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An Inquiry into the Nature of Russian Foreign Policy: The Quest towards Ontological Security

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MSc Thesis – Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences

An Inquiry into the Nature of Russian Foreign Policy: The Quest towards Ontological Security?

MSc Political Science, International Organisation

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Introduction

On Christmas Day in 1991, the flag of the Soviet Union was lowered in Moscow and replaced by that of the newly declared Russian Federation, an act which signified the final moments of the sixty-nine-year USSR experiment with state communism. In the following days, the whole of the Russian state went through a considerable metamorphosis. To replace the old Soviet institutions, a return was made to the old symbols of the Russian state as it had existed before the Revolution of 1917, including a switch from the CCCP symbol of the USSR above the Grand Kremlin Palace to the double-headed Eagle symbol, the same one that features in the Russian Coat of Arms (Hill, 2018). These processes signalled a new beginning for Russia, but much less clear was the role it should now take in the world. Even though Russia had inherited all the official duties of the USSR, such as its permanent seat at the UN Security Council, it did not have a clear role to play as it pertained to the global system of state actors and international relations (Hansen, 2016). That is to say, with the Cold War over and therefore the rivalry with the US that it entailed, which road was Russia supposed to take?

The immediate answer was taken by the first President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, who saw the Western model of liberal democracy as a system to be replicated in Russia (Hill, 2018). As a result, steps were taken on both sides which signalled the way towards closer ties and cooperation; the US and European countries initially looked to include Russia in a Euro-Atlantic security alliance, and as for Russia, it took steps to liberalise its markets and bring its social welfare programmes into line with those of the European Community (Hill, 2018; Lemon, 1998). This optimistic era of good relations was not to last forever. With the degrading situation in Russia, marked by substantial increases in crime, inequality, and social unrest, a change in direction was soon to appear (Alexseev, 2003; Fedorov, 2002). Vladimir Putin succeeded Boris Yeltsin, and the new era of Russian foreign policy began. Since then, relations between the West and Russia have been steadily worsening, marked by key events in last 15 years which form the basis of this thesis.

Research Goal and Question

Explaining Russia's foreign policy is a complicated task at best, since in terms of traditional realist theories of International Relations (IR), the decisions it makes are not always

explainable (Hansen, 2016). The problem is that Russia's actions in the post-USSR era took a definitive route away from cooperation with the West and towards confrontation. Both sides ultimately caused this state of affairs, but the reasoning is not immediately clear. However, the concept of ontological security allows for an uncovering of state behaviour whereby risk of confrontation with other states is sought and routinised in its relationships (Mitzen, 2006). The use of force by Russia in conflictual scenarios with neighbouring countries, such as Georgia, brings this into focus. As such, the question becomes: to what extent can use of force in Russian foreign policy be considered a result of ontological security seeking, during the presidencies of Putin and Medvedev? In order to answer this, three key events during this time span will be considered: the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, the Annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the Syrian conflict (2015-present). The analysis of these events is undertaken under a constructivist approach which contends that military conflict is above all a political action which is practiced within a known conceptual context and that is discursively framed by those involved with it. As such, this approach examines how the Russian government under Putin and Medvedev has used conflict to reconstitute Russian identity and vice versa; in other words, how Russian identity affects the decision to enter into conflict. Knowing the relationship between conflict and identity in this way is highly significant as it can serve to better inform the discourse which surrounds Russia's relations with the West and ways in which cooperation is to be achieved (Fabian, 2019; Hansen, 2018). In other words, the more that is understood of the building blocks of Russian foreign policy, the better will be the ability to engage in constructive dialogue which reduces the chances of conflict.

Literature Review

This thesis' goal is to seek to make sense of Russian foreign policy decision-making under the presidencies of Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, whilst attempting to conclude to what extent this can be effectively done with the concept of ontological security as a point of reference. As such, the literature surrounding Russia's state behaviour since the fall of the Soviet Union should be examined. The first Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, was understood to be sympathetic to the West and in favour of integrating Russia with its western neighbours (Nalbandov, 2016). Scholars thus describe a period where Russia engaged in a rapprochement towards the West, whereby market liberalisation and social reforms took place (Hill, 2018; Lemon, 1998). Importantly, this signalled a significant shift in Russian foreign policy, as a loss of power emanating from the collapse of the USSR coincided with the retreat as a global superpower – so much so that Russia was prepared to accept the West's position as the standard to be matched (Kutchins & Zevelev, 2012). Noticing that this approach put Russia in a position of relative weakness, whereby its foreign policy was essentially non-existent in any sovereign way (Nalbandov, 2016), a feeling of resentment became noticeable among a growing number of people in the political sphere (Ibid.). This began a shift away from the goal of assimilation to the West's values and instead the birth of a national debate about the meaning of Russia and the ways in which it is unique (Hill, 2018). Importantly, the idea that Russia was like any other European state quickly became abandoned. Instead, Steele (2008) noted that Russians began to stop trying to emulate their European neighbours and realise its difference in culture. This led to a realisation that the Russian and Western ideas of 'Self' were not the same (Hansen, 2016).

Many studies have considered the relationship between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War (Akchurina & Sala, 2018; Eberle & Handl, 2020; Fabian, 2019; Freire, 2020; Hansen, 2016; Hill, 2018; Kubicek, 1999; Morales, 2018; Pacher, 2019). Among the various subjects of analysis, that of understanding the shift of Russian foreign policy away from détente and friendship with the West towards hostility and antagonism is of particular interest. It must be noted that scholars are divided between where the blame ultimately lies (Hansen, 2016, Hill, 2018). However, the area of commonality is that both the West and Russia have engaged in activities and behaviours that have reinforced the differences between the two and worked to entrench the adversarial nature of their relationship (Hill, 2018, Morales, 2018, Pacher, 2019).

Scholars have looked at the period in Russia after the Cold War, during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, and noted the turmoil and uncertainty that affected Russian society (Fedorov, 2002; Hill, 2018, Lee & Connolly, 2016; Sussman, 2017). It is in this time that Russia attempted a move towards liberal democracy, understood as a decidedly Western concept, and therefore gravitate itself to its Western neighbours. Unsurprisingly, the fact that this coincided with bleak prospects for most Russians led to this becoming an unpopular endeavour, as it became to be viewed as a causal relationship (Hansen, 2016; Hill, 2018).

Resulting from this, a redirection in Russian behaviour began to develop (Hill, 2018). As explained by Mitzen (2006), states can engage in risky behaviours if it allows them to maintain a clear idea of identity. Since the election of Vladimir Putin, scholars have noted an emergence of a more aggressive Russian foreign policy, which aims at protecting its 'sphere of influence' and maintaining its standing in the international order (Akchurina & Sala, 2018; Bolton, 2021; Edenborg, 2016). This naturally begs the question as to whether Russian foreign policy of this manner can be understood through the lens of the attempt to forge a strong sense of identity after a period of relative instability, and not solely the typical understanding of aggressive foreign policy as a rational realist exercise in power-seeking in a non-ideological 'realpolitik' sense.

Additionally to this, scholars have coupled Russia's foreign policy with other concepts, such as information warfare and hybrid warfare (Bolton, 2021; Porotsky, 2018; Di Resta et.al, 2018; Linvill & Warren, 2020). Hereby, a link is made between Russian activities and its attempt to sow discord and division in Western countries, most notably in the US. Whether through the spread of 'fake news' on popular social media, or through state-sponsored hacking, scholars have argued that these actions constitute threats to the ontological security of its targets (Bolton, 2021; Di Resta et.al, 2018; Hansen, 2016). On the other hand, certain scholars have questioned the validity of terms such as 'hybrid warfare' as explaining Russian behaviour, arguing instead that this is just a Western attempt at understanding what it considers surprising actions by Russia (Fabian, 2019; Gartzke, 2013; Janicatova and Mlejnkova, 2021). Viewed this way, Russia has not engaged in any coordinated, innovative way, rather the results of Russian strategy have left Western commentators searching for an explanation, hence the theory of hybrid warfare. In any case, the under-studied nature of Russia's actions and how it relates to its own ontological conception of its sense of self, as well as the sense of a significant 'other, represents the area this thesis will explore.

Furthermore, the corpus of literature surrounding Russia's foreign policy and indeed its relationship with the West since the fall of the Soviet Union can be largely described as existing through a realist framework. That is to say, this topic has been covered extensively under the theory and therefore assumptions of realism, especially offensive realism, whereas other approaches, such as ontological security and its constructivist predisposition, are in need of further elaboration (Mitzen, 2006; Hill, 2018). While realism does serve to explain some phenomena related to Russian behaviour, a solely realist approach lacks an appreciation of the nuances that can impact state behaviour as it relates to the historical context and identity. Due to this, a study which takes a constructivist outlook and examines whether Russian foreign policy can also be understood through a constructivist and ontological security framework, will be a beneficial addition to the academic literature on this topic. This thesis can thus be understood as adding to the existing realist research on the topic, rather than necessarily opposing it.

Theoretical Framework

In order to better understand the importance of ontological security, a clear conceptual definition must be given. The concept of ontological security in International Relations originally owes its existence to the work of psychologists, most notably that of Robert David Laing in 'The Divided Self' (1969). The idea is such that individuals develop early in their lives a clear sense of their individuality and the role they play in the world. In this manner, ontological security can be obtained when an individual feels a sense of order to one's life, such that existential questions are answered: who am I? where am I going? etc. (Giddens, 1991). In the field of International Relations, however, this concept is scaled up to the level of the nation-state. Similarly to how humans seek to have a unified idea of 'self' in the world, so too do states have this desire. More importantly for states is the aspect of ontological security which considers the role of maintaining structure in relationships with others. With this in mind, ontological security can be seen to develop once relationships with others are stable, or 'routinised', which also leads to states becoming attached to its relationships (Mitzen 2006: 342). This concept has been used to explain series of state behaviours which otherwise seem illogical, if it were not for the reasoning of routinisation (Kinvall & Mitzen, 2017). Often overlooked in favour of traditional, often realist understandings of IR, ontological security considerations are argued to play a major role in determining state behaviour (Mitzen, 2006). As such, scholars have looked at the implications of the pursuit towards ontological security, and some scholars have argued that the desire for ontological security is strong enough to make states occasionally risk their physical security, which is primarily manifested as the protection of the territorial integrity of the state (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2005; Zarakol, 2016). On the other hand, states are understood to engage in disruptive behaviours, aimed at weakening the ontological security of other countries, which can be seen most notably in the examples of interference in the elections of other states, such as the Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election through the use of disinformation and cyber-attacks (Bolton, 2021; Fabian, 2019; Porotsky, 2018). Since ontological security is all about maintaining a consistent and coherent sense of self, risky behaviours become easily explainable. In the case of the security dilemma, scholars have reasoned that states may choose to not engage in de-escalation behaviours since it would constitute uncertainty and threaten its ontological security (Kinvall & Mitzen, 2017; Mitzen, 2006; Bolton, 2021; Steele, 2008). Moreover, adversarial relationships may have become routinised and are therefore favourable to a more friendly relationship, from an ontological point of view. Conversely, behaviours that increase risk, such

as heightened armament, may be preferable as it conforms with the familiar actions of a state which provides it with a routine narrative conforming to its sense of self (Hansen, 2016, Mitzen, 2006). In this way, the security dilemma of realist scholars is disputed, as the assumption that ‘security-seeking’ states can end up in conflict as a result of this dilemma is not necessarily applicable. In other words, it may be that states assumed to be ‘security-seeking’, through the use of increased military strength and alliance building, are actually seeking to solidify the routinised, conflictual relationships it has and thereby booster its own ontological sense of self.

This thesis employs the concept of ontological security as a conceptual framework upon which to analyse the question of whether Russian state behaviour can be understood through this lens. However, this theory carries less academic weight in the traditional understanding of IR due to the relatively fewer number of articles and studies which consider its effects (Sellers, 2016). Despite this, ontological security considerations have been seen to play a significant role in numerous state behaviours, especially in conflict situations (Bolton, 2021; Edenborg, 2017; Morales, 2018). Traditional realist explanations in IR state that a security dilemma is produced in global politics since there is uncertainty between states and a desire for physical security (Mitzen, 2006). However, when engaging with an ontological security perspective, this theory is challenged to some extent, since states are understood to engage in ‘risky’ behaviour which may ferment conflict, not as a result of security-seeking in a physical sense, but rather the desire for a continued narrative of Self and routinisation of relationships with Others. This can be due to the certainty and consistent narrative of self that may be produced from a relationship that is consistently hostile. As such, conflict would then be explained as arising from the certainty it brings to the states involved, rather than from uncertainty, as proposed by realist theory.

Importantly, ontological security is able to provide explanations in areas of IR where a realist understanding would have more difficulty. Due to a lack of acknowledgment of state identity being socially constructed, realists are not as easily able to deal with the differing cases of ‘risky’ behaviour inherent in ongoing conflicts which is related to identity itself (Ejdus, 2018; Kinvall & Mitzen, 2018; Mitzen, 2006). Indeed, realism in this regard does provide an understanding in a lot of cases, but there are some assumptions which do not apply to all scenarios and must therefore be challenged (Hansen, 2016). Conversely, a constructivist outlook which takes into account the need for ontological security is able to see persistent conflict as a result of an inter-state relationship that is built and reproduced by a sense of certainty and a clear understanding of the roles each member plays in maintaining ontological

understandings of their existence on the world stage. Given this, Russian foreign policy during the presidencies of Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev can be investigated under this theoretical perspective with the aim of concluding whether decisions to engage in conflictual situations against neighbouring states (Georgia, Ukraine), and to use hostile behaviours in regard to its western border (i.e. military build-up on the Ukrainian border), are motivated by ontological security concerns.

Methodology and Case Selection

As conceptualised in the theoretical framework, the theory of ontological security entails that states seek to maintain a clear sense of self-identity, as well as a knowledge of their place in the world vis-à-vis other states (Mitzen, 2006). In order to examine this in terms of Russia's behaviour in the 21st century, three key events will be analysed, since the topic of Russian Foreign Policy is far too broad on its own: the Russo-Georgian War (2008), the Annexation of Crimea (2014), and the Syrian Conflict (2015-present). The question is to what extent the Russian state behaviour during these events can be understood through the lens of ontological security and how the desire for ontological security may have informed its decision-making. These cases have been chosen for the use of force that was present during them, with all three events involving numerous casualties on all sides, as well as for the fact these events put Russia at odds with the West and can therefore be understood as risky endeavours. As explained previously, states can be considered risk-takers in multiple theories of IR, with constructivism allowing for considerations of 'identity fulfilment' as possible explanations. Additionally, this allows for an analysis which considers examples of the use of force in foreign policy/defence by Russia and therefore ways in which security (whether it be ontological or physical) were put into question.

This thesis will employ a discourse analysis of government documents to inquire to what extent ontological security considerations constitute a determinant of state behaviour. In this research, government sources include those of high-level decision-makers such as ministers, as well as the president and prime minister at the time of the events (Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev). The documents include speeches, parliamentary debates, foreign policy papers, interviews (conducted by TV channels), and diplomatic correspondences. The majority of these are obtained via the Kremlin website of the President of the Russian Federation, and by the official Government of the Russian Federation archives. Additionally, Russian foreign policy think-tanks will be used to build an understanding as to the general climate of the Russian debate with regards to its place in the world at the time of each of the conflicts. Finally, secondary sources, such as journal articles, will be used to aid in the contextual understanding of the discourses existing at the time of the conflicts under analysis.

This thesis will build upon a discourse analysis research method due to the fact that such a method aids in the discovery of systems of meaning which underly the discourse of those public officials under enquiry (Milliken, 1999). Using the theoretical framework of this thesis, the

system of meaning reflects a search for a routinised relationship with a clear ‘Other’, and the need for a consistent conception of the ‘Self’, whereby this research focuses on the logic pertaining to the relationship between these two objectives as they are manifested by state behaviour. As a result, patterns will be searched for wherein references to Russia’s relationship with the West is invoked. In accordance with the diverse national narratives, for example using that of Ilya Muromets, this research will look at whether there are these types of discourses that reveal ontological security considerations in the national debates and narratives surrounding the events in question. The presence of these would allow for a conclusion to be made that the concept of ontological security plays a considerable role in understanding Russian foreign policy actions and should therefore be considered in future applications to engaging with Russian actions and behaviours on the international stage.

Despite the fact that I do not speak Russian, I will use online translation tools for the primary sources in Russian, as well as verifying these translations with native speakers. This allows me to access data which would have been otherwise unavailable to me and will make my research more valid, as I can expand my analysis to include non-Western sources. Having said this, it is understood that this thesis risks being biased in its approach as the majority of secondary sources will be English language materials. Additionally, some sources are English-language translations of Russian primary accounts, such as translated interviews or speeches. In this cases, only well-known publishers (including newspapers and journals) will be used. A number of documents are sourced directly from the Kremlin website, which provides English translations of various speeches from the Russian president and can therefore be trusted as legitimate translations.

Analysis

As explained previously, Russian identity went through a period of uncertainty after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The president at this time, Boris Yeltsin, declared that a problem Russia had to deal with was that it no longer had any clear ideology, as opposed to previous stages in Russian history (Breslauer and Dale, 1997). Furthermore, the leaders at this time expressed a desire for the new Russian identity to follow a new path of partnership and cooperation with the West, and for the Soviet Union to represent Russia's significant Other (Hansen, 2016). Yeltsin's visit to the US Congress in 1992 served as an expression of willingness to join the club of liberal democracies, wherein he declared "I am proud that the Russian people have found strength to shake off the crushing burden of the totalitarian system" (Yeltsin, 1992). This conciliatory approach, which was matched with liberal market reforms at home and the significant success of the Liberal Democratic Party in the national elections, did not lead to the kind of societal revival that it was assumed to by the post-Soviet leadership. Instead, the social welfare system collapsed, crime levels soared, oligarchs gained significant power, and the ordinary citizen was neglected (Alexseev, 2003). According to the US Ambassador to Russia during Bush's presidency, the runaway inflation and shortages in essential goods made life in Russia resemble anarchy rather than a modern democracy (Russia Today, 2021). This unsurprisingly did not appeal to the Russian people, who failed to see any improvements since the transition from the communism of the Soviet Union to the capitalism of the new Russian Federation. It is also important that during these early years of the 1990s, there was already a turn towards conflictual relations with the West from certain policy-makers in the Russian establishment (Hansen, 2016). This largely came from the fact that certain voices in Russia claimed that the West kept insisting that it defeated the USSR in the Cold War and humiliated Russia (Razyvayev, 1992). This fits in with the long-held theme in the construction of the Russian identity since Imperialist Russia, and coincides with the belief popular in Russia that the West as a collective views Russia as a threatening and power-hungry force, looking to continuously expand and can therefore not be trusted (Krashenninikova, 2007 in Hansen, 2016).

As a result of these beliefs, it is not surprising that the rapprochement with the West was short-lived. Instead, Putin was elected President and the relationship between the two blocs became less and less amicable (Hill, 2018). In order to understand the Russian identity, which forms the basis of its ontological security, this perpetual conflict with the West cannot be overlooked.

Indeed, it is one of the two fundamental parts of Russia's ontology, its 'Other'. Regarding the 'Self', Russia has had to define and re-define this concept over the course of its history, no more so than after the Cold War.

Having examined the documents, speeches, and other pertinent material as explained in the methodology section of this thesis, a number of themes have been discerned in the Russian leadership discourse relating to its use of force in the 21st century. These are: Defender of the wider Russian peoples, Sovereign Democracy, Commemorative Maintenance, and Victim of Western contempt. The following analysis can therefore be understood on the basis of these discovered themes. The Georgian and Ukrainian conflicts that were investigated were found to have evidence of ontological security considerations through the narrative exposed by Russian leaders. However, the use of ontological security considerations was less evident in the discourses surrounding the Syrian conflict, even if there are themes present in the discourse which are also applicable to the other conflicts; this is discussed below.

Defender of the wider Russian peoples

***"We are one people. Kiev is the mother of Russian cities."** – Vladimir Putin, in a 2014 address to the Russian Duma about the Crimean situation*

During the Georgian and Crimean conflicts, the narrative of Russia as a defender of its people comes into play. Using a historical narrative, actions taken in these regions are justified by reference to the existence of a common Russian interest and history. For example, the Russian annexation of Crimea was naturally not portrayed as an annexation at all, but rather a natural reincorporation of an old Russian territory into its federation. In his primary speech to the Russian parliament after the disputed referendum in Crimea leading to its 'reunification' with Russia, Vladimir Putin spoke of the historical ties between the two and declared "Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia" (Putin, 2014a). More importantly than this simple statement was the way that the past was framed. Invoking the USSR and its leadership who decided to add Crimea and Sevastopol to the Republic of Ukraine in the 1950s, Putin explains that this was done without any consideration of the ethnic makeup of the regions' population, nor their desires. As such, it was not legitimate. Therefore, this provided a sense of justification for accepting Crimea back into the Russian federation, not as a separate state, but as a sort of long-lost brother re-joining the family. It is also during this speech, that Putin unveiled his logic of the wider Russian state outlook that informs their foreign policy. Again invoking the USSR past, Putin contends that its dissolution caused a tragic cutting up of the 'Russian nation' of

peoples. About the day the USSR collapsed he said, “Millions of people went to bed in one country and awoke in different ones... while the Russian nation became one of the biggest, if not the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders (Putin, 2014a). This exemplifies the way in which the Russian leadership views now independent, sovereign states and justifies interference with them by virtue of the presence of people of Russian origin in these states. In other words, the Russian nation is greater than just the Russian Federation. Importantly, this implies deeper interests in Crimea than just a simple power-hungry analysis of great-powers. Instead, there is a notion of historical ties invoked to bind the two regions together.

The same logic is applied to the Georgian conflict in 2008, where the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia were the battlefield between separatists (backed by Russian forces) and the Georgian military. During this time, the President of Russia was Dmitry Medvedev whilst Putin served as the Prime Minister. It should be noted that the contemporary constitution in Russia precluded Putin from serving three consecutive terms as President; this has now been changed (BBC News, 2020). Describing the situation in Georgia was done by highlighting the struggle of the South Ossetians and Abkhazians against an oppressive Georgian state. Medvedev expressed to the Russian parliament that “the Georgian leadership...unleashed an armed conflict victimizing innocent civilians” (Medvedev, 2008). This justifies military action to protect those seen as victims of unacceptable violence. Indeed, Medvedev claimed that the decisions and behaviour of the then-Georgian president Saakashvili had ruined the chances for a peaceful coexistence of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Georgia. It is then not surprising that Russia is one of the very few states to recognise South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent republics, similar to that of Crimea before its integration into the Russian Federation. Doing so was justified as being the “only way to save human lives” in those regions formerly under Moscow’s control (Medvedev, 2008). This conflict always served as an example, alongside the Crimean conflict, as times when Russia acted in complete opposition to its Western counterparts, such as NATO, the EU, and the US (Nalbandov, 2016). It is important to note that the lives in question are those considered historically linked to Russia, and therefore their protection is seen as important by those in the Russian leadership, using the narrative of a larger ‘Russian nation’.

Sovereign Democracy

During the years where Russia was searching for a cohesive identity, the idea of a system of ‘sovereign democracy’ was brought up (Hansen, 2016). It comes from the devastating consequences of 1990s market liberalisation on the Russian economy and subsequently the lives of Russian people. Claiming that trying to emulate the West was wrong because Russia is fundamentally a different kind of society and therefore requires institutions and systems suited specifically to it, the idea then emerged of a ‘sovereign democracy’ wherein democracy itself is not a universal and singular concept, but rather existing on a spectrum and necessarily different in countries that practice it (Ivanov, 2007 in Hansen, 2016). Acting often in tandem with this line of reasoning is the insistence that the West is hypocritical in the way it pressures countries to follow its own brand of liberal democracy, whilst regularly contravening these values (Freire, 2020). This is seen in speeches and declarations from Russian leaders, often at international summits. For example, at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Vladimir Putin made a speech wherein he confronted the West’s (and by this he largely meant the US) inability to see its hypocrisy. “Russia – we – are constantly being taught about democracy. But for some reason those who teach us do not want to learn themselves” (Putin, 2007). This alludes to the contemporary climate at the time of his speech, when Russia had already begun its shift away from the West and vice versa, all the while the US was engaged with its so-called ‘War on Terror’. Again to reinforce his point, the following rhetoric: “The United States has overstepped its national borders in every way... well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?” (Putin, 2007).

The main narrative at play here is that the global system imposed by the US and by implication, the West, is not suited for Russia and many other countries across the globe. It is argued that the West destabilises and causes security problems, rather than helping solve them. Putin reaffirmed this narrative in 2015, at the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly, by deriding the policies of the US and EU by “exporting revolutions, except now these are ‘democratic’ revolutions” (Putin, 2017). In a further agitation to the US and its allies, regarding the worsening situation in Syria at the time, Putin asked: “I’m urged to ask those who created this situation, do you at least realize now what you’ve done?” (Putin, 2015). This speech served to entrench the position of Russia as opposed to the US and the West, especially in terms of the Syrian conflict which was at its beginnings. Indeed, over the following years, Russia has increasingly become involved on the side of the Syrian government, to which the US, NATO and its allies are opposed (Souleimanov & Dzutsati, 2018). This serves to reinforce the idea of sovereign democracy as the idea of Russia being against the West is made more firm.

Victim of Western contempt

Another theme discovered in the discourse of Russian leaders in the 21st century is the cementation of an identity that is formed with a sense of victimisation at the forefront. This is related to the other themes insofar as its identity is an amalgamation of all of the themes. That being said, particular links can be made to the idea of sovereign democracy discussed above. These two themes became cemented after Russia and the West became more detached in the beginning of the 2000s, a time in which it is argued by Russian leaders that the West took actions to provoke Russia and limit its influence in the world (Hill, 2018). It is important to highlight the interrelatedness of historic events with current events and the effect they have in forming beliefs. For example, the period in the mid-2000s saw a deterioration in the European security order and ultimately the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 (Hill, 2018). In this time, European leaders voiced concerns about a perceived democratic deficit in Russia (Mouritzen & Wivel, 2012). This helped form the discourse of sovereign democracy by Russian voices, serving as a counterpoint to accusations from the West (Hansen, 2016). On the other side, there were growing complaints from the Russian leaders about US deployments of missile defence systems in Europe. This was seen as evidence that the West continues to view Russia as a threat and refuses to think in any other way, even though the Cold War was over and the two sides were nominally no longer enemies (Hill, 2018). Indeed, even as late as 2014, Putin describes this frustration in a speech to the Russian parliament about the Crimean situation by explaining that the sanctions imposed on the USSR in the Cold War are still hurting Russia today: “Today, they have been formally eliminated... in reality, many limitations are still in effect” (Putin, 2014a). In any case, the grievances that Russia had about perceived mistreatment were evident in and around the time of the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 (Putin, 2014b). Preceding this event, the Kosovan independence declaration, which was overwhelmingly supported by the West and vehemently opposed by Russia, led to further discord between the two sides (German, 2019).

The narrative of victimisation at the hands of the West as it relates to perceived slights since the end of the Cold War has acted to provide the Russian leadership with a common ground to unite Russian people under a collective identity (Edenborg, 2017). By doing so, the idea of Self and Other is made clearer and therefore it is made ontologically secure.

Commemorative Maintenance

The final theme prominent in the Russian discourse in foreign policy and identity debates is that of commemorative maintenance. This refers to the way in which Russia's past, especially its Soviet past, is being used to reinforce the notion of 'us' and utilise positive aspects to foster unity, and doing this by neglecting or refashioning more negative aspects of its history (Forest & Johnson, 2002). A key part of this is the history of the Second World War. Not only does this serve as a basis upon which to draw positive ideals of heroism and strength, but it also adds to the narrative of victimisation. This is due to Russia having been attacked from a 'Western' country, Germany, thereby justifying the claim that the West is a natural adversary of Russia (Hansen, 2016). Not only this, but the post-USSR history is used to this effect. In an interview with the American broadcaster NBC, Putin complained about NATO expansion after the collapse of the USSR and therefore the end of the Cold War. "What was the point of expanding NATO to the east?... Did Russia after the USSR collapsed present any threat to the US or European countries? We voluntarily withdrew our troops from Eastern Europe" (NBC, 2021). This comes on top of numerous allusions to a continuous threat to Russia from Western countries, from NATO expansion and missile defence systems close to the Russian border. "These threats are not becoming fewer but are only transforming and changing their appearance. These new threats, just as under the Third Reich, show the same contempt for human life and the same aspiration to establish an exclusive dictate over the world" (Putin, 2007b). Here the speech was given on the Memorial Day for the Second World War, called the Great Patriotic War in Russia, and focused on the threats Russian is subject to from what Putin considered a unilateral global system led by the United States; this is also the main theme during the Munich Security Conference speech of the same year.

Syrian Conflict

The Syrian conflict that has existed since 2015 has produced a situation whereby Russia has taken the opposite side to the US and its NATO allies by supporting the President Bashar al-Assad. In doing this, the idea of an 'Other' was solidified again, as the conflict became a proxy for the interests of Russia and the West. The narrative produced from Putin stressed the importance of maintaining stability and criticising the US and its allies for creating a situation of instability. In describing the dire situations of Iraq, Libya, and Syria, Putin declared, "we all know why that happened... we know who decided to oust the unwanted regimes and brutally impose their own rules" (Putin, 2015). This criticism can be understood through the similarities with the other declarations made by Putin wherein the West is viewed as a destabiliser (see Putin, 2007a). In doing this consistently, Putin enforces the routinisation of the relationship

Russia has with the West and this maintains a solid ontological security, whereby the 'Other' is clearly expressed and portrayed as behaving in consistent ways (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010; Mitzen, 2006). This also serves to justify intervention by siding with the role of 'stabiliser', as was done during the Georgian conflict, thus also reinforcing the theme of 'protector' that is evident in Russian discourses on identity (Hansen, 2016). Despite this, little else exists of a type of narrative which is obviously concerned with ontological security, as the vast majority of the discourse is related to Syrian terrorism which may affect Russia (Souleimanov & Dzutsati, 2018).

Discussion

The behaviour of Russia during the three conflicts analysed in this thesis has many nuances to it that are not easily explained through any one theory in particular. However, what has emerged is the pattern of risk-taking and foreign policy objectives that can be understood with the help of ontological security.

Firstly, the themes that this research have in common is that they all allow Russian identity to be consolidated under a premise of uniqueness and opposition to the West. As discussed above, a component to this body of research that cannot be overlooked is the role that the West has played in shaping the path Russia has taken in its identity creation and consolidation. Indeed, the decision to exclude Russia from the European security apparatus is considered an important part of the continuing tensions that arise in Eastern Europe (Hill, 2018). Despite this, it has been shown through the findings of this research that this path has allowed Russia to build and rebuild an identity which has solid bases and a clear sense of 'Self' versus 'Other'. On a state-level, ontological security refers to the way states are able to build a clear idea of their identity and thereby their place in the world, as it relates to a global system of state-actors (Mitzen, 2006). On top of this, a state's security is enhanced by a continuing national narrative, which is reinforced generation upon generation (Kinvall & Mitzen, 2017). In this way, the Russian narrative of uniqueness and opposition to the West allows for a strong sense of ontological security. This is because the idea of 'Self' and 'Other' is clear and self-perpetuating, as a result of Russia's antagonistic relationship with the West (its 'Other') fostering its own identity of uniqueness (its 'Self').

Having identified four themes through which Russian foreign policy discourse takes place and show clear signs towards a consideration of ontological security, there is evidence that Russian state behaviour and foreign policy is able to be understood to a substantial extent through the lens of ontological security. Additionally, there are some areas where this research allows for a deeper understanding of Russian behaviour where other realist theory may struggle. For example, there are numerous expectations of realist theory that are not easily discernible in the three conflicts studied in this thesis. Balancing represents a concept used by realists to explain the unfeasibility of hegemony since states aim to limit the power of another state so as to stop them gaining hegemonic influence (Mearsheimer, 2001). Whilst this concept is useful in potentially explaining why Russia engages in confrontational behaviour with regards to the West (primarily meaning the US) in the case of Syria, there is less scope for its use in the conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine, since the US (its explicit adversary) is not explicitly involved in these two countries other than passive support. Instead, ontological security considerations are evident in the discourses surrounding these events, and therefore allow for a deeper understanding of the Russian decision-making in these instances. Nevertheless, the scope for other theories to better explain the Syrian conflict suggests that more studies could be conducted into this particular conflict and the motivations Russia had behind its involvement, in order to critically assess how it affects its ontological security.

This thesis argues that the concept of ontological security adds to the existing work on the topic of Russian foreign policy, rather than seeking to replace the existing theoretical understandings. The work by numerous scholars to highlight states' need for an ontological secure identity has informed this thesis' understanding of the way discourses have influenced Russian behaviour in conflict situations. Instead of the focus being on states' need for physical security, scholars have noted the importance placed on states' need for a more abstract sense of security related to its identity (Gustafsson, 2014; Kinvall & Mitzen, 2017; Narozhna, 2020). This, along with the research findings of this thesis, suggest that an important factor in explaining Russia's confrontational behaviour in foreign policy lies in its concern with building and sustaining a strong sense of ontological security. Nonetheless, this thesis could be backed up with further considerations as to the effects of domestic Russian politics as it relates to ontological security, which is a task better suited for a native Russian speaker, with access to documents otherwise inaccessible to English-speakers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has aimed to give an answer to the question: to what extent can use of force in Russian foreign policy be understood as a result of ontological security seeking, during the presidencies of Putin and Medvedev? The time after the USSR's collapse in the late 20th century caused a period of uncertainty in regard to its identity. This thesis uncovered the ways in which this manifested and its ultimate change towards a new understanding of Russia's place in the world in the 21st century. Through the conflicts in Georgia, Ukraine, and to some extent Syria, it was found that conflict has served to reinforce themes in Russian identity and routinise its relationship with the West as a largely antagonistic one. As such, ontological security can be seen as a useful way to understand more about Russian foreign policy and behaviour. Indeed, this concept adds to the existing theories of realist scholars, rather than taking away from them. In this way, ontological security acts as another explanatory tool to know more about the deeper underlying reasons for certain actions, as it takes into account the political and historical contexts which may be otherwise overlooked.

The thesis therefore adds to the debate on Russian foreign policy and its relationship with the West as a result. With an appreciation for Russia's need, like any other state, for ontological security, a more productive dialogue can be forged and more effective cooperation can be achieved. Having said this, the present thesis would be aided by further research that considers other instances of Russian foreign policy decision-making, as well as a study on more Russian-language sources. Beyond this, and since the nature of identity is constantly in flux, studies should continue to be conducted which consider the role of Russia's concept of 'Self' and 'Other'. Finally, studies which consider the effect of Russia's behaviour in its neighbouring countries could benefit the topic of ontological security, as these states share often intertwined histories and peoples'.

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