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Master's Thesis

***Russian Foreign Policy through a Neoclassical Realist lens:
the complete image?***

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Introduction

In 2013, Ukrainian president Yanukovich suspended preparations to sign an association agreement with the European Union and embarked on a more pro-Russian policy path. Ukraine enhanced its ties with the Kremlin by pursuing loans from Russia.¹ These developments contributed to the Maidan-revolution, in which the pro-Russia president Yanukovich was ousted from power and exiled into Russia.² Moscow denounced the events as an illegitimate coup and at the same time, Russian troops seized Crimea, a peninsula in the Black Sea, in a near bloodless military takeover.³ In March 2014, the Russian parliament approved President Putin's request to invade Ukraine. Subsequently, Russian forces tightened their grip on Crimea and caused instability in the eastern regions of Ukraine.⁴ After a referendum -held solely under Crimean people- the Russian Federation annexed the Crimean peninsula.⁵ In the aftermath of these events, commentators compared contemporary Russian foreign policy to the days of the Cold War, as the land-grabbing and expansion of the Russian sphere of influence reminded of the second half of 20th century.⁶

In 2011, civil unrest in the Syrian Arab Republic inspired by the so-called Arab Spring spiralled into the Syrian civil war. This multi-sided conflict has been ongoing since 2011 and is predominantly fought between the Ba'athist regime of President Bashar al-Assad and various (combinations of) opposition groups, most notably the Free Syrian Army, the Syrian Democratic Forces, and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant - and the international actors supporting them.⁷ Russia supported the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad politically and with military aid since the dawn of the conflict. Russia vetoed draft resolutions in the United Nations Security Council that demanded the resignation of president Assad.⁸ Moreover, in

¹ Richard Balmforth, "Kiev protesters gather, EU dangles aid promise," *Reuters*, December 12, 2013, accessed February 9, 2020, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-idUSBRE9BA04420131212>

² Gabriela Baczyńska, Pavel Polityuk and Raissa Kasolowsky, "Timeline: Political crisis in Ukraine and Russia's occupation of Crimea," *Reuters*, March 8, 2014, accessed February 14, 2020, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-timeline-idUSBREA270PO20140308>; Zvi Magen, Pnina Sharvit Baruch and Olena Bagno-Moldavsky, "The Annexation of Crimea: International Ramifications," *Institute for National Security Studies*, March 24, 2014, accessed February 14, 2020, <http://www.inss.org.il/publication/the-annexation-of-crimea-international-ramifications/>

³ Gabriela Baczyńska, Pavel Polityuk and Raissa Kasolowsky, "Timeline: Political crisis in Ukraine and Russia's occupation of Crimea," *Reuters*, March 8, 2014, accessed February 14, 2020, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-timeline-idUSBREA270PO20140308>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Haroon Siddique and Alan Yuhas, "Putin signs treaty to annex Crimea as Ukraine authorises use of force," *The Guardian*, March 18, 2014, accessed June February 16, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/18/ukraine-crisis-putin-plan-crimea-annex-speech-russia-live>; Lukas Harding and Shaun Walker, "Crimea applies to be part of Russian Federation after vote to leave Ukraine," *The Guardian*, March 17, 2014, accessed November 16, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/17/ukraine-crimea-russia-referendum-complain-result>; No author, "Crimea referendum: Voters 'back to Russia union'," *BBC*, March 16, 2014, accessed February 12, 2020, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26606097>

⁶ Jonathan Marcus, "Russia v the West: Is this a new Cold War?" *BBC*, April 1, 2018, accessed December 14, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43581449>

⁷ No author, "Syria's civil war explained from the beginning," *Al Jazeera*, April 14, 2018, accessed March 31, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html>

⁸ Julian Borger and Bastien Inzaurre, "Russian vetoes are putting UN security council's legitimacy at risk, says US," *The Guardian*, September 23, 2015, accessed March 31, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/23/russian-vetoes-putting-un-security-council-legitimacy-at-risk-says-us>

September 2015, the Federation Council, the upper house of the Russian Federal Assembly, approved a request by president Putin to launch air strikes in Syria. This was the beginning of overt Russian military involvement in the Syrian Civil war, as per requested by the Syrian regime ‘in order to combat rebel and jihadist groups’.⁹ It marked the beginning of the first armed conflict outside the borders of the former Soviet Union that Russia entered since the end of the Cold War on its own account.¹⁰

Both instances of Russian foreign policy have been significant, with considerable domestic, regional and international consequences. This alone makes it worthwhile to thoroughly study these two cases. Moreover, many Western leaders appeared shocked when Russia militarily intervened to achieve foreign policy objectives.¹¹ This reaction could stem from the assumption that norms and laws are gaining stronger international relevancy, and the logic of realism holds little relevance in the 21st century.¹² Russia’s military engagement was perceived as the embodiment of an antiquated approach to international relations. The US Secretary of State John Kerry stated in 2014 ‘‘You just don’t, in the 21st century, behave in 19th century fashion by invading another country on completely trumped up pre-text.’’¹³ Russia indeed militarily engaged in Ukraine and Syria, which unsurprisingly and deservedly received the bulk of the attention. Nevertheless, it is not the only instrument Russia employed to achieve its foreign policy objectives, and this study aims to shed light on this.

This study acknowledges that there have been other analyses of Russian foreign policy by academics such as Andrei Tsygankov, Elias Götz, Talal Nizameddin, William Wohlforth, Lyudmila Igumnova, Brandon Friedman and John Mearsheimer.¹⁴ These studies offer significant insights into the causes of contemporary Russian foreign policy and will be consulted throughout this study. Nevertheless, they often either emphasize factors internal to

⁹ Shaun Walker, ‘‘Russian Parliament grants Vladimir Putin right to deploy military in Syria,’’ *The Guardian*, September 30, 2015, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/30/russian-parliament-grants-vladimir-putin-right-to-deploy-military-in-syria>.; No author, ‘‘Russia joins war in Syria: five key points,’’ *BBC News*, October 1, 2015, accessed March 30, 2019 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34416519>.

¹⁰ Maria Tsvetkova and Anton Zverev, ‘‘Ghost soldiers: the Russians secretly dying for the Kremlin in Syria,’’ *Reuters*, November 3, 2016, accessed March 31, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-insight-idUSKBN12Y0M6>.

¹¹ Peter Baker, ‘‘Pressure Rising as Obama Works to Rein in Russia,’’ *The New York Times*, March 2, 2014, accessed February 27, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/03/world/europe/pressure-rising-as-obama-works-to-rein-in-russia.html?_r=0.

¹² Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, ‘‘Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens,’’ *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 112-133.; John Mearsheimer, ‘‘Why the Ukraine crisis is the West’s fault: the liberal delusions that provoked Putin,’’ *Foreign Affairs*, 93, (2014): 78.

¹³ Will Dunham, ‘‘Kerry condemns Russia incredible act of aggression in Ukraine,’’ *Reuters*, March 2, 2014, accessed February 21, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-usa-kerry-idUSBREA210DG20140302>.

¹⁴ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity and national identity*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019); Elias Götz, ‘‘Neorealism and Russia’s Ukraine policy, 1991-present,’’ *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): 301-323.; Talal Nizameddin, *Putin’s New Order in the Middle East*, (London: Hurst, 2013), 1-358.; William Wohlforth, ‘‘The Russian-Soviet Empire: A Test of Neorealism,’’ *Review of International Studies* 27, no.5 (2001): 213-235.; Lyudmila Igumnova, ‘‘Russia’s strategic culture between American and European Worldviews,’’ *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 24, no. 2 (2011): 253-273.; Brandon Friedman, ‘‘Putin’s Russia in the Middle East,’’ *Bustan, The Middle East Book Review* 6, no. 2 (2015): 92-119.; John Mearsheimer, ‘‘Why the Ukraine crisis is the West’s fault: the liberal delusions that provoked Putin,’’ *Foreign Affairs*, 93, (2014): 77-89.

Russia, such as Putin's worldviews and Russian identity, or pinpoint geopolitical factors as the drivers of Russian behaviour.¹⁵ What sets this study apart is that it reviews Russian foreign policy regarding Ukraine and Syria through a neoclassical realist lens. Neoclassical realism has been the latest addition to the realist paradigm, one of the major theories of the academic field of international relations.¹⁶

Classical realism emphasizes a state's internal factors to explain foreign policy, whereas neorealism effectively turns the state into a 'black box' and argues that systemic incentives are the primary cause for a state's foreign policy.¹⁷ There are examples of neorealists, such as Mearsheimer, who've elaborated on domestic factors such as military and economic power, but this predominantly pertains to the execution of foreign policy, and not the formation of it.¹⁸ Neoclassical realism argues that the scope and ambition of a state's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by the state's relative power (a system-level variable).¹⁹ However, the impact of these power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex as these capabilities are filtered through domestic variables (unit-level factors).²⁰ The theory incorporates both, something previous realist approaches refrained from.²¹ Furthermore, the theory incorporates subjective and normative elements into the analysis of foreign policy instruments, and claims it offers a broader image of the foreign policy toolkit.

As this thesis aims to review Russian foreign policy vis-à-vis Ukraine and Syria through neoclassical realist lens, it is different from previous analyses of Russian foreign policy. With regard to the formation phase, both systemic and unit-level factors will be incorporated in the research. With regard to the execution phase, which focuses on the modus operandi of a state's foreign policy, the focus will be on the instruments used by Russia vis-à-vis Ukraine and Syria. The main research question of this study therefore is: *To what extent can neoclassical realism explain the causes and course of Russian foreign policy regarding Ukraine and Syria between 2012 and 2016?*

¹⁵ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity and national identity*, (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019); Elias Götz, "Neorealism and Russia's Ukraine policy, 1991-present," *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): 301.; John Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault: the liberal delusions that provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, 93, (2014): 80.; Allen C. Lynch, "The Realism of Russia's Foreign Policy," *Europe-Asia Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2001): 7-31.; Derek Averre, "From Pristina to Tshkinvali: the legacy of Operation Allied Force in Russia's relations with the West," *International Affairs* 85, no. 3 (2009): 575-592.; Richard Sakwa, "New Cold war' or twenty years' crisis? Russia and international politics," *International Affairs*, 84, no. 2 (March 2008): 241-267.

¹⁶ Steve Smith, "Introduction: Diversity and Disciplinarity in International Relations Theory," in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 4.

¹⁷ Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith, *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 78.

¹⁸ John Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault: the liberal delusions that provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, 93, (2014): 85.

¹⁹ Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (October 1998): 144-177.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism, the state and foreign policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4-21.

Thomas Juneau, a proponent of neoclassical realism, explains the formation of foreign policy on the basis of three elements with an underlying causal logic; relative power → domestic variables → foreign policy.²² This causal chain, which will be discussed more elaborately in the theoretical framework, is the basis for the first two sub-questions.

The first sub-question focuses on Russia's relative power at the time of Putin's return to presidency in 2012, which is the first element in the causal chain of foreign policy. The first sub-question is: *To what extent is neoclassical realism able to account for the effect of Russia's relative power on its foreign policy, when Putin returned to presidency in 2012?* The theory posits seven indicators for a state's relative power, which will be more elaborately discussed in the theoretical framework. A power analysis of Russia in 2012 will be provided, and the effect on its foreign policy will be measured on the basis of a hypothesis which will be discussed in the theoretical framework.

After the review of Russia's relative power, it is imperative to analyse Russia's domestic filters, as this is the key innovation of neoclassical realism. Juneau proposes three domestic factors, namely a state's status, its regime identity and factional politics.²³ The second sub-question is: *To what extent is neoclassical realism able to explain the effect the domestic variables have on Russian foreign policy?* A hypothesis put forward by Colin Dueck claims that the domestic arena is not a primary cause of an intervention, but is highly influential with regard to its form.²⁴ This hypothesis will be explored more in the theoretical framework but is fundamental for this section, as it offers guidance for the analysis of the effect the domestic factors have on the exact form of foreign policy. This is significant to review, as at first glance, the interventions in Ukraine and Syria differ. The Ukrainian case study seems to be more significant for Russia, as it required longer and heavier engagement of its forces, received tougher international backlash yet generated more attention and higher praise in Russia's domestic arena.²⁵ Could this difference stem from Russia's domestic arena?

The second phase of foreign policy, the execution phase, will be reviewed in the third

²² Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 35-54.

²³ Ibid, 17.

²⁴ Colin Dueck, 'Neoclassical Realism and the national interests: presidents, domestic politics, and major military interventions,' in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 139-170.

²⁵ Jon Swaine, 'Obama's marathon Putin Ukraine call: candid, direct but no meeting of minds,' *The Guardian*, March 2, 2014, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/02/obama-putin-phone-call-ukraine-russia-crimea>.; No author, 'EU's Barroso warns Putin against military action in Ukraine,' *Reuters*, August 11, 2014, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-barroso/eus-barroso-warns-putin-against-military-action-in-ukraine-idUSKBN0GB1I820140811>.; Tony Paterson, Peter Foster, and Bruno Waterfield, 'Angela Merkel: Russia 'will not get away' with annexation of Crimea,' *The Telegraph*, March 12, 2014, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ukraine/10693400/Angela-Merkel-Russia-will-not-get-away-with-annexation-of-Crimea.html>.; Alberto Nardelli, Jennifer Rankin and George Arnett, 'Vladimir Putin's approval rating at record levels,' *The Guardian*, July 23, 2015, accessed May 26, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/datablog/2015/jul/23/vladimir-putins-approval-rating-at-record-levels>.

section. Neoclassical realism claims it allows for a broader study of the foreign policy toolkit, as it not only reviews traditional usages of military, but also takes into account more indirect means of exercising state power.²⁶ These indirect means are subjective and normative instruments such as the use of discourse, norms and selective use of international law. The analysis of the foreign policy toolkit used by Russia through a neoclassical realist lens, should yield an answer to the third sub-question, namely: *To what extent does neoclassical realism offer a broader image of Russia's foreign policy toolkit?* This section will entail a comparative element, as this section aims to clarify whether or not the neoclassical realist lens yields a broader image of foreign policy than traditional realist analyses.

The analyses consist of the examination of military events, analyses of leadership rhetoric and historical events. In light of both cases, the expanded interpretation of realist theory -i.e. neoclassical realism- is used to analyse the causes of Russian foreign policy, as well as instruments employed by Russia to advance its geopolitical interest abroad. An elaborate description of this thesis' modus operandi will be given in the methodology section.

Neoclassical realism's dependent variable is foreign policy. Therefore it is logical that foreign policy is the subject of this study. The choice has been made for Russian foreign policy as there have been multiple analyses of Russian foreign policy, and they often conclude that Russia operates on realist tenets.²⁷ These analyses often do not incorporate systems-level and unit-level variables, which this study aims to do and therefore could shed new light on Russia's foreign policy.

In addition, neoclassical realism claims it can account for contemporary foreign policy puzzles, and not only produces sweeping historical accounts of foreign policy. This narrows the scope of possible subjects down to the post-Soviet Russian Federation era. As military interventions are often perceived as the *ultima ratio* of foreign policy, case studies in which Russia was militarily intervened stood out. There are 12 cases that fit the description of taking place after 1991 and in which Russia has been overtly militarily involved, namely; the Georgian civil war in the early nineties, the war in Abkhazia, the Transnistria-war, the Ossetian-Ingush conflict, the Tajikistani civil war, both conflicts in Chechnya, the war in Dagestan, the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, the insurgency in the North Caucasus, Ukraine and the Syrian civil war. The military interventions in Ukraine and Syria are the subject of this thesis as they are both

²⁶ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, "Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens," *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 112-133

²⁷ Allen C. Lynch, "The Realism of Russia's Foreign Policy," *Europe-Asia Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2001): 7-31.; Derek Averre, "From Pristina to Tshkinvali: the legacy of Operation Allied Force in Russia's relations with the West," *International affairs* 85, no. 3 (2009): 575-592.; Richard Sakwa, "New Cold war' or twenty years' crisis? Russia and international politics," *International Affairs*, 84, no. 2 (March 2008): 241-267.

case studies that fit the timeframe and specifics previously mentioned, yet have different empirical characteristics in terms of geography and international repercussions. The Ukrainian case study has been chosen as it takes place outside the borders of the Russian federation, in contrast to several of the other aforementioned conflicts, and sparked reactions from multiple world leaders on Russian behaviour.²⁸ The military intervention in Syria on the other hand is interesting because it is the only conflict of these twelve which takes place beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union. Neoclassical realism claims it is able to account for differences in foreign policy and due to these differences, it is interesting to review both case studies.

The specific timeframe that will be reviewed starts at May 7 2012, the day Vladimir Putin was installed as president of the Russian Federation for his third term, until March 2016, encompassing roughly four years. The crisis in Ukraine is ongoing until this day. The more this thesis will go into ‘yesterday’s history’, the harder it is to gather credible evidence from proven sources. The timeframe until March 2016 predominantly stems from the Syrian case study, as president Putin stated in March 2016 that Russia’s military mission in Syria was largely accomplished and ‘the main part’ of Russia’s forces in Syria were to be withdrawn from Syria.²⁹ This offered a natural end of the timeframe. It should be acknowledged that certain elements of this study require a deviation from the timeframe, as significant developments prior to 2012 occurred, and should not be excluded due to their significance. One example of this concerns a state’s regime identity, which simply requires historical context.

Analysing Russian foreign policy through a neoclassical realist lens will have a twofold merit. Firstly, neoclassical realism claims it is able to provide a solid understanding of foreign policy in general. Therefore, if neoclassical indeed is able to do this, this study could give the reader a comprehensive overview of why and how Russian foreign policy came into being and which foreign policy instruments were used regarding Ukraine and Syria. Furthermore, the theory suggest it can account for differences in foreign policy, which in light of these case studies is noteworthy as well. Secondly, neoclassical realism has contributed to the realist paradigm yet remains underexplored in contemporary analyses.³⁰ An increasing number of scholars have recognised the insufficiency of systems-only explanations in international politics

²⁸ Jon Swaine, ‘Obama’s marathon Putin Ukraine call: candid, direct but no meeting of minds,’ *The Guardian*, March 2, 2014, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/02/obama-putin-phone-call-ukraine-russia-crimea>; No author, ‘EU’s Barroso warns Putin against military action in Ukraine,’ *Reuters*, August 11, 2014, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-barroso/eus-barroso-warns-putin-against-military-action-in-ukraine-idUSKBN0GB1I820140811>; Tony Paterson, Peter Foster and Bruno Waterfield, ‘Angela Merkel: Russia ‘will not get away’ with annexation of Crimea,’ *The Telegraph*, March 12, 2014, accessed May 21, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ukraine/10693400/Angela-Merkel-Russia-will-not-get-away-with-annexation-of-Crimea.html>;

²⁹ No author, ‘Syria conflict: Russia’s Putin orders ‘main part’ of forces out,’ *BBC News*, March 14, 2016, accessed May 24, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35807689>

³⁰ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, ‘Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens,’ *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 112-133.

and opted to combine systemic and unit-level variables under the theoretical umbrella of 'neoclassical realism'.³¹ Nevertheless, the theory remains scarcely applied to contemporary foreign policy decisions.³² The theory's academic relevance might improve by studying contemporary foreign policy case studies through a neoclassical realist as they could provide tangible empiric evidence for the theory's claims.

Furthermore, with regard to this thesis' societal relevance, Russia's contemporary Ukraine policy is often assessed as at least some version of realist, by academics and think-tank analysts alike.³³ However, there seems to be less research on the subject of Russian foreign policy regarding Syria from this angle. Moreover, there is little academic work on Russia's Ukraine or Syria policy from a neoclassical realist perspective. When the neoclassical realist lens produces a comprehensive understanding of Russian foreign policy, the societal gain is that not only academics but even more so analysts and policymakers can develop a better understanding of Russia's foreign policy toolkit, as well as possible future causes for Russian foreign policy.

In order to answer the research question, an elaborate overview of neoclassical realism will be outlined in the theoretical framework. This section will include the theory's foundation, its specific characteristics, and the theory's perspective on the shortcomings of other realist/IR approaches. Other theories might offers significant insights and these will be discussed. However, as this thesis' aim is not to compare the applicability of IR theories, but to delve in deeper in neoclassical realism, these theories will be covered briefly. Subsequently, criticism on neoclassical realism will be outlined, as well the theory's counter-arguments. Subsequently, the theory's perspective on the formation and execution of foreign policy will be clarified, in which the hypotheses of this study will be covered as well. The next section covers the chosen methodology, data collection, and conceptualizations of key concepts will be presented.

This study then proceeds by analysing Russian foreign policy through the neoclassical realist lens. The first section aims to account for the effect Russia's relative power had on its foreign policy. The subsequent section will review the unit-level variables and their effect on Russia's foreign policy. The third analysis section will predominantly focus on the foreign policy instruments Russia used vis-à-vis Ukraine and Syria.

The combined result of these sections should offer a comprehensive answer to the main

³¹ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, "Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens," *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 113.; Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism, the state and foreign policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 10.

³² Nicholas Kitchen, "Systemic pressures and domestic ideas: a neoclassical realist model of grand strategy formation," *Review of international studies* 36, no. 1 (2010): 118.

³³ Elias Götz, "Neorealism and Russia's Ukraine policy, 1991-present," *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (2016): 301-323.

research question of to what extent neoclassical realism is able to showcase why and how Russian foreign policy took shape with regard to Ukraine and Syria. The final section will present this study's conclusions, as well as new avenues for future academic research.

Theoretical framework

This section is divided into three sub-sections. The first sub-section covers neoclassical realism in general, including its core assumptions, its theoretical characteristics and how it differs from other forms of realism. This sub-section draws heavily on *Neoclassical Realism, the state and foreign policy*, edited by Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, as it is one of the cornerstones of the neoclassical realist theory. Thereafter, the main criticisms on neoclassical realism are showcased, as well as neoclassical realist arguments to negate them. The last part of this section will provide an overview of the insights of other IR theories into foreign policy, and will provide a justification for the choice for neoclassical realism instead of other IR theories.

The second sub-section will clarify the theory's perspective on the formation of foreign policy. Thomas Juneau's work on Iranian foreign policy will feature as it presents a specific way of conducting research into the formation of foreign policy in accordance with neoclassical realist principles.

Subsequently, in the third and last part of this section, a detailed account of studying the foreign policy toolkit will be elaborated upon, inspired by the work of Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus. They present a certain range of strategies that can be used in foreign policy which fall under the scope of neoclassical realism, ranging from military strategies to the strategic use of discourse.

Neoclassical realism and its theoretical cradle

Since the dawn of the IR academic field, all forms of realism have been paramount in theoretical debates.³⁴ Although realism endured some reputational loss as it struggled to adequately explain the dissolution of the USSR, the theoretical debate on international relations in the 1980's and 90's remained dominated by proponents of neorealism and their various critics.³⁵ That claim was made by Rose, who coined the term neoclassical realism in 1998, in his article *Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign policy*, which is the bedrock of neoclassical realist theory.³⁶

In order to grasp the essence of neoclassical realism, one needs to have a general understanding of classical realism and neorealism beforehand. To that end, classical realism and neorealism will be described firstly, in order to elaborate on neoclassical realism

³⁴ Steve Smith, "Introduction: Diversity and Disciplinarity in International Relations Theory," in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 4.

³⁵ Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and its critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); Barry Buzan et al., *The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); and David A. Baldwin, ed., *Neorealism and Neoliberalism: the Contemporary Debate* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

³⁶ Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and theories of Foreign policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 144-172.

afterwards. A schematic overview of where the theories converge and diverge will be included at the end.

Classical realism, neorealism, and neoclassical realism

Realism is first and foremost a philosophical position, dating back to the writing of Thucydides and Sun Tzu in the fifth century BCE.³⁷ What unites all proponents of this philosophical position is a profoundly pessimistic view of the human condition, a rejection of teleological concepts of politics (meaning that politics -whether within a state or between them- does not have to result in some pre-ordained end or higher purpose), and ethics and morality are products of power and material interests, and not the other way around.³⁸

Realism has, debatably, three core assumptions.³⁹ Firstly, human beings are not fit to survive as individuals, but rather as members of larger groups. Therefore, political and social life are based on tribalism, as groups can provide a certain degree of security. Consequently, all variants of realism are group-centric. This translates into the fact that contemporary realism's main actors are states. The second assumption is that politics is a perpetual struggle between self-interested groups, under conditions of scarcity of material and uncertainty about the other's intention. The third assumption is that power is a necessity for any group trying to secure its goals.⁴⁰ Although there is grave disagreement among proponents of realism on numerous aspects, the above-mentioned principles enable scholars to speak of a coherent tradition that encompasses the likes of Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Carl von Clausewitz, Winston S. Churchill, Kenneth Waltz, and John Mearsheimer.⁴¹

Classical realism predominantly focuses on the sources and uses of national power in international politics, and the issues political leaders encounter whilst conducting foreign policy. This leads to a body of research fixated on the character of states, as well as the power distribution among states. These studies, predominantly conducted in the twentieth century, offered philosophical reflections on statesmanship or created inductive theories of foreign policy. Moreover, what is now called classical realism, was never really a coherent research program, but rather an enormous bundle of texts written over the course of 2500 years. Most classical realists were not even social scientists, and did not stick to the commonly accepted methodological standards of social science.⁴² Nevertheless, extensive works have been written

³⁷ Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism, the state and foreign policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 14.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 14-15.

⁴¹ Ibid, 16.

⁴² Ibid.

on the state by for example Morgenthau, Kissinger and Wolfers. A significant characteristic of classical realism is that it focuses on relative power distribution among states, but refrains from elaborating on the effect the international system has on foreign policy. This is where classical realism differs significantly from neorealism and neoclassical realism, as both these theories emphasize the effect of the international system on foreign policy.⁴³

In addition, a significant schism between classical realism and neorealism is illustrated by the answer to the simple yet significant question ‘why do states want power?’ A classical realist’s answer like Morgenthau would be human nature, as according to the classical realism, virtually everyone is born with a will to power hardwired into them.⁴⁴ States are led by individuals who have this hunger for power. Following this logic, the answer therefore lies in a state’s characteristics.⁴⁵

Contrastingly, according to neorealists, the answer to that question lies in the structure of the international system and human nature has little to do with it. This deductive theory, sometimes called structural realism, argues that international politics takes place in an anarchic system, meaning that there is no centralized authority that presides over states.⁴⁶ This compels states to pursue power in order to survive, as there is no independent governing institute. Neorealists believe that states pursue power regardless of its characteristics, as the system creates the same pressures, possibilities and basic incentives for all states. It matters relatively little for a state’s foreign policy whether a state is democratic or autocratic, or whether a state’s foreign policy is made by an extensive foreign policy decision-making apparatus or is virtually decided upon by one leader. The incentives produced by the international structure determine foreign policy, as the theory steers clear from taking a state’s internal characteristics into account. Neorealism turns its main actors, states, in effect into ‘black boxes’.⁴⁷

Neorealism is geared towards explaining common patterns of international behaviour over time, defined as likely outcomes of the interaction between states. This leads to a body of research predominantly occupied with the rather big questions of international politics such as: ‘why do wars occur?’, ‘why is cooperation difficult?’, and ‘why do states balance against powerful states?’. These questions are addressed in a scientific manner, with the research program embracing a positivist methodological position in an attempt to remedy classical

⁴³ Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism, the state and foreign policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 16.

⁴⁴ Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith, *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 77.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism, the state and foreign policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 17.

⁴⁷ Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith, *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 78.

realism's lack of scientific methods.

One of neorealism's most prominent products is the balance of power theory, created by Waltz. As it is of importance to neoclassical realism, it is briefly summarized below. Waltz created a deductive theory to explain the patterns of international politics over time. He argues that balances of power structurally develop over time in light of the absence of a sustained hegemonic international system. The scholar posits one independent variable, namely the systemic distribution of power as measured by the number of great powers, for example hegemony or bipolarity. The theory puts forward two predictions, namely that across different international systems, balances of power tend to form, and states tend to mirror the success of others. This has two implications, also affecting neoclassical realism. Firstly, states respond to systemic incentives, as not engaging in balancing would lay them open to danger.⁴⁸ Secondly, it assumes that states are able to extract and mobilize domestic resources without domestic restraints. A state's power, and therefore its international influence, is equivalent to its military and economic power.⁴⁹ These generalizations are simplifications of reality, but are important elements of the balance of power theory.⁵⁰

Due to its focus on grand recurring patterns, neorealism is unable to precisely account for how specific states respond to these pressure and possibilities, nor does it aim to.⁵¹ Some neorealists, like Waltz, even rule out the subject of foreign policy from theorization due to its complexity, as they assume that foreign policy is driven by both internal and external factors. Although neorealism does include some general assumptions about the motivations of individual states, it does not contend to explain their behaviour in great detail.⁵² Or as Waltz put it; the theory is unable to explain "why state X made a certain move last Tuesday."⁵³ He argues that theories should only deal with coherent logic of *autonomous realms* and foreign policy, as it is influenced by both internal and external factors, lies outside the realm of theorization. He argues that mere analyses or accounts of foreign policy should be satisfactory.⁵⁴

Others have rejected this perspective, and this is where neoclassical realism becomes significant. Neoclassical realism differs from neorealism in both subject of study and focus. Neoclassical realism is geared towards explaining the foreign policy of a state, which includes

⁴⁸ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove: Waveland, 1979), 188.

⁴⁹ John M. Hobson, *The State and International Relations* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2000), 17-63.

⁵⁰ Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism, the state and foreign policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 17.

⁵¹ Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and theories of Foreign policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 145.; Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 17.

⁵² Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and theories of Foreign policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1(1998): 145.

⁵³ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1979), 121.

⁵⁴ Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and theories of Foreign policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 145.

the likely diplomatic, economic and military response of a particular state to systemic incentives. It seeks to explain variation in foreign policy of the same state over time or across different states by taking into account both systemic and domestic factors.⁵⁵

In line with neorealism, neoclassical realism emphasizes systemic influences. Yet it also explicitly incorporates a state's internal factors, thereby remedying classical realism's refrainment from the influences of the international structure.⁵⁶ The theory has been dubbed a witches' brew of systemic and unit-level factors, as it combines the system-centred focus of neorealism with classical realism's emphasis on a state's characteristics.⁵⁷ Neoclassical realists believe that the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its power capabilities vis-à-vis other states.⁵⁸ The theory argues that the impact of relative power on foreign policy is indirect and complex because the systemic pressures are affected by intervening variables at the unit level. These factors are for example the decision-makers' perceptions of a state's status, the strength of its state apparatus, its regime identity, and the ability of state leaders to mobilize their nation's human and material resources behind foreign policy decisions.⁵⁹ This intervening element is often referred to as the influence of a 'state's elite'.

Neoclassical realism contributed to the realist paradigm by simultaneously opening up the 'black box' of the state and incorporating domestic variables into foreign policy analyses, without parting with the significance of the systemic incentives. Neoclassical realists draw upon the rigor and theoretical insights of neorealists like Waltz and Gilpin without sacrificing the practical insights about foreign policy and the complexity of statecraft in the classical realism of Morgenthau, Kissinger and Wolfers.⁶⁰

The table below, put forward by Lobell, Ripsman and Taliaferro, illustrates where the different branches of realism overlap and where they differ.

⁵⁵ Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism, the state and foreign policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 21.; Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and theories of Foreign policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 147.

⁵⁶ Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism, the state and foreign policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 17-21.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁸ Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and theories of Foreign policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 146-150.

⁵⁹ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015); Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and theories of Foreign policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 157-61.

⁶⁰ Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism, the state and foreign policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4.

Research Program	Epistemology and methodology	View of the international system	View of the units	Dependent variable	Underlying causal logic
CLASSICAL REALISM	Inductive theories; philosophical reflection on nature of politics or detailed historical analysis (generally drawn from W. European history)	Somewhat important	Differentiated	Foreign policies of states	Power distribution or distribution of interests (revisionist vs. status quo) → foreign policy
NEOREALISM	Deductive theories; competitive hypothesis testing using qualitative and sometimes quantitative methods	Very important; inherently competitive and uncertain	Undifferentiated	International political outcomes	Relative power distributions (independent variable) → international outcomes (dependent variable)
NEOCLASSICAL REALISM	Deductive theorizing; competitive hypothesis testing using qualitative methods	Important; implications of anarchy are variable and sometimes opaque to decision-makers	Differentiated	Foreign policies of states	Relative power distributions (independent variable) → domestic constraints and elite perception (intervening variables) → foreign policy (dependent variable)

Table 1. Classical realism, neorealism, and neoclassical realism.⁶¹

⁶¹ Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism, the state and foreign policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 21.

Neoclassical realism and its critiques

It is important to acknowledge a theory's critics, as any scientific theory should be able to refute these claims in order to firmly establish itself in the realm of IR theories. Neoclassical realism endured criticism, and the most significant are outlined below. This section will also include arguments that according to neoclassical realists should refute the critics' claims.

Firstly, some critics see neoclassical realism as an attempt to smuggle unit-level variables into neorealism's balance of power theory in order to account for certain anomalies. The theory's proponents argue that neoclassical realism is not simply a refinement of Waltz's product, as it is incorrect to state that neoclassical realism and the balance of power theory seek to explain the same variable. Neoclassical realism's dependent variables are foreign policies of a state, whereas neorealism seeks to explain broad patterns of systemic outcomes. A neoclassical realist hypothesis might explain the possible diplomatic, economic and military response of a state (a state's foreign policy), but is unable to account for systemic consequences of those responses.⁶²

Furthermore, some critics focus on the fact that neoclassical realism allegedly violates the systems-focused logic of neorealism as it incorporates unit-level variables. By focusing on non-systemic elements, neoclassical realism is seen by some as an attempt to incorporate elements of liberal and institutionalist theories into neorealism.⁶³ According to Lobell, Ripsman and Taliaferro, this criticism stems from a misreading of the unit-level variables of neoclassical realism in general.⁶⁴ In their view, there is no deductive reason why neoclassical realism should not be able to incorporate unit-level variables whilst simultaneously maintaining the significance of structural variables. This is due to the neoclassical realist concept of the state, which is in line with the realist assumptions on tribalism. Neoclassical realism presents a 'top-down' concept of the state, meaning that systemic incentives ultimately drive external behaviour, yet are filtered through a state's characteristics. According to neoclassical realism, the state is embodied by a national security executive, consisting of the head of government, and the ministers charged with foreign security policy such as the minister of Foreign Affairs and minister of Defence.⁶⁵ This foreign policy executive sits at the crossroad of the state and the international system but is often compelled to deal with domestic actors in order to enact policy. In contrast to for example liberalism, neoclassical realism does not see states as simply

⁶² Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism, the state and foreign policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 21.

⁶³ Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anyone Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24, no. 2 (Fall, 1999): 21-25.

⁶⁴ Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism, the state and foreign policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 23-26.

⁶⁵ Margaret G. Hermann, Charles F. Hermann, and Joe D. Hagan, "How Decision Units Shape Foreign Policy Behavior," in *New Directions of Foreign Policy*, ed. Charles F. Hermann, Charles W. Kegley, and James N. Rosenau (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987), 309-336.

aggregating demands of different societal interest groups, but rather as units defining the national interest and thereby foreign policy, albeit subject to domestic constraints.⁶⁶

Furthermore, critics like John A. Vasquez, Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik have criticized neoclassical realism as they contend that it parts from realism's core assumptions, specifically that states act rationally.⁶⁷ As neoclassical realism emphasizes the intervening role of a state's elite and their perception of systemic pressures, this rationality in their eyes is forgone. However, where some realist theories do assume that a state acts rationally, this assumption is not essential to realism. Both Waltz and Morgenthau even reject the assumption of rational behaviour of states.⁶⁸

Finally, there is the argument that neoclassical realism lacks theoretical rigor and predictive power as it does not focus on one aspect, but emphasizes the importance of both domestic and systemic variables.⁶⁹ Lobell, Ripsman and Taliaferro believe that this core element of neoclassical realism is a product of the balancing act between theoretical parsimony (meaning that the simplest explanation should prevail) and explanatory power, and that neoclassical realism does quite well when compared to other IR theories in upholding a healthy balance.⁷⁰

The abovementioned critiques are the most significant, and it is clear that proponents of the neoclassical realist theory have arguments to counter and even refute claims by its critics. As this thesis draws on neoclassical realism, it is important to acknowledge both the criticisms and the rebuttal.

Why neoclassical realism?

Other theoretical approaches might have significant insights into Russian foreign policy regarding Ukraine and Syria too, so the question arises why has the choice been made to opt for neoclassical realism. Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro, as well as Rose and Juneau, discuss in their respective books and articles several other theories possibly capable of explaining certain aspects of a state's foreign policy.⁷¹ However, these theories fail, due to different reasons, to make sense of the larger picture of foreign policy. Some of these are outlined below,

⁶⁶ Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism, the state and foreign policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 23-26.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 22.; Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anyone Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24, no. 2 (Fall, 1999): 13-15.; Andrew Moravcsik, "Liberal International Relations Theory: A Scientific Assessment," in *Progress in International Relations Theory*, ed. Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (Massachusetts: MIT press, 2003), 190-193.

⁶⁸ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, (Long Grove: Waveland, 1979), 118.; Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 71.

⁶⁹ Stephen M. Walt, "The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition," in *Political Science: the State of the Discipline*, ed. Ira Katznelson and Helen V. Milner (New York: Norton, 2003), 211.

⁷⁰ Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism, the state and foreign policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 23.

⁷¹ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015); Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and theories of Foreign policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998).

including neoclassical realist arguments why they offer insufficient explanations. It is important to acknowledge that other theories are capable of explaining elements of foreign policy. Yet this study's aim is not to compare neoclassical realism's applicability to other IR theories, but rather to analyse Russian foreign policy regarding Ukraine and Syria through a neoclassical realist lens. As this is not a comparative theoretical study, the overview of other IR theories' explanations will be brief.

For example, the shortcomings of offensive realism in explaining foreign policy are shown by demonstrating that this theory is not able to account for specific choices in foreign policy.⁷² The theory argues that security in the anarchic international system is scarce and states live in uncertainty because they can't be certain about their neighbours' intentions. Assuming these intentions are aggressive leads to a system where states are driven to maximize their power in order to ensure survival.⁷³ Offensive realism is right to emphasize Russia's incentive to expand its interests abroad. However, it is unable to account for specific choices in this endeavour, as it does not cover the execution phase of foreign policy in great detail. This boils down to the previously mentioned notion of a theory's dependent variable, or its subject of study.

Another theory incapable of explaining foreign policy is defensive realism. This theory also incorporates the idea of the anarchic system, but claims that the competition for security is shaped by the offense-defence balance, which is almost always in favour of defence.⁷⁴ Defensive realism may be right in stating that Russia, perceiving an acute threat from the EU encroachment or potential loss of an allied regime in the Middle East aimed to maximize its security by counterbalancing. Nevertheless, this theory neglects the importance of relative power and the way it influences decision-making.⁷⁵ Its predictions would not have differed significantly if Russia's perceived power did not alter in the last decade.

Juneau also showcases the shortcomings of constructivism, which has been a valuable addition to the realm of IR theories as it emphasizes norms, rules, and language – elements that are neglected by for example offensive and defensive realism. Wendt states that identity, or collectively held beliefs, values and assumptions shape preferences and interests.⁷⁶ A constructivist reading of Russian foreign policy would therefore emphasize Russian identity as being shaped by interaction with others, most notably the United States and the West in general.

⁷² Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 2.; Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and theories of Foreign policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 152.

⁷³ John Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War," *International Security* 15, no. 4 (1990).

⁷⁴ Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith, *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 88.

⁷⁵ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 2.

⁷⁶ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it," *International Organization* 46, no.2 (1992): 391-425.

Although Juneau studies Iranian foreign policy, he remarks that Iranian identity did not change significantly in his studied time frame (2001-2009) but Iranian assertiveness did.⁷⁷ The same argument can be made for Russia's identity and therefore, constructivism is beset by one crucial flaw in this regard.

Liberalism also posits an alternative explanation of foreign policy, disputing many realist assumptions. Liberal proponents argue that democratic values, economic interdependence and institutional regulations drive both states and the entire international system towards cooperation.⁷⁸ Liberalism however fails at explaining contemporary state behaviour in light of realist tenets. For example, there arguably was regional economic interdependence with the European Union, and institutional actors like NATO, the UN and the OSCE had interests in the situation in Ukraine. As multiple organizations were engaged and there was a degree of economic interdependence, the conflict should have been prevented. Nevertheless, the annexation of Crimea did occur and realist tenets such as power maximisation and the protection of national security are capable of explaining such phenomenon.⁷⁹

In conclusion, there are several IR theories that have significant insights regarding foreign policy and are able to account for certain aspects or trends in foreign policy. However, according to neoclassical realism, they are also flawed in certain aspects, as demonstrated above and more elaborately touched upon by several authors.⁸⁰ The arguments provided above are outlined by multiple proponents of the theory. They view neoclassical realism as a theory that is able to account for foreign policy in full, as foreign policy is its main dependent variable, and takes into account both unit-level and systemic variables. The dismissal of major IR theory paradigms in a mere paragraph might not feel satisfactory to some readers. To reiterate, it does not fit this thesis' aim to go into lengthy detail comparing IR theories and therefore, the choice has been made to briefly yet coherently discuss other IR theories.

⁷⁷ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 3.

⁷⁸ For more information on liberalism, I recommend Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1-312.

⁷⁹ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, "Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens," *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 116.

⁸⁰ Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and theories of Foreign policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 145.; Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 2.

The formation of foreign policy through a neoclassical realist lens

Now that the theory's main tenets are clear, its specific approach to the formation of foreign policy will be outlined below. To that end, the work of Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy*, will prove useful as the author demonstrates how a detailed case study of contemporary foreign policy puzzles can be constructed in line with neoclassical realism. His strategic analysis variant of neoclassical realism will be reviewed, including the conceptualization of its main elements. For clarification, in this study, 'Russia' or "Russian foreign policy" means the official position of the Russian government. Consistent with neoclassical realism's concept of the state, a state can be equated with its main decision-makers regarding the formation of foreign policy.

The following section conceptualizes the three aspects in the causal chain of Juneau's strategic analysis variant, namely; a state's relative power → intervening variables → foreign policy. This is an operationalization of what Lobell calls 'the imperfect transmission belt' in which a state's relative power is filtered through a state's domestic level variables and consequently lead to a state's foreign policy.⁸¹

A state's relative power

The first element in the causal chain of foreign policy is relative power. Neoclassical realism rejects conceptualizations of a state's relative power based on a small number of indicators, in contrast to many realists who often limit their definition to military power. Although it is seen as the *ultima ratio* of international politics, neoclassical realism favours a more comprehensive view of power. The elements that constitute a state's relative power are geography, population, military power, economic power, alliances, popular mood, and appeal.⁸² These elements will be outlined below, as well as specific ways to incorporate them whilst researching Russian relative power. At the end of this section, a hypothesis derived from the theory will be discussed, which forms the basis for the analysis of Russia's relative power. It is significant to acknowledge that the neoclassical realist tradition uses hypotheses to explore causes and consequences and as guidelines shaping the analysis, not as specific propositions to be quantitatively tested.⁸³

The theory suggests geography plays a role regarding the opportunities and constraints a state faces. A simple example of this stems from the first half of the 20th century. In

⁸¹ Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism, the state and foreign policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4.

⁸² Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 37.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 12.

comparison with continental Europe, Great Britain's geography provided protection during both World Wars, as it could rely on its surrounding bodies of water to protect it against land-based invasions. There are geographic elements that affect a state's relative power such as sheer landmass, natural borders and natural resources. However, according to Juneau, natural resources should be included under economic power, and therefore will be discussed later. The impact of geography on a state's power matters only in relative terms; a state's intentions are shaped by its own geography but also by the geography of the states it interacts with.⁸⁴ In this study, Russia's geographic aspects of importance, such as its strategic positioning, Russian access to bodies of water, and Russia's geographic relations to Ukraine and Syria will be accounted for on the basis of sources as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Population is the second element that affects a state's relative power. Classical realist Morgenthau already argued that a significant population is necessary to be powerful.⁸⁵ A populous country is not necessarily a great power but a great power cannot amount to such a status without a significant population.⁸⁶ It is not only a population's size that matters according to Juneau, as he argues that four dimensions affect a state's relative power.⁸⁷ Firstly, its growth rate matters, as a growing population reinforces the perception of an important place in the system, as according to Juneau, anticipations of population growth create expectations of growing power. Age distribution matters as a younger population equals a larger workforce, which consequently affects a state's economic performance. Thirdly, urbanization rates matter, as it indicates the degree to which an economy has shifted away from an agricultural-based economy. Fourthly, ethnic cohesion matters, as well as the number, size, and integration of ethnic groups. Juneau emphasizes cohesion as friction or constraints can arise along demographic lines.⁸⁸ In order to account for this element of Russian power, demographic reports on Russia's population provided by the World Bank and the Russian census of 2010 will be consulted. In addition, the Russian diasporas outside of its borders will be reviewed as there are indications that this influenced Russia's foreign policy vis-à-vis Ukraine.

Military power is arguably one of the most significant indicators of a state's relative power, as certain branches of realism simply equal it to a state's power in general. Juneau dissects this component into several smaller elements. One of the most significant is the defence budget and military expenditure, which is often used as an indicator of military power and allows

⁸⁴ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 37.

⁸⁵ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1993), 139.

⁸⁶ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 37.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

for international comparisons. Furthermore, trends in expenditure, a breakdown of a military into its services, nuclear armament, military leadership and a state's defence industry are also significant indicators of military power. In order to measure this component, official reports and statements on its military (budget) from Russian sources such as the Ministry of Defence and Finance will be consulted. In light of objectivity, observations by international organizations and think-thanks such as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and RAND will be reviewed as well.

A state's relative power is also affected by its economic performance. There are branches of realism that see economic power merely as a tool to afford for military expenditure. Neoclassical realism and Juneau reject this and have a more holistic approach to economic power as they state that economic power can be a foreign policy pressure tool as well. A state's economic power can be measured by indicators such as GDP, GDP per capita and share of world GDP, and these numbers will be studied in order to analyse the effect of Russia's economic power on its relative power. According to Juneau, a state's trade ties and its natural resources and strategic use thereof are significant as well. In order to incorporate this element into this study, Russia's economic performance prior to the military interventions will be analysed. This will predominantly be based on findings by international organizations such as the World Bank and global market trend analyses.

Alliances can contribute to a state's relative power as well, as their purpose is to combine the members' capabilities to solidify their interest. Allies provide deterrence, political and diplomatic support and strategic depth. Nevertheless, Juneau also points out that alliances are hard to pinpoint due to their fluid nature and matter relatively little, as states in general derive less power from alliances than from internal developments.⁸⁹ In order to account for alliances in this study, Russia's membership of military alliances will be reviewed. Furthermore, the Russo-Ukrainian/Russo-Syrian relationship prior to the military interventions will be reviewed, predominantly based on academic sources and statements by Russian leaders on these bilateral relations. In Juneau's definition of relative power, alliances with nonstate actors are taken into account as well, which might prove useful considering Russia's alleged support for nonstate actors in both Ukraine and Syria.

Popular mood is the penultimate element affecting a state's relative power. This concerns the people's support for and identification with the government, as a state with domestic unrest can be discouraged from foreign adventurism and vice versa. This element of

⁸⁹ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 40.

Russia's relative power will be measured predominantly on the basis of popularity polls, supplied by the Moscow-based Levada Centre, and analyses of the parliamentary and presidential elections prior to Putin's third stint as president.

The last element in Juneau's definition of a state's relative power concerns the appeal or attractiveness of a state, specifically of a state's political culture and ideology, the values it stands for and its political system. This overlaps with Joseph Nye's definition of soft power.⁹⁰ Nye conceptualizes this by emphasizing the degree to which the values of state A resonate in other states. If they are similar, state A's appeal increases and its ability to influence outcomes increases as well.⁹¹ Data for Russia's soft power will be based on academic sources, as well as a 2010 report by the international consulting firm Ernst and Young, who've aimed to rank the world's global powers on the basis of soft power.

The analysis of the abovementioned elements of Russia's relative power is geared towards an answer to the question 'to what extent is neoclassical realism able to account for the influence of Russia's relative power on its foreign policy.' A hypothesis derived from the theory claims that *'if a state's power increases, the more likely it to exercise its influence abroad; conversely, if a state's power declines, it is less likely to be assertive in the international arena'*. To that end, the elements will be categorized as additive to Russian power, constant, or decreased Russian power. Although these two cases will not indefinitely verify or debunk this hypothesis, it will shed light on these two specific cases and possibly be the beginning of a larger database with regard to the effect of relative power on foreign policy.

Intervening variables at the unit-level

The next step in the causal chain between relative power and foreign policy, is the key innovation of neoclassical realism, namely domestic-level filters. Juneau introduces three elements that bring greater accuracy while explaining these unit-level factors, namely the international status of a state, a regime's identity and factional politics.⁹²

The status of a state pertains to the rank it holds in the international arena. Previous analyses operationalized this by for example examining the number of diplomatic representations a state hosted.⁹³ Juneau discards this and claims it is a social concept and refers to a position, recognized by others, in social hierarchy. His conceptualization relies on the relationship between a state's aspiration and its perception by other states. Aspiration, relates

⁹⁰ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 41.

⁹¹ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 35-40.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹³ David Singer and Melvin Small, "The Composition and Status Ordering of the International System: 1815-1940," *World Politics* 18, no. 2 (1966): 236-282.

to the status a state aspires to, for example a regional or great power. This is incorporated in the analysis by reviewing the discourse used by Russian foreign policy executives regarding its international ambitions. Furthermore, academic works on Russia from the theoretical angle of the *power transition theory*, a theory that typifies a state's status on the basis of its actions, will be consulted. The combined result of discourse and academic sources should reveal Russia's status in the international pecking order.⁹⁴

The second element is regime identity. This concerns the national identity and the strategic culture of a state. Separately, Juneau labels these concepts as too broad and vague and combines them. The resulting regime identity factor is conceptualized as a lens through which the world is interpreted by a state's regime, which pertains to how "threats are evaluated, options are assessed, and interests are defined through this cognitive filter, pushing states towards a certain assessment of the external environment."⁹⁵ This requires historical context, as regime identity is best described as a puzzle resulting from its previous interactions in the international arena and therefore, this section will primarily be descriptive. Nevertheless, statements by Russia's foreign policy elite on the necessity of military intervention will be reviewed, as this gives insight into the policy-making progress.

Factional politics is the last unit-level variable. It pertains to the effect the domestic political arena has on foreign policy. Juneau conceptualizes factional politics as the "balance of power among regime factions involved in making foreign policy".⁹⁶ He argues that the domestic landscape is a battlefield for factional competition with a certain set of rules and structure. In order to account for the domestic political environment, this study incorporates an analysis of the Russian political landscape on the basis of certain parameters such as the number of parties involved, how political relationships are characterized in Russia and how the Russian political arena developed throughout the 2000s.

The sub-question this section aims to answer concerns the ability of neoclassical realism to account for the effect the domestic variables have had on Russian foreign policy. This will be explored on the basis of Colin Dueck's hypothesis, stemming from his research into US interventions under different administrations, which is '*The domestic arena in which foreign policy is shaped matters, not as a primary cause of intervention but rather a powerful influence on its exact form.*'⁹⁷ This is significant to review, as the interventions in Ukraine and Syria have

⁹⁴ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 42-44.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 45.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 47.

⁹⁷ Colin Dueck, 'Neoclassical Realism and the national interests: presidents, domestic politics, and major military interventions,' in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 139-170.

different characteristics with different consequences, and it could well be that these differences stem from the domestic arena.

Foreign policy

The last stage of the causal chain is foreign policy. Juneau incorporates four separate elements that clarify foreign policy, which are outlined below.

The first element concerns the national interest behind certain policy decisions. The national interest is the aggregate of what a state pursues in foreign policy; the actual or desired end-goal. Juneau rejects the notion of the national interest being either power or security, and claims that there is a constant trade-off between them but states are also likely to pursue both at the same time. States seek to maximize several ends and which ends and in what proportion has to be determined empirically, based on reviewing accounts of how foreign policy was executed.⁹⁸

The second element of foreign policy pertains to the *modus operandi* of foreign policy. To maximize influence, a state has to adopt and implement policies that align the international environment with national interests.⁹⁹ This will be elaborated upon in the following section in greater detail, as this concerns the foreign policy toolkit, which is adequately conceptualized by Becker, Cohen, Kushi and McManus.

The third component of foreign policy is a state's strategy. Juneau draws on the work of Schweller, who identified eleven strategies, divided into two categories. According to Schweller, there are strategies in response to threats (balancing, bandwagoning, binding, distancing, buck-passing, and engagement) and strategies in response to opportunities (jackal bandwagoning, piling on, wave of the future, contagion, and holding the balance).¹⁰⁰ By linking the choice of strategy with the causal effect of particular combinations of foreign policy tools, a comprehensive explanation should be provided instead of merely a descriptive account.

The last element that Juneau uses to describe foreign policy pertains to the consequences of foreign policy.¹⁰¹ These consequences only concern the state (Russia in this case study), as neoclassical realism is unable to predict what kind of repercussions there will be on the systemic level.¹⁰² Consequences arise when the actual interests a state pursues diverge from the ideal,

⁹⁸ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 51.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁰⁰ Randall Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances. Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 65-83.

¹⁰¹ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 49

¹⁰² Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman, and Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism, the state and foreign policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 21.

structurally induced interests. If this happens, its place in the international system becomes inconsistent with its actual interests. There are five distinct scenarios of consequences, namely; over-reach (ambitions outweigh capabilities), under-stretch (capabilities exceed ambitions), refusing to let go (capabilities and ambitions are declining, but capabilities are declining faster), accelerated retrenchment (capabilities and ambitions are declining, but ambitions are declining faster), or Hail Mary (capabilities are declining, but ambitions suddenly spike).¹⁰³

The model Juneau uses to analyse foreign policy formation through a neoclassical realist lens will be applied to Russian foreign policy in the analysis section. However, there also is a focus on the course of Russian foreign policy; the so-called toolkit that is used in order to achieve a foreign policy objective. In order to incorporate this in the analysis, the following section will elaborate on foreign policy instruments.

¹⁰³ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 54.

The execution of foreign policy through a neoclassical realist lens

This section focuses on a state's toolkit a state to achieve its foreign policy objectives. Neoclassical realism rejects, in contrast to other forms of realism, a view of foreign policy that is dominated by traditional hard power military strategies. Although military means attract the bulk of the academic and media attention, there are constructivist and normative elements that arguably should not be left out the analysis. This allows for an analysis that includes the use of economic pressure tools, the use of discourse and a state's selective appeals to international law and norms.¹⁰⁴ This stems from the neoclassical realist tenet that statesmen should use all political, economic, ideological and military strategies at their disposal to enhance their state's long-term interests.¹⁰⁵ The work of Becker, Cohen, Kushi and McManus proves useful, as they present a range of tools that can be used to execute foreign policy that fall under the scope of neoclassical realism. This toolkit exists of traditional military tools, covert military tools, economic strategies, the selective use of international laws and norms, and the use of discourse and will be conceptualized below.¹⁰⁶

Foreign policy toolkit

Traditional military tools in light of foreign policy pertains to the overt use of all military disciplines (army, naval, air force and special forces) in either a state's own territory or outside of its borders with the aim of completing a foreign policy objective.¹⁰⁷ Military interventions are described as the deliberate act of introducing military forces into the course of an existing controversy, while military occupation is described as the condition in which territory is under the effective control of foreign armed forces.¹⁰⁸ The range of military tactics is large, as it includes well-known 'boots on the ground'-type campaigns, as well as aerial bombardment and naval blockades. This aspect is incorporated into the analysis of Russian foreign policy on the basis of international reports on Russian military operations, as well as statements by Russian foreign policy executives on military engagements. The use of multiple domestic and international sources on Russian military engagements is necessary in light of the objectivity. There have been several contested claims by representatives of Moscow that downplayed the role of the Russian military, especially with regard to the annexation of the Crimean peninsula.

¹⁰⁴ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, "Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens," *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 118.

¹⁰⁵ Nicholas Kitchen, "Systemic pressures and domestic ideas: a neoclassical realist model of grand strategy formation," *Review of international studies* 36, no. 1 (2010), 118.

¹⁰⁶ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, "Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens," *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 112-133

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ United States Department of Defense, *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, (January 2020): 140, accessed April 15, 2020, <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/dictionary.pdf?ver=2018-05-02-174746-340>

This brings us to the next element of the foreign policy toolkit, namely covert military tools.

Covert military tools are a lot harder to pinpoint yet are part of the foreign policy toolkit.¹⁰⁹ The American Department of Defense's *Dictionary of Military of Associated Terms* (Joint Publication JP1-02) defines covert operations as the operations that are planned and executed in a specific manner, in order to conceal the identity of the sponsor or permit plausible denial by the sponsor.¹¹⁰ This definition is one of the most widely recognized definitions of covert operations and will be adhered to in this study. Covert operations are executed when it is advantageous for a state's interest to operate under the radar, as openly acting against a target could have adverse effects. They include sabotage, assassinations, supporting coups d'états, supporting (non-state) actors with weapons, direction and intelligence, and false flags. It is difficult to incorporate this into the analysis, as its aim is to remain undetected. Nevertheless, empiric data from investigative journalistic platforms and claims by both international actors and Russian representatives will provide data for the use of covert military tools by Russia.

The third instrument in the foreign policy toolkit pertains to the economic realm. Economic instruments in order to force concessions have been used for centuries, and they are often geared towards inflicting economic harm on an adversary.¹¹¹ The most well-known economic instrument is a trade sanction, in which state A bans the import and export of certain products to and from state B. In addition, states are able to strategically exploit access to its natural resources, as the energy sector is vital to any state's economy. Moreover, there are economic tools such as the access to trade unions and loans. This study will predominantly focus on the use of trade sanctions and access to natural resources, as there are indications that Russia has used these instruments explicitly with regard to Ukraine and Syria to a certain extent.

Then there is the selective use of international laws and norms. This is the case when a state abides to laws that are in line with its national objectives but simultaneously challenges or undermines treaties that hinder its foreign policy. By undermining and co-opting international laws, foreign policy moves can be justified, at least from a state's own perspective. Examples of this are nullifying binding agreements or treaties that contradict a state's foreign policy objective and disguising actions under claims of at face value irrelevant treaties. International agreements and treaties that are ratified by Russia and are of importance to the military interventions in Ukraine and Syria will be reviewed, as well Russia's actions when it is

¹⁰⁹ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, "Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens," *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 112-133

¹¹⁰ United States Department of Defense, *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, (January 2020): 53, accessed April, 15, 2020, <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/dictionary.pdf?ver=2018-05-02-174746-340>

¹¹¹ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, "Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens," *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 122.

challenged in the international arena on this point.

The fifth instrument of importance is the strategic use of norms and discourse. By incorporating the use of normative arguments and emphasizing the importance of discourse, neoclassical realism strays away from previous branches of realism. The strategic use of normative arguments and discourse is often employed by a state to justify its actions and establish a narrative that favours its interest. Normative arguments constitute an integral part of how nations can act self-interestedly and justify their actions in an evolving international arena.¹¹² By responding to critics or proactively disseminating its own narrative, a state solidifies its position without having to reach for traditional hardcore strategies. In order to incorporate this element into the analysis, the Russian use of discourse and normative arguments is reviewed by delving into its justifications for its actions on the basis of foreign policy executives' statements.

¹¹² Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, "Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens," *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 123.

Methodological framework

This section sheds light on the chosen research methods in order to collect and analyse empirical data in a sustained and proven academic way. It is crucial for qualitative research to be conducted within certain methodological frameworks. Without proper justifications for specific methodological frameworks, the rigour and value of qualitative research can be weakened and potentially propel unsatisfactory understanding of the phenomenon at interest.

This research will predominantly make use of process tracing, analytical narratives and case study research, which will be covered in the first subsection. The second sub-section will briefly discuss the collection of data and its sources. At the end of this section, an overview of the operationalization of key concepts of this study will be presented.

Research methods

In order to adequately analyse Russian foreign policy vis-à-vis Ukraine and Syria through a neoclassical realist lens, a combination of three research methods is used, namely process tracing, analytical narratives and case study research. Neoclassical realism offers few methodological innovations, although it does emphasize certain aspects and tools that have been neglected by other realist branches.¹¹³

Process tracing is a research method focused on clarifying the links between possible causes and observed outcomes. It is often applied in studies that monitor sequential processes such as decision-making.¹¹⁴ It is a method that examines complexity in processes in great detail and documents complex interactions.¹¹⁵ Juneau argues that process-tracing is a suitable method for analysing decision-making processes as it is capable of delving into the process and enables the researcher to translate initial conditions into outcomes following a certain methodological logic.¹¹⁶ Neoclassical realism opens up the ‘black box’ of a state and emphasizes the effect the domestic foreign policy decision-making apparatus has on a state’s foreign policy. Therefore, a research method that enables close examination of the contexts in which foreign policies are formulated is necessary, which Rose argued as well.¹¹⁷ This is why process-tracing is one of the major tools for the production of extensive accounts of foreign policy, and will be employed in this study as well.

¹¹³ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran’s Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 14.

¹¹⁴ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 7.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran’s Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 14.

¹¹⁷ Gideon Rose, ‘Neoclassical Realism and theories of Foreign policy,’ *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 147.

The second research method is called analytical narrative and is used to organize material in chronological order, focusing the content into a single coherent story albeit it with subplots.¹¹⁸ This research method is used to grasp the essence of large depictions of reality, and single out the most significant themes. Narrative analysis is very compatible with process-tracing and can even be seen as a logical implication of the use of process-tracing.¹¹⁹

This study will be based on a comparative case study between Russian foreign policy vis-à-vis Ukraine and Russia foreign policy vis-à-vis Syria. Case studies are “detailed examinations of an aspect of a historical episode to develop or test historical explanations that may be generalizable.”¹²⁰ The case study approach has the ability to examine proposed causal mechanisms in great deal, accommodate complex causal relations and put forward levels of conceptual clarity.¹²¹ Both cases of Russian foreign policy have similarities and differences at face value and by comparing them, the formation and execution phase of foreign policy across them can be compared, as neoclassical realism claims it is able to account for differences on the basis of its intervening variables. There are criticisms on this method, as it has been labelled atheoretical, ad hoc and not suitable for theory testing.¹²² Neoclassical realism reject this on the basis of the claim that case studies are used to develop and apply theoretically inspired frameworks based on laws and core assumptions.¹²³

There are six types of case studies, which vary on level of analysis and number of case studies.¹²⁴ This thesis sets out to perform an integrative comparative case study, meaning that there are multiple case studies and it looks to compare the cases both within- and cross-case. Within-case analysis means that causal processes are researched: $X - (A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C) \rightarrow Y$ instead of merely a causal effect $X \rightarrow Y$, which is in line with neoclassical realism’s causal chain of foreign policy. When these processes of Russian foreign policy have been analysed, this thesis aims to compare them cross-case in order to see if there are differences and if the theory is able to account for these possible differences.¹²⁵

Data

Process-tracing requires the examination of historical accounts, archival documents, interview

¹¹⁸ Lawrence Stone, *The past and present revisited* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 74.

¹¹⁹ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran’s Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 14.

¹²⁰ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004): 5.

¹²¹ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran’s Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 14.

¹²² Ibid.; Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research Design and Methods*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2014).

¹²³ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran’s Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 14.

¹²⁴ Ingo Rohlfing, *Case Studies and Causal Inference: An integrative framework* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 12-15.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 14.

transcripts and other sources to clarify whether or not the process that the theory proposes is in fact evident in the researched subject.¹²⁶ These sources will be gathered for the purpose of this study as well, which means that Russian governmental statements, documents and other openly accessible items from the Kremlin will play a significant role in the database. Nevertheless, as this concerns foreign policy and extensive accounts have been made by international media on certain tools, these will be taken into account as well. This is, in light of objectivity, also necessary, as there are certain claims made by representatives of the Russian government that are disputed by others, and vice versa. Furthermore, there have been other academic researches into Russian foreign policy in these two instances. Although they may differ in terms of theoretical application, they will be consulted as they have made significant contributions with regard to empirical accounts of Russian foreign policy.

Operationalization of neoclassical realist key concepts

The following section offers an overview of the operationalization of concepts that are used to analyse Russian foreign policy in line with the causal chain: a state's relative power → intervening variables → foreign policy.

Juneau uses seven indicators for a state's relative power, namely geography, population, military power, economic power, alliances, popular mood, and appeal.¹²⁷ For example, geography, population, military power and economic power are rather easily operationalized, as the theory presents clear parameters that affect a state's relative power, and empirical evidence is rather accessible.

Russia's geography, its natural borders, access to bodies of water, and strategic position matter to its relative power. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* will provide useful data, as well as historical accounts on the effect Russia's geography had throughout history.

Russia's demographic situation will be clarified on the basis of the Russian census of 2010, the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook and the World Bank. The trends Juneau proposes, such as a population's growth rate and the rate of ethnic cohesion, can be gathered rather easily in the abovementioned sources. This should provide an adequate image of Russia's demography.

With regard to Russia's military power, indicators such as trends in expenditure, a military's manpower, and nuclear weapons are significant. This will be accounted for on the basis of the Russian ministerial documents, academic sources who've delved deeper into

¹²⁶ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 7.

¹²⁷ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 37.

Russian military (expenditure) and international organizations such as the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute and RAND, who have provided adequate reports on Russia's military developments. This variety of sources is a way of guaranteeing objectivity.

Trends in Russian GDP will indicate Russia's economic performance. Furthermore, natural resources and trade ties are also of impact on a state's economic power. They are incorporated by reviewing Russian export of natural resources. Some historical context in this regard is necessary, as it will demonstrate Russia's perspective on the strategic use of natural resources in international politics. This economic analysis will predominantly be based on findings by international organizations such as the World Bank and global market trend analyses.

There are also elements of a state's relative power that are harder to pinpoint, as the process of operationalization and analysing empirical data is more intricate. This is the case for for example alliances, popular mood and appeal.

Juneau also points out that alliances are hard to assess due to their fluid nature.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, they are incorporated in this study by reviewing Russia's membership of military alliances, as the focus is on military interventions. Furthermore, the Russo-Ukrainian/Russo-Syrian relationship is worth reviewing, as they effectively constitute the platform for this study. Moreover, Russian behaviour in involved entities such as the United Nations will briefly be discussed. This is predominantly based on academic sources, statements by Russian leaders on (bilateral) relations and media coverage.

Popular mood is not necessarily hard to define, nor is it always hard to measure. However, Russia is often labelled as an authoritarian regime, which complicates certain avenues for exploring this element.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, the parliamentary and presidential elections of late 2011 and early 2012 offer significant insights into Putin's popularity. This data is supplemented by popularity polls of the Moscow-based Levada Centre, a widely-recognized polling agency, as solely basing this element on the elections would for example omit the opinion of people who never vote at all in elections.

The last element of Russia's relative power is its international appeal, which due to the subjectivity of the matter is also intricate to operationalize. The conceptualization of Joseph Nye's 'soft power' offers a solution. This has been studied by scholars, which offer sufficient empirical data. Furthermore, a report by international consulting firm Ernst & Young, who've

¹²⁸ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 40.

¹²⁹ Michael McFaul and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, 'The Myth of the Authoritarian Model: How Putin's Crackdown Holds Russia Back,' *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (January 2008): 68.

delved into the global arena of soft power and ranked various states, offers interesting insights into this aspect of Russian power as well.¹³⁰

With regard to the operationalization of the domestic intervening variables concepts, Juneau posits some parameters. Juneau's conceptualization of status relies on the relationship between a state's aspiration and its perception by other states. Russia's aspirations on the international level will be accounted for on the basis of discourse used by Russian foreign policy executives on this subject. This will be supplemented with academic works on Russia from the theoretical perspective of the *power transition theory*, which aims at categorizing a state as a *revisionist*, a *status quo* or a *reformist* state.

The following element of domestic intervening variables is harder to operationalize, namely a state's regime identity. Juneau's conceptualization of this element relies on a combination of the national identity and the strategic culture of a state. The resulting regime identity variable is described as a lens through which the world is interpreted by a state's regime and how the state steers its options. This leads to a primarily descriptive account of how Russia's regime identity developed throughout history. This context, in combination with the reviewal of statements by the foreign policy elite, enables the analysis to showcase how regime identity influenced the ranking of the available options.

The operationalization of factional politics is rather straightforward. Juneau's conceptualizes it as "the balance of power among regime factions involved in making foreign policy".¹³¹ This is incorporated by analysing the Russian political environment, by considering the number of involved parties, how political relationships in Russia can best be characterized and Putin's influence on the national political system. There are multiple academic works who've aimed to shed light on Russia's political arena, and they will form the basis of this element.

The third link in the causal chain is the actual foreign policy, which Juneau conceptualizes by dividing it into four elements. National interest is the aggregate of what a state pursues in foreign policy; the actual or desired end-goal. Juneau claims that states balance between power and national security and this balance can only be determined empirically.¹³² This second component of foreign policy concerns the foreign policy instruments, and is elaborately discussed in the section on the course of Russian foreign policy. The third

¹³⁰ Ernst & Young, "Rapid-Growth Markets Soft Power Index," *Ernst & Young*, Spring 2012, accessed May 13, 2020, [https://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/Rapid-growth_markets_Soft_power_index/\\$FILE/Rapid-growth_markets-Soft_Power_Index-Spring_2012.pdf](https://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/Rapid-growth_markets_Soft_power_index/$FILE/Rapid-growth_markets-Soft_Power_Index-Spring_2012.pdf)

¹³¹ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign Policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 47.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 51.

component of foreign policy is a state's strategy, which is based on the work of Schweller who identified eleven strategies.¹³³ Indicators of this have to be the result of comparing Schweller's descriptions of the strategies to Russian foreign policy. The fourth component of foreign policy are the consequences, which may vary significantly. The balance between Russian capabilities and its aspirations will lead to a conclusion on which consequences are most likely.

The conceptualization of the foreign policy toolkit exists of five different instruments and are operationalized below.

Overt military tools are rather straightforward in their operationalization, as it simply concerns the overt behaviour of Russia's military branches. There are numerous international reports on Russian foreign policy in this regard, describing Russian troop movement, their actions, and its military engagements.

Covert military tools is different as it is rather clear in its conceptualization, but is hard to measure, as its aim is to remain undetected and permit plausibly denial by its perpetrators. Nevertheless, there is data from investigative journalistic platforms and claims by both international actors and Russian foreign policy executive on this instrument.

Economic tools are conceptualized as economic pressure instruments that enable a state to inflict economic harm on another state. Its dominant form are trade sanctions, which are rather easily measured as they offer empirical data. Access to Russia's natural resources is included in the same manner, and both elements will offer insight into Russia's use economic instruments.

The fourth element of the foreign policy toolkit is discriminatory or selective use of international law and adherence to treaties. In order to incorporate this into this study, international agreements and treaties that are ratified by Russia and are of importance to the military interventions in Ukraine and Syria will be reviewed, as well Russia's actions when it is challenged in the international arena in this regard.

The strategic use of discourse is the fifth and last instrument of the toolkit and is incorporated by analysing the discourse and normative arguments of Russia's foreign policy executive.

¹³³ Randall Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances. Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 65-83.

Foreign policy analysis

The section entails the analysis of Russian foreign policy along neoclassical realist lines. The theory argues that the scope and ambition of a state's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by the state's relative power. However, the impact of these power capabilities on foreign policy are indirect and complex as they are filtered through unit-level variables.¹³⁴ The analysis of Russian foreign policy is divided in accordance with these steps, which are also at the root of JunEAU's causal chain of relative power → domestic variables → foreign policy.

Firstly, Russia's relative power, based on concepts such as geography, military and economic power is analysed, in an attempt to answer the first sub-question. Pinpointing the effect of a Russia's relative power on its foreign policy is guided by exploring the hypothesis that if a state's relative power increases, it is more likely to exercise its influence beyond its borders, and conversely, if a state's relative power decreases, it is less likely to have an assertive foreign policy.

After the analysis of Russia's relative power, it is imperative to review the domestic filters that according to neoclassical realism influence foreign policy. This is the focus of the second section of this analysis, as it aims to answer '*to what extent is neoclassical realism able to explain the effect of Russia's domestic variables on its foreign policy?*' The hypothesis at the foundation of this section is '*the domestic arena in which foreign policy is shaped matters, not as a primary cause of intervention but rather a powerful influence on its exact form.*'

The execution phase of foreign policy is analysed in the third and last analysis-section. The sub-question aims to answer '*to what extent has Russia used instruments that fall inside the scope of neoclassical realism's foreign policy toolkit?*' as neoclassical realism claims it is able to account for all means of foreign policy, as it includes several elements that are often omitted in traditional realist analyses.

¹³⁴ Gideon Rose, 'Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,' *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (October 1998): 144-177.

The effect of Russia's relative power on its foreign policy

The first element in neoclassical realist's causal chain of foreign policy is a state's relative power. This section reviews Russia's relative power based on the elements put forward by the theory, namely; geography, population, military power, economic power, alliances, popular mood and appeal. These elements were operationalized, as can be read in the methodological framework, in order to account for Russia's power in 2012, when Putin regained presidency. The hypothesis that this sections seeks to shed light on is '*If a state's power increases, the more likely it to exercise its influence abroad; conversely, if a state's power declines, it is less likely to be assertive in the international arena.*' The insights offered should pave the way for answering the sub-question '*to what extent is neoclassical realism able to account for the influence of Russia's relative power on its foreign policy when Putin returned to presidency in 2012?*'

The first component of relative power is geography. The Russian Federation is by far the world's largest state. It extends nearly halfway around the Northern Hemisphere and is located in both the European and Asian continent.¹³⁵ Judging by its size, Russia is a powerful state. However, it is not sheer landmass that counts, as neoclassical realism emphasizes the effect of certain geographical features.

In terms of its interests in Ukraine, the evidence suggest that geographical features play a role and could partially explain why Russia has consistently mingled in Ukrainian politics; an allied state to the west would be an useful buffer.¹³⁶ In the past 500 years, Russia has been invaded several times from the west, ranging from invasions by the Swedes in 1707 to the German *Operation Barbarossa* in 1941. These invasions came from the west as the Great European Plain, the largest mountain-free landform in Europe, provides a more or less flat route straight to Moscow.¹³⁷ Beyond modern-day Poland, which presents a relatively narrow corridor between the Baltic Sea and the Carpathian Mountains, an over 3000 kilometre wide landmass opens up. Ukraine is part of this landmass, and could potentially be an ally in defence before the Russian border is reached, which due to its width, is hard to defend. This feeds the assumption that Russia deems it necessary for its national security to incorporate Ukraine in its sphere of influence.¹³⁸ What should be mentioned here is that Russia's vastness has both been

¹³⁵ John C. Dewdney et al, "Russia," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, April 25, 2020, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Russia>

¹³⁶ Daniel Drezner, "Why Ukraine cannot be a buffer state," *The Washington Post*, February 10, 2015, accessed May 5, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/02/10/why-ukraine-cannot-be-a-buffer-state/?utm_term=.09580106e10c

¹³⁷ Tim Marshal, "Russia and Curse of Geography," *The Atlantic*, October 31, 2015, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/russia-geography-ukraine-syria/413248/>

¹³⁸ Daniel Drezner, "Why Ukraine cannot be a buffer state," *The Washington Post*, February 10, 2015, accessed May 5, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/02/10/why-ukraine-cannot-be-a-buffer-state/?utm_term=.09580106e10c

disadvantageous and advantageous from a historical perspective. Although its vastness complicated defence, the fact that invading factions would leave behind unsustainably long supply lines proved to be an opportunity as well, as they would become increasingly difficult to protect.¹³⁹

With regard to Syria, Russia's geographical features also seemed to have played a role. Despite Russia's enormous territory, Russia lacks strategical access to its own warm-water port with direct access to the globe's oceans.¹⁴⁰ In order to establish a foothold in the Mediterranean, Russia has leased a naval facility in the port of Tartus in Syria since 1971.¹⁴¹ This is Russia's only naval base outside the former Soviet Union, and gives the Kremlin a critical beachhead in the Mediterranean. The base is claimed to be crucial to Russia's military presence in the Middle East, as it offers its navy the opportunity to refuel and re-arm without having to pass by Istanbul and cross the Black Sea.¹⁴² Although its significance is disputed as it only saw its revival in 2007, the commander-in-chief of the Russian navy, Vice-Admiral Viktor Chirkov, stated in June 2012 that the base is essential to Russian interests, and will continue to operate.¹⁴³ Moscow entered the Syrian civil war in 2015, which helped turn the conflict in favour of president Assad's regime.¹⁴⁴ A leap in time shows that in 2017, Russia secured a deal to lease the port of Tartus for another 49 years and in late 2019, the Russian government announced its plans to invest \$500 million dollar in the navy base, suggesting it will be a centrepiece in rebuilding Syria's economy.¹⁴⁵

The second element that affects a state's relative power is its population. According to the World Bank, with a population slightly over 143 million in 2012, Russia was the most populous state in Europe.¹⁴⁶ However, as Juneau mentions, there are other significant demographic features that should be taken into account.¹⁴⁷ After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia dealt with a population decline at a 0.5% annual rate.¹⁴⁸ In 2009, the population grew

¹³⁹ Tim Marshal, "Russia and Curse of Geography," *The Atlantic*, October 31, 2015, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/russia-geography-ukraine-syria/413248/>

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Henry Foy, "Russia to invest \$500m in Syrian port of Tartus," *The Financial Times*, December 17, 2019, accessed May 25, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/f52bdde6-20cc-11ea-b8a1-584213ee7b2b>

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 30.; Frank Gardner, "How vital is Syria's Tartus port to Russia?" *BBC News*, June 27, 2012, accessed May 25, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18616191>

¹⁴⁴ Henry Foy, "Russia to invest \$500m in Syrian port of Tartus," *The Financial Times*, December 17, 2019, accessed May 25, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/f52bdde6-20cc-11ea-b8a1-584213ee7b2b>

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.; Yuras Karmanau, "Russia plans to invest \$500 million in its only navy base outside the former Soviet Union – here's what it's like there," *Business Insider*, December 19, 2019, accessed May 25, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/base-in-syria-helps-russia-expand-presence-in-mediterranean-2019-9?international=true&r=US&IR=T>;

¹⁴⁶ No author, "Population, total – Russian Federation", *The World Bank Data*, The World Bank, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?end=2018&locations=RU&start=1983>

¹⁴⁷ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 38.

¹⁴⁸ Steven Eke, "Russia's population falling fast," *BBC News*, June 23, 2005, accessed May 6, 2020, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4125072.stm>

the first time in over a decade and in 2012, Russia recorded a growth rate of 0.16%, which continued in the ensuing five years.¹⁴⁹ According to the census that was held in Russia in 2010, its median age was 38. In 2012, Russia's workforce totalled over 75 million people.¹⁵⁰ Roughly three quarters of the population (105.3 million – 73.7%) lived in urban areas, whereas a quarter (37.5 million – 26.3%) lived in rural areas, which presents a normal degree of urbanization for the European/Central Asian region.¹⁵¹

The 2010 census also presents an image of the ethnic composition of Russia: 77.7% of the Russian population is ethnically Russian, and 1.4% is ethnically Ukrainian.¹⁵² The Russian diaspora in former Soviet states is significant whilst analysing the demographic effect on Russia's relative power. In 1989, the percentage of ethnic Russians of Ukraine's total population was 22.1%.¹⁵³ There are no records of the ethnic composition of Ukraine in 2012, as the last Ukrainian census was in 2001. This census recorded a percentage of 17.3% of ethnic Russians in Ukraine, and the population of the Crimean peninsula was roughly 58% ethnically Russian.¹⁵⁴ This Russian diaspora is significant to take into account whilst analysing the Russian foreign policy toolkit, especially with regard to the strategic use of discourse.

The following component of a state's relative power is often argued to be the most significant, as it concerns a state's military power. Neoclassical realism posits indicators for military strength that surpass the budget alone, emphasizing for example trends in expenditure, a breakdown of its branches, a state's defence industry and nuclear armament.

Russia introduced a military reform in 2008, aimed at modernizing the Russian Armed Forces and giving them a new look – the 'Novyia Oblik'.¹⁵⁵ This modernization came after years of already increased Russian defence budgets. Russia's military expenditure has grown since the economic crash of 1998, with especially steep increases between 2005 and 2009 and from 2012 until 2016.¹⁵⁶ Over a ten-year period, starting in 2003, Russia's military expenditure doubled. Furthermore, Russia announced a new state armament program (Gosudarsvennaya

¹⁴⁹ No author, "Population, total – Russian Federation", *The World Bank Data*, The World Bank, accessed May 5, 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?end=2018&locations=RU&start=1983>

¹⁵⁰ No author, "Labor force, total – Russian Federation", *The World Bank Data*, The World Bank, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.IN?contextual=default&end=2012&locations=RU&start=1990&view=chart>

¹⁵¹ No author, "Population data", *Russia*, The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://www.rusemb.org.uk/russianpopulation/>; No author, "Russian Census 2010 Final Results, *Infographics*, Sputnik News, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://sputniknews.com/infographics/20111222170405728/>

¹⁵² Central Intelligence Agency, "Russia," *The World Factbook*, Central Intelligence Agency, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rs.html>

¹⁵³ Moya Flynn, *Migrant Resettlement in the Russian Federation: Reconstructing Homes and Homelands* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 15.

¹⁵⁴ Jeffrey Mankoff, "Russia's Latest Land Grab: How Putin Won Crimea and Lost Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3 (May/June 2014): 62.; No author, "All-Ukrainian population census 2001", *State Statistics Committee of Ukraine*, accessed May 6, 2020,

<http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/results/>

¹⁵⁵ Susanne Oxenstierna, "Russia's defense spending and the economic decline," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7, no.1 (January 2016): 60-70.

¹⁵⁶ Keith Crane, Olga Oliker, Brian Nichiporuk, "Trends in Russia's Armed Forces: An Overview of Budgets and Capabilities," *Rand Corporation* (2019), accessed May 7, 2020, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2500/RR2573/RAND_RR2573.pdf

Programma Vooruzhenii) GPV 2011-2020, with the aim of modernizing at least 70% of the Armed Forces' arms by 2020.¹⁵⁷

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute concluded that Russia's defence expenditure in 2013 amounted to \$88 billion, placing the country in the top three, overtaking both Great Britain and France for the first time in years.¹⁵⁸ The \$88 billion expenditure amounts to a sizable share of Russia's GDP, namely 4.4%, which is on par with the United States but high in comparison with other European states.¹⁵⁹

The graph below, presented by SIPRI, shows the GDP shares of military expenditure of Russia and other states of interest. It also shows the GDP share of the Russian defence budget, which is a smaller number and is presented by the Russian Ministry of Finance. The difference between the data by SIPRI and the Russian Ministry of Finance can be accounted for as SIPRI's data is based on common definitions for military expenditure which allows for international comparisons, whilst the Russian ministry solely shows the defence budget.¹⁶⁰

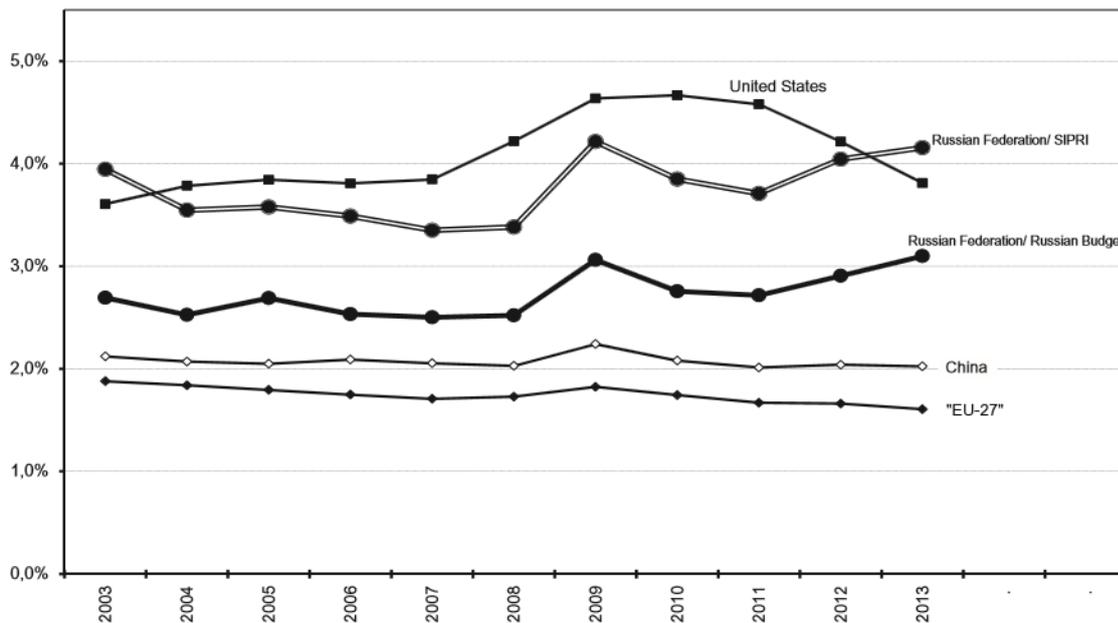


Fig.1 Estimated military expenditure as a share of a state's GDP; per cent. Source: SIPRI 2014 and the Russian Ministry of Finance.

Neoclassical realists also emphasize the state of the military. Analyses of Russian military capabilities suggest that since 2008, the Russian military has become much more capable in general. This concerns its capability to defend Russian borders and territory, as well as its

¹⁵⁷ Susanne Oxenstierna, "Russia's defense spending and the economic decline," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7, no.1 (January 2016): 60-70.

¹⁵⁸ Nathan Toohey, "Russia's defense spending grows to third largest in the world," *The Moscow News*, April 17, 2012, accessed May 7, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140305133919/http://themoscownews.com/russia/20120417/189640006.html>

¹⁵⁹ No author, "Military expenditure 2014," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, accessed May 7, 2020,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140208055140/https://milexdata.sipri.org/files/?file=SIPRI%2Bmilex%2Bdata%2B1988-2012%2Bv2.xlsx>

¹⁶⁰ Susanne Oxenstierna, "Russia's defense spending and the economic decline," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7, no.1 (January 2016): 60-70.

invasive capabilities, which were put to use in Georgia in 2008.¹⁶¹ These improvements have been contributed to the substantial increases in expenditures, as well a more focused approach on readiness, organization, modernizing armaments and updating tactics and doctrine. Analyses suggest that Russia's military is more streamlined, organized and more capable than at the beginning of the decade, when the Soviet legacy was still strong.¹⁶²

Russia's arms industry is one the largest the world, and is estimated to amount to a total sales of around \$25 billion in 2012.¹⁶³ The defence industry became increasingly important when Vladimir Putin regained presidency in 2012, as one of his first actions in office was signing Decree No. 603. This decree's aim was to modernize the defence industry in order to meet the demands of GPV 2011-2020. Putin commented that the defence industry should be a driver for Russian economic development and initiated special investment programs.¹⁶⁴

Furthermore, there is a nuclear armament component to military power. The collapse of the Soviet Union saw the Russian federation in possession of the vast majority the USSR's nuclear arsenal. Although Russia engaged in nuclear arms control agreements, dismantled or downsized substantial parts of its nuclear arsenal, and even ratified the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in January 2011, it was still one of the major nuclear powers in 2012.¹⁶⁵ Russia does not publish complete aggregate numbers of its nuclear arsenal but estimates are that in early 2012, Russia has more than 4400 nuclear warheads, with 2430 nuclear warheads assigned to its operational intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarines and heavy bombers.¹⁶⁶ In 2012, Russia displayed its nuclear power in of its most comprehensive tests since the collapse of the USSR, with president Putin taking a leading role. Moscow stated that Russia intended to modernize its nuclear arsenal, and will continue to use nuclear weapons as a key deterrent.¹⁶⁷

The next element of importance to Russian relative power is its economic performance. Russia experienced a financial crisis in 1998. In 2000, almost one third of Russians lived below the poverty line.¹⁶⁸ However, between this and the global crisis in 2008, the Russian economy

¹⁶¹ Keith Crane, Olga Oliker, Brian Nichiporuk, "Trends in Russia's Armed Forces: An Overview of Budgets and Capabilities," *Rand Corporation*, (2019): 12, accessed May 7, 2020, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2500/RR2573/RAND_RR2573.pdf

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 14.

¹⁶⁴ Vladimir Putin, "Ukaz o realizatsii planov razvitiia Vooruzhennykh Sil i modernizatsii OPK. Decree No.603," *President of the Russian Federation*, accessed May 7, 2020, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/15242>; Susanne Oxenstierna, "Russia's defense spending and the economic decline," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7, no.1 (January 2016): 60-70.

¹⁶⁵ Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S Norris, "Russian Nuclear Forces in 2012," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 68, no. 2 (2012): 87-97.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Steve Gutterman, "Putin flexes muscle in big test of Russia's nuclear arsenal," *Reuters*, October 20, 2012, accessed May 26, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-nuclear-putin/putin-flexes-muscle-in-big-test-of-russias-nuclear-arsenal-idUSBRE89J0EJ20121020?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>

¹⁶⁸ Alberto Nardelli, Jennifer Rankin and George Arnett, "Vladimir Putin's approval rating at record levels," *The Guardian*, July 23, 2015, accessed May 26, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/datablog/2015/jul/23/vladimir-putins-approval-rating-at-record-levels>

boomed.¹⁶⁹ Between 1999 and 2008, Russian GDP, a significant indicator of a state's economic performance, grew with an average of 6.7% annually, which can largely be contributed to favourable oil prices and Russian economic policies.¹⁷⁰ On the macro level, the Russian economy performed well in the 2000s.¹⁷¹ The global financial crisis in 2008 caused a remarkably steep fall, but Russian economic activity recovered in 2010-11 and with a GDP growth of 4,5%, it approximated global-average rates of recovery.¹⁷²

Nevertheless, the Russian economy did not regain its former momentum. When Putin returned to presidency in 2012, several of his announced economic goals proved difficult to achieve, especially after the sharp decline in growth in 2013.¹⁷³ The consequences from the Russian annexation of Crimea lowered growth expectations for the ensuing years, in addition to a dramatic fall in oil prices at the time.¹⁷⁴ The graph below, presented by the World Bank, shows the Russian GDP growth annually in percentages from the 1990s until 2018.

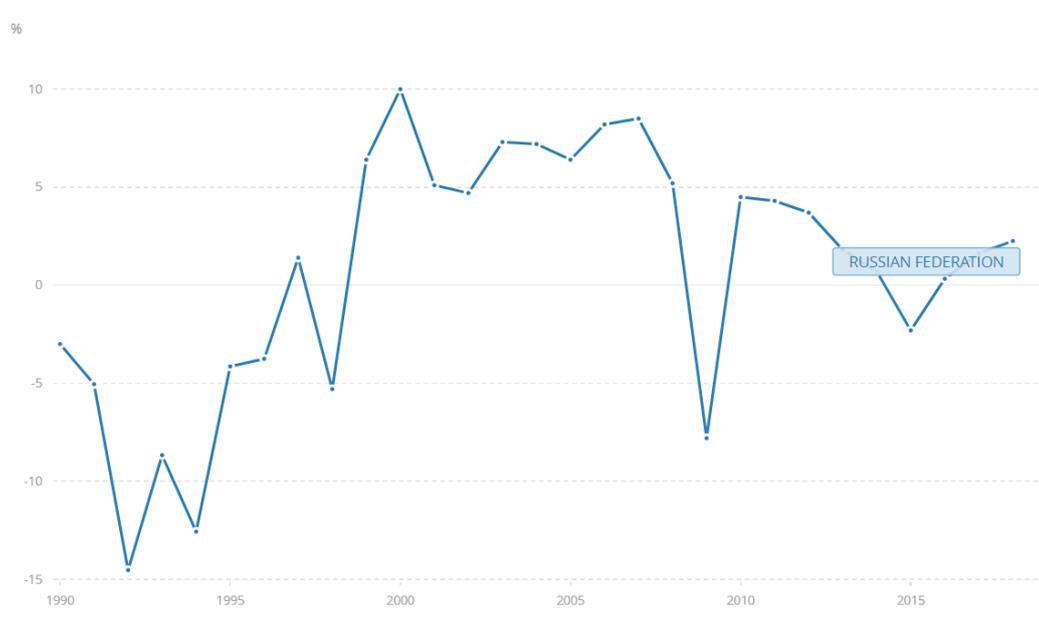


Fig.2 GDP growth (annual %) – Russian Federation. Source: The World Bank.

It is not only a state's economic performance that affects a state's relative power, as neoclassical realism also emphasizes (the strategic use of) natural resources and a state's trade ties. This emphasis on natural resources stems from the geopolitical dimension of the energy sector.

Russia is well endowed with a variety of naturally occurring resources, most notably oil

¹⁶⁹ Philip Hanson, "Analysis of the Russian Economy," *Centre for Security Studies Zurich*, 149 (2014): 2-6, accessed May 08, 2020, <https://www.research-collection.ethz.ch/bitstream/handle/20.500.11850/86464/eth-8840-01.pdf>

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Susanne Oxenstierna, "Russia's defense spending and the economic decline," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7, no.1 (January 2016): 60-70.

¹⁷² Philip Hanson, "Analysis of the Russian Economy," *Centre for Security Studies Zurich*, 149 (2014): 2-6, accessed May 08, 2020, <https://www.research-collection.ethz.ch/bitstream/handle/20.500.11850/86464/eth-8840-01.pdf>

¹⁷³ Susanne Oxenstierna, "Russia's defense spending and the economic decline," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 7, no.1 (January 2016): 60-70.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

and natural gas. Both commodities have been a key part of the Russian economy for years.¹⁷⁵ In 2012, Russia was the third-largest exporter of petroleum and produced an estimated 10.4 million barrels per day whilst consuming roughly 3.2 million bbl/d, meaning that over 7 million bbl/d are exported.¹⁷⁶ Furthermore, Russia holds the world's largest gas reserves, accounting for a quarter of the world's total proven reserves. In 2012, Russia was the largest exporter of gas worldwide.¹⁷⁷

Noteworthy is that Russia has not been hesitant to use its resources for political purposes in contemporary history.¹⁷⁸ On the one hand, Belarus, an important neighbour to the Kremlin, received extensive support from Russia in the 2000s, as Russia nullified much of Belarus' debt and heavily subsidized oil and natural gas export to the country.¹⁷⁹ On the other hand, in December 2005, an economic and diplomatic crisis erupted between Russia and Ukraine after Moscow announced that Ukraine would no longer receive beneficial below-market prices for natural gas, which would lead to a five-fold increase in the price of natural gas. This decision was largely assessed as a punishment for the Orange Revolution, in which pro-Russian candidate Yanukovich lost the election to Viktor Yushchenko. In early January 2006, Russia even cut off natural gas export to Ukraine entirely.¹⁸⁰ Although the crisis was of short duration, as Russia was forced to relent after two days due to diplomatic pressure from Western Europe, its political significance should not be underestimated. The use of natural resources and the energy sector for political purposes was firmly established in the first era of Putin's presidency.¹⁸¹

The next element of importance to a state's relative power is alliances. Juneau points out that alliances are hard to assess due to their fluid nature, and matter relatively little as states generally derive less power from alliances than from internal developments.¹⁸² Nevertheless, alliances of importance to Russia's relative power in 2012 are reviewed.

With regard to international allies, a 19th-century quote by Emperor Alexander III is sometimes facetiously used to describe Russia's self-reliance in the international arena:

¹⁷⁵ Heli Simola and Laura Solanko, "Overview of Russia's oil and gas sector," *BOFIT Institute for Economies in Transition: Policy Brief*, (2017), accessed May 11, 2015, <https://helda.helsinki.fi/bof/bitstream/handle/123456789/14701/bpb0517.pdf?sequence>

¹⁷⁶ No author, "Russia - overview," *Energy Information Administration*, November 26, 2013, accessed May 11, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140308072712/http://www.eia.gov/countries/analysisbriefs/Russia/russia.pdf>

¹⁷⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, "Russia," *The World Factbook*, Central Intelligence Agency, accessed May 6, 2020, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rs.html>

¹⁷⁸ Peter Rutland, "Russia as an Energy Superpower," *New Political Economy*, 13, no. 2 (June 2008): 203-210, accessed May 6, 2020 <https://www.tandfonline-com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2443/doi/pdf/10.1080/13563460802018547?needAccess=true>

¹⁷⁹ Thomas Ambrosio, "Insulating Russia from a Colour Revolution: How the Kremlin Resists Regional Democratic Trends," *Democratization* 14, no. 2 (April 2007): 244.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 232-252.

¹⁸² Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 40.

‘Russia only has two allies: its army and its navy.’ Even president Putin referred to this quote in 2015 but quickly clarified he was not being serious and Russia definitely has foreign allies.¹⁸³ Nevertheless, Russia is not a member of an influential contemporary military alliance like NATO. There is the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), an intergovernmental alliance created in 1992, comprised of six post-Soviet states: Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.¹⁸⁴ The CSTO-forces however have never been called into combat. This organization does provide Russia the reassurance that most of its neighbours are closely aligned with it.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, there are legally binding agreement with Abkhazia and South-Ossetia, self-proclaimed republics recognized by only five UN members. They are obliged to help each other in case of a military attack, which in effect means that Moscow guarantees the protection and security of the republics, as the military capabilities of these republics wouldn’t make a significant addition to the Russian forces.¹⁸⁶

Apart from military alliances, Russia is a member of a multitude of international organizations, most notably the United Nations, in which it holds a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council.

With regard to Syria, it is important to acknowledge that Russia has friendly bilateral relations with Syria and diplomatically supported the Syrian regime of president Bashar al-Assad since the onset of the Syrian civil war. The UNSG briefed the UNSC on the deteriorating situation in Syria in April 2011.¹⁸⁷ It took another five months for the UNSC to meet on the matter, in which France, Germany, Portugal and the UK attempted to pass a non-coercive resolution ‘strongly condemning the continued grave and systemic human rights violations and the use of force against civilians by the Syrian authorities.’¹⁸⁸ Russia, and China, vetoed the resolution, despite the fact they previously expressed grave concerns over the humanitarian crisis in Syria. Russia declared that its veto reflected ‘not so much a question of acceptability of wording as a conflict of political approaches.’¹⁸⁹ The Russian representative reiterated that the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria, as well as the principle of (military)

¹⁸³ No author, ‘‘Putin agrees with emperor that Russia’s only allies are Army and Navy,’’ *TASS*, April 16, 2015, accessed May 12, 2020, <https://tass.com/russia/789866>

¹⁸⁴ Collective Security Treaty Organization, ‘‘From the Treaty to the Organization,’’ *Collective Security Treaty Organization*, accessed May 12, 2020, <https://en.odkb-csto.org/25years/>

¹⁸⁵ Keith Crane, Olga Oliker, Brian Nichiporuk, ‘‘Trends in Russia’s Armed Forces: An Overview of Budgets and Capabilities,’’ *Rand Corporation*, (2019): 68, accessed May 7, 2020, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2500/RR2573/RAND_RR2573.pdf

¹⁸⁶ Oleg Yegorov, ‘‘Who are Russia’s main allies?’’ *Russia Beyond*, January 18, 2019, accessed May 12, 2020, <https://www.rbth.com/lifestyle/329861-who-are-russia-allies>

¹⁸⁷ United Nations Security Council, ‘‘The situation in the Middle East, S/PV. 6524,’’ *United Nations*, April 27, 2011, accessed May 26, 2020, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Syria%20S%20PV%206524.pdf>

¹⁸⁸ Justin Morris, ‘‘Libya and Syria: R2P and the spectre of the swinging pendulum,’’ *International Affairs* 86, no. 5 (2013) 1265-1283.

¹⁸⁹ United Nations Security Council, ‘‘The situation in the Middle East, S/PV. 6524,’’ *United Nations*, April 27, 2011, accessed May 26, 2020, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Syria%20S%20PV%206524.pdf>

non-intervention, in its affairs should be respected. Some scholars suggest that the UN-mandated establishment of a no-fly zone in Libya went too far from Russia's point of view, and played a role in Russia's stance on Syria.¹⁹⁰ Similar expressions have dominated the Security Council's deliberations over Syria, which saw similar non-coercive resolutions being vetoed by both Russia and China. This suggests that Moscow's ties with Damascus run deep, which is also showcased by other elements of the bilateral relationship, for example, the extensive arms trade between Moscow and Damascus, the long history of Soviet-Syrian relations, and Russia's perception of Syria as an ally.¹⁹¹

Furthermore, Ukraine -under president Yanukovich- was perceived as an ally of the Kremlin. Under his presidency, the relationship between Moscow and Yanukovich's government in Kiev can best be described as cooperative. Significantly, after Yanukovich was installed as president in 2010, Ukraine and Russia signed an agreement which guaranteed Russian access to the Sevastopol military base until 2042, which proved its significance later in 2014.¹⁹² The relationship between the Kremlin and Yanukovich('s entourage) traces back to a period in 2005, when Russia tried to secure its interests in Ukraine directly through a formal agreement between United Russia and Yanukovich's Party of Regions, with the aim of restoring the strategic relations between Ukraine and Russia.¹⁹³

The penultimate factor of relative power is a state's popular mood, which is measured by reviewing data on the government's popularity. In his research on Iran, Juneau ran into the fact that its government polls are unreliable, while independent polling is difficult to carry out.¹⁹⁴ To some extent, the same can be said for Russia, as public opinion is hard to measure in authoritarian states.¹⁹⁵ Nevertheless, the parliamentary and presidential elections in late 2011 and early 2012 offer significant insights on the popularity of the Kremlin's main decision maker, as well as data from the Levada Centre, a Moscow-based polling agency.

On the annual United Russia's party congress in September 2011, Russian prime minister Putin accepted then-president Medvedev's proposal of running for president in the

¹⁹⁰ Justin Morris, "Libya and Syria: R2P and the spectre of the swinging pendulum," *International Affairs* 86, no. 5 (2013): 1272.

¹⁹¹ Keith Crane, Olga Olikier, Brian Nichiporuk, "Trends in Russia's Armed Forces: An Overview of Budgets and Capabilities," *Rand Corporation*, (2019): 18, accessed May 7, 2020, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2500/RR2573/RAND_RR2573.pdf; Theodor Tudoroiu, "The reciprocal constitutive features of a Middle Eastern partnership: The Russian-Syrian bilateral relations," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 6, no. 2 (July 2015): 143-152.; Jonathan Marcus, "Why China and Russia rebuffed the West on Syria," *BBC News*, October 5, 2011, accessed May 27, <https://www.odu.edu/content/dam/odu/offices/mun/news-archive/article-2011-oct-5b-bbc.pdf>

¹⁹² Kimberly Marten, "Putin's choices: explaining Russian foreign policy and intervention in Ukraine," *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2015): 190.

¹⁹³ Thomas Ambrosio, "Insulating Russia from a Colour Revolution: How the Kremlin Resists Regional Democratic Trends," *Democratization* 14, no. 2 (April 2007): 245.

¹⁹⁴ Thomas Juneau, *Squandered Opportunity: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 70.

¹⁹⁵ Denis Volkov, "How Authentic is Putin's Approval Rating?" *The Moscow Carnegie Center*, July 27, 2015, accessed May 27, 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/60849>

ensuing year.¹⁹⁶ This announcement sparked resentment among certain groups, as the opposition and some Russians felt that a backroom deal had been foisted on them.¹⁹⁷ Furthermore, legislative elections were held in the beginning of December 2011, which saw United Russia – led by then prime minister Putin – take 49.32% of the vote. This meant a loss of the two-third constitutional majority it held prior to the election, but the party maintained the majority of the 450 seats in the Duma. The election results were controversial and sparked protests, as there were claims that the elections were not free and fair.¹⁹⁸ In December 2011, Moscow saw some of its biggest protests since the 1990s, focusing primarily on United Russia and Putin’s intention to run for president in 2012.¹⁹⁹ Protesters were motivated by the claim that the election process was flawed and united under the slogan ‘For Fair Elections’ - developments that reminded of the Orange Revolution of Ukraine. President Medvedev announced a package of political reforms regarding party registration rules and the rules for governor selection, implicating the Kremlin was not tone-deaf.²⁰⁰ Despite these tumultuous protests, by March 2012, the authorities seemed to have regained their position as Putin was voted into his third stint as president of the Russian Federation with 63.6%.²⁰¹ Putin later portrayed the protests as U.S.-inspired and coordinated.²⁰²

Data from the Levada centre, a widely-recognized Moscow-based polling agency who’s data is often used in academic work on Russian sentiment, supports the abovementioned trends.²⁰³ Putin’s approval rating dropped in 2012 and 2013 into the 60s, as can be seen in the graph below. However, his popularity increased in the ensuing year, which for a significant part has been attributed to Russia’s foreign policy and the developments in Ukraine.²⁰⁴ This sudden increase of popular support in Russia for president Putin reached ‘stratospheric levels’.²⁰⁵ Despite the imposition of broad sanctions by the United States and the European Union, the

¹⁹⁶ No author, ‘Russia’s Putin set to return as president in 2012,’ *BBC News*, September 24, 2011, accessed May 12, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-15045816>

¹⁹⁷ Jim Nichol, ‘Russia’s March 2012 Presidential Election: Outcome and Implications,’ *Congressional Research Service*, March 14, 2012, accessed May 12, 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R42407.pdf>

¹⁹⁸ No author, ‘Russian election: Biggest protests since fall of USSR,’ *BBC News*, December 10, 2011, accessed May 12, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16122524>

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ Grigorii V. Golosov, ‘The 2012 Political Reforms in Russia: The Interplay of Liberalizing Concessions and Authoritarian Corrections,’ *Problems of Post-Communism* 59, no. 6 (November 2012): 4.

²⁰¹ Timothy J. Colton and Henry E. Hale, ‘Putin’s Uneasy Return and Hybrid Regime Stability: The 2012 Russian Election Studies Survey,’ *Problems of Post-Communism* 61, no. 2 (March 2014): 4.

²⁰² Kimberly Marten, ‘Putin’s choices: explaining Russian foreign policy and intervention in Ukraine,’ *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2015): 194.

²⁰³ Alberto Nardelli, Jennifer Rankin and George Arnett, ‘Vladimir Putin’s approval rating at record levels,’ *The Guardian*, July 23, 2015, accessed May 26, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/datablog/2015/jul/23/vladimir-putins-approval-rating-at-record-levels>; Henry E. Hale, ‘How Crimea Pays: Media, Rallying ‘Round the Flag, and Authoritarian Support,’ *Comparative Politics* 50 (April 2018): 369-380.

²⁰⁴ Alberto Nardelli, Jennifer Rankin and George Arnett, ‘Vladimir Putin’s approval rating at record levels,’ *The Guardian*, July 23, 2015, accessed May 26, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/datablog/2015/jul/23/vladimir-putins-approval-rating-at-record-levels>

²⁰⁵ Sam Greene and Graeme Robertson, ‘Explaining Putin’s popularity: Rallying round the Russian flag,’ *The Washington Post*, September 9, 2014, accessed May 26, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/09/09/explaining-putins-popularity-rallying-round-the-russian-flag/>

polling agency recorded an 84% approval rating in August 2014. This has been labelled as a rally-round-the-flag effect, which is a theoretical tenet that states that patriotic sentiment and support for a country's leader or government soar when it is faced with external crises or war.²⁰⁶ It is important to acknowledge that this effect might have been anticipated by the Kremlin, as the president's approval rating increased in prior crisis situations, such as the Moscow theatre siege, the Beslan school hostage massacre and the Russian-Georgian war in 2008.²⁰⁷

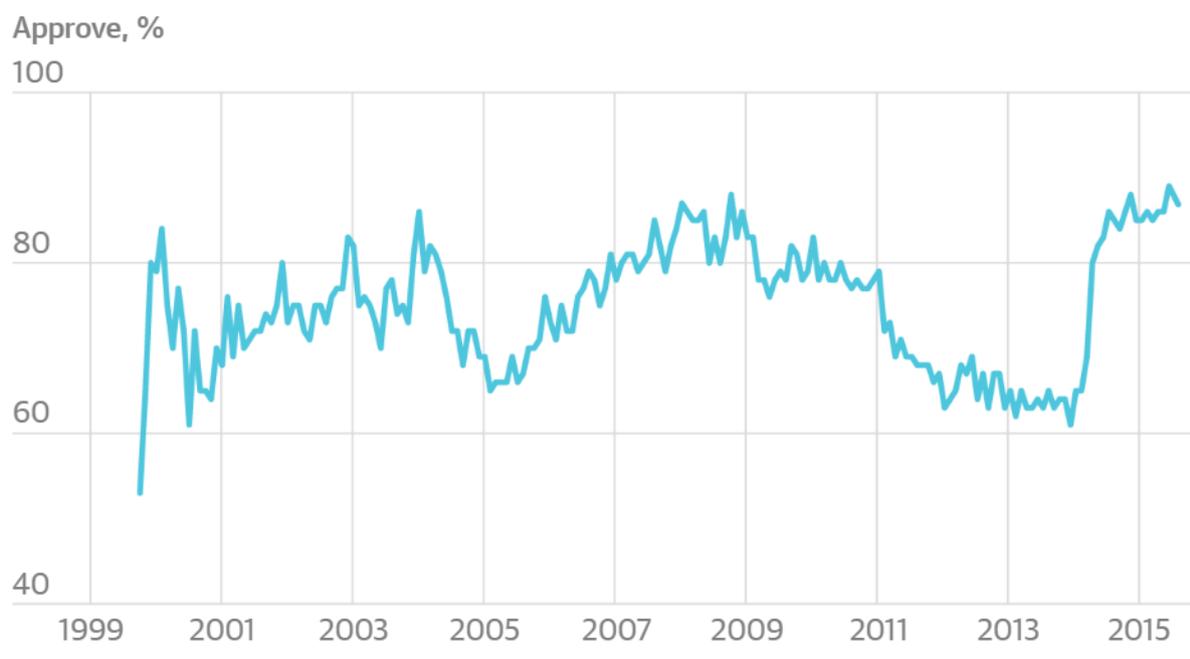


Fig.3 President Vladimir Putin's popularity rating. Source: The Guardian.²⁰⁸

The last element that affects a state's relative power in relation to its foreign policy is its appeal. This overlaps with Joseph's Nye concept of soft power. According to Nye, there are three ways to exercise power – coercion, payment or attraction- and soft power is the latter.²⁰⁹ The idea of soft power tools was formally introduced in the Kremlin's foreign policy doctrine in 2013, and senior Russian leaders, including president Putin have stated that soft power instruments are the most important instruments in Moscow's foreign policy arsenal.²¹⁰ Upon his 2012 re-election, president Putin called on Russian foreign policy makers to incorporate the use of non-

²⁰⁶ Joshua S. Goldstein and Jon C. Pevehouse, *International Relations: Eight Edition* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2008), 144.; Henry E. Hale, "How Crimea Pays: Media, Rallying 'Round the Flag, and Authoritarian Support," *Comparative Politics* 50 (April 2018): 369-380.; Timothy Frye, "Economic Sanctions and Public Opinion: Survey Experiments From Russia," *Comparative Political Studies* 52, no. 7 (2019): 967-994.

²⁰⁷ Alberto Nardelli, Jennifer Rankin and George Arnett, "Vladimir Putin's approval rating at record levels," *The Guardian*, July 23, 2015, accessed May 26, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/datablog/2015/jul/23/vladimir-putins-approval-rating-at-record-levels>

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 41.

²¹⁰ Alexander Sergunin and Leonid Karabeshkin, "Understanding Russia's Soft Power Strategy," *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (2015): 347.

traditional foreign policy instruments in its arsenal, which consequently made its way into the Russian Foreign Policy Concept of February 2013.²¹¹ This document declared:

Soft power has become an indispensable component of contemporary international politics, which is a complex set of instruments for resolving foreign policy tasks backed by potential of civil society, information and communication, humanitarian and other methods and technologies, alternative to a classical diplomacy.

The state's soft power capabilities rests primarily on three resources; its culture, its political values and its foreign policies. Among Russian political leadership, the concept of soft power also includes an economic dimension. Although, as seen before, economic tools can effectively serve as hard power tool too.²¹² Prior to the Ukrainian crisis, the international consulting company Ernst & Young ranked Russia tenth among the top global soft powers.²¹³ The Kremlin tried to promote itself as an attractive economic power, culturally relied on Russian 'high' culture and promoted its education system.²¹⁴ In addition, the role played the Russian Orthodox Church should not be underestimated. A significant part of the Kremlin's focus was aimed at former-Soviet states, as they were viewed as a channel for projecting soft power due their Russian speaking population. In general, Russia's soft power efforts enabled Moscow to improve its bilateral relations within the region, also regarding European countries, prior to the annexation.²¹⁵

The analysis of Russia's relative power at the time of Putin's return to presidency laid the foundation for reviewing the hypothesis central to this section. To that end, the seven factors of Russia's relative power have to be categorized in categories that increased Russia's power, had little effect on it, or decreased Russia's power.

There are three factors that seemingly increased Russia's relative power when Putin returned to presidency in 2012, namely its military power, its appeal and its population, although the effect of the latter seems quite minimal. This increased relative power stems mainly from the fact that Russia modernized its military in the years prior to and in 2012, on the back of increased budgets and state armament programs. Analyses of Russia's military capabilities suggest that it shed the rigid Soviet legacy and became more streamlined, organized and capable. Furthermore, Russia's nuclear arsenal did not change considerably, although it did

²¹¹ Alexander Sergunin and Leonid Karabeshkin, "Understanding Russia's Soft Power Strategy," *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (2015): 349.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 352.

²¹³ Ernst & Young, "Rapid-Growth Markets Soft Power Index," *Ernst & Young*, Spring 2012, accessed May 13, 2020, [https://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/Rapid-growth_markets_Soft_power_index/\\$FILE/Rapid-growth_markets-Soft_Power_Index-Spring_2012.pdf](https://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/Rapid-growth_markets_Soft_power_index/$FILE/Rapid-growth_markets-Soft_Power_Index-Spring_2012.pdf)

²¹⁴ Alexander Sergunin and Leonid Karabeshkin, "Understanding Russia's Soft Power Strategy," *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (2015): 354.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 355.

flex its 'nuclear muscles' in 2012. In addition, Russia's appeal contributed to its relative power as the use of soft power instruments by the Kremlin increased. In the years prior to the annexation, the evidence suggests that Russia improved its regional bilateral relations with its neighbouring countries by emphasizing soft power instruments in its foreign policy strategy. Lastly, Russia recorded a population growth for the first time in 2009 since the turn of the millennium, reversing a negative trend. Other demographic features did not change considerably, although the research did showcase other interesting elements, such as a significant ethnically Russian population in Ukraine, which seemingly steered Russian foreign policy with regard to Ukraine.

The elements that did not affect Russia's relative power significantly in the studied timeframe are geography and alliances. This does not negate the fact that studying Russia's geographic features showcased significant arguments for its interests in Ukraine and Syria. Concerning Russia's alliances, the evidence shows no major shifts but did reveal interesting aspects of the Russo-Ukrainian/Russo-Syrian relationships.

There are elements which seemingly attenuated Russia's relative power, namely popular mood and economic power. Putin's approval rating dropped considerably on the back of the announcement of his running for presidency in 2011, which continued in the following years. However, the annexation of Crimea and Russia's Ukrainian policy saw these numbers soar, with a 84% approval rating in the summer of 2014. The evidence suggests that this might have been anticipated by the Kremlin, as the president's approval ratings increased as well after prior crisis situations. Furthermore, Russia's economic performance did not necessarily contribute to Russia's relative power. Its economy boomed until the international financial crisis of 2008 and despite Russian growth approximating global-average growth levels after the crisis, the economy did not regain its former momentum. Russia's economic growth expectations fell even further after broad sanctions and a dramatic fall in oil prices. However, one specific element of Russia's economic performance has contributed to its relative power, namely its willingness to strategically make use of its natural resources. Russia is amongst the highest exporters of petroleum and natural gas and as the evidence showed, it is not hesitant to use them for political purposes.

In light of the foregoing, it can be concluded that Russia's relative power increased slightly at the time of Putin's return to presidency. The hypothesis that argues that a state is more inclined to exercise its power abroad when its power has increased therefore seems to be applicable to the Russian case study. However, the hypothesis is neither verified or debunked, as it would be presumptuous to make claims on this on the basis of this study alone; further

research is necessary for that.

The answer to this section's sub-question (*to what extent is neoclassical realism able to account for the influence of Russia's relative power on its foreign policy when Putin returned to presidency in 2012?*) is multidimensional. The theory posits seven indicators that measure relative power, and subsequently paves the way for a review of their effect on a state's foreign policy by positing a hypothesis that sheds light on power constructions vis-à-vis its behaviour. In this case, the evidence suggests that Russia's power indeed increased, and therefore it was more likely to exercise its influence abroad, which eventually also happened vis-à-vis Ukraine and Syria. In light of this, it can be concluded that neoclassical realism is to a relatively high degree able to clarify the effect of Russia's relative power on its foreign policy. In addition, the multidimensional power analysis allows for a broader view of a state's power, delving into significant aspects of a state's power in the international arena, such as geographical features, alliances and population. Now it has been established that Russia was inclined to exercise its influence abroad, it is imperative to review the effect of the domestic variables on Russian foreign policy, as the theory suggests that the domestic arena eventually shapes the exact form of foreign policy.

Russia's domestic intervening variables

The key innovation of neoclassical realism is that it applies domestic-level filters, as the theory argues that foreign policy is the product of both systemic- and domestic-level factors. This section will focus on the domestic-level variables, namely; a state's status in the international arena, its regime and its factional politics. The hypothesis at the foundation of this section is *'the domestic arena in which foreign policy is shaped matters, not as a primary cause of intervention but rather a powerful influence on its exact form.'* The insights offered by this hypothesis should enable us to answer the sub-question *'to what extent is neoclassical realism able to explain the effect domestic variables have on Russian foreign policy?'*

In order to review Russia's status in the international arena, discourse used by Russia's political leadership on the subject will be reviewed, as well as theoretical insights from the power transition theory.

In the early days of Putin's first presidency, he attempted to find common cause with the West, most notably with US president George W. Bush after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.²¹⁶ His outreach cooled after two particular events, in which the US failed to recognize what Putin thought would represent Russia's role in the international arena. The first deteriorating action was Bush's unilateral abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, a cornerstone of US-Soviet arms control which emphasized the balance between the two states. Secondly, the US invasion in Iraq without UNSC approval negated Russia's veto power in the UNSC and therefore belittled Russia's status.²¹⁷

The power transition theory, designed and associated mainly with A.F.K Organski, explains foreign policy behaviour by identifying two types of powers; *status quo* and *revisionist* powers.²¹⁸ Status quo powers are those who participated in designing the 'rules of the international game', benefit from them, and are eager to maintain them. Revisionist powers aim at changing the international system, as they focus on attaining a new place for themselves in the international system, commensurate with their power. Present-day Russia is often labelled as a revisionist state.²¹⁹ However, a third concept can be added to the theory, namely *reformist* states, which would suit Russia's status more adequately.²²⁰ Reformist states are unsatisfied with the rules of the game as it stands, but do not seek to radically change them. Rather, they aim to reform the system in order to adapt it to new global realities, such as increased power

²¹⁶ Kimberly Marten, "Putin's choices: explaining Russian foreign policy and intervention in Ukraine," *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2015): 194.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

²¹⁸ Abramo F.K. Organski, *World Politics*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1958).

²¹⁹ Alexander Sergunin and Leonid Karabeshkin, "Understanding Russia's Soft Power Strategy," *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (2015): 350.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

and therefore statuses.²²¹ The discourse used by Russia's political leadership is in support of this categorization.

For example, president Putin, in a speech to the Federation Council in 2005, called the collapse of the Soviet Union 'a major geopolitical disaster of the century'.²²² Two years later, in his address to the Munich Conference on Security Policy, he declared that the unipolar world, with the US as only superpower, is "not only unacceptable, but also impossible in today's world".²²³ In the Foreign Policy Concept of 2008, Russia specifies itself as one of the leading states of the world which 'exerts a substantial influence on the development of a new architecture of international relations'.²²⁴ In the wake of the intervention in Ukraine, the deputy secretary of Russia's Security Council Evgeny Lukyanov declared that Russia and the US needed to sit down and renegotiate the entire post-Cold War settlement.²²⁵ Similar comments have been made but the point is clear; Russian leadership has repeatedly and vociferously expressed its dissatisfaction with the existing US-led international order.²²⁶

Besides these repeated statements of Russian unease with the international order, Russian political leadership also specifically commented on developments in Ukraine in the runup to the annexation of the Crimean peninsula. Several comments have been made on the EU association agreement, as president Putin declared it a 'major threat' to the Russian economy in November 2013.²²⁷ Prime minister Medvedev stated that it will never happen that Ukraine can 'sit well on two chair, enjoy them both and get dividends'.²²⁸ Prior to the events of late 2013, Russia released similar statements, alongside threats in the direction of Ukraine.²²⁹

With regard to military intervention in Syria, the developments in Libya are arguably of significance. Russia abstained from voting on the resolution that established an UN-mandated no-fly zone over Libya. Nevertheless, it was the first UN-mandated military intervention 'taking all necessary measures ... to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack', in a sovereign state against the explicit will of that state's government.²³⁰ Russia

²²¹ Alexander Sergunin and Leonid Karabeshkin, "Understanding Russia's Soft Power Strategy," *Politics* 35, no. 3-4 (2015): 351.

²²² Vladimir Putin, "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation," *President of Russia*, April 25, 2005, accessed May 13, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>

²²³ Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," *President of Russia*, February 10, 2007, accessed May 13, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>

²²⁴ "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," *President of Russia*, January 12, 2008, accessed May 15, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116>

²²⁵ Yuval Weber, "Why the U.S. does nothing in Ukraine," *The Washington Post*, March 18, 2015, accessed May 14, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/03/18/why-the-u-s-does-nothing-in-ukraine/>

²²⁶ Elias Götz and Camille-Renaud Merlen, "Russia and the question of world order," *European Politics* 20, no. 2 (2019), 133-153. (p. 134).

²²⁷ No author, "Putin says Ukraine-EU deal a threat a Russia," *Al Jazeera*, November 27, 2013, accessed May 14, 2020,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2013/11/putin-says-ukraine-eu-deal-threat-russia-20131126235224640384.html>

²²⁸ Robert Nalbandov, *Not by Bread Alone: Russian Foreign Policy under Putin* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 185.

²²⁹ Will Englund and Kathy Lally, "Ukraine, under pressure from Russia, puts brakes on E.U. deal," *The Washington Post*, November 21, 2013, accessed May 13, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/ukraine-under-pressure-from-russia-puts-brakes-on-eu-deal/2013/11/21/46c50796-52c9-11e3-9ee6-2580086d8254_story.html

²³⁰ Justin Morris, "Libya and Syria: R2P and the spectre of the swinging pendulum," *International Affairs* 86, no. 5 (2013) p. 1272.

perceived it as a development ‘which could potentially open the door to large-scale military intervention.’²³¹ Moscow expressed its concerns in this regard, and when developments in Syria started to unfold and the state descended into civil war in 2012, international leaders called for president Assad to resign.²³² In the wake of the Libyan case, Russia maintained its support for the regime in Damascus. This is so, as some have argued, because Putin sees the Middle East through a geopolitical prism, with a certain zero-sum aspect to it; each diplomatic or economic gain for Russia is a defeat for the US.²³³

The abovementioned Russian attitude towards the international order and specifically regarding the prospect of Ukraine signing the association agreement with the EU and the potential loss of an ally in Syria discloses Russia’s status in the international arena. At the time of Putin’s return to presidency in 2012, Russia seemed dissatisfied with its place in the international pecking order and aspired to a greater significance for the Russian federation, which fits the pattern of a *reformist* state as conceptualized by Sergunin and Karabeshkin.

The second domestic-level variable that Juneau incorporates in his causal chain of foreign policy is regime identity. This concerns the national identity and strategic culture of a state, which is conceptualized as a lens through the which the world is interpreted by the Russian foreign policy executive. This requires historical context on the development of Russian regime identity throughout history, with special regard for the Russo-Ukrainian/Russo-Syrian relationship.

Russia’s regime identity is heavily intertwined with its geography, historical identity, and geopolitical and normative claims on state survival. The Russian Empire was situated between several civilisations, such as the European, the East Asian and Islamic. This environment, perceived as constantly perilous, played a part in Russia’s strive to be a regional hegemony.²³⁴ As Russia was under a perceived constant threat due to its landmass and neighbouring empires, the concept ‘of having to look after oneself’ is ingrained in Moscow and the Kremlin. This is arguably why the Kremlin strictly adheres to the Westphalian principle of the absoluteness of state sovereignty. Russia’s political elite believes that it should remain the fundamental ordering principle of the international system, as it also serves as a protectionary measure to prevent foreign powers to mingle in its domestic arena.²³⁵

²³¹United Nations Security Council, “The situation in Libya, S/PV.6498,” *United Nations*, March 17, 2011, accessed May 29, 2020, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Libya%20S%20PV%206498.pdf>

²³²No author, “Syria unrest: World leaders call for Assad to step down,” *BBC News*, August 18, 2011, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14577333>

²³³Talal Nizameddin, *Putin’s New Order in the Middle East*, (London, Hurst, 2013), 122.; Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 29.

²³⁴William Wohlforth, “The Russian-Soviet Empire: A Test of Neorealism,” *Review of International Studies* 27, no.5 (2001): 220-222.

²³⁵Lyudmila Igumnova, “Russia’s strategic culture between American and European Worldviews,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 24, no. 2 (2011): 256-259.

Despite this stance, Russia's political leadership (as well as its society) have difficulties with accepting similar standards for the former Soviet republics. This is illustrated by Moscow's century-long interferences in its claimed sphere of influence, on the basis of self-determination norms turned inside out, which continued into the post-Soviet era.²³⁶ The period after the dissolution of the USSR deserves closer examination, as it arguably is fundamental to the way Russia's perceives its interests.

The dominant narrative is that the West won the ideological confrontation. Russia however was unable or unwilling to let its national identity be defined by this and simply follow the West's path.²³⁷ After the end of the Cold War, NATO-forces kept their presence in Europe, which concerned Russia. Furthermore, Moscow voiced its objections to the alliance's possible growth in the future. Nevertheless, the first round of NATO enlargement took place in 1999, and the expansion was eastwards, creeping closer to Russia. The Kremlin complained from the start.²³⁸ In 2004, another expansion round eastward concerned Russia, as this incorporated the (former Soviet) Baltic states into the alliance. In April 2008, at a NATO summit in Bucharest, the prospect of Georgia and Ukraine joining the alliance was raised and a statement was released which declared that both states would become members.²³⁹ Moscow voiced clear objections and Putin threatened that if Georgia joined NATO, Russia would be forced to create a buffer zone in between them, whereas Ukraine would simply "cease to exist".²⁴⁰ More importantly, Russia did more than expressing dissatisfaction, as an armed conflict arose between Russia and Georgia. In 2008, a large-scale land, sea and air invasion into Georgian territory was launched.²⁴¹ As Georgia became divided and involved in a conflict, NATO-accession would be impossible.²⁴² The Russian response demonstrated its willingness to act when its sphere of influence was endangered.

NATO expansion was not the only thorn in Russia's eye, as the European Union also embarked on expansionist policies regarding Russia's near abroad.²⁴³ Ukraine is a partner within the 'Eastern Partnership' program of the EU, specifically aimed at enhancing ties with

²³⁶ Mark R. Beissinger, "Self-determination as a Technology of Imperialism: The Soviet and Russian Experiences," *Ethnopolitics* 14, no. 5 (2015): 480.

²³⁷ Natasha Kurth, "Russian Foreign Policy," in *The Routledge Handbook of Russian Politics and Society*, ed Graeme Gill and James Young (New York, Routledge, 2011), 421-431.

²³⁸ John Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault: the liberal delusions that provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, 93, (2014): 78.

²³⁹ "Bucharest Summit Declaration," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, April 3, 2008, accessed June 6, 2017,

http://www.nato.int/cps/in/natohq/official_texts_8443.htm

²⁴⁰ Maria Snegovaya, "Ukraine's Crisis is Not the West's Fault," *The Moscow Times*, September 15, 2014, accessed June 8, 2017,

<https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/ukraines-crisis-is-not-the-west-fault-39411>

²⁴¹ Roy Alison, "Russia Resurgent? Moscow's Campaign to 'coerce Georgia to Peace'," *International Affairs*, 84, no. 6 (2008): 1148.

²⁴² Tuomas Forsberg and Graeme Herd, "Russia and NATO: From Windows of Opportunities to Closed Doors," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 23, no.1 (2015): 10.

²⁴³ Florin Pasatoiu "From Obsolete Normative to Realpolitik in the EU and Russia Foreign Policy Relations," *Romanian Journal of European Affairs* 14, no. 4 (December 2014): 13.

the union's six eastern neighbours, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.²⁴⁴ A product of this initiative was the Ukraine-European Union Association agreement, initialled on March 30th 2012 in Brussels, aimed at establishing deeper political, economic and judicial association between the parties. Some developments caused upset in the European camp, specifically related to former prime minister Tymoshenko's trial and deteriorating health. Nevertheless, in March 2013, Stefan Fule, the EU's Commissioner for Enlargement stated that Ukrainian authorities gave their 'unequivocal commitment' to address issues raised by the EU.²⁴⁵ This raised the expectation that the agreement would be signed. However, in November 2013, president Yanukovich suspended preparations for the signing of the association agreement.²⁴⁶ Prior to this decision by Yanukovich, it was Russian president Putin who warned Ukraine that he would retaliate with protectionist measures if Ukraine would sign the landmark trade deal with the EU.²⁴⁷

At a Valdai Club (Moscow-based think-tank) meeting in October 2014, president Putin compared Russian foreign policy regarding its near abroad with a bear, a symbol often used to portray Russia. Putin stated 'the bear won't ask anyone's permission ... it is not going to ... move to other climatic zones, where it is uncomfortable. But it will not give up its taiga to anyone.'²⁴⁸ Developments prior to Yanukovich's decision to steer away from the EU association agreement and statements of Russia's political leadership suggest that Russia intended to maintain Ukraine in its sphere of influence and certainly wasn't able or willing to let other international institutions replace it.

The effect of Russia's interactions in its near abroad on its regime identity have been well-documented, as it is one of dominant factors shaping Russian regime identity. The Syrian case study arguably is an extension of the hostilities with and antagonization of the West. The steadfast support of Putin for Assad arguably stemmed from the possibility to portray Russia's aggressive, decisive and unwavering character, which would be in stark contrast to the US posture in the region.²⁴⁹ This would simultaneously lead to an impression that the US was impotent in the face of Assad's defiance. This overlaps with the previously mentioned

²⁴⁴ European Union External Action Service, "Eastern Partnership," European Union, accessed May 15, 2020, https://eeas.europa.eu/diplomatic-network/eastern-partnership_en

²⁴⁵ Stefan Fule, "Speech – EP debate on the situation in Ukraine", *European Parliament*, March 13, 2013, accessed May 13, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_13_226

²⁴⁶ Will Englund and Kathy Lally, "Ukraine, under pressure from Russia, puts brakes on E.U. deal," *The Washington Post*, November 21, 2013, accessed May 13, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/ukraine-under-pressure-from-russia-puts-brakes-on-eu-deal/2013/11/21/46c50796-52c9-11e3-9ee6-2580086d8254_story.html

²⁴⁷ Alexei Anishchuk, "Putin warns Ukraine over Europe ambitions," *Reuters*, September 19, 2013, accessed May 13, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-ukraine-putin/putin-warns-ukraine-over-europe-ambitions-idUSBRE98I0WB20130919>

²⁴⁸ Robert Nalbandov, *Not by Bread Alone: Russian Foreign Policy under Putin*, (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 185.

²⁴⁹ Brandon Friedman, "Putin's Russia in the Middle East," *Bustan, The Middle East Book Review* 6, no. 2 (2015): 106.

geopolitical perspective on the Middle East with a zero-sum aspect.²⁵⁰

The third unit-level factor is a state's domestic political arena, or as Juneau conceptualized it; a state's factional politics. Kimberly Marten describes the process of Russian policymaking as inherently opaque and unclear.²⁵¹ She contends that decisions are often made behind closed doors by unknown individuals, and not so much within well-defined constitutional bodies or bureaucratic institutions.²⁵² This stems from the Tsarist and Soviet legacy of traditional patron-client relationships between individuals, which has found its way into contemporary politics. Authority in Russia comes through personal connections, cemented through family, neighbourhood and prior school or working experiences. Although all political systems depend to some extent on these networks, the extent and depth of this patronage system in Russia exceeds European or North American counterparts.²⁵³ There have been reports that over time, Putin's personal circle has narrowed, and he predominantly receives advice from a handful of people, especially his old KGB and FSB cronies.²⁵⁴ This is illustrative of Russia's political landscape, which is dominated by Putin's party United Russia.

The Duma, as the Russian parliament is named, is sometimes dismissed as a rubber stamp parliament.²⁵⁵ The executive branch often relied exclusively on United Russia to pass – or block- initiatives. However, there is evidence inconsistent with this description, as Ben Noble and Ekatarina Schulmann showcase.²⁵⁶ They contend that rather than always providing a seal of approval, the Duma serves as an elite battleground, in which ministries, departments, executive agencies and economic interests are the result of intra-elite policy squabbling.²⁵⁷ When the Kremlin wants a show of unity however, something called ‘the Crimean consensus’ becomes apparent on the Duma floor, with ‘opposition’ parties joining the party of power to present an united front.²⁵⁸ Therefore, there is a certain rubber-stamp element to the Duma.

With regard to the Syrian case, the domestic political situation allegedly played a part too, as the military intervention in Syria and Putin's support for Assad can also be interpreted as a powerful message to its domestic opponents, who surfaced during his re-election

²⁵⁰ Talal Nizameddin, *Putin's New Order in the Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2013), 122.; Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 29.

²⁵¹ Kimberly Marten, "Putin's choices: explaining Russian foreign policy and intervention in Ukraine," *The Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2015): 195.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 193.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 195. For an in-depth discussion on post-Soviet political networks, recommended literature is Rasma Karklins, *The System made me do it: corruption in Post-Communist Societies* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2005) or Alena V. Ledeneva, *How Russia Really Works: The Informal Practices that Shaped Post-Soviet Politics and Business* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

²⁵⁴ Henry Meyer and Irina Reznik, "The Chilly Fallout Between Putin and His Oligarch Pals," *Bloomberg News*, January 22, 2015, accessed May 14, 2020 <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-01-22/putin-said-to-shrink-inner-circle-as-ukraine-hawks-trump-tycoons>

²⁵⁵ Ben Noble and Ekatarina Schulmann, "Not Just a Rubber Stamp," in *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics and Policy in Putin's Russia*, ed. Daniel Treisman (Washington, Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 49.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 49-83.

campaign.²⁵⁹

In conclusion, the analysis of Russia's domestic variables laid the foundation for reviewing the hypothesis central to this section, namely; *the domestic arena in which foreign policy is shaped matters, not as a primary cause of intervention but rather a powerful influence on its exact form*. The insights offered by this hypothesis aid the answering of the sub-question "to what extent is neoclassical realism able to explain the effect domestic variables have on Russian foreign policy?"

Russia's (perception of its) status in the international arena showcased considerable unease with the post-Cold War international pecking order, and Russia can be described as a *reformist state*. Russia's political leadership made repeated statements on the necessity of changes of the US-led international order. Regarding Ukraine, Putin commented that the association agreement was a major threat. For Syria, the evidence suggests that Moscow supports the Assad regime as it views the Middle East through a geopolitical prism, in which every gain for Russia is a defeat for the US.

Russian regime identity predominantly developed through its interactions with its near abroad, as the historic context demonstrated. Russia's strategic thinking stems from a period in which 'it had to look after itself', and heavily emphasizes the absoluteness of Russian state sovereignty. This principle is not highly regarded in relation to its perceived sphere of influence. With this in mind, Ukraine's looming pivot to the west in the form of EU and NATO accession antagonized Russia. With regard to the Syrian case, the evidence suggest that regime identity played a role in the context of opening another playing field for thwarting US/Western interests.

The third unit-level variable is Russia's political arena. Russian political processes are described as opaque, with a rather large emphasis on patron-client relationships, and Putin has a small circle of advisors. It has been established that the Duma is not merely a rubber stamp parliament, but can be used as such when deemed necessary. The military intervention in Syria and Putin's support for Assad can be interpreted as a powerful message to its domestic opponents, who surfaced during his re-election campaign.²⁶⁰

In light of the foregoing, I make the case that it can be established that Russia's domestic arena indeed was of heavy influence on its foreign policy, in line with the hypothesis at the foundation of this section. Russia's moderate increase in relative power found fruitful soil in the Kremlin. The Russian political leadership was at considerable unease with the US-led international order. Its regime identity emphasized the significance of maintaining its sphere of

²⁵⁹ Brandon Friedman, "Putin's Russia in the Middle East," *Bustan, The Middle East Book Review* 6, no. 2 (2015): 106.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

influence and furthering its interests whilst simultaneously thwarting American/Western interests. The domestic political arena contributed the formation of Russian foreign policy, as the Duma functioned as a rubber stamp parliament when it was deemed necessary. On the basis of these elements, I therefore contend that the domestic arena indeed might not have been the primary cause of intervention, but it certainly made up a fruitful soil. The answer to this section's sub-question therefore is rather straightforward, as it has been demonstrated that the theory is able to explain the effect the domestic variables have on foreign policy. It offers the tools for an extensive reviewal of the domestic arena. Nevertheless, what did strike me as peculiar was that although this section concerns the unit-level variables, a lot of emphasis remains on international interactions. However, I think this stems from the extensive interplay between the two, which then subsequently fits into the theory's main tenet, which is that system-level and unit-level variables affect each other.

The Russian foreign policy toolkit

Now the formation phase of foreign policy is reviewed on the basis of Juneau's causal chain, this section will focus on the second phase of foreign policy, namely the execution phase. Neoclassical realism rejects, in contrast to other forms of realism, a view of foreign policy dominated by traditional hard power military strategies. The theory emphasizes the incorporation and reviewal of subjective and normative instruments, and thereby claims it allows for a broader understanding of the foreign policy toolkit.²⁶¹ The neoclassical realist foreign policy toolkit exists of traditional military tools, covert military tools, economic strategies, the selective use of international laws and norms, and the use of discourse.²⁶² Firstly, this section will review the use of the abovementioned elements in the two specific instances of Russian foreign policy. Secondly, it will entail a comparative element, as this section aims to clarify whether or not the neoclassical realist lens indeed yields a broader image of foreign policy than traditional realist analyses.

The first instrument of foreign policy is overt military action. With regard to the Ukrainian case study, Russia initiated military exercises and a significant troop build-up along the eastern border of Ukraine, in order to showcase the strength of the Russian military, as well strategically position its forces for a possible land invasion.²⁶³ Simultaneously, it is important to acknowledge that Russia's Black Sea Fleet was already stationed in the Crimean port of Sevastopol, under what became known as the Kharkiv Pact, a continuation of the 1997 Black Sea Partition Treaty signed by Medvedev and Yanukovich in 2010.²⁶⁴ Officials in Kiev told the Russian military to remain within the naval base –failure to do so would be an act of military aggression- as the developments of late February unfolded, in which armed men seized government buildings in Crimea.²⁶⁵ On March 1, 2014, the Duma approved Putin's request to use force in Ukraine ‘until normalization of a socio-political environment in the country’.²⁶⁶ One day later, Russian forces had already tightened their grip and exercised complete control over the Crimean peninsula.²⁶⁷ As late as April 17, Russian foreign minister Lavrov stated there

²⁶¹ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, “Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens,” *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 2-22.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid, 10.; Shaun Walker, “Russian takeover of Crimea will not descend into war, says Vladimir Putin,” *The Guardian*, March 4, 2014, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/04/ukraine-crisis-russian-troops-crimea-john-kerry-kiev>

²⁶⁴ Luke Harding, “Ukraine extends lease for Russia's Black Sea Fleet,” *The Guardian*, April 21, 2010, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/apr/21/ukraine-black-sea-fleet-russia>

²⁶⁵ Andrew Higgins and Steven Erlanger, “Gunmen Seize Government Buildings in Crimea,” *The New York Times*, February 27, 2014, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/28/world/europe/crimea-ukraine.html>

²⁶⁶ Vladimir Radyuhin, “Russian Parliament approves use of army in Ukraine,” *The Hindu*, March 1, 2014, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/world/russian-parliament-approves-use-of-army-in-ukraine/article5739708.ece>; Gabriela Baczynska, Pavel Polityuk and Raissa Kasolowsky, “Timeline: Political crisis in Ukraine and Russia's occupation of Crimea,” *Reuters*, March 8, 2014, accessed February 14, 2020, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-timeline-idUSBREA270PO20140308>

²⁶⁷ Gabriela Baczynska, Pavel Polityuk and Raissa Kasolowsky, “Timeline: Political crisis in Ukraine and Russia's occupation of Crimea,” *Reuters*, March 8, 2014, accessed February 14, 2020, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-timeline-idUSBREA270PO20140308>

were no spare armed forces in the territory of Crimea besides the Black Sea Fleet, as that would be contrary to Russia's international obligations.²⁶⁸ It is significant to note that Russian officials have gone to considerable lengths to argue that prior to and even after the Duma approval, armed men in Crimea were not official Russian servicemen.²⁶⁹ This will be reviewed later under the element of covert military action.

With regard to the Syrian case study, Russia's overt military operations are less obfuscated, although its targets were often disputed in the international arena. The Russian military operation in Syria began on September 30, 2015 after the regime in Damascus made an official request for military help and the Duma granted approval.²⁷⁰ At this point, Russian involvement pertained to air raids and bombings.²⁷¹ Russia deployed over 50 aircrafts in Syria.²⁷² Moscow insisted in the early days of the intervention that its air strikes targeted ISIS.²⁷³ However, the Army of Conquest, or Jaish Al-Fatah in Arabic, a loose combination of armed rebel groups opposed to the Assad regime, was also targeted.²⁷⁴ This trend continued throughout the studied timeframe. By December 2015, US officials privately admitted that Russia, while maintaining a relatively light footprint, achieved its goal of stabilising the Assad regime.²⁷⁵

The airstrikes were criticized as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International contended that Russian fighter jets targeted civilian targets and hospitals, and caused civilian casualties.²⁷⁶ Allegedly, Russian military used inherently indiscriminate and internationally banned weapons such as cluster bombs.²⁷⁷ In March 2016, Putin stated Russia's military

²⁶⁸ Sergey Lavrov, "Speech by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his answer to questions from the mass media summarising the meeting with EU, Russia, US and Ukrainian representatives, Geneva, 17 April 2014," *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, April 17, 2014, accessed May 30, 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/vistupleniya_ministra/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQUMdqBY/content/id/64910

²⁶⁹ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, "Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens," *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 11.

²⁷⁰ Shaun Walker, "Russian Parliament grants Vladimir Putin right to deploy military in Syria," *The Guardian*, September 30, 2015, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/30/russian-parliament-grants-vladimir-putin-right-to-deploy-military-in-syria>;

²⁷¹ Andrew Osborn and Phil Stewart, "Russia begins Syria air strikes in its biggest Mideast intervention in decades," *Reuters*, September 30, 2015, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia/russia-begins-syria-air-strikes-in-its-biggest-mideast-intervention-in-decades-idUSKCN0RU0MG20151001> ; Paul Rogers and Richard Reeve, "Russia's intervention in Syria: Implications for Western Engagement," *Oxford Research Group*, October 14, 2015, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk/russias-intervention-in-syria-implications-for-western-engagement>

²⁷² No author, "Russian Air Force in Syria deploying over 50 planes & choppers – Defense Ministry," *Russia Today*, October 1, 2015, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.rt.com/news/317179-russian-airforce-syria-aircraft/>

²⁷³ No author, "Syrian crisis: Russia air strikes 'strengthen IS'," *BBC News*, October 2, 2015, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-34431027>

²⁷⁴ Ben Hubbard, "A look at the Army of Conquest, a Prominent Rebel Alliance in Syria," *The New York Times*, October 1, 2015, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/02/world/middleeast/syria-russia-airstrikes-rebels-army-conquest-jaish-al-fatah.html>; Anne Barnard and Andrew E. Kramer, "Russia Carries Out Airstrikes in Syria for 2nd Day," *The New York Times*, October 1, 2015, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/02/world/middleeast/russia-syria-airstrikes-isis.html>

²⁷⁵ Jonathan Landay and Warren Strobel, "U.S. sees bearable costs, key goals met for Russia in Syria so far," *Reuters*, December 29, 2015, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-syria/u-s-sees-bearable-costs-key-goals-met-for-russia-in-syria-so-far-idUSKBN0UB0BA20151228>

²⁷⁶ No author, "Russia/Syria: Extensive Recent Use of Cluster Munitions," *Human Rights Watch*, December 20, 2015, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/20/russia/syria-extensive-recent-use-cluster-munitions>; No author, "Syria: Russia's shameful failure to acknowledge civilian killings," *Amnesty International*, December 23, 2015, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/12/syria-russias-shameful-failure-to-acknowledge-civilian-killings/>;

²⁷⁷ No author, "Russia/Syria: Extensive Recent Use of Cluster Munitions," *Human Rights Watch*, December 20, 2015, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/20/russia/syria-extensive-recent-use-cluster-munitions>

intervention had largely achieved its objectives, and ordered its ‘main part’ to be withdrawn from Syria.²⁷⁸ This is not to say that Russia’s engagement in Syria ended altogether. In fact, it turned out to be mostly rhetoric. Russia’s military maintained its presence, supplemented with various private military companies. Furthermore, Russian military advisors trained pro-regime militias, the presence of servicemen at the Port of Tartus was increased, and as late as 2018, Putin stated ‘we are not planning a withdrawal of these military forces.’²⁷⁹

The second instrument in the neoclassical realist foreign policy toolkit are covert military tools, which are operations with the aim of permitting plausible denial by the sponsor. As stated before, Russia has gone to great lengths to deny the use of its military during the annexation of Crimea. However, it was later established that Russian soldiers in unmarked uniforms (to render the appearance that they were recruited from the local population) surrounded and occupied several critical infrastructures, such as the Simferopol International Airport, military bases in Crimea and the Crimean Parliament.²⁸⁰ They were dubbed ‘little green men,’ as the Russian troops masqueraded as Crimean self-defence forces wore unmarked green uniforms. The invasion of these forces allowed for the swift grab of control of the Crimean peninsula, only a day after the Duma allowed for the use of force in Ukraine in early March.²⁸¹ Initially, Putin claimed that the men in green were not part of the Russian armed forces but spontaneous ‘self-defence groups’ who may have acquired Russian-looking uniforms from local shops.²⁸² Russia’s denial of active involvement in Crimea continued despite contradicting evidence. It was not until after the formal incorporation of Crimea into Russia, that Putin’s narrative shifted. On April 17, he publicly acknowledged that Russian servicemen have been involved in the events of Crimea, and backed the so-called Crimean self-defence forces.²⁸³ This is significant, as it showcases Russia’s desire to downplay its military involvement.²⁸⁴

²⁷⁸ No author, “Syria conflict: Russia’s Putin orders ‘main part’ of forces out,” *BBC News*, March 14, 2016, accessed May 24, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35807689>

²⁷⁹ Joseph Daher, “Three years later: the evolution of Russia’s military intervention in Syria,” *The Atlantic Council*, September 27, 2018, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/three-years-later-the-evolution-of-russia-s-military-intervention-in-syria/>; Christian Lowe, Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber, Tom Balmforth, “Putin says Russia not planning to withdraw from Syria yet,” *Reuters*, June 7, 2018, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-syria/putin-says-russia-not-planning-to-withdraw-from-syria-yet-idUSKCN1J31JD>

²⁸⁰ Mark R. Beissinger, “Self-determination as a Technology of Imperialism: The Soviet and Russian Experiences,” *Ethnopolitics* 14, no. 5 (2015): 483.; Andrew Higgins and Steven Erlanger, “Gunmen Seize Government Buildings in Crimea,” *The New York Times*, February 27, 2014, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/28/world/europe/crimea-ukraine.html>

²⁸¹ Mark R. Beissinger, “Self-determination as a Technology of Imperialism: The Soviet and Russian Experiences,” *Ethnopolitics* 14, no. 5 (2015): 483.

²⁸² Julian Borger, “Putin offers Ukraine olive branches delivered by Russian tanks,” *The Guardian*, March 4, 2014, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/04/putin-ukraine-olive-branches-russian-tanks>

²⁸³ Vladimir Putin, “Direct Line with Vladimir Putin,” *President of Russia*, April 17, 2014, accessed May 30, 2020, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796>; Alexei Anischchuk, “Putin admits Russian forces were deployed to Crimea,” *Reuters*, April 17, 2014, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-putin-crimea/putin-admits-russian-forces-were-deployed-to-crimea-idUSL6N0N921H20140417>

²⁸⁴ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, “Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens,” *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 11.

The situation in Eastern and Southern Ukraine 2014 initially developed to a certain extent in a similar manner, yet took a vastly different course in the long run. Pro-Moscow activists barricaded themselves inside government buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk, and hastily organized referenda in order to repeat the Crimean situation. The indications that Moscow fuelled the ensuing conflict by providing intelligence, military equipment and mercenary troops to the pro-Russian separatists are beyond doubt.²⁸⁵ While the rebel groups have taken actions independent of Russian instructions, they would be unable to function without Russian weapons and directions.²⁸⁶ Putin once more denied that Russian forces nor instructors were, or had been sent into Eastern Ukraine, as Russia ‘is not a party in the internal Ukrainian conflict.’²⁸⁷ However, the retreat of Ukrainian forces in the fall of 2014 coincided with Russian military vehicles crossing the border and numerous Russians ‘independent volunteers’.²⁸⁸ These tactics reveal a strategy in which Moscow provides backing and support for Ukrainian separatists, while being able to maintain plausible deniability, thereby allowing Russia to avoid further sanctions.²⁸⁹ The conflict in these areas is still on-going.

With regard to Russia’s modus operandi in Syria, the covert military instrument was not as evident in the studied timeframe as in Ukraine. This might stem from the fact the Russians received an official invitation to militarily support the Assad regime. Nevertheless, its use of private military companies (PMCs) is controversial.²⁹⁰ Officially, Russia participated in the Syrian conflict with only a small number of special forces on the ground and the Kremlin denies that its troops are involved in regular ground combat operations.²⁹¹ However, it was established that Russian fighters, in the form of contractors or mercenaries, hired by PMCs play a more substantial role in ground combat than Kremlin says they do. Despite their unofficial status, these companies operate in coordination with Russian military, are treated in hospitals reserved for the Russian military and get privileges in Russia normally available to serving soldiers.²⁹² This phenomenon is illustrated by an amendment in law no. 53 by the end of 2016.. After this

²⁸⁵ No author, ‘‘The Ukraine Crisis: Boys from the Blackstuff,’’ *The Economist*, April 16, 2014, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2014/04/16/boys-from-the-blackstuff>

²⁸⁶ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, ‘‘Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens,’’ *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 11.

²⁸⁷ Shaun Walker, Oksana Grytsenko, and Leonid Ragozin, ‘‘Russian soldier: you’re better clueless because the truth is horrible,’’ *The Guardian*, September 3, 2014, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/03/ukraine-soldier-youre-better-clueless-because-truth-horrible-moscow-ilorovaysk>

²⁸⁸ Mark R. Beissinger, ‘‘Self-determination as a Technology of Imperialism: The Soviet and Russian Experiences,’’ *Ethnopolitics* 14, no. 5 (2015): 483.; Maria Tsvetkova and Anton Zverev, ‘‘Ghost soldiers: the Russians secretly dying for the Kremlin in Syria,’’ *Reuters*, November 3, 2016, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-insight-idUSKBN12Y0M6>

²⁸⁹ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, ‘‘Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens,’’ *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 11.

²⁹⁰ Willi Neumann and Steffen Dobbert, ‘‘Putin’s Mercenaries,’’ *Zeit Online*, February 6, 2017, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2017-02/russia-vladimir-putin-military-mercenary-soldiers-syria>

²⁹¹ Maria Tsvetkova and Anton Zverev, ‘‘Ghost soldiers: the Russians secretly dying for the Kremlin in Syria,’’ *Reuters*, November 3, 2016, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-insight-idUSKBN12Y0M6>

²⁹² Ibid.

amendment, the law stated that anyone who completed basic military service or is a reservist, is to be considered a member of the Russian military if that person ‘prevents international terrorist activities outside the territory of the Russian federation.’²⁹³ Given the almost universal completion of military service after finishing school in Russia, this law pertains to almost all Russian men and therefore permits the deployment of Russian mercenaries around the world. In short, it allows for augmenting the Russian military with private military companies.²⁹⁴

In addition to military instruments, Russia deployed several economic instruments to force concessions from Ukraine. In June 2014, the Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom cut off gas supplies to Ukraine.²⁹⁵ This was perceived as an aggressive manner to create instability within the country, and is part of ‘a general plan for the destruction of Ukraine’, Ukrainian prime minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk stated.²⁹⁶ Furthermore, Russia banned the import of various Ukrainian products, including a ban on the chocolates produced by the company of then Ukrainian presidential candidate Poroshenko.²⁹⁷

With regard to Syria, the perspective shifts. The abovementioned economic strategies pertain to inflicting harm on a foreign economy, which would in every way contradict the Kremlin’s goals in Syria. Therefore, this section is irrelevant in this regard. What however should be mentioned is that the military intervention was labelled as a way to showcase Russian weaponry, specifically the SU-34 fighter jets and cruise missiles.²⁹⁸

The fourth instrument in the foreign policy toolkit is the selective use of international laws. By challenging or co-opting international laws, Russia attempted to justify its actions. Russia is a signatory to the 1994 Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, which aimed to ensure the respect for the independence, sovereignty and borders of Ukraine. Furthermore, the signatory parties (US, UK, and Russia) would refrain from economic coercion.²⁹⁹ Russia’s invasion and annexation of Crimea represent clear violations of this treaty. However, Russia did not simply ignore the Budapest Memorandum. Instead, it claimed that the rightful Ukrainian government was ousted via a *coup d’état*, and therefore the binding agreements were not in

²⁹³ Willi Neumann and Steffen Dobbert, ‘‘Putin’s Mercenaries,’’ *Zeit Online*, February 6, 2017, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2017-02/russia-vladimir-putin-military-mercenary-soldiers-syria>

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, ‘‘Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens,’’ *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 11.

²⁹⁶ Neil Macfarquhar, ‘‘Gazprom Cuts Russia’s Natural Gas Supply to Ukraine,’’ *The New York Times*, June 16, 2014, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/17/world/europe/russia-gazprom-increases-pressure-on-ukraine-in-gas-dispute.html>

²⁹⁷ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, ‘‘Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens,’’ *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 11.

²⁹⁸ Joseph Daher, ‘‘Three years later: the evolution of Russia’s military intervention in Syria,’’ *The Atlantic Council*, September 27, 2018, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/three-years-later-the-evolution-of-russia-s-military-intervention-in-syria/>

²⁹⁹ Belarus, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Russia, United States of America, United Kingdom, ‘‘Memorandum on Security Assurances,’’ December 5, 1994, accessed May 30, 2020, <http://www.pircenter.org/media/content/files/12/13943175580.pdf>

effect.³⁰⁰ Furthermore, Russia claimed the military intervention in Crimea was conducted in order to protect the human rights of ethnic Russians within Crimea, including from genocide, despite the lack of evidence that would substantiate such claims.³⁰¹ In addition, the International Criminal Court in The Hague released a report in 2016, labelling the situation in Ukraine an armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and the annexation an on-going state of occupation. Russia signed the organization's statutory treaty in 2000, but never ratified it. Russia responded by simply withdrawing from the treaty, with the official narrative being that the organization failed to live up to the expectations of the international community.³⁰²

The Crimean referendum granted legitimacy for the annexation of Crimea, at least from a Russian perspective. The referendum was largely considered illegal by the international community as it would be in violation of both the Ukrainian constitution and international law.³⁰³ Russia supported it on the basis of principles such as self-governance, and democratic will of people.³⁰⁴

From a judiciary perspective, Russia is in a much less precarious situation with regard to Syria, as its military presence was legitimized by the official request from the host-nation. Conversely, Moscow has often condemned Western interventions that lacked UNSC approval or host-state invitation, for example Kosovo and Iraq. Russia appealed to international law to confront other states, as the United States repeatedly endured. Washington does not have Damascus's consent for its operations and thus acts "illegitimately," as Foreign Minister Lavrov often claimed.³⁰⁵ Moreover, Assad's invitation offered the opportunity to reinforce Moscow's position on regime change and intervention, as Russia assisted a sitting government to enforce its writ over its own territory.³⁰⁶ On the one hand, this gave Russia the opportunity to substantiate its claims concerning the Libyan intervention. On the other hand, it gave Putin a chance to stand for law and order and legitimate leaders against mutinies.³⁰⁷

The last element is the strategic use of discourse in order to justify its actions and established a narrative in favour of Russian interests. With regard to Ukraine, the discourse can

³⁰⁰ No author, "Ukraine - The end of the beginning?" *The Economist*, March 6, 2014, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2014/03/06/the-end-of-the-beginning>

³⁰¹ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, "Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens," *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 13.

³⁰² Robbie Gramer, "Why Russia Just Withdrew from the ICC," *Foreign Policy*, November 16, 2016, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/11/16/why-russia-just-withdrew-from-icc-putin-treaty-ukraine-law/>; No author, "Russia withdraws from International Criminal Court," *The New York Post*, November 16, 2016, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://nypost.com/2016/11/16/russia-withdraws-from-international-criminal-court/>

³⁰³ Mark Mardell, "Ukraine crisis: 'illegal' Crimean referendum condemned," *BBC News*, March 6, 2014, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26475508>

³⁰⁴ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, "Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens," *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 13.

³⁰⁵ Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, "Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria," *Rand Corporation* (2018): 8, accessed May 30, 2020, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3180.html

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

be divided into three separate categories, namely nationalistic, geopolitical and western/liberal.³⁰⁸

Russia's primary justification for its foreign policy regarding Ukraine has been the perceived existence of security threats against ethnic Russians, which make up for a significant part of the Crimean peninsula. This reasoning has been extended towards Russian-speakers as well, which allowed for a continuation of the same argument regarding eastern Ukraine.³⁰⁹ Russia's argument that it must offer security and protection to its ethnic kin in Ukraine and other regions around the Black Sea is underpinned by the idea that they belong to the same community as Russia itself, which in itself stems from concept of 'Novorossiya'. This political slogan underwent renewed prominence in the course of separatist uprisings in Crimea and eastern and southern Ukraine.³¹⁰ There is a two-fold dynamic to this, as this allows the Kremlin to use nationalistic rhetoric to incite protests, whilst also allowing for the argument that they have no control over the separatists, as they are not under direct control.³¹¹

With regard to the geopolitical discourse, Russia justifies its actions as Ukraine was encircled by a hostile environment by various institutions, most notably the NATO and the EU. In Russian discourse, they aimed to incorporate Ukraine in its sphere of influence and Russia's actions were portrayed as merely defensive.³¹²

Russia's political leadership has co-opted Western and liberal arguments to justify their actions, most notably by emphasizing the right to self-determination. The evidence however suggests its use of these norms is perceived as opportunistic and disingenuous, as Russia emphasizes self-determination only in cases where territories wish to be a part of Russia. With regard to this justification in light of the annexation, the vast majority of states had little difficulty to recognize the Russian invasion as a gross violation of international law. Russia however maintained the pretence that the Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea were simply, as UN Ambassador Churkin stated, "a shining example of the right to national self-determination being put into practice".³¹³ In Putin's speech celebrating the annexation of Crimea by Russia, he argued specifically that it was justified by "the right of nations to self-determination" and that the Crimea's secession from Ukraine is nothing different from the

³⁰⁸ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, "Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens," *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 13.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Fiona Hill, "How Vladimir Putin's World View Shapes Russian Foreign Policy," in *Russia's Foreign Policy: Ideas, Domestic Politics and External Relations*, ed. David Cadier and Margot Light (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 42-64.

³¹¹ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, "Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens," *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 13.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Mark R. Beissinger, "Self-determination as a Technology of Imperialism: The Soviet and Russian Experiences," *Ethnopolitics* 14, no. 5 (2015): 484.

secession of Ukraine from the USSR or Kosovo from Serbia.³¹⁴

The use of discourse with regard to the military intervention in Syria is different, as the situation did not allow for the incorporation of nationalistic elements, which were so significant regarding Ukraine. Neither was it necessary to emphasize western/liberal principles, as its military presence was already justified by the host-nation's invitation. The intervention was predominantly framed and justified on the basis of two pillars, fighting international terrorism and geopolitical considerations.

The rhetoric surrounding the intervention in Syria predominantly emphasized the immediate threat ISIS posed, and grounded the intervention as a preventive measure in the fight against terrorism.³¹⁵ Estimates at that time were that around 7000 foreign fighters from the former Soviet Union were in ISIS, and the caliphate even declared its own governate in the North Caucasus region.³¹⁶ The intervention was framed as a preventive measure, as Russian media claimed that if the government of Assad fell, terrorist organizations would get resources to move to the borders of Russia. This was controversial, as it was established that Russia did not only strike ISIS targets, but also areas controlled by armed opposition forces.³¹⁷

With regard to the geopolitical discourse, Russia justified its intervention on two separate but intertwined elements. Firstly, Russia emphasized the fact it was invited by the Syrian regime in power, which is elaborated upon in the previous section. Furthermore, in a televised interview broadcast in the midst of October 2015, Putin declared Russia's goal as 'stabilising the legitimate power in Syria and creating conditions for political compromise'.³¹⁸

To summarise, the course of Russian foreign policy showcased that Russia has made use of a broad array of tools to achieve its foreign policy goals and justify its actions. This includes overt and covert military tools, as well as economic instruments. However, nationalistic appeals, geopolitical discourse, and co-optation of international law and Western norms are also part of the foreign policy toolkit. Such rhetoric is mainly exploited by Russia to attain its geopolitical goals while minimizing the risk of retaliation by others in the international arena.³¹⁹

³¹⁴ Bridget Kendall, "Crimea crisis: Russian President Putin's speech annotated," *BBC News*, March 19, 2014, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26652058>

³¹⁵ Olga Razumovskaya, "Putin's Domestic Media Blitz Focuses on Islamic State Threat in Russia," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 2, 2015, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/putins-domestic-media-blitz-focuses-on-islamic-state-threat-in-russia-1443805304>; Hugo Spaulding, "'5 huge myths about Russia's military intervention in Syria,'" *Business Insider*, December 1, 2015, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/5-huge-myths-about-russias-military-intervention-in-syria-2015-11?international=true&r=US&IR=T>

³¹⁶ Hugo Spaulding, "'5 huge myths about Russia's military intervention in Syria,'" *Business Insider*, December 1, 2015, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/5-huge-myths-about-russias-military-intervention-in-syria-2015-11?international=true&r=US&IR=T>

³¹⁷ Azmi Bishara, "Russian Intervention in Syria: Geostrategy is Paramount," *Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies* (2015): 11, accessed May 30, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep12697.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ab7ce9474f8cf527c710082807bf09dca>

³¹⁸ No author, "Syria conflict, Putin defends Russia's air strikes," *BBC News*, October 12, 2015, accessed May 30, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34502286>

³¹⁹ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, "Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens," *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 15.

These examples showcase that Russia does no longer rely on traditional military tools only to achieve objectives.

Now the course of Russian foreign policy vis-à-vis Ukraine and Syria has been analysed through a neoclassical realist lens, it is time to review to claim that the theory makes regarding its ability to offer a broader view of the foreign policy toolkit than previous branches of realism did.

In light of the foregoing, I make the case that it indeed is established that neoclassical realism does offer a broader, more comprehensive view of the foreign policy toolkit. Previous branches of realism would have emphasized Russia's overt and covert military tools in these two instances, and possibly incorporated economic pressure instruments.³²⁰ Where neoclassical realism in fact sets itself apart, is by reviewing the selective use of laws and especially the strategic use of discourse. Neoclassical realism provides more nuance to account for the vast array of both military and non-military strategies contemporary states use in order to achieve their objectives. The strategic use of norms and discourse should be understood within the context of realist objectives.³²¹ Russia intervened in Ukraine and Syria in pursuit of realist objectives, as would be demonstrated by any other realist branch. However, Russia's behaviour deviated from traditional realist tenets, as Russia used normative appeals, economic strategies and indirect coercion strategies alongside military means to achieve its objectives.³²² The value of applying the neoclassical realist perspective to the execution phase of foreign policy puzzles thereby is demonstrated.

³²⁰ Ibid, 9.

³²¹ Ibid, 10.

³²² Ibid, 15.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to review to what extent neoclassical realism was able to account for the causes and course of Russian foreign policy vis-à-vis Ukraine and Syria between 2012 and 2016. To come to an answer, the theory's main tenets were elaborated upon, upon which Russian foreign policy was reviewed in the two specific instances through a neoclassical realist lens.

The theoretical framework showcased an elaborate overview of neoclassical realism's main tenets. Thereafter, the theory's perspective on the formation of foreign policy was outlined. Neoclassical realism posits a causal chain of foreign policy in which a state's foreign policy is first and foremost driven by a state's relative power. However, these power capabilities are filtered through its domestic variables, which consequently leads to foreign policy. With regard to the execution of foreign policy, neoclassical realism incorporates subjective and normative elements in the foreign policy toolkit, which are left out in traditional realist analyses.

In order to review the effect of relative power on Russia's foreign policy, the seven indicators of a state's relative power (geography, population, military power, economic power, alliances, popular mood and appeal) were reviewed in Russia's regard. The hypothesis at the foundation of this section was that if a state's power increases, the more likely it is to exercise its influence abroad; conversely, if a state's power declines, it is less likely to be assertive in the international arena. The evidence suggested a moderate increase in Russia's relative power, predominantly stemming from increased military power, as well as positive demographic trends and increased use of soft power instruments prior to the annexation of Crimea. Furthermore, Putin's popularity was decreasing as a result of the announcement that he would run for presidency in 2012. This can also be perceived to have contributed to Russia's assertive foreign policy, as a rally-round-the-flag effect could have been anticipated by the Kremlin. The answer to this section's sub-question is that neoclassical realism was indeed able to clarify the effect of Russia's relative power on its foreign policy to a relatively high degree, as Russia's relative power increased, and therefore was more likely to exercise its influence abroad.

The subsequent section reviewed the ability of neoclassical realism to account for the influence of the domestic-level variables. To that end, Russia's status in the international arena, its regime identity and the Russian domestic political arena were elaborately discussed in light of the two cases of Ukraine and Syria. In light of these findings, I made the case that the domestic arena was indeed of heavy influence on Russian foreign policy, as the theory hypothesized. Russia's moderate increase in relative power found fruitful soil in the Kremlin,

as Russia's political leadership was at considerable unease with the US-led international order, its regime identity emphasized the importance of maintaining its sphere of influence and Russia's political arena can be seen as an accelerator of the above due to its characteristics. The ability of the theory to actually explain the effect of the domestic variables was established. However, it was noted that there was an emphasis on international interactions in this section on unit-level variables.

Subsequently, the ability of neoclassical realism to account for the execution of Russian foreign policy was examined. The theory incorporates non-military instruments such as economic coercion tools, the selective use of international law and strategic use of discourse in the analysis of foreign policy, in contrast to previous branches of realism. Applying these concepts to Russian foreign policy vis-à-vis Ukraine and Syria gained interesting insights into Russia's overt and covert military instruments, its strategic use of national resources to force concessions from Ukraine, the co-optation of international law to justify the interventions in both Ukraine and Syria and the strategic use of discourse to establish a narrative in favour of Russia's actions. In light of the foregoing, I make the case that it indeed is established that neoclassical realism does offer a broader, more comprehensive view of the foreign policy toolkit. Russia intervened in Ukraine and Syria in pursuit of realist objectives, as would be demonstrated by any other realist branch. However, Russia's behaviour deviated from traditional realist tenets, as Russia used normative appeals, economic strategies and indirect coercion strategies alongside military means to achieve its objectives.³²³ Neoclassical realism provides more nuance as it account for a vast array of both military and non-military strategies contemporary states use in order to achieve their objectives.

The main research question of this thesis is: *To what extent can neoclassical realism explain the causes and course of Russian foreign policy regarding Ukraine and Syria between 2012 and 2016?* On the one hand, the theory seems able to disclose the causes for Russia's military interventions in Ukraine and Syria, by emphasizing both system-level variables (its moderate increase in relative power) and unit-level variables (this moderate increase found fruitful soil in the Kremlin, as demonstrated before). Furthermore, the value of applying the neoclassical realist lens to the execution phase of foreign policy has been demonstrated in the third section of the analysis. Where previous realist branches would have focused predominantly on military (both overt and covert) actions, the theory allows for the incorporation of multiple subjective elements, most notably the strategic use of discourse and

³²³ Michael E. Becker, Matthew S. Cohen, Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus, "Reviving the Russian empire: the Crimean intervention through a neoclassical realist lens," *European Security* 25, no. 1 (2016): 9.

selective use of international law. A research program inspired by neoclassical realism shows promise for explaining not just why a state pursues a certain foreign policy, but also how it acts upon these objectives in a fairly wide context. Scholars and policy-makers who aim to explain or even predict a state's foreign policy in the contemporary international arena would gain from taking into account both system- and unit-level variables, as well as the military and non-military strategies of states to achieve its goals.

On the other hand, this thesis knows its limitations, and acknowledges the fact that it would be presumptuous to verify the hypotheses outlined by neoclassical realism on the basis of these case studies. Therefore, I would argue that in light of the above, it would benefit the theory to amass more studies of foreign policy through a neoclassical realist lens. It is hoped this research may lead to further inquiries regarding Russian foreign policy with regard to different cases, or even other states' foreign policy in the contemporary era.

Neoclassical realism has, in my view at least, certainly potential to explain foreign policy in a broader, comprehensive way, because of its focus on systemic- and unit-level variables, and its emphasis on both military and non-military tools. It showed that tenets of previous realist branches have not lost relevancy, but have simply been incorporated in a broader, more comprehensive theory. In the introduction I referred to US secretary of state John Kerry, as an example of a statesman who assumed that norms and laws have gained stronger international relevancy and Russia's approach to international relations was antiquated. This study has shown that realist tenets are not antiquated, they have been merely incorporated into a more hybrid foreign policy toolkit. As John Mearsheimer stated: "the crisis shows realpolitik is relevant and states that ignore it do so at their own peril."³²⁴ Neoclassical realism is able to showcase the relevancy of realpolitik, as well as the significance of norms and laws.

³²⁴ John Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault: the liberal delusions that provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, 93, (2014): 78.

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