrainian forces 9,500–10,500 and separatist formations, 12,500–13,500), and more than 1.5 million people displaced internally.³⁴⁵

Russia continues to use the combination of military, political, financial, economic, social, informational, and ideological methods of warfare in Donbas to impose political pressure on the Ukrainian government, and create divisions in other regions within Ukraine. The Kremlin has created in Donbas a powerful military force, the 1st and 2nd Army corps of DPR and LPR. This force is under the command of the 8th Army headquarters of Southern Military District of the Russian Armed Forces. The latter uses occupied Ukrainian territories as a training ground to test Russian military equipment and personnel.³⁴⁶ Despite Russia's total denial of its involvement in the Donbas turmoil, the Kremlin's impact on conflict dynamics, as well as military, political and economic life within the occupied territories is apparent.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁴ Cory Welt, "Recent Developments in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict" (Congressional Research Service, February 13, 2020), 2, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11222>.

³⁴⁵ "Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine 16 November 2019 to 15 February 2020" (Geneva, Switzerland: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, March 12, 2020), https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/29thReportUkraine_EN.pdf.

³⁴⁶ Mykhailo Pashkov, "The War in Donbas: Realities and Prospects of Settlement," National Security & Defence (Kyiv, Ukraine: Razumkov Center, 2019), 36, http://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/journal/eng/NSD177-178_2019_eng.pdf.

³⁴⁷ Kurt Volker, Press Briefing with Kurt Volker, Special Representative for Ukraine Negotiations, November 8, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/telephonic-press-briefing-with-kurt-volker-special-representative-for-ukraine-negotiations/>.

D. CONCLUSION

In 1991, after gaining independence and international recognition of its borders, Ukraine embarked on its autonomous path. It included closer cooperation with the Euro and Euro-Atlantic community. This choice did not suit Ukraine's eastern neighbor—Russia. Moscow was constantly trying to influence Kyiv's domestic and foreign policies.

At the same time, Ukraine became an influential factor in Russia's relations with the West. Since the 2000s, these relations suffered significant turbulences and possessed apparent features of both confrontation and cooperation. Finally, the consequences of that relations became reflected in Russia's perceived threat to its security, status, or regime, which subsequently generated its assertive foreign policy choices towards its neighboring states, first in Georgia, then in Ukraine.

Since independence, Ukraine has experienced two pro-European revolutions—the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. The latter event created an opportunity for Russian aggression, which resulted in Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine's eastern provinces. Ukraine's discourse in Russia highlighted multiple sets of reasons why the Kremlin aggressed in Ukraine. It touches deep historical, cultural, ethnic, and geostrategic importance of Donbas and Crimea for Russia. In turn, it generates material, ideational, or regime survival factors which could serve as primary reasons for Russian aggression. Which of these factors were more influential during Kremlin's decision-making with respect to Ukraine the subsequent chapters, analyzing Crimea and Donbas cases, add clarity to this issue.

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V. RUSSIA'S ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

On March 18, 2014, the Russian Federation marked its incorporation of Crimea and Sevastopol. Against the background of the euphoria of the annexation for the Russians, this event was undoubtedly accompanied by pain for the Ukrainian nation. Crimea marked the beginning of Russian aggression against Ukraine and, at the same time, destroyed all illusions of 'fraternal' relations between the two countries. Incorporating the Crimea into the Russian Federation is an unacceptable precedent in the modern democratic world, but it is necessary to examine the reasons for Russia's behavior.

Most of the reasons for annexation can be grouped into three theoretical paradigms—realism, constructivism, and domestic politics. All three highlight the role of a threat as the key driver of Russian behavior. However, they locate the source of threat in very different arenas. For realism, the threat is to national security or regional hegemony and arises from increases in external material capabilities that endanger those aims. For constructivism, the threat is to national identity and arises from material and non-material acts that challenge Russia's identity as a great power. For domestic politics explanation, the threat is to Vladimir Putin's regime, and it arises from challenges to the legitimacy and control of that regime over Russian politics and society.

However, the analyses highlight the unique feature common throughout all explanations. The annexation of Crimea in this story is limited. The peninsula was incorporated into Russia as a separate federal unit. Therefore, it loses its role as a tool for keeping Ukraine under Russia control, hence requiring Russia for further aggression. In this vein, Crimea is seen as a starting point and Donbas as a continuation of the Kremlin's policy. At the same time, the difference between the two cases lies in their eventual purpose for Moscow, which has material, ideological, and regime survival aspects and will be discussed in detail in this and subsequent chapter.

This chapter looks at Russia's decision to annex Crimea as an event separate from the incursion into eastern Ukraine. It assesses empirical knowledge through the prism of the aforementioned theoretical frameworks. Realism emphasizes the material factors. It

analyses the balance of power between Russia and the West in military capabilities and economic power. It is looking at the overall state of relations between sides and a place of Ukraine in it. Constructivism pays attention to historical, cultural, and ideational variables, such as Crimea's value in Russia's pursuit of its great power status aspirations. It looks at Russia's relations with the West from the ideational perspective. Constructivism also pays attention to the role and influence of Russia's elites on the Kremlin's foreign policy choices. Domestic politics explanation, in turn, looks at Russia's internal processes that could serve as drivers for aggression. It examines RF's domestic circumstances that could generate Russia's authoritarian regime's perception of fear for losing its power. Therefore, making annexation of Crimea as a lifesaver for the regime from potential domestic discontent.

A. REALISM

From the realist standpoint, the material aspects form the basis of the decision to annex Crimea and invade Donbas. In terms of the role of a threat as a driver of Russia's foreign policy, the realist explanations in both cases can be divided into two approaches—defensive and offensive. The former looks at Russia's invasion as a forceful response to the external factors that threaten Russia's national security, while the latter looks at the threat to Russian regional hegemony.

The causal factors that, from a realist standpoint, could trigger Russia's aggression first in Crimea and then in Donbas in 2014 are closely connected to the behavior and condition of the West—a unified term applied to NATO, led by the U.S. and the EU.³⁴⁸ The two versions of realism differ in terms of explaining the threat that those behaviors possess for Russia. Defensive realism sees the West's activities as those that threaten Russia's sense of security or physical encroachment on its sovereignty and integrity that endanger the state's survival. Offensive realism focuses on the protection of Russia's regional hegemony from any external threat and influence. More specifically, in this sense, Russia pursued expansionist policies intended to protect its regional hegemony and reach geostrategic dominance in a certain area in Eastern Europe. In particular, the area of

³⁴⁸ Kuzio and D'Anieri, *The Sources of Russia's Great Power Politics*, 2.

Russia's specific interests there includes post-Soviet countries excluding the Baltic state, which became a part of the European Community.³⁴⁹ This area beyond Russia's territory, in 2008 Dmitri Medvedev attributed to the zone of Russia's privileged sphere of interest where Ukraine belongs.³⁵⁰ In both approaches, a pro-Russian Ukraine is cast as vital to Russia's interests for material reasons.

Realism anticipates Russia will act rationally and make its foreign policy decisions based on cost-and-benefit calculations. Therefore, to evaluate the realist explanations, the foreseeable benefits arising from annexing Crimea and Donbas' invasion should outweigh the costs to Russia's security or hegemony. In this regard, defensive realism suggests that Russia acted aggressively to diminish the threat to its security. Offensive realism suggests that Russia aggressed to preserve its regional hegemony.

The first question that arises within the realist perspective is whether NATO or EU capabilities and actions were imposing a threat to Russia's security or its regional hegemony at a time of Russia's aggression in Crimea in 2014. The most turbulent period in Russia's-NATO relations occurred over 2007–2009 when the sides had major disputes regarding the security architecture in Europe. Those included disputes around the U.S. missile-defense projects in Poland and the Czech Republic, Ukraine's and Georgia's intentions to join the NATO MAP, and the accession of Albania and Croatia to NATO. However, the former was resolved by the U.S. cancellation of its MDS project. The latter question of NATO enlargement eastwards remained a subject of Moscow's concern, especially after Alliance's reassurances that Ukraine and Georgian will be able to join the block.

The subsequent period of Russia-NATO relations between 2010 and 2013 was relatively calm in terms of security. As discussed in Chapter 4 regarding the military balance between NATO and Russia, it is essential to highlight that, since 2010, the

³⁴⁹ Dolenko et al., "The Geopolitical Factor in Russian Policy," 447.

³⁵⁰ Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," 78–84; Michael McFaul, Stephen Sestanovich, and John J. Mearsheimer, "Faulty Powers: Who Started the Ukraine Crisis?," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 6 (2014): 167–68, 170, 175; Kuzio and D'Anieri, *The Sources of Russia's Great Power Politics*, 6.

Alliance's military capabilities and expenditures became reduced. Russia's indicators remained relatively stable, however, in 2011, Moscow launched the massive reformation of its military forces, including the modernization of its military equipment.

Moreover, the 2010 version of Russian military doctrine was oriented towards strengthening the security architecture Europe, and the improvement of relations in this area with NATO and the EU.³⁵¹ Indeed, the military doctrine considered NATO capability building and its expansion towards Russia's borders as a military risk. Risks in this case are seen as a precondition to threats. However, the RF's primary concern noted was the "demonstrations of military force during military exercises on the territories of states contiguous with Russia" or its allies, literally for "provocative purposes."³⁵² At the same time, Russia considered its nuclear potential as a pillar of its deterrence strategy and maintaining strategic stability.³⁵³

In addition, in 2013, before Russia annexed Crimea, the number of NATO forces deployments in the closest states to Russia's border—Poland, Hungary, and Lithuania—amounted to 200 personnel. In contrast, Russia's troops in Eastern Europe, including states neighboring NATO, constituted of about 33 thousand.³⁵⁴

Therefore, in terms of military capabilities and balance, NATO less likely was oriented to impose a physical threat to Russia's security, nor its policies anticipated any hostilities towards RF. In this regard, Article 5 of the NATO charter, regarding collective defense, can only be applied in case of direct military threat to NATO members. In addition, in Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the NATO Members adopted in Lisbon in 2010, it is directly stated that "NATO poses no threat to Russia," and the

³⁵¹ "Voyennaya doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii [Military doctrine of the Russian Federation]," Official Page, President of Russia, February 5, 2010, <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/461>.

³⁵² "Voyennaya doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii."

³⁵³ "Voyennaya doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii."

³⁵⁴ Jorge Benitez and Lucas Della Ventura, "Infographic: Data Disproves Russian Lies about NATO Military Expansion," Analytics and Opinions, Atlantic Council, August 11, 2015, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/infographic-data-disproves-russian-lies-about-nato-military-expansion/>.

Alliance is expecting the reciprocal steps from Moscow.³⁵⁵ The document considers NATO-Russia cooperation as a matter of strategic importance for the Alliance. Moreover, it recognizes the Euro-Atlantic area as peaceful and any conventional threat to it as very low.³⁵⁶ Paradoxically, NATO's strategic concept has not changed since then, even after Russia's aggression in Ukraine. However, since 2014 the Alliance terminated all practical cooperation with Moscow and switched to the policy of the "dual-track approach" that anticipates both defense and dialogue.³⁵⁷

In addition to the military sphere, Russia's economic ties with major European countries and their strong dependence on Russia's energy resources, as discussed in Chapter 4, make the scenario of their involvement in the open confrontation with Russia as less likely.

Furthermore, the threat perception of both Russia's elites and the population from the West did not show significant signs of concern. According to William Zimmerman et al., Russia's elite's perception of threat from the West in 2012 (before Russia annexed Crimea) was lower than in 2004. In particular, in 2012, while 64 percent of Russia's elites expressed hostility towards the U.S., far fewer, 48 percent, saw it as a threat to Russia's security.³⁵⁸ In contrast, in 2004, 54 percent of Russia's elite considered the U.S. as a threat.³⁵⁹ Moreover, Russia's population reaction to the probable threat from the NATO states remained relatively equal both before and after the events in Crimea. In March 2011,

³⁵⁵ "Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security of the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization" (NATO, November 2010), 29–30, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_publications/20120214_strategic-concept-2010-eng.pdf.

³⁵⁶ "Strategic Concept for the Defence and Security," 10.

³⁵⁷ "The Secretary General's Annual Report 2019" (NATO, 2020), 19, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/3/pdf_publications/sgar19-en.pdf.

³⁵⁸ Elena Bashkirova, Tamara Litikova, and Dina Smeltz, "Moscow Elites and the Use of Coercive Foreign Policy," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 5–6 (November 2, 2019): 472, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1663047>; William Zimmerman, Sharon Werning Rivera, and Kirill Kalinin, "Survey of Russian Elites, Moscow, Russia, 1993–2016" (Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2019), <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR03724.v6>.

³⁵⁹ Zimmerman, Rivera, and Kalinin, "Survey of Russian Elites, Moscow, Russia, 1993–2016."

63 percent of the Russian population anticipated threat from the NATO states, and in March 2014, this number was 62 percent.³⁶⁰

Moreover, according to Levada Center surveys, in July 2013, before the Euromaidan in Ukraine, most of the Russian population expressed positive feelings regarding Russia's relations with the West. Fifty-three percent of respondents viewed Russia-U.S. relations positively, while 36 percent negatively. Regarding Russia-EU relations, 64 percent expressed positive feelings, and only 24 percent negative ones.³⁶¹

That raises the question of why Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, rather than earlier as the level of threat perception did not change much. Realism does anticipate aggression as a possible scenario to protect either state's security or regional hegemony. However, both defensive realism and offensive realism are different in terms of explaining the timing of aggression. Defensive realism would expect the state to use aggression when there is a heightened threat to Russia's security from the West, not when the security situation is not particularly dangerous. In this regard, defensive realism would look at the triggering factors that accelerate the state's perception of threat from the West. In contrast, offensive realism would expect aggressive actions in relatively calm times, and when the window of opportunity opens. The subsequent sections look at these factors in more detail.

1. Defensive realism

Defensive realists would argue that the rising tension and danger in the security environment led to the increase of Russia's perception of threat to its security. Once the threat reached its highest point, Russia fell into the state of the security dilemma and annexed Crimea to diminish that threat. However, it worth mentioning that the latter reveals the weakness of the theory. It cannot say precisely when this highest point of tension comes and triggers the state's forceful response. This theoretical approach's weakness fails to explain why Russia aggressed first in Crimea, and second in 2014. Defensive realism

³⁶⁰ "Vragi Rossii [Russia's Enemies]," Research Center, Levada-Center, October 1, 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/2018/01/10/vragi-rossii/>.

³⁶¹ "Putin's Approval Ratings," Research Center, Levada-Center, accessed June 13, 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/>.

would have expected such an act, not in 2014, but earlier, either in 2004, when the Baltic states joined NATO and the Orange Revolution took place in Ukraine, or 2009, after NATO announced Ukraine would one day join and Ukraine sought to expel the BSF from Crimea.

Although, based on this assumption, scholars point out two primary causal factors that were causing the continuous rising of tension and therefore instigated the Russian Federation to annex Crimea in 2014. These reasons stress that Russia reacted defensively to the NATO and the EU enlargements eastwards, revealing Russia “as a passive victim compelled to respond.”³⁶² In other words, if Russia is defensively oriented, it is the policies of the West and Ukraine’s provocations that pushed Russia towards aggression.³⁶³ In this case, the theory suggests that President Putin acted rationally since the international system’s threatening structure made him do so. Russia attacked Ukraine to stop further Western enlargement that would bring these institutions to Russia’s southwestern borders.

a. *Russia and NATO Enlargement*

NATO enlargement was a question of Russia’s particular concern and considered a threat in Russia’s military doctrines since the 2000s. In this regard, Ukraine’s joining the Alliance brings NATO to Russia’s borders. From the Russian standpoint, this outcome changes the balance of power in Europe and generates an existential threat to Russia’s security. In addition, Ukraine’s NATO membership threatens that Russia’s BFS naval base in Crimea can be removed from the Peninsula.³⁶⁴

As discussed in the previous chapter, disputes between Russia and the West regarding NATO enlargement had reached their peak in 2008 when Ukraine and Georgia applied to join the Alliance. However, after Russia’s endorsement, the question of their membership was suspended. Moreover, in 2010 President Yanukovych announced

³⁶² Kuzio and D’Anieri, *The Sources of Russia’s Great Power Politics*, 4.

³⁶³ Paul D’Anieri, “Magical Realism: Assumptions, Evidence and Prescriptions in the Ukraine Conflict,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 60, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2019.1627231>.

³⁶⁴ Treisman, “Why Putin Took Crimea,” 47–48.

Ukraine's non-bloc status and extended Russia's BSF stay in Crimea till 2042.³⁶⁵ In 2013 Ukraine did not plan to become a member of NATO, and till 2014 neither of the sides expressed commitments that Ukraine would join the Alliance.³⁶⁶ Furthermore, before the Ukraine-Russia conflict, there was not strong domestic support and political will in Ukraine for NATO membership. According to public opinion polls, in 2010, 52 percent of Ukrainians opposed joining NATO, while only 28 percent voted in favor.³⁶⁷

Moreover, between 2010 and 2013 the United States reduced its military presence in Europe. European states pursued a reduction in their military capabilities. Consequently, in 2013, such a state of events indicated no apparent signs of NATO's intent to use force against Russia. Therefore, it was less likely the real causal factor of rising tension and threat to Russia's security as the defensive realism anticipates.

As for the BSF issue, Daniel Treisman, referring to his close-to-the-Kremlin source, explains that Russia's annexation of Crimea was prompted by a fear of losing the naval base for its BSF. In this regard, Stephen Sestanovich argues that in 2014 "Nor was the large Russian naval base in Crimea [BSF] at risk, no matter the feverish charges of Russia commentators".³⁶⁸ At that moment, the question of the BSF remaining in Crimea was settled for Russia. However, although its length was extended until 2042, Russia still was dependent on Ukraine's political orientation. After the bitter experience of the pro-Western government in Ukraine and its attempts to expel the BSF from Ukraine in 2009, the preservation of Russian forces' strategic position in Crimea became one of the most critical for Putin.

In sum, the continuation of NATO enlargement to Georgia and Ukraine, disregarding Moscow's security concerns expressed in the Bucharest summit (2008) and

³⁶⁵ "Ukraine Abandons NATO Ambitions"; Stanislav Belkovsky, "Ukrainian Sovereignty Withstands Medvedev," News and Opinions, KyivPost, May 20, 2010, <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/op-ed/ukrainian-sovereignty-withstands-medvedev-67349.html>.

³⁶⁶ Motyl, "The Surrealism of Realism: Misreading the War in Ukraine," 81.

³⁶⁷ Kathleen Holzward Sprehe, "Ukraine Says 'No' to NATO," Analytics, Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, March 29, 2010, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2010/03/29/ukraine-says-no-to-nato/>.

³⁶⁸ McFaul, Sestanovich, and Mearsheimer, "Faulty Powers: Who Started the Ukraine Crisis?," 172.

the probable cession Russia's BSF, are events that a defensive realist might expect to be met with the use of force. However, at the time of Russia's aggression, neither of these issues were probable nor were at the discussion table between Ukraine and the West.

In addition, the fact that Russia possesses the world's largest nuclear potential makes any physical or material encroachment on its territory as a very unlikely scenario.

Conversely, first the Euromaidan and then the Revolution of Dignity that led to Yanukovych's ouster, leaving Ukraine to pro-Western forces, would bring unexpected changes to Russia's calculus. These events pose a significant threat to Russia's influence over Ukraine. In the material sense, it increases the likelihood of accelerated Ukraine-Western partnership and perhaps activation of processes for Ukraine to join NATO. In the future perspective, Russia could perceive such a move as a shift in the balance of forces against Russia. However, the Euromaidan did not necessarily change the material strength of Russia, NATO, or the EU. It changed Ukraine's domestic composition, which has an ideational dimension rather than a material one and can be better explained through constructivism and domestic politics explanations.

b. Russia and the EU Enlargement

Another defensive realist standpoint suggests that in 2013 it was not NATO, but the EU took the lead in expanding into territories that Russia considered vital for its security. Moreover, in contrast to the NATO enlargement factor, the EU EaP program was actively proliferating in Ukraine. Considering EU EaP policies as a causal factor for Russia's aggression, defensive realists would argue that Ukraine's participation in Euro integration programs would bring the country to the NATO membership. The theory expects that, at this point, a potential threat to Russia's security emerges. Therefore, it holds that Russia annexed Crimea to stop the EU extension eastwards and constrain Ukraine's further European integration, thus diminishing the threat to its security.³⁶⁹

However, it is hardly possible to explain what level of threat to Russia's security the EU possessed. At first, Ukraine's participation in EaP does not anticipate its

³⁶⁹ Kuzio and D'Anieri, *The Sources of Russia's Great Power Politics*, 14.

membership in any military bloc, including NATO. Second, as described in the previous chapter, the EU, and Russia's economic cooperation before 2013 was substantial. Moreover, the EU till nowadays has a strong dependence on Russia's energy resources. Therefore, the European community had less interest in becoming in confrontation with Russia, especially over Ukraine. Western response to the annexation of Crimea in terms of sanctions confirms the latter. In 2014 the U.S. and the EU imposed three rounds of sanctions on Russia for its aggressive actions in Ukraine. However, Western sanctions regarding Crimea had quite a moderate effect. They included sanctions against specific individuals and enterprises that "were not significant to the Russian economy as a whole."³⁷⁰ Consequently, the most severe sanctions—the third round that impacted Russia's economy's critical sectors—were imposed after the shooting down the civilian airliner MH-17 over Donbas in July 2014. The annexation of Crimea did not trigger them.³⁷¹

Finally, if Russia considered EaP a threat to its security, realism still cannot explain why Moscow did not interfere earlier when the EaP project was at the development stage after 2008. It also fails to explain why Russia attacked Ukraine and not the other participants of European partnership programs.

2. Offensive Realism

From the offensive realism standpoint, while evaluating Russia's aggression in Crimea, it is important to consider two critical conditions that would make the theory more credible. First, Russia is seen as a power maximizer and acts aggressively once the opportunity emerged. The second condition emphasizes that it is not necessary that there should be a rising tension or danger as triggering factors to such actions. Rather, the best time for Russia to impose aggression is during the period of Western weakness.

³⁷⁰ Evsey Gurvich and Ilya Prilepskiy, "The Impact of Financial Sanctions on the Russian Economy," *Russian Journal of Economics* 1, no. 4 (December 2015): 360, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ruje.2016.02.002>.

³⁷¹ Ivan Gutterman and Wojtek Grojec, "A Timeline Of All Russia-related Sanctions," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, September 19, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-sanctions-timeline/29477179.html>.

As the previous section indicated, over 2010–2013 the West was not instigating the rising tension with Russia in terms of security prior to its aggression in Ukraine. Therefore, the state of a relatively calm environment satisfies the condition under which offensive realism can be considered.

Most scholars who look at Russia through the realist lens agree that changes in Russia's foreign policy towards a more offensive posture took root between 2007 and 2008. This time coincided with the rule of pro-Western democratic forces in Ukraine and a period of highly tense disputes with the West over security issues.³⁷² Following this assumption, it is logical to assume that Russia lacked trust in the West's promises not to interfere with Russia's sphere of interests (as discussed earlier) and was looking for the opportunity to reassure its regional hegemony.

Analyzing the state of events at the beginning of 2014, can we regard that time as a period of West's weakness? Theory cannot say exactly what should be considered as a weakness and when its condition reaches a perfect level to react. The analyses of the empirical data regarding the military balance between Russia and West, discussed in the previous section, highlight that between 2010 and 2013, NATO was pursuing the policies of reducing its military force capabilities in contrast to Russia, who was working to maximize its material power. The United States was intent on improving relations with Russia in line with its "reset" policy.³⁷³ In addition, in 2013, the EU overcame the consequences of the Eurozone crisis that struck Europe in 2011–2012. Moreover, the U.S. Obama Administration was criticized for its weakness in resolving problems in Syria, and for asking Putin for help in 2013.³⁷⁴ Finally, between 2009 and 2014, NATO and Russia's

³⁷² Kanet, *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security*, 261–62; McFaul, Sestanovich, and Mearsheimer, "Faulty Powers: Who Started the Ukraine Crisis?," 172; "Illarionov: U Kremliya Bilo Tri Popitki Zahvatit' Krim [Illarionov: Kremlin Had Three Attempts to Annex Crimea]," News and Analytics, Gordonua, January 29, 2016, <https://gordonua.com/news/crimea/illarionov-u-kremlya-bylo-tri-popytki-zahvatit-krym-117639.html>.

³⁷³ Shuster, "U.S.-Russia Relations: In Need of a New Reset."

³⁷⁴ Elliot Abrams, "Syria, Russia, and American Weakness," Analytics and Opinions, *Council on Foreign Relations* (blog), May 7, 2013, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/syria-russia-and-american-weakness>.

former satellites (Ukraine and Georgia) did not execute any practical steps regarding the approximation of the latter to join the Alliance.³⁷⁵

The latter is one of the critical factors that play in favor of offensive realism and explains why Russia could perceive that its hegemony in Ukraine was threatened. In 2008 President Putin was not satisfied by NATO's decision to leave the doors for Ukraine and Georgia open to "one day" join the Alliance.³⁷⁶ Moreover, in 2015 scheduled elections were planned in Ukraine that could end Yanukovich's time in power and bring a pro-Western ruler to power there. Therefore, in the long-term perspective, Ukraine's renovation of its aspirations to join Western institutions could emerge again.

Consequently, in terms of weakness, it can be said that in 2014 the West was rather busy with its problems, but it does not explicitly mean that it was suffering the condition of weakness, therefore, opening the window of opportunity to Russia to react.

However, in terms of opportunity, it is essential to look at Ukraine's Euromaidan as a suitable moment for Russia's invasion. In February 2015, Ukraine's President Poroshenko, referring to Ukraine's Security Service report stated, that the sniper groups that reportedly shot the demonstrators in Maidan—and therefore instigated more people's resistance in Ukraine—arrived in Kyiv from Russia. He announced that the Kremlin guided their actions. At the time of writing, the investigations regarding the shootings of the protesters in Maidan are still ongoing, so his claims are not yet confirmed.³⁷⁷ Regardless, from this standpoint, the Maidan played in favor of Russia not only in terms of justification of its aggression and therefore blaming the West in setting up the regime change in Ukraine, that fall better under constructivism and domestic politics explanation. It also gave Russia

³⁷⁵ "Ukraine Abandons NATO Ambitions"; Adrian Croft, "NATO Will Not Offer Georgia Membership Step, Avoiding Russia Clash," News and Analytics, Reuters, June 25, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato-enlargement-idUSKBN0F00IJ20140625>.

³⁷⁶ Trenin, *Post-Imperium*, 55.

³⁷⁷ Shylga Olya, "Poroshenko: Snayperamy Na Maydani Komanduvav Pomichnyk Putina Surkov [Poroshenko: Snipers on the Maidan Were Commanded by Putin's Aide Surkov]," News and Opinions, Mirror Weekly, February 20, 2015, https://zn.ua/ukr/UKRAINE/poroshenko-snayperami-na-maydani-komanduvav-pomichnik-putina-surkov-164879_.html.

a good chance to conduct Ukraine's invasion at a relatively low cost regarding the material / military losses.

Another weakness of the theory lies in its inability to explain what hegemony means for Russia, what is Ukraine's place in it, and how many of Ukraine's territory, in this case, Russia, needs to protect its material interest. From the offensive realist view, it is difficult to explain whether Crimea was enough to satisfy Russia's ambitions in protecting its hegemony in Ukraine. From that perspective, Crimea's annexation can be considered a starting point of Russia's broader strategy to invade all Ukraine or at least the eastern part of it. In this case, both cases—Crimea and Donbas—make sense to treat as a part of the Kremlin's one scenario.

In terms of Russia's goals, it is possible to approach Russia's annexation of Crimea and its invasion in Donbas from two sides. First, some proponents of realism argue that to protect its hegemony Russia was driven by the desire to reintegrate all of Ukraine around Moscow politically and economically.³⁷⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski attributes this to innate Russian imperialism, stating that “without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire.”³⁷⁹ The second approach states that Russia was not interested in occupying all of Ukraine and could be satisfied by the annexation of Crimea and invasion of a part of Ukraine. Russia needs Crimea to fulfill its A2/AD strategy, while the latter is necessary to impose Moscow's control over Ukraine's foreign and domestic politics and restrain its Western integration, thereby protecting its hegemony over Ukraine.

Analyzing both interpretations in more detail, the first one holds that the Crimea was seized to test Western reaction and see if the time is appropriate to conquer the rest of Ukraine.³⁸⁰ This explanation is widely shared by the Ukrainian political establishment in charge when the annexation happened. In this regard, Oleksandr Turchinov, who served as

³⁷⁸ Kofman, “Through a Glass Darkly,” 3.

³⁷⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, “The Premature Partnership,” *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 2 (1994): 80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045920>.

³⁸⁰ Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin,” 85.

acting President of Ukraine in 2014, in his interviews, states that Russia had been prepared for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine for a long time.³⁸¹ According to him, in October 2013, Russia conducted the “Zapad-2013” military exercises, practicing to combat insurgency helping near abroad states. He emphasized that according to intelligence reports in February 2014, Russia deployed 200 thousand troops alongside Ukraine’s border with the highest military combat readiness level.³⁸² On March 1, 2014, Russia’s Federation Council granted president Putin permission to use force in Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea was treated by Ukrainian leadership as a starting point of the Kremlin’s operation in Ukraine, which constituted its latent phase.³⁸³ In addition, the Russia/Ukraine expert Tor Bukkvoll confirmed from Kremlin sources that the Kremlin considered a full-scale invasion scenario. However, it was rejected due to the probability of high costs. Kremlin calculated that such an invasion would bring significant personnel and financial losses for Russia in a short-term perspective. In the long-term view, Moscow could face challenges caused by insurgency resistance, especially in Ukraine’s central and Western parts.³⁸⁴

On June 24, 2014, Putin asked the Federation Council to cancel the permission to use force in Ukraine, stating that Russia “used [its] armed forces to ensure the freedom of expression of the Crimeans.”³⁸⁵ Moreover, Putin rejected Russia’s forceful military

³⁸¹ Sokolova, *Oleksandr Turchynov in Rendezvous with Yanina Sokolova*.

³⁸² Sokolova.

³⁸³ Sokolova; Anjelika Rudenko and Viktoriia Veselova, “‘Aleksandr Turchinov:’ Tam gde v Krymu Vypolniali prikaz, vihodili s oruzhiem i znamenami” [‘Aleksandr Turchinov: ‘Where in Crimea the order was carried out, they went out with weapons and banners’],” *Krym.Realii* [Realities of Crimea], March 10, 2020, <https://ru.krymr.com/a/turchinov-tam-gde-v-krymu-vypolnyali-prikaz-vyhodili-s-oruzhiem-i-znamenami/30479136.html>.

³⁸⁴ Tor Bukkvoll, a private conversation with one of the Russian experts close to Russia’s military leadership.

³⁸⁵ Denis Demkin, “Putin otkazalsya ot prava vvesti voyska na Ukrainu [Putin refused the right to send troops to Ukraine],” *News and Analytics*, Reuters, June 24, 2014, <https://ru.reuters.com/article/topNews/idRUKBN0EZ11B20140624>.

involvement in Donbas. The latter confirms that Russia was not interested in full-scale warfare in Ukraine.³⁸⁶

Besides, the tactics and methods of warfare that Russia chose in Crimea and later in Donbas also indicate that the Kremlin was not oriented towards full-scale invasion. The deployment of Russia's troops around Ukraine can be treated as necessary leverage in convincing Kyiv and the West that the Kremlin was ready to go until the end in annexing Crimea and invading part of the Donbas territory he needed.³⁸⁷

The second approach in explaining Russia's goals regarding Crimea and Donbas holds that Russia uses the opportunity to conclude its A2/AD strategy and deprive the West of the possibility of reaching its borders. In respect to Crimea, Russia's robust militarization of the Peninsula that included the deployment of sophisticated air-defense systems and electronic warfare assets capable of operating at the range of 5,000 km contributes to this explanation.³⁸⁸ As for the Donbas, as it will be discussed in the next chapter in more detail, it provides Russia a tool to constrain Ukraine from joining Euro and Euro-Atlantic communities, thereby still preserving its hegemony over it. This outcome is a reality nowadays. In the military domain, occupied Ukrainian enclaves are used by Russia as a 'grey zone' that, in case of military hostilities, can be used to deter NATO forces before they reach Russia's borders.³⁸⁹ From the offensive realist standpoint, the fulfillment of these goals regarding both Crimea and Donbas gives Russia significant leverage in case of

³⁸⁶ In December 2015 during an annual press-conference President Putin, answering the question of a Ukrainian journalist, admitted, "We've never said there are no people [in Donbas] who deal with certain matters, including in the military area, but this does not mean that regular Russian troops are present there." The phrase was caught up by the media outlets interpreting that Russia's President admitted Russian military forces were engaging in combat operations in Donbas. Later, Putin's press-secretary explained that under the phrase "people, who deal with certain matters, including in the military area" Putin meant 'volunteers' and other military personnel whose deployment there was authorized by the Minsk agreement—e.g. Joint Centre for Control and Co-ordination (JCCC) in Donbas. In fact, disregarding irrefutable evidence of Russian regular troops fighting in Ukraine, Kremlin officials never officially confirmed that Russia's military forces participated in Donbas combat operations.

³⁸⁷ Solovyov, *The President*.

³⁸⁸ Roger N McDermott, *Russia's Electronic Warfare Capabilities to 2025: Challenging NATO in the Electromagnetic Spectrum* (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, 2017), 14, https://www.icds.ee/fileadmin/media/icds.ee/doc/ICDS_Report_Russias_Electronic_Warfare_to_2025.pdf.

³⁸⁹ Pettyjohn and Wasser, *COMPETING IN THE GRAY ZONE*.

confrontation with the Alliance. Moreover, this would impact NATO's ability to respond decisively to probable Russian hostilities in other areas of potential confrontation.³⁹⁰

In sum, speaking about realism in general, the main question is whether the West itself is interested in a material confrontation with Russia. The evidence shows that Russia's material interests were unlikely to be in danger. Indeed, the material factors cannot be completely ruled out from Kremlin's calculus and they should be considered as significant contributors to the explanatory power in the case of Crimea. The conventional threat to Russia's security or hegemony from the Alliance in the case of Crimea was rather imaginary and was used by Russia's political elites more to influence international and domestic audiences. However, the latter adds to the conclusion that the Kremlin was driven by additional factors beyond material ones while annexing Crimea, which can be better explained through constructivism or domestic politics explanations.

B. CONSTRUCTIVISM

Constructivists would argue that Russia annexed Crimea as a means to protect its identity as a hegemon over eastern Slavic nations and former Soviet republics, and as a European Great power. From this standpoint Russia was motivated by ideational motives that pushed Russian leaders towards assertive actions aimed at the preservation of Russia's great-power identity. This identity establishes Russia's national interest, which in turn shapes Russia's foreign policy choices. From an identity standpoint, Russian leaders believe that great power status entitles Russia to respect and specific privileges and rights that other lesser states do not possess.

In contrast to realism, constructivist theories look beyond material resources and threats to identify the source of a state's behavior. In the case of Russia, the analysis of certain historical events helps to better understand Moscow's behavioral patterns.

As it was mentioned in the previous section in 2008 Russia's then-president Dmitri Medvedev stated that Ukraine belongs to Russia's sphere of privileged interests which

³⁹⁰ Kanet, *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security*, 262.

Russia will protect at all means.³⁹¹ From the constructivist prism, the notion of interest does not have an only material background (as in realism) and can be explained by the strong historical, cultural, and ideational ties between Ukraine and Russia. Therefore, dominance over Ukraine is argued to be central to Russia's great power identity. In this regard, constructivists argue that Russia's aggression first in Crimea, and then in Donbas, is the result of its reaction towards multiple external and internal factors which directly affect Russia's great power identity.

The external factors include the Western lack of recognition of Russia's status—evidenced by Western promotion democracy and influencing Ukraine to pursue deeper Euro and Euro-Atlantic integration. They serve as causal triggers of the Western threat to Russia's great power status by denying its ambitions to be treated as an equal actor.

The internal factors involve Russia's elites as the drivers for Russia's leadership to regain and protect the state's great power status by the de-facto occupation of Crimea and invasion in Donbas. Those elites, particularly hardliners and radical nationalists, feeling the repeated experience of status immobility, which is manifested in Western denial of Russia's status ambitions, push Russia's leaders toward aggression.

1. Social Identity Theory: Externally Oriented Status-Seeking

Scholars see Russia's annexation of Crimea as a result of its assertive and volatile response towards Western policies. The theory suggests that Russia remains very sensitive to its self-image as a great power. Its source of the foreign policy depends on aspirations for global recognition concurrently preserving state's national identity.³⁹² Any humiliation and disrespect perceived by Russia can be seen as a cause of its aggressive reaction. This theory suggests that Russia's annexation of Crimea was the result of a threat to Russia's status as a great power. In this manner, Russia reacted to a perceived humiliation from the West since the end of the Cold War, which was contributed by the Western attempts to facilitate Ukraine's Euro and Euro-Atlantic integration, therefore encroaching on Russia's

³⁹¹ "Dmitry Medvedev's interview with Russian Television Channels Has Been Published," President of Russia, August 31, 2008, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/1276>.

³⁹² Larson and Shevchenko, "Russia Says No," 270.

sphere of privileged interests. This in turn projected a direct threat to Russia's status and identity as a great European power. In this case, Russia blames the external status hierarchy, dominated by the United States, for not recognizing Russia as a great power. This continued lack of recognition is the main trigger of Russia's aggression. Russia acted aggressively to restore its threatened great power status and restore the desired status hierarchy. To support this argument, social identity theorists turn to Russia's post-Cold War history.

Larson and Shevchenko argue that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia suffered a deep identity crisis. According to them this crisis rooted to Russia's self-image as a great power and Western denial to accept that status.³⁹³ Scholars argue that Western policies within the last two decades, in particular NATO enlargement eastwards, ignore Russia's interest in overseas operations or support of pro-democratic revolutions in post-Soviet states, Russia treated "as humiliating interference in [its] backyard."³⁹⁴

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in one of his articles, said, that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, people had the impression that Russia was simply "written off [the world stage] as material for a new territorial and political re-division of the world."³⁹⁵ Given the views of the Russian elite, Dmitry Trenin summarizes that in Moscow to this day the conviction prevails that the West did not give Russia the status that it deserves after the end of the Cold War.³⁹⁶

Since that time, Ukraine's course Westwards, Russia treated negatively. The Closest in time to Russia's occupation of Crimea are events surrounding Ukraine's relations with the European Union. In November 2013 Russian leaders regarded Ukraine's joining the free-trade partnership program with the EU as an insult to Russia's interests. Moscow applied pressure on Kyiv not to sign the treaty with the EU, and to join instead of

³⁹³ Larson and Shevchenko, 272.

³⁹⁴ Larson and Shevchenko, 273.

³⁹⁵ Sergei Lavrov, "Nastoyashcheye i budushcheye global'noy politiki: vzglyad iz Moskvyy [Present and future of global politics: a view from Moscow]," *Russia in Global Affairs* 6, no. November/December (December 4, 2019), <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/nastoyashhee-i-budushhee-globalnoj-politiki-vzglyad-iz-moskvyy-2/>.

³⁹⁶ Trenin, "Russia Leaves the West," 91.

the Russian led economic project—the Eurasian Customs Union—as an alternative to the West. Russia viewed the EU’s Eastern Partnership program (EaP) as not only a threat to its economic interests but as another Western instance to put Russia “into a corner.”³⁹⁷ In 2009 at the EU summit in Khabarovsk, Russian president Dmitri Medvedev stated that his European colleagues failed to convince him that EaP was not harmful to Russia’s interests and named the program as a “partnership against Russia.”³⁹⁸

Moscow did not forcibly constrain Ukraine from joining the EaP at that time. However, Charap and Colton argue that the last moment before signing the Association Agreement the Kremlin pushed Ukraine to work out with the EU amendments to the agreement that considered Russia’s interests. Both Ukraine and the EU omitted this initiative due to the lack of time.³⁹⁹ This move was treated as another sign of Western humiliation of Russia’s status and identity.

Another issue, more remote in time to Crimea’s occupation that affected Russia’s status and identity was the West’s security policies in Central and Eastern Europe. Russia places the U.S. and its foreign policy at the center of its problems in relations with the West. In particular, in 2007 during the Munich Security Conference, President Putin sharply criticized U.S. foreign policy in Central and Eastern Europe.⁴⁰⁰ In 2008 Russia felt humiliated when Ukraine and Georgia applied to join the NATO MAP during the NATO Summit in Bucharest. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the event ended up with Putin’s menace to seize Crimea and Ukraine’s east and to target nuclear weapons on Ukraine in case it joins the Alliance.⁴⁰¹

Especially sensitive for Moscow was the question BSF deployed in Crimea and its future perspective if Ukraine joins the Alliance. Russian leaders saw Sevastopol as a city

³⁹⁷ Kuzio and D’Anieri, *The Sources of Russia’s Great Power Politics*, 81.

³⁹⁸ James Marson, “Putin to the West: Hands off Ukraine,” *Time*, May 25, 2009, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1900838,00.html>.

³⁹⁹ Samuel Charap and Timothy J. Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia*, Adelphi Series 460 (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 105–6.

⁴⁰⁰ Trenin, *Post-Imperium*, 54–55.

⁴⁰¹ Zyiglar, *The whole Kremlin army*, 110.

of Russia's military glory and birthplace of BSF. Ukraine's attempts to expel the fleet in 2009 are still well remembered in Russia. Therefore, any attempts to remove the fleet Russia perceived as a severe humiliation of its status.

Russia reportedly perceived constant disputes with the West as a significant threat to its status and prestige.⁴⁰² In this regard, Dmitri Trenin argues that Russian post-Soviet foreign policy contained Russia's attempts to integrate into the West; reintegrate the post-Soviet states around Moscow; and create there a center of power in Eurasia. Any move of the West towards post-Soviet states Russia regarded as a threat to its interests.⁴⁰³

The constructivist theory on status suggests that "emotions of anger and vengefulness associated with not receiving due recognition [can lead] to offensive reaction."⁴⁰⁴ That anger and resentment can build up over time. If the opportunity arises, those negative emotions manifest themselves in the form of aggression. Such behavior is not new in Russian history. Russia suffered a serious blow to its status after the defeat in the Crimean War. Then, Prince Gorchakov expressed his famous phrase, "La Russie ne boude pa, mais se recueille" ("Russia is not sulking, it is collecting herself"). The latter principle formed the basis of foreign policy beliefs and the line of behavior of the Russian contemporary leadership.⁴⁰⁵ As a particular example, scholars bring Russia's invasion of Georgia in August 2008 that followed the disrespect of Russia's status in the form of a March 2008 NATO joint communique stating that Georgia and Ukraine would one day join NATO.⁴⁰⁶ In turn, the Western challenge of Russia's status and refusal to treat Russia as an equal partner could lead to its aggression in Ukraine in 2014.

⁴⁰² Larson and Shevchenko, "Russia Says No," 274–75.

⁴⁰³ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Spheres of Interest, Not Influence," *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (September 23, 2009): 3–4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01636600903231089>; Mikhail Sokolov, "Posle geopoliticheskoi katastrofi [After geopolitical catastrophe]," Radio Liberty, March 7, 2019, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29808358.html>.

⁴⁰⁴ Larson and Shevchenko, "Russia Says No," 273.

⁴⁰⁵ Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia's Resurgence*, 154.

⁴⁰⁶ Clunan, "Historical Aspirations and the Domestic Politics of Russia's Pursuit of International Status," 288–89.

In addition to the security issues, Russia finds pro-democratic changes of power in the post-Soviet countries as particular acts of humiliation. The coming to power of the pro-Western forces in Ukraine in 2014 as the result of the revolution Moscow perceived as a threat to Russia's status and interests. Putin directly blamed the West for the 2013–2014 pro-democratic revolution in Ukraine. In March 2014, after signing the formal incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation, President Putin in his address pointed out the misdeeds done by the West,

...they [Western states] have lied to us many times, made decisions behind our backs, placed us before an accomplished fact. This happened with NATO's expansion to the East, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure at our borders. They kept telling us the same thing: "Well, this does not concern you." That's easy to say...

[Western states] are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position, because we maintain it and because we call things like they are and do not engage in hypocrisy. But there is a limit to everything. And with Ukraine, our Western partners have crossed the line, playing the bear and acting irresponsibly and unprofessionally.⁴⁰⁷

Such rhetoric reflects Putin's conviction that the situation in Ukraine is only the result of a long confrontation between Russia and the West that arose as an outcome of the West's refusal to treat Russia with the respect and as an equal partner. Emphasizing "crossing the line," his indignation against the West has been accumulating for a long time, making Ukraine the critical point of no return. Putin himself stated that the decision to annex Crimea was partially prompted in response to the West's violations of promises regarding Russia's interests.⁴⁰⁸ Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy argue that the military intervention in Ukraine can be treated as a demonstration to the West that Russia's interests should no longer be ignored.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁷ "Vladimir Putin Addressed State Duma."

⁴⁰⁸ Vladimir Putin, "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin," Official Page, President of Russia, April 17, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796>.

⁴⁰⁹ Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*, Paperback edition (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 378.

Russia has seen the West's hand in both revolutions in Ukraine—Orange Revolution (2004) and the Revolution of Dignity (2013-2014)—that led the pro-Western governments to come to power in Kyiv. In this regard, Russia had a bitter experience with Ukrainian president Yushchenko's administration in 2004 when the relations between Kyiv and Moscow suffered huge instability. At that time Kyiv pursued policies—condemnation of the Soviet leadership for their brutality during WWII, support for Euro- and Euro-Atlantic integration, efforts to increase the status of Ukrainian language—that Russia perceived as disrespectful of its interests and values.⁴¹⁰ When Yushchenko came to power, he received widespread support in the West which saw his accession to power as the victory of democracy in Ukraine.⁴¹¹

Therefore, the revolutionary changes of power in Ukraine could be seen by Russia not only as a geopolitical threat to Russia but also as a humiliation and attempts aimed to challenge Russia's role and status in Eurasian continent, which in 2014 Kremlin decided not to tolerate. During his speech in the Valdai discussion club on October 24, 2014, Putin once again blamed the West for Ukraine's changes of power, and therefore, violating Russia's sphere of interests.⁴¹²

Consequently, the success of Euromaidan and Yanukovich's ouster in February 2014 opened the window for opportunity for Russia's aggression in Ukraine. The first question rises why Russia decided to start with Crimea. The reasons for such choice surely have some material background in terms of Russia's security and force projection as it was discussed earlier in the realism subsection. However, not less compelling reasons lay in the historical significance of the peninsula for Russia that takes its roots from the tsarist era making Crimea a subject of national pride, which is not less important from a constructivist standpoint. Hence, the latter is also important for domestic politics lenses.

⁴¹⁰ Tsygankov, "Vladimir Putin's Last Stand," 291.

⁴¹¹ Oleksa Semenchenko, "Chy ne zarano Zakhid pryypnyv pidtrymku Ukrayiny? [Isn't it too early for the West to stop supporting Ukraine?]," News and Opinions, Radio Svoboda, April 12, 2007, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/962338.html>.

⁴¹² "Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club," President of Russia, October 24, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46860>.

In terms of timing, constructivism (as realism) is hard to provide a precise explanation of why Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. However, it looks at values and ideology that rooted in history, and not on the material factors that surrounded Russia right before aggression. In the case of Crimea, the constructivist approach seems more compelling. From this perspective, when facts on the ground turning against Moscow and opportunity emerges, it imposes aggression based on the menace accumulated after a period of feeling either disrespected and suffering insults [in the constructivist view] or a slew of material threats [in the realist view]. However, in regard to the latter, as it was discussed in the realist section, the perspective of NATO membership for Ukraine or threat to Russia's security doesn't seem that real in Ukraine's case prior to 2014. Furthermore, as Michael McFaul, U.S. Ambassador to Russia during the Obama administration, claims that in 2014 the United States was not pursuing close cooperation with Ukraine or the goal of Ukrainian membership in NATO.⁴¹³ In addition, between 2009 and 2013 Moscow and the West/US showed signs of cooperation in multiple security issues.⁴¹⁴

Overall, the social identity theoretical framework points out that Ukraine has always played an important role in Russia. The two states had close historical, cultural, and ethnic connections. Moreover, in the foreign policy domain, Kremlin attributes Ukraine to its privileged spheres of interest and considers it an integral part of the Russia-led Eurasian project. In turn, Western policies within recent decades including support of Ukraine's Euro and Euro-Atlantic aspirations jeopardized Russia's perception of threat to its great power status and consequently made the Ukraine-Russia conflict possible.

It seems like before 2014 Kremlin was not ready to risk its relations with the West over Ukraine, and was relying on political and economic pressure to keep Ukraine in its orbit. However, in 2014 the departure of Yanukovich marked a point of no return in holding Kyiv under control and opened the window of opportunity for Russia to react. Consequently, Russia neglected probable costs and placed its identity and interests in the foreground.

⁴¹³ Kathryn Stoner and Michael McFaul, "Who Lost Russia (This Time)? Vladimir Putin," *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (April 3, 2015): 172–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1064716>.

⁴¹⁴ Stoner and McFaul, 172.

The level of effectiveness of the Crimea's annexation in reducing a threat to Russia's great power status is difficult to measure. Nevertheless, the Kremlin's assertive politics considerably reflected in the rise in national self-pride. In October 2012 according to the Levada Center survey, only 48 percent of the Russian population considered Russia as a great power.⁴¹⁵ However, in March 2014, just after the annexation of Crimea, this number leaped to 63 percent.⁴¹⁶ This indicator has more implications for the domestic politics explanation, however it reflects that Russia's self-perception of great power status significantly improved.

At the same time, the theory sees Russia's annexation of Crimea as a starting point in the Kremlin's overall goal to constrain Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic integration as well as to demonstrate to the West the consequences of threatening its great power status and identity. Crimea in this story is limited. The peninsula was incorporated into Russia as a separate federal unit. Therefore, it loses its role as a tool for keeping Ukraine under Russia's control. This role nowadays is dedicated to Donbas which is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. Moreover, Russia refrains from any international discussion regarding the status of Crimea considering it as an integral part of the Russian Federation.

Such an outcome needs additional clarification. To make the status-seeking argument more powerful it is necessary to pay attention to the internal processes in Russia and the role of domestic elites in shaping the Kremlin's a foreign policy decision concerning Crimea.

2. Status Immobility: Internally Driven Status-Seeking

Steven Ward argues that repeated experience of "status immobility" by the Russian elites can empower hardliners and radical nationalists to push the state's foreign policy toward aggression. In this case, domestic elites' aspirations to protect the state's great

⁴¹⁵ "Natsional'naya Identichnost' I Gordost' [National Identity And Pride]," Research Center, Levada-Center, January 1, 2019, <https://www.levada.ru/2019/01/17/natsionalnaya-identichnost-i-gordost/>.

⁴¹⁶ "Natsional'naya Identichnost' I Gordost'."

power status shape leaders' foreign policy behavior.⁴¹⁷ This theory suggests that Russian leaders decided to annex Crimea to demonstrate that they are upholding Russia's great power status to satisfy the domestic elites—namely hardliners and radical nationalists—and ensure their support of Putin and his regime. Crimea was the right place to act considering its ideational, symbolic, or even geostrategic meaning for the elites. Once the opportunity emerged in 2014, these elites pushed Putin towards annexation. The consequences of the annexation of Crimea cost significant losses for some of those elites in terms of Western sanctions, persona non-grata status in Ukraine, EU, and the U.S.⁴¹⁸ However, their ideational considerations placed status and prestige on the foreground.

The system of power of President Putin is often seen as a pyramid, where he himself is the central figure. However, it is not a rigid hierarchy ruled by only one person. The system of power in Russia is rather a mixture of elite clans and groups consolidated around Putin. According to Yevgeny Minchenko, these conglomerate of clans constitutes a “the locus of real decision-making in Russia.”⁴¹⁹ He stresses that Putin there is the most influential figure and has a final word. He acts as an arbiter between these groups and clans and therefore retains his power balancing between their interests.⁴²⁰

The hardliners in Russia constitute a substantial part of these elites. Some of them have direct access to President Putin and therefore can be a part of his decision-making in certain issues.⁴²¹ Hardliners in Russia also include the proponents of ultra-right, neo-imperialist views. Donald Jensen, based on his analyses, split Russia's hardliners into two main antagonizing camps—“war party” and “corporate” Russia. The most famous

⁴¹⁷ Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*, 3–5.

⁴¹⁸ “How Far Do EU-US Sanctions on Russia Go?,” News and Analytics, BBC News, September 15, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28400218>; “US Issues ‘Putin List’ but Avoids Sanctions,” News and Analytics, BBC News, January 30, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-42870021>.

⁴¹⁹ Evgeny Minchenko, “Politburo 2.0: Can Putin's Inner Circle Survive the Crisis?,” Analytics and Opinions, *Center on Global Interests* (blog), April 2, 2015, <https://globalinterests.org/2015/04/02/politburo-2-0-can-putins-inner-circle-survive-the-crisis-2/>; Donald N. Jensen, “Are the Kremlin Hardliners Winning?,” Institute of Modern Russia, October 1, 2014, <https://imrussia.org/en/analysis/world/2041-are-the-kremlin-hardliners-winning>.

⁴²⁰ Minchenko, “Politburo 2.0.”

⁴²¹ Jensen, “Are the Kremlin Hardliners Winning?”

members of the former group are Director of the Federal Security Service (FSB) Alexander Bortnikov, Director of External Intelligence Service in 2007–2016 (SVR) Mikhail Fradkov, Secretary of the Security Council Nikolay Patrushev, Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu, Putin’s economic advisor Sergey Glazyev, Director General of Roscosmos Dmitry Rogozin, Director General of Rostec Sergei Chemezov, businessman Konstantin Malofeyev, Vladimir Yakunin, and Yury Kovalchuk, neo-nationalist and Russophile Aleksander Dugin, and others. This camp reportedly supported the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the formation of Novorossiia. The latter group includes Putin’s assistant Vladislav Surkov, ideologist Sergei Kurginyan, some members of Dmitri Medvedev’s cabinet, or members of Yeltsin’s family, and others.⁴²² They favored the war in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in general. However, they had more limited goals.

Most of Russia’s elites, firmly believed that Crimea was an integral part of their country’s heritage and military glory. Some of them saw Crimea as a geostrategic stronghold for Russia’s security and home station of Russian BSF. Despite the variety of factors determining Crimea’s importance, most of the elites perceived the status of Crimea as a part of Ukraine as unnatural and believed that it became Ukrainian accidentally.⁴²³

Many sources emphasize that Putin himself had a certain ideological attachment to the Crimea. Putin apparently considers Ukraine an artificial country and ‘failed state’ that throughout history received its lands from Russia.⁴²⁴ Particularly, after his reelection in 2012, Putin in his inner circle continually insisted on the necessity to deal with Ukraine.⁴²⁵ In respect to Crimea, Putin openly emphasized that the loss of the peninsula was “outrageous historical injustice” in Russian history.⁴²⁶ The same point of view was expressed by Russian writer and Noble Price winner Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his work

⁴²² Jensen.

⁴²³ Fedor Lukyanov.

⁴²⁴ Kuzio and D’Anieri, *The Sources of Russia’s Great Power Politics*, 11; Gordon, *Kto i kak pomog Putinu ukrast’ Krim. Dokumental’noe rassledovanie* [Who and how helped Putin to seize Crimea. Documentary investigation].

⁴²⁵ Zyiglar, *The whole Kremlin army*, 193; Tor Bukkvoll, “Why Putin Went to War: Ideology, Interests, and Decision-Making in the Russian Use of Force in Crimea and Donbas,” *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201310>.

⁴²⁶ “Vladimir Putin Addressed State Duma.”

“Gulag archipelago” (1974) whom Putin was noticed citing.⁴²⁷ Russian journalist Aleksei Venediktov stated that in 2008 during his conversation with President Putin, he mentioned that Crimea should equitably belong to Russia.⁴²⁸

In this regard, Fedor Lukyanov argues that the idea of Crimea’s return to Russia remained on the agenda in Kremlin’s political circles since the dissolution of the Soviet Union.⁴²⁹ Crimea was a subject of particular interest for the representatives of Russian business elites and some politicians. In the 2000s the Russian Member of Parliament Konstantin Zatulin has repeatedly spoken out publicly that Russia can easily take Crimea from Ukraine in case of necessity. During that time, he was frequently noticed participating in pro-Russian demonstrations in Crimea, including against joint NATO-Ukraine maritime exercises. Therefore, he was declared as persona non-grata by Ukraine’s authorities for three times for “instigating interethnic hostilities and threat to Ukraine’s sovereignty and integrity.”⁴³⁰ Businessmen Anatoliy Chubais, for instance, in one of the interviews in 2003 proposed a more “liberal” approach to seize Crimea. He stated that it can be taken from Ukraine through constant involvement of Russia’s investments and a raise of pro-Russia’s sentiments among the population that will facilitate Crimea’s formal accession to Russia.⁴³¹ One of the most prominent proponents of the Crimea’s return to Russia was the former Moscow Mayor Yurii Luzhkov. Despite very cool relations with Putin and Medvedev, Luzhkov enjoyed strong authority with Russia’s business circle.⁴³² Since the 90s he used his power and resources to promote Russia’s interests and pro-Russian sentiments in the

⁴²⁷ Howard and Pukhov, *Brothers Armed*.

⁴²⁸ Gordon, *Kto i kak pomog Putinu ukrast’ Krim. Dokumental’noe rassledovanie [Who and how helped Putin to seize Crimea. Documentary investigation]*.

⁴²⁹ Fedor Lukyanov.

⁴³⁰ “Zatulin Wants Russian Foreign Ministry to Find out When Ukraine Lifts His Persona Non Grata Status,” News and Opinions, KyivPost, October 28, 2009, <https://www.kyivpost.com/article/content/ukraine-politics/zatulin-wants-russian-foreign-ministry-to-find-out-51425.html>.

⁴³¹ “Chubais: Liberal’naya imperiya – eto zakhvat Ukrainy rossiyskim biznesom [Chubais: Liberal Empire is the seizure of Ukraine by Russian business],” News and Opinions, Pravda, November 13, 2003, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2003/11/13/4375407/>.

⁴³² Howard and Pukhov, *Brothers Armed*, 12; Zyigar, *The whole Kremlin army*, 98–99.

peninsula.⁴³³ These people were known for their strong anti-Western sentiments and considered any potential NATO/U.S. presence in Crimea as humiliation.⁴³⁴

Here comes the weakness of the theory, as constructivism cannot explain the timing of aggression, namely why the Kremlin did not decide to do it prior to 2014. As mentioned above, in the 2000s Russian elites were more open in their statements in regard to Crimea's status. Moreover, in 2006 Russia's State Duma ordered the Parliamentary committees to work out measures to return the Crimea peninsula to Russia.⁴³⁵ However, at that time, Kremlin rulers abstained from making open statements in regard to Crimea's status, preferring not to escalate relations with Ukraine which were already tensed over gas wars and BSF questions. Moreover, Putin himself emphasized in 2006 that Russia should respect Ukraine's territorial integrity and Kyiv's decision about BSF stating, "Today we need to proceed from the realities that have developed. Crimea is a part of the Ukrainian state, and we cannot interfere in the internal affairs of another country."⁴³⁶

Consequently, the status immobility of Russia's elites at that time could only escalate due to the behavior of both Ukraine and also the Kremlin rulers. However, in 2010 Yanukovych's accession of power in Kyiv allowed Russia to regain its position in Ukraine, including resolving the BSF issue. Nevertheless, the memory of humiliation stayed.

Mihail Zyigar argues, that by the fall of 2013 when pro-Western demonstrations started in Kyiv, the issue about Crimea became a daily topic for discussion among security officials and business elites close to Kremlin. The most robust proponents of this topic were the head of Rosneft and Luzhkov's friend, Igor Sechin, and the head of Russian Railways Vladimir Yakunin.⁴³⁷

⁴³³ Howard and Pukhov, *Brothers Armed*, 11–12.

⁴³⁴ Lyubov' Pyatiletova, "Potomki ne prostyat [Descendants will not forgive]," *Rosiiskaya gazeta*, July 25, 2008, 4715 edition, <https://rg.ru/2008/07/25/luzhkov.html>.

⁴³⁵ "Gosduma Trebuyet Vernut' Krym Rossii? [Does State Duma Demands to Return the Crimea to Russia?]," News and Opinions, Vecherniy Kharkov, May 29, 2006, <https://vecherniy.kharkov.ua/news/4229/>.

⁴³⁶ "Transcript of the Hot Line with President of Russia Vladimir Putin," President of Russia, October 25, 2006, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23864>.

⁴³⁷ Zyigar, *The whole Kremlin army*, 193.

The annexation of Crimea was widely supported in nationalist circles. A particular role in the promotion of this idea was played by neo-nationalist Aleksander Dugin. His neo-Eurasian ideology is built on neo-imperialist views and focused on Russia's rights as a great power. It played an important role in the formation of the ideological basics of Russia's nationalist elites and politicians since the 1990s.⁴³⁸ Neo-Eurasianists assert that Russians and the non-Russian peoples, who lived under the rule of the Russian empire and the Soviet Union share a common historical identity. Therefore, they see the political and economic reintegration of the former Soviet states into a unified space under Moscow's supervision as a consistent pattern.⁴³⁹ In his academic works, Dugin described Crimea as a stronghold of geostrategic importance for Russia. In his view, Crimea as a part of Ukraine creates an imminent threat to Russia and therefore must be annexed.⁴⁴⁰ Kirill Kalinin writes that Dugin's theory looked like a "practical guide to rebuilding the Russian Empire."⁴⁴¹ He continues, that Dugin's work *Osnovy Geopolitiki* (The Foundations of Geopolitics) was used as a text-book on international relations in higher educational institutions of the country, especially in political and military ones.⁴⁴²

In 2008 Dugin openly called Russian leaders to annex Crimea from Ukraine.⁴⁴³ Halya Coynash, the human rights specialist, stated that the influence of Dugin's neo-Eurasianist ideology on the annexation of Crimea was beyond any doubts.⁴⁴⁴ At the same time, it is important not to consider Dugin as a single driving element of Russia's nationalism system. Dugin and his ideology is only the visible tip of the iceberg in the hierarchy of Russian elites, the analysis of which makes it possible to understand the level of their probable impact on the state policies.

⁴³⁸ Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism*, 103–4.

⁴³⁹ Laruelle, 41.

⁴⁴⁰ Dugin, *Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia: English Translation*, 217.

⁴⁴¹ Kalinin, "Neo-Eurasianism and the Russian Elite," 461.

⁴⁴² Kalinin, 461.

⁴⁴³ Dina Newman, "Russian Nationalist Sees War with Ukraine," News and Analytics, BBC News, July 10, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28229785>.

⁴⁴⁴ Halya Coynash, "Intrigue over 'Dismissal' of Putin's Ideologue, Alexander Dugin," Human Rights in Ukraine, July 2, 2014, <http://khpg.org/en/index.php?id=1404029911>.

Aleksander Dugin was able to maintain a close connection to Putin's circle via the ultra-nationalist, neo-imperialist organization Izborskii Club.⁴⁴⁵ Piotr Eberhardt argues that the Club is famous for its analytical studies on Russia's geopolitics and its future prospects. Club's basic concepts propound the idea of geopolitical transformation of Central Eastern Europe and its subdivision between Russian and German areas of influence.⁴⁴⁶

The Club includes such personalities as Konstantin Malofeev, Nataliia Narochinskaya, neo-fascist Alexander Prokhanov, Bishop Tikhon (Shevkunov), who is alleged to be Putin's spiritual advisor, and retired general and Dugin's supporter Leonid Ivashov. The latter served as an influential liaison between Russian nationalists and the military.⁴⁴⁷ Russian high-ranking politicians Dmitri Rogozin and Sergei Glazyev provide the Club with significant political support. Moreover, the Club openly propagates the concept of the Eurasian project where Dugin developed an ideological aspect and Glazyev introduced its structural component—Kremlin-backed Eurasian Union.⁴⁴⁸

The inherent features of the Club's members are strong anti-Western sentiments. Narochinskaya in her works portrays the West as a threat to Russian civilization and its cultural and orthodox values were the main battlefield in Ukraine.⁴⁴⁹ Prokhanov considered his life mission to start another Cold War with the West.⁴⁵⁰ Malofeev and Glazyev were less open in their anti-Western rhetoric before 2013. However, after the escalation of Ukraine's crisis, the former started openly call Russia for tough actions to protect Russia's

⁴⁴⁵ Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism*, 139.

⁴⁴⁶ Piotr Eberhardt, "The Izborsk Club and Their Geopolitical Phantasmagorias," *Studia Polityczne* 46, no. 3 (2018): 129.

⁴⁴⁷ Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism*, 139.

⁴⁴⁸ Laruelle, 145, 148.

⁴⁴⁹ Nataliia Narochinskaya, "Ukraine: Istoricheskaya Retrospektiva I Geopoliticheskaya Perspektiva [Ukraine: Historical Retrospective And Geopolitical Perspective]," *Opinions*, Pravoslavie.ru, December 2, 2004, <https://pravoslavie.ru/5154.html>.

⁴⁵⁰ Ellen Barry, "Foes of America in Russia Crave Rupture in Ties," *The New York Times*, March 15, 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/16/world/europe/foes-of-america-in-russia-crave-rupture-in-ties.html>.

historical memory from the West. The latter blamed the West, particularly the U.S. in reshaping the world economic order.⁴⁵¹

During the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine in 2014, the Club stood in line with the Russian propaganda machine portraying Ukraine's crisis as a military coup in Kyiv conducted by ultra-rights fascist forces under Western guidance.⁴⁵²

It is believed that Dugin's views are very popular among the Russian hardliner elites—'war party' that includes the members of the so-called *siloviki* group.⁴⁵³ In Russia, *siloviki* are called politicians who came into politics from the military, law enforcement, and intelligence agencies. The key figures in the *siloviki* include Igor Sechin, Nikolai Patrushev, Vladimir Yakunin, Alexander Bortnikov, Dmitry Rogozin, Sergei Ivanov, and others.⁴⁵⁴

Joss Meakins, citing Ian Bremmer and Samuel Charap, argues that these individuals pursue different political views, however, they share a similar outlook preferring "political control, orthodox nationalism, and economic statism."⁴⁵⁵ He continues that, they also share a militant mentality and strong anti-Western views. They consider any Western encroachment on Russia's spheres of interest as a threat to its security and great power status. They see the security and military forces as the defenders of Russia in its confrontation with the West.⁴⁵⁶ Their anti-Western sentiments are rooted in their experience working in the security environment, where the West was always portrayed as

⁴⁵¹ "Konstantin Malofeyev: Rossiya dolzhna zhostko reagirovat' na oskorbleniye istoricheskoy pamyati [Konstantin Malofeev: Russia must react toughly to the insult of historical memory]," *Opinions, Izborskii Club* (blog), May 15, 2020, <http://izborsk.md/konstantin-malofeev-rossija-dolzhna-zhystko-otvetit-za-oskorblenie-istoricheskoy-pamjati/>; Sergey Glazyev, "Sergey Glaz'yev i Konstantin Malofeyev: Krizis kak vozmozhnost' operezhayushchego razvitiya Rossii [Sergei Glazyev and Konstantin Malofeev: Crisis as an opportunity for Russia's advanced development]," *Opinions, Izborskii Club* (blog), June 10, 2020, <https://izborsk-club.ru/19437>.

⁴⁵² Aleksandr Nagorniy, "Uroki Kiyevskogo perevorota [Lessons from the Kiev coup]," *Opinions, Izborskii Club*, February 27, 2014, <https://izborsk-club.ru/2610>.

⁴⁵³ Jensen, "Are the Kremlin Hardliners Winning?"

⁴⁵⁴ Joss I. Meakins, "Squabbling 'Siloviki': Factionalism Within Russia's Security Services," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 31, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 257, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2018.1417525>; Jensen, "Are the Kremlin Hardliners Winning?"

⁴⁵⁵ Meakins, "Squabbling *Siloviki*," 257.

⁴⁵⁶ Meakins, 257.

an adversary and threat to both Russia's security and status. Kryshtanovskaya and White explain the "silovik ideology" as follows:

The state is the basis of society; therefore, the state should be strong. A strong state controls everything... A strong state should also control the economy, at least its natural resources, which cannot be allowed to remain in private hands. Pluralism of opinions is dangerous as it undermines the state from within. There is still an external enemy — the West — and this means that a strong army is needed, and a powerful armaments industry... [T]he aim of Russia itself should be to be feared, as only those who are feared are respected.⁴⁵⁷

Moreover, Putin himself is a *silovik*. Before his political career, he was a KGB officer and shares the same system of beliefs. Some of these men form Putin's closest inner circle and have a significant influence on his decisions.⁴⁵⁸

Denis Volkov writes that Siloviki are the most influential group in Russia's power hierarchy. Moreover, they are strong enough to be able to threaten Putin's rule. Therefore, the satisfaction of their ambitions makes them less interested in radical changes in the hierarchy of power.⁴⁵⁹

Former Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov emphasized that Putin's immediate circle played a particular role in his decision to annex Crimea.⁴⁶⁰ As Mihail Zyigar argues, the night this decision was taken, Putin was with his closest advisors from the siloviki group—Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Secretary of the Security Council of Russia Nikolai Patrushev, the head of the Federal Security Service Alexander Bortnikov, and the head of the Presidential Administration Sergei Ivanov.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁷ Ol'ga Kryshtanovskaya and Stephen White, "Inside the Putin Court: A Research Note," *Europe-Asia Studies* 57, no. 7 (November 2005): 1073, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130500302830>.

⁴⁵⁸ Meakins, "Squabbling *Siloviki*," 257.

⁴⁵⁹ Denis Volkov, "Russian Elite Opinion After Crimea," *Analytics and Opinions*, Carnegie Moscow Center, March 23, 2016, 14, <https://carnegie.ru/2016/03/23/russian-elite-opinion-after-crimea-pub-63094>.

⁴⁶⁰ Gordon, *Kto i kak pomog Putinu ukrast' Krim. Dokumental'noe rassledovanie* [Who and how helped Putin to seize Crimea. Documentary investigation].

⁴⁶¹ Zyigar, *The whole Kremlin army*, 192.

Reportedly Putin himself brought the Crimea issue up for discussion. Nikolai Patrushev and Sergei Ivanov particularly insisted on the annexation; Sergei Shoigu argued against it because he had to be responsible for carrying out the operation.⁴⁶²

An important role in the process of the annexation of Crimea was played by the Russian businessman and nationalist Konstantin Malofeev. Malofeev is also known for his friendship with Aleksandr Dugin, Sergei Glazyev, and ties with Izborskii Club. According to various sources, Malofeev has ultra-right, imperialist views and is a great proponent of Orthodox Christianity. He has strong links with Russia's radical nationalist circles and advocates the idea of reuniting the original Russian lands.⁴⁶³

Malofeev was one of the original ideologists and organizers of the annexation of Crimea. He actively financed pro-Russian politicians, separatist movements in Crimea including Sergei Aksyonov, who became the head of the Crimean state after the annexation. In addition, he sponsored Cossack paramilitary forces, who backed Russia's special forces during the annexation of Crimea.⁴⁶⁴ Malofeev sent to the Peninsula key mercenaries Igor Girkin (Strelkov) and Alexander Boroday, who served as Aksyonov's advisors during the Crimea's annexation and subsequently took an active part in the outbreak of the war in Donbas.⁴⁶⁵ According to the open-source intelligence agency Bellingcat, during the annexation of Crimea Malofeev coordinated his actions with the Kremlin via Bishop Tikhon. In other cases, Malofeev directly communicated with Putin's advisers Surkov and Glazyev, and closely cooperated with the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS), led by the former KGB / SVR general Leonid Reshetnikov.⁴⁶⁶ The latter organization significantly contributed to the incitement of Russia's leaders to

⁴⁶² Zyigar, 197, 226–27; Bukkvoll, “Why Putin Went to War,” 7.

⁴⁶³ Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism*, 142.

⁴⁶⁴ Oleg Kashin, “‘Iz Kryma v Donbas: priklyucheniya Igorya Strelkova i Aleksandra Borodaya’ [From Crimea to Donbas: the adventures of Igor Strelkov and Alexander Boroday],” May 19, 2014, <https://republic.ru/posts/41009>; Cristo Grozev, “The Kremlin’s Balkan Gambit: Part I,” *bellingcat*, March 4, 2017, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/04/kremlins-balkan-gambit-part/>.

⁴⁶⁵ Kashin, “Iz Kryma v Donbas.”

⁴⁶⁶ Grozev, “The Kremlin’s Balkan Gambit.”

unleash the war in Ukraine through direct recommendations in their reports (discussed in more detail in Chapter 6).

Consequently, the analysis shows that internally driven factors provide strong enough explanatory power in Putin's decision to annex Crimea. Russian elites played a substantial role not only but in decision-making but also in the process of annexation. Ward's status immobility explanation suggests that Russian elites would have pursued a long-standing interest in Crimea's annexation. The understanding that Crimea should be an integral part of the Russian Federation dominated in Russia's higher hierarchical circles since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. They pursued a different set of motives and reasons which varied from ideational and historical to geopolitical and status-seeking convictions. It is widely seen that consolidated efforts of Russian elites imposed both direct and indirect influence on Putin's decision to annex Crimea. A particular contribution to this decision belongs to the president's inner circle. Also, the decision to annex Crimea coincided with Putin's own considerations. The weakness of the argument here is that there was a limited public pressure on Putin from those hardliners for assertiveness. However, the implicit data show that their influence during his decision-making over Ukraine is beyond any doubt.

An additional important influential factor was the presence of the neo-Eurasianist sentiments and ideology in the highest echelons of Russian politics. However, with those who pursued neo-imperialists views, things are more complicated. As subsequent events on the Donbas showed (as discussed in Chapter 6) the annexation of Crimea solely was not enough to satisfy their ambitions that consequently turned their admiration for Putin into his criticism.

C. DOMESTIC REGIME SURVIVAL

The mass protests in Russia in 2011–2012 forced Russian leaders to pay more attention to public sentiments. Since that time, Kremlin puts a lot of effort to measure public perception of his regime. It is logical to admit that a low level of public satisfaction Putin may consider as an existential threat for his legitimacy and cost him a position. Therefore, fears for his rule demand from Putin certain actions aimed at its preservation.

The revolution in Ukraine in 2014 fueled Putin's fears about the possibility of mass mobilization and overthrow of his government.⁴⁶⁷ However, whether his decision to attack was primarily motivated by the intention to preserve the power, or his popularity became a collateral effect of his actions needs additional clarification.

1. Authoritarian Legitimacy

The Russian population sees president Putin as a “strongman” leader who can restore stability and prevent Russia's return to crisis. Putin's “strongman” image requires him to act accordingly to bolster domestic mass support for his rule.⁴⁶⁸ The theory of authoritarian legitimacy proposed by Aleksandar Matovski suggests that the Kremlin has to orient its policies to convince the domestic masses that the current regime is the only alternative that can deal effectively with emerging domestic crises and troubles in neighboring states. In this case, the annexation of Crimea could be orchestrated by Kremlin. They did so to convince the Putin's electoral core, which is based on conservative nationalist sentiments, about his capability to counter Western pro-democracy “subversion” of Russia's rights in its sphere of influence and deliver the restoration of order and protect Russian interests abroad.

Russia is not a simple dictatorship where everything happens as the leader says. Stability there largely depends on the public support of the leadership. Indeed, the annexation of Crimea boosted Putin's approval rates up to 80 percent. Such high rates, in turn, are an indicator that nothing threatens his regime. However, so far it is hardly possible to confirm empirically that the paramount goal of Putin's decision to annex Crimea was to stay in power. Most likely, a high level of popular reaction was the consequence and collateral effect of Putin's aggressive actions. However, what makes this explanation most compelling is that it can best explain the timing of the aggression. In addition, following the aggression Putin's decisions in regard to domestic politics show that the regime's concerns in its survival are indirectly present in his further policies.

⁴⁶⁷ Stoner and McFaul, “Who Lost Russia (This Time)?,” 180.

⁴⁶⁸ Aleksandar Matovski, “Popular Dictators: Crises, Popular Opinion and the Rise of Electoral Authoritarianism” (2020), chap. 5, p. 13-16.

Russian society throughout recent history experienced deep traumatic crisis accompanied by three major events. The first one was the dissolution of the Soviet Union. For many, this resulted in a difficult situation, being isolated by established borders and left outside their homeland.⁴⁶⁹ This led to the second one—the crisis of national self-preservation and identity. Most Russians and elites strongly identified the Soviet Union with the superpower status. Therefore, its collapse was a huge strike on people’s identity, and hurt their pride. Besides, many lives became affected as people left outside their homeland.⁴⁷⁰ The third crisis was connected with the Russia’s catastrophic transition from the post-Soviet into independent state that coincided with the governance of Boris Yeltsin and his administration.⁴⁷¹ The failed economic reforms in the 1990s led the country to a catastrophe and people on the verge of survival. In more detail, Russia’s economy dropped for 42 percent and subsequently led the country to default in 1998. Poverty, economic inequality, and mortality rates in Russia became raised. Overall, the population declined by up to 5 percent (about 7 million people). This number was additionally doubled by the migration outflow.⁴⁷²

Based on this traumatic experience, according to the authoritarian legitimacy theory, Russia’s people see president Putin’s strong hand as the savior of the Russian nation and his regime as the best available alternative of the government. Putin’s popularity is rooted in a fear that without his rule, the country will go into chaos and instability.⁴⁷³ To achieve this, Putin’s regime effectively uses the strategy of persuasion rather than coercion that allows him to preserve power even through the ballot box.⁴⁷⁴ A significant role in maintaining the Putin’s strongman image is played by Russia’s media resources, which, by and large, are controlled by the government.

⁴⁶⁹ Matovski.

⁴⁷⁰ Matovski, 232.

⁴⁷¹ Aleksandar Matovski, “Popular Dictators: Crises, Popular Opinion and the Rise of Electoral Authoritarianism” (2020), chap. 5, p. 13-16.

⁴⁷² Matovski, 15–16.

⁴⁷³ Matovski, 16–19.

⁴⁷⁴ Matovski, 2.

However, despite Putin's popularity for a recent two decades, Russian people becoming tired of Putin's created "security-service-dominated crony capitalist [government] system, designed to maximize loyalty and control" fueled by corruption and increase of inequality. In this sense, the 2011–2012 mass pretest wave in Russia marks the apogee of Putin's legitimacy crisis. Therefore, to improve his legitimacy among the population Putin needs the ability to demonstrate his strongman rule. One of the solutions that proved its effectiveness remains the manufacture of external crisis.⁴⁷⁵

In the post-Soviet history of Russia, this tactic has shown its effectiveness. In 1999 Russia's military campaign in Chechnia made Putin "an instant star".⁴⁷⁶ Russia's military intervention in Georgia in 2008 had the same effect.⁴⁷⁷ Even Russia's military involvement overseas is positively perceived by the Russian population. For instance, according to polls conducted by the Russia Public Opinion Research Center in 2015, the popular support of Russia's air force operation in Syria was approved by 66 percent of respondents. However, 41 percent of them stated that they do not know what Russia's interest there are.⁴⁷⁸ The annexation of Crimea is not an exception and brought president Putin a significant jump in his approval ratings since 2013.⁴⁷⁹

There was no doubt that the annexation of Crimea by Russia could become very popular among many Russians. In June 2014 polls demonstrated that more than 90 percent of the Russian population approved the annexation of Crimea.⁴⁸⁰ First of all, it is necessary to take into account the importance of Crimea not only for the Russian elites (as described earlier) but also for the ordinary population of the country. For many, Crimea was

⁴⁷⁵ Matovski, 230–31.

⁴⁷⁶ Matovski, 217.

⁴⁷⁷ Taylor, "Analysis | Is There a Link between Putin's Approval Rating and Aggressive Russian Foreign Policy?"

⁴⁷⁸ "Nashi v Sirii: pervyy opros [Ours in Syria: the first survey]," Sociological surveys, wciom, October 9, 2015, <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=115423>; Viktor Hamraev, "'Rossiyane odobryayut voyennuyu operatsiyu v Sirii' [Russians approve a military operation in Syria]," *Kommersant*, October 10, 2015.

⁴⁷⁹ "Putin's Approval Ratings."

⁴⁸⁰ Harley Balzer, "The Ukraine Invasion and Public Opinion," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 16, no. 1 (2015): 82.

associated with an inseparable part of Russian great history and the fact that it was transferred to Ukraine unjustly. If Putin was looking for a way to convince his electorate why they still need him as president, this crisis worked very well. It appeals to patriotism, moreover evokes the image of an “enemy” that requires a strong leader to hold the nation firmly against foreign pressure.⁴⁸¹ This all works well in the short term. However, the rally-around-the-flag effect does not last forever and requires further actions.

It is logical to ask whether in 2014 Putin’s regime was threatened. Kuzio and D’Anieri stated that the annexation of Crimea “was not merely the project of an unpopular and autocratic government.”⁴⁸² If Putin suffered from a scarcity of approval among the population, then why he was waiting until the opportunity to seize Crimea emerged. His rating never fell below 60 percent, and before the annexation (January 2014) was 65 percent.⁴⁸³

However, even these relatively high indicators can be perceived by the regime as a potential threat to its legitimacy. In contrast to the democratic rules, where 60 percent of popular support is considered as a relatively high advantage over political rivals, Putin’s electoral autocracy relies on supermajority—guaranteed way of staying in power via the ballot box—to deter challenges to his regime. For example, in December 2011 during the outbreak of mass demonstrations in Moscow, Putin’s approval rating was 63 percent. It did not significantly improve since that time. It was enough to consider that people’s dissatisfaction with the regime would only deteriorate.

In this case, Putin’s approval is not the only indicator that characterizes public sentiment with respect to the regime. In addition, Levada Center polls show that people’s approval rating of Russia’s government had more negative indicators than Putin’s. In December 2011, 44 percent of respondents approved the activities of Russia’s government and only 38 percent thought that Russia’s overall course is moving in the right direction. Before the annexation, in January 2014, these indicators were not much better. 43 percent

⁴⁸¹ Bridget Kendall, “Putin’s Full Crimea Speech Annotated,” News and Analytics, BBC News, March 19, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26652058>.

⁴⁸² Kuzio and D’Anieri, *The Sources of Russia’s Great Power Politics*, 123.

⁴⁸³ “Putin’s Approval Ratings.”

of respondents expressed positive feelings about the government's activities and 43 percent approved Russia's course. Drawing parallels between these two periods, there is a reason to believe that in 2014 the level of dissatisfaction of the Russian people with the authorities admitted the probability for a new popular uprising.⁴⁸⁴

Consequently, the Yanukovych's ouster became that driving force which prompted Putin to react. In this case, these circumstances and rising probability to lose Ukraine from Kremlin's orbit caused Putin's defensive reaction to protect his regime's legitimacy and popularity. As far as the latter significantly relies on the electoral core that shares nationalist sentiments, the potential loss of Crimea could have been treated domestically as Putin's weakness. Therefore, in this situation the regime survival is the most compelling theoretical approach in explaining the timing of the aggression.

Additional fuel to the fire was added by the revolutionary uprising in Ukraine. From Kremlin's perspective situation in Ukraine could generate the regime's fears to its legitimacy through the instigation of the domestic population to upraise against the regime in Russia. In this case, the success of Ukraine's revolution, which resulted in Yanukovych's removal prompted Russia to pull the trigger of aggression. Kremlin used that opportunity to manufacture an external crisis to improve the regime's legitimacy.

Michael McFaul and Kathryn Stoner summarize, "what happened in Ukraine was exactly what Putin feared for Russia."⁴⁸⁵ How decisive these circumstances were in inclining Putin to aggression is difficult to measure. However, as it was discussed before, the Kremlin's concerns about color revolutions became more open and sharp. Despite the narrative about the protection of Russia's great power status and interests, its policies against color revolutions had direct implications in Russia's domestic politics and regulations.

Namely, in Russia's military doctrine that was issued shortly after the annexation of Crimea, the colored revolutions became treated as real new aspects determining military

⁴⁸⁴ "Indicators," Research Center, Levada-Center, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/>.

⁴⁸⁵ Stoner and McFaul, "Who Lost Russia (This Time)?," 180.

risks to Russia. Margarete Klein argues, that the document highlights to what extend Russia's "leadership fears for the stability for its authority and how vulnerable it feels" in front of popular revolts.⁴⁸⁶ She continues, that informational activities against the population and particularly youth became treated as additional internal military risks.⁴⁸⁷ The doctrine also includes aspects of mobilization of society and the economy in order to prevent Maidan scenarios in Russia. It anticipates special arrangements for financial and fiscal sectors in case of mobilization. In turn, it provides the Kremlin with more effective instruments to intervene in the economy in case of crisis and gives additional leverage over businesses to ensure their loyalty. Finally, the doctrine encourages the state to improve the "military-patriotic education" and security of its information environment.⁴⁸⁸ Probably, the latter is oriented to impose control over media and the informational environment on the internet, especially in social media which usually serves as the main source of information during popular revolts.

However, Crimea's annexation improved the regime's legitimacy. In May 2014, Putin's approval rating reached 83 percent; the government's—60 percent. The same 60 percent agreed that Russia moves in the right direction.⁴⁸⁹ Noteworthy, that in January 2012, 57 percent of Russia's expressed their main expectation from the incumbent to bring Russia back its great power status.⁴⁹⁰ Therefore, after Crimea's annexation in March 2014, 68 percent of the population responded that this will was satisfied.⁴⁹¹

At the same time, Kremlin-controlled media and propaganda significantly inflated People's emotions. Russians consider television as the main and trustful source of news

⁴⁸⁶ Margarete Klein, "Russia's New Military Doctrine: NATO, the United States and the 'Colour Revolutions'" (German Institute for International and Security Affairs, February 9, 2015), 2, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/russias-new-military-doctrine/>.

⁴⁸⁷ Klein, 2.

⁴⁸⁸ Klein, 3.

⁴⁸⁹ "Indicators."

⁴⁹⁰ "Za Kakogo Politika Gotovy Progolosovat' Rossiyane I Chego Ozhidayut Ot Vyborov [For Which Policy Are Ready To Vote The Russians And What Expect From Elections]," Research Center, Levada-Center, February 2, 2012, <https://www.levada.ru/2012/02/02/za-kakogo-politika-gotovy-progolosovat-rossiyane-i-chego-ozhidayut-ot-vyborov/>.

⁴⁹¹ "Natsional'naya Identichnost' I Gordost'."

and objective information.⁴⁹² The Kremlin makes serious bets on Russia's media as a tool for manipulating the masses. The annexation of Crimea was accompanied by massive anti-Ukrainian propaganda that spread a narrative about a Western-sponsored military coup in Kyiv and a neo-fascist threat to the Russian-speaking population. However, polls showed that only 10 percent of respondents shared this official Kremlin's justification.⁴⁹³ This suggests that people were guided not by the bait provided by the Kremlin propaganda, but by their convictions and understanding of the Crimea's importance.

In addition, after the annexation Crimea was integrated into Russia, so the euphoria from its seizure quickly evaporated and the peninsula itself became an additional problem for the budget of the country and its people. Populations' readiness to pay the cost of Crimea's annexation has decreased significantly over time. A Levada Center poll conducted in May 2019 showed that still, a majority (58 percent) support the annexation, but the number who oppose paying for Crimea (through taxation) increased from 19 percent in March 2014 to 36 percent in May 2019.⁴⁹⁴

The Crimea costs for Russia's budget varies between \$1 and \$2.7 billion annually.⁴⁹⁵ The relocation of finance to the needs of the Crimea rather than to other regions can affect ordinary Russians. Thus, the positive impact of the annexation on public opinion began to wane since the annexation. According to the polls conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation in 2019, only 39 percent of Russians believe that Crimea's

⁴⁹² Thomas Sherlock, "Putin's Public Opinion Challenge," Text, *The National Interest* (The Center for the National Interest, August 21, 2014), <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/putins-public-opinion-challenge-11113>.

⁴⁹³ Balzer, "The Ukraine Invasion and Public Opinion," 82.

⁴⁹⁴ "Prisoedineniye Kryma [Incorporation of Crimea]," Research Center, Levada-Center, April 1, 2019, <https://www.levada.ru/2019/04/01/prisoedinenie-kryma/>; "Donbass: vydacha pasportov i budushcheye [Donbass: issuing of passports and the future]," Research Center, Levada-Center, June 11, 2019, <https://www.levada.ru/2019/06/11/donbass-vydacha-pasportov-i-budushhee/>.

⁴⁹⁵ Leonid Bershidsky, "Five Years Later, Putin Is Paying for Crimea," *Analytics and Opinions*, Bloomberg Opinion, March 16, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2019-03-16/russia-s-annexation-of-crimea-5-years-ago-has-cost-putin-dearly>.

incorporation to Russia has done more good than harm, in contrast in 2014 this number was 67 percent.⁴⁹⁶

In the long-run, due to the sanctions and drop in oil prices, Russia has been squeezing its budget by cutting spending on domestic and military programs to maintain a strong international position. In 2018 Kremlin announced that it would reduce Russia's defense budget to less than 3 percent during the next five years. In 2020 the situation deteriorated with the pandemic and forced Russia to cut additional funds (10 percent) from the court system and relocate additional resources from state reserve to pay the country's debts and social payments.⁴⁹⁷ At the beginning of 2020, President Putin has called for the investment in healthcare and education and promised improvement of the living standards. However, experts say that in reality, Russia faces the dilemma between sacrificing geopolitical interests (which is related to the sanctions) in order to facilitate foreign investments. Still, nowadays Russia continues to spend savings affecting the ordinary population.⁴⁹⁸

The latter indicates that in the long run the ability to manipulate popular consent through foreign adventure leads to the economic sacrifice from the population. A high rating in exchange for a huge package of problems that Crimea brought to Russia—sanctions, the activation of the West, and NATO, the complete hostility of the Ukrainian population towards Russia—still constitute a costly price for Kremlin. However, theory suggests, that if this price justifies the regime survival, then it worth of being paid.

History shows that the creation of an external crisis is an effective technique for convincing the masses in Russia of the strength and stability of the current Kremlin incumbent. It gives the population a good reason for pride and faith in great Russia and

⁴⁹⁶ "Rossiyane o prisoyedinenii Kryma [Russians on the annexation of Crimea]," Statistics and Polls, Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), December 23, 2014, <https://fom.ru/m/Politika/11883>; "Krym [Crimea]," Statistics and Polls, Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), March 14, 2019, <https://fom.ru/Politika/14182>.

⁴⁹⁷ "Russia, Hit by Coronavirus Crisis, Considers Military Spending Cuts," News and Analytics, Reuters, July 21, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-economy-military-idUSKCN24M1IF>.

⁴⁹⁸ Ivan Nechepurenko and Andrew E. Kramer, "Putin Aims to Revive the Economy With a Plan. And Pianos.," *The New York Times*, June 5, 2019, sec. Business, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/05/business/russia-economic-development-plan.html>.

does not depend on what kind of conflict or crisis the country is embroiling in. A serious role in generating these beliefs is played by monopolized media resources. They present any, even negative phenomenon as the success of a strongman and unshakable leader who successfully resolves any problem.

At the same time, due to the lack of empirical data, it is quite difficult to assess how powerful the regime survivor aspect was when Putin decided to occupy the Crimea. In this case, the annexation of Crimea is better seen as an important contributing factor to the status-seeking causal explanation of Putin's decision. The results show that this decision gave the regime popularity. It provided the Russian people an additional reason for pride and allowed Kremlin to avert the probable public discontent as the result of losing Ukraine from Moscow's orbit, divert attention from domestic problems, therefore in the short-run to ultimately guarantee the stability for Putin's regime for the upcoming years. In the long run, the post-Crimea effect will fade, and the costs of its annexation will become more apparent. Following the authoritarian legitimacy logic, this will require from Kremlin another external crisis to improve its legitimacy.

D. CONCLUSION

This chapter analyses empirical knowledge concerning Russia's decision to annex Crimea in 2014 through the lenses of three theoretical frameworks—realism, constructivism, and regime survival. Overall, all the potential explanations have a certain degree of explanatory power.

The realist perspective looks at the Crimea's annexation from the material lenses. Realism considers Western policies and actions as a causal factor that threaten Russia's security (defensive realism) and regional hegemony (offensive realism). In general, the realist theoretical approach cannot provide an exact explanation of why Russia's annexed specifically Crimea and did it in 2014. However, disregarding that gap, the analyses were designed to highlight whether Russia's security or regional hegemony was threatened. The results showed that in terms of military balance and capabilities in 2014 the West imposed a factual physical threat neither to Russia's security nor its regional hegemony. NATO itself was pursuing a strategy aimed at the reduction of its military potential. Besides, its

policies were oriented to build up strategic cooperation with Russia in multiple security issues. In addition, before Crimea's annexation, neither NATO nor Ukraine pursued the goal to integrate the latter into the Alliance.

In addition, the EU's policies less likely were oriented to worsen its relationship with Russia. The probability of a threat to Russia's material interests from EU-Ukraine's cooperation either was relatively low. Moreover, Russia's economic ties with major European countries make the scenario of their involvement in the open confrontation with Russia as less likely. Therefore, Russia's perception of threat from the West was rather imaginary than practical. However, even in this case the contribution of the material factors—the perception of threat to Russia's security or hegemony—into the Kremlin's decision to annex Crimea should not be ruled out. Analyses highlighted that Russia's interest in Crimea from the material perspective can be explained by its intention to fulfill the A2 / AD strategy aimed to deter NATO in the future. This makes Crimea (and Donbas) as an element of Moscow's bigger strategy in its relations with the West and brings the material factors a flavor of importance.

Aside from security considerations, the analysis shows the availability of multiple non-material factors that could influence the Kremlin's decision on Crimea's annexation. These factors can be better explained through constructivist lenses. The latter considers that Russia annexed Crimea in response to the Western threat to Russia's great power status. Again, the weakness of constructivism (as in realism) is in its inability to explain the timing of the aggression. However, the analyses demonstrated that ideational factors played an important role in the formation of Russia's threat perception to its status and interests and therefore inclined Kremlin to protect it through aggression in Ukraine. Russia perceived the West's policies and actions since the end of the Cold War as acts of humiliation and refusal to treat RF equally. Although at the time of aggression Russia and the West showed the signs of cooperation, the old memories of past grievances played an important role in Crimea's annexation's decision. At the same time, there should be considered the particular role of Russia's elites—especially hardliners—in inclining the Kremlin rulers to annex Crimea and therefore protect Russia's great power status. Hardline elites in Russia can be split into two antagonizing camp—the war party and corporate

Russia camp. In the case of Crimea, both groups insisted on the annexation to protect Russia's great power status. Consequently, the Kremlin satisfied both camps. In addition, analyses highlight that some of those elites participated in Putin's decision-making and later directly in organizing and managing the Crimea's annexation.

Finally, the regime's survival explanation through the theory of authoritarian legitimacy brings the issue that Crimea's annexation was caused by the necessity for Putin to protect his legitimacy and preserve power. The prism of the theory argues that Putin used the tactics in manufacturing the external crisis in Ukraine to protect his legitimacy and popularity. Indeed, this theoretical approach can best explain the timing of aggression. In 2014, Russian people's dissatisfaction with the government's performance reached its minimum since 2011–2012 when Moscow was hit by the mass anti-government protests. Moreover, the success of the revolution in Ukraine and Yanukovych's ouster could be treated by Putin as probable causal factors to the threat to his regime's legitimacy in Russia. In turn, the lack of empirical knowledge and sensitivity to the regime's survival issue created some difficulties in the evaluation of the theory. However, the analyses demonstrate, that Crimea's annexation brought Putin and Russia's government an impressive boost of their popularity, regardless of the package of financial and economic problems that would hit the Russian population directly. Consequently, in the short run, the annexation of Crimea reassured Putin's legitimacy and guaranteed his stay in power. In the long-run, emerged economic problems and their effect on the Russian population can facilitate popular discontent and therefore generate a new threat to Putin's legitimacy.

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VI. RUSSIA'S INVASION OF DONBAS

When considering the Russian Federation's invasion of eastern Ukraine, the overt factors point to a difference in the Kremlin's approach to this decision. The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula created certain conditions and implications. The factor of Crimea became a critical element in subsequent Russia's foreign policy choices concerning Ukraine. At the same time, it found its reflection in all three theoretical paradigms.

Thus, realism points to the importance of taking into account material factors and their implications on the threat to Russia's security and regional hegemony after Crimea's annexation. Defensive realism insists that Russia acted to diminish the threat to its security. From this perspective, the annexation of Crimea pushed the West and Ukraine to reactivate their security policies, improve cooperation, and impose active measures to deter Russia's aggression. In this case, it could aggravate the threat perception to Russia's security and, therefore force Kremlin to continue aggression. Offensive realism sees Donbas as the continuation of the Kremlin course in building up its deterrence strategy against the West and therefore protect Russia's regional hegemony in the post-Soviet states. In both cases, Donbas is seen as a tool to influence Ukraine's domestic and foreign policy, constrain Ukraine from its ability to join Euro and Euro-Atlantic communities, and deter the West from potential expansion eastwards.

Constructivism suggests that with the invasion of Donbas, Russia continued its pragmatic policy against the West to protect its status of great power. In this case, conflict in Donbas is seen as a constant reminder to the West about Russia's great power role in European hierarchy. In addition, by influencing the intensity of the conflict Russia is able to demonstrate the West its ability to be an influential player and intentions to protect its sphere of interests. Moreover, the invasion of Donbas was widely supported by Russia's hardliner elites, who called the Kremlin to continue aggression. Some of them directly participated in the organization of the invasion and subsequent transfer of invaded territories into the zone of frozen conflict.

The domestic regime survival explanation looks at the factors related to Russia's population's mood when deciding to invade Donbas. It can be assumed that while invading Donbas, the population was still under the post-Crimean euphoria, which became still the main driving force in the demobilization of the Russian population against the country's leadership. In contrast to the Crimean case, the Russian population did not show enthusiasm to be involved in the war in Ukraine. However, in Donbas, the Kremlin continued to pursue its own pragmatic goals considering public sentiments.

A. REALISM

Russia's annexation of Crimea and its incorporation into as a Federal unit created specific implications on Russia's position in terms of threat to Russia's security and hegemony. This chapter's main realism argument holds that Crimea's annexation generated tension between Russia and the West over Ukraine. Russia's encroachment on Ukraine's sovereignty pushed Kyiv towards more comprehensive cooperation with the West and call for the protection of its sovereignty. For Russia, such Kyiv's move could be predictable.

In the case of Donbas, defensive realism and offensive realism differ in goals of invasion. The former would argue that Russia considered emerged circumstances of rising tension with the West as a necessity to protect its security from the possible Western response. From the latter standpoint, the Donbas invasion is seen as a continuation of Russia's course aimed to preserve its hegemony in the areas of Russia's privileged sphere of interests.

However, both dashes of realism agree on the methods to achieve these goals. They would consider Donbas' occupation and keeping it in the condition of the frozen conflict as the most suitable scenario that allows Moscow to keep Ukraine under control, therefore to diminish the threat to Russia's security and reassure its regional hegemony. To do so, Russia can use Donbas to constrain Ukraine from unfavorable for Moscow foreign policy choices and to hold probable activation of the West's expansion eastwards.

In respect to defensive realism, it is worth mentioning that Crimea's annexation generated a specific condition of tension and feeling of danger between Russia and the

West. The latter does not necessarily mean that Russia's security became imperiled in a material sense. Russia is a nuclear power. It makes any physical attack against Russia's sovereignty as a less likely scenario. Hence it makes an explanation that Russia invaded Donbas to protect its territory as less credible. However, the annexation of Crimea and tension that arose afterward set up a condition where defensive realism can be considered. In terms of hegemony, Russia is threatened to lose its control over Ukraine. Here, Russia's territory is not directly threatened. Therefore, the use of nuclear power here for offensive purposes is unlikely. Thus, the goal to keep Ukraine under control requires other methods.

The subsequent analyzes look at offensive and defensive realism simultaneously to identify the change of the level of threat to Russia's security or hegemony. In this case, the annexation of Crimea itself became a causal factor for Russia's further intervention in Donbas. To diminish that threat, Russia reacted aggressively. Subsequently making Donbas a tool of pressure over Ukraine's domestic and foreign policies, divert attention from the Crimea's annexation and make impossible Ukraine's Euro and Euro-Atlantic integration.

In more detail, Moscow's actions in Crimea made Russia as a strategic enemy for Ukraine. Kyiv started seeking for Western support in the protection of Ukraine's territorial integrity.⁴⁹⁹ In addition, Ukraine called the signatories of the Budapest Memorandum (1994) for assistance in the protection of its sovereignty.⁵⁰⁰ For Kremlin, such Ukraine's reaction to Crimean events was predictable. In this regard, in March 2014, Fyodor Lukyanov wrote that Kremlin expected that the Ukrainian elite, which raised on the wave of the Maidan, would drive the state into the hands of NATO and EU.⁵⁰¹ He announced

⁴⁹⁹ Ivan Timofeev, "Theses on Russia's Foreign Policy and Global Positioning (2017–2024)" (Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council, June 30, 2017), 13, 18–19, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/publications/theses-on-russia-s-foreign-policy-and-global-positioning-2017-2024/>.

⁵⁰⁰ "Pro Zvernennya Verkhovnoyi Rady Ukrayiny Do Derzhav-Harantiv Vidpovidno Do Memorandumu pro Harantiyi Bezpeky u Zv'yazku z Pryyednanniam Ukrayiny Do Dohovoru pro Nerozpovsyudzhennya Yadernoyi Zbroyi [On the Address of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine to the Guarantor States in Accordance with the Memorandum on Security Guarantees in Connection with the Accession of Ukraine to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons]," Official Page, Official web-portal of the Parliament of Ukraine, February 28, 2014, <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/go/831-18>.

⁵⁰¹ Fyodor Lukyanov, "Prinuzhdeniye k novomu miru [Forcing a new world]," *Russia in Global Affairs*, no. Editor's column (March 4, 2014), <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/prinuzhdenie-k-novomu-miru/>.

this point of view before the events in Donbas and added that Ukraine's lean towards the West forced Russia to impose immediate and sharp actions.⁵⁰² The latter could be seen as a significant causal factor to the potential rise of the threat to Russia's security or regional hegemony.

Simultaneously, the situation with Crimea dispelled illusions about a peaceful Europe and pushed the European countries and NATO members to recalibrate their security strategies aimed at Russia's deterrence. It intensified tension between Russia and the Alliance. In this regard, the U.S. military presence started to shift eastward, covering Poland, the Baltic states, and Romania.⁵⁰³ Eastern European and Baltic states announced the increase of their defense budgets. The Alliance activated the concept of rapid deployment forces. Besides, Poland and the Baltic countries became reinforced by additional troops from the Alliance.⁵⁰⁴ Russian experts admit that the EU has begun to define Russia as a critical challenge to European security.⁵⁰⁵ Dmitri Trenin argued that Ukraine's crisis, due to Russia's intervention, became the starting point in forming a line of "military-political confrontation in the geostrategic area" between Russia and the West.⁵⁰⁶

However, the analyses of the Donbas invasion process point out that Russia was sensitive to costs. In terms of means, the tactics that the Kremlin has chosen in Donbas—hybrid warfare and support of separatist enclaves—compliments the opinion that Russia did not pursue the goal to invade all Ukraine despite the remarks of some of Russia's policymakers concerning the restoration of Novorossiia.

Besides, when Moscow sent regular troops to invade Donbas, the Kremlin was already able to see and evaluate the West's reaction to its actions in Ukraine. The EU's

⁵⁰² Lukyanov.

⁵⁰³ Dmitri Trenin, "European Security Is Becoming Euro-Asian," Analytics, Carnegie Moscow Center, December 18, 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80635>.

⁵⁰⁴ Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 195.

⁵⁰⁵ Timofeev, "Theses on Russia's Foreign Policy and Global Positioning (2017–2024)," 29.

⁵⁰⁶ Trenin, "European Security Is Becoming Euro-Asian."

reluctance regarding sanctions and Georgia's experience in 2008 showed how far the West could go in response to Russia's aggressive actions. These factors could be taken into account by Russia when planning aggression.

Indeed, NATO's physical reaction to Crimea's events had a defensive character and was not oriented to threaten Russia's security nor Alliance imposed forceful measures to protect Ukraine, therefore threatening Russia's regional hegemony. In addition, the EU's physical reaction to the Donbas events was quite slow. The reason was apparent—economic cooperation and energy dependence from Russia fueled by the reluctance to undermine these relations over Ukraine. Such EU's behavior and goals were well visible in terms of sanction. In this case, the 'black swan' became the shooting-down of civilian aircraft MH-17 over Donbas, killing 298 passengers aboard. This dramatic event directly affected European interests. A chronological timeline of all Russia-related sanctions shows that the United States introduced the first round of its sectoral sanctions the day before the tragedy, on July 16, 2014.⁵⁰⁷ Conversely, the downing of a civilian plane and the escalation of the conflict changed Europe's position regarding sanctions.⁵⁰⁸

Consequently, by the end of July 2014, the EU extended individual sanctions and along with the United States issued own restrictions impacting Russia's defense, financial, and energy fields of economy. In September 2014, the West additionally tightened its sectoral sanctions, sending Russia a signal about its consolidated position against Ukraine's aggression.⁵⁰⁹

Andrew Chatzky argues that in 2014–2015, Russia's economy overcame its longest recession for the last two decades. At that time, the Western restrictions overlapped with the drop of oil prices, while the energy resource production share constitutes 30 percent of

⁵⁰⁷ Ivan Gutterman and Wojtek Grojec, "A Timeline Of All Russia-related Sanctions," Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, September 19, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-sanctions-timeline/29477179.html>.

⁵⁰⁸ Cory Welt et al., "U.S. Sanctions on Russia" (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, January 17, 2020), 37, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45415.pdf>.

⁵⁰⁹ Welt et al., 38.

Russia's GDP.⁵¹⁰ As a result, the value of the country's currency crashed, the unemployment rate almost reached a historic low (4,7 percent), and people's earnings also fell (-3.5 percent).⁵¹¹ However, scholars cannot agree with what harmed Russia more, sanctions, or energy resources prices.⁵¹²

Consequently, the Western reaction to Russia's invasion of Donbas exacerbated tension but less likely imposed a threat to Russia's security or hegemony despite Russia's officials' constant narrative about rising danger from NATO or the EU. The latter was mainly oriented to justify Russia's aggression in domestic and international arenas and can be better explained through constructivist and domestic politics lenses.

Analyzing the Russian military doctrine, signed on December 25, 2014, from the force and security (material) perspective underlines that Russia's policies concerning the West did not become more radical. The document traditionally defines the buildup of NATO's forces and destabilization of the situation in regions of Russia's interest as the primary external military dangers for Russia. However, it does not consider the possibility of unleashing a large-scale war against Russia by the West.⁵¹³ On the contrary, according to the newly issued (at that time) doctrine, Russia calls for maintaining an equal dialogue with the European Union and NATO in the field of Eurasian security and cooperation aimed at ensuring joint security and defense.⁵¹⁴ The document reflects that Russia is leveraging checks and balances between confrontation and cooperation with the West seeking recognition and desire to be treated as equal by the Western powers that fall under the constructivist vision.

⁵¹⁰ Andrew Chatzky, "Have Sanctions on Russia Changed Putin's Calculus?," Analytics and Opinions, *Council on Foreign Relations* (blog), May 2, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/have-sanctions-russia-changed-putins-calculus>.

⁵¹¹ Chatzky; Henry Foy, "Factory Demise Symbolises Rot at Core of Russian Economy," *Financial Times*, December 2, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/3b795a48-f2ee-11e8-ae55-df4bf40f9d0d>.

⁵¹² Chatzky, "Have Sanctions on Russia Changed Putin's Calculus?"; Gurvich and Prilepskiy, "The Impact of Financial Sanctions on the Russian Economy," 360.

⁵¹³ "Voyennaya doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii, Porucheniye Prezidenta RF ot 25 dekabrya 2014 goda №Pr-2976' [Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, Order of the President of the Russian Federation of December 25, 2014, No. Pr-2976]" (Electronic Fund of Legal and Regulatory Technical Documentation, December 25, 2014), <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/420246589>.

⁵¹⁴ "Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation."

At the same time, public perception of the probable threat to Russia from the NATO states remained at a relatively equal level both before and after the events in Crimea. In March 2011 and March 2014, 63 and 62 percent of the Russian population anticipated threat from the Alliance.⁵¹⁵ These indicators are important to see whether the perception of material threat has a practical implementation.

Scholars highlight several reasons why Moscow decided to intervene in Donbas. The first motive holds that Ukraine's post-Crimea activity activates Kyiv's and the West's cooperation in the security field. The Western school of thought representatives argues that the boiling conflict in Donbas serves to secure Russia against Ukraine's close collaboration with NATO and its membership in the Alliance in the future. In this sense, Russia proceeds from the logic that states with unsettled territorial or ethnic conflicts would not be able to join the Euro-Atlantic community.⁵¹⁶ This reason satisfies both offensive and defensive realism. It will minimize the chance for Alliance to reach Russia's borders and keep Ukraine under Russia's influence, despite its territorial claims over Crimea.

The same point of view is widely shared inside Russian scientific circles. Sergei Karaganov states that in 2014, Russia, having incorporated the Crimea and supporting the rebels in the Donbas, put an end to the expansion of NATO eastwards.⁵¹⁷ He considers that Moscow's main goal was to ensure Russia's security and sovereignty and improve its advantageous position in the international system. Such a policy deters the West from imposing threats to Russia's security and helps Russia protect its sphere of interest.⁵¹⁸

As evidence, most likely, for this reason, Russia does not integrate LPR and DPR as a part of the Russian Federation and keeps them in the condition of the frozen conflict. Dmitri Trenin argues that the Kremlin has long experience using such scenarios to influence other states' foreign policy. In 2008 Moscow used the same tactics in Georgia to

⁵¹⁵ "Vragi Rossii."

⁵¹⁶ Götz, "Neorealism and Russia's Ukraine Policy, 1991–Present," 316.

⁵¹⁷ Sergei Karaganov, "Ukhod voyennogo prevoskhodstva Zapada i geoeconomika [Western military superiority and geoeconomics]," *Polis. Policy research*, no. 6 (November 27, 2019): 8–21, <https://doi.org/10.17976/jpps/2019.06.02>.

⁵¹⁸ Sergei Karaganov, "Voyennaya sila i geoeconomika [Military force and geoeconomics]," *Russia in Global Affairs*, November 8, 2019, <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/voennaya-sila-i-geoeconomika/>.

prevent the country from joining NATO and, therefore, convince the West that Georgia is not suitable for membership in any Western institution.⁵¹⁹

The second motive holds that the unleashed conflict in Donbas opens up other possibilities for the Kremlin to ensure its security and hegemony. It is about the Kremlin's goal to influence Ukraine's domestic policy.⁵²⁰ Moscow began to actively press Kyiv to give Ukraine's administrative regions more autonomy through decentralization or federalization. The necessity to federalize Ukraine became spread idea among Russian elites. It was also frequently promoted by Putin.⁵²¹

Such a strategy is also not new for Kremlin. According to Trenin, in 2003, when Russia was involved in the conflict between Moldova and the unrecognized Transnistria Moldavian Republic, the Kremlin tried to foist federalization to Moldova. However, the agreement fell through at the last moment due to the interference of the West.⁵²² The chief negotiator from Russia in Moldova issues was the Kremlin official Dmitry Kozak. Noteworthy is that in February 2020, Putin appointed Kozak to be in charge of Donbas issues replacing Vladislav Surkov.⁵²³ Perhaps Russian leaders believe that Kozak will be able to implement a beneficial for Russia strategy in Ukraine considering his experience.

From the Russian standpoint, due to Ukraine's population's polarization, federalization would allow different parts of the country—Ukraine's East and West—to focus on various external partners without destroying the state's integrity.⁵²⁴ In addition,

⁵¹⁹ Trenin, *Post-Imperium*, 56.

⁵²⁰ Timofeev, "Theses on Russia's Foreign Policy and Global Positioning (2017–2024)," 31.

⁵²¹ Putin, Interview with German TV channel ARD; Vladimir Putin, Interview with Austrian ORF television channel, Interview, June 4, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57675>; Rar Aleksandr, "Putin i Zapad. Ot Lyubvi Do Nenavisti... [Putin and the West. From Love to Hate...]" (Moscow: Algorithm Publishing House LLC, 2017), <https://books.google.com/books?id=Ae5qDQAAQBAJ>; Lukyanov, "Prinuzhdeniye k novomu miru [Forcing a new world]."

⁵²² Trenin, *Post-Imperium*, 146.

⁵²³ "Kremlin Names Veteran Kozak As New Ukraine Negotiator," News and Analytics, RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, February 11, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kremlin-kozak-new-ukraine-negotiator-russia-surkov/30429185.html>.

⁵²⁴ Lukyanov, "Prinuzhdeniye k novomu miru [Forcing a new world]."

Russia embedded these provisions into Minsk Agreements and regularly uses decentralization as a stumbling block in their implementation.⁵²⁵

However, Kyiv sees federalization as an unacceptable scenario for Ukraine. The country's political elites consider such prospects a direct threat to the Ukrainian state's integrity and existence.⁵²⁶ It would give the Kremlin the ability to use decentralized Ukraine—especially eastern and southeastern regions—to implement the Crimean scenario.⁵²⁷ Decentralized Ukraine would allow Moscow to establish its control over the other Ukraine's provinces with predominant Russian-speaking population. Russia will be able to use these provinces as security buffer zone and avert foreign military presence in Ukraine's southern and eastern regions.⁵²⁸ At the same time, in the most preferable for Russia scenario, the heads of these provinces would be able to influence Ukraine's foreign policy orientation. The latter provides Moscow with significant weight to undermine Kyiv's Euro and Euro-Atlantic integration.⁵²⁹

Understanding that Ukraine will less likely accept the federalization scenario, Kremlin can warm up Donbas's conflict when Kyiv acts against Moscow's interests and comes to close cooperation with the United States or other Western powers, therefore, ensuring Russia's security or emphasizing its hegemony in the area.⁵³⁰

In sum, it is hard to say unequivocally what purpose the Kremlin was pursuing at the time of the decision to invade Donbas, defensive or offensive. But its actions and the 7-year history of the conflict highlight probable factors that caused the invasion. One such

⁵²⁵ Eduard Solovyov, "Minskiy tupik: v poiskakh vykhoda [Minsk dead end: in search of a way out]," *Russia and the new states of Eurasia*, no. 1 (2016): 18–20.

⁵²⁶ "Poroshenko: Russia Will Not Force Ukraine to Agree to Federalization or Autonomy," News and Analytics, UNIAN, September 14, 2018, <https://www.unian.info/politics/10261146-poroshenko-russia-will-not-force-ukraine-to-agree-to-federalization-or-autonomy.html>.

⁵²⁷ "Federalizatsiya mozhe pryzvesty do rozkolu Ukrayiny - Poroshenko [Federalization could lead to the split of Ukraine - Poroshenko]," News and Analytics, UNIAN, May 12, 2014, <https://www.unian.ua/politics/917145-federalizatsiya-moje-prizvesti-do-rozkolu-ukrajini-poroshenko.html>.

⁵²⁸ Götz, "Neorealism and Russia's Ukraine Policy, 1991–Present," 316.

⁵²⁹ Götz, 316.

⁵³⁰ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Goal in Ukraine Remains the Same: Keep NATO Out," News and Analytics, Al-jazeera, June 2, 2015, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/6/2/russiaa-s-goal-inukraineremainsthesametokeepnatoout.html>.

factor is the annexation of Crimea. It created inevitable consequences for Russia, directly related to Russia's convictions about the need to take measures to guarantee its security or protect its hegemony. The presence of a controlled gray zone in eastern Ukraine allows Moscow to keep Ukraine and the West at a distance. It gives Russia an additional place for maneuver in case of military escalation. From first sight, such an outcome satisfies both dashes of realism in terms of ensuring Russia's security or regional hegemony at a relatively low price. However, in the long-term perspective, the Donbas factor would not be an obstacle for Ukraine to continue to pursue its strategic goal towards integration into the Euro or Euro-Atlantic communities. In addition, Kyiv will less likely accept the Kremlin's conditions for federalization and annexation of Crimea.

Moreover, Ukrainians' alienation against Russia will likely rise if the conflict in Donbas would accelerate. These will probably contribute to increasing tension and a sense of insecurity between Russia and the West. In addition, Ukraine and Alliance are looking for opportunities to integrate Kyiv to NATO, disregarding the ongoing conflict in Donbas, and found no legal obstacles to implement this, only political ones.⁵³¹ Can we then call Russia's aggressive actions in Donbas as miscalculation? From the realist perspective, probably yes. Or Putin neglected these consequences and was driven by other motives—protect Russia's status as a great power or preserve his regime—which can be better explained from the constructivist or regime survival perspectives.

B. CONSTRUCTIVISM

Ukraine has always been of particular interest to Russia. The narrative about the common identity of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples often proceeded from the Russian political elite. At the same time, relying on the post-Soviet past, Russia regarded Ukraine as an important part of its privileged sphere of interest and Russia-led Eurasian integration processes. Particularly negatively Kremlin reacted to the policies of the West aimed to involve Ukraine into closer cooperation. In the end, following the annexation of the

⁵³¹ "No Legal Obstacles to Ukraine Joining NATO – Prystaiko," News and Opinions, UNIAN, March 12, 2020, <https://www.unian.info/politics/10911605-no-legal-obstacles-to-ukraine-joining-nato-prystaiko.html>.

Crimean Peninsula, Russia continued its aggression in the east of Ukraine. When considering the Russian invasion of the Donbas through the prism of constructivism, it is important to distinguish both external and internal factors that influenced that decision.

Regarding external factors, Russia, for a long time, has been pursuing great power status aspirations. However, its relations with the West generated the perceived feeling of threat to Russia's great power status. The West's refusal to accept Russia into a high-level club fueled by the inclusion of the post-Soviet countries into democratic integration processes, Russia interprets as humiliation and ignore its interests. Thus, the Russian invasion of the Donbas following the annexation of Crimea is a way to declare to the West about its status as a big player. In contrast to Crimea, Donbas is serving as a constant reminder to the West about Russia's role in the European environment. Therefore, influencing the intensity of the conflict, Russia forces the West to reckon with it on an equal footing. In addition, Russia is using Ukraine to convince the West that it belongs to another—Russia-led—integration processes, and, moreover, to constrain Ukraine from its contingents with Euro and Euro-Atlantic communities.

Internal factors point out that Russian elites—hardliners and radical revisionists—experienced the condition of status immobility as a result of the Western threat to Russia's great power status. Therefore, those elites became a driving force provoking the Kremlin to continue aggression in Ukraine's east. In this case, nationalists and neo-Eurasianists showed particular interest in the invasion of Ukraine's south-east including Donbas, and create there a quasi-republic loyal to Moscow—Novorossiia. Others, like siloviki, were driven by anti-Western sentiments and a strong desire to protect Russia's status as a great power in the international arena. In this case, satisfying their ambitions the Kremlin was able to win their loyalty, and therefore guarantee the stability to the regime.

1. Social Identity Theory: Externally Oriented Status-Seeking

Externally oriented status-seeking a theoretical approach indicates that the Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine is a consequence of the relationship between Russia and the West. The theory suggests that Russia's great power status was threatened by the West due to its refusal to treat Russia as an equal player. The stumbling block in their relations

became Moscow's perceivable exclusion of Ukraine from the Russian sphere of influence as a result of the revolutionary change of power in Kyiv in 2014. External factors in the form of Western policies and actions towards Russia throughout history prompted Moscow to act aggressively in Ukraine.

The Russian invasion of the Donbas in the context of the status-seeking framework is seen as a sequential continuation of the Crimean scenario. However, unlike Crimea which was incorporated into Russia, the ultimate purpose of Donbas is different.

Considering the outcome and the protracted character of the conflict, the constructivist approach helps to identify three main purposes for Russia to invade Donbas. First, influencing the conflict intensity in Donbas Russia keeps it as a constant reminder to the West about its status as an important player in the international arena. Second, occupied territories demonstrate the West that Ukraine belongs to Russia-led Eurasian integration processes. Finally, Russia uses Donbas to influence Ukraine's foreign and domestic politics, therefore, constrain it from Euro and Euro-integration.

From a constructivist standpoint, the overall goal to keep Donbas under Russia's control coincides with the realist argument. Both theories agree that Russia's main intent by keeping Donbas in the state of the frozen conflict is to restrain Ukraine's Euro and Euro-Atlantic integration. However, from the constructivist perspective, Russia is using Donbas to protect its great power status by diminishing Western encroachment on Russia's sphere of privileged interests. Today, Russia uses Donbas as a tool for self-affirmation and a constant reminder to the West of its status.

Reportedly, the sustainment of the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, including Crimea cost Russia's budget up to \$4 billion annually (about 0.3 percent of Russian GDP).⁵³² In addition, between 2014 and 2022 Russia plans to invest \$13 billion on Crimea alone, which comes directly from Russia's federal budget, making it the first-

⁵³² "Russia Spends US\$4 Bln Annually on Occupied Crimea, Donbas," News and Analytics, UNIAN, September 25, 2019, <https://www.unian.info/politics/10697436-russia-spends-us-4-bln-annually-on-occupied-crimea-donbas-putin-s-ex-advisor.html>.

fastest growing economy in Russia.⁵³³ The latter can negatively affect Russia's people, as they see the financial resources that could be used to develop other regions inflow into Crimea.⁵³⁴ However, from constructivist lenses, that is not a significant sacrifice for the constant possibility to influence the agenda in Europe. Freire and Heller argue that by unleashing a conflict in the Donbas, Russia declares its right to protect its interests and status, to be considered a great power, and treated by the West equally.⁵³⁵ Therefore, it partially explains why Russia does not want to compromise on the resolution of the conflict. Nor it undertakes steps to incorporate Donbas as a part of Russia. However, through heating the conflict, Russia remains in the foreground and thus forces the West to reckon with it.

In contrast to the Crimea, the protracted character of the conflict in Donbas gives Putin additional leverage in his negotiations with the West. Russia was continuously using escalations in Donbas as a mechanism for self-esteem. Thus, Russia's participation in the Normand format to resolve the conflict in Donbas allows Russia to maintain the position of an influential player on Ukraine's issues. Even though Ukraine considers Russia a full-fledged side of the conflict and the aggressor, the Kremlin positions itself as an influential mediator between quasi-republics and Kyiv. Besides, by directly affecting the intensity of the conflict, the Kremlin makes the West to 'blandish' it to mitigate tension. Since 2014, every large-scale escalation of the conflict in Donbas was accompanied by appeals of European leaders to President Putin asking him to influence the self-proclaimed republics regarding the cessation of violence.⁵³⁶

⁵³³ "Crimean Economy Named Fastest Growing in Russia," News and Analytics, The Moscow Times, June 3, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/06/03/crimean-economy-named-fastest-growing-in-russia-a65851>.

⁵³⁴ Barclay Ballard, "Crimea Doesn't Pay: Assessing the Economic Impact of Russia's Annexation," News and Analytics, World Finance, October 28, 2019, <https://www.worldfinance.com/special-reports/crimea-doesnt-pay-assessing-the-economic-impact-of-russias-annexation>.

⁵³⁵ Maria Raquel Freire and Regina Heller, "Russia's Power Politics in Ukraine and Syria: Status-Seeking between Identity, Opportunity and Costs," *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 8 (September 14, 2018): 1190–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1521914>.

⁵³⁶ "Merkel Urges Putin to Help End Violence in Eastern Ukraine," News and Analytics, Reuters, February 7, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-germany-ukraine-idUSKBN15M14Y>; "Macron Presses Putin on Ukraine," News and Analytics, Bangkokpost, August 16, 2019, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/1731551/macron-presses-putin-on-ukraine>.

In 2019 Sergei Lavrov wrote, that Russian diplomacy in recent years has proved that the country's political leadership has a well-thought-out and tested in practice strategy in international affairs.⁵³⁷ This message can be interpreted as Moscow's readiness to aggression to declare the West about its ambitions.

Simultaneously, history shows that Russia already has experience in using violent conflict in neighboring countries to protect its interests. For example, the Kremlin uses conflicts in Transnistria and the Caucasus as a means of expanding its influence in the post-Soviet space and at the same time reducing there the influence of the West.⁵³⁸ The former region does not share borders with Russia and does not add much to Russia's security architecture. Therefore, Moscow's involvement there is better explained through the status-seeking purposes. The conflict in Donbas is not an exception. It contributes that Russia can use various tactics of destabilizing society and covert occupation to manage regional politics. The latter is crucial both for Russia's identity and for its ability to maintain the status of great power.⁵³⁹

Thus, in terms of status power-enhancement and recognition-seeking, it is difficult to measure if the Russian strategy succeeded or failed. West imposed significant resistance to Russia's actions in Ukraine in the form of sanctions. Additionally, Moscow suffered partial international isolation. Western states canceled many high-level diplomatic events with Russia. The state was excluded from the G8.⁵⁴⁰ Furthermore, according to the Pew Research Center, the EU medium population's perception of Russia dropped dramatically. In 2013, before its aggression in Ukraine, 63 percent of respondents expressed favorable opinions about Russia. In 2015, when the conflict in Donbas reached its most violent stage, only 31 percent of respondents expressed positive feelings.⁵⁴¹

⁵³⁷ Lavrov, "Present and future of global politics: a view from Moscow."

⁵³⁸ Tatyana Malyarenko and Stefan Wolff, "The Logic of Competitive Influence-Seeking: Russia, Ukraine, and the Conflict in Donbas," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34, no. 4 (July 4, 2018): 191, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1425083>.

⁵³⁹ Malyarenko and Wolff, 191.

⁵⁴⁰ Freire and Heller, "Russia's Power Politics in Ukraine and Syria," 1197.

⁵⁴¹ "Views on the European Union across Europe," Sociological surveys, Pew Research Center, October 14, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/14/the-european-union/>.

Aggression also resulted in further alienation of Ukraine from Russia, reinforcement of Ukrainian national identity, and the emergence of anti-Russian sentiments. In addition, as stated earlier Russia faces additional material expenses due to the necessity to allocate substantial funds to sustain the occupied territories.⁵⁴²

From the first sight, these observations undermine the argument that aggressive policy helped Russia to protest its status. However, since 2014 the question of Russia's foreign policy behavior is widely circulating in the world's military, political, and academic platforms. Russia's behavior keeps Europe and NATO tensed. "Boitsa — znachit uvazhaet" (If you are feared—you are respected). By this Russian proverb, Sergei Lavrov explained the essence of Russia's relations with the West at a Mediterranean conference in Rome in 2018.⁵⁴³ In addition, some leaders of the EU and NATO states—e.g. Hungary and Turkey—openly admired Putin's style of governance and thought it inspiring.⁵⁴⁴

And finally, although the West's disapproval of Russia's actions, the level of national pride among Russia's population was significantly raised. Levada Center polls show that in 2015, 68 percent of respondents considered Russia as a great power.⁵⁴⁵ Subsequently, and during the active stage of the war in Donbas, this figure continued to rise, hitting 75 percent in 2018.⁵⁴⁶

In general, after 2014, Russian politicians began to openly declare their claims to the West. According to Vladimir Frolov, "the speeches of the Russian president became a list of well-known "grievances" inflicted on Russia by the treacherous West, primarily the

⁵⁴² Freire and Heller, "Russia's Power Politics in Ukraine and Syria," 1197.

⁵⁴³ "Vystupleniye i otvety na voprosy Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V.Lavrova na konferentsii 'Sredizemnomor'ye: rimskiy dialog' [Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to questions at the 'Mediterranean: Roman Dialogue' conference]," Official Page, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, November 23, 2018, https://www.mid.ru/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/3419721.

⁵⁴⁴ Aleksandar Matovski, "The Logic of Vladimir Putin's Popular Appeal," in *Citizens and the State in Authoritarian Regimes*, by Aleksandar Matovski (Oxford University Press, 2020), 220, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190093488.003.0009>.

⁵⁴⁵ "Natsional'naya Identichnost' I Gordost'."

⁵⁴⁶ "Natsional'naya Identichnost' I Gordost'."

United States.”⁵⁴⁷ This list includes NATO expansion eastwards, the military invasion of Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Libya, the recognition of Kosovo’s independence, the Arab Spring “organized by the CIA”, the destabilization of the Middle East, the deployment of missile defense in Europe, and Asia, the “coup in Kyiv” and the [West’s] “stupid decision on sanctions against Russia.”⁵⁴⁸

In addition to Russia’s official discourse, Russia’s dissatisfaction with Western policies is also manifested in Russia’s national security and foreign policy documents. Freire and Heller argue that the National Security Strategy issued in December 2015 highlights that the West’s participation in “countering integration processes and creating seats of tension in the Eurasian region” imperils Russia’s national interests.⁵⁴⁹ Russia’s Military Doctrine of 2014 also indirectly emphasizes the latter and treat as a military dangers the West’s encroachment on Russia’s near abroad, particularly former Soviet states and establishing there a democratic rules.⁵⁵⁰ Consequently, they stress on Russia’s dissatisfactions with its international status, lack of recognition of its role as a great European power, and negligence of its national interests by the international community.⁵⁵¹

It cannot be said unequivocally that the Kremlin invaded the Donbas exclusively to fulfill its status ambitions. However, Russia’s aspirations to protect its status as a great power from an external threat can be considered as one of the most credible explanations of Russia’s assertiveness in Ukraine. The east of Ukraine in this case is only a small element of Russia’s big game with the West. Despite the dissatisfaction of the world community, it is obvious that keeping the conflict in the Donbas in the active phase allows Moscow to demonstrate to the West its determination to protect its status. In addition, in a certain sense, it makes the West treat Russia as an equal played in Ukrainian questions. Notably, regulating the intensity of the conflict can be considered a constant reminder of the role of

⁵⁴⁷ Vladimir Frolov, “Govorit Moskva: chto Putin predlozhit miru v novoy myunkhenskoy rechi [Moscow says: what Putin will offer the world in a new Munich speech],” *Analytics and Opinions*, Republic.ru, January 14, 2016, <https://republic.ru/posts/62473>.

⁵⁴⁸ Frolov.

⁵⁴⁹ Freire and Heller, “Russia’s Power Politics in Ukraine and Syria,” 1190.

⁵⁵⁰ Klein, “Russia’s New Military Doctrine:,” 2.

⁵⁵¹ Freire and Heller, “Russia’s Power Politics in Ukraine and Syria,” 1190.

Russia in the European security architecture. Finally, the annexation of Crimea and protracted conflict in Donbas significantly improved Russia's domestic perception of pride and great power status. Still, there is a gap in explaining the timing of the regression. The more clarity to this issue can be added by the regime's survival explanation.

2. Status Immobility: Internally Driven Status-Seeking

According to the status immobility theoretical approach, Russia's elites—hardliners and radical revisionists—experiencing the condition of status immobility, imposed pressure on the Kremlin to invade Donbas to protect Russia's great power status from external threat.⁵⁵² By annexing Crimea and its incorporation into Russia, the Kremlin met the expectations of Russia's hardliners—war party and members of corporate Russia. In this case, the ambitions and goals of both antagonizing camps coincided. However, unlike the Crimea, the situation around the Donbas demonstrates that the Kremlin has chosen the most deliberate strategy—invade part of Ukraine and use it as a tool of influence. The selected scenario—in terms of its outcome—did not suit everyone completely but managed to win support and loyalty from the most influential stratum of the Russian hardliner elites.

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, members of the war party pursued the goal of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Jensen argues that they supported the establishment of Novorossiia in Ukraine covering most of the country's east and south (including Kharkiv and Odesa regions) and opposed any form of mitigation of conflict, including the Minsk agreement. The second group—corporate Russia—supported a more limited scale of Russia's incursion.⁵⁵³ From this standpoint, they were interested in establishing control over Ukraine at minimum cost for Russia.

Constructivism lenses cannot explicitly say how many of Ukraine's territory Putin needed to satisfy the elites. As the subsequent analyses show, this measure differs among the elites. Consequently, such a state of events made Putin balance between ambitions or

⁵⁵² Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers*, 42.

⁵⁵³ Jensen, "Are the Kremlin Hardliners Winning?"

hardline elites, at the same time considering the probable cost of such assertiveness for Russia.

A special place in the outbreak of conflict in the Donbas played radical nationalists, in particular, adherents of neo-Eurasianist views generated by Aleksander Dugin. The neo-Eurasianist theory places a special emphasis on Ukraine in general and considers it as a key aspect for the success of the entire Eurasianist project and protection Russia's great power status.⁵⁵⁴ Thus, Russian elites might potentially accept Dugin's ideas since the Ukrainian crisis is seen as a battlefield for the Eurasian project's future.⁵⁵⁵ However, Kirill Kalinin argues, that in 2014 Dugin's ideas did not possess significant impact on Russian intellectual elites. Nevertheless, some academics and analysts see some patterns of his theory in Kremlin's foreign policy decisions.⁵⁵⁶

As discussed in the previous chapter, adherents of Dugin's theory, including those among the Russian ruling elite, were directly involved in the events during Russia's annexation of Crimea. After Crimea, neo-Eurasianists switched their efforts to the Donbas, where they actively began to promote the concept of Novorossiia. This concept presupposed a large-scale political reorganization of Ukraine. Its framework anticipated the separation of the eastern, southern, and southeastern regions of Ukraine from Kyiv's rule and establishing there a buffer state—Novorossiia—loyal to great power neo-imperial Russia.⁵⁵⁷

Dmitry Trenin argues that the concept of Novorossiia became widely discussed in scientific and political circles of Moscow after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004. At that time, the Kremlin felt the greatest discomfort due to the alleged penetration of the West into the post-Soviet space.⁵⁵⁸ However, at that time Kremlin was constrained from any aggressive actions.

⁵⁵⁴ Dugin, *Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia: English Translation*, 215.

⁵⁵⁵ Kalinin, "Neo-Eurasianism and the Russian Elite," 464.

⁵⁵⁶ Kalinin, 467.

⁵⁵⁷ Trenin, *Post-Imperium*, 146.

⁵⁵⁸ Trenin, 146.

Among the main actors from the Russian hardline elites, directly involved in the outbreak of the conflict in the Donbas were the same figures, who participated in the annexation of Crimea. In the Kremlin, all activities regarding DPR and LPR were coordinated by Sergei Glazyev—representative of the war party—and Vladislav Surkov—a member of the corporate camp. The former was responsible for the economic and infrastructural development of the quasi republic. While the latter holds the political folio.⁵⁵⁹

Glazyev was an active supporter and lobbyist of the Novorossiia project. According to Zyigar, he used every opportunity to propagate it to Putin and insisted on the necessity to incorporate occupied Donbas into Russia following the Crimean scenario.⁵⁶⁰ However, his vision was significantly opposed by Surkov, who saw Donbas from the perspective of an instrument to influence Ukraine. Noteworthy, that both have a personal detest for each other since the beginning of the 2000s when Glazyev and Surkov had a sharp conflict of interests.⁵⁶¹

Financial support and coordination of the situation destabilization in the Donbas, as in Crimea, was carried out by Glazyev's one-thinker Konstantin Malofeev. Besides, Malofeev's people—former FSB colonel Igor Girkin and businessman Alexander Borodai—took up the posts of Minister of Defense and head of the self-proclaimed DPR, respectively.⁵⁶² A similar conflict of interests, as in the higher echelon of power, took place between the two camps on the ground. As an example, close to Surkov ideologist Sergei Kurginyan publicly accused Girkin and his followers, loyal to Glazyev and Malofeev, of betraying the Novorossiia interests.⁵⁶³

⁵⁵⁹ Zyigar, *The whole Kremlin army*, 201.

⁵⁶⁰ Zyigar, 198.

⁵⁶¹ Ivan Rodin, "Izmennik 'Rodiny' [Traitor to 'Motherland']," News and Opinions, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, March 5, 2004, https://www.ng.ru/politics/2004-03-05/1_glazev.html.

⁵⁶² Oleg Kashin, "'Iz Kryma v Donbas: priklyucheniya Igorya Strelkova i Aleksandra Borodaya' [From Crimea to Donbas: the adventures of Igor Strelkov and Alexander Boroday]," May 19, 2014, <https://republic.ru/posts/41009>; Cristo Grozev, "The Kremlin's Balkan Gambit: Part I," *bellingcat*, March 4, 2017, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/04/kremlins-balkan-gambit-part/>.

⁵⁶³ "Solov'yov — ukrainsam: Kurginyan i yest' 'uzhasnaya russkaya armiya' v Donbasse [Solovyov to Ukrainians: Kurginyan is the 'terrible Russian army' in Donbass]," News and Opinions, *REGNUM*, November 7, 2019, <https://regnum.ru/news/2770356.html>.

Active assistance in the formation quasi-republics was held by Izborskii Club. In June 2014, the Club assisted the DPR in drafting its ‘Constitution’, which had not been adopted. Besides, the Club opened a representative office in Donetsk and supported there ideational projects promoting separatism.⁵⁶⁴

In addition, the Kremlin-sponsored think-tank—Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS) led by Reshetnikov played an important role in the process of provoking the Russian leadership to implement the Novorossiia project.⁵⁶⁵ Former RISS analyst Alexander Sytin said that the ideological approaches of the Institute were similar to Izborskii Club. RISS employees (including leadership) were adherents of Russian neo-imperialism and neo-Eurasianism. The nature of their reports to the Kremlin emphasized this assumption. Sytin writes that during 2013–2014, RISS actively foisted the Kremlin the need to unleash a war in Ukraine to protect the Novorossiia project.⁵⁶⁶ However, as the Novorossiia project more and more demonstrated insolvency and uncontrollability, signals, received from the Kremlin, pointed on its unwillingness to engage in a full-scale war with Ukraine.⁵⁶⁷

Consequently, in August 2014, by Kremlin’s urgent decision, the nationalists were removed from Donbas. Besides, Putin moved away Glazyev from Donbas affairs and tasked Vladislav Surkov to led the processes in occupied territories. Scholars argue that Surkov obtained the mission of integrating Donetsk and Lugansk areas back into the Ukrainian state to use them as tools of influence on Ukrainian politics transforming the conflict into a frozen one under Moscow’s control.⁵⁶⁸

⁵⁶⁴ Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism*, 198.

⁵⁶⁵ “About.”

⁵⁶⁶ Aleksandr Sytin, “Anatomiya Provala: O Mekhanizme Prinyatiya Vneshnepoliticheskikh Resheniy Kremlya [Anatomy of Failure: On the Kremlin’s Foreign Policy Decision Making Mechanism],” *News and Opinions*, Ves Kharkov, January 14, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150114213631/http://all.kharkov.ua/articles/state/anatomiia-provala-o-mehanizme-priniatiia-vneshnepoliticheski.html>.

⁵⁶⁷ Sytin.

⁵⁶⁸ Zyigar, *The whole Kremlin army*, 200; Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism*, 209; “Putin.Voina [Putin.War],” *Independent Report* (Moscow, May 12, 2015), 52, https://www.putin-itogi.ru/cp/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Putin.Voina_.pdf.

At this moment, the negotiations of Minsk agreements marked the end of neo-Eurasianist ambitions. Consequently, this Kremlin's decision did not fully satisfy the nationalist group of the war party, who pursued neo-imperialistic goals.⁵⁶⁹ According to Mikhail Zygar, Putin did not want to take any decisive action in the Donbas despite the appeals of the neo-Eurasianists.⁵⁷⁰ Putin's concern was related to the growing popularity of Russian radicals fighting in the Donbas and their public calls for Putin to send troops to Ukraine. Consequently, some representatives of these views openly accused Putin of indecision and weakness.⁵⁷¹

Putin's public reaction to the concept of Novorossiia was not too active. He limited to only a few of its references in public. A month after the annexation of Crimea, during the annual press conference, Putin stated that the regions referred to by this term historically belonged to Russia and, accordingly, are mostly populated by ethnic Russians.⁵⁷² However, John O'Loughlin et al. argue, that public articulation of the term Novorossiia by Putin in that context rose three important aspects. First, he could justify the use of force by the need to protect ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers in the southeast of Ukraine. Second, naming that the area was previously a part of Russia he was "giving a public legitimacy to this geopolitical imaginary" therefore justifying Dugin's theory of neo-Eurasianism.⁵⁷³ Third, Putin "reaffirmed the existing geopolitical order of border and citizenship."⁵⁷⁴

Such Russia's President's statement at the beginning of the aggression gave nationalists a signal that Moscow was going to support their ambitions. In this regard, Dugin wrote:

⁵⁶⁹ Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism*, 209.

⁵⁷⁰ Zygar, *The whole Kremlin army*, 198.

⁵⁷¹ Dmitri Gordon, "Girkin (Strelkov). Donbas, MH17, Gaaga, FSB, poludokhlyy Putin, Surkov, Bozhiy sud. 'GORDON' (2020)" [Girkin (Strelkov). Donbas, MH17, The Hague, FSB, half-dead Putin, Surkov, God's judgment. GORDON (2020)], Interview (YouTube: Dmitri Gordon, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hf6K6pjK_Yw&feature=emb_title; Zygar, *The whole Kremlin army*, 200.

⁵⁷² Putin, "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin."

⁵⁷³ O'Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov, "The Rise and Fall of 'Novorossiia,'" 129.

⁵⁷⁴ O'Loughlin, Toal, and Kolosov, 128–29.

Putin in his “direct line” gave hope to the entire Southeast [of Ukraine]. He spoke about the illegitimacy of the junta [temporary government in Kyiv in 2014] and Novorossiia. He clearly hinted that it was part of the Russian World. So let him be responsible for his words.⁵⁷⁵

However, Russia stopped in Donbas and did not make further military pressure to gain more territories. Moreover, Russia till nowadays continues to keep the quasi-republic as separatist enclaves. Kremlin neither recognizes their independence nor incorporates them as a part of Russia’s territory. Such behavior indicates that Russia had other goals invading Donbas rather than satisfying hegemonic ambitions foisted by neo-Eurasianists and nationalists.

In contrast to neo-Eurasianists, another war party member—siloviki—possessed a more pragmatic approach in Ukraine’s question. Some of them—for example, Patrushev, Sechin, or Yakunin—are active supporters of Dugin’s views. However, as was stated before, their ambitions are more driven by the anti-Western sentiments and restoration of Russia’s great power status by confronting the West. Many of their beliefs stem from the traumatic experience of the collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia’s loss of its great power status.⁵⁷⁶ The increase of anti-Western sentiments also serves as a means by which many elites insist on their identity and affirm loyalty to the regime.⁵⁷⁷ The most prominent exemplar of siloviki, Nikolai Patrushev supported Minsk Agreements, however, noted that the international community should recognize Crimea as Russian.⁵⁷⁸

According to William Zimmerman et al., the anti-Western sentiments of Russia’s elites intensified considerably after the Russian aggression in Ukraine. In particular, in 2012 (before Russia annexed Crimea) 64 percent of Russia’s elites expressed hostility

⁵⁷⁵ Alexander Dugin, *Moia Voina – Geopoliticheskii Dnevnik [Ukraine: My War – A Geopolitical Diary]* (Moscow: Tsentrpoligraf, 2015), 378.

⁵⁷⁶ Sharon Werning Rivera and James D. Bryan, “Understanding the Sources of Anti-Americanism in the Russian Elite,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 5–6 (November 2, 2019): 386–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1662194>.

⁵⁷⁷ Nikolai Patrushev, “‘Nuzhny li Rossii ‘universal’nyye’ tsennosti?’ [Does Russia need ‘universal’ values?],” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, June 17, 2020, 132 edition, sec. 8186, <https://rg.ru/2020/06/17/nuzhny-li-rossii-universalnye-tsennosti.html>.

⁵⁷⁸ “Sekretar’ Sovbeza RF: Donbass - eto Ukraina [Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation: Donbass is Ukraine],” News and Opinions, Bigmir, January 27, 2016, <http://news.bigmir.net/ukraine/972385-Sekretar-Sovbeza-RF-Donbass---eto-Ykraina->.

towards the U.S. and 48 percent saw it as a threat to Russia's security. Conversely, in 2016 (during the ongoing conflict in Donbas) 88 percent of respondents became hostile and 79 percent considered the U.S. as peril.⁵⁷⁹ Moreover, 82 percent blamed Washington and 45 percent criticized Europe for setting up Ukraine's crisis.⁵⁸⁰

In addition, it is important to indicate that the Russian influential elites considered military power rather than economic instruments dominant in international relations. In 2012, before the Ukrainian crisis, 48 percent of elites perceived military power as the most influential tool in international relations in contrast to the economic ones. In 2016, this figure became 55 percent.⁵⁸¹

As of 2016, the conflict in the Donbas was already in a protracted phase. Thus, it can be assumed, that militarization of preferences among the Russian elites was caused by the consequences of Russia's aggression in Ukraine in the complex (Crimea and Donbas), as well as the Western response to it. This, in turn, led to an increase in anti-Western attitudes and justification of the use of force in Ukraine. Therefore, following Russia's culture and logic, the more they hate the West, the more they consolidated around the leader who satisfies their anti-Western ambitions by the robust response.

Ultimately, the Kremlin's invasion of Donbas satisfied both hardliner camps in their majority. Particularly those who were united by anti-Western sentiments.⁵⁸² It seems that Putin tried to make decisions by striking a balance between the demands of two hardliner groups and acted as if he wanted to avoid conflict with hardliners. Apparently, he did not want hardliners to become strong enough to dominate other elite blocs, especially

⁵⁷⁹ Bashkirova, Litikova, and Smeltz, "Moscow Elites and the Use of Coercive Foreign Policy," 472; Zimmerman, Rivera, and Kalinin, "Survey of Russian Elites, Moscow, Russia, 1993–2016."

⁵⁸⁰ Bashkirova, Litikova, and Smeltz, 472; Zimmerman, Rivera, and Kalinin, "Survey of Russian Elites, Moscow, Russia, 1993–2016."

⁵⁸¹ Kirill Petrov and Vladimir Gel'man, "Do Elites Matter in Russian Foreign Policy? The Gap between Self-Perception and Influence," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 5–6 (November 2, 2019): 456, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2019.1662185>.

⁵⁸² Sergey Glazyev, "How to win the war," *Vzglyad: delovaya gazeta*, July 24, 2014, <https://vz.ru/opinions/2014/7/24/697063.html>; Patrushev, "'Nuzhny li Rossii 'universal'nyye' tsennosti?' [Does Russia need 'universal' values?]."

those whose business interests are connected with the West.⁵⁸³ In this regard Volkov writes, “[t]he ongoing confrontation with the West, the regime of mutual economic sanctions between Russia and the West, and Russian support for the Donbas separatist republics in Ukraine have increased the power of the siloviki, allowing them to justify the use of force.”⁵⁸⁴ Russia’s aggression in Ukraine diminished their status immobility. As it was mentioned in the previous chapter, Putin’s focus on siloviki is understandable. This hardliner group of elites is powerful enough to potentially threaten Putin’s rule. Nonetheless, once their ambitions are satisfied, they prefer to preserve the existing power vertical.⁵⁸⁵

Finally, the annexation of Crimea brought Putin strong popular support. At the same time, while Putin’s popularity rating remains high, Russian elites are hardly to raise against Putin and “likely continue to see him as a suitable arbiter who can balance various interest groups.”⁵⁸⁶ In this case, Putin’s aggressive decisions over Ukraine can be better explained through the lenses of domestic politics.

C. DOMESTIC REGIME SURVIVAL

Following success in Crimea, where Kremlin had no losses and resistance, Putin benefited from a powerful rally-around-the-flag effect. After such a quick and painless result, the question arises of how long the Crimean euphoria will last. In the context of the regime surviving theory, the outbreak of war in Donbas is seen as a continuation of Moscow’s policy of maintaining the appropriate moods among the masses, thereby diverting attention from internal problems and protecting Putin’s legitimacy. However, the outbreak of the conflict in Donbas did not cause strong enough enthusiasm among the Russian population to get involved in the war with Ukraine. However, disregarding public discontent the Kremlin continued.

⁵⁸³ Jensen, “Are the Kremlin Hardliners Winning?”

⁵⁸⁴ Volkov, “Russian Elite Opinion After Crimea,” 10.

⁵⁸⁵ Volkov, 10.

⁵⁸⁶ Volkov, 14.

At the same time, the Kremlin's actions in Donbas, and its public manifestation were different compared to other diversionary crises. If we consider the Russian invasion of Donbas as a separate case study, the question arises to what extent this conflict was necessary for the Russian regime to protect its legitimacy and preserve its power. In this context, the Russian invasion of Donbas can be seen as attempts to support the post-Crimean euphoria, as well as the way to feed the anti-Western sentiments of Russians. Thus, the Kremlin's actions in Donbas did not have the same effect as in Crimea. Regime's ratings remained high, however, seems like the role of Donbas in this is limited.

At the same time, Putin's regime limited the disclosure of the use of force in Ukraine's east. This indicator shed some difference in the diversionary patterns that Kremlin used before. From the one side, it can be explained by the sensitivity to the more robust reaction from the West. From the other side, Putin considered the responsiveness of its population. Many Russians feel a strong affinity to Ukraine, others became tired of Russia's military losses abroad. In any case, such strategy in turn helps to demobilize the Russian population and maintain a high level of popular support for Putin's regime.

1. Authoritarian Legitimacy

After the occupation of Crimea, which brought huge support to Putin's regime, the Kremlin set about working out a scenario for unleashing a conflict in eastern Ukraine. According to the theory, by the manufacture of external crises, the Russian leaders pursued the goals to constrain the population from possible revolts, and therefore protect their legitimacy and preserve the regime.⁵⁸⁷

Denis Volkov concludes that Russia's participation in international conflicts remains the simplest and fastest way for the regime to satisfy the population's great-power ambitions and the need for self-esteem, therefore secure its legitimacy. He continues that sociological surveys among the Russian population reflect these indicators. Measurements of public opinion in the periods after the war in Yugoslavia, the Russian-Georgian war, and

⁵⁸⁷ Matovski, "The Logic of Vladimir Putin's Popular Appeal," 234.

the annexation of Crimea show that during these periods Russian population acquired confidence in Russia authoritarian leaders.⁵⁸⁸

As discussed earlier, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 brought Putin huge popularity among the Russian people. Most Russians believed that the state regained its great power status. People felt pride in their country and saw Putin as a strong leader who brought Russia its forgotten fame.⁵⁸⁹ In this case, it is logical to assume that the Kremlin did not consider how long the post-Crimea euphoria would last. In addition, the common feature that migrates along all theoretical explanations is that Crimea became incorporated into Russia. Therefore, from the regime survival theoretical standpoint, unleashing protracted conflict in Donbas serves as a continuation of the Kremlin's diversionary policy to prolong the post-Crimea effect. In fact, as discussed below the Kremlin's actions pointed out its intentions to achieve these goals.

During the Russian invasion of Donbas, the regime launched a huge propaganda campaign to reassure in the domestic arena the legitimacy of its actions. According to opinion polls, in July 2014 more than 90 percent of respondents considered Russian television as the main source of information about the events in Ukraine. At the same time, 74 percent were confident in the objectivity of Russian media.⁵⁹⁰ The interest of the Russian population in the Donbas situation remained very high. About 64 percent of Russians were closely following what was happening there.⁵⁹¹

During the invasion of Donbas, the main reference points of the propaganda could be divided as follows. First, the regime created and maintained the image of a military coup

⁵⁸⁸ Denis Volkov, "O gordosti za stranu [About the state's pride]," Analytics and Opinions, Riddle, April 18, 2018, <https://www.ridl.io/ru/o-gordosti-za-stranu/>.

⁵⁸⁹ Volkov, "Natsional'naya Identichnost' I Gordost'"; "Za Kakogo Politika Gotovy Progolosovat' Rossiyanе."

⁵⁹⁰ "Ukrainskiy krizis: vnimaniye i otsenki [The Ukrainian Crisis: Attention and Assessment]," Research Center, Levada-Center, July 28, 2014, <https://www.levada.ru/2014/07/28/ukrainskiy-krizis-vnimanie-i-otsenki/>.

⁵⁹¹ "Ukrainskiy krizis."

in Ukraine with the further installation of ‘fascist’ power in Kyiv.⁵⁹² Particular attention was paid to the volunteer battalions formed in Ukraine in the early stages of the war. According to the Russian media, they obtained the image of ‘punitive detachments’ that acted against their Ukrainian civilian population.

Second, propaganda was robustly promoting the image of an external enemy in the form of the West. Comparing the period before the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the active phase of the war in Donbas in August 2014, the number of Russians who had a negative attitude towards the United States increased from 44 percent to 73 percent.⁵⁹³ In this case, following the growing anti-Western sentiments among Russians, the Kremlin used a strategy of convincing the masses that the West initiated the change of power in Kyiv and should be responsible for the ongoing violence in eastern Ukraine. As a result, in August 2014, opinion polls show that 77 percent of Russians blamed the West (in particular the U.S.) for the outbreak of the crisis in eastern Ukraine.⁵⁹⁴ At the same time, the Russians denied both personal responsibility (81 percent) and the responsibility of the Russian state (75 percent) for the violence in Donbas.⁵⁹⁵

Third, media outlets were constantly maintaining the image of Putin as a strong leader, capable of dealing with any crisis and protecting Russian interests, including in Ukraine. The narrative about ‘humanitarian aid’ from Russia to the residents of Donbas overfilled the air. Media highlighted the migration crisis, and Russia’s readiness to accept refugees from Donbas. They emphasized the ‘victories’ of the separatists over the Ukrainian troops under the slogan of the struggle for freedom and independence. At the same time, Russia was totally denying its force involvement in Donbas affairs. It propagated the Kremlin leadership as peacebuilders and mediators between Ukraine and quasi-republics.

⁵⁹² “The Surkov Leaks: The Inner Workings of Russia’s Hybrid War in Ukraine,” RUSI, July 16, 2019, 81, <https://rusi.org/publication/occasional-papers/surkov-leaks-inner-workings-russias-hybrid-war-ukraine>.

⁵⁹³ “Otnoshenie k stranam [Attitude to countries],” Research Center, Levada-Center, accessed July 18, 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/otnoshenie-k-stranam/>.

⁵⁹⁴ “Ukrainskiy krizis,” July 28, 2014.

⁵⁹⁵ “Ukrainskiy krizis.”

Forth, many civilians, succumbing to the influence of propaganda, from all over Russia went to the Donbas to fight on the side of the separatists.⁵⁹⁶ In addition, despite Russian citizens, the conflict in Donbas became attractive for the international audience from different states both loyal and opposite to Russia.⁵⁹⁷ However, the Russian side took all organizational measures for the unhindered delivery of these ‘volunteers’ to Donbas for further participation in hostilities on the side of the separatists.⁵⁹⁸

To maximize anti-Western sentiments among the Russian masses, discussions of the situation in Ukraine during 2014–2019 took up most of the prime time of Russian popular talk shows and news broadcasts. Similarly to television, literary works began to appear on sale, promoting the same propaganda narratives.⁵⁹⁹

At the same time, despite the Kremlin’s efforts, intervention in Donbas became much less popular among Russia’s than Crimea’s annexation. Kuzio and D’Anieri write that “devoting more soldiers and money to the conflict might be unpopular.”⁶⁰⁰

Kremlin’s decision to invade Donbas became a subject of criticism among some of the Russian opposition leaders. For example, Alexei Navalny spoke out openly against Russian military intervention in Ukraine’s east.⁶⁰¹ Konstantin Krylov believed that the uprisings in Donbas would provoke a national revolution within Russia that would overthrow the Kremlin.⁶⁰²

Russia’s intervention in Donbas faced weak support among the domestic population. Even with the post-Crimean euphoria, in August 2014, before the Kremlin entered the active phase of the escalation in Ukraine, only 41 percent of Russians supported

⁵⁹⁶ Mitrokhin, “Infiltration, Instruction, Invasion Russia’s War in Ukraine,” 232–35.

⁵⁹⁷ Mitrokhin, 235.

⁵⁹⁸ Mitrokhin, 236.

⁵⁹⁹ Kateryna Bohuslavska, “What Books Are Banned in Ukraine?,” News and Analytics, 112 UA, February 19, 2018, <https://112.international/opinion/what-books-are-banned-in-ukraine-25796.html>.

⁶⁰⁰ Kuzio and D’Anieri, *The Sources of Russia’s Great Power Politics*, 132.

⁶⁰¹ Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism*, 184.

⁶⁰² Laruelle, 178–79.

Russia's involvement in the Donbas conflict.⁶⁰³ Conversely, most of them supported non-military intervention. According to the Russian Public Opinion Research Center, only 27 percent (29 percent—Levada Center) of the Russians supported the influx of Russian troops to Ukraine to terminate the conflict. At the same time, 66 percent opposed the invasion of Ukraine.⁶⁰⁴

Moreover, 87 percent of respondents stated that they heard the information about the probable shellfire of Russia's territory from Ukraine's side. However, only 11 percent of this number supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine because of that reason. 63 percent of respondents still insisted on Russia's diplomatic methods in conflict resolution.⁶⁰⁵ Besides, in August 2014, 55 percent of the respondents said, that the Russian leadership should focus primarily on solving domestic social and economic problems in Russia, and not intervene in Ukraine's events. Only 31 percent of respondents insisted on the importance of Russia's geopolitical and strategic interests, rather than internal economic and social problems in Russia itself.⁶⁰⁶

These results underline the reluctance of the Russian population to get involved in the open war with Ukraine. At the same time, despite these indicators, Moscow still deployed its regular troops to Ukraine. In June 2014, Russia began to transfer heavy military equipment through the border.⁶⁰⁷ In August 2014, the first full-scale hostilities near Ilovaisk took place with the participation of the Russian regular army.⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰³ "Ukrainskiy krizis: deystviya rukovodstva Ukrainy i Rossii [The Ukrainian crisis: actions of the leadership of Ukraine and Russia]," Research Center, Levada-Center, August 12, 2014, <https://www.levada.ru/2014/08/12/ukrainskiy-krizis-deystviya-rukovodstva-ukrainy-i-rossii/>.

⁶⁰⁴ "Grazhdanskaya voyna na Ukraine: mysli, chuvstva, emotsii rossiyan [Civil war in Ukraine: thoughts, feelings, emotions of Russians]," Research Center, Russian Public Opinion Research Center, July 31, 2014, <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=753>.

⁶⁰⁵ "Grazhdanskaya voyna na Ukraine."

⁶⁰⁶ "Ukrainskiy krizis," August 12, 2014.

⁶⁰⁷ Michael R. Gordon, "Russia Sent Tanks to Separatists in Ukraine, U.S. Says," *The New York Times*, June 13, 2014, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/14/world/europe/russia-has-sent-tanks-to-ukraine-rebels-us-says.html>.

⁶⁰⁸ "'Putin.Voina' [Putin. War]," 17–23.

At the same time, it is important to note that Russia's military invasion in Ukraine was accompanied by a complete denial by the Kremlin of any military involvement. This narrative is also reflected in the Russians' popular opinions. According to Levada Center surveys as of July 2015, only 26 percent of Russian residents agreed with the presence of regular Russian troops in Donbas, 52 percent were sure that there was no Russian military there.⁶⁰⁹

For example, the Russian invasion of Georgia was accompanied by open armed aggression and was generally supported by the Russian population. Thus, 53 percent of the respondents said that Russia should send troops to South Ossetia, and 57 percent of respondents approved the participation of Russian volunteers in the battles on the side of South Ossetia.⁶¹⁰ The same can be said about Russia's participation in the Syrian conflict. For instance, according to polls, in 2015, 64 percent of Russians approved Kremlin's force interference into the Syrian conflict.⁶¹¹

In all of the above conflicts, Russia did not hide its military involvement. However, in Donbas, this was hidden in every possible way. In addition, the participation of Russian troops was accompanied by significant personnel losses. However, it is not possible to find official information on the exact number of Russian soldiers killed in the Donbas. Moreover, according to the decree signed by President Putin in May 2015, any information on Russia's military casualties became classified.⁶¹² Nevertheless, according to various sources, the number of Russian military deaths in Donbas in the period 2014–2017 varies from several hundred to thousands.⁶¹³ According to the human rights activists, the family could officially receive approximately \$88 thousand in compensation for a dead Russian

⁶⁰⁹ "Kto voyuyet v Donbase [Who is fighting in the Donbas]," Research Center, Levada-Center, July 28, 2015, <https://www.levada.ru/2015/07/28/kto-voyuet-v-Donbase/>.

⁶¹⁰ "Rossiysko-Gruzinskiy Konflikt: Novyye Dannyye [Russian-Georgian Conflict: New Data]," Research Center, Levada-Center, August 11, 2008, <https://www.levada.ru/2008/08/11/rossijsko-gruzinskij-konflikt-novye-dannye/>.

⁶¹¹ "Nashi v Sirii."

⁶¹² Freire and Heller, "Russia's Power Politics in Ukraine and Syria," 1199.

⁶¹³ Sergei Bratuschak, "'Besslednyy polk'. Voyennyye poteri RF na Donbase. Chast' 2 ['Traceless Regiment'. Military losses of the Russian Federation in the Donbas. Part 2]," News and Analytics, Ukrainska Pravda, May 17, 2017, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/articles/2017/05/17/7144148/>.

serviceman. However, the Russian security service interviews the relatives so that they do not spread information about the death of a soldier in Ukraine.⁶¹⁴

The public disclosure of these data can potentially harm the regime's image. Besides, this has a direct bearing on the difficulty of justifying a military invasion of the territory of an independent state both domestically and internationally. Over time, the protracted conflict can lead to the negative consequences that, may develop into a public concern. In addition, supporting the conflict is costly for Russia's budget. As discussed earlier, Russia's sustainment of the Crimea and Donbas cost Kremlin about \$4 billion annually. However, in contrast to Crimea, Russia's expenditures on Donbas are not officially disclosed.

Denis Volkov writes that nowadays the pessimism among the Russian public begun to appear. In 2020, its satisfaction with Russia's economy had closely reached the levels observed in late 2013.⁶¹⁵ Keeping Donbas in frozen condition does not cause enthusiasm among Russians, especially considering Russia's tough macroeconomic situations.

Despite the emergence of pessimism in economic matters, Putin's popularity level was high for a relatively long period of time. However, a greater role in this was played by the annexation of Crimea. According to polls, people still remember Crimea as one of the main achievements of Putin's regime. In 2017 and 2018, 43 and 45 percent of Russians considered Crimea's incorporation into Russia as a matter of undeniable pride for the country.⁶¹⁶ This indicator ranks third for Russians among all significant historical events.

Even in this case, the popular euphoria faded. Since May 2018 Putin's approval rating showed regression and in May 2020 reached its historic minimum since the 2000s—59 percent. Russians' satisfaction with the government lasted even less. If in June 2014, 60 percent of Russians approved its performance, in August 2018, 66 percent expressed negative sentiments towards the government's performance.⁶¹⁷ Following the logic of the

⁶¹⁴ Bratuschak.

⁶¹⁵ Volkov, "Russian Elite Opinion After Crimea," 3.

⁶¹⁶ "Natsional'naya Identichnost' I Gordost'."

⁶¹⁷ "Indicators."

Authoritarian legitimacy theoretical approach, these indicators reached the point when Putin needs to manufacture another external crisis to improve his waned legitimacy.

Consequently, the role of Donbas in Putin's diversionary strategy is difficult to measure, especially when the population was still experiencing the post-Crimea euphoria. However, the results of this aggression point out two outcomes that can be treated as equally correct. Kremlin's actions in Donbas in terms of justifying the regime's domestic legitimacy was a miscalculation or the invasion pursued a different goal.

D. CONCLUSION

This chapter argues that Crimea's annexation generated a certain condition that impacted Russia's subsequent decision to invade Donbas. The Crimean case created tension between Russia and the West over Ukraine. In addition, it pushed Kyiv to build more robust cooperation with the West and call for the protection of its sovereignty.

Realism looks at the material factors that could lead to the emergence of a threat to Russia's security or regional hegemony. In the case of Donbas, defensive realism and offensive realism differ in explaining Russia's ultimate goals of Donbas invasion. Defensive realism argues that Russia considered emerged circumstances of Crimea annexation as rising tension with the West. Therefore, such an imaginable threat required a necessity to protect its security from the possible Western response. Offensive realism sees the Donbas invasion as a continuation of Russia's course aimed to preserve its hegemony in the sphere of Russia's privileged interests, as well as improve its deterrence strategy aimed to constrain the West from potential threat in the future.

Both dashes of realism agree, that the invasion of Donbas and maintaining there a frozen conflict is the most suitable scenario that allows Moscow to keep Ukraine under the Kremlin's control. From that perspective, Russia is able to diminish the threat to its security and reassure its regional hegemony over Ukraine. To do so, Russia can use Donbas to constrain Ukraine from unfavorable Moscow foreign policy choices and hold further West's expansion eastwards.

The constructivist approach pays attention to non-material factors that could lead to Russia's decision to invade Donbas. In this case, after the incorporation of Crimea, Russia invaded Donbas for three main purposes. First, influencing the conflict intensity in Donbas Russia keeps it as a constant reminder to the West about its status as an important player in the international arena. Second, occupied territories demonstrate the West that Ukraine belongs to Russia-led Eurasian integration processes. Finally, Russia uses Donbas to influence Ukraine's foreign and domestic politics, therefore, constrain it from Euro and Euro-integration, which in this case, relies on ideational tights between Ukraine and Russia. Consequently, Russia neglected material costs and placed ideational factors on the foreground. The analyses showed, that it is difficult to measure to what extend Russia was able to improve its status, however, despite the Wests' negative response to Russia's actions, the question of Russia's factor became widely popular in the international arena.

In addition, as in the case of Crimea, a particular role in Russia's decision to invade Donbas was played by Russia's hardline elites, who pushed the Kremlin to aggression to protect Russia's great power status. Both hardliner groups—war party and corporate camp—welcomed the invasion. However, their interests with respect to Donbas were different. Not all hardliners became satisfied in the final end. However, Putin's assertiveness in Ukraine made it enough to win the loyalty of the most influential hardliner elites.

From the domestic regime survival explanation perspective, the annexation of Crimea brought the regime immense popularity. Besides, the post-Crimea euphoria lasted for a relatively long time. If in the case of Crimea, the Russian population, in general, supported the annexation, in the case of Donbas domestic public showed reluctance to go for war in Ukraine. However, the Kremlin still conducted a military invasion of Donbas. In contrast to other conflicts, which brought the Kremlin popularity among the domestic population (e.g. Syria 2015, Georgia 2008), and where Russia was openly using its regular army, in Donbas their involvement became concealed. Consequently, Donbas became one more burden on Russia's budget. Moreover, post-Crimean euphoria started to fade bringing regime popularity rates to the historical minimum levels since 2000. Therefore, the question of whether Putin invaded Donbas as a diversionary war to protect his legitimacy

is a less likely scenario or can be considered as regime miscalculation in the attempts to win public support by foreign policy adventures.

VII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In 2014 the Russian Federation took unprecedented actions annexing the Crimean Peninsula and invading Ukraine's Donbas. Russia's aggression in Ukraine marked the end of peaceful times in Europe since the end of the Cold War. As a result of RF's actions, the system of global and regional security, as well as the current system of international law became undermined. Almost all international security guarantees for Ukraine (including within the framework of the Budapest Memorandum) proved ineffectiveness, especially in the conditions when the aggressor was one of the guarantors—the Russian Federation.

In scholarly literature, most of the explanations of Russia's aggression in Ukraine can be grouped into three theoretical frameworks—realism, constructivism, and regime survival explanation that roots in Russia's domestic politics. The realist framework focuses on the material factors that motivated Russia's behavior. The constructivist set of explanations places ideational factors on the foreground and looks at the internal and external aspects that drive Russia's decision making. The domestic politics framework focuses on Russia's regime's survival aspirations as motivating causes of RF's aggression in Ukraine.

In turn, each of the explanations emphasizes the particular role of the threat as a key driver of Russia's behavior. However, they see the source of the threat in different areas. Realism looks at the threat to Russia's national security or regional hegemony which arises from external material capabilities that endanger those aims. Constructivism considers a threat to national identity that arises from material and non-material acts that challenge Russia's identity as a great power. The regime's survival explanation focuses on the threat to Vladimir Putin's regime, which arises from challenges to his legitimacy and control over Russian politics and society.

This thesis evaluates Russia's decision-making through three theoretical frameworks in two case studies—Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas in 2014. It finds that despite both cases occurred sequentially, the causal factors, that prompted Russia towards aggression in Crimea and Donbas are different. Moreover, it is

important to consider the consequences for Russia from its aggression in both cases. Crimea became incorporated into the Russian Federation as a separate federal unit and is not a point for discussion for Russia. The invasion of Donbas ended with the emergence of Moscow-backed quasi-republics and the unleashing of a protracted frozen conflict. Besides, the relation between Russia and the West and Ukraine's role in them is an important contributing factor in explaining Russia's aggression in Ukraine, especially in realist and constructivist perspectives.

This research argues that material factors are important and stay on the background of Russia's decision in both cases. They were not necessarily the most important aspects in the case of Crimea's annexation, however, come on the foreground in the case of Donbas's invasion. Although, cultural and ideational factors mattered most in both case studies. In addition, the research points out the importance to consider Russia's internal domestic factors, which refers to regime survival. The latter has more explanatory power in the case of Crimea's annexation.

Overall, this chapter summarizes the findings derived from the case studies, assess the prospects of conflict termination between Ukraine and Russia in light of the causes and consequence for Russia from its aggression, and provides recommendations to Ukraine's foreign policy regarding Russia.

A. RUSSIA'S ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

The annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation marked the starting point of Russia's aggression in Ukraine. In February 2014, following the revolutionary crisis, that led to President Yanukovich's ouster, Kremlin launched the active phase of its operation aimed to seize the peninsula out of Kyiv's control. The research points out the particular significance of the Peninsula for Russia that is echoed in all three sets of explanations. Crimea's geostrategic location, emphasize on its material importance for Russia. Besides, Crimea possesses strong historical, and ideational values for both Russia's rulers (including elites) and its population.

In more detail, the realist perspective looks at the Crimea's annexation from the material lenses. In particular, the thesis examines the West's and Ukraine's policies and

actions as a causal factor, that, from defensive realist lenses, threaten Russia's security or imperils Russia's regional hegemony, which reflects offensive realism vision. As a regional hegemony, in this case, we should understand Russia's domination over the post-Soviet states in Eastern Europe, that Russian leaders consider as an area of exclusive rights or privileged sphere of interest.

The theoretical gap here is that the realist approach cannot provide an exact explanation of why Russia annexed specifically Crimea and did it in 2014. Regardless, the analysis stresses the availability of material factors, that point out if Russia's security or regional hegemony was threatened. The findings show, that in 2014 in the military domain the West (in particular NATO) did not possess a physical threat either to Russia's security or regional hegemony. Firstly, NATO itself was pursuing a strategy aimed at the reduction of its military potential. Secondly, its policies did not consider Russia as a threat, and vice versa were oriented to build up strategic cooperation with Kremlin in multiple security issues. Thirdly, before Crimea's annexation, neither NATO nor Ukraine pursued the goal to integrate the latter into the Alliance. Finally, material perspective cannot explain why Russia did not aggress in 2004 when Ukraine underwent first pro-democratic revolution and announced its full course to Euro and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Besides the Euro-Atlantic community, the EU's policies less likely were oriented to worsen its relationship with Russia. The probability of a threat to Russia's material interests from EU-Ukraine's cooperation either was relatively low. Moreover, Russia's economic ties with major European countries make the scenario of their involvement in the open confrontation with Russia as less likely. Therefore, Russia's perception of threat from the West was rather imaginary than practical.

However, the thesis finds, that the material factors in the Kremlin's decision to annex Crimea also should be considered. In particular, Crimea's geostrategic location allows Russia to fulfill its A2 / AD strategy aimed to deter NATO in the future. In this case, Crimea is a very important contributor to Russia's ability to reassure its security from a potential threat from the West as well as project its power in the Black Sea area, therefore reassuring its regional hegemony.

Aside from material factors, the analyzes emphasize the importance to consider multiple non-material aspects in explaining the Kremlin's decision on Crimea's annexation. In this case, ideas and values played an important role in generating Russia's perception of the threat to its identity as a great power state. Therefore, the necessity to protect this identity was a key driver to Russia's aggression in Crimea. In this case, Russia considered Ukraine as an important part of its Eurasian integration processes and an essential element of Russia's privileged interests. Moreover, the thesis argues that Crimea itself possesses a significant ideational value for Russia. This fact contributes to the understanding of why Russia started its aggression from that particular place.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize the distinction between external and internal ideational factors that pushed Russia towards annexation. In respect to the external drivers, the research points out, that the Western policies within the last two decades, in particular, NATO enlargement eastwards and ignore Russia's interest in overseas operations RF treated as humiliation. In turn, Western support of pro-democratic revolutions in the post-Soviet States was a subject of Russia's major concern. The revolutionary changes, that brought pro-Western power in Ukraine, Russia perceived as the West's attempts to pull Ukraine out from Kremlin's orbit, therefore undermine its great power status and threaten its interests. The thesis finds that at the time of aggression Russia and the West showed signs of cooperation. The absence of evident physical threat to Russia contributes to the understanding, that Kremlin was driven by the old memories of past grievances towards the West in making its decision of Crimea's annexations. In this case, Russia acted to protect its status and interests neglecting probable material consequences of its aggression.

Internal factors emphasize the particular role of Russia's elites—especially hardliners—in inclining the Kremlin rulers to annex Crimea and therefore protect Russia's great power status. The thesis finds, that both antagonizing hardliner elite camps in Russia—the war party and corporate Russia—insisted on the annexation. Besides, their motives were driven by strong anti-Western sentiments. Although the hardliners' pressure on the incumbent was not necessarily public, however, as per ascertained facts, some of those hardline elites directly participated in the actual decision-making and, subsequently,

were involved in the organization and execution of the operation in Crimea's annexation. Consequently, Kremlin managed to satisfy both camps, and therefore to win their loyalty and support.

Finally, the thesis looks at the Crimea's annexation through the lenses of the regime's survival explanation. It is grounded on the necessity for Putin to protect his legitimacy as Russia's strongman leader and preserve his power through a preemptive response to the consequences of Ukraine's crisis that led to Yanukovych's ouster. The thesis finds that before the annexation in February 2014 Putin's regime (including government) suffered the historical drop of its popularity as people increasingly rejected the need for Putin's overbearing strongman type of rule. Also, revolutionary changes of power in Ukraine and particularly Yanukovych's ouster are considered to be additional causative factors to the perception of threat to Putin's domestic legitimacy due to the possible threat of contagion of these revolutionary movements to Russia itself.

In this sense, the regime survival explanation has a significant contributing role in Putin's decision-making regarding Crimea. The research focuses on comparing the regime's legitimacy and popularity before the aggression and evaluating the results of the annexation and its effect on Russia's public. It finds that annexing the Crimea regime managed to significantly improve its legitimacy and credibility at home as indispensable protector of national interests regardless of the package of financial and economic problems that with the time would hit the Russian population directly. The thesis emphasizes, that from the domestic politics standpoint, such success of the annexation is rooted in the particular value of Crimea not only for Russia's elites but also for Russia's population. At the same time, the research finds that existing empirical data do not allow to explicitly say to what extent Putin was driven purely by the regime's survival motives while annexing the Crimea, or this success had a collateral effect on the regime's popularity.

B. RUSSIA'S INVASION OF DONBAS

Russia's annexation of Crimea generated certain circumstances, that impacted the Kremlin's subsequent decision to invade Donbas. The thesis finds, that the causal factors for Russia's invasion of Donbas differ from Crimea's one. At the same time, the annexation

of Crimea itself is seen as an important contributing aspect that prompted Russia to further aggression. The research argues, that the outcome of the Donbas invasion—creation there a Moscow backed quasi-republics and keeping the area under the condition of frozen conflict—is the most suitable scenario for Russia. The latter outcome equally satisfies both material and ideational explanations of Russia's motives, that in more detail is discussed below.

The thesis argues, that in contrast to Crimea's case, material factors could play more important role in pushing Kremlin towards a further invasion of Donbas. From this standpoint, the annexation of the peninsula generated tension between Ukraine, the West, and Russia. In turn, the findings highlight, that both defensive and offensive realism agree, that this tension is considered as a significant causal factor to the rise of the level of the Kremlin's perceived threat to Russia's security or regional hegemony. At the same time, both realisms interpret the ultimate goals of the Donbas invasion differently. Defensive realism argues, that Russia in response to the rising tension acted preemptively to diminish the potential threat to its security from the possible Western response. Offensive realism sees the Donbas invasion as a continuation of Russia's course aimed to preserve its hegemony in the sphere of Russia's privileged interests, and improve its deterrence positions against the West.

The thesis reveals, that in terms of the outcome invasion of Donbas and keeping it in the state of frozen conflict allows Moscow to retain Ukraine under the Kremlin's control. Russia can use Donbas to constrain Ukraine from unfavorable to Moscow foreign policy choices and hold further West's expansion eastwards. By doing so, from the material perspective Russia can diminish the level of threat to its security or regional hegemony.

The non-material factors, like ideas and values, are no less significant contributors to Kremlin's decision to invade Donbas. Herewith, the thesis finds it important to consider both external and internal factors that prompted Kremlin towards incursion.

In respect to the former, the thesis helps to highlight three main purposes of Russia's actions that have an ideational background and are associated with Russia's goal to protect its great power status. First, occupying Ukraine's territory, Russia sends the West

a strong message that Ukraine belongs to Russia's sphere of interests and is a part of Moscow-led Eurasian integrational processes. Second, regulating the conflict intensity between Ukraine and occupied territories, Russia can constantly emphasize to the West on its status as an influential player in the international arena. Third, Russia obtained the possibility to influence Ukraine's foreign and domestic politics, therefore constrain it from joining the Western institutions. The latter correlates with the material explanations, as well as domestic politics explanation in the sense that Ukraine's progress towards euro-integration can have a significant contagion effect on the Russian population. However, in this case the argument relies more on the ideational aspects of relations between Ukraine, Russia, and the West.

The thesis finds the particular role of Russia's hardliner elites in instigating the Kremlin to invade Donbas. Research reveals, that, as in the case with Crimea, both hardliner elite camps supported the invasion. However, their ultimate goals and interest regarding Donbas were different. The proponents of neo-Eurasianism insisted on the necessity to invade a major part of Ukraine's eastern and southern territories and created there loyal to the Moscow state—Novorossiya. While siloviki and members of the corporate camp became satisfied by the invasion of Ukraine's territory, big enough to be able to influence Ukraine's domestic and foreign politics and protect Russia's great power status. Consequently, not all hardliners became satisfied in the end with the Kremlin's strategy. However, Putin's assertiveness in Ukraine made it enough to win the loyalty of the most influential segments of hardliner elites.

Lastly, in terms of the domestic politics explanation, research reveals, that the role of regime survival motives in the Kremlin decision to invade Donbas is rather limited. First of all, at the time of the invasion, Russia's domestic population was already experiencing the condition of strong post-Crimean euphoria, which brought the regime immense popularity. Besides, Russia's population strongly supported Crimea's annexation. However, in the case of Donbas, the majority of indicators highlight, that Russians did not express much enthusiasm to expand the war in Ukraine and preferred more humanitarian and diplomatic involvement rather than military. Hence, the Kremlin still conducted the invasion, at the same time concealing its forceful involvement in combat operations in

Donbas. The thesis draws the parallel with the other Russia-led conflicts like Georgia 2008 and Syria 2015. It finds, that in contrast to Donbas, in those cases domestic population approved Russia's military incursions. Besides, Russia was openly using there its regular army. However, the thesis finds it hard to explain through regime survival lenses, why, despite public reluctance, the Kremlin still conducted the Donbas invasion. Here explanation has a strong correlation with the constructivist argument in the sense that Russia's ability to cripple Ukraine from Euro-integration helps to demobilize its domestic population from probable contagion effect. The research concludes, that the Kremlin either miscalculated in its ability to manipulate the public sentiments through foreign policy adventures or it pursued another set of motives for the Donbas invasion.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The results of the thesis point out consequences for further relations between Ukraine and Russia. At the same time, a better understanding of the motives of Russia's aggression in Ukraine facilitated to see the prospects of conflict termination. In addition, the research results may contribute to building Kyiv's lines of behavior concerning Russia which are aimed to restore Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

1. Annexation of Crimea

The situation with the Crimea's annexation is very complicated for Ukraine. The analyses point out the unfortunate reality, that Russia will continue to make all possible efforts to preserve Crimea in its possession. At the same time, the latter argument is universal when taking into account all three theoretical approaches explaining the reasons for the annexation. From the realism standpoint, Crimea's return would generate a physical threat to Russia. From constructivist perspective any acquiescence regarding the Peninsula would undermine Russia's status and prestige. At the same time, it would anger Russia's elites, who in turn are able to threaten the regime in case of negligence of their interests. Besides, from the regime's survival perspective, Russia's people, in their majority, will less likely agree to give up their new symbol of 'national pride.'

Considering that Crimea became formally incorporated into Russia, the Kremlin removed Crimea's issue away from any negotiation table. Moreover, it will continue by all

possible means to strive for recognition of Crimea's annexation by the international community. To do so, Russia will use diplomatic, political, economic, and legal mechanisms, including manipulations with international law. In addition, the further use of military force by Russia in the south-east of Ukraine to restore infrastructure communications (water supply and electricity) to the peninsula is also a possible scenario.

At the same time, Ukraine in close cooperation with the international community should continue to pursue the goal of bringing Crimea back to Ukraine. Therefore, Kyiv has to include all available mechanisms for the return of the peninsula. So far, at the time of writing, Ukraine still does not have a formalized and approved Strategy of Crimea's de-occupation. Therefore, the adoption of such a document would serve as a decisive message to all international community, including Russia about Ukraine's intentions not to tolerate any encroachment on its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Nowadays, the reaction of the world community to the problems of Crimea is unsystematic and irregular. Russia is widely using such a situation to reconcile the whole world with the occupation of the Crimean Peninsula. In this regard, Ukraine should take measures to consolidate the international support of its policies regarding Crimea. To do so, the necessity arises to create an international communication platform on Crimea, preferably involving the states-signatories of the Budapest Memorandum (1994). Simultaneously, it is important to accelerate international pressure on Russia, including through toughening economic sanctions, and diplomatic pressure on the Kremlin using international platforms (e.g. United Nations Security Council, Council of Europe, OSCE).

In addition, it is significant for Ukraine to focus its efforts on seeking justice in international court institutions to bring Russia's incumbent to responsibility for the breaches committed by annexation.

Most importantly, Ukraine should not under any circumstances abandon its efforts in respect to Crimea's return in exchange for the Russia's promises regarding the peace in Donbas. Therefore, any assurances to relieve its policies concerning Ukraine's east for Crimea's compromise, likely doomed to be an empty wording, especially considering the

fact how excellent Russia is in disrespecting international law and given security guarantees under international agreements.

2. Invasion of Donbas

In the case of Donbas, its current status and circumstances of the invasion point out that Russia keeps occupied territories as a tool to influence Ukraine's domestic and foreign policies. This outcome satisfies both realism and constructivist approaches. Therefore, Russia less likely gives the occupied territories back under Kyiv's control unless it finds another effective mechanism to control Ukraine.

At the same time, realists would expect the Kremlin can proceed further to invade more territories of Ukraine. In this sense, Kyiv's close affiliation with the West, especially NATO would instigate the Kremlin to encroach more on Ukraine's eastern and southern regions. The point of particular interest there for Russia is to build the land corridor between Crimea and occupied territories. Therefore, Kremlin would resolve its infrastructure problems with water and electricity supply to the peninsula, as well as cut Ukraine, from the access to the Sea of Azov turning it into internal Russia's sea.

In turn, constructivists are satisfied with the outcome unless Donbas helps Russia to perform its function in keeping Ukraine out of the West. However, in this case, there is a threat that Russia will try to integrate Ukraine back under into orbit by using political means including escalation of tension in Donbas.

The regime's survival perspective in the Donbas case discloses the regime's weaknesses in terms of Russian people's reluctance to go for war with Ukraine. In this case, it is important for Kyiv to launch a large-scale information campaign, involving international media platforms and to constantly highlight the reality of Russia's direct involvement in Donbas hostilities. Besides, an effective mechanism for bringing this information to the public is to prove the unlawful actions of the Putin's regime in international court institutions. One of the key landmarks in this is to find justice in proving Russia's guilt in the downing of a passenger airliner MH-17 over occupied Donbas in July 2014.

In contrast to Crimea, in the case of Donbas Kyiv still has different platforms of communication to negotiate the conflict termination. This contains Normandy Four, the Minsk format, including the Trilateral Contact Group. However, the mentioned platforms are widely used by Russia to pursue its own goals in keeping Ukraine under Kremlin's control. One of the critical points here is that Russia constantly insists on constitutional changes in Ukraine in terms of giving occupied territories special status, but still being integrated in Ukraine. The main Russia's goal here is to turn Donbas into a veto tool on Ukraine's domestic and foreign political choices. The constitutional reform foisted by Moscow is aimed to decentralize and federalize Ukraine. Moreover, the latter is a point of contention in the implementation of the Minsk agreements.

Therefore, Ukraine needs to consider not to cross 'the red lines' in favor of Russia's goals, which can threaten the state's sovereignty and disintegrate its integrity. In particular, it is important for Ukraine not to play with the constitutional changes that can endanger Ukraine's constitutional administrative and territorial structure. Not less important is to continue Ukraine's strategic course of EU and NATO membership, improving the level of political dialogue and bilateral institutional mechanisms for cooperation in the European and Euro-Atlantic areas.

Ukraine should not abandon the activities in international courts and arbitrations to bring Russia to international legal responsibility for acts of aggression and harm to Ukraine and its citizens. Alongside that it is important to accelerate the work with international partners to strengthen the sanctions regime against Russia, therefore sending the international community the signal, that violation of international law should not be tolerated.

In any case, defending its right and territorial integrity, in particular from Russia's threat, should be the paramount priority for Ukraine. The Ukrainian nation has fought for this right for 7 centuries and deserves to win. The ongoing war with Russia in this case is something more than a struggle for territories or interests. For Ukraine, this is a battle for survival and freedom in which the state must go till the end.

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