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International Relations

*Understanding Russia's annexation of Crimea:
A perspective through Strategic Culture Analysis*

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Introduction

“A referendum was held in Crimea in March, at which its residents clearly expressed their desire to join Russia. After that, the Crimean parliament - it should be stressed that it was a legitimate parliament that was elected back in 2010 - adopted a resolution on sovereignty. And then we saw the historical reunification of Crimea and Sevastopol with Russia. It was an event of special significance for the country and the people, because Crimea is where our people live, and the peninsula is of strategic importance for Russia as [well as] the spiritual source of the development of a multifaceted but solid Russian nation and a centralized Russian state.”¹

The citation above was taken from Russian president Vladimir Putin’s annual address to the Federal Assembly at the Kremlin’s St. George hall in early December 2014. The address came at the end of an eventful year for Russia, during which it undertook the historic annexation of Crimea. Putin referred to the event as a form of ‘historical justice’ and Crimea’s ‘reunification with the motherland’, an event which was supposedly as much about the preservation of the Russian civilization as about sending a message to the West. Some scholars call the annexation a dramatic failure, pointing out how the annexation resulted in NATO deepening its presence in eastern Europe, Russia’s international isolation, economic sanctions and the alienation of most of the Ukrainian population.² Due to the impact the event had on international relations, it is no surprise that much has been written about the annexation, as well as the Russian presence in Ukraine in general. These writings often examine various factors, both domestic and international in nature, which might have contributed to Putin’s decision to annex the peninsula. Yet questions and uncertainties continue to exist when it comes to the exact motivation behind this highly ambitious and seemingly reckless move, which is partially to blame on the lack of open access to documents and other such crucial source materials.

In this regard, the main research question that this thesis seeks to answer is not exactly novel. After all, it seeks to understand why Russia annexed Crimea. Unlike most scholars who have researched this topic, however, this thesis utilizes a rather uncommon

¹ Putin, V., “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly”, (04-12-2014)
<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173> (12-06-2019), pp. 3.

² Treisman, D., ‘Why Putin Took Crimea - The Gambler in the Kremlin’, *Foreign Affairs*, 95:3 (2016), pp. 50.

approach when it comes to its methodology. Drawing inspiration from an article by Mette Skak, this thesis seeks to answer its main research question through the application of strategic culture analysis (SCA). SCA allows one to utilize a hermeneutic approach whereby the researcher explores the (mis)perceptions of individual decision-makers.³ Such ideas and perceptions can be derived from a wide variety of sources, such as speeches, official statements and interviews. After mapping such ideas, it is the strategic culture researcher's goal to then explain how these perceptions might lead to concrete strategic behavior. The relevance of this thesis therefore primarily lies in its methodology, since the alternative perspective which SCA provides will allow this research to provide findings which can complement both existing SCA research as well as general research into Crimea's annexation.

This thesis is divided into four chapters and will proceed as follows. The first chapter revolves around SCA. It provides an in-depth look at the methodology, its origins, the so-called 'Gray-Johnston debate', as well as some problematic aspects of its application. The second chapter examines Russian strategic culture. This chapter features a short overview of previously produced writings regarding Russia's strategic culture by Aaron Bateman and will feature a more in-depth look at Skak's article. After those sections, the methodology of this thesis will be explained more elaborately, thereby touching upon Edward Lock's suggested approach to SCA. The third chapter consists of a literature review, featuring different takes on the annexation of Crimea by a variety of scholars. The chapter is constructed around three main questions, which look at the significance of the Crimean Peninsula to Russia, the timing of its annexation, as well as touching upon the debate regarding Putin's motivation behind the annexation; was it an act of opportunism or part of a 'grand scheme'? Finally, the fourth chapter consists of the empirical aspect of this thesis, whereby SCA will be applied on a multitude of sources produced by Putin between early and late 2014. This chapter will conclude with this thesis' findings, as well as comparing these findings to those of the authors featured in chapter three.

³ Skak, M., 'Russian Strategic Culture: The Role of Today's Chekisty', *Contemporary Politics*, 22:3 (2016) 328.

Chapter 1: Strategic culture analysis

The intention of this first chapter is to serve as the theoretical backbone for this thesis. The goal is to make the reader familiar enough with the field of strategic culture analysis (SCA) to become aware of its origins, the evolution and application of its theory through the decades, the prominent debate which takes place amongst scholars of SCA and the effect that this debate has had on research. By utilizing this approach, the thesis aims to make the reader understand the gaps in some areas of research, inherently problematic aspects of SCA, and possibilities for improvement. Finally, after reviewing all the aforementioned, the methodological approach for this thesis' research will be examined, thereby explaining how this thesis will avoid these issues, how it'll contribute to research into the topic, and how it aims to answer the research question.

What is strategic culture analysis?

One of the intentions of this thesis is to bring a new dimension of clarity and precision to the field of SCA. As this chapter will seek to illustrate, definitions within the field of SCA matter and are debated heavily. Therefore, this section will start by providing the definition of SCA that this thesis will apply. This definition was coined by Edward Lock in his 2017 article, as an entry into the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics. Lock defines Strategic Culture as 'referring to patterns of common ideas regarding strategy distributed across populations, and the term 'strategy' refers to matters pertaining to organized violence.'⁴ It should be noted hereby, that 'populations' refers to a group that can contain any number of people, ranging from a single individual, to small amounts such as four, or even entire regional or national populations, depending on the type of research. He argues in favor of adopting this specific definition because he considers it to be 'crystal clear' about what strategic culture is, and because of this fact, 'it leaves questions about where and how strategic culture operates to be answered through empirical investigation'.⁵

Lock instructs those who seek to analyze strategic culture to undertake three specific tasks: '(a) to map the common ideas that constitute strategic culture at a given point in time, (b) to trace where those ideas have come from, and (c) to examine how

⁴ Lock, E., 'Strategic Culture Theory: What, Why, and How', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia* (2017), pp. 2.

⁵ Ibid, pp. 3.

those common ideas may impact on strategic behavior'.⁶ However, he notes that not all research needs to apply all three of these steps. In fact, he states that 'good research will need at least two elements; a mapping of [ideas regarding] strategic culture at a given point in time and an investigation into either the production of that distribution of common ideas or the translation of those ideas into behavior'.⁷ The usefulness of Lock's definition and method, compared to definitions utilized by previous authors researching strategic culture, will be elaborated on in the second chapter. What follows now is a look at the origins of SCA, the evolution of the concept, as well as its utilization for research over time.

Origins of Strategic Culture Analysis

Strategic Culture is a term that has been explained differently by scholars across four decades and three 'generations' of studying the theory. Originally coined in 1977 by Jack Snyder whilst researching Soviet strategy, Snyder defined strategic culture as 'the sum of total ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other with regard to nuclear strategy'.⁸ The analysis of this strategic culture would allow Snyder and his team at RAND to unite previously 'raw', incoherent data on Soviet strategic behavior into a 'coherent, political, historical and organizational context', so that the 'why' behind Soviet behavior could be explained'.⁹

Naturally, considering the ongoing Cold War, strategic culture was applied within the framework of 'Sovietology', the study of affairs and events in the former Soviet Union. Especially in the early years of research into strategic culture, the notion of culture was generally accepted to refer to 'ideas-plus-behavior'.¹⁰ However, as time went on, the term received more scholarly interest and usage in fields other than Sovietology as well. Scholars such as Ken Booth, Alan Bloomfield and Kim Richard Nossal contributed their different takes on what culture meant, suggesting that it could be seen as 'a nation's

⁶ Lock, 'Strategic Culture Theory: What, Why, and How', pp. 12.

⁷ Ibid, pp. 14.

⁸ Snyder, J. L., *The Soviet strategic culture: Implications for limited nuclear operations. A project air force report prepared for the United States Air Force R-2154-AF*. (Santa Monica 1977), pp. 8 -9.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 8.

¹⁰ Lock, 'Strategic Culture Theory: What, Why, and How', pp. 4.

traditions, values, attitudes, patterns of behavior' and could perhaps be seen as even more inclusive.¹¹ Bloomfield and Nossal further concluded that the ideas found within a strategic culture are often relatively stable in nature, meaning that their contents are only changing slightly over time.¹² As commented on by Lock, a trend started to develop whereby the focus seemed to lie more on discussions of the definition of strategic culture, rather than on application of the theory to actual research. During the second half of the 90's, a clear two-sided debate started to take shape. This debate revolved around the contrast between the definitions utilized by authors Colin Gray and Alastair Iain Johnston, often referred to as the Gray-Johnston debate.¹³

The Gray-Johnston debate

In the 80's and 90's, research into strategic culture became broader, but by no means any more precise. SCA was involved in an ever-increasing amount of research and studies, and the debate between Gray and Johnston became the center stage of discussion for the term. Whilst the notion that culture referred to 'idea-plus-behavior' had remained relatively unquestioned since Snyder coined the term in 1977, Johnston and Gray essentially clashed because of their different interpretations regarding the inclusiveness of 'culture' within strategic culture.

Johnston's implementation of SCA in his 1995 book 'Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History' treats culture as something that was not to be conflated with ideas and behavior.¹⁴ He stated that by 'subsuming behavior in a definition of strategic culture, [it] implies that strategic thought leads consistently to one type of behavior', which would lead to the oversimplification of reality in findings of SCA research.¹⁵ This issue of oversimplification, as well as alleged disregard for 'ample counterevidence' against claims made is the criticism levelled by Johnston against Gray.

¹¹ Booth, K., 'The concept of strategic culture affirmed' in *Strategic Power USA/USSR* (New York 1990), pp. 121.

¹² Bloomfield, A., & Nossal, K. R., 'Towards an explicative understanding of strategic culture: The cases of Australia and Canada', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 28:2 (2007), p. 288.

¹³ Lock, 'Strategic Culture Theory: What, Why, and How', pp. 4.

¹⁴ Ibid, pp. 4.

¹⁵ Johnston, A. I., *Cultural Realism: Strategic culture and grand strategy in Chinese history* (Princeton 1995a), pp. 8.

Instead, Johnston's book maintains the idea that the cultural aspect consists of ideas about 'the role and efficacy of the use of military force in interstate political affairs'.¹⁶

Gray on the other hand stresses the wholistic nature of strategic culture and argued for the importance of a more inclusive definition. In his 1999 article, Gray attempts to reiterate his understanding of strategic culture, and the importance of the inclusiveness of the cultural aspect. Gray argued that 'culture is ideals, it is the evidence of ideas, and it is behavior'.¹⁷ In the context of Russia, especially, the usage of a more inclusive definition of strategic culture analysis is something he considers to be mandatory, with Gray arguing the state to be one with a so-called 'high-context society' (a national community that is prone to a complex, organic view of events whereby subtexts, sub-plots and subtle interconnections are relevant).¹⁸ However, like Johnston, Gray's approach to- and understanding of strategic culture is not immune to criticism either, a fact that he was well aware of. He admits that one could argue that if strategic culture is everywhere and all-inclusive like he claims it to be, one could also argue that it is in practicably researchable terms, nowhere.¹⁹

It is indeed so that the Johnston-Gray debate has had, and still has, some problematic consequences on the field of SCA as a whole. As argued by Morgan, due to the central position the debate takes within strategic culture theory, authors who have done any research into the topic are often seen picking either side of the debate or trying to add to their definitions in a variety of ways.²⁰ By doing so, the focus on debate remains, a phenomenon that Lock considers to be especially harmful to the strategic culture research agenda: 'what is problematic here is that current definitions of strategic culture do not merely enable us to ask and answer questions about how culture influences the military policies of nation-states; they suggest that such questions are the only ones that are relevant to those who posit the existence and importance of a cultural component to

¹⁶ Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, pp. 36.

¹⁷ Gray, C. S., 'Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back.', *Review of International studies* 25:1 (1999), pp. 52.

¹⁸ Skak, 'Russian Strategic Culture', pp. 326.

¹⁹ Gray, 'Strategic Culture as Context', pp. 52.

²⁰ Morgan, F. E., *Compellence and the strategic culture of imperial Japan: Implications for coercive diplomacy in the twenty-first century* (Westport, 2003), pp. 8.

strategic affairs'.²¹ An example of this debate still influencing research being published will be discussed in chapter two.

Conclusion

This first chapter has set out to clarify multiple crucial aspects of this thesis. It examined the field of SCA, by looking at its origins and evolution, as well as the central Gray-Johnston debate. What became apparent was the vital importance of a clear and precise definition, which was also provided.

²¹ Lock, 'Strategic Culture Theory: What, Why, and How', pp. 8.

Chapter 2: Russian Strategic Culture

This second chapter examines recent research into Russian strategic culture (RSC), touching upon some ideas which are considered by other authors to be characteristic, such as Russia's historical obsession with (perceived) foreign threats against its sovereignty. To that end, it first examines an article by Aaron Bateman, before moving on to the article that serves as an inspiration to this thesis, which was written by Matte Skak. Skak's article will be critically examined for flaws and points to improve on, before laying out the methodology of this thesis at the end of this chapter.

Recent research into RSC

Research into RSC has been occurring for several decades and this section seeks to briefly examine recent writings and central ideas on the topic. One such idea central to RSC is the obsession of Russian heads of state with territorial integrity. This territorial integrity, as well as domestic stability, is often perceived to be threatened by enemies from both outside Russia, as well as within. It is an obsession which can be traced throughout history, as concluded by Bateman in his article. He argues that, due to Russia's size, its past rulers -be they Tsars, princes, khans or Soviet presidents- have continuously been afraid of being overthrown by either foreign- or domestic enemies.²² In an attempt to prevent this, Bateman explains, a fundamental characteristic of any form of modern Russian regime has always been a 'strong, highly centralized security service designed to provide internal stability'.²³ There have been secret services or committees for 'state stability' such as the Okhrana, the Cheka, the KGB and now the FSB, amongst many others.

One important event that influenced Russian strategic culture, both Bateman and Skak argue, was the Hungarian revolution of 1956. Yuri Andropov, who would become KGB chairman from '67 until '82, was stationed in Budapest as ambassador to the Soviet Union at the time. He is said to have 'watched in terror' as his comrades were lynched in the streets by Hungarian citizens, which left him traumatized and fiercer than ever on the topic of internal stability: such domestic rebellion against Soviet leadership was

²² Bateman, A., 'The Political Influence of the Russian Security Services', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 27:3, (2014), 381.

²³ Ibid, pp. 381.

something that had to be prevented at all costs in the future.²⁴ To that end, the KGB was elevated from being part of the state security apparatus, to influencing the state itself; under Andropov the foundation for a mightier-than ever Russian secret state-police force was established, which obtained the power to influence Soviet policy.²⁵

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the first president of the newly formed Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, had the intention of reforming Russia into a more democratic state.²⁶ In reality, this transitional period was marked by corruption, shifts of wealth and a redistribution of political power, making it a chaotic and instable period. Like many Russian leaders before him, Yeltsin realized that in order to stabilize and protect the newly formed state from both internal and external enemies, a strong security service was mandatory.²⁷ Together with Anatoly Sobchak they approached the so called *siloviki*, Russian for 'men of force', former secret service officers and KGB agents in an attempt to build relations between 'the new state and the security services', since this was perceived as way to restore stability to Russia.²⁸ This is when Yeltsin, according to Michael Waller, had three options: abolish existing security services and start anew from the ground up, he could reform the security system whilst rooting out the 'hardline' KGB-ers (influenced by Andropov), or Soviet security services and those working for them could be preserved and continued under new names.²⁹ Although the reason behind the decision remains uncertain, Yeltsin opted for the latter. Yeltsin is also perceived to be responsible for the so called 'rise of Putin', as he considered Putin to be a suitable predecessor, because of his KGB background and his apparent democratic-leaning mindset, thought to be vital for the success of the new state.³⁰

Whilst this example of recent writing on Russian strategic culture might not appear directly related to the annexation of Crimea, this notion of a considerable degree of influence from *siloviki* on Russian politics is an idea expanded upon by Skak in her article, which seeks to understand the annexation of Crimea. Additionally, since this

²⁴ Bateman, 'The Political Influence of the Russian Security Services', pp. 388.

²⁵ Skak, 'Russian Strategic Culture: The Role of Today's Chekisty', 328.

²⁶ Bateman, 'The Political Influence of the Russian Security Services', pp. 384.

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 386.

²⁸ Ibid, pp. 387.

²⁹ Waller, M., *Secret Empire: The KGB in Russia Today*, (Boulder 1994), pp. 99–100.

³⁰ Bateman, 'The Political Influence of the Russian Security Services', 386.

thesis seeks to contribute to research on Crimea's annexation as well as RSC in general, touching upon such topics is not a bad idea, since the findings of this thesis will complement some of them.

Skak's research into Crimea's annexation

Let us proceed by more closely examining Mette Skak's article, which served as an inspiration for this thesis. Whilst not being without problematic aspects, the article shares similarities with the intents of this thesis in its research topic, its method and its scope, since the annexation of Crimea is the main topic and the utilized research method is SCA. In her article Skak examines an elite group of Russian politicians and individuals with political influence, the so called *chekisty*, that she believes to be the at the core of Russian strategic culture. She aims to 'reconstruct the mental universe and policy preferences' of the chekisty in order to hermeneutically prove how Russia's foreign policy is influenced by this group, who act on (mis)perceptions rooted in KGB groupthink.³¹ Her article sets multiple research goals: she aims to update research on Russian strategic culture, to contribute to the understanding of why Russia annexed Crimea, to add a new layer of depth by adding a chekist dimension to Russian strategic culture analysis and to contribute to broader theorization of Russian strategic culture as a result of KGB ethics mixed with the habits and preferences of the Russian political elite.³²

To realize these goals, Skak closely examines the imprint of three individual chekists on late Soviet and post-Soviet Russian strategic culture.³³ These individuals are Russian president Vladimir Putin, former Russian minister of Foreign Affairs Yevgeni Primakov and Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev, all three considered by Skak to be chekists whose influence she believes to be connected to one another. She follows the methodological examples and definitions of Gray and Snyder as founding fathers for the application of strategic culture analysis, meaning that her understanding of culture, as well as what does and what does not fall under the definition of strategic culture, differs from the way this thesis will apply SCA.

³¹ Skak, 'Russian Strategic Culture: The Role of Today's Chekisty', pp. 328.

³² Ibid, pp. 325-326.

³³ Ibid, pp. 326.

Skak concludes that Russia's foreign policy is influenced by strategic decisions made by a small, elite group, which she considers to have been mentored under the same KGB regime (Andropov's). The thought- and decision-making processes found within these groups are plagued by 'groupthink', the practice of thinking or making decisions as a group, resulting typically in unchallenged, poor-quality decision-making. Due to influences from Andropov's -and the KGB in general- obsession with regime security and domestic stability, this set of ideas and interpretations of foreign intentions resulted in a misperception of the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution as a US-initiated color revolution with the goal of spreading to Russia, a domino theory of sorts.³⁴ Finally, she concludes that this is an example of inside-out logic whereby Russian domestic concerns triggered actions at the level of foreign policy.³⁵

Whilst Skak's article has its merits, there are some problematic aspects that this thesis believes should be addressed as well. The first of these aspects is Skak's approach to strategic culture analysis. In her methodology, Skak argues that a more inclusive definition of culture is the only logical choice,³⁶ thereby citing Gray's argumentation behind Russia's high-context society as the primary reason.³⁷ She also states that Gray (and to an extent, Snyder) is regarded as a founding father and is considered her example to approaching the analysis of Russian strategic culture. This means that the critique that was levelled against Gray, be it by Johnston, Gray himself or -in my case- Lock, can be applied to Skak as well.

Secondly, Skak states that she aims to understand how Russian strategic culture - in the form of chekist misperception- shaped foreign policy with regard to the Crimea annexation. However, the individuals that she selected to be subject to analysis are selected for another reason. Stating that she intends to 'reformulate strategic culture analysis into analysis [of] the post-Soviet Russian secret services as keepers of strategic culture beyond the Russian military',³⁸ this in effect means that whilst the selection of individuals (Putin, Primakov and Patrushev) makes sense if the research topic is

³⁴ Skak, 'Russian Strategic Culture: The Role of Today's Chekisty', pp. 324.

³⁵ Ibid, pp. 325.

³⁶ Ibid, pp. 326.

³⁷ Ibid, pp. 326.

³⁸ Ibid, pp. 325.

Sovietology, the same selection makes far less sense when one aims to examine the Crimea 2014 annexation through the application of strategic culture analysis.

Thirdly, Skak generalizes when it comes to ideas of strategy adhered by ‘the siloviki’ or ‘the chekisty’. She concludes that the temporary chekisty are in essence an elite group of siloviki that follow a ‘kto kogo’ (who conquers whom) ideology, rooted in Soviet KGB-groupthink and -ethics. However, as research by Brian Taylor points out, it would be a severe oversimplification of reality to consider the chekisty, or the siloviki for that matter, as adherent to ‘one’ set of ideas regarding strategy. Rather, the silovki are ‘internally divided along both organizational (formal) and so-called clan (informal) lines.’³⁹ Whilst one could argue that the political elite, or ‘Putin’s circle’, adheres the same ideas of strategy, this should be argued on the basis of Russia being an autocratic state whereby Putin’s policy preferences are decisive. Keeping the flaws, as well as the strengths of Skak’s work in mind, this thesis will now lay out a suggestion for a different approach to SCA with the aim of understanding why Russia annexed Crimea.

Methodology of this thesis

So far, the first two chapters have provided an overview of the field of strategic culture analysis, thereby sketching the debate that exists, as well as inherently problematic aspects of existing research. Based on the aforementioned definition and methodological example of Edward Lock, the final section of this chapter will now explain how this thesis intends to approach existing issues within the field of SCA, fill a gap in research, and contribute to overall research into this topic. First and foremost, this thesis will analyze the outings (or ‘artifacts’) of Vladimir Putin for elements of strategic culture. Contrary to Skak, who analyzes the ideas of various individuals (whose direct connection to the annexation of Crimea is debatable), this thesis elects to provide a more in-depth analysis of multiple sources related to Putin specifically. This choice was made primarily because Putin, as the head of an autocrat state, is ultimately in charge of strategic decisions. Those who are deemed part of his ‘inner circle’ are considered to follow suit regarding decisions he makes. This means that if multiple individuals were analyzed, they would simply mirror Putin’s ideas. On top of this fact, Putin’s speeches, interviews and statements are well documented and accessible for research purposes.

³⁹ Taylor, B. D., ‘The Russian Siloviki & Political Change’ *Daedalus*, 146:2 (2017), pp. 54.

Secondly, the source material that will be analyzed will be more directly related to the event researched. The Kremlin's internet archive holds a considerable number of interviews, statements and speeches which directly touch upon the topic of the annexation of Crimea. The focus of the empirical aspect of this thesis will lie on source material produced between the 4th of March and the 18th of December 2014. According to step (a) of Lock's methodology, this section will map the common ideas which can be derived from these sources, which will be divided into three categories. These categories are the 'historical and cultural ties', 'Putin, the West and NATO' and 'Russian national interests'. The findings from these individual categories will be brought together in a subsequent section that discusses the relation between these ideas and how they might have contributed to strategic behavior, corresponding with step (c) of Lock's methodology. The findings of this research will then be compared to findings of other authors (which will be featured in chapter three) in order to provide an answer to the main question. This means that step (b), which involves the tracing of how ideas change over time, will not be applied to this thesis. The reasoning behind this decision is that the focus of this research lies on a single historical event which fully occurred within a timespan of merely one year. In order to trace potential change of the mapped ideas of step (a) that might occur, one would have to implement a significant amount of context, as well as a broader timescale, which is outside the scope of this research. It is also justified by Lock himself, who states that step (b) need not always be included in order to produce a good piece of research.

Third, at the foundation of this thesis lies the regard for Russia as an autocrat state. This means that it considers president Putin to be ultimately in charge of any major strategic decisions being made. Because of this, whilst one could argue that the analysis of multiple individuals within Putin's so-called inner circle might produce a more complete research, this thesis believes that these additional individuals are likely to more or less 'mirror' Putin's strategic culture. Therefore, analyzing sources produced directly by Putin himself should suffice for the sake of this essay. On top of this, the comments made in interviews, statements, speeches and other artifacts that will be analyzed for this thesis will not be checked for factual accuracy, as it falls outside the scope of this thesis. The reason why this shouldn't be a problem for the findings of this research, however, is that the factual accuracy of the analyzed sources is of little relevancy to this research.

After all, what is of relevancy here are the common ideas regarding strategy that can be extracted from these sources, as well as an explanation as to how these ideas could influence strategic decisions. The ideas and perceptions which help shape Russia's strategic culture need not be based on truth in order for it to be influential to foreign policy, as also argued by Skak.⁴⁰

By approaching the research this way, SCA allows for research into so-called inside-out factors influencing Russia's foreign policy. Current scholarly attention for the topic of Russia's annexation of Crimea mostly features explanations of an outside-in nature.⁴¹ Findings of this essay might be able to contribute to inside-out explanations behind Russia's foreign policy decision-making, by explaining how (mis)perceptions from Putin's perspective might have contributed to the annexation of Crimea. Secondly, as argued by Lock, research within the field of strategic culture analysis has often been conducted utilizing problematic definitions. By adopting a crystal-clear definition and theoretically sound methodological approach, this thesis will hopefully contribute to advancing the research agenda, rather than getting stuck in debates over definition, as has often proven to be the case with SCA. This thesis does not necessarily expect to formulate new findings compared to recent research into the Russian annexation of Crimea, but rather focuses on the formulation of findings via a 'different' method of research, namely SCA. Instead, findings from this research will largely support existing findings regarding Russian foreign policy, most notably concerning the Crimea annexation as an opportunistic action brought about by external pressures which threatened Russia's national interests.

Conclusion

This second chapter opened with an examination of some central ideas Bateman discussed in his article, followed by a section which illustrated how the recent piece of research into Russian strategic culture expands on these ideas. Skak's article was discussed for its strengths, as well as points whereupon this thesis might be able to improve. Finally, the chapter ended with an overview of the proposed methodology, the contribution this thesis will provide to general research into the topic, and how the main research question will be answered.

⁴⁰ Skak, 'Russian Strategic Culture: The Role of Today's Chekisty', pp. 325-326.

⁴¹ Ibid, pp. 325.

Chapter 3 - Literature review: the annexation of Crimea

This third chapter will feature a literature review whereby the findings of other scholars regarding Russia's annexation of Crimea will be discussed. The findings of several of these authors will later be revisited within the empirical research this thesis features. This chapter will be divided into three sections, each of these sections represents an aspect of Crimea's annexation which is touched upon by several of the featured authors. The first section will examine the Crimean Peninsula itself, thereby asking the question 'why Crimea?'. The second section will revolve around the timing of Crimea's annexation, asking 'why did the annexation occur when it did?'. Finally, there is the third and last section; which examines a popular debate regarding whether or not the annexation of Crimea was part of a grand scheme to revert Russia's geostrategic losses and global influence following the collapse of the Soviet-Union, or an act of opportunism.

Why annex Crimea?

If one seeks to understand why Russia annexed Crimea, one of the first questions that needs to be asked is 'why Crimea?', what makes the peninsula of such apparent importance to Russia that Putin was willing to annex it regardless of the possible consequences? The answer to this question, according to Greame Gill, Daniel Treisman and Andrei Tsygankov, is twofold. The first half of the answer comes in the form of the Sevastopol naval base. Since Crimea's accession to the Russian empire in 1783, the territory has been of great geostrategic importance, primarily due to the naval base. This naval base provides the Russian fleet -amongst other advantages- with access to the Black sea and the sea of Azov. As Treisman comments, the Black Sea Fleet is crucial to Russia's ability to project force into the Black and Mediterranean Seas.⁴² Following Ukraine's independence in 1991, which meant that Russia would lose access to the Sevastopol base, an agreement was made between Ukraine and Russia which would provide Russia with access to the port until at least 2042. However, this agreement is not set in stone and could change or even be nullified if Ukrainian politicians were to favor ties with the West over ties with Russia.⁴³

⁴² Treisman, 'Why Putin Took Crimea', pp. 50.

⁴³ Gill, G., 'The Russian Annexation of Crimea in March 2014', *United Service*, 65:2 (2014), pp. 10.

The second half of the answer lies in the role of NATO, and the threat it forms to Russian interests. Tsygankov states in his article that the Kremlin holds a 'securitized perception of NATO as an alliance which reflects the eternal expansionist drive of Western civilization and its desire to undermine Russia as the alternative other with distinct values and international priorities.'⁴⁴ Especially following NATO's broken promise that the alliance would not expand eastward following Germany's reunification has nursed a Russian feeling of distrust towards it. Adding to this issue is the fact that Russia is frequently considering itself to be sidelined by NATO, which accuses the state of making unfounded claims and calls it unworthy of attention.⁴⁵ Blunting NATO's eastward expanse is a seemingly important aspect of Russian foreign policy. In order to do so, Russia has been known to provoke and maintain conflict situations in states that seek to join NATO, the so called 'frozen conflict' approach, a strategy which has been openly confirmed by Dmitry Medvedev.⁴⁶ But how do Russia's fear of NATO's expansionist policies tie in with the annexation of Crimea? This is where Sevastopol comes in again. As concluded by Gill, if Ukraine were to ever join NATO, it would very likely result in a Western presence in Sevastopol, meaning that the Black Sea Fleet's access to the port could either be renegotiated, or that the fleet would have to share the facilities with NATO vessels.⁴⁷ After Yanukovych was ousted and the Ukrainian interim government supposedly commenced talks with both the EU and NATO regarding a possibility of future accession, Putin panicked. This leads Treisman to conclude that Putin's annexation of Crimea appears to have been a reaction to external pressure, 'triggered by fear of losing Russia's strategically important naval base in Sevastopol.'⁴⁸

Besides the naval base, Crimea also houses roughly 1,5 million ethnic Russians who became foreign citizens after the fall of the Soviet Union. The role which these people played in the annexation of Crimea is a contested topic, but it is generally agreed that the wellbeing of these people was not Putin's primary concern when setting his sights on Crimea. On the contrary, authors such as Roy Allison believe Putin constructed an

⁴⁴ Tsygankov, A. P., 'The sources of Russia's fear of NATO, *Communist and Post-Communist studies*, 51 (2018), pp. 103.

⁴⁵ Ibid, pp. 103.

⁴⁶ Iskra Kirova, Public diplomacy and conflict resolution, pp. 14

⁴⁷ Gill, 'The Russian Annexation of Crimea', pp. 10.

⁴⁸ Treisman, 'Why Putin Took Crimea', pp. 48.

imaginary extremist threat following the ousting of Yanukovych (these extremists being neo-Nazi's, Russophobes and ultranationalists) in order to have a legitimate-appearing pretense for the annexation of Crimea.⁴⁹ Treisman and Rosefielde support this notion, with Treisman stating that Putin showed little interest in the fate of ethnic Russians in Crimea during his 14 year in power, putting sincere doubt to the claim that Putin sought to protect these people.⁵⁰ Rosefielde concludes that claims of civil unrest and ethnic strife, combined with the looming implementation of a language law proposed by the interim government, provided Putin with a compelling argument to invade under the pretense of protecting ethnic Russians.⁵¹

Examining the timing of Crimea's annexation

A crucial aspect that has to be examined in order to understand why Russia annexed Crimea when it did, is the event which many scholars believe to have triggered Putin's decision: the Euromaidan protests and the following Ukrainian revolution. The series of protests against Yanukovych's rejection of an association agreement with the European Union which took place on the Maidan Nezalezhnostie in Kyiv and which began on the 21st of November 2013, are also referred to as the Euromaidan protests. After several occasions of escalation, the protests eventually transitioned into what became known as the 2014 Ukrainian revolution, after which Yanukovych and his regime were ousted, and the president fled the country.⁵² Much has been written about the revolution itself, as well as its aftermath. The authors discussed in this literature review spend a significant amount of attention on the Euromaidan protests and its role as the triggering event behind Russia's annexation of Crimea. At its core, Euromaidan was a pro-EU protest, whereby those protesting in Kyiv interpreted Yanukovych's rejection of an association agreement with the European Union as nothing but a thinly veiled promise of eventual

⁴⁹ Allison, R., 'Russian 'deniable' intervention in Ukraine: how and why Russia broke the rules', *International Affairs*, 90:6 (2014), pp. 1260-1261.

⁵⁰ Treisman, 'Why Putin Took Crimea', pp. 47.

⁵¹ Rosefielde, S., *The Kremlin strikes back: Russia and the West after Crimea's annexation*. (New York, 2017), pp. 46-47.

⁵² Studzińska, Z., 'How Russia, Step by Step, Wants to Regain an Imperial Role in the Global and European Security System', *Connections*, 14:4 (2015), pp. 30.

integration into the Russian economic zone.⁵³ It had roots in historical grievances towards the Soviet Union and Russia, the corruption associated with these political ties, as well as fears of economic malaise. The protests were largely regarded as a democratic occurrence, at least in the West and by those participating. This resulted in a lot of media coverage, as well as the protestors receiving significant international support from emphatic outsiders.

As the protests proceeded, an agreement between Yanukovych, several protest leaders as well as Western diplomats was being worked in the presence of special Russian envoy Vladimir Lurkin. This agreement, which would've been acceptable in the eyes of Russia, was nullified the next day by the protestors, who possibly felt in a position to do so due to the political support and attention their cause was receiving from the West. In effect, this meant a rejection of the Russian-approved deal, followed by the ousting of an elected official, which was perceived as nothing short of a coup d'état. Allison comments that Putin was 'deeply shocked' by this sudden overthrow of Yanukovych,⁵⁴ implying that this was far from an anticipated occurrence. After the government fell, a democratic process ensured that a legitimate interim government was established until new elections could be held.⁵⁵ The agreement that put this government into place was rejected by Russia and Lurkin refused to sign it. Russia referred to the new officials as 'fascists', dismissed their authority and started to openly question the safety of ethnic Russians residing within Ukrainian territory.⁵⁶ As Gill suggests, Moscow perceived the situation as if it were so that 'the West was out to overthrow a legitimate government and install an anti-Russian administration in its place.'⁵⁷ These claims of a fascist presence expanded to claims of violence being inflicted on ethnic Russians by ultra-nationalist and neo-Nazi protestors. Whilst being severely overstated, it created a rhetoric of danger which would require acting on.⁵⁸

⁵³ Ibid, pp. 40.

⁵⁴ Allison, 'Russian 'deniable' intervention in Ukraine', pp. 1257.

⁵⁵ Studzińska, 'How Russia Wants to Regain an Imperial Role', pp. 29-30.

⁵⁶ Chalupa, A., 'Putin's Fabricated Claim of a Fascist Threat in Ukraine', *Forbes* (04-04-2014)

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2014/04/04/putins-fabricated-claim-of-a-fascist-threat-in-ukraine/#258a96a75901> (accessed 23-05-2019).

⁵⁷ Gill, 'The Russian Annexation of Crimea', pp. 11.

⁵⁸ Treisman, 'Why Putin Took Crimea', pp. 47.

The Kremlin's declaration regarding the illegitimacy of Turchynov's rule and the coup against Yanukovych had caused protests to spark on Crimea since the 26th of February.⁵⁹ After dismissing the Ukrainian Crimean government, a referendum on Crimea's autonomy was called for. This vote, held on the 16th of March, resulted in a supposedly overwhelming call for secession, a red carpet for Putin to annex Crimea if ever there was one. Olena Podolian wrote an article on this referendum, concluding that it failed to fulfill both legal and legitimate criteria, that it was a direct breach of both Ukraine and Russian's international legal frameworks, as well as being impossible to consider legitimate due to violation of the criteria for free and fair voting.⁶⁰ On top of these issues, previous public opinion polls held on Crimea since 1991 regarding its status as an autonomous republic never reached more than 33% of votes in favor of a hypothetical secession to Russia.⁶¹ Regardless of the factual legitimacy of this referendum, Moscow found the semblance of legitimacy it had been seeking and combined with the political unrest in Ukraine an opportunity had presented itself. On the 18th of March, Crimea was annexed by the Russian Federation.⁶²

'Grand scheme' or opportunism?

Now that an answer has been provided for the questions 'why Crimea' and 'why then', there is one topic of discussion that remains to be explored: was the annexation of Crimea part of a grand scheme, or an act of opportunism? In order to answer that question, arguments from both sides of the debate will be briefly examined, followed by the final conclusion of this chapter.

The notion that the government of the Russian Federation is engaged in a long-term campaign to revert the losses of influence and territory that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet-Union is not exactly a novel theory. After Russia's war against Georgia in 2008, authors such as George Friedman already pointed at the fact that 'Russia has been an empire for centuries' and that 'the last 15 years or so were not a new reality,

⁵⁹ Studzińska, 'How Russia Wants to Regain an Imperial Role', pp. 46.

⁶⁰ Podolian, O., 'The 2014 Referendum in Crimea', *East European Quarterly*, 43:1 (2015), pp. 111.

⁶¹ Ibid, pp. 115.

⁶² Studzińska, 'How Russia Wants to Regain an Imperial Role', pp. 47.

but simply an aberration to be rectified, and now it is being rectified.’⁶³ After the annexation of Crimea, authors such as Zofia Studzińska and Steven Rosefielde began to expand upon this idea, discussing their findings regarding the annexation of Crimea within the context of an overall larger ‘scheme’ or campaign. The goal of this ‘anti-liberal doctrine’ or long-term campaign to exert dominance in Eurasia,⁶⁴ supposedly driven by Putin’s personal ambitions, is perhaps best summarized by Rosefielde, who states that Putin’s seeks to ‘roll back post-Communist geostrategic losses, blunt the advance of NATO’s eastward expansion, to prevent (western-instigated) color revolutions from taking place throughout former Soviet space, and to expand the Kremlin’s sphere of influence.’⁶⁵

In her article, Studzińska explains that indications of Putin working on such a scheme can be observed at their earliest after the 2003 Rose revolution in Georgia and the 2004 Orange revolution in Ukraine. Originally not appearing to be too bothered by the developments in these two states, Putin stated that ‘Ukraine is a sovereign, independent state, and can decide its own security policy’, whilst adding that ‘Russia’s interests are not harmed by good Ukrainian relations with NATO and it certainly will not cast a shadow on relations between Russia and Ukraine.’⁶⁶ However, the consequences of these revolutions would turn out to be more problematic than Putin might’ve anticipated. Indeed, as Hosaka also notes, Russia felt confident between 2004 and 2005 that it might be able to utilize then president Yushenko to boost the interdependence of Ukraine and Russia on economic, cultural and institutional aspects.⁶⁷ However consequences of the Orange Revolution resulted in, amongst other undesirable outcomes, several threats at Russia’s address regarding the expelling of its Sevastopol fleet, as well as increased

⁶³ Friedman, G., ‘The Russo-Georgian War and the Balance of Power’, *Stratfor Global Intelligence* (12-08-2008) <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russo-georgian-war-and-balance-power> (accessed 19-05-2019).

⁶⁴ Studzińska, ‘How Russia Wants to Regain an Imperial Role’, pp. 21.

⁶⁵ Rosefielde, *The Kremlin strikes back*, pp. 45.

⁶⁶ Nygren, B., *The Rebuilding of Greater Russia: Putin’s Foreign Policy Towards the CIS Countries* (New York, 2007), pp. 55.

⁶⁷ Hosaka, S., ‘The Kremlin’s Last ‘Active Measures’ Failed in 2013: That’s When Russia Remembered its Last Resort - Crimea’, *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, 26:3 (2018), pp. 357.

cooperativeness towards the West and NATO.⁶⁸ This 'woke' Russia up to the need to repel NATO's eastward advance according to Studzińska, marking the starting point of Putin's campaign.⁶⁹ As she points out, an observable change in Putin's attitude was notable during the 2008 Bucharest NATO summit, where he commented that 'the possible extension of NATO to include Ukraine could lead to the disintegration of the country.'⁷⁰

Roughly four months after the statement which gave insight into Putin's change of heart regarding the sovereignty of former Soviet states, the Georgian war took place. Whilst describing and discussing this war in-depth is outside the scope of this thesis, the responses to the Georgian war by the international community carries a high degree of relevancy for a more detailed understanding of the annexation of Crimea. Maia Otarashvili argues that the Georgian war provided Putin with a means to 'test the waters' for future invasions as part of his campaign. Claims of ethnic Russians lives being at stake, providing a degree of justification to their action, combined with other 'rational' excuses resulted in a lack of any major international outrage towards Russia. This set a precedent which was precisely what Putin hoped for, laying the groundwork for the war in Ukraine.⁷¹ Indeed, following the war in Georgia, scholars such as Ronald Asmus predicted that Ukraine would be the next target in Putin's grand scheme.⁷²

Sahiro Hosaka puts the observable starting point of Putin's campaign at early 2013, a significant amount of time later than his colleagues. His article, whereby he examines leaked emails between the Kremlin and Russian covert political actors, concludes that Putin approved and launched a 'comprehensive program of covert influence operations to draw Ukraine away from its path towards European integration and back into Russia's orbit.'⁷³ In other words, already in early 2013, Putin supposedly started working on adding Crimea to 'his collection'. Whilst this was originally meant to

⁶⁸ Tkachenko, M. and Watson, I., 'Russia, Ukraine Agree on Naval Base for Gas Deal', *CNN World* (21-04-2010) <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/04/21/russia.ukraine/> (01-07-2019).

⁶⁹ Studzińska, 'How Russia Wants to Regain an Imperial Role', pp. 22-23.

⁷⁰ Ibid, pp. 30.

⁷¹ Otarashvili, M., 'Georgia and Moldova Remain Fragile as Russian Aggression Continues', *Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI)*, (30-01-2015) <http://www.fpri.org/geopoliticus/2015/01/georgia-and-moldova-remain-fragile-russian-aggression-continues> (accessed 22-05-2019).

⁷² Asmus, R. D., *A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia and the Future of the West* (New York, 2010), pp. 112.

⁷³ Hosaka, 'The Kremlin's 'Last Active Measures'', pp. 323.

be an approach primarily consistent of soft power, Russia found itself completely out of maneuvers by November 2013, leading Hosaka to conclude that it was no surprise that Russia would move towards annexation given the opportunity.⁷⁴

In conclusion, whilst not reaching a consensus on the starting point of Putin's supposed grand scheme, the aforementioned authors all believe they found evidence indicating that Putin is working towards a 'restoration' of the Soviet Union. Naturally, this is a contested claim, one that especially Treisman disagrees with. Treisman notes how there are indeed signs that may lead researchers to believe that a grand scheme is being carried out by the Kremlin. As an example, he mentions the fact that Vladislav Surkov, a member of Putin's 'inner-circle', made various visits to Crimea's capital in the fall and winter of 2013-14.⁷⁵ At the same time, Russian secret police agents had been spotted in Kiev.⁷⁶ However, as Treisman points out, Surkov's real assignment was likely to keep Yanukovych in power, a task which he failed. The secret police, he adds, was likely present in order to advise Yanukovych on how to crush antigovernment protests in the capital. 'Had they been planning for an operation in Crimea, they would have been sent there instead.'⁷⁷ He furthermore comments on the 'almost farcical lack of preparation' that accompanied the invasion, as well as Putin's failure to conjure a viable plan for a bridge that would connect Crimea to the Russian mainland (for which there had been negotiations in the ten years leading up to the annexation), further indications that there was no pre-existing plan to annex Crimea.⁷⁸

Gill is rather clear about his views regarding Putin's annexation of Crimea. He rejects the notion of a grand scheme, stating that the action was neither part of Putin's aspiration to reunify Crimea with the Russian motherland, nor an illustration of Russia's expansionist foreign policy. Gill instead refers to the annexation as nothing but 'an opportunistic act' that occurred due to political mistakes the West made during the Euromaidan protests.⁷⁹ In fact, Gill would have been surprised if Russia had not 'taken advantage' of the situation and annexed the peninsula. Allison also seems to see signs of

⁷⁴ Ibid, pp. 357.

⁷⁵ Treisman, 'Why Putin Took Crimea', pp. 50.

⁷⁶ Ibid, pp. 51

⁷⁷ Treisman, 'Why Putin Took Crimea', pp. 51.

⁷⁸ Ibid, pp. 51-52.

⁷⁹ Gill, 'The Russian Annexation of Crimea', pp. 9 & 12.

Crimea being an act of opportunism, stating that the ousting of Yanukovych triggered a 'rapid decision to implement a plan for the eventual annexation of Crimea.'⁸⁰ The fact that this plan was conceived not even a full month prior to Crimea's annexation further indicates the lack of a pre-existing plan.

Conclusion

This chapter looked at the explanations which various authors have provided to the question 'why did Russia annex Crimea?'. The first section discussed the appeal of the Crimean Peninsula to Russia. What became apparent is the crucial role Sevastopol's naval base plays, as well as Russia's fear of NATO. In the case of Ukraine's accession to NATO, it would have been likely that Western forces would establish a permanent presence on the peninsula, placing the military alliance extremely close to the Russian border. This section also briefly touched upon the role of the ethnic Russians on Crimea, which the featured authors believe to provide little more than a justification for Putin's invasion. The second section revolved around the question of timing. 'Why then?'. The answer to this question is the same for all authors, directly linking the annexation of Crimea to the Euromaidan and subsequent Ukrainian revolution. Yanukovych's ousting, which came as a 'shock' for Putin, resulted in Russian attempts to frame the interim government as 'fascist' in nature, whilst at the same time constructing a narrative whereby the lives of ethnic Russians across all of Ukraine were in danger. Realizing that scenario of Ukraine joining NATO had just become a lot more likely, plans were made for the annexation of Crimea. Following a highly dubious referendum amidst Russian presence on the peninsula, Russia ultimately annexed Crimea on the 18th of March. The third section examined the debate surrounding this decision. Was Crimea's annexation part of a larger scheme to restore Russia to its peak of influence as it was during the Soviet Union, or an act of opportunism? In this regard, the notion of opportunism seems to have the largest degree of explanatory power.

⁸⁰ Allison, 'Russian 'deniable' intervention in Ukraine', pp. 1296.

Chapter 4 - Applying strategic culture analysis

This fourth and final chapter will apply the previously outlined approach to strategic culture analysis in order to provide an answer to the main question. This analysis has been applied to a variety of sources consisting of interviews, speeches, meetings and statements held by president Putin between the 4th of March and the 18th of December 2014. These sources were retrieved from the English version of the Kremlin's official website, found by searching through the Kremlin's archive for content with the topic 'Crimea'. This chapter has been divided into two main parts, which are each divided into several subsections. The first part consists of an analytical component which corresponds to the first step (a) of Lock's proposed approach to SCA: the mapping of common ideas that constitute strategic culture at a given point in time. Due to the size of this analytical component, the section regarding the common ideas which were found within the dataset has been divided into three categories. These categories are 'historical and cultural ties', 'Putin, the West and NATO' and 'Russian national interests.' These categories appear in no particular order and the relations between the observed ideas from section (a) will be discussed in the second half of this chapter. That second half corresponds to step (c), which examines how the common ideas mapped during step (a) may impact strategic behavior.

Historical and cultural ties

This first category examines ideas regarding historical and cultural ties found within the analyzed material. These ideas vary from thoughts about Sevastopol as the cradle of Russian civilization, the inseparable historical and cultural bond between Russia and the Crimean Peninsula, as well as ideas regarding Western attempts to vanquish Russian civilization. This category should be considered especially relevant due to the predominant influence history has on the formulation and outcome of a state's strategic culture.⁸¹ Furthermore, all strategic choices are ultimately based on historically rooted strategic preferences.⁸² Ideas central to this section are the historical and cultural ties between Russia and Crimea, the 'historical injustice' of Crimea's accession to Ukraine and

⁸¹ Kari, M. J., 'Strategic Culture Theory as a Tool for Explaining Russian Cyber Threat Perception', *Academic Conference on Cyber Warfare and Security* (2019), pp. 532.

⁸² Ibid, pp. 532.

its far-stretching consequences, as well as Putin's fear that (primarily) Western states seek to erase Russian civilization.

1 - Crimea as Russia's Jerusalem

The first idea regarding history and culture revolves around the ties between Russia and Crimea. There are numerous of these ties, which usually concern Sevastopol in particular. As Putin states, Sevastopol has, in the eyes of ethnic Russians, a kind of 'sacred significance.'⁸³ '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.'⁸⁴ This religious aspect appears especially important and is stressed multiple times throughout the sources. Putin describes Christianity as a 'powerful spiritual unifying force that helped involve various tribes and tribal unions of the vast Eastern Slavic world in the creation of a Russian nation and Russian state', without which there would not have been 'a united [Russian] nation.'⁸⁵ In other words, Sevastopol could be seen as the birthplace of Russian civilization. But Crimea is more than that: 'Crimea is Balaklava and Kerch, Malakhov Kurgan and Sapun Ridge. Each one of these places is dear to our hearts, symbolizing Russian military glory and outstanding valor.'⁸⁶ An example of such military glory is Sevastopol's naval base, which houses the Russian Black Sea fleet. Furthermore, graves of Russian soldiers 'whose bravery brought Crimea into the Russian empire' can also be found on Crimea.⁸⁷ Putin refers to the cultural and historical significance of Crimea as Russia's equivalent of what the Temple Mount in Jerusalem means to the followers of Islam and Judaism, especially considering the role Sevastopol supposedly played in the baptism of Vladimir the Great. The struggle of the Russian people to gain what he refers

⁸³ Putin, V., "Meeting with heads of leading international news agencies". (24-05-2014)

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/21090> (12-06-2019), pp. 11-12.

⁸⁴ Putin, V., "Address by President of the Russian Federation", (18-03-2014a)

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603> (12-06-2019), pp. 2.

⁸⁵ Putin, 'Presidential Address', pp. 3.

⁸⁶ Putin, 'Address by President', pp. 2.

⁸⁷ Ibid, pp. 1.

to as 'a firm foothold' in its historical front is considered to be of extreme importance.⁸⁸

2 - Historical injustice: Crimea's allocation to Ukraine

The second idea revolves around the allocation of Crimea to Ukraine under the Soviet Union, and the tragic consequences this would eventually have as a form of 'historical injustice'. Following a decision from Nikita Khrushchev in 1954, Crimea became a part of Ukraine, causing Russia to lose this important territory. However, as Putin comments, this decision was nothing but a formality as the territory remained within the boundaries of the Soviet Union. When Crimea's succession to Ukraine took place, it was 'impossible to imagine that Ukraine and Russia [would ever] split up and become two separate states.'⁸⁹ Yet the unimaginable did happen, the 'big country' as Putin refers to it, fell apart, causing Russia to de-facto lose the territory in 1991. This tragedy occurred primarily due to the myriad of issues the Russian state found itself in after the collapse of the USSR, which rendered it 'incapable of protecting its interests', as well as the interests of its citizens.⁹⁰ When the dust began to settle, Russia realized that it had been 'plundered'. In a sense, Russia had lost its Jerusalem.

The collapse of the USSR furthermore resulted in a diaspora of ethnic Russians. This is the issue that lies at the core of Putin's comment regarding the USSR's collapse being the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century: 'All the citizens of the Soviet Union lived in a nation state irrespective of their ethnicity, and after its collapse 25 million Russians suddenly became foreign citizens'.⁹¹ 'Millions of people went to bed in one country and awoke in different ones.' Of those millions of people, over 1,5 million now lived just outside Russia's border, on the Crimean Peninsula.⁹² Still, the thought that Crimea essentially remained Russian land and Sevastopol a Russian city remained alive amongst Russians on both sides of the border during these 'hard 23 years'. When Russia finally annexed Crimea, it was considered by many ethnic Russians, as well as Putin, to

⁸⁸ Putin, V., "Meeting with young academics and history teachers", (05-11-2014), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46951> (12-06-2019), pp. 12.

⁸⁹ Putin, 'Address by President', pp 3.

⁹⁰ Ibid, pp. 4.

⁹¹ Putin, V., "Vladimir Putin's interview with Radio Europe 1 and TF1 tv channel". (04-06-2014) <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/45832> (12-06-2019), pp. 2.

⁹² Putin, 'Address by President', pp. 2.

be a reunification and an end to the 'third siege of the Hero city'.⁹³ The reunification of Crimea with Russia was declared an example of 'the restoration of historic justice'.⁹⁴

3 - The erasure of Russian civilization

The third and final idea in the category history and culture that is present in the analyzed sources is the idea that Russian civilization is threatened by external actors who seek to erase it in order to create a 'unipolar' world. In Putin's eyes, the Russian civilization has several key characteristics. 'A person from the Russian world primarily thinks about his or her highest moral designation, some highest moral truths', whereby the focus is society as a whole, rather than 'concentrating on his or her own precious personality'.⁹⁵ This is, in his view, the main difference from Western society whereby values of self-centeredness take priority over the greater good.⁹⁶ He further describes Russian civilization as being 'more traditional' than other civilizations, as well as it being primarily a Christian civilization.⁹⁷ The preservation of a world where a difference between Russian civilization and other civilizations -or, multipolarity- can exist is a cause which he seemingly considers to be of great importance. 'The world is multipolar. People want to decide their own futures and preserve their own cultural, historical and civilizational identity'.⁹⁸ He also comments that Russia has good relations with states that share a similar view on society and its norms and values, such as China.⁹⁹

However, there are actors who he perceives to be pursuing a world of unipolarity. Indeed, Putin believes that the West -by which he primarily means the United States- seeks to create a unipolar world for which they utilize their political influence and the

⁹³ Putin, V., "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin" (17-04-2014)

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796> (12-06-2019), pp. 11.

⁹⁴ Putin, V., "Speech at gala concert to mark the 69th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War and 70th anniversary of the liberation of Sevastopol from Nazis", (09-05-2014)

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/20993> (12-06-2019), pp. 1.

⁹⁵ Putin, 'Direct Line', pp. 89.

⁹⁶ Ibid, pp. 90.

⁹⁷ Ibid, pp. 82.

⁹⁸ Putin, V., "St. Petersburg International Economic Forum". (23-05-2014)

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/21080> (12-06-2019), pp. 3.

⁹⁹ Putin, V., "Conference of Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives", (01-07-2014)

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46131> (12-06-2019), pp. 9.

Western-oriented global economic systems. 'The global economic, financial and trade systems are becoming unbalanced, and moral and spiritual values are being washed out. [...] Peoples and countries are raising their voices in favor of self-determination and civilizational and cultural identity, which conflicts with the attempts by certain countries to maintain their domination [...].'¹⁰⁰ Such attempts are, in his mind, also made by influencing or toppling governments of instable states, after which Western norms and values are forced upon these states. The West is thereby only interested in its own gains. An example that shows this mindset is a quote regarding the Arab spring: 'standards were imposed on these nations that did not in any way correspond to their way of life, traditions, or these peoples' cultures. As a result, instead of democracy and freedom, there was chaos, outbreaks in violence and a series of upheavals. The Arab Spring turned into the Arab Winter.'¹⁰¹ This danger of unipolarity, or rather, the inability to maintain Russia's cultural, historical and societal identity seems to be a serious fear of Putin. 'We see attempts being made to recode society in many countries, and such attempts are being made to recode our society too.'¹⁰² Putin does not plan to let this happen however, stating that Russia 'will protect the diversity in the world.'¹⁰³ Should Russia not succeed in this, the outcome is clear: 'I would like to emphasize this: either we remain a sovereign nation, or we dissolve without a trace and lose our identity.'¹⁰⁴

Putin, the West and NATO

The second category consists of four common ideas Putin has regarding international relations. Due to the context of this research, the focus is limited to relations with the United States and the West, as well as with NATO. It discusses ideas such as the role of the U.S. as the global main aggressor, Russia's inability to trust Western partners or to conduct diplomacy with them, NATO as a major threat to Russia and the West's involvement in Euromaidan and subsequent ousting of Yanukovich.

¹⁰⁰ Putin, 'Conference of Russian Ambassadors', pp. 4

¹⁰¹ Putin, 'Address by President', pp. 9

¹⁰² Putin, 'Meeting with Young Academics', pp. 2

¹⁰³ Putin, 'Presidential Address', pp. 9

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, pp. 6

1 - The United States as the world's primary aggressor

The first observed idea regarding world politics concerns the role the United States plays. Putin perceives the United States as the primary aggressor in the world. The U.S. formulates their own geopolitical and state interests in a clear way, which are then followed with persistence. Formulating and pursuing one's interests is not a problem on its own, but it is their usage of the principle of 'being with us or against us' through which they draw the rest of the world in that is of concern to Putin.¹⁰⁵ Putin furthermore comments on the U.S.' global military presence. 'There are US military bases everywhere around the world and they are always involved in the fates of other countries even though they are thousands of kilometers away from US borders.'¹⁰⁶ In particular, he names the presence of U.S. forces being present in Europe, the Pentagon's massive military budget and the deployment of strategic missile defense components in Romania and Poland as worrying examples of U.S. aggression.¹⁰⁷ He adds that, in order to make such aggression look legitimate, 'they force the necessary resolutions from international organizations, and if for some reason this does not work, they simply ignore the UN Security Council and the UN overall.'¹⁰⁸ Finally, Putin notes how those who go along with the U.S.' policies dislike Russia's independent position, as he claims Russia does not play along with these 'double standards'.¹⁰⁹

2 - Russia's distrust towards its Western partners

The second idea revolves around Russia's inability to trust what he refers to as its 'Western partners', meaning the U.S. and Western European states, as well as NATO. Whilst there are quite a few examples to be found in the sources that indicate this distrust, the examples listed here capture the essence of the issue. As an example of the U.S.' shadiness, he comments on the pretense under which the U.S. invaded Iraq. 'The entire

¹⁰⁵ Putin, V., "Vladimir Putin answered journalists' questions on the situation in Ukraine", (04-03-2014) <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20366> (12-06-2019), pp. 9.

¹⁰⁶ Putin, 'Interview with Radio Europe 1', pp. 11.

¹⁰⁷ Putin, V., "News conference of Vladimir Putin", (18-12-2014) <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47250> (12-06-2019), pp. 39.

¹⁰⁸ Putin, 'Address by President', pp. 9.

¹⁰⁹ Putin, 'Conference of Russian Ambassadors', pp. 5.

world remembers the U.S. Secretary of State demonstrating the evidence of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, waving around some test tube with washing powder in the UN Security Council.¹¹⁰ Attempts to resolve certain issues via the diplomatic approach, such as the placement of U.S. military installations in Poland which were considered to be a threat to Russia, often result in the same situation: 'Is anyone listening to us? Is anyone engaging in some dialogue with us about it? No. No dialogue at all. All we hear is 'that's none of your business. Every country has the right to choose its way to ensure its own security.' All right, but we have the right to do so too. Why can't we?'.¹¹¹ This adds a layer of perceived hypocrisy to the mix, further adding to the lack of trust that exists between the parties. NATO's eastward expansion following Germany's reunification at the end of the Cold War serves as another example: 'We were promised that after Germany's unification, NATO wouldn't expand eastward. [...] However, it started expanding by incorporating former Warsaw Treaty member-countries and later on, the Baltic states, former Soviet republics. I used to say at one time: "Why are you doing this?" [...] I heard in response: "This doesn't concern you."¹¹² Russia previously requested that its Western partners would sign an official document which contained the promise that this military presence close to Russia's borders was indeed nothing to be concerned about, and would not be utilized against the state. 'It would seem a trifle –a piece of paper that could be signed today and thrown away tomorrow- but they are reluctant to do even that.'¹¹³ In short, the lack of open dialogue, the U.S.' shady behavior and NATO's broken promises all contribute to Russia's distrust towards the West.

3 - The role of NATO

The third idea which was derived from the analyzed sources revolves around the role of NATO as an extension of U.S. policies, that NATO shouldn't exist post-Cold War and the direct threat it poses in the context of Ukraine and Crimea. The notion that the NATO is a tool which serves as an extension of U.S. policies can be derived from the following quote: 'There are many ways to protect yourself. For example, the United States could have just

¹¹⁰ Putin, 'Interview with Radio Europe 1', pp. 4-5.

¹¹¹ Putin, 'News Conference', pp. 39

¹¹² Putin, 'Direct Line', pp. 38.

¹¹³ Ibid, pp. 40.

signed a bilateral treaty on friendship and collaboration, including military collaboration. How is this treaty different from a country's accession to NATO?'¹¹⁴ The fact that Putin regards such an agreement between any state and the U.S. as being on par with NATO membership indicates that he sees virtually no difference between the two. In fact, the only difference he observes is that the U.S. can impose a monetary contribution for NATO membership, on which he mockingly comments that such member-states 'don't [pay] anyway.'¹¹⁵

Putin furthermore believes NATO should have dissolved, or at least significantly changed its purpose after the end of the Cold War. 'NATO was established as a counterbalance to the Soviet Union and to the Soviet Union's policy in Eastern Europe. The Warsaw Pact was signed in response. The Soviet Union ceased to exist, but NATO remains. We are told it is changing and becoming more of a political organization. But Article 5 is still in effect, which is an article on mutual military support. Who does NATO act against? Why is it expanding towards our borders? Are there plans to establish new blocs?'¹¹⁶ But how exactly does he expect this threat to influence Russia? The answer to this question comes in Ukrainian context: 'So, tomorrow Ukraine may end up being a NATO member, and the next thing you know, it will have a US missile defense complex stationed on its territory'.¹¹⁷ 'We have already heard declarations from Kiev about Ukraine soon joining NATO. [...] It would have meant that NATO's navy would be right here [in Sevastopol], and this would create not an illusory but a perfectly real threat to the whole of southern Russia.'¹¹⁸ In short, Russia perceives NATO as both a direct extension of the U.S.' foreign influence and a major military threat.

4 - Western involvement in Euromaidan

Finally, there is the idea, or rather the absolute certainty in Putin's mind that the West is behind the escalation of the Euromaidan protests. This idea is rooted partially in historical experiences, such as the West's involvement with Ukraine's 2004 orange revolution. The ousting of Yanukovych was, according to him, not a democratic process,

¹¹⁴ Putin, 'St. Petersburg', pp. 25.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 25.

¹¹⁶ Putin, 'Direct Line', pp. 20.

¹¹⁷ Putin, 'St. Petersburg', pp. 18.

¹¹⁸ Putin, 'Address by President', pp. 12.

but a west-instigated coup d'état against a constitutionally elected official. The ultimate goal according to Putin, is Ukraine joining the EU and NATO in an attempt to weaken Russia, and to tear it apart like 'what they did to Yugoslavia'.¹¹⁹

Let us begin at the comments regarding the West's previous involvement with influencing protest movements in Ukraine. He states that for the West, the protests against Yanukovych's refusal to sign the EU association agreement was 'simply an excuse to support the forces opposing [Yanukovych] in a fight for power. Overall, this is nothing special [...] and it is not the first time our Western partners are doing this in Ukraine.'¹²⁰ 'In 2004, to push the necessary candidate through at the presidential elections, they thought up some sort of third round that was not stipulated by the law. [...] And now, they have thrown in an organized and well-equipped army of militants.'¹²¹ These two quotes practically speak for themselves; Putin believes that the West has consistently involved itself in Ukraine's political reforms, taking their meddling a step further in 2014 than it did 10 years prior. The question then is how the West, according to Putin, has orchestrated this coup d'état. 'What actually happened there? There was a conflict and that conflict arose because the former Ukrainian president refused to sign an association agreement with the EU. Russia had a certain stance on this issue. We believed it was indeed unreasonable to sign that agreement because it would have a grave impact on the economy, including the Russian economy. [...] We discussed this with our European partners. Instead of continuing the debates by legitimate and diplomatic means, our European friends and our friends from the United States supported the anti-constitutional armed coup.'¹²²

Then, after this coup, the interim government began talks with the West -as mentioned previously- regarding accession to the EU and NATO. This fact further reinforced Putin's idea that all of this was an orchestrated attempt to weaken Russia. 'We understand what is happening; we understand that these actions were aimed against Ukraine and Russia and against Eurasian integration.'¹²³ Throughout the analyzed sources, this sentiment is repeated multiple times, in various degrees of subtlety. At times

¹¹⁹ Putin, 'Direct Line', pp. 32

¹²⁰ Putin, 'Vladimir Putin answered journalists', pp. 16

¹²¹ Putin, 'Address by President', pp. 9

¹²² Putin, 'Interview with Radio Europe 1', pp. 4

¹²³ Putin, 'Address by President', pp. 9

Putin speaks of 'our Western partners', at other times he is quite blunt: 'Washington actively supported the Maidan protests.'¹²⁴ This idea is the most frequently brought up idea of any listed in these subsections. The final aspect that needs to be addressed then, is how Putin perceives this alleged coup and Western influence as an action against Ukraine, Russia and Eurasian integration overall. 'There are enough forces in the world that are afraid of our strength, 'our hugeness', as one of our sovereigns said. So, they seek to divide us into parts, this is a well-known fact. Look at what they did with Yugoslavia: they cut it into small pieces and are now manipulating everything that can be manipulated there, which is almost anything. Apparently, someone would like to do the same with us.'¹²⁵

Russian national interests

This third and final category focuses on ideas regarding Russia's national interests. The three main ideas discussed here revolve around Russia's role as an independent actor in international affairs, Russia's national interests in Crimea, as well as how Putin perceives Russia's actions in Crimea as sending a message to the West that certain lines are not to be crossed.

1- Russia as an independent international actor

The first main idea revolves around the role of Russia as an independent actor within international relations and affairs. Putin is quite clear in this regard: 'It is imperative to [...] accept the obvious fact: Russia is an independent, active participant in international affairs; like other countries, it has its own national interests that need to be taken into account and respected.'¹²⁶ In this regard, Russia is unwilling to cater to the political and geopolitical interests of other states,¹²⁷ referring to their actions in Crimea as an example of what happens when other states demonstrate a lack of consideration into Russia's national interests.¹²⁸ Putin compares this to the snapping of a spring: 'If you compress

¹²⁴ Putin, V., "Interview to Politika newspaper", (15-10-2014)

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46806> (12-06-2019), pp. 7.

¹²⁵ Putin, 'Direct Line', pp. 32.

¹²⁶ Putin, 'Address by President', pp. 11.

¹²⁷ Putin, 'Meeting with heads', pp. 19.

¹²⁸ Ibid, pp. 18.

the spring all the way to its limit, it will snap back hard. You must always remember this.’¹²⁹

2 - Russian national interests in Crimea

The second idea concerns Russia’s interests in Crimea, as well as the threats that would arise from a NATO presence on the peninsula. Analyzing Putin’s statements sketches an image of Crimea as being of high importance to regional stability, as well as having economic ties to Ukraine as a whole via the free trade area as a CIS country.¹³⁰ ‘We have 390 economic agreements with Ukraine and Ukraine is a member of the free trade zone within the CIS. We wouldn’t be able to continue this economic relationship with Ukraine as a member of the free trade zone [if they were to join the EU].’¹³¹ Putin further states that these concerns were voiced to their Western partners during multilateral meetings prior to the ousting of Yanukovych, but that their objections ultimately fell on deaf ears.¹³²

The national interests of Russia aren’t exclusively economic in nature, however. There are also geostrategic interests at stake, in the form of Sevastopol’s naval base. Whilst Putin suggests that, in Russian hands, the military importance of Sevastopol is far less significant than it was in the 18th and 19th centuries, if this territory were to fall in NATO hands it would be highly problematic: ‘If NATO troops walk in, they will immediately deploy [modern strike] forces there. Such a move would be geopolitically sensitive for us because, in this case, Russia would be practically ousted from the Black Sea area. We’d be left with just a small coastline of 450 or 600km, and that’s it!’¹³³ Next to the possibility of being ousted from the Black Sea, the risk of NATO placing ground-based strategic missiles being within striking range was another reason for Putin to defend Russia’s interests on Crimea.

Finally -and according to Putin most importantly- there is the fate of ethnic Russians living in Crimea. Since the invasion of Georgia, Russia has often claimed to regard the safety of Russophones abroad as a high priority. In the case of Crimea, this was no different. Many involved with the protests at Maidan were accused of having resorted

¹²⁹ Putin, ‘Address by President’, pp. 10.

¹³⁰ Ibid, pp. 12.

¹³¹ Putin, ‘Meeting with heads, pp. 14.

¹³² Putin, ‘Presidential Address’, pp. 4-5.

¹³³ Putin, ‘Direct Line’, pp. 39.

to 'terror, murder and riots'. Nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites were all involved in the coup according to Putin.¹³⁴ On top of this, the interim government's idea to revise Ukraine's language policy in a manner which was considered damaging to Russophones further contributed to the idea that ethnic Russians abroad were in danger.¹³⁵ In Putin's eyes, this situation forced Russia to act: 'We clearly had no right to abandon the residents of Crimea and Sevastopol to the mercy of nationalists and radical militants; we could not allow our access to the Black Sea to be significantly limited; we could not allow NATO forces to eventually come to the land of Crimea and Sevastopol, the land of Russian military glory, and cardinaly change the balance of forces in the Black Sea area.'¹³⁶ 'It was the interests of our country and people that demanded that we make an adequate response to primitive and unprofessional attempts to act against our interests using force, and our partners should have taken this into consideration earlier.'¹³⁷

3- Sending a message

The third and final idea that can be derived from the sources is the notion that Russia wanted to 'send a message' with its annexation of Crimea. Following the referendum that resulted in Crimea's accession to Russia, Putin made several statements that indicate this idea. The metaphorical spring snapped: 'There are certain red lines that we can't allow to be crossed. Ukraine and Crimea are such a red line.'¹³⁸ '[The West] decided they were the winners, they were an empire, while all others were their vassals, and they needed to put the squeeze on them. [...] I believe that our tough stand on certain critical situations, including that in the Ukraine, should send a message to our partners.'¹³⁹ In the context of all the aforementioned ideas and factors, Putin brings up an analogy of a bear protecting its taiga that (although he states he is referring to nuclear deterrence) serves as representation of his thoughts on this issue: 'Sometimes I think that maybe it would be best if our bear just sat still. Maybe he should stop chasing pigs and boars around the

¹³⁴ Putin, 'Address by President', pp. 5

¹³⁵ Ibid, pp. 5.

¹³⁶ Putin, 'Conference of Russian Ambassadors', pp. 2

¹³⁷ Putin, 'Meeting with heads, pp. 18

¹³⁸ Ibid, pp. 16

¹³⁹ Putin, 'News Conference', pp. 11

taiga but start picking berries and eating honey. Maybe then he will be left alone. But no, he won't be! Because someone will always try to chain him up. As soon as he's chained they will tear out his teeth and claws. [...] And then, when all the teeth and claws are torn out, the bear will be of no use at all. Perhaps they'll stuff it and that's all. So, it's not about Crimea, but about us protecting our independence, our sovereignty and our right to exist. That is what we should all realize.'¹⁴⁰

Findings and Conclusions

This fourth and final section of this chapter presents the findings and conclusions of the analytical aspect of this thesis. It does so by following the final step of Lock's approach to strategic culture analysis, which revolves around examining how the aforementioned ideas might shape strategic decisions. After presenting the findings of the empirical research, these findings will be compared to those of the authors discussed in chapter three, putting the contributions of this thesis into perspective.

Based on past experiences of the West's involvement in Ukraine, as well as his inability to trust his Western partners, Putin perceived the protests on Maidan Nezalezhnosti that took place in Kyiv following Yanukovych's refusal to sign the EU-association agreement as a Western-instigated coup d'état, the goal of which was to disrupt relations between Ukraine and Russia in order to weaken the Russian state so it could be split apart.¹⁴¹ Putin acknowledges that amongst these protestors there were definitely Ukrainians with rightful grievances and an intent to protest peacefully, but he firmly believes that the West placed 'well trained agents' amongst those protestors whose foreign sponsors were out to plunge the country into hysteria.¹⁴² Whilst keeping a close eye on the situation as it escalated, an agreement was signed by Yanukovych on the 21st of February, under the presence of foreign ministers from Poland, France and Germany. This agreement, which would have solved the situation in the eyes of Russia and Ukraine, was nullified a day later, after which the opposition 'renewed its attacks' and finally accomplished its coup d'état.¹⁴³ After denouncing the interim government and president Turchynov as illegitimate, the sources suggest that Putin began considering the possibility of annexing Crimea.

¹⁴⁰ Putin, 'News Conference', pp. 14-15

¹⁴¹ Putin, 'Direct Line', pp. 32.

¹⁴² Putin, 'Address by President', pp. 5-6.

¹⁴³ Putin, 'Direct Line', pp. 18.

The interim government's early talks regarding the possibility of Ukraine joining the NATO and EU further enforced Putin's idea that the West was involved in the regime change in Ukraine. At the same time, he realized that Russia's national interests were at stake in multiple ways. First of all, the historical and cultural bond between Russia and Ukraine, and in particular, between Russia and the 'legendary hero city' of Sevastopol. The presence of Western troops, let alone NATO troops, would have surely resulted in a loss of face for Putin, as well as the whole situation being an insult to Russia itself. Apart from these cultural and historical ties, NATO access to Sevastopol would also have military and strategic implications. It could mean that Russia would lose access to Sevastopol's naval base, where they house their Black Sea fleet. On top of this, it could result in Russia effectively being ousted from the Black Sea, which would reduce their ability to project force in the region. Furthermore, the placement of U.S. ground-based missile systems would be sure to follow. These concerns could apparently not be voiced, as it was 'obvious' to Putin that there was no 'legitimate executive authority in Ukraine [...] nobody to talk to.'¹⁴⁴ Because of these stakes and with seemingly no diplomatic way to discuss them, an important question had arisen: 'Are we ready to consistently defend our national interests, or will we forever give in, retreat to who knows where?'¹⁴⁵

This sketches an image of the situation whereby Putin had no pre-existing plans to annex Crimea, but rather acted on the spot due to external pressures. This is something he has claimed multiple times, and based on the sources, it seems plausible: 'We never even thought of annexing Crimea. [...] We never had any such plans.'¹⁴⁶ Rather, Putin claims that his ambition to integrate within the post-Soviet space revolved around the Eurasian union (which came into force in 2015).¹⁴⁷ Under the pretense of protecting the ethnic Russians abroad -like with the Georgian war- Russia sent troops into Crimea, in order to establish safe conditions under which a referendum was held. During this referendum, people supposedly voted overwhelmingly for accession to Russia, and Crimea formally became part of Russia on the 18th of March 2014, reverting the historic injustice that occurred after the fall of the USSR. This event placed Ukraine in a situation of frozen conflict, thereby halting the eastward advance of NATO. It secured Russia's

¹⁴⁴ Putin, 'Address by President', pp. 6.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, pp. 13.

¹⁴⁶ Putin, 'Meeting with heads, pp. 23.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 23.

interests and Russia's tough stance on the issue sent a message to the West. Don't push the spring, it'll snap back at you.

When comparing the findings of this thesis with the findings of other authors featured in both the literature review and the section regarding previous writings on Russian Strategic Culture, the following conclusions can be drawn. First and foremost, this thesis supports the notion that the annexation of Crimea was an act of opportunism. Throughout the analyzed source material, this notion became clear from both Putin's direct comments on the matter, as well as the context in which these comments were conceived. Secondly, like Studzińska and Skak conclude, the analysis suggests that Putin did indeed perceive the Euromaidan protests and the subsequent Ukrainian revolution as a Western-instigated plot to weaken and ultimately divide Russia. However, unlike Skak who concludes that Putin feared that Euromaidan would have a spillover-effect (like the 2003 and 2004 color revolutions) which would destabilize Russia, this thesis found no direct evidence that this was the case. Thirdly, Tsygankov's article which discusses Russia's fear of NATO seems spot-on. The analysis of this chapter frequently commented on Russia's problematic relation with NATO, its distrust towards the alliance and its regard for NATO as nothing but an extension of Western expansionism. Finally, this thesis supports Bateman's conclusions regarding Russia's obsession with territorial integrity. Although the findings this thesis were reached through a different approach and focus, analysis of the source material sketched an image of Putin's fear that Russian integrity would fail due to Western influence, much like the West has done with Yugoslavia in Putin's eyes.

Conclusion

According to the findings of this thesis, Russia's annexation of Crimea was driven by a multitude of external factors which placed Putin in a tough situation, forcing him to make a difficult decision. Putin seems to have perceived the Euromaidan protests as a Western-instigated coup with the goal of undermining, weakening and ultimately dividing Russia. Several crucial ideas regarding the role Crimea plays when it comes to Russian security, as well as historical and cultural ties, have likely influenced Putin's decision to annex the peninsula. These ideas primarily revolve around the threats produced by the ever-approaching NATO -regarded by Putin strictly as a military alliance- as well as the prospect of Russian access to Sevastopol's naval base being lost were Ukraine to succeed to NATO. This seemingly resulted in Putin feeling pressured to annex Crimea; it was a 'now or never' situation in many regards. Under the pretense of protecting ethnic Russians abroad, a highly dubious referendum was held, and Crimea was formally annexed on the 18th of March 2014.

The findings of this thesis support claims made by several of the featured authors. For example, Gill and Treisman's perception of Crimea's annexation as an act of opportunism, rather than being part of a lengthy Russian campaign to restore geostrategic losses suffered under the collapse of the Soviet Union, is supported by the findings of this thesis. Likewise, Tsygankov's findings regarding the role of NATO and Russia's fear towards it is another element which was strongly present in the empirical section of this thesis. Some of the previous writings on Russian strategic culture were also partially verified and complemented. Bateman's comments on Russia's size and the obsession with state integrity, as well as Skak's conclusion regarding the perception of Western influence were also verified by this research. However, this thesis found no concrete indication that Putin seems to fear a 'domino theory' of color revolutions spreading from post-Soviet states into the Russian state.

Naturally, just because this research did not come to a certain conclusion does not mean that other theories aren't correct. After all, this research isn't without its shortcomings and limitations either. The 15.000-word limit imposed on this thesis meant that the implementation of a wider timeframe, as well as a comparative element could not be realized. This is regrettable, because comparing the annexation of Crimea to, for example, the invasion of Georgia, would have allowed to implement the second step of Lock's approach to SCA. This second step, the tracing of ideas for change over time, might

have contributed to a more complete analysis of Russian strategic culture. To that end, this thesis would like to suggest such research being carried out in the future, in order to further contribute to the understanding of Russia's annexation of Crimea in general, and Russian strategic culture studies in particular. Such future research could potentially also expand upon the number of individuals analyzed, possibly including prominent individuals such as Sergey Lavrov and Vladislav Surkov.

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