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INTRODUCTION

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is considered to be a historic turning point which has galvanized the world. Escalation of the conflict that originally started in 2014 challenged European security and drew the attention of the global community. Understanding the historical background and context is of a great importance if one aims to get deeper insights into the origins of the conflict. Thus, this study will cover the period from the collapse of the USSR to the Crimean annexation and ongoing events.

The collapse of the USSR in 1991 has revolutionized the situation in the region giving rise to independent nations. The fight for preserving sovereignty, having separate identity, maintaining control over territories contributed to the Russo-Ukrainian war. Geopolitical factors, narratives based on nationality as well as identity laid grounds for uproarious events. The interruption of the Association Agreement (AA) between the EU and Ukraine by the former Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich leading to large-scale protest known as “Euro-Maidan” was unexpected turn of events which resulted in annexation of Crimea in 2014. It was the annexation which changed the geopolitical landscape of the region and paved the way for the full scale invasion of Ukraine and outburst of hostilities.

Relevance of the study

The ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine has substantial geopolitical implications, both within the borders of the two countries and for the broader European and international security landscape. The conflict has led to displacement of population, loss of life as well as economic constraints. Obtaining nuanced comprehension of the conflict’s origins, dynamics, and potential resolutions is of utmost importance for policymakers and international organizations that seek to ensure stability and security in the region. Thus far, the war has attracted the attention not only local but also international media outlets and therefore, conducting a comprehensive research on the origin of the war is essential as it can broaden public understanding and combat misinformation that potentially exacerbates the tensions between two nations. Based on the data collected the study can provide recommendations for policy interventions targeted at advancing regional peace and stability.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to delve into the origins of the Russo-Ukrainian war through the theoretical lenses of Realism and Constructivism. By conducting a comparative analysis grounded in these two prominent international relations theories, the study seeks to examine the underlying factors and dynamics that contributed to the outbreak of the conflict. Furthermore, the study aims to explore how the interplay between Realist power dynamics and

Constructivist ideational factors shaped the decisions and actions of key actors involved in the conflict. The study intends to deepen the comprehension of the complex geopolitical and socio-cultural dimensions of the Russia-Ukraine war and contribute to scholarly discourse.

Research objectives

One of the main objectives of the research is to conduct a detailed analysis of the historical events and major developments leading to the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, considering the contrasting but at the same time complementary perspectives offered by Realist and Constructivist theories. The study delves into Realist principles such as power politics, security dilemmas, and state interests as well as Constructivist ideational factors, including national identities, historical narratives, and cultural influences in order to evaluate their role in escalating tensions between Russia and Ukraine. Another key objective is to assess the involvement of external actors, such as NATO, the European Union, and the United States, in the conflict through the dual lenses of Realism and Constructivism. Through empirical examination and critical analysis, the study will evaluate implications of both theories for policy and contribute to a thorough understanding of the conflict's origins, dynamics, and suggest potential pathways to resolution.

Significance of the study

The significance of this work lies in its contribution to academic knowledge by employing realist and constructivist perspectives to a real-world conflict scenario. It provides insights that can influence academic discourse, public awareness and policy-making. Through comprehensive analysis, this study addresses a gap in previous literature by focusing on the root causes of the war that have received limited attention. While providing explanation to the behavior displayed by key actors', the role of material factors have been predominant. This study, on the other hand, highlights the importance of ideational elements alongside material drivers. By incorporating realist and constructivist notions, the research demonstrates how the two theoretical perspectives complement each other in explaining the origins of the on-going war. Despite its limitations, the study provides an in-depth analysis of the conflict and contributes to existing knowledge in the field.

Research questions

The questions analyzed in the research are as follows: *What are the origins of the Russia-Ukraine conflict? How do realist and constructivist schools of international relations explain the origins of this conflict?* The research endeavors to address the central inquiry: *Does the origins of the conflict stem from tangible power dynamics and security challenges, as suggested*

by realist theorists, or does it arise from intangible elements such as collective identities, ideas and narratives, as posited by constructivist thinkers?

From the theoretical framework, the study focuses on the perspectives which are dissimilar but complementary at the same time: Realism and Constructivism. Realism mainly focuses on power dynamics, state interests, the security dilemma, and strategic calculations, while constructivism puts emphasis on shared ideas, identities and norms. Incorporating both lenses will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate nature of the conflict. So far, attempts on providing explanations for behavior displayed by the President Vladimir Putin have mainly been based on realist perspectives, claiming that realist tenets are the key motivators behind Russian foreign policy. However, it is argued that there are shortcomings in realist interpretations too. Constructivism, on the other hand, offers a different set of glasses, and this perspective is not about material factors but rather idea-based ones, particularly national identity, norms, the role of society and culture. Political structures and ideational factors are interconnected as one has the ability to change the other.

The outline of the study

The following chapters of this study will unfold as follows: Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive literature review and theoretical framework. Chapter 3 delves into the historical context and key events. Chapter 4 examines the key drivers of the war, while Chapter 5 analyzes applicability of Realism and Constructivism to the origins of the Russo-Ukrainian war. The study ends with a conclusion which summarizes the main points of the research and offers policy recommendations.

I CHAPTER: LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Overview of Existing Research

To explain the origins of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine a number of scholars have resorted to realist and constructivist frameworks of international relations.

Mearheimer (2001) posits that great powers constantly seek power and influence due to the anarchical international system that makes states insecure and promotes mistrust. Using realist theory and examples from history, he estimates that rivalry among world powers such as China, Russia and many others that strive to gain influence in the international system will intensify. This increase in tension became crystal clear after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine when the USA along with other nations opposed Russia. Mearsheimer (2014) also criticizes the widespread belief in the West which claims that realism is no longer relevant and argues that the Ukrainian crisis proves the lasting importance of realpolitik. He evaluates West's expansion eastwards reaching Russia's doorstep as a strategic blunder that neglected security concerns of Russia. Mearsheimer (2014) also encourages readers to get better insights into the geopolitical dynamics in action. Although his work offers thought –provoking examination, it also displays a one-sided perspective largely blaming the West and ignoring Putin's expansionist policies in the region. The work also reduced the role of the Ukrainian population in defining the trajectory of their country and failed to put importance on people's desire for self-determination. Thus, a more balanced approach has to be employed in order to get a more robust comprehension of the reasons behind the war.

In case of the policy of Russia, Alyushin and Knyazeva (2018) also focuses on realism as a theoretical framework. Realpolitik displayed by Russia is seen as a legacy of the Cold War era and is observed in its force used against Ukraine. While other scholars argue that this one dimensional approach is overemphasizing material factors, neglecting the ideational factors. Along with geopolitical ambitions and security concerns Allison (2014) also mentions Crimea's cultural and historical importance for Russia. He believes that the invasion was triggered by the combination of the elements such as desire for dominance in the region, security concerns, historical ties etc. Yet, the article has not given sufficient place for ideational factors.

Turning to constructivist perspective, prominent social constructivist Alexander Wendt (1992) claims that material factors such as economic power and military capability are not the only determiners of states behavior. Unlike realism, which puts an emphasis on self-help, Wendt (1992) contends that based on mutually shared beliefs states form alliances and cooperate. Wendt (1992) further develops this approach, again criticizing neorealism for heavily relying on assumptions such as fixed human nature and material factors. Wendt (1999)

contends that the international system is socially constructed and must not be seen as a given structure. Katzenstein (1996) sheds light on how cultural factors influence states' threat perceptions, the formation of alliances and the strategic choices. The approaches by Wendt and Katzenstein go beyond conventional material considerations. Checkel (1997) supports integration of rationalist and constructivist views, understanding that both perspectives have strengths and weaknesses. He posits that incorporating both approaches provide more in-depth insights into dynamics of international relations.

Hayat (2022) explains the driving factors of the conflict based on constructivist analysis. Hayat highlights the differences in the deep-rooted historical as well as collective identity of two states. These differences are claimed to have led to the escalating conflict into a war. As for the combination of two perspectives Tandilashvili (2015) examines different views including classical realism and norm-based constructivism on the causes behind Russia's aggression, with realism, which highlights desire for influence and power and constructivism, which, on the other hand, focuses on the power of identities and ideas. Samokhvalov (2021) discusses the historical concept of "great power" politics in Russia, claiming that it is linked to its power over deciding the fates of nations in the region. In this context, the historical idea of "deciding the fates of entire nations" should not only be considered in the context of power dynamics or geopolitical interests, as this concept has its deep roots in historical identity, sense of leadership and responsibility. Kuzio (2022) posits that Putin views Ukraine as an "artificial" nation created by Bolsheviks. Based on this perspective, Kuzio(2022) argues that Putin sees Ukrainians as a construct of wide range of external forces such as Poles, Austrians, Lenin and now, the US, the EU and CIA have been added to this list as well. Ukraine is viewed as a puppet state of the West and this hinders the unification of Little Russians with Russians. Kuzio's ideas can align with both realism and constructivism. From the realist point of view Putin rejects to see Ukraine as a sovereign state, cannot accept Ukrainian independence and his dream of building a pan-Russia is the product of a zero-sum mindset, where gains of one state are seen as another state's losses. From a constructivist perspective the idea of pan-Russia stems from the emphasis Putin puts on historical narrative and shared identity.

To conclude, a comprehensive study of the war requires a combination of both perspectives. The review of the literature indicates that realist scholars mainly see power dynamics and security concerns as the key drivers of the war, while constructivist scholars emphasize the influence of ideational and cultural factors, norms and identities on states' behavior. In order to get a solid comprehension of the complicated situation a more balanced approach is applied in the following paragraphs.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

Realism is known to be a mainstream and dominant theory in international relations. So far, a realist framework has been applied to comprehend the dynamics of international relations and get a better understanding on why states behave in a particular manner. Key realist assumptions include a pessimistic view of human nature. There is also a conviction that international relations are conflictual and thus conflicts are ultimately resolved by war. Apart from that, national security and state survival are highly valued. These pervasive ideas influence most leading realist IR theorists' thoughts, both past and present (Jackson & Sorensen, 2013).

One of the founding fathers of realist school, Hans Morgenthau, posits that humans are political animals by nature and they are born with the "lust" for power (Morgenthau, 1948). The desire for power encourages one to seek for a safe political space, or territory, where one can live without being subject to the political will of others. The independent state is, without a doubt, the ultimate political space in which safety can be established and enjoyed (Jackson and Sorensen, 2013). Morgenthau provides principles of political realism, which can be summarized as follows: Morgenthau asserts that politics, similar to society, is governed by objective laws grounded in human nature. Challenging these laws may involve failure, and thus acknowledging and working within the constraints of political realities is of utmost importance. The objective laws of politics are unbiased and do not serve for personal desires or beliefs. Individuals have to acknowledge and respect these laws to cope with the challenges of political interactions successfully. Ignoring these laws, however, can have adverse implications (Morgenthau, 1948).

Kenneth Waltz, the leading neorealist thinker, shared assumptions which are different from classical realism in several key ways. First of all, while classical realism highlights the role of individual state leaders and the decisions they make, Waltz (1979) focuses on the structure of the international system. The external structure, the distribution of power among states, in particular, is the primary analytical priority. Neorealism minimizes the importance of the central assumptions of classical realism including human nature and the ethics of statecraft. Waltz's neorealism also suggests that based on the structure of the international system, states exhibit predictable behavior. By emphasizing the distribution of power and systemic constraints, neorealism suggests that state actions do not necessarily depend on individual leaders' preferences but rather the structure. Waltz sees states as "billiard balls" and highlights how internal structures influence foreign policy (Waltz, 1979). As for the concept of stability and peace, Waltz's ideas are as follows: "With only two great powers, both can be expected to act to maintain the system" (Waltz, 1979, p. 204). The reason is that in maintaining the system

great powers are maintaining themselves and based on view, the Cold War was the period when peace and international stability prevailed (Jackson & Sorensen, 2013).

Mearsheimer, one of the key proponents of offensive realism, expands on Waltz's view on the stability of bipolar systems. Waltz, as previously mentioned, argues that compared to multipolar systems, bipolar systems are superior as they enhance peace and security by fostering higher international stability. Bipolar systems tend to be peaceful and stable for three main reasons. First, there are fewer great-power disputes, which lowers the chances of a great-power conflict. Moreover, since fewer superpowers are involved, it is simpler to maintain an efficient deterrent system. Last but not least, there is less chance of error and miscalculation because there are only two dominant powers in the system (Jackson & Sorensen, 2013). Jackson & Sorensen (2013), further discusses John Mearsheimer's question concerning the potential implications of transitioning from a bipolar system to a multipolar one in Europe. Mearsheimer posits that such a shift could lead to a substantial rise in the possibility of major conflicts in the region. He recognizes that the rate of violence is not expected to exceed that of the early 20th century. Yet, he argues that conflicts would probably become more common in Europe than they were in the second half of the century (Jackson & Sorensen, 2013). As a proponent of offensive realism, which highlights the aggressive power pursuit by states, Mearsheimer posits that states are driven by the quest of achieving hegemony: "But great powers do not merely strive to be the strongest of all the great powers... Their ultimate aim is to be the hegemon—that is, the only great power in the system" (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 2).

As a general rule, the theory is state centric, that is to say, states are considered to be major actors in international relations. Realism posits that the way states behave is usually influenced by their desire for power and pursuit of national interest (Morgenthau, 1948). Realist scholars also focus on the concept of self-help, claiming that in an anarchic system, to secure survival, states have to rely on their own capabilities. In other words, doing strategic calculations as well as maximizing military power is of great importance as long as states want to survive (Waltz, 1979).

The concept of balance of power is another key tenet which was also applied in the analysis of the Cold War period as each state tried to keep the power in balance so as to hinder the other state from accumulating more power. As for the security dilemma, being in such a dilemma often makes states feel insecure and thus, incite a conflict, when one state attempts to boost its security, other states consider it as a threat. Expansion of military alliances or deployment of nuclear weapons, can be good examples for this. When one state maximizes its power for security purposes, the other state sees it as an aggressive behavior that threatens its security or

existence, which in turn leads to mistrust among states. The same situation was observed during the Cold War when the weakened relations between the rivals were even more exacerbated. However, multipolarity, a situation when multiple actors like the US, Russia and China emerge as global powers, can bring about problems too (Kissinger, 2014).

Although realism failed to predict the collapse of the USSR, it did get its importance back and played a key role in explaining the relations between Russia and West and Russia-Ukraine conflict that happened in 2014 as well as the ongoing war. For instance, in his prominent work named “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault”, Mearsheimer claims that the US’s adherence to liberal principles provoked Vladimir Putin. He argues that the wish to spread democracy in the Post-Soviet region, which is considered to be Russia’s sphere of influence, as well as moving NATO and the EU to the eastward exacerbated the situation and contributed to the outburst of the conflict.

Unlike some other mainstream theories, constructivism claims that idea-based factors have an essential role to play in international relations as these factors can dramatically shift states’ behavior. Nicholas Onuf, who coined the term constructivism, in his book “World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations” (1989), posits that states as well as individuals live in a socially constructed world – “world of our making”. He also focuses on the idea of “constitutive rules” where he claims that rules should not be only seen as guidelines to determine a proper behavior, as they have a power to shape the actors’ identity and existence. That is to say, the rules do not only dictate what is allowed to do and what is not, but rather these rules play a role in identifying these actors (Onuf, 1989). Unlike realism that sees concepts such as anarchy, sovereignty etc. as out there or fixed, constructivists like Onuf believe that those concepts are the product of our making, which usually happens through language and interactions.

Another prominent constructivist scholar Alexander Wendt in his works “Anarchy is what states make of it” (1997) as well as “Social Theory of International Politics” (1999) claims that the way states behave do not entirely stem from material interests such as power, military or economy, but also shared ideas, beliefs and identities. Wendt challenges the conventional realist thought that anarchy inevitably results in conflict among states. He claims that the way states view and perceive their security environment determines the nature of anarchy, whether fosters cooperation or conflict.

Apart from that constructivists argue that norms and international institutions also influence states behavior. It is the norms, beliefs and identities, based on the constructivist viewpoint, that construct social realities. In other words, in the international system, the ways

actors behave and interact are not only influenced by power dynamics or material drivers, but rather norms and ideas that are socially constructed. Norms are viewed as the standards of behavior which are followed by most of the states in the form of rights and obligations. The norms are considered to be guidelines on how states have to behave and interact, shaping mutual expectations on appropriate ways of behavior and interaction. Wendt (1999) suggests three strategies for identity transformation in a decentralized global system. First, redefining sovereignty is one way to transform identities. The ability of a state to rule itself free from outside intervention is referred to as sovereignty in the context of international relations. Redefining sovereignty and limiting state power is one of the ways to achieve identity transformation. Secondly, the cooperation among states, according to Wendt, have a power to alter identities. By means of the co-operation, states can establish trust, mutual objectives, which in turn, shape the way states see themselves and others in the international system. Thirdly, national identities are subject to a change when they are converted into collective identities, which involves states sharing a sense of community and mutual objectives. According to Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein (1996), the way states identify themselves and behave are influenced by cultural and institutional elements.

Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink in their book, *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change* (1998) articulate the concept of Norm Life Cycle, a process that consists of three steps including norm emergence, norm cascade-broad norm acceptance, and internalization. The first step involves acceptance of new norms by states, while the second one is about making the norm more prevalent through the socialization process. Final step involves actors internalizing norms once they become widely accepted (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

The above mentioned elements of constructivism will be applied to examine the origins of the war, to get a perspective that is different from the one offered by realists. Nonetheless, constructivism has its own limitations too, as it is hard to measure or operationalize the influence of the ideational factors on states behavior. Thus, both theoretical perspectives have to be employed to compensate for the weaknesses of each one and get more nuanced insights into the origins of the on-going war. The next chapters will examine historical background, key events and main drivers of the war through the lenses of both theoretical frameworks.

1.3 Hypotheses

The first hypothesis is based on realist notions: *Full scale invasion of Ukraine is driven by Russia's desire to keep Ukraine under its sphere of influence and prevent Ukraine from having closer ties with the West.* "Russia's desire to keep Ukraine under its sphere of influence and

prevent Ukraine from having closer ties with the West” is an independent variable, which is posited to lead to the “full-scale invasion of Ukraine”- dependent variable.

The next hypothesis finds its grounds on constructivist notions: *Competing normative beliefs, identities, and narratives between Russia and Ukraine lead to mutual mistrust and sense of enmity, intensifying hostilities between two states.* “Competing normative beliefs, identities, and historical narratives between Russia and Ukraine” is an independent variable, which is believed to lead to “mutual mistrust and a sense of enmity, intensifying hostilities between the two states”-dependent variable. The study aims to find cause and effect relations between dependent and independent variables offered by both theoretical frameworks.

II CHAPTER: METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

2.1 Research Design and Data Collection

The study uses a qualitative research design, incorporating analysis of historical events and key drivers of the conflict. The study employs dual perspectives of realist and constructivist school of international relations in order to provide detailed explanation to behaviours displayed by major actors. The research aims to yield nuanced comprehension of the root causes and dynamics of the conflict from two different as well as complementary perspectives.

Both primary and secondary sources of research are analyzed to define core concepts and approaches to the conflict. Primary sources include original documents, official records, interviews, speeches, statements by key political figures including Vladimir Putin and other relevant actors. Secondary sources consist of literature reviews, review articles and books as well as news articles and analysis from reputable media outlets which provide insights into public discourse and narratives.

2.2 Units of Analysis

The study incorporates a detailed analysis of the key historical events from the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 to present time. This includes the rise of independent nations, struggles for sovereignty, the suspension of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and EU, the Euromaidan protest, the annexation of Crimea, which all have led to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Utilizing historical events as a unit of analysis allows for a detailed examination of tangible drivers of the conflict, such as territorial disputes, security concerns, and power struggles and intangible ideational factors such as identities, norms and narratives. Another unit of analysis in the study is political actors. This includes political leaders, policymakers, and other relevant actors. A thorough examination of their actions, decisions, and rhetoric provides explanations to their behavior, the strategic calculations, and motivations. As a textual unit of analysis the study incorporates academic literature, official documents, media reports and speeches. By examining these units, the study identifies normative beliefs and competing narratives that shape perceptions and behaviors of actors involved in the conflict.

Limitations

It is also important to recognize the limitations of the study. Due to the inability to experience the conflict firsthand by traveling to the conflict area, the results of interviews, surveys or polls are based on indirect sources. Nevertheless, study will be based on unbiased

and balanced perspectives, and these limitations will not undermine the significance of knowledge which is obtained through the methodology in use.

Ethical considerations

The study will not contain any misrepresentation or misinterpretation of the content of both written and visual materials. The study also considers cultural differences and evaluates each viewpoint equally and respectfully.

III CHAPTER: HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANT MILESTONES

3.1 Historical Background

Russia and Ukraine share history that goes back centuries. Kyiv used to be the heart of the first Slavic state-Kyivan Rus, which is considered to be the birthplace of both states. More than thousand years ago, in 987 Volodymyr the Great, prince of Kyiv, who adopted Orthodox Christianity was baptized in the Chersonesus, a city situated in Crimea. Based on it, Vladimir Putin on many different occasions described Russians and Ukrainians as one people and a single whole.

It is also important to go back to the 20th century, a period after 1917 when many countries including Ukraine witnessed a violent civil war and finally became part of the USSR in 1922. Few years later, Ukrainians became a victim of famine organized by Joseph Stalin, then leader of the USSR. The famine is known as the Holodomor, which emerged from the combination of two Ukrainian words : “starvation” and “to inflict death” and according to one estimate it took 3.9 million lives. Although most famines of the time used to be caused by either drought or blight, this famine was caused in order to punish Ukrainians who were aspiring for independence posing threat to the totalitarian regime exerted by the dictator (Kiger, 2019). Historical legacies of eastern and western parts of Ukraine have been another matter of concern. Western Ukraine historically had the control of European powers, namely Austro-Hungarian Empire, while the eastern part had been exposed to Russian influence and thus developed tighter bonds with Russia. As a result, in today’s Ukraine, people living in the eastern part of the country have Orthodox Christianity faith and mostly speak Russian, meanwhile, the population of the western part of the country are primarily Catholics who tend to speak Ukrainian. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, fifteen independent states including Ukraine emerged. Yet, the unification of the country was far from easy. One reason for that, according to the words of Steven Pifer , who was a former ambassador to Ukraine, was the fact that the sense of nationalism in the western part of Ukraine was deeper than it was in the eastern one. Nevertheless, the newfound sovereignty of independent nations substantially changed the situation in the region triggering geopolitical shifts, which was mainly because of the fact that each state wanted to find their unique national identity and finally gain control over their respective territories. This in turn, was a dramatic turn of events for Russia. This was clear from Vladimir Putin’s statement where he characterized the fall of the Soviet Union as follows : “The collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geo-political catastrophe of the century. And for the Russian people, it became a real drama. Tens of millions of our citizens found themselves outside the Russian Federation...” (Putin, 2005).

The tensions between Russia and Ukraine concerning the Crimean Peninsula and the port city of Sevastopol, in particular, date back as far as the disintegration of the USSR itself (Wood, 2016). As fifteen former Soviet republics sought for their own identities figuring out how each state relates to one another, territorial disputes engulfed many former-USSR states including Russia and Ukraine. The “independence” of Crimea and the issue of whether it belonged to Ukraine or Russia was at the heart of the conflict between the two fraternal nations (Wood, 2016). According to Wood, when the independence of Ukraine was declared by Ukrainian parliament, Russian president Boris Yeltsin threatened Ukraine by raising the questions regarding territorial claims. Even after formal recognition of the independence of Ukraine by Russia in 1992, there was an attempt to declare the independence of Crimea as a sovereign state. Name-calling over Sevastopol and Crimea kept going throughout the early 1990s. Attempts to retake the Crimean peninsula was described as an “imperial disease” by then-Ukrainian president Leonid Kravchuk, while Sevastopol was claimed to be a “Russian city” by the Russian parliament. Apart from that, in the mid-1990s millions were spent on Sevastopol under the name of “fraternal aid” by Yuri Luzhkov, who was the Moscow mayor. Crimea and Sevastopol, in particular, were turning into the Russian neoimperialist’s pet projects, which claimed that Sevastopol-hero city was supposed to be part of Russia (Wood, 2016).

Wood (2016) further states that, when Putin became a prime minister in 1999, the Russian consulate in Simferopol started to function, being entitled to an instant mandate to provide all Black Sea sailors as well as the members of their families with Russian passports so that they would have a chance to take part in parliamentary elections. It was also pointed out that the majority of the Crimean population viewed themselves as Russian and the vast majority spoke Russian as their main language.

3.2 Major Developments

The tension between two states over the peninsula was intensified with the Orange Revolution in 2004 that enabled Viktor Yushchenko to come to power. It was obviously against the interest of Russian leaders, as Ukraine sought to attain full sovereignty and strived for independence from Russia. This in turn, triggered a broad spectrum of Russian forces comprised of paramilitary groups, the Russian Orthodox Church, youth groups, business as well as criminal elements—which were involved in the provocation aimed at rejoining Crimean Peninsula to Russia (Wood, 2016). There were several major groups that were actively involved in the agitation process and the study covers five of them as identified by Wood (2016):

The first one was, the Russian Community of Crimea which, in November, 2000, sent a petition to Putin where they asked the President of “Big Russia” to stand up for the Russian population of “Little Crimea”.

The second notable one was the youth group named Proryv (Breakthrough), which was known for its activities in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transdnistria. The leader of the group, Aleksey Dobychin claimed that the rise of Wahhabism among Tatars in Crimea would make the war “inevitable” in the Crimean peninsula. He further took “Kosovo precedent” as an example to show the case when muslim population attempted to distance themselves from Christians and he further demanded that the return of Crimea and Sevastopol to Russia had to be initiated by the president of the Russian Federation. “Proryv” was “a sort of paramilitary umbrella,” which promoted a number of faux-international conferences discussing the ‘Kosovo precedent’ in order to achieve justifications for parallel secessionist claims (Wilson, 2007, as cited in Wood, 2016).

The third group worth mentioning is the People’s Front Sevastopol-Crimea-Russia created by a group of nationalists, which aimed at returning Crimea to Russia . Despite the fact that they intended to reach their goals legally, not all actions taken by them were lawful .

The fourth was the Paramilitary Cossack groups, which are claimed to have taken an active part in riots and assaults aimed at the Crimean Tatars.

The fifth and the final one was the Eurasian Youth Movement, which was associated with extreme nationalist Alexander Dugin, who has been claimed to be planning protests against NATO and promoting military-themed “patriotic education” in Crimea. Due to its “anti-Ukrainian” activities, the organization was outlawed throughout all of Ukraine, including Crimea in 2001 . Yet, have kept seeking veterans to fight in Donetsk since March 2014.

Despite the fact that these groups did not involve huge number of people, they were claimed to be supported by the Russian security service (Wood, 2016).

Historical legacies of eastern and western parts of Ukraine have been another matter of concern. Western Ukraine historically had the control of European powers, namely Austro-Hungarian Empire, while the eastern part had been exposed to Russian influence and thus developed tighter bonds with Russia. As a result, in today’s Ukraine, people living in the eastern part of the country have Orthodox Christianity faith and mostly speak Russian, meanwhile, the population of the western part of the country are primarily Catholics who tend to speak Ukrainian. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, fifteen independent states including Ukraine emerged. Yet, the unification of the country was far from easy. One reason for that, according to the words of Steven Pifer , who was a former ambassador to Ukraine, was the fact

that the sense of nationalism in the western part of Ukraine was deeper than it was in the eastern one. Nevertheless, the newfound sovereignty of independent nations substantially changed the situation in the region triggering geopolitical shifts, which was mainly because of the fact that each state wanted to find their unique national identity and finally gain control over their respective territories. This in turn, was a dramatic turn of events for Russia. This was clear from Vladimir Putin's statement where he characterized the fall of the Soviet Union as follows : "The collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geo-political catastrophe of the century. And for the Russian people, it became a real drama. Tens of millions of our citizens found themselves outside the Russian Federation..." (Putin, 2005).

Thus, one can deduce that today's ongoing war has its deep roots in past events. Overall, the aggression displayed by Putin was an accumulation of different variables including historical dominance of Russia in the region, geopolitical factors, NATO's eastward expansion, national narratives, historic, linguistic, cultural ties etc. Apart from that, strategic and economic interests also have their own role to play. All of these factors have to be taken into account and studied deeply to understand the real reasons behind the escalation of the conflict.

3.2.1 Political Dynamics in Ukraine

In the fall of 1999, as President Yeltsin was about to step down in Russia, endorsing Putin as his heir, President Leonid Kuchma of Ukraine was getting ready to run for reelection. Kuchma managed to stabilize the Ukrainian economy by means of privatization as well as cooperation with the IMF and other Western donors (Plokyh,2023).According to Plokyh (2023) the electoral campaign held by Kuchma in 1999 replicated that of Yeltsin in 1996. Kuchma, like Yeltsin, represented himself as the shield against a re-emergence of communism, which in turn, was favored by industrial entrepreneurs in the eastern part of Ukraine and voters in the western part of the country who supported the independence of Ukraine and its integration into Europe. Defeating Petro Symenko, who was a communist leader in Ukraine, Kuchma managed to win the elections, with more than half of total votes (Plokyh, 2023). After being elected Kuchma concentrated on market reforms replicating the methods used by Yeltsin. Viktor Yushchenko became a new prime minister and subsequently a considerable boost in economy and increase in revenues were observed. Apart from that, all unpaid pensions and salaries were paid as a result of the economic growth. The economic reforms also had a positive impact on industries, mainly on mining and metallurgy, resulting in sustainable growth of exports and the economy as a whole. The events happening after the 1999 elections, however, were not favored by the population. Kuchma, took advantage of the success and popularity and attempted to make an alteration to the country's constitution. The purpose of the alteration was

to call for a referendum which would enable the president to consolidate more power in his hands. By doing so, the president Kuchma, was trying to achieve more effective implementation of his agenda. The referendum, on the other hand, led to political turmoil since the opposition refused to recognize the results of it. The secret tapes revealing the corrupt practices undermined Kuchma's prestige and reduced public confidence in his leadership.

In the next presidential elections conducted in 2004 Kuchma was leaving the scene. The main two candidates were Viktor Yanukovich and Viktor Yushchenko, pro-Western candidate with his own political party named *Nasha Ukraina*, which literally means *Our Ukraine*. In September of the same year, Yushchenko was reported to have contracted the dioxin poisoning, which is thought to be caused by Russian intelligence (Kimmage, 2024). When Yanukovich succeeded in the first round of voting, people in Kyiv took a civic action and protested against the outcome of the election claiming that it was rigged. Protestors wearing orange, which was the color of the campaign held by Yushchenko, marched in a large number. Their aim was not to change the system but rather to achieve elections, with fair results (Kimmage, 2024). Both Russia and the EU acted as mediators during the crisis, which in turn, resulted in conducting a second round of elections, where Yushchenko finally came out as a winner. The results of the second election, however, enraged Putin as he saw it as stealing Ukraine from his sphere of influence (Kimmage, 2024).

3.2.2 Euromaidan and the Crimean Annexation

When Viktor Yanukovich finally came to power in 2010, he was quite welcomed by the Ukrainian population mainly due to the fact that the government under former president Viktor Yushchenko proved to be incompetent. However, after one month of being elected, what he did was not welcomed by the Ukrainian nation at all. Ukrainians disapproved of the Landmark agreement, which was signed between the Russian president Dimitri Medvedev and Viktor Yanukovich in April 2010. Based on this agreement the price of Russian gas exported to Ukraine was reduced by 30%, Ukraine, in turn, had to prolong Russian base's lease in the Black sea for 25 years. The Ukrainian public, on the other hand, condemned such an agreement, as it would allow Russia to control Crimea in return for cheap gas provision. Apart from that, a few months later Yanukovich amended the country's constitution, the article concerning president's removal. The public again were not in favor of the decision as it gave a president a chance to lengthen presidential term. Opposition and majority of Ukrainians claimed that, by this way, Yanukovich was trying to rule Ukraine like Russian government ruled Russia, since Vladimir Putin as well as leaders of Soviet Russia were also known to have taken such steps. Eventually, Yanukovich lost the confidence of his nation (Matuszak & Sarna, 2013). To reverse

the situation and gain his popularity back, in 2013 he and his government claimed that they were eager to sign the European Association Agreement and actively promoted this idea. Through this hype he could gain the faith of his nation back. However, later in November he suspended the signing of the agreement which led to civil unrest and eventually to the Euromaidan movement, which is also known as Revolution of Dignity.

The purpose of the movement was to oust president Yanukovich, yet, the public had mixed opinion as main supporters of the protest were from Kyiv and Western part of Ukraine, while almost the same proportion of the public were against the movement. When the Euromaidan movement peaked, Yanukovich fled to Russia and a temporary government came to power in Ukraine. Consequently, in June 2014, Petro Poroshenko, who was an opposition leader, became the new president of Ukraine. When Yanukovich was removed from his office, there were protests in Eastern parts of the country, including Crimea where majority of citizens are Russian speakers or ethnic Russian population. In response to the removal of the government led by Yanukovich, Vladimir Putin intervened in Crimea and eventually annexed the peninsula (Budjeryn, 2023).

Putin's address on Crimea joining Russia

On 16th of March in 2014 Crimea gained independence according to the results of a referendum which revealed that the vast majority of voters were willing to join Russia. Nonetheless, the referendum is considered to be illegal by Ukraine as well as the majority of western countries. Yet, Putin in his speech given to the Russian parliament after the referendum tried to justify his annexation of Crimea. Putin repeatedly mentioned the historical as well as cultural ties between Russia and Crimea mainly emphasizing Prince Vladimir and Orthodoxy. Putin also mentioned decisions made by Bolsheviks to show that Crimea, a historically Russian land, was gifted to Ukrainians, which was done in totalitarian regime when people's will had no role to play in a decision making process. On the contrary, the result of the referendum held in March, 2014 was the reflection of people's will, according to his words. He condemned the West for abusing international law for their benefits, highlighting the case when Belgrade was bombed and Kosovo was separated from Serbia. He compares the situation in Kosovo with the one in Crimea:

“... [A] very similar situation, when they agreed that the unilateral separation of Kosovo from Serbia, exactly what Crimea is doing now, was legitimate and did not require any permission from the country's central authorities” (Putin, 2014).

Putin also shared his concern about NATO's expansion eastwards and emphasized that having a foreign military alliance on Russia's doorstep, especially in Sevastopol, which is the cradle of Russian Black Sea Fleet, is a threat to the country's security.

3.2.3 The War in Donbas

The war in Donbas, which took place in April, 2014, is considered to be the second phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war, culminating with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The annexation of the peninsula ensured separatist-minded groups in the eastern part of Ukraine that Russia would support their decision to mobilize. During the Euromaidan uprising there were clashes between local forces and separatist ones. Although separatist groups did not achieve success in cities like Odessa, Kharkiv and many more, they did it in parts of the Donbas region. As a result, pro-Russian factions, held referendum and declared "independence" in Donetsk and Luhansk, part of the Donbas region. The mentioned regions were no longer under control of the government of Ukraine and proclaimed as "Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics".

The reasons why the separatist groups were successful was that they were largely supported by the local security forces as well as oligarchs. Russia also used the media as a tool to disseminate propaganda which condemned the Ukrainian government and portrayed the leaders of Ukraine as "Nazi" and "fascist". Russia's military intelligence service was also actively involved in spreading propaganda along with the media outlets. Although Russian media was considered to be the key source of propaganda, the local media was also in the role of an echo chamber. The local oligarchs, however, were rather neutral, trying to maintain their power and wealth (Sasse, 2023). Although there were attempts for the restoration of the control by means of military operations as well as ceasefire agreements such as Minsk I and Minsk II protocols, the dispute continued. In spite of all the challenges, both in Donetsk and Luhansk, the majority of the population kept a sharp sense of loyalty and belonging to Ukraine. The sense of civic identity overshadowed the ethnic divisions in the region (Sasse, 2023).

3.2.4 Zelensky's Tenure as a Ukrainian President

On April 21st, in 2019 Volodymyr Zelensky won the presidential elections with majority votes (73%) (Pisano, 2022). Zelensky, after coming to power established a one-party-majority in the Verkhovna Rada (Supreme Council in Ukraine) —something that had never been done by any previous presidents in Ukraine, which was probably a mark of the strong aspiration for change that Ukrainian voters gave Zelensky and Servant of the People- his party, a generous mandate, to mitigate some insurmountable problems and solidify Ukraine's westward

orientation (Minakov, 2022). Zelensky's presidency was viewed as a virtual Maidan (Hosa & Wilson, 2019).

Zelensky and his team were supposed to achieve three objectives: (1) peace in the Donbas, (2) economic betterment for ordinary Ukrainians, and (3) a non corrupt and responsive government (Minakov, 2022). During his meeting with his German, French and Russian counterparts in Paris, in late 2019, some prospects for peace were offered. The policies, however, were subject to change between 2020 and 2021 due to several reasons including continuous hostilities in the Donbas. In 2021 Zelensky's administration set a list of priorities that was different from the one they had in 2019. The number one priority was to fight against the Russian claims to Crimea, which garnered public support of Western democracies, the other two priorities were to accelerate the integration of Ukraine to the EU and NATO. All of these domestic and international policy initiatives were carried out to prevent a more hostile attack to Ukraine (Minakov, 2022).

3.2.5 Putin's Essay and the Invasion of Ukraine

An essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" by Vladimir Putin, published on July 12th, 2021, provides deeper insights into the relationship between Russians and Ukrainians from Putin's perspective. The study will delve into the main points of the article. First, Putin emphasized the importance of several historical events. He attempted to make it clear that Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians all have a common ancestor –Ancient Rus. All these nations, therefore, are inextricably tied together and share common language as well as economic ties. He also portrayed Kyiv as "the mother of all Russian cities". He delved into the origin of the name "Ukraine" suggesting that it goes back to the Old Russian word "okraina" (periphery), which was used as a reference to frontier guards protecting the external borders of the region. He mentioned the emergence of the wall between two brotherly nations –Russians and Ukrainians, partly blaming it on the past mistakes made in different parts of the history and partly on deliberate efforts. According to Putin, Polish elite and Malorussian intelligentsia promoted the idea of the Ukrainians being a separated nation from the Russians, although there was no historical basis for that. He argued that such an idea was used as a political tool for rivalry between European states (Putin, 2021). The essay posits that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, both nations were still hoping to have sustainable spiritual, cultural as well as economic ties. Nevertheless, there was an unexpected turn of events. Based on Putin's claimed authorities in Ukraine chose another path denying two countries' shared past, promoting myths and rewriting history where they portrayed Russian Empire's as well as the

Soviet Union's rule as oppressive occupation. These narratives, in turn, led to alienation from Russia and glorified sovereignty and autonomy of Ukraine.

Putin then highlighted the economic ties, which aimed at strengthening the security of both nations, claiming that even after the Maidan protest Russia tried to maintain economic ties with Ukraine. He blames the West for its efforts to undermine the economic co-operation between the two countries: "I recall that long ago, well before 2014, the U.S. and EU countries systematically and consistently pushed Ukraine to curtail and limit economic cooperation with Russia" (Putin, 2021). He also blames the West involving Ukraine in a geopolitical game aiming to turn Ukraine into a springboard against Russia. According to Putin, the concept "Ukrainians are not Russians" has been replaced by a new one - "anti-Russia", the concept which he will never reconcile with.

He further accused Western countries of supporting the coup and interfering in Ukraine's internal affairs. Such a policy, he claimed, led to the emergence of nationalist groups which were radical by nature and allegedly played a role of a "battering ram". In other words, they served for the external actors' interest promoting Russophobia via slogans and ideologies. This in turn, according to Putin, has contributed to the marginalization of the Russian language and drifted two fraternal nations apart: "All the things that united us and brought us together so far came under attack. First and foremost, the Russian language. Let me remind you that the new "Maidan" authorities first tried to repeal the law on state language policy" (Putin, 2021). Putin argued that such an artificial divide by the West not only aimed at making Russians in Ukraine reject their roots, but also perceived Russia as their enemies. He further claimed that attempts to create a Ukrainian state that aims to be ethnically pure and sees Russia as a foe, can be compared to the use of weapons of mass destruction against Russia since both have similar consequences. Another matter of concern expressed in the essay is so-called Neo-Nazism and promotion of traitors as heroes: "Mazepa, who betrayed everyone, Petliura, who paid for Polish patronage with Ukrainian lands, and Bandera, who collaborated with the Nazis, are ranked as national heroes" (Putin, 2021). Overall, the collapse of the USSR has opened a new page in the history of Ukraine, which according to Putin, has eroded historical and cultural connections and undermined the shared heritage.

Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, on February 24th, which is the third stage of the Russo-Ukraine war, began much earlier when near the borders between Russia and Ukraine there was a substantial buildup of Russian troops and equipment. In spite of the fact that the President of the US, Joe Biden offered diplomatic resolutions in order to reduce military

pressure over Ukraine during the conference held in Geneva in April, 2021, which aimed to reduce Russia's military pressure on Ukraine, nothing significant was achieved. President Biden on the one hand, aimed to cultivate positive relations with Russia while also focusing on strategic priorities with regard to China. President Putin, on the other hand, with his maximalist requests revealed a conflicting agenda, which hampered the chances of successful negotiations.

Months later, Putin came with the ultimatums and threats towards the US and NATO demanding to roll the NATO back to the year 1997, when NATO-Russia Founding act was signed, which aimed at building trust and cooperative security. Apart from that he also demanded the West to cancel its plans to make Ukraine and Georgia members of NATO. Despite the fact that the West restated NATO's commitment to its eastern members and rejected a return to the pre-1997 status quo, Putin stayed stubborn. In his hostile speech given in February, 2022 Putin persisted in disseminating narratives questioning the statehood of Ukraine and condemned NATO for transforming Ukraine into a potential battlefield. He highlighted Russia's willingness to solve the conflict by means of diplomatic negotiations, still insisting on the rollback of NATO to the status quo that existed before 1997. By condemning the West for not giving adequate reaction and blaming Ukraine for the genocide in Donbas, Putin paved the way for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. He framed the invasion as a “special military operation” that intended to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine. According to Roberts (2022) on 16 September 2022, Putin while being interviewed by a group of Russian journalists, said:

“ [Western states] have always been seeking the dissolution of our country – this is very true. It is unfortunate that at some point they decided to use Ukraine for these purposes. In effect...we launched our special military operation to prevent events from taking this turn. This is what some US-led Western countries have always been seeking – to create an anti-Russia enclave and rock the boat, threatening Russia from this direction. In essence, our main goal is to prevent such developments” (Putin, 2022, as cited in Roberts, 2022 pp. 25-26).

CHAPTER 4 THE KEY FACTORS BEHIND THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

Since the start of the conflict back in 2014 different propositions have been put forward to explain the root causes of the war. The study will delve into several major drivers suggested from both realist and constructivist viewpoints

4.1 Geopolitical and Economical Dimensions

The geopolitical landscape of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict is shaped by numerous factors, including historical alliances, strategic interests, and regional power dynamics. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has actively sought to reassert its influence over the former Soviet states, viewing this region as a crucial buffer zone against Western encroachment and a vital area for maintaining its strategic depth. This drive for influence is rooted in a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and political factors that continue to shape Russia's foreign policy. The economic dimension of the conflict is equally significant. Ukraine is a key transit country for Russian natural gas exports to Europe, making it strategically important for both Russia and the European Union. Control over Ukraine allows Russia to safeguard its energy interests and leverage its position as a major energy supplier to Europe. Additionally, Ukraine's rich agricultural land and industrial base offer substantial economic opportunities, making it a valuable asset in the regional economic landscape.

4.1.1 Geopolitical Rivalry

Russia views the post-Soviet region as its sphere of influence and such a perception has existed since Yeltsin's era (Adomeit, 2011). Origins of such a perception stems from common historical background as well as a sense of "special rights" in post-Soviet space. Andrey Kozyrev, who was a foreign minister during Yeltsin's era initially supported the policy named as "Euroatlantic community from Vancouver to Vladivostok" which promoted the integration into a common Euroatlantic space. Supporters of the policy advocated for having shared values with the West. However, neo-imperialist politicians, nationalists and communists objected to such a policy and were in favor of a separate "Euroasian" identity. Putin in its turn, also had a different policy compared to Yeltsin. He prioritized integration within the CIS and EEC, as opposed to Yeltsin, who mainly concentrated on cooperation with the West within a "Euroatlantic community", although both acknowledged Russia's special interests with countries along its borders. Putin has focused on the idea to bring Russia's role as a major power back and restore its influence and dominance in the post-Soviet space (Adomeit, 2011).

States located between Russia and the EU is often named as the “common neighborhood” which is of utmost significance to both Russia and the West owing to its geostrategic location, for serving as a transport corridor between the EU and China as well as a transit route for European energy supplies (Huseynov, 2019). Both EU and Russia shared similar objectives which they intended to implement by means of their respective regional projects for the shared eastern neighborhood, thus trying to act as “universalists” over their shared neighborhood (Korosteleva, 2016). Since these nations' declaration of independence, they have both viewed themselves as global normative actors (Tocci, 2007, as cited in Korosteleva, 2016). The EU's main objective is to ascertain Western-controlled stability and guarantee the safety of its borders. While Russia has been anxious about the military and political expansionism of the West to the region that has been identified as “near abroad” by Russian leaders. Russian leaders emphasize the significance of establishing unchallenged dominance in those territories, and its existential importance for the Russian political elite as well as its pivotal role in shaping the country's international standing and foreign policy perspectives (Jackson, 2003, pp. 69-70, as cited in Huseynov, 2019).

Much of grievance with the post-Cold War order stems from Russia's perception that western powers violated its ‘legitimate’ security interests in its perceived historical sphere of influence. Therefore, in zero-sum competition mindset Russia has aggressively attempted to re-establish its influence over neighbouring countries (Raik et al., 2024). From the geopolitical perspective of the Kremlin, Russia is supposed to restore the hegemony over the “near abroad” before it can take on a role of a global player (Huseynov, 2019). However, significant geopolitical ramifications could arise if Russia emerges as a regional hegemon in Eurasia, since it would endanger US interests. Thus, Washington tries to thwart Moscow's plans for regional reintegration and prevent the resurgence of Russian over the post-Soviet space (Sakwa, 2015).

4.1.2 Strategic Significance of Crimea

The Crimean Peninsula lies south of the main land mass of Ukraine. The peninsula and especially its leading port, Sevastopol, have played a dominant maritime role on trade routes in this region for centuries. It has been strategically valuable for Russia due to its geographical location. Possessing the peninsula, gives Russia countless advantages as it can exert its power in Black Sea region. The region is known to be a vital region for military operations, trade and energy transportation. By seizing the peninsula Russia obtains access to maritime routes, can control maritime traffic, trade routes and energy transportation. Access to natural resources – oil, gas reserves as well as mineral deposits is another advantage that Russia gets by maintaining its control in Black Sea region. This in turn, boosts Russia's energy security and economic

potential. Moreover, having its Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol (Crimea) is of utmost importance to Russia. In this way, Russia turns into a state with a powerful naval capability and exerts its power not only within the region but also beyond it. Before seizing the peninsula, Russia had anxieties about its basing rights in Sevastopol. The agreement of 1997 between Russia and Ukraine, which is also known as the Kharkiv Accords, was of a great importance since it enabled Russia to maintain a naval base in the Black Sea region. The agreement was reached for 20 years, with the option of an automatic five-year extension, unless either party provided notice to terminate it sooner than agreed. Such uncertainties and worries were dispelled, once Russia annexed the peninsula. By doing so, Russia got full control over naval bases and in addition, was no longer subject to leasing payments. Moreover, the control over Ukrainian naval bases made the Russian fleet the most powerful one in the region surpassing the Turkish fleet (Allison, 2014).

4.1.3 NATO Expansion

The rivalry between East and West goes back to the Cold War period when there was an ideological as well as the geopolitical competition between the United States along with Western allies versus the USSR and Eastern bloc allies. After the Cold War period, the concept of security in the Euro-Atlantic region was founded on the liberal principles of recognition of the status quo and cooperation between international organizations to uphold peace and urged democratization. Such an approach went by the name cooperative security and promoted the false and idealistic belief in this system states could work together to balance their conflicting objectives (Zieba, 2017). Yet, this system failed to take all participants' interest into account. In other words, while the West was attempting to ensure its security by expanding NATO and the EU eastwards, Russia kept having anxieties about the West's attempts to "encircle" it, even though the Cold War was over.

According to Zieba (2017) initially, Russian leaders namely Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev regarded the country as a significant part of the European continent and considered establishing cooperation with the West. Nevertheless, the West mainly focused on the lack of democracy in the political system of Russia and persisted in "Europeanizing" it. Russian leaders also felt that Russia is not treated equally with regards to the resolutions of the problems. The disregard towards Russian leaders' view was seen on several occasions including NATO launching airstrikes against Yugoslavia and invasion of Iraq. NATO is an alliance for collective-defense with solid internal ties and its actions have a strong effect on the regional security affairs of East Central Europe (Kugler and Kozintseva, 1996). Since the members are committed to collective defense in case of an attack, enlargement of it will result in ever-stronger and closer

relations between the alliance and member states and prospects of NATO's expansion may complicate matters (Kugler and Kozintseva, 1996).

As it is known, the US played a crucial role in the formation of NATO, which was seen as a containment strategy against communism, aiming to maintain democratic values. It promoted the idea of collective defense and preventing aggression towards any member state via military power. Despite the fact that the Cold war came to an end in 1991, the rivalry between Russia and the West still persists. After the dissolution of the USSR, NATO did not only cease to exist but also attempted to attract many more members. Russia's statist foreign policy, after the collapse of the USSR, involved state-centered and assertive approach in its international relations (Kugler and Kozintseva, 1996). Before the Baltic states became NATO members Kugler, a scholar on US national security policy and defense strategy, emphasized potential challenges that will come with its expansion eastwards. Russia, was resurfacing as a prominent player in the geopolitical arenas of Eurasia and Europe and its policy was to ward off the state's interests and halt the expansion of the West (Kugler and Kozintseva, 1996).

Kugler and Kozintseva's predictions on the outcomes of Baltic States' and Ukraine's integration into NATO were as follows: 1) Incorporating the above mentioned states would lead to substantial geopolitical shifts in Eastern Europe, which in turn, would enhance the western influence in the region, leading to the subsequent shift in the balance of power. 2) Becoming a member of NATO would boost security and stability of the states in case of hostility from Russia. Russia, on the other hand, would perceive this expansion as a threat to its influence and dominance in the region, which would contribute to tensions and in the worst case, military conflicts between the West and Russia. 3) Despite economic advantages, those states, especially Ukraine could face internal difficulties involving division in the society, as pro-Russian sentiment has always existed in Ukraine. Conforming to democratic institutions and values promoted by the West, would either result in stability in the region or intensify prevailing tensions in the region.

Nevertheless, even the founding member states of the Warsaw pact – military as well as political alliance, which was considered to be a counterbalance to NATO, ended up becoming members of NATO. In the first stage of enlargement, the alliance involved the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland in 1999 and then in the second round, which happened 5 years later, all three Baltic countries as well as Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia became the members, which in turn led to complaints by Moscow (Mearsheimer, 2014). Then Russian leader Boris Yeltsin described NATO's bombing campaign aimed at Bosnian Serbs as follows:

“This is the first sign of what could happen when NATO comes right up to the Russian Federation’s borders. . . . The fame of war could burst out across the whole of Europe” (Mearsheimer, 2014). This “encroachment” was happening while President Putin was still pro-European and the matters got even worse when the West showed its support to the “color revolutions” in different CIS countries including Ukraine (Bandeira, 2015, as cited in Zieba, 2017). Moscow saw these actions as the West’s expansion toward its boundaries (Wilson, 2010, 21, Becker et al., 2016, 120 as cited in Zieba, 2017, p. 118).

Bucharest Summit, held in 2008, was the last drop when the US considered to attract Georgia and Ukraine to the alliance. Then Russia’s deputy foreign minister, Alexander Grushko referred to Georgia’s and Ukraine’s membership in the alliance is “a huge strategic mistake , bearing most serious consequences for pan-European security” (Mearsheimer, 2014). The crisis in Ukraine served as evidence that Russia and the West had conflicting and incompatible interests. Military and strategic relations were the areas in which this incompatibility showed up the most.

4.1.4 Europeanization and Democratization of Ukraine

Since the dissolution of the USSR Ukraine has aimed to emerge as a sovereign state with its own independent domestic and foreign policy. Three years later, in 1994, the June 14th Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between Ukraine and the EU replaced the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (1989) that existed between the USSR and the European Community. This in turn, paved the way for political, trade and economic ties which established the foundation for future cooperation. The policy of the Ukrainian leaders was expected to become more pro-Western as a result of a new AA offered by the EU (Sakwa, 2015, p. 26 as cited in Zieba, 2017). The Orange revolution was another event that took Ukraine closer to Europe. The revolution which took place in 2004 brought the West together around democratic values (Aslund & McFaul, 2006). Protests against electoral fraud and desire for democracy gained support from the West. All of those events were against Russia’s expectations from Ukraine and its interests. The situation for Russia got even worse when the Ukrainian government agreed to sign AA with the EU in 2014. By signing the agreement the parties declared their commitment to enduring partnership in light of common values. These values included full respect for democratic principles, good governance, rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms. This in turn meant the rejection of Eurasian Economic Union offered by Russia, thus Russia being an autocratic state saw it as a threat to its integrity or a great humiliation (Martos, 2022). This is mainly because, liberal democracy glorified by the EU is in complete contrast to the method of its government and thus appears threatening (Martos, 2022).

According to Person and McFaul (2022), Putin did not overreact to the color revolution in Serbia which overturned Milosevic since he still considered cooperating with the West. Yet, having experienced the same in former-USSR states, Putin changed his attitude towards the West. When the Rose Revolution took place in Georgia in 2003, Putin was enraged by breakthroughs backed by the US and named then Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili a pro-American puppet (Person&McFaul, 2022). This in turn, resulted in Russia's invasion of Georgia, declaring two regions, namely Abkhazia and South Ossetia independent. The association agreement signed between the EU would have undoubtedly accelerated market and democratic reforms in Ukraine and resulted in a clear shift in Kyiv's foreign policy. The shift was from the one that strikes a balance between Russia and the West to the one that clearly chooses to follow the path of the West. For this reason, the leaders of the West approved the inclusion of nationalist politicians in Arseniy Yatseniuk's newly established temporary government and as a result, the post-Cold War international order in Europe was violated in the spring of 2014 (Zieba, 2017). The Rose Revolution in Georgia was followed by Orange Revolution in Ukraine. The US backed coups, according to Putin, have threatened Russia's national interests and after revolutions which took place in Serbia, Georgia, and finally in Ukraine, Putin displayed a more antagonistic attitude towards the US, blaming it on NATO's enlargement policy (Person&McFaul, 2022).

“Europeanisation” of Ukraine since the Revolution of Dignity in Maidan has been a nightmare for Russia and the largest pro-democracy protests in Belarus, which is another brotherly state, against Lukashenko in 2020, August exacerbated those fears even more (Martos, 2022). Putin might have considered such protests as contagion which would not only reduce Russia's dominance in its sphere of influence, but also could encourage Russian people to fight for democratization in Russia too.

4.1.5 Trade Relations

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, was viewed by Russia as an economic catastrophe, yet it also opened doors for a commercial opportunity. Russia quickly got involved in negotiating agreements which aimed at integration into the global market economy. Thus, the Russian government ended up signing a number of bilateral investment treaties as well as double taxation treaties to attract investment from overseas. Although Russia succeeded in integration into the global economy after the disintegration of the USSR, it never has adopted the “win-win” approach to global trade. President Putin has stuck to a zero-sum mentality, in which there are “losers” and “winners” in any kind of interaction (Pomeranz, 2016). Creation of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was a further measure taken by the Russian

government to strive for a free trade zone in the former-Soviet space and in 2011 it managed to bring eight successor states (Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) together. This, in turn, meant the removal of customs duties which allowed for the free trade of goods among the member countries. However, Russia did not only seek for a free trade zone, it also intended to imitate the EU establishing its own trade bloc through customs union. Putin's aspirations went beyond the free zone and sought for a more cohesive Eurasian customs union that would help him achieve his wider geostrategic goals and shared Eurasian economic space was assessed as a crucial bridge between Europe and Asia, with influential Russia domineering on the middle ground (Pomeranz, 2016). Having close economic ties has been of great importance to Russia. In an effort to persuade Ukraine into entering the Customs Union, the Kremlin offered export discounts for natural gas. According to Pomeranz, Putin was determined in his message which clearly stated the importance of Ukraine to Russia's future trade strategy, and thus Putin did not intend to share Russia's major trade partner with anyone.

Nevertheless, Ukraine compared to other member states turned out to be more resistant. A free trade deal between the EU and Ukraine as part of the AA was reached in November, 2013, on the condition that Yanukovich's long-time political rival Yulia Tymoshenko is released from jail (Pomeranz, 2016). Although Yanukovich reluctant to make such a compromise, free trade agreements and unrestricted access to both the EU and the CIS appeared to be feasible for Ukraine. The EU did not object to such an arrangement either since free trade, multiple trade agreements are viewed as a net positive in almost all situations (Pomeranz, 2016). Alas, Putin did not hold this optimistic outlook. Pomeranz (2016) further posits that Russia was concerned about the free trade agreement between the EU and Ukraine, negatively articulating that Ukraine in theory could import EU goods duty-free and re-export those goods to Russia, consequently steering clear of Russian charges on European goods. A second key concerning the issue was Ukraine's transition to EU standards in accordance with the AA. This in turn, from Russian leaders' point of view, would be to the detriment of Russia's future exports to Ukraine, as Russian goods were less likely to fulfill the demands of the improved standards in the near future. Enabling European duty free goods to access the Russian through Ukraine would have a devastating impact on agriculture, car production, aviation and other sectors of economy in Russia. Such a situation, would force Putin, according to his words, to put an end the trade agreements between Russia and Ukraine. According to Putin, that was not a political but rather a pragmatic matter, an economic issue (Pomeranz, 2016).

Trade experts of the West, on the other hand, disregarded Putin's concerns and viewed them as unreasonable. Such regulations, properly enforced, would restrict the reexport of European goods into Russia. Michael Emerson, who was the former EU ambassador to Russia, disapproved of Putin's concerns claiming that new EU standards would have no negative impacts on trade relations between Russia and Ukraine since all labeling requirements would be met. Despite the fact that what the EU did was in line with the trade theory, it would hamper Russia's major geostrategic goal. The EU did not take into the consideration the fact that Putin's concerns were about the trade bloc he sought to establish. Once the AA reached between the EU and Ukraine, it would put an end to the competing trade block attempt, which would be a zero-sum game for Putin, where the EU would be a winner and Russia a loser. Ukraine, in its turn, ended up being the focal point of the struggle.

4.1.6 Energy Diplomacy

Russia has always tried to maintain its power and hegemony in the sphere of its influence. The creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) by 11 post-Soviet states out of 15, including Ukraine, was of great importance to Russia. Russia, to ensure its dominance tried to reduce the sovereignty of the states, particularly Ukraine's (Koranyi, 2014). To maintain Ukraine's dependence on it, Russia provided supply of gas at a lower price. Ukraine, on the other hand, was aiming for diversification in order to reduce its dependence on Russia. This, in turn, was against Russia's interests and thus Ukraine's desire to broaden its horizon in terms of its energy supply had to be suppressed. Gazprom, which was the main exporter of Russian gas to Europe as well as Ukraine, in its turn imposed a substantial price rise for Ukraine, in March, 2014 (Koranyi, 2014). By doing so, Russia warned Ukraine that such a decision by Ukraine is bound to have financial consequences (Koranyi, 2014). Energy has not been viewed as an essential natural resource but also as a weapon to exert its influence over the former –Soviet republics. This “energy diplomacy” was used in order to enhance political leverage of the country not only in the region but also in the EU. To make particular post-Soviet Union countries including Ukraine obey its demands, gas prices were manipulated and those countries were threatened with supply cut off in case they refuse to obey. A good example for this would be the rise observed in the price of gas exported to Ukraine which in turn, resulted in interruptions to the gas supply and discussions about price agreement. In addition, Russia devised the “assets-for-debt”- plan, which required the indebted CIS to hand over strategic assets to Russia in order to get debt relief. Russia's economic and political dominance was further strengthened through this strategy, which allowed it to purchase interests in pipelines, power plants, and energy infrastructure in these nations. When supplies of natural gas exported

to Ukraine were cut off by Gazprom, in December, 2005, Ukraine used some amount of gas meant for European consumers for internal purposes, which in turn, has led to the objections from the European countries. As a result, Russia had to resume the export of gas in January, 2007 and reach an agreement with its neighbor Ukraine. Although both Ukraine and Gazprom agreed with the gradual rise in the gas prices exported to Ukraine over the following five years, when pro-Western parties came to power in September of the same year, Gazprom urged Ukraine to pay for its gas debts. The disagreement over the gas supplies deteriorated in 2008, when there was a 50% reduction in gas supplied to Ukraine by Gazprom, owing to the disagreement over pricing. This resulted in the short-term interruption of gas supplies. The peak of the conflict was observed when Russia ceased to deliver gas to Ukraine as well as other European customers for over an almost 2-week period in early 2009, which contributed to an alarming gas crisis. This event raised concerns about European countries' problems with energy security and their vulnerability (Koranyi, 2014).

Since Black Sea is home to huge oil and gas resource, annexation of Crimea meant Ukraine's loss of major energy fields which in turn would undermine its attempts to diversify (Umbach, 2014). Putin knew that the West would take advantage of more independent, diversified Ukraine and it would undermine Russia's dominance over Ukraine. Apart from that, having dominant Russia in the Black Sea curbs European attempts to get alternative pipelines. However, having more diversified Ukraine would open doors for better cooperation and prospects. Such behavior by Putin casts uncertainty and doubts over the question whether Russia is a reliable energy supplier or not, leading to security concerns among EU states (Umbach, 2014). According to the International Trade Administration Ukraine possesses abundant natural resources, including natural gas which is estimated to amount to 900 billion cubic meters, ranking the second in Europe. Apart from that, in the south the Black Sea and Crimea region, in the western part of Ukraine, Dnipro-Donetsk basin are the regions rich in hydrocarbon resources. The basin of Dnipro-Donetsk is also responsible for 90% of oil and gas production in Ukraine (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2021). Therefore, invading Ukraine would enable Russia to possess the energy fields situated in the Sea of Azov, the Black Sea region and Donetsk, preventing Ukraine from competing with Russia in the European marketplace.

4.2 Ideational Dimensions

Unlike, material factors, ideational factors place significance to historical and religious ties, beliefs and narratives. The ideational dimensions of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict delve into the underlying ideological shifts and societal aspirations that shape the narratives and motivations

of both Ukraine and Russia. Beyond geopolitical maneuvering, these dimensions illuminate the ideological battleground upon which the conflict unfolds.

4.2.1 Symbolic Value of Crimea

The Crimean peninsula symbolizes the greatness of Russia as it has belonged to Russian Empire since its annexation by Catherine the Great in 18th century. Vladimir Putin in his speech on the annexation of Crimea in 2014 expressed the importance of it in the following way : “Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptized. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. The graves of Russian soldiers whose bravery brought Crimea into the Russian empire are also in Crimea” (Putin, 2014). Russian annexation of Crimea, which was followed by the assistance provided for the separatist groups in the eastern provinces of Ukraine showed that when the threats to interests of a state occur, it leads to the breaching of the law. Although Russia viewed itself as a defender of international law and strictly condemns the violation of the laws by any state, Putin ended up breaking OSCE principles. Thus, according to fundamental principles of Morgenthau's political realism, even states that proclaim to adhere to universal moral standards opt for advantageous political action (Zieba, 2017).

4.2.2 Russian Strategic Culture

Strategic culture describes how states and their leaders view the role of war, the nature of their enemy, how force should be used and against whom (Wiltenburg, 2022). Each state has a distinct strategic culture, which plays a vital role in comprehending state behavior. “The sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses and patterns of habitual behavior that members of national security have acquired through instruction and imitation and share with each other” (Snyder, 1994, as cited in Hayat 2022, p. 31). Getting insights into Russia’s strategic culture is essential to comprehending why Moscow waged a war against its fraternal eastern neighbor. According to Wiltenburg (2022), first of all, Russia sees itself as a great power and thus wants to be treated as such. Secondly, the sense of insecurity in Russia which has long historic roots, tends to be mitigated by authoritarian leadership and strong military. Fighting outside national borders is another key component of Russian strategic culture and as a tool of foreign policy, few restrictions on the coercive use of its armed forces are being imposed (Wiltenburg, 2022).

Russian strategic culture pins a strong significance to the belief that the country is open to external attack. Götz and Staun (2022) divides these narrative strands into four interconnected stories: Russia's vast territory, experience of repeated invasions, historical lessons and connection between internal and external threats (Götz and Staun, 2022). First narrative to be analyzed is based on Russia's vast territory and extensive borders, which in turn, pose challenges defending the entire nation (Covington, 2016; Lo, 2015, pp. 100–112; Vitkovskiy, 1992 as cited in Götz and Staun, 2022). Another source of vulnerability is thought to be past experiences and invasions that Russia was subjected to for centuries and insecurities regarding the West. These collective narratives are deeply seated in the strategic culture of Russia. Despite having multiple regions in its border, the importance of Europe has been much greater due to cultural, social and religious continuity (Hayat, 2022). According to Hayat (2022) for Russian foreign policy Europe has historically been a vital region in different periods of time ranging from the "The Great Game" of 19th century, which was a period of colonial competition between the Russian Empires and the British Empire to conflict over communist doctrine in the 1900s. The Crimean war fought between 1853-56, can also serve as an example, since the alliance of Britain, Austria and the Ottoman Empire were against Russia, which in turn made Russia to perceive European states as dishonest betrayers. Other prominent historical events which played a substantial role in shaping Russia's strategic culture were a 17th century war with Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, invasion of Russia during Napoleonic wars at the beginning of the 19th century, fight against Nazi Germany in 20th century and finally Cold War with the United States and the NATO, which lasted for more than 40 years. All these cases coming from the West contributed to the creation of currently existing narratives (Hayat, 2022; Götz and Staun, 2022). From this perspective, strategic thinkers and decision makers in Russia portray NATO as an existential threat. The expansion of NATO eastwards and its "military infrastructure" near the borders of Russia have been portrayed as a danger/risk (*opastnost*) or threat (*ugroza*) in National Security Strategies and Russian Military Doctrines since 1993 (Götz and Staun, 2022).

Due to its volatile geography, which does not have features that would serve as barriers for defense, territorial expansion has always been in the agenda of Russian policy. Historically Russia has tried to expand towards Europe in the west, towards Siberia in the east, and finally in the direction of Central Asian and Caucasian states in the south (Hayat, 2022). As Catherine the Great said once: "I have no way to defend my borders but to extend them." Russia sees European plains as a shield for the state's security. Thus, national security professionals in Russia have understood the significance of keeping geographical vicinities under control and

steer those regions clear of rival superpowers. Hence, the strategic culture of Russia places a significant importance on the establishment of buffer zones as well as the pursuit of strategic depth (Lo, 2015, 103 as cited in Götz and Staun, 2022). “As a country of plains, Russia has experienced devastating invasions more than once; the Kremlin has long seen reinforcing ‘strategic depth’ as the only way to guarantee its survival” (Lukyanov, 2016, p. 32 as cited in Götz and Staun, 2022).

A fourth narrative centers on the relation between internal and external threats. Russian leaders perceive “color revolutions” as a threat coming from the western adversaries, and accuses the West of employing maneuvers in order to eliminate all pro-Russian leaders from former Soviet space. Putin repeatedly on several occasions referred to “color movements” and Euromaidan as a coup d’etat backed by the West. According to Götz and Staun (2022) Nikolai Patrushev, then-director of the FSB, claimed that the opponents of Russia intentionally and consistently attempt to undermine Russian influence over the CIS area and the “color revolutions” in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan are the obvious signs of it (Götz and Staun 2022). Ambassador George F. Kennan in his telegram to the Secretary of State, described the reasons behind Russia’s sense of insecurity:

“Russia came into contact with economically advanced West, fear of more competent, more powerful, more highly organized societies in that area. ... for Russian rulers have invariably sensed that their rule was relatively archaic in form fragile and artificial in its psychological foundation, unable to stand comparison or contact with political systems of Western countries. For this reason they have always feared foreign penetration, feared direct contact between Western world and their own, feared what would happen if Russians learned the truth about the world without or if foreigners learned the truth about the world within. And they have learned to seek security only in a patient but deadly struggle for total destruction of rival power, never in compacts and compromises with it” (Kennan, 1946).

4.2.3 Identity and Nationalism

Nationalism and sense of identity are one of the major ideational elements too. Several factors played a role in the development process of Ukrainian and Russian identity and nationalism. Regarding Ukrainian nationalism and identity, Kiryukhin (2015) mentions three projects of national identity in Ukraine. The first project was Pan-Slavic, which promoted the idea that Ukraine and Russia belonged to the same Slavic world, pointing to national, cultural and religious similarities and commonalities. The project saw those two nations as a part of future political communities which share Slavic heritage. The second project was classified as Little Russian Identity, which highlighted the shared political history of three countries-Russia,

Belorussia and Ukraine stating that they all had the same origin which stemmed from Kievan Rus. Apart from that, this project put emphasis on shared religious faith –Orthodox Christianity and language which is Old Church Slavonic. The latter project was different from the first one in that it saw Ukraine as a Little Russia rather than the part of Slavic world. The third project - “Ukrainian proper” put significance on ethno-cultural identity of Ukraine, which is distinct and different from that of Russian’s. This project advocated for the idea that Ukrainians had to be seen as an independent nation and it has its own language and culture based on traditions which are separate from Russian traditions. The project encouraged distinctiveness and a sense of pride towards Ukraine as a separate country having separate nationality and identity. Kiryukhin (2015) also analyzes how national movement affected the relations between Ukraine and Russia, making it more disputable.

The emergence of above mentioned projects have changed the way Ukrainian nations perceive themselves. Apart from that, narratives constructed by opposition swayed Ukrainians viewpoints on their relations with Russia. Those narratives highlighted how Ukrainian nation struggled to gain its independence and all the oppression they underwent under the Soviet rule. The desire for sovereignty among the Ukrainian nation was against Russian interests and thus added to the tensions that had been existing between two nations. The tension deteriorated even more with the debate on what language had to be in use Ukrainian or Russian as Ukraine is home for both Ukrainian and Russian-speaking folks.

As for Russian nationalism and identity, imperial legacy has a strong impact on the way Russia identifies itself. Historically, Russian empire was one of the influential empires and this past legacy has deep roots reflecting itself in the process of self-identification as well as Russia’s attitude to other states especially the ones that are considered to be its sphere of influence. There have been shifts in Russian nationalism. To be more specific, if there were imperial tendencies which highlighted the importance of strong, influential and multi-ethnic states, over the last few years, ethnonationalism which pins more significance to national identity has been emphasized more strongly. This unprecedented breed of nationalism takes many forms including racism and xenophobia (Kolsto, 2016). Along with it comes the idea of “national democracy” attempting to emulate nationalism in the West, which aims to promote this ideology within a democratic values, prioritizing ethnic identity and cultural preservation (Kolsto, 2016).

The "Russian Spring," which involved the annexation of Crimea and military interventions in the Donbas against Kyiv, were also backed by a range of organization including the Russian All-National Union, Russian Imperial Movement, National-Socialist Initiative as well as by

pro-Kremlin nationalists, the National Bolsheviks, and a majority of national democrats (Verkhovsky, 2016). Putin, on March 18th in 2014, delivered a speech to the Federal Assembly of Russia where he justified his annexation of Crimea. Kolsto (2016) argues that apart from usual rhetoric -importance of building a strong state and the arguments against the double standards offered by the West, there was also emphasis on “russkii narod”. He referred to “russkii narod” as an ethnic entity and on many different occasions he stated that with the dissolution of the USSR the Russian nation turned into one of the biggest divided nations (Putin,2014). In his 2012 article, while using terms like “Russian Armenians”, “Russian Tatars”, and “Russian Germans” he used the word russkii not rossiski and with that way he wanted to show that the nations which reside in Russia are exposed to acculturation into Russian culture (Kolsto, 2016). Replacement of the term rossiski with russkii according to Kolsto was not just a phrasing but rather was a signal for significant changes in Russian national identity and nationalism.

Imperial and colonial identity in Russia also plays a crucial role in determining the the behaviour of the Russian leadership. Putin has never reconciled with the loss of Russia’s Great Power status and tried to reassert it by all means. Putin has asserted for a long time that Russians and Ukrainians are one people with shared history and thus they ought to have shared political fate. Putin is also claimed to question Ukraine’s sovereignty and statehood, claiming that it was created by Bolsheviks. The idea of sovereign Ukraine has long been rejected and condemned by Russian elites. One of the prominent literary critics, Vissarion Belinskii, perceived the rising Ukrainian movement as a threat to Russian imperial identity and underlying myths. As a result, he applied familiar, yet more insulting orientaling rhetoric to refer to early modern Ukrainian literature and historiography (Riabchuk, 2015). Belinskii’s discourse was as follows:

“The history of Little Russia is just a tributary that flows into the grand river of Russian history. Little Russians have always been a tribe and never a nation, let alone a state...Neither the so-called Hetmanate nor Zaporozhzhya had ever been a republic or state but just an odd community in the Asian manner. Their real and permanent foes had been the Crimean Tatars, and the Little Russians fought them admirably, in the spirit of their nationality...It was a parody of a republic, in other words a Slavonic republic that, despite all its disorder, still had some signs of orderliness. And that orderliness was based not on rights that freely evolve from historical processes but on customs that are a cornerstone of all Asiatic people. The customs had substituted for laws and tamed the unruliness of that courageous and indomitable, but muddle-headed and ignorant peasant democracy. Such a republic could be an excellent

instrument for some strong state but per se it was quite a caricatured state that could only fight and drink horilka” (Belinskii, 1955, 60-62 as cited in Riabchuk, 2015).

According to Riabchuk (2015), as early as the 1840s, due to the rise in social mobility and attempts by some group of “Little Russians” to give the “khokhols” a distinct Ukrainian identity by means of education, the social divide between educated “Little Russians” and illiterate “khokhols” was diminishing. The rebellious group of “Little Russians” was called “Mazepintsy”, referring to Ivan Mazepa who was labeled as a traitor for siding with Swedes against Peter I. The insulting and diminishing phrase “khokhol” became widespread and was used to refer to all Ukrainians as illiterate tribesmen, rejecting to see them as a nation. Such an interaction between “Great Russians” and “Little Russians” was of colonial nature. It showed the former’s dominance over the latter one. Orientalization strategies to humiliate “Little Russians” found its reflection in Russian proverbs that aimed to label them as stupid and lazy. It was done to instill a sense of inferiority, gain legitimacy for imperial hierarchies and prevent “Little Russians” from avoiding the accepted norm – the norm that claims that Russians and Ukrainians are “almost the same people”. Negative othering and stereotyping, humiliation through proverbs and other means of rethorics was used to bolster an inferiority complex among Ukrainians. This strategy was used to fulfill imperial purposes and the ones who disapproved of the idea of being “almost the same people” were criticized, rejected and reminded that they are of “khokhol” heritage. Such techniques continued during Soviet as well as post-Soviet eras (Riabchuk, 2015). Ukrainians were also portrayed as a backward nation during the Tsarist-era literature (Oksamytna, 2023). Prince Ivan Dolgoruky’s description of “the khokhol” was as follows:

“The khokhol [a slur term for a Ukrainian] appears to be created by nature to till the land, sweat, burn in the sun and spend his whole life with a bronzed face ... [H]owever, he does not grieve over such an enslaved condition: he knows nothing better ... He knows his plough, ox, stack, whisky, and that constitutes his entire lexicon ... [H]e willingly bears any fate and any labor. However, he needs constant prodding, because he is very lazy..[I]f this entire people did not owe a debt to well-mannered landowners for their benevolence and respect for their humanity, the khokhol would be difficult to separate from the Negro in any way: one sweats over sugar, the other over grain” (Oksamytna, 2023, as cited in Shkandrij, 2001, pp. 79–80).

According to Oksamytna imperialism is not only about territorial conquest, it also involves an exercise of dominance and supremacy. The ruthlessness displayed by Russian forces had the purpose of rectifying a “faulty” cultural code of Ukrainianness which failed to acknowledge the excellence of Russianness. This strategy also involved inhibiting the

Ukrainian language and subsequently, spreading pro-Russian propaganda. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine Russia has to be conceptualized as colonial power rather than modern power, ready to wage colonial wars that would cost a fortune (Oksamtyna, 2023).

Russia, due to its hegemonic past, regards the Ukrainians as “young brothers”. With this idea in mind, the Russian government believes that it has a right to dominate or even impose certain restrictions on Ukrainians in case they behave “inappropriately”. He compares this relation with the one between Friday and Robisonn Crusoe, where it is believed that there is a chance to civilize “good” Friday and make it nearly the same as Crusoe, which can be compared to Russian popular rhetoric about Ukrainians –“almost the same people”. On the other hand, “bad” Friday is perceived as a sinister which is controlled by antagonistic Robinsons (the West) (Riabchuk, 2015).

Today, to Russia its global stature is of utmost importance and he believes that the state’s opinion has to be considered as important as that of other states. Receiving a seat on the UNSC and having veto power is seen as a way to reassert its status on the international level. Although Russia has a veto power, this power has been neglected by the west in the cases of the conflicts in Kosovo and Iraq. This in turn was against Russia’s interests as its vote had no role to play in the UNSC’s decision and thus Russia contested the legitimacy of international law. Apart from that, Putin has viewed the dissolution of the USSR as “a geopolitical tragedy of the 21st century” (Putin, 2014) and the expansion of NATO to eastwards as an act of betrayal. The perceived humiliation and betrayal have fueled his aspiration to reassert Russia’s previous imperial status. Imperial status in its turn involves having an influential leader, restoring influence over other nations and previous imperial territories which have been lost or “gifted”. He claimed that by gifting Crimea to Ukraine Krushchev probably intended to gain the support of Ukraine or to make up for the repressions committed in the 1930s and such a decision was against any constitutional norms (Putin, 2014). Moreover, the collapse of the Soviet Union changed the way Russia is identified, in other words, it was no longer called empire but a nation-state. Narratives and invented myths about imperial past, injustices and betrayals were used as a tool, constructing the idea that Russia has to take its rightful position back and regain the historical Russian land –Crimea. Exerting absolute power over it’s fraternal neighbor and to reestablish the “empire of yesteryear” was the crucial part of Putin’s plan (Martos, 2022).

Religious identity

Tsar Nicholas I, the prominent figure in the history of Russia, known for his bravery fighting the Crimean war, summed up the church-state identity in Russia with three words: “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality”, which represented the core of Russian national identity

during the 1917 Russian Revolution (Kozelsky,2014). Since the Russian Orthodox faith was passed from Byzantium to the Crimea, the region is considered to be in the heart of Nicholas I's nationality platform and the moment when Prince of Kievan Rus Vladimir was baptized by Byzantine emperor, has been viewed as the event which is of utmost importance in the history of all Russia as this conversion has been considered to be a new era in every aspect of their lives: in terms of enlightenment, customs, religious faith, morality as well as judiciary and nation-building (Kozelsky,2014).

On the other hand, political landscape and the history of the Orthodox church in Ukraine are profoundly intertwined: once the Russian Empire (the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church) and the USSR (the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate, or UOC KP, in 1992) dissolved, present day national Ukrainian Orthodox religious bodies emerged. Their emergence has a direct connection to an idea of independent Ukrainian statehood. Modern Christian world, however, revolves around the Russian Orthodox Church (Ketenci&Nas, 2014). Moscow Patriarchate perceives Fener Greek Patriarchate as an element of Western policies and also stands against Latin Christianity, seeking safeguards for Orthodoxy's interests at the state level geo-politically (Ketenci&Nas, 2014).

Other divisions of Ukrainian Orthodox Churches (UOC-MP) were triumphed over by the Russian Orthodox Church starting from the 1990s in an attempt to bring up Crimean sacred sites (Kozelsky, 2014).When, in 1992, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church separated itself from the Russian Orthodox Church, other Orthodox patriarchs refused to give it recognition (Ketenci, 2014). Not permitting Ukraine to have a separate church is the policy that Ukraine has been objecting to for decades. Following the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, the UOC KP refused to re-register as a religious organization under Russian law and faced a campaign of harassment and intimidation.

Russia, the military and church are close companions. The invasion of Ukraine is completely supported by the head of the Orthodox Church in Russia, Patriarch Kirill. He claims that what Russia is doing is not aggression but the fight against the genocide Ukrainians carrying out against Russian speakers in the Donbas and the bombs headed to Crimea have been blessed by him . A notable interaction between the Orthodox Church and Kremlin became apparent when Putin won back the presidency in 2012 and it was then when Russia started to promote itself as a protector of traditional values among which was religion ,against so-called "decadent Western liberalism". Such perceptions were compatible with the anti-Western and conservative ideas held by Kirill, who also characterized Putin's comeback as a "miracle from God".

Orthodoxy is considered to be a conservative branch of the Christian Church, which in turn has resulted in the church serving as a focal point for modern conservative identity politics. In communities which are primarily Orthodox, the church is generally viewed as the protector of national consciousness and the representation of national identity. From this respect the church is even considered to play a greater role than the state.

A survey conducted by PEW Research Center showed a significant correlation between religion and national identity. Seventy percent of population in countries with an Orthodox majority and fifty-seven percent of population in countries with a Catholic majority consider that being Orthodox or Catholic is crucial to one's national identity.

Religious landscape of Central and Eastern Europe

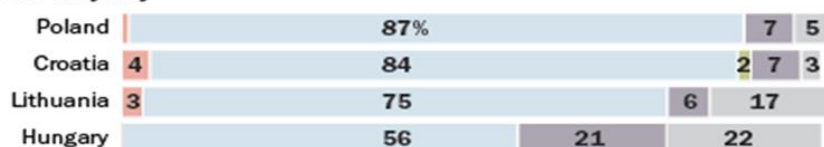
% who identify as ...

Orthodox Catholic Muslim Unaffiliated Other

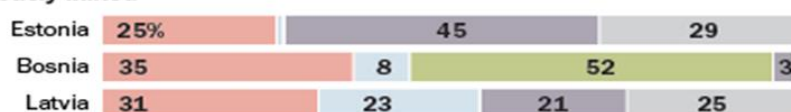
Orthodox majority



Catholic majority



Religiously mixed



Majority religiously unaffiliated



Note: 13% of respondents in Hungary identify as Presbyterian. In Estonia and Latvia, 20% and 19%, respectively, identify as Lutherans. And in Lithuania, 14% say they are "just a Christian" and do not specify a particular denomination. They are included in the "other" category. A negligible share of respondents in each country decline to answer the question. They are included in the "other" category. Source: Survey conducted June 2015-July 2016 in 18 countries.

See Methodology for details.

"Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 4.1 Religion and national identity in Central and Eastern Europe. Source: "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe" by Pew Research Center, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe>

Political Orthodoxy

Political Orthodoxy, is the situation when political ideologies and agendas become inextricably linked with Orthodox Christianity. According to Wanner (2022) the same situation can be observed in Ukraine, the Orthodox Church have a major impact on national identity, political discourse and even geopolitical relations. Wanner states that such a politicization of Orthodoxy can contribute to the emergence of specific political orthodoxies that reconcile religious convictions with specific political goals and power structures (Wanner, 2022).

A political slogan by then-president Petro Poroshenko, whose administration played a key role in creating the first independent Orthodox Church, “Freedom Is Our Religion” has significant political and religious interpretations. According to Wanner (2022) the slogan is an influential political statement, representing the goals and aspirations which inspired the Ukrainian Maidan. The slogan encourages shared commitment to freedom by equating the concept of freedom to religion. This in turn, illustrates the way religion forms societal values. The combination of religious and political rethortics serves as a powerful tool instilling a sense of pride and independence. Secondly, the slogan is viewed as a way to secularize religion, in other words, to export to religious rhetoric and symbols to convey political objectives. By framing freedom as a central doctrine of their “religion” the authority attempts to receive general public’s unity and support around two major concepts: self-determination and national freedom. The slogan promotes the idea that Ukraine is an independent state with its unique national, cultural and political identity (Wanner, 2022).

However, Russia has always been concerned about Ukrainians’ aspiration for independence. According to the 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Ukraine, the Russian Federation and its intermediaries are known to have outrageously violated the rights of minorities both psychologically and physically since the Crimean invasion in 2014. These practices were intensified after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, February 24th. Prohibitions against minority religious groups – evangelical Christians, Roman and Greek Catholics and non-Orthodox Church communities, became prevalent. It was followed by disappearance of religious leaders, unlawful detention, deliberate demolition or confiscation of religious buildings, maltreatment and physical abuse (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

4.2.4 Propaganda and Narratives

“The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime. To this end, we will seek to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation” (Putin, 2022). Putin made these statements while addressing his nation at the Kremlin, before launching a full-scale invasion to Ukraine, which he portrayed as a “special military operation”.

Russian authorities and media outlets often refer to crucial events in the history of Russia, in particular, WW II, which is known as the Great Patriotic War in Russia, as a tool to justify their actions and garner public’s support. Putin, on different occasions, highlighted the norms established following WWII, their applicability to current geopolitical dynamics and portrayed Russia as the defender of these norms. He also frequently expressed his disapproval of the West to whom the documents outlining the terms of World War II are no longer necessary (Kumankov, 2022). In his speeches he has repeatedly emphasized the sacrifices the USSR made, the heroes they lost to defeat Nazis. “Your fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers did not fight the Nazi occupiers and did not defend our common Motherland to allow today’s neo-Nazis to seize power in Ukraine” –he stated in his address to his nation (Putin, 2022, as cited in Kumankov, 2022). Putin and Russian officials claim that there is need to demonize Ukraine and its government provoking the memory of World War II and shared historical consciousness. He described the government Ukraine as “junta” and “a gang of drug-addicts and neo-Nazis” in his address to his nation. “Do not allow neo-Nazis and Banderites to use your children, your wives and the elderly as a human shield. Take power into your own hands. It seems that it will be easier for us to come to an agreement than with this gang of drug addicts and neo-Nazis” Putin stated in his 2022 meeting with the security council of Russia.

Overall, Nazism, fascism, and Hitlerism have extremely negative connotations in the Russian context (Kumankov, 2022). The Federal Security Service (FSB) claimed that “denazification” process has not been supported sufficiently and there has to be more intense pressure on Ukrainian nationalists perpetrators who allegedly committed crimes in so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic” and “Luhansk People’s Republic”. FSB, also went further, proposing the dissemination of provocation through the staged videos where the Russian and Ukrainian World War II veterans in staged videos where they would demand Russia to “put an end to fascism in Ukraine” (United States Department of State, U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Italy, 2022).

Russian authorities, in several occasions claimed that authorities in Kyiv were being involved in the military operations against Donbass residents who were against coup d'état and held Ukraine responsible for alleged genocide of the people of Donbass, shelling of civilians and violation of human rights (Kumankov, 2022).

Anti-western narratives

Russian leaders have long resorted to strategic and national narratives to achieve their end goals. “Creating instruments for influencing how it is perceived in the world”, “developing its own effective means of information influence on public opinion abroad”, and “counteracting information threats to its sovereignty and security” are stated to be some of the main priorities of Russian foreign policy (Russian Foreign Ministry, 2013, as cited in Hutchings and Szostek, 2015).

The major strategic narrative claims that as the international order is shifting the liberal West is attempting to sustain its hegemony, while the national one portrays Russia as a center of the Russian world and a leader of regional integration (Big Eurasia), while maintaining its original civilization and sovereignty (Snigyr,2023). Snigyr (2023) divides Russian strategic narratives into four key sub narratives that support the main narrative. The sub narratives are as follows: 1)Denial of sovereignty of Europe (European states) 2) Conflict of values 3) Russia as the leader of a non-liberal world 4) Russia as a victim of the West (Snigyr, 2023, p. 5) Negative narratives around the West prevails over the rest and they had already been a salient feature of Russian political and media discourse before the crisis in Ukraine began (Smyth and Soboleva, 2014, pp. 257-275; Yablokov, 2014, pp. 622-636, as cited in Hutchings and Szostek, 2015, p.184). According to Hutchings and Szostek (2015) anti-Western narratives serve for several purposes. By spreading such narratives Russian leaders try to garner support for their actions and undermine the credibility of condemnation from the West and shape the way Russian population both regular and those who belong to the elite interpret global politics. Vladimir Putin himself, on several occasions, condemned the West, especially the US, for affecting the destinies of other nations that are situated in great distances away from their own borders. He finds it peculiar that Americans tend to criticize Russian military deployments abroad, which is much smaller in scale compared to the US's (Putin, 2014, as cited in Hutchings and Szostek, 2015).

Russian international system narrative, criticizes the existing unipolar world order for being an unfair system propagated by modern Western neocolonialism and accuses Western nations of exercising the colonial policies of previous centuries. In addition, based on these narratives, Russian authorities claim that such an unfair system is backed by a group of

Western-imposed international legal norms and they also claim that international financial institutions play a crucial role in reinforcing the unjust system. While signing the treaties which enabled Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, as well as Kherson and Zaporozhye regions to Russia, to becoming part of Russia, Putin stated that the Western powers are ready to go to great lengths to sustain the neo-colonial system that give them a chance to exploit the global resources, due to the prevalence of the dollar as well as the advanced technology. Their main objective is to maintain the economic incentives they obtain through this system, which involves extorting prosperity from humanity and sustaining their position as hegemon. For this reason, total de-sovereign-isation is one of their priorities. (Putin, 2022, as cited in Snigyr, 2023). Russian media outlets, according to Hutchings and Szostek (2015) also disseminate anti-West propaganda. In one of the well-known television Russian channels-Rossiya 1, it was claimed that the Americans and English shared the same goal, - to fuel animosity between Russia and Germany with the goal to exhaust them. They also accuse the West for their alleged attempt to put an end to a portion of the Orthodox world and to do so they then target Serbia and now eastern Ukraine has become another target of theirs (Rossiya 1, 2014 as cited in Hutchings and Szostek, 2015).

Hutchings and Szostek (2015) identifies three major plotlines in terms of the objectives of the Russian leadership in regard with western powers: 1)The first plotline is related to the western "interference" which is thought to be the main reason for instability and unrest around the globe. They take Syria, Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan as well as Georgia and Ukraine as examples claiming that once the West interferes, the countries disintegrate. Thus, a less interventionist approach has to be adopted by the West, particularly by the US. Russia, being concerned about the fact that the US support has so far contributed to the ouster of autocratic leaders, tries to prevent the US intervention in the domestic affairs of the states that once were part of Post-Soviet space. Ukraine is of greater importance to Russia among all. 2) The second plotline is about the Western dominance, again the US is the main matter of concern. The US is blamed for acting domineeringly without consulting with the rest of the world. Therefore, the Russian leadership believes that such an obstacle on their way can be tackled by allowing non-western nations such as Russia and to be precise, the ones that support Russia to have a greater role in an international decision making process. Russia's support for "multipolar world" and promoting the organizations like the G20 and BRICS can be an example to such efforts. 3)The third plotline is about the 'inevitable' cooperation between Russia and Europe. The narrative disseminated by Russian leaders as well as state media outlets claimed that commercial and business relations between Russia and the EU were still continuing to prosper, in spite of the

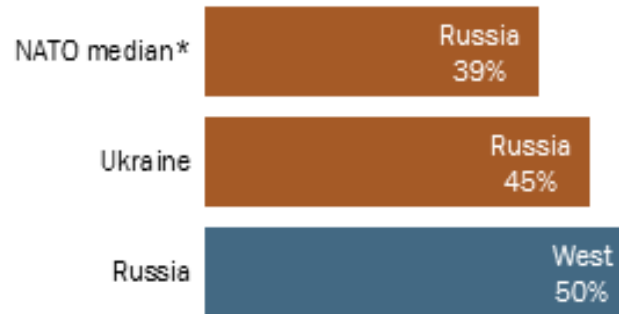
political tensions that occurred in 2014, since both Russia and EU could benefit from ‘pragmatic cooperation’. By doing so the Russian leadership aimed for “single economic and humanitarian space from Lisbon to Vladivostok” (a space which obviously attaches Europe to Russia while detaching it from the USA) (Putin, 2014a, as cited in Hutchings and Szostek (2015). In this way, Russia wanted to be viewed as a European great power. To reach this objective Russian leaders aimed to minimize the US’s “interference” and get their once lost legitimacy back, re-exert itself as a great power which has a “louder” say in the global arena. They hoped to make Europe less “western” as it is believed to connect Europe more with the USA and subsequently undermine the role of Russia in Europe (Hutchings and Szostek, 2015).

Based on the Russian narrative, there is a war of values between the liberal-democratic West and societies with traditional values. It is also worth mentioning that, Russian authorities view traditional values of theirs as spiritual and moral values that stem from traditional Christian values as well as the cultural heritage of the society. Although “conservatism”, was the major component of the society in late 20th century and early 2000s, from the first decade of 21st century the word “conservatism” has not been used widely and replaced by the concept “traditional” (Laruelle, 2021; Snigyr, 2023). Alternative terms with similar or the same semantic domain become more common in speeches delivered by the president. The speeches included the terms like “spirituality (dukhovnost’); national traditions (natsional’nye traditsii); authentic roots (iskonnye korni); moral values (moral’nye and then npravstvennye tsennosti); cultural code (kul’turnyi kod); moral compass or rods (moral’nye sterzhni); spiritual staples (dukhovnye skrepy); cultural sovereignty (kul’turnyi suverenitet); and, above all, traditional values (traditsionnye tsennosti)” (Laruelle, 2021: 8). In this war both sides attempt to have larger sphere of influence and simultaneously try to reduce each other’s influence. The supporters of this framework argue that traditional societies and their state systems are undermined by liberal democratic values by means of Western conceptions such as human rights and freedoms (Snigyr, 2023).

The survey conducted by Pew Research Center showed that 26% of people in Russia blame the Ukrainian, while only 2% see the Russian government as the main perpetrator of the conflict. Half of the Russian population, however, blamed the West, the US and EU in particular, for the conflict (Poushter, 2015, Pew Research Center).

NATO Countries and Ukraine Blame Russia for Conflict; Russians Blame West

Views in: Most to blame for Ukraine conflict



* Median includes Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, the UK and the U.S.

Source: Spring 2015 Global Attitudes survey. Q47.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 4.2 Perception of blame for the Ukraine crisis. Source: "Key findings from our poll on the Russia-Ukraine conflict" by Poushter, J. (2015), Pew Research Center.

Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2015/06/10/key-findings-from-our-poll-on-the-russia-ukraine-conflict/>

Overall, through the narratives and propaganda Russia presents itself as an intimidating opponent of the liberal world, which is represented by the West. Russia is portrayed as a victim of the actions done by the liberal West and also a country leading the global movement opposing the hegemony imposed by western powers. The crisis in Ukraine, in its turn, is an essential element of the confrontation (Snigyr, 2023).

4.2.5 Misconceptions and Illusions

According to Oksamytna (2023), Ukraine, through the Russian leaders' perspective, was incorrectly viewed as "fragmented" and "weak". Russia, on the other hand, was generally perceived as a modern power, which is in quest of a "sphere of influence" by intermittently intruding on neighbors' affairs. The relations between two countries were misinterpreted as "brotherly." Oksamytna claims that Russia needs to be viewed as a colonial power which aims to re-establish dominance over the Ukrainian people by means of aggression. Such a desire stems from Ukraine's integration into Europe, which in turn, from Russia's point of view, is a transgression of hierarchies. The intensity of the invasion was exacerbated when Russian forces

ascertained that Ukrainians turned Russia's "rescue mission" down (Oksamytna, 2023). During the interview with Tucker Carlson, Putin said: "Why are the Ukrainian authorities dismantling the Ukrainian Orthodox Church? Because it brings together not only the territory. It brings together our souls. No one will be able to separate the soul" (Putin, 2024). Although Putin sees the soul of the two nations as inseparable, the importance of these representations is eroding in Ukrainians' collective consciousness and thus taking apart the building symbolizing Russo-Ukrainian friendship, representing the past, indicates Ukraine's orientation toward having more autonomy and sovereignty, as well as transforming the cultural identity (Koutsoukis et al., 2024). Russian erroneous assumptions about Ukraine are partly central to the simplistic idea that ethnic Russians, Russian-speakers in Ukraine, and those who demonstrate an attachment to Russian culture or exhibit Russia's hostile attitude toward the EU, NATO, and the West as a whole, are all in the same category referred as "pro-Russian" and thus, believing that Ukrainians were really Russians was a blunder and Putin's biggest mistake (Solchanyk, 2023). The false belief that Ukrainians are almost identical to Russians made invaders think that Ukrainians would welcome them "with flowers" (Oksamytna, 2023).

4.3 Putin's Perspective

On February 8th, 2024, Vladimir Putin was interviewed by an American conservative political commentator Tucker Carlson. It was a golden opportunity for Putin to express his perceived truth and reasons behind the full-scale invasion to his own as well as Western communities. The study examines Putin's justification through the lenses of Realism and Constructivism.

As a first justification, Putin mentions the coup in Ukraine which took place in 2014. He mentions "The Agreement on the Settlement of the Political Crisis" in Ukraine, which was signed on 21st February 2014, by Viktor Yanukovich, then-president of Ukraine and the leaders of opposition through the mediation of the European Union and Russia. Putin accuses European countries of disregarding the agreement: "[B]ack then the representatives of three European countries – Germany, Poland and France – arrived. They were the guarantors of the signed agreement between the Government of Yanukovich and the opposition. ... They just threw it on the stove right away and nobody recalls that" (Putin, 2024). He characterizes the Euromaidan movement as a coup d'état supported by the West, especially the US.

Putin also blames the West, particularly the US, for breaking their promises regarding NATO's enlargement. Putin claims that although after the collapse of the USSR, Russia expected to be admitted to the fraternal family of "civilized people", however, it was not the case. He blames the US for deceiving Russia. Although Russia has experienced a colossal

transformation from communist regime to a capitalist market economy, showing that it is ready to cooperate with the West, the West didn't not keep its promises. "[But] the United States - you promised that there would be no NATO expansion to the east, but this happened five times, five waves of expansion. We endured everything, persuaded everything, said: no need, we are now our own, as they say, bourgeois, we have a market economy, there is no power of the Communist Party, let's come to an agreement" (Putin 2024)-he said sharing his historical grievances and perceived betrayal. Putin claims that Russia would never lift a finger, if bloody events on Maidan hadn't happened. Putin also expresses his dissatisfaction with the idea of involving Ukraine into NATO as it would undermine the agreement to keep their borders along the boundaries of former Soviet Union's republics after the dissolution of the Union.

He also argues that not Russia, but Ukraine is to blame for the start of the war in 2014 when they rejected the implementation of the Minsk Agreement. The agreement in turn was signed to resolve the conflict in Donbass. He claims that the leadership of the Ukrainian Foreign Minister, officials and then president disapproved of the Minsk Agreement and didn't intend to comply with it. Putin also argues that former leaders of France and Germany, who also signed the agreement, overtly stated that they were never going to comply with the agreement. Putin characterizes the situation as "leading Russia by the nose" (Putin, 2024).

Denazification is another justification provided by Putin and an aim that he has not achieved yet. Ukraine, according to Putin, began to search its identity and ended up building its identity on counterfeit heroes who collaborated with Nazi Germany. He condemns Ukrainians for making people such as Bandera, Shukhevich, who were involved in exterminating the Polish, Jewish and Russian population. Putin also criticizes the government of Ukraine for making these people heroes and erecting monuments for them. Putin also harshly condemns Zelensky for applauding a speaker of parliament in Canada, who served in SS troops and was personally involved in killing Poles, Jews and Russians during World War II, which is also referred to as the Great Patriotic War in Russia.

Another rationale is protecting Russian-speaking people from the "war machine". Putin sees the process of integrating Ukraine into NATO as a threat for Russia speaking people, claiming that the ones who were not supporting the coup happened in 2014 were persecuted. He also accuses Ukraine and NATO of launching war in Donbass in 2014 and for military operations in Donetsk. He claims that this was where the west crossed the line, and it was Russia's moral obligation to protect their brothers in faith.

V CHAPTER: IMPLEMENTING REALISM AND CONSTRUCTIVISM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WAR

5. 1 Realism in Practice

Russia persists in seeing the world of international relations employing the prism of Realpolitik. That's to say, the political leaders of Russia aligned their visions with the pre-Cold War or even pre-World War I order, rather than adjusting their policies to the post-Cold War international order driven by principles of integration and globalization (Rotaru, 2018). The states act according to their own interests and they differ primarily by their greater or lesser capabilities for performing similar tasks (Waltz 1979 p. 97, as cited in Rotaru, 2018). Russia, despite the fact that in the early 1990s had experienced a brief shift towards the West, trying to integrate itself into the Western democracies and institutions, its foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has been defined by realism. Once Evgenii Primakov, who was a former deputy chairman of the KGB, became a foreign minister, in January 1996, remaining appearances of liberalism in Russian foreign policy ceased to exist (Rotaru, 2018). It was followed by a zero-sum mentality based on an extremely traditional interpretation of realism and marked by anti-Westernism as well as the demand for multipolarity. Primakov explicitly supported "pragmatic nationalist" and "Eurasianist" ideas with statements like "Russia has been and remains a great power, and its policy toward the outside world should correspond with that status" and "Russia doesn't have permanent enemies, but it does have permanent interests" (Donaldson and Noguee 2009:116, as cited in Rotaru, 2018). Putin's reign, on the other hand, was characterized by a new kind of realism. The newly elected president combined Russia's traditional foreign policy orientation towards Realpolitik, taking advantage of the country's revival in economy. More specifically, Vladimir Putin acknowledged national interests, while simultaneously attempting to incorporate Russia into the international community on its own terms. According to him, Russia was supposed to be recognized as an equal member of the global community and be allowed to integrate itself in its own manner, pointing out Russia's position in European civilization. Russian aspirations to be a great power and have global influence were not abandoned by this new realism; rather, it was pursuing a greater awareness of the need to balance goals with available resources (Rotaru, 2018).

Overall, Russia's foreign policy aligns with both classical and (neo)realism's assumptions. Realists view international relations as the major power competition for dominance: "The struggle for power is universal in time and space and is an undeniable fact of experience. It cannot be denied that throughout historic time, regardless of social, economic and political

conditions, states have met each other in contests for power. ... International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim” (Margenthau, 1948:28). Preventing a state from becoming a world hegemon, based on the assumptions of classical realists, can be achieved by the balance of power. Neorealists, on the other hand, believe that balance of power can be better achieved through bipolarity than multipolarity. After the collapse of the USSR, the emergence of a unipolar system where the US is viewed as a sole power, in its turn, concerned Russia, which at that period of time was coping with economic constraints and instability. At the same time it was seen as a defeated country that also lost its geopolitical power over its sphere of influence. NATO's eastward expansion, the West's influence over former Soviet member states, as well as the military intervention in Kosovo, raised concerns about American hegemony that was threatening Russian interests.

Since NATO expanded eastwards, Putin has been concerned about the disruption of the balance of power. From his point of view, expansion of NATO towards Russian borders creates imbalance and thus undermines Russia's power in the region. Meanwhile, the West benefits from the shift of power. Numerous realist scholars, including Mearsheimer have justified these concerns: “The taproot of the crisis is the American-led strategy to make Ukraine a Western bulwark on Russia's borders, by integrating Ukraine into the EU, turning Ukraine into a pro-Western liberal democracy and most importantly, incorporating Ukraine into NATO” (Mearsheimer, 2022, p.18). According to Mearsheimer (2022), William Burns, who is now the head of the CIA, but was the U.S. ambassador to Moscow at the time of the Bucharest summit wrote a memo to then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice:

“Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all red lines for the Russian elite, not just Putin. In more than two and a half years of conversations with key Russian players, from knuckle-draggers in the dark recesses of the Kremlin to Putin's sharpest liberal critics, I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests” (Mearsheimer, 2022, pp. 18-9). NATO, he said, “would be seen ... as throwing down the strategic gauntlet. Today's Russia will respond. Russian-Ukrainian relations will go into a deep freeze...It will create fertile soil for Russian meddling in Crimea and eastern Ukraine” (Mearsheimer, 2022, pp. 18-9).

The Russian leadership sees the enlargement of NATO as a security threat. Involving countries that used to be part of the USSR and Russian sphere of influence in western military alliance undermines the power Russia once had. Putin in his interview with an American

filmmaker Oliver Stone , who was working on the documentary named “Ukraine on Fire” (2016) stated:

“[W]hy do we react so vehemently to NATO’s expansion? We are concerned with the decision-making process... As soon as the country becomes a member of NATO, it cannot resist the pressure of the USA. And very soon anything at all, can appear in such country-missile defense systems, new bases, or, if necessary, new missile strike systems. What should we do? We need to take countermeasures, meaning, to aim our rocket systems at the new facilities which we consider to be threatening us. The situation gets intense” (Putin, 2016).

National interest is another key tenet of realism which can explain Putin’s anxiety. For classical realists, like Margenthau, the national interest is a moral idea that must be defended and promoted by state leaders (Jackson & Sorensen, 2013, p. 81). Putin is definitely against the idea of expanding NATO eastwards as it is against his and the state’s interests. By contrast, Russia tries to prevent countries of its sphere of influence from becoming a member of the western military alliance. For neorealist scholars, like Waltz, the national interest operates like an automatic signal commanding state leaders when and where to move (Jackson & Sorensen, 2013, p. 81). Thus, Putin’s position is Geopolitics 101: great powers steer clear of potential threats close to their borders (Mearsheimer, 2014). Mearsheimer goes further trying to make the US put itself in Russia’s shoes. Mearsheimer wants the administration of Washington to imagine having a huge military alliance built by China which aims to involve Mexico and Canada. This, undoubtedly would be seen as an existential threat urging the US to take strict measures.

Apart from that, from a realist point of view, Russia’s quest of dominance and desire for power can be seen as the expression of “imperial syndrome”. For realists, in an anarchical international system Russia’s attempt to restore its Great Power status is a rational step. Apart from that the decisions made based on historical grievances from realist lenses are seen as a move to overcome deemed threats to the state’s interest as well as security. Yet, offensive realists like Mearsheimer oppose to the view that Putin has imperial ambitions and thus his aim is to conquer Ukraine. Mearsheimer focuses on the statements Putin made on his 2021, July 12th article. In the article Putin states that if Ukrainians want to establish a state on their own they are welcome and Russia treats Ukraine with respect, and what Ukraine will become is determined by the people of Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2022). Based on these statements, Mearsheimer posits that claims on Putin’s desire to make Ukraine part of Greater Russia are far from real.

Nevertheless, maintaining influence over post-Soviet republics would enable Russia to achieve its geostrategic, foreign policy and security objectives. Russian leaders assumed that these states, would find themselves in a security vacuum, become victims of general instability, exacerbated by transnational crime, terrorism, or interethnic and interreligious militancy, which in turn would bring instability to Russia's front porch (Rumer 2007, as cited in Rotaru, 2018). Russia wants to establish itself as the center of power, gain its influence and prestige back among its neighbors and to be recognized as a major power in a multipolar world. Thus, Russia's geopolitical strength is largely influenced by its relations with post-Soviet states. Putin's decision to annex Crimea is also seen as a rational, realpolitik move. To ensure its survival, not to lose its strategic assets and to maintain its power and dominance, states tend to resort to military moves and wage a war. Thus, based on a realist perspective, what Russia did and is doing now is in order to ensure its power, survival and security.

For Putin, the spread of Western values and liberal democracy in post-communist countries as well as Ukraine's efforts to emerge as a sovereign state with its own independent domestic and foreign policy since the dissolution of the USSR can be seen as a direct challenge to Russia's interests and influence in the region. Realists would argue that Russia views Ukraine as part of its sphere of influence and considers any moves towards the West, such as signing agreements with the EU or embracing liberal democratic values, as threats to its security and integrity. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between Ukraine and the EU, as well as the Orange Revolution in 2004, are perceived by Russia as undermining its power and influence over Ukraine. The rejection of the EEU in favor of closer ties with the EU further exacerbated tensions between Russia and Ukraine.

While taking the economical dimension into consideration, it is important to note that since the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia has been steadily losing population, making control over labor migration, major markets and pipelines are crucial to its economy (Rotaru, 2018). Misuse of the energy resources for political leverage, coercion, and influence over neighboring countries align with the principles of realpolitik. Russia's energy tactics, which is highly concentrated on leveraging gas and oil supplies in order to exert control, obtain strategic assets, and control the foreign policies of neighboring states is the reflection of pragmatic and power-centric policies. Energy resources are, in other words, used as tools, for the pursuit of its national interests in the former-Soviet space, which in its turn, goes along with the principles of realpolitik.

As for Putin's extensive interview with Tucker in February 2024, Putin once again mentioned that the Euromaidan movement was a western-backed coup and expressed his

concerns about the expansion of NATO eastwards, since such events go against Russia's security interest. He believes that Russia has to assert its geopolitical dominance and uphold a strategic balance of power in the region. Such an attitude can be once more explained by one of the key tenets of realism known as security dilemma, a situation when increase in one state's security makes other states feel insecure and more concerned about its own security. States can never be certain whether other states have offensive intentions to go along with their offensive capabilities (Mearsheimer, 2001). Such a behavior also aligns with the notion of anarchy, which is another major tenet of realism. In an anarchic international system, states find themselves in an uncertain and competitive environment. As Mearsheimer posits :“One might surmise that international anarchy is the key structural factor that causes states to fight wars” (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 334). He also criticizes the West for not keeping the promises made and ignoring the agreements reached, thus portraying the West as “unreliable partner”.

All in all, Putin's policy and discourse also align with the realist concept of power dynamics, anarchy, balance of power and national interests which force states to strive to safeguard their existence, interests, to maintain or boost their power within the international system. “[P]ower exists only when a state exercises control or influence... Simply put, the most powerful state is the one that prevails in a dispute” (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 57).

Nonetheless, proponents of these views, see realist perspectives as flawed and inadequate in explaining the war, McFaul and Sestanovich (2014) claim that Mearsheimer's arguments fail to provide a nuanced understanding of the war between Russia and Ukraine. According to Mearsheimer, Putin has been acting according to realist dictates, while the West has been adhering to liberal ideas about international politics (Mearhseimer, 2014). Sestanovich (2014) however, evaluates Putin's behavior otherwise and says : “Putin cultivates a mystique of cool, KGB professionalism, and the image has often served him well. But the Ukraine crisis has revealed a different style of decision-making. Putin made impulsive decisions that subordinated Russia's national interest to his own personal political motives. He has not acted like a sober realist” (Sestanovich, 2014, p. 172). McFaul, in his turn, argued that the crisis is more about Putin and his unrestrained, unpredictable adventurism than it is about Russia, NATO, and realism (McFaul, 2014). Motyl (2015) focuses on the internal factors such as domestic developments between two countries. Unlike realists who mainly focus on external factors, according to Motyl (2015), internal factors were the main drivers of the Orange Revolution as well as the Maidan protest. To understand the reasons behind Putin's behavior Motyl poses questions: “Are Putin's anti-realist justifications delusional? Is he really a realist, as the realists insist, who doesn't know it? Or is he, as Ukraine experts would claim, being quite frank about

his imperial intentions and aspirations to reestablish Russian glory” (Motyl 2015:82). He challenges the realist idea which suggests that states are solely rational actors pursuing their national interest.

5.2 Constructivism in Practice

“When Neorealists offer multipolarity as an explanation for war, inquire into the discursive conditions that constitute the poles as enemies rather than friends” (Wendt 1999:135-6, as cited in Jackson and Sorensen, 2006). By “inquiring discursive conditions” constructivists highlight the importance of examining the linguistic and symbolic factors, which influence the way actors construct their identities and their relations with other states. The importance of historical narratives, grievances and memories cannot be ignored either. Certain historical events such as World War II left lasting traces. Russians’ tendency to call WWII as the Great Patriotic War indicates the significance of this historic event to the Russian government and the community as a whole. The war has permanently altered the Russian psyche as well as mentality and narratives about Russians’ heroism, sacrifice and bravery, and these narratives have been passed down from one generation to another. Victory over Nazi Germany is still considered as an event that illustrates Russia’s strength and perseverance and symbolizes the nations’ pride. Due to this memory and historical narratives Russia sees western involvement in the region as a potential, existential threat. Based on constructivist viewpoint, one can deduce that NATO’s enlargement brings the fear of encirclement that Russia has experienced at some point in the past. Although the expansion of NATO was mainly viewed as the main cause of the disagreement between Russia and the West, for the Russians it is more a matter of disrespect and disregard than a security issue (Likhotal, 2022).

In the process of narrative construction media also play a substantial role. In the case of Russia, media outlets frame the enlargement of NATO in a way to make the public perceive its expansion as a threat. Constructions both within Russia's own and in the larger global community create its negative perception of NATO's objectives and influence. According to Alexander Wendt, norms, rules, identities, threats etc. are all socially constructed. Political leaders can manipulate and change such constructions to achieve specific ends. Thus, the threat posed by NATO can be viewed as a social construct that has its seeds planted on the Russian people’s brain. The way Russian people see the West and western intentions can be easily manipulated by Putin’s rhetoric and narratives, which are mainly of negative nature. Change in the way West’s actions and NATO’s expansion perceived, on the other hand, can actually reduce the intensity of the hostilities Russia carries out against its fraternal neighbor Ukraine.

The speeches given by Putin have also played a crucial role in shaping narratives around the significance of the Crimean peninsula. The ideas behind his speeches align with the key tenets of constructivism –identity, beliefs, culture and norms. Putin in his speeches emphasizes the importance of shared history and a sense of pride. He emphasizes historical narrative around religious faith -Orthodoxy , thus presenting Crimea as a holy place where Prince Vladimir was baptized. He also pins significance to the concept of unity by mentioning three brotherly nations, namely Russians, Ukrainians and Belarussians. This way, Putin also tries to indicate that these nations share the same identity, culture and history and thus have to be seen as one people. Another narrative has been built around the resilience, bravery and determination of Russian soldiers which promotes a sense of pride and instills a sense of patriotism among Russian people. Putin uses memory politics as a tool and often includes impressive rhetoric in his speeches. The expressions like “historical injustice”, “historically Russian land”, “tragedy”, “betrayal” “one people” and other religion and cultural based narratives create a sense of victimhood which in turn drives Russia’s desire to reassert its great power status. By focusing on the narratives constructed on the importance of Crimea and it's unfair transfer to Ukraine by Nikita Krushchev in 1954, Putin tries to gain reasonable justification for the annexation of the Crimean peninsula. Emotional connection to territorial identity, in its turn, affects the way people understand policy choices. According to Putin’s claims, Crimea has stronger cultural links to Russia and the justifications behind his actions are aligning with the concepts of identity and emotional attachment. This is why a strong Russian identity can explain Russia's interest in regaining Crimea (Tandilashvili, 2015). As opposed to realism that focuses on the material assets Crimea brings to Russia, constructivism highlights the ideational meaning given to the peninsula.

As for “imperial and colonial syndrome”, constructivists see it as a social construct. The negative language used against Ukrainians back in Tsarist Russia constructed the idea that Ukrainians are inferior to Russians and such a belief is used as a justification for patronizing and domineering behavior.

The conflicting narratives and the collective objectives of various linguistic and ethnic groups in Ukraine have also had a significant role to play in shaping the conflict. The actions taken by Ukraine in the conflict shows how its identity has been evolving as a sovereign state attempting to restore its territorial integrity, country’s engagement with international norms and its efforts to assert its independence, while the actions taken by Russia indicated that it sees itself as a regional power seeking, protector of all-Russian speaking people, which tries to

overcome all perceived security threats and restore its dominance in former-Soviet sphere of influence.

Constructivism, unlike realism, sees the shift towards more nationalistic movements and discourse through social and ideational perspectives. The narratives constructed on distinct Ukrainian culture and language and history of suffering experienced under oppressive dominance encourages Ukrainians to stick to their own unique identity and become more resistant against any dominant power that tries to undermine its uniqueness. The emphasize put on narratives and grievances glorify a sense of pride, patriotism and revenge. The same can be applied to the nationalistic discourse used by the president of Russia or media outlets , such a shift in rhetoric has the power to change the socially constructed ideas that have been planted in the brain of the nation. In other words, both Russians and Ukrainians, due to the nationalist rhetoric may end up in polarization, that's to say, developing the image of "other" towards each other. This in turn, can lead to the emergence of negative stereotypes and creation of enemy images. Due to constructed narratives, community grievances and invented myths the nations and states that used to perceive one another as friends, may analyze each other's move from antagonistic perspectives. Putin has also repeatedly called Zelensky Nazi and urged the denazification of Ukraine. With such claims Putin, according to a constructivist point of view, invokes historical memory and aims to gain domestic support. All in all, constructivists claim that we categorize all socially constructed reality as "good" and "bad" (Adler, 1997). In the case of Russia and Ukrainians, nationalism and identity construction influence the way they perceive each other as something good -friends or bad- enemies.

Constructivist thinkers also place great significance to norms while analyzing the behavior of actors in the international system. The ideas about the changes in norms through sovereignty, cooperation and transformation into collective identity, by Wendt (1996) can be applied to explain the root causes of the crisis. Sovereignty is one of the central issues concerning the conflict. To be more specific, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine have been challenged once Crimea was annexed by Russia. This in turn, led to the redefinition of sovereignty in the area. The controversial claims over the sovereignty of territories altered the way states identify themselves and each other. As for the cooperation, attempts to resolve the conflict through diplomatic ways, such as signing Minsk agreements, was a way to shift identities from hostilities to amiable coexistence. However, ineffective collaboration has prolonged the conflict and in its turn deepened the animosity and mistrust that had already existed.

Constructivists argue that states tend to comply with certain norms in the international system. “Norms are collective expectations for proper behavior of actors within a given identity” (Katzenstein, 1996, p. 5). Russia has historically accepted the status of great power as a norm. Thus, increase in western influence and ideology in the region, where Russia used to be a great power, goes against Russia’s norms. As for the importance of norms, constructivists see Euromaidan movement as the reflection of preferring certain norms over the others. To be more specific, it was the Ukrainian nation’s desire to develop closer bonds with the EU, as some of them may see these western norms as more superior compared to the Soviet norms they had. Adoption of new norms is another factor that changes state behavior according to constructivism. In the case of Ukraine, since the collapse of the USSR, especially the western part of Ukraine has had a tendency to align with norms of the West, which emphasizes democratization and human rights.

Constructivists also see the process of “Europeanization” as identity transformation-shift from Soviet or Russian identity to European one. Apart from that Ukraine’s willingness to adopt European norms is considered to be norm diffusion from a constructivist viewpoint . Russia has always seen itself as a defender of Orthodox Christian as well as Slavic culture and identity. Therefore any attempts to democratize or Europeanize Ukraine is perceived as the West’s intrusion on Ukraine’s identity. Moreover, adversary image and negative stereotypes constructed around the West and its policies, make Putin see the color revolutions as a contagion which will spread in its territory soon. To prevent it from happening Russia resorted to military invention as a means of precaution.

The narratives Putin uses in his essay construct the idea that Ukrainians are actually Russians who have been misguided by their wrong narratives which portrays the Russian government as an enemy with hostile and oppressive intentions. On the other hand, what the Ukrainian government and the West see as a norm is not perceived as a norm by Putin. Norms in turn, according to Finnemore (1996) are as influential as material factors when it comes to shaping behavior. From a constructivist point of view, norms and rules have a significant influence on justifications made by Putin. The fact that we live in an international society means that what we want and, in some ways, who we are shaped by the social norms, rules, understandings, and relationships we have with others. These social realities are as influential as material realities in determining behavior. Indeed, they are what endow material realities with meaning and purpose. In political terms, it is these social realities that provide us with ends to which power and wealth can be used” (Finnemore, 1996: 128, as cited in Jackson and Sorensen, 2006). According to norm-based constructivism a behavior or idea becomes a norm

when it is accepted by an adequate number of agents and those agents adhere to them. Based on it, Russia leaders argue that Russia considered the expression of the will of the Crimean population who voted for the integration of the peninsula into Russia according to the result of the referendum held in March 2014. Thus, Russia believes it adheres to international law and norms based on its unalienable right to recognize a state and conclude a treaty with the consent of both parties (Tandilashvili, 2015).

Putin believes that Ukraine and its western allies, particularly the US and NATO neglected the norms regarding the signed agreements as well as the expansion of NATO. “The war in Ukraine is seen in Moscow as a stage in the destruction of norms, rules and institutions of the modern world system” (Likhotal, 2022, p. 6). According to Putin the measures taken by the leadership of Crimea were in line with the norms of international law and sought to protect the interests of its populace. Russia is claiming that they have done nothing illegal since their decision to accept Crimea as a part of Russia came from a proposal from another sovereign country (Tandilashvili, 2015).

Another significant constructivist notion explaining Putin’s claims is socialization and interaction. “[E]xploring not only how that state’s identities are produced in interactions with other states, but also how its identities are being produced in interaction with its own society and the many identities and discourses that constitute that society” (Hopf 2002:294, as cited in Jackson and Sorenson, 2013, p. 224). The way Russia interacts or socializes with other states, in this case, particularly the West, has an impact on Putin’s behavior and decisions. Seeing the West as an enemy and its involvement in post Soviet countries as a threat is a negative narrative that portrays him as a defender of Russia’s interests and identities. Russia’s interaction with its own society also has an equal role to play. To gain support and approval for his actions, Putin resorts to perceived grievances, historical narratives and influential rhetoric. By making his society believe in these narratives, experience community grievances, Putin tries to construct himself as a hero who is going to protect the Russian-speaking community from “the evil”.

5.3 Realist vs. Constructivist: Bridging Perspectives

Both realist and constructivist perspectives provide deep insights in understanding the complex dynamics of the war between Russia and Ukraine. Realist analysis sees the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent invasion of Ukraine as a strategic move by Russia to assert its control over territories that are considered to be crucial to its security and geopolitical interests. Realist thinkers highlight the zero-sum nature of international relations, which encourage states to ensure their own security and survival, often to the detriment of other states. Therefore, realism emphasizes the role of military capabilities, alliances, and geopolitical positioning in

influencing the behaviour displayed by the leadership of Russia and Ukraine. Constructivist analysis, on the other hand, underscores the role of ideational factors, normative beliefs, and narratives in shaping state behavior and conflict dynamics. From this perspective competing historical narratives, national identities, and collective grievances play a crucial role in promoting mutual mistrust and hostility between Russians and Ukrainians, who were believed to be fraternal nations. The decision to annex the Crimean peninsula, for example, can be interpreted not only as a strategic move by the leadership of Russia, but also as a reflection of strong historical ties, deeply seated historical narratives and competing territorial claims. Therefore, according to constructivist thinkers, the role of perceptions and ideas in driving state behavior is significant, and it is claimed that shifts in these ideational factors could possibly change the way the conflict plays out.

Since the material and ideational elements are interconnected, both have a potential determining the relations between Russia and Ukraine. Thus, both factors have to be taken into account in order to address the rising challenges and achieve peace and stability.

5.4 Findings

Ukrainians have sought after having its own unique identity that is different from that of Russian. The leadership of the Ukrainian government favors integration into the EU, and shows solidarity with Western values and principles, which in turn, is against Russia' national interests. Losing its influence over Ukraine, which is considered to be the most important neighboring country in former-Soviet space and having western alliance in its doorsteps have been perceived as a disastrous turn of event for Russia that triggered the President Vladimir Putin to take military action. The research shows that although realist notions have provided valuable insights into the origins of the war, one cannot entirely rely on material factors to explain the behavior of key actors. Ideational factors offered by constructivist thinkers complement the arguments provided by realist scholars, contributing to the better understanding of the complex nature of the conflict. The key findings of the study are as follows:

Realist findings

Geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West is one of the key drivers of the conflict. Both Russia and the EU see Ukraine as a buffer state due to its strategic location. The Russian leadership perceives western oriented Ukraine as a challenge which poses a threat to its security as well as its dominance in the region. This in turn, triggers Russian leaders to resort to military intervention to ensure its status as a regional hegemon.

Expansion of NATO eastwards, is viewed as a threat to Russia's security and a challenge to the balance of power. The Russian leadership views the expansion as a menace which

undermines its influence in the post-Soviet space. Having a military alliance in its doorsteps increases a sense of vulnerability and provokes Russia to resort to more aggressive actions in order to hinder NATO from influencing the states that were once under Russia's sphere of influence.

Dependence on energy has been another dimension that heightened the intensity of the conflict. For Ukraine, integration into the EU is a way to minimize its economic dependence on Russia, while from the perspective of the Russian leadership, such a policy is perceived as a potential threat to economic influence Russia has had in the region. Both Russia and Ukraine aim to reach their own respective goals to ensure control over pipelines that benefit them economically.

Domestic dynamics in both states have contributed to political and social unrest. Having two contesting, pro-European and pro-Russian, divisions of people has been a source of instability. Russian leadership, on the other hand, with its more conservative and assertive policy and aspiration to restore its influence in the region attempted to legitimize its military intervention in Ukraine.

Constructivist findings

Actions taken by the Russian leadership in the war against Ukraine stem from its strategic culture, defined by a sense of insecurity. Such a sense of insecurity has its deep historical roots and promotes a belief that for Russia sustaining its sphere of influence in the periphery and hindering the Western influence are of utmost importance. Overall, Russian strategic culture has a crucial role to play in shaping its national interests.

Competing narratives, norms, national, cultural as well as religious identities and beliefs intensify conflict between two neighboring states. While Russia portrays itself as a defender of all Russian speaking Slavic people, sees the western powers as betrayers due to its past experiences, and cannot accept Ukraine's close ties with the West, the leadership of Ukraine presents their attempts as a quest for democracy, independence and integration into Europe. Such an aspiration from the side of Ukraine originates from historical narratives around oppressive Soviet rule and the grievances stemming from past events like Holodomor. These constructed narratives significantly influence public's perceptions and enable the leaders of both states to receive support for their actions.

CONCLUSION

“In war, truth is the first casualty.”

Aeschylus

The study has undertaken a comprehensive examination of the origins and dynamics of the Russia-Ukraine war through the lenses of realism and constructivism. The research questions: “What are the origins of the Russia-Ukraine conflict?”, “How do realist and constructivist schools of international relations explain the origins of this conflict?” have been used as a guideline to uncover the underlying factors that have contributed to the hostilities between two neighboring nations.

In essence, the study has found out that realist and constructivist dynamics are deeply entwined in the war between Russia and Ukraine. The study on the one hand, has focused on realist notions that emphasizes the role of power dynamics and security interests as key drivers of the conflict, which is demonstrated by Russia’s full scale invasion of Ukraine in response to perceived dangers (such as the eastward expansion of NATO) to its security and territorial dominance resulting from Ukraine’s adherence to Western values. Therefore, the war between Russia and Ukraine can be evaluated as a manifestation of geopolitical competition.

On the other hand, the research has incorporated the constructivist view, which promotes the significance of ideational elements such as normative beliefs, identities and historical narratives. Russian national identity, which sees Ukraine as an inextricable part of its historical and cultural domain, has been analysed in detail to understand the reasons behind Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine. The study has also highlighted Ukraine’s quest for a distinct national identity and aspiration for closer ties with the West and found that, it has intensified tensions and provoked Russia to resort to military intervention. The study has revealed that historical narratives and grievances, negatively affect the way two neighboring states perceive each other leading to exacerbation of the situation. It has been suggested that while Russia perceives the West as a “traitor” for historical invasions and losses it experienced, and condemns Ukrainians for collaborating with Nazis, Ukrainians hold on their past memories related to the Soviet rule and events like Holodomor. This in its turn, leads to formation of negative stereotypes leading to a sense of enmity between two nations.

To sum up, the research findings strongly support the hypotheses provided based on realist and constructivist notions and suggests that the integration of the both perspectives offers better explanations to the behavior displayed by key actors. Therefore, both perspectives have to be equally considered in any future attempt to resolve the conflict

At the end of the study, following policy recommendations are being suggested:

1. It is important that realist concerns of the both Russian and Ukrainian leadership vis-a-vis territorial control and security are acknowledged. Reaching mutual agreements on territorial disputes through negotiations is essential in order to guarantee safety as well as sovereignty of both actors involved.
2. It is recommended to take confidence-building measures to mitigate security concerns of the Russian leadership. The intensity of tension can be reduced through guaranteeing that NATO's troop deployments and military exercises are transparent and do not aim to encircle or pose a threat to Russia.
3. It is advisable to establish trust and economic co-operation between Russia and the EU. Promoting economic integration, revisiting the agreements that have been in use, reaching new agreements that can equally benefit Russia, Ukraine and the EU are of ultimate importance so as to cultivate cordial relations and mutual confidence.
4. It is essential to take into account differences in normative beliefs, cultural identities and to address deeply rooted historical grievances via diplomatic efforts and dialogues that would alleviate negative perceptions and build trust between two nations.

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