



**ТЕМАТИЧЕСКОЕ ДОСЬЕ:
Внешняя политика России в XXI веке
в оценках российских и зарубежных экспертов**

**THEMATIC DOSSIER:
Russia's Foreign Policy in the 21st Century:
Views from Inside and Outside**

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Research article / Научная статья

Vladimir Putin, Twenty Years On: Russia's Foreign Policy

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Abstract. This article touches upon the main dynamics in Russian foreign policy since Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000. Following a Constructivist approach to the analysis of foreign policy, the article positions this study at the intersection of domestic processes and external relations, as well as understanding foreign policy as a combination of material and ideational aspects. The discursive practices that drive foreign policy shaping and making are the result of social interaction, and thus, of the combination of these elements, in different formats and weights. Three main dimensions in Russia's foreign policy course are identified, namely a normative one, defining the guiding principles for foreign policy shaping, the status dimension as the power-alignment underlining foreign policy making, and an identity-driven dimension, ontologically characterizing foreign policy. These three dimensions of analysis are co-constitutive and reinforce each other at different moments and in distinct configurations. The article concludes that Russian foreign policy in the last twenty years has kept its main end-goal quite stable — great power status, — what has changed have been the means — and ways of doing — to achieve this, both regarding a more assertive foreign policy, and increased pressure for revising the international order, attributing Russia the label of a revisionist power in the international system.

Key words: Russian foreign policy, Russia, normative, status, identity

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Владимир Путин, двадцать лет спустя: внешняя политика России

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В статье прослеживается основная динамика российской внешней политики с момента прихода к власти Владимира Путина в 2000 г. Следуя конструктивистскому подходу к анализу внешней политики, данное исследование сочетает изучение внутреполитических процессов и международных отношений, а также исходит из понимания внешней политики как сочетания материальных и идейных аспектов. Дискурсивные практики, определяющие формирование внешней политики, являются результатом социального взаимодействия, а значит, сочетания этих элементов в различных форматах и соотношениях. Во внешнеполитическом курсе России выделяются три основных измерения: нормативное, определяющее руководящие принципы для формирования внешней политики, статусное измерение как расстановка сил, лежащая в основе разработки внешней политики, и измерение, основанное на идентичности, онтологически характеризующее внешнюю политику. Все три аспекта анализа соорганизуются и усиливают друг друга в различные моменты и в различных конфигурациях. Автор приходит к выводу, что главная конечная цель российской внешней политики, состоящая в сохранении статуса великой державы, за последние двадцать лет не изменилась. Претерпели изменения лишь средства и способы достижения данной цели как в отношении более активной внешней политики, так и в отношении усиления давления с целью пересмотра международного порядка, в связи с чем в системе международных отношений Россию изображают как ревизионистскую державу.

Ключевые слова: российская внешняя политика, Россия, норматив, статус, идентичность

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Introduction

This article traces the main dynamics in Russian foreign policy since Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000. Following a Constructivist approach to the analysis of foreign policy, the article positions this study at the intersection of domestic processes and external relations, as well as understanding foreign policy as a combination of material and ideational aspects. This starting point allows a combination of material elements, such as economic performance or military capabilities, which are more objective, with other elements of a more intersubjective nature, such as identity-definition and perceptions' shaping in foreign policy processes. The discursive practices that drive foreign policy shaping and making are the result of social interaction, and thus, of the

combination of these elements, in different formats and weights.

Three main dimensions in Russia's foreign policy course are identified, namely a normative one, defining the guiding principles for foreign policy shaping, the status dimension as the power-alignment underlining foreign policy making, and an identity-driven dimension, ontologically characterizing foreign policy. These three dimensions of analysis are co-constitutive and reinforce each other at different moments and in distinct configurations.

Analysing how through the course of the last 20 years Russian foreign policy has been aligned and enacted, the article argues it has been aiming at the consolidation of a path of affirmation of Russia's great power status in the international setting. This consolidation goal has

been complemented by a geographical matrix organising foreign policy in areas of primary relevance (e.g. post-Soviet space, relations with the European Union (EU), the United States of America (USA) or China), and of thematic alignment of issues (e.g. sovereignty, non-interference).

The means to pursue the goals set have changed with time, and in this course relations with the West¹ have been of utmost relevance. Moreover, a trend in militarization of Russian foreign policy and the use of more robust approaches have been visible, in Russian actions in Georgia in 2008, in the Ukraine crisis in 2014 or in the bombardments in Syria in 2015. These actions need to be put in context and discursively analysed, in order to grasp Russia's positioning in foreign policy along time. The article concludes that Russian foreign policy in the last twenty years has kept its main end-goal quite stable — recognition of its great power status, — what has changed have been the means — and ways of doing — to achieve this — both at the level of pressing for change in the international order, and in the more assertive and militarized foreign policy means that have been put in place, attributing Russia the label of a revisionist power in the international system.

The article is organised as follows: first, the conceptual approach to foreign policy underlying this study is exposed, clarifying the dimensions that we consider most pressing when discussing Russian foreign policy. These dimensions — normative, status and identitarian, — will be then analysed, including illustrations from foreign policy in the last twenty years. This will guide the analysis of narratives' building and policy-practice in Russian foreign policy, in order to grasp the contexts and factors that have been shaping it. This study of the foreign policy course of Russia in the last two decades includes official documents and academic contributions.

¹ West is used in the text to refer broadly to the European Union, the United States of America and the Atlantic Alliance, unless otherwise specified.

Foreign Policy in the Making: Conceptual Approach

Foreign policy is at the core of an actor's positioning in international relations, reflecting the combination between the political goals defined usually referred to regarding states as "national interest", and the milieu where these are enacted, which might hinder or project them. Thus, the intersection between domestic politics and the external setting is essential to understand foreign policy shaping and making. As Manning [1977] refers to it, politics take place at the "intermestic". In this same line of analysis, Putnam [1988] puts forward what he calls the "logic of two-level games", addressing the "entanglements of domestic and international politics" and seeking to clarify when and how these two-levels interact and become visible. When looking at Russian foreign policy, the co-constitution of these two levels of analysis becomes clear, such as in the cases of Crimea or Syria. Despite the differentials, both cases reflect a more muscled foreign policy, both cases assume relevance to Russia in terms of its ability to influence standards in international developments, and both cases refer to levels of domestic approval associated to a national discourse confirming the status of great power [Freire 2017].

The national interest, the self-definition of identity and the perceptions about "us" and the "other" overlap with the external context where foreign policy is enacted. There is a continuous inter-relation between these two dimensions, with national priorities shaping the foreign policy agenda, while international relations also condition or prove favourable to this agenda, demanding many times a difficult balance [Saideman, Ayres 2007: 191; Breuning 2007]. Therefore, it is difficult to analyse foreign policy without taking into account this double layer. Moreover, domestic politics and public support for these are also a fundamental element in the drafting of public policies. Gathering support among the population for fundamental lines in foreign policy, particularly when these involve the use of military means or imply substantial financial commitments or specific alliances, is key to a successful course.

In the Russian case, the consolidation of internal politics particularly in the first decade after the end of the Cold War was most important to consolidate the baselines for a more active foreign policy. The same applies in a context of economic retraction, propelled by the 2008 global financial crisis and the current pandemic affecting global economy, and with high impact in Russian finances. This means the conditions at home are needed not only in terms of capabilities and principled-ideals, but also regarding public support, for advancing certain foreign policy agendas.

According to the Levada Centre², between January 2000 and March 2020, Vladimir Putin has generally kept a high approval rating as President or Prime-Minister (despite popularity ratings varying³), whereas the assessment of the situation in the country is mixed, with answers to the question “Is Russia moving in the right direction or this course is a dead-end?”, revealing different levels of support at different moments in time. From the data available, political decisions such as the intervention in Georgia (2008) or in Ukraine (2014) were followed by increased support and the understanding that Russia was moving “In the right direction”⁴. Albeit limitedly, this hints at the relevance of domestic support for politics-enactment towards Russia’s affirmation in international relations, accompanying the nationalist pride narrative of great Russia.

Also, the international context is detrimental in the way states shape (dis)alignments and many times are forced to make decisions. This contextual-factor might imply further engagement, more isolationism, politics of confrontation,

logics of cooperation — depending on what are our interests and goals and how we might operationalize them. The end-result might, still, bring unintended consequences, adding pressure to the foreign policy decision machine. For example, the sanctions regime imposed on Russia by the EU and the USA after Crimea has remained in place until today, and has been negatively affecting Russian economy and foreign investments in the country, and damaging Russia’s credibility as a partner — as often stated in the West. Whereas the post-Georgia tension setting between Russia and the West was quickly over, of which the “reset policy” became an illustration, the post-Crimea context has been different and the tension created has persisted in time. This prolongation of the restrictive measures might be understood as an unintended consequence of Russian actions in Ukraine. Not so much the tensions that arose, or even the agreement on a sanctions regime, but more the lasting effects of the latter.

This foreign policy making exercise reflects also a material and an ideational dimension, in its purposes, in its motivations and in its end-goals. This means that foreign policy is not only guided by security-military and hard power considerations, but also permeated and shaped by “discourse, ideas and values” [Hill 2003: 9]. It is therefore multilevel and multifaceted in order to deal with the complexity it implies [Neack 2008: 6].

Foreign policy is a process, continuously adjusting to context and interpretation, as visible in discourse. Political narratives construct the national interest and the ideas sustaining foreign policy, which are continuously re-shaped in discursive terms having then practical implication. The identitarian dimension gains here a central place as the social constitution of agents is fundamental to understand foreign policy drivers. Ideas, and even the normative dimension in foreign policy discourses, are not independent from the identity discourse [Kowert 2010] and from how this is perceived domestically and internationally. Identity construction becomes a key feature of the self-definition, with implications domestically and internationally. Thus, the normative, status and

² Putin’s approval rating & Assessment of situation in the country // Levada Centre. 2020. URL: <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings> (accessed: 04.05.2020).

³ Volkov D. Is Putin no longer Russia’s Mr. Popular? // Riddle. February 26, 2020. URL: <https://www.ridl.io/en/is-putin-is-no-longer-russia-s-mr-popular> (accessed: 12.03.2020); Troianovski A. Branding Putin. How the Kremlin Turned the Russian President into a Global Icon // The Washington Post. July 12, 2018. URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/putin-brand/> (accessed: 12.03.2020).

⁴ Putin’s approval rating & Assessment of situation in the country // Levada Centre. 2020. URL: <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings> (accessed: 04.05.2020).

identitarian dimensions are clearly inter-related in the analysis of Russian foreign policy.

The narratives associated to the great Russia self have been present in political discourse since the end of the Cold War, from the moment Russia sought to reestablish its positioning in the international system as a great power — regaining the place it understood it belonged to. In fact, this ambition is already present with Boris Yeltsin back in the nineties, when he supports the replacement of an international structure organised around blocs by a new multipolar structure, linking this new configuration to a normative understanding of international relations, based on the principle of non-intervention [Rangsimaporn 2009: 101]. This principle has been repeatedly underlined in Russian foreign policy, along with sovereignty and respect for the territorial integrity of states, and will be discussed further in the article. This quest for status recognition has been visible in the main official documents, and gained a new emphasis when Vladimir Putin came to the Russian Presidency in 2000.

Russian official foreign policy documents consistently describe Russia as a relevant player, pursuing policies “to achieve firm and prestigious positions in the world community, most fully consistent with the interests of the Russian Federation as a great power, as one of the most influential centres of the modern world”⁵; underlining “its status as one of the leading States of the world”⁶, and “Russia’s increased responsibility for setting the international agenda and shaping the system of international relations”⁷, consolidating “the

Russian Federation’s position as a centre of influence in today’s world” [Freire 2018]⁸. The narrative on great power status comes hand in hand with a national-patriotic approach where Russia as the “Motherland” is praised, consistently performing the values associated to Putinism — strong ruling, strong presence. This line has been reinforced along time, with a national conservative approach to politics marking V. Putin’s governing style at home and in foreign affairs. At his Presidential inaugural addresses, V. Putin has consistently remarked this baseline for Russian politics and action: “The first President of Russia, Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin, recalled this today, as he leaves the Kremlin, with words that many will remember. He repeated today in this hall: ‘Take care of Russia. This is precisely what I see as the primary responsibility of the President. I will require that my comrades in arms and my colleagues fulfill this duty. I also expect to get help in this patriotic effort from the citizens of Russia and from all those who hold dear the future of our Motherland’. ... Voted ‘for a better life, for a prosperous and strong Russia’”⁹.

“Together we have made our Motherland a country that is open to the world, a country that seeks broad and equal cooperation, a country that has strengthened its positions on the international stage and has learned how to use peaceful means to stand up for its lawful interests in a rapidly changing world”¹⁰.

“We have strengthened our country and returned our dignity as a great nation. The world has seen a Russia raised anew, and this is the result of our people’s hard work and our

⁵ The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. Approved by Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation, 28 June, 2000. URL: <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/econcept.htm> (accessed: 12.03.2020).

⁶ The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. Approved by Dmitry A. Medvedev, President of the Russian Federation, 12 July, 2008 // The President of Russia official website. January 12, 2008. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116> (accessed: 12.03.2020).

⁷ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, Approved by President of the Russian Federation V. Putin, 2013 // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. URL: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/122186 (accessed: 12.03.2020).

⁸ Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. Approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016 // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. December 1, 2016. URL: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248 (accessed: 12.03.2020).

⁹ Speech at the Inauguration Ceremony // The President of Russia official website. May 7, 2000. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21399> (accessed: 12.03.2020).

¹⁰ Address to the Nation at the Presidential Inauguration Ceremony // The President of Russia official website. May 7, 2004. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22452> (accessed: 12.03.2020).

common effort, to which everyone has made their personal contribution”¹¹.

“I am aware of my responsibility towards Russia, a country of magnificent victories and accomplishments, towards the history of the Russian state that goes back centuries and towards our ancestors. Their courage, relentless work, undefeatable unity, and the way they sanctified their homeland are eternal examples of their dedication to their Fatherland... Russia is a strong, active and influential participant in international life; the country’s security and defence capability are reliably assured. We will continue to pay the necessary, close attention to these issues”¹².

Traveling along these words, the reinforcement of Russia’s status becomes clear, sustaining a path towards modernisation of the country and the projection of an image of strength and union. The affirmation course of Russia as a great power has always been present as a main goal, sustained on a multi-ethnic society, on civilizational, historical and traditional values, and on Russia’s distinctive character. This formula cemented the basis for the projection of foreign policy, which has discursively been promoting traditional conservative values in the legitimation of power gains. Particularly in the context of Ukraine in 2014, a “new normal” emerged to define post-Crimean international relations, where civilizational discourse and predisposition for the use of force arise in political rhetoric and in the performance of foreign policy with a new guise of justification, legitimation and power affirmation.

The mix of a discourse based on traditional values sustaining great power status and the challenges from new configurations of power in international relations has put Russian foreign policy on a track of more robustness when needed. The militarization trend that is visible,

particularly reinforced in the last decade, including the reformation of the military forces, investment in the development of new military capacities and technologically advanced equipment, and more robust interventions, acknowledges this path.

Most interesting when analysing Russian foreign policy is the interconnection between a normative dimension — built on the civilizational, traditional values narrative, and the mission this implies, with a status dimension — reflected in the great power narrative, as re-enacting the place Russia should have always kept and be recognised in the international system, and an identity dimension — congregating Russia’s uniqueness, built in-between eastern and Western influences, cross-cutting boundaries by defining Russians as all those that feel close and allegiance to the Motherland. These normative, status and identity dimensions have driven Russian foreign policy along time, with distinct weights and formats, and changing contours with time and context, as analysed next.

Russia’s Foreign Policy Normative Dimension

Russian foreign policy normative dimension rests on three main principles related to the ordering of international life, namely sovereignty and the respect for territorial integrity, the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, and the promotion of a polycentrism. Russia has been described as a sovereignist power, traditionally following these principles regarding its conduct in international affairs. Russian votes and vetoes at the United Nations’ Security Council, for example, have generally been in line with these normative guidelines. This means Russia promotes the traditional ordering principles in the international system, particularly regarding the sovereignty principle and respect for the territorial integrity of states, as well as non-interference in internal affairs, but has also challenged these, with the case of Ukraine becoming a paradigmatic illustration.

The debate has been fierce between the Russians, who claim the referendum in Crimea and the “reintegration” or “incorporation” of the peninsula to Russian territory was a legal act,

¹¹ Vladimir Putin Inaugurated as President of Russia // The President of Russia official website. May 7, 2012. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/15224> (accessed: 12.03.2020).

¹² Vladimir Putin Has Been Sworn in as President of Russia // The President of Russia official website. May 7, 2018. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57416> (accessed: 12.03.2020).

legitimised by an historical and cultural past — “the return of Crimea to the Motherland”; and the West, claiming Russian actions in Crimea were illegal in light of Ukrainian and international law, with the “annexation” of Crimea thus violating the territorial sovereignty of Ukraine and constituting an interference in Ukrainian internal affairs [Yefremenko 2014; Allison 2014]. Moreover, the violence that has persisted in eastern Ukraine and the inability of Ukrainian central authorities to control this territorial part of the country has added to discord.

The debate on the legitimate/illegitimate act has remained open and marked by dissension, with no optimistic sight regarding a political settlement of the issues at stake, particularly in the Eastern part of Ukraine. The most relevant question in this regard remains whether this sovereignist power is willing to breach a fundamental principle in its normative commitments to pursue foreign policy goals, justifying it according to certain standards, not validated in the West and of course issue of contestation; or whether this was a case in point, and Russia will stick to its traditional normative alignments.

These actions in Ukraine had strong impact in Russia’s relations with Ukraine — where Ukrainian nationalism re-emerged and the Russian brotherhood was dismissed, – impacting the traditional identity narrative associated to Ukraine, underlining “the fragility of Russian national identity and the incomplete nature of V. Putin’s offering” [Goble 2016: 37]. It also impacted on relations with the West. The latter points to the imposition of sanctions, reflecting a state-of-affairs of disagreement and tension between Russia and the West. Moreover, the “annexation” of Crimea required huge investments from Russia, when the country’s economy was recovering from a period of recession [Freire, Heller 2018].

The economic implications and pressure on a fragile economy should not be underestimated. The prestige cost should also not be undervalued — the downgrading of Russia from the G8, for example, also brings political impacts, with consequences in the status

dimension that is also key to Russian foreign policy.

Also central to the normative dimension is the conceptualisation of the international order as multipolar or polycentric. The idea of a unipolar international system led by the USA is understood as potentially destabilizing the international order, as affirmed by Vladimir Putin when he arrived to power¹³. Accompanying this narrative, Russia underlines the multi-national character of its population, and the cultural diversity that marks the country, making of Russia a unique actor with a strong civilizational mission — which links to the identity-dimension.

According to Richard Sakwa [2012] this is translated in a pluralist approach to the application of universalism, which is at the heart of Russia’s neo-revisionism. The current Western neoliberal order — which is being contested — also by Russia, is not to Moscow’s understanding inclusive and representative of the different powers in the international system. Thus, this universalist agenda seeks to provide space for inclusion, while contesting Western “supremacy” and “hegemony”, which replicates logics of exclusion and exploitation. The dynamics that were developed within the BRICS¹⁴ context are in this regard interesting, by demonstrating a counter-hegemonic movement for more justice and more equality in south-south relations [Sergunin 2020; Kirton, Larionova 2018]. And more than that — as there have been many challenges the group has been facing, – the symbolism this implies in terms of the

¹³ National Security Concept of the Russian Federation. Approved by Presidential Decree No. 24 of 10 January 2000 // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. URL: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/589768 (accessed: 12.03.2020); Russia’s Military Doctrine, 21 April, 2000 // Arms Control Association. URL: <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2000-05/russias-military-doctrine> (accessed: 12.03.2020); The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. Approved by Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation, 28 June, 2000. URL: <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/econcept.htm> (accessed: 12.03.2020).

¹⁴ BRICS stands for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

contestation to a Western-led order should be highlighted. In this light, Russia has been called a revisionist power.

The war in Georgia in 2008 was a narrative-changer in Russia in this regard, as discourse became more assertive about Russia's role in a multipolar international system [Makarychev 2010; Lukyanov 2010]. In the context of the Ukraine crisis, Russia has underlined that “the system of international relations is in transition as a new polycentric world order is taking root. We are witnessing the creation of a fundamentally new global model marked by growing competition in all spheres, including social and economic development and moral values”.

The document continues: “Russia has consistently advocated an inclusive and positive agenda aimed not at restricting but rather amplifying ties between states. Our country stands ready to join efforts with all those who are equally willing to cooperate in line with the principles of equality, mutual respect, mutual benefit and norms of international law, as well as recognition of the central role of the United Nations in global affairs. The work of the UN Security Council, the Group of 20, BRICS, SCO and CSTO clearly demonstrates the efficiency of joint efforts”¹⁵.

This means that the international system's configuration and the principles driving this are being contested, and that Russia clearly sees itself as having a central role in this polycentric values-oriented reshaping.

Russia's Foreign Policy Status Dimension

Linked to the normative dimension is the goal of Russia's status affirmation and recognition, reflected in the great power narrative. Re-enacting the place Russia should have always kept and be recognised for in the international system has been a continuous feature of Russian foreign policy. As mentioned before, Georgia was a marker, not only in terms

of the reading of the system — multipolar, — but also regarding Russia's understanding of its great power status. Moscow has, nevertheless, kept this same direction, assuring this recognition is effective and has concrete materialization. This is visible both in discourse and practice — again Ukraine and Syria stand out as good illustrations of status seeking/recognition. The Russian moves in both these cases provided a change in contexts favourable to Russia.

In the case of Ukraine, Crimea and destabilisation in the eastern areas of the country provided Russia leverage while demonstrating the limits of the EU's neighbourhood policy or of Western politics more generally. In Syria, the bombardments conducted in 2015 changed the course of the war in favour of the Assad regime, supported by Russia. Russia's narrative in both cases amounted to status affirmation, by showing willingness and capacity to act and pursue its foreign policy goals. But these gains did not come without costs. Briefly, these were mainly political and socio-economic, bringing questions about Russia's commitment to international norms, as discussed above or adding pressure to economic performance. The three dimensions under analysis — normative, status and identitarian — are clearly present in policy actions¹⁶. And this goes back in time.

The reference by V. Putin to the severe consequences of the disintegration of the USSR, in his famous words “a major geopolitical disaster”, underline the idea that the losses of the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union were damaging but not irreversible, as he makes clear in his speech to the Federal Assembly: “We should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century. As for the Russian nation, it became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself. Individual savings were depreciated, and old ideals destroyed. Many institutions were

¹⁵ Russian Foreign Policy // Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the European Union. 2016. URL: <https://russiaeu.ru/en/russian-foreign-policy> (accessed: 12.03.2020).

¹⁶ For further discussion on gains and costs associated to Russian foreign policy in the cases of Ukraine and Syria, see: [Freire, Heller 2018].

disbanded or reformed carelessly. Terrorist intervention and the Khasavyurt capitulation that followed damaged the country's integrity. Oligarchic groups — possessing absolute control over information channels — served exclusively their own corporate interests. Mass poverty began to be seen as the norm. And all this was happening against the backdrop of a dramatic economic downturn, unstable finances, and the paralysis of the social sphere. Many thought or seemed to think at the time that our young democracy was not a continuation of Russian statehood, but its ultimate collapse, the prolonged agony of the Soviet system. But they were mistaken”¹⁷.

These losses, related to status and normative commitments, based on an identity-definition of the self, were to be reverted. The course of Russia's foreign policy in the last 20 years has been marked by many ups and downs, particularly in its relations with the West, following this path of seeking to revert trends considered obstacle to Russia's power projection.

In the early 2000s the West welcomed V. Putin's arrival to power and relations were overall friendly. For example, in November 2003 a Russia – EU Joint Declaration was signed in Rome leading to the definition of the “common spaces”, providing a framework for bilateral cooperation¹⁸. Later, in May 2005, the roadmap to operate the four common spaces — a common economic space; a common space of freedom, security and justice; a common space of cooperation in the field of external security; and a common space of research, education and culture, – was put forward. But projects such as the EU's and NATO's enlargements, the USA plan to install equipment related to the anti-missile defence shield in Polish and Czech

territory, or EU pressure for Russia's signing of the Energy Charter, were understood as moves contrary to Russian interests.

In November 2007 Russia unilaterally withdrew from the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty), criticising state parties of non-compliance¹⁹. With the tension mounting in relations with the West, Russia consolidated relations within the scope of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, particularly with China, including the joint holding of military exercises, as part of a policy of containment of American primacy. Not intending to deeply go through the various interactions along the years, the multivectorial character of foreign policy is clearly at the basis of Russia's external action. And despite no space to develop further the Asian dimension in Russian foreign policy; this has clearly been strengthened, particularly after 2014 and in the context of difficult relations between Russia and the West.

The election of Dmitry Medvedev as president of Russia (March 2008), implied lines of continuity to the foreign policy alignments defined by V. Putin. D. Medvedev presented in September 2008 what he defined as the five basic principles guiding foreign policy. These include the primacy of international law; a multipolar international order, again underlining the limits of unipolarity and the counterweight to American primacy; a non-confrontationist policy and avoiding isolation (including promoting relations with the West, in the post-Georgia-war context); the protection of Russian citizens abroad; and the recognition of areas of influence, namely the border areas described as “priority regions”²⁰. These principles are expressed in the foreign policy document of 2008, as well as translating,

¹⁷ Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation // The President of Russia official website. April 25, 2005. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931> (accessed: 12.03.2020).

¹⁸ Joint Declaration between the EU and the Russian Federation on strengthening dialogue and cooperation on political and security matters. 12th EU — Russia Summit. Rome, 6 November, 2003. P. 21—22. URL: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/declarations/77846.pdf (accessed: 12.03.2020).

¹⁹ Information on the decree “On Suspending the Russian Federation's Participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe and Related International Agreements” // The President of Russia official website. 14 January, 2007. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/3327> (accessed: 12.03.2020). (Russia completely withdrew from the CFE Treaty in 2015. — *Editor's note*).

²⁰ Reynolds P. New Russian World Order: The Five Principles // BBC News. September 1, 2008. URL: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7591610.stm> (accessed: 12.03.2020).

in a sharper tone, into the new military doctrine approved in February 2010²¹.

The war in Georgia in summer 2008 marked Russian discontent and showed Russia's willingness to have its great power status recognised in international relations. This more assertive alignment translated what Margot Light called "nationalist pragmatism" [Light 2003: 48], which has been reinforced with time. When Russia perceives its interests threatened it proves its willingness and ability to act to safeguard these, as Georgia showed. This has become clear in Russian policies towards the post-Soviet space, described as an area of primary interest, and where external involvement is not unrestrictedly welcomed; as well as in other contexts, as the case of Syria demonstrates.

The events in Georgia aimed at a change in the course of events, as Russia perceived Western moves as challenging its interests and power, particularly in the post-Soviet area, but also in terms of its international positioning. With the five days' war, Russia made clear the West crossed red-lines and that the post-Soviet space is part of a primary area of influence for Russia. Through this intervention, Moscow weakened Georgia, a country that was pursuing pro-Western policies, sent clear signals to other republics about its reading of this space, and put forward a clear containment policy regarding Western interference in Eurasia.

Russia sought also with this move to reaffirm its position in the international system as a great power. On 26 August 2008, then President D. Medvedev recognised the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, formalising a status quo aligned with Russian goals. Of course these moves faced criticism in the West, and relations came to a low. However, it did not take long before political relations were resumed, in bilateral and multilateral contexts,

²¹ Russia's Military Doctrine, 5 February, 2010 // The President of Russia official website. URL: <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/461> (accessed: 12.03.2020). (In Russian); The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. Approved by Dmitry A. Medvedev, President of the Russian Federation // The President of Russia official website. January 12, 2008. URL: <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116> (accessed: 12.03.2020).

showing Western inability to respond differently to Russia's recognition of these two new independent republics, violating the territorial integrity of Georgia, as claimed by the Tbilisi government and Western voices. The normative dimension in Russian foreign policy is again called upon.

The financial crisis of 2008 also hit hard Russia, which economy is very much dependent on energy prices. This excessive dependence on an economic sector has made the Russian economy extremely vulnerable, demonstrating the need for structural adjustments to avoid unexpected fluctuations in oil and gas prices, with direct consequences on the performance and results of the Russian economy. While Russian economy was still recovering from recession, the Covid-19 pandemic impact on the global economy is also having a fundamental impact in the Russian economy, which extent is still to be seen. At the time of writing, V. Putin had just announced that "as of May 12, it is necessary to create terms and conditions to resume operations in energy, communications, other basic industries where direct contact with consumers is not required", since "the epidemic and associated restrictions have had a strong impact on the economy and hurt millions of our citizens"²². Closely associated to political moves, economic performance is relevant for Russia's status seeking.

The return of V. Putin to power in 2012 reinforced all these dimensions, signalling also more difficulties in Russia's relations with the West, particularly after the events in Ukraine in 2014. Other mutual accusations, such as those of espionage, diplomatic expulsions, or disinformation campaigns, have added to friction. In a nutshell, and not intending a thorough analysis of the evolution of Russian foreign policy, what these brief considerations show is that status seeking is closely associated to relations with the West (including the contested international order), has the post-

²² COVID-19: Putin Ends Russia's 'Nonworking Period'; Kazakhstan Eases Restrictions // RadioFree Europe/RadioLiberty. May 11, 2020. URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/covid-19-moscow-mortality-surge-death-toll-underreported/30605393.html> (accessed: 12.03.2020).

Soviet space at centre-stage, and has translated in different ways of doing, both in discourse and policies, such as the increased militarization trend in foreign policy illustrates. The national interest, as part of Russia's affirmation as a great power, bringing together the normative and identitarian dimensions is, thus, key to understanding Russian actions.

Russia's Foreign Policy Identity Dimension

The way Russia has been constructing its self has shown a multi-layered identity that congregates Russia's uniqueness at the intersection of Eastern and Western influence. Identity is closely linked to status attribution and the normative commitments of foreign policy, by inscribing this intersubjective self-referential dimension in foreign policy making. In line with Tsygankov, "Russia's identity or sense of honor is not limited to protection of state international status/prestige in the eyes of other states, but also includes a distinctive idea of national self" [Tsygankov 2014: 347]. The "categorizations" that have been proposed to describe Russia's policy options, such as Atlanticism versus Eurasianism²³, reflect the multiple identities that make its uniqueness, while also pointing out different self-identification narratives following on context and circumstance.

With time, the Eurasian narrative of self-identification became more prevalent in Russian discourse. "Eurasianism serves as an ideological driver for strengthening Russian influence in the Eurasian region (the former Soviet space) and for supporting policy initiatives as the Eurasian Union — a fundamental component of V. Putin's foreign policy strategy of multipolarity and great power balancing" [Gerrits 2020: 88]. In this way, it serves the various dimensions of Russian foreign policy, while showing Russia's course as an Eurasianist power. This puts forward an agenda, as mentioned, while bringing in the

identity-vector as distinctive of Russia's self-affirmation.

The way Russia defines itself and perceives "the other" is most relevant in this regard, as it contributes to the definition of internal and external options in its policies, whether promoting or constraining agendas to be followed [Sjöstedt 2007: 138; Houghton 2007: 42—43]. The re-enactment of the old Cold War narrative of "the other as the enemy", visible in Russia's relations with the west, demonstrates how this self-understanding and perception about the other are key in paving the way for policy decisions and actions. This narrative also legitimizes options such as for further militarization, in face of this "new enemy". In this regard, it should be noted that military affairs have always been present in Russian politics after the end of the Cold War, and that the goal of modernizing the armed forces was early sketched.

In fact, even in the context of economic recession after the 2008 financial crisis, the defense area was one of the sectors that less reduction had in budgetary terms²⁴. Bobo Lo [2002: 158—159] argues that with V. Putin a trend towards securitization of foreign policy was initiated, revealing the relevance that security structures — individuals and institutions — have in the country, the primary role of military-security affairs in the agenda, and the conjugation of security and economic agendas as part of the overall strategy of influence projection and affirmation of Russia's great power. These developments must be contextualized within the framework of domestic economic and social difficulties in Russia, following the prolonged effects of the 2008 crisis (and the current pandemic) and in the face of international issues that challenge Russia's position, such as the colour revolutions in the post-soviet space, the Arab Spring, NATO's enlargement or the current sanctions regime in place after the events in Ukraine.

²³ Torbakov I. Russia's Eastern Offensive: Eurasianism Versus Atlanticism // *Eurasia Daily Monitor*. No. 1 (38). June 24, 2004. URL: <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-eastern-offensive-eurasianism-versus-atlanticism/> (accessed: 12.03.2020). See also: [Gerrits 2020].

²⁴ Russia Prepares to Tighten Spending in 2016 // *Stratfor*. November 3, 2015. URL: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russia-prepares-tighten-spending-2016> (accessed: 12.03.2020).

Reinforcing the uniqueness of Russia, has been the promotion of “global civilization”²⁵, which has become increasingly clear in Moscow’s foreign policy formulation, such as in the last Foreign Policy Concept (approved in 2016). According to this formulation, the “Russian world” (*Russkii mir*) transcends Russia’s state borders, to include Russians living abroad. “In 2014 (in the context of Ukraine), the terms (‘compatriots’ and ‘Russian world’) converged in Russian political rhetoric to form a nationalist discourse about the necessity for Russia’s revival as a great power and its revanche in the post-Soviet space” [Zevelev 2014]. The “Russian world” and the perspective of “greater Russian civilization” (as first mentioned by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, in 2009) became part of Russia’s identitarian narrative, with global competition incarnating a civilizational dimension [Zevelev 2014].

In the case of Ukraine, to provide an illustration, the building of the *Russky mir* promoted “a universal antagonistic border that is constitutive for the whole imaginary community of Russians”, which indicates who “belongs” and who does not “belong” to this community [Suslov 2017: 203]. Moreover, the uniqueness of Russia and its distinct value-set distance it from the “decadent” and “genderless” West, where discourse on minorities and individual rights counters traditional conservative values (e.g. gay rights or women rights)²⁶. This discursive identification permeates the Russian narrative,

²⁵ Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016) // The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. URL: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248 (accessed: 12.03.2020).

²⁶ Roxburgh A. Putin Began by Embracing the West. Now, He Wants Revenge // The Guardian. August 12, 2019. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/12/vladimir-putin-west-russian-president-20-years> (accessed: 12.03.2020). See also: [McFaul 2018].

extending to the discourse about Russian minorities abroad and how Moscow should reach out to protect and defend their rights and interests when at risk [Freire 2018]. These identity-driven factors have been central to Russia’s positioning in international affairs, while also reinforcing V. Putin’s power at home.

Concluding Remarks

Russian foreign policy is played at the intersection of domestic and external relations and conveys both material and ideational dimensions. In the course of consolidating foreign policy processes, three main dimensions of analysis cross-cut Russian foreign policy — normative, status and identitarian. These dimensions define Russia’s approach to international politics, and make clear that the end-goal of status affirmation and recognition, based on a revisionist approach to the international order aligned by conservative values, and based on identity considerations has been put forward. This end-goal has always been present along the last twenty years, and has clearly been reinforced by Vladimir Putin’s foreign policy. The changing trends in foreign policy have been visible at the level of policy making, with a clear tendency towards a more robust, assertive, militarized approach. This shows how context and perception are crucial to foreign policy dynamics. Perceiving its interests endangered, or its status questioned, Russia changed its course in order to reinstate its role and rule. From the analysis, it becomes clear that Russian foreign policy in the past two decades has been faithful to its main goal of international affirmation as a great power. In this way, what has changed in foreign policy processes have been the means and ways of doing, with a revisionist Russia seeking a path where this great power is domestically reinforced and internationally reinstated. A course not expected to be changed in the near future.

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