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## Why do we need a multi-level approach to the analysis of Russian foreign policy? Role theory and the Ukraine crisis

**Keywords:** *Russian foreign policy, international relations theories, foreign policy-making, role theory, annexation of Crimea*

**Abstract:** This article presents the main theoretical approaches to the analysis of Russian foreign policy and assesses their contributions. I argue that although Russia's international behaviour has been broadly analysed, realism, liberalism, and constructivism leave much unexplained and do not pay enough attention to the understanding of Russia's perceptions and interactions between domestic and foreign factors. As such, the application of multi-level frameworks is advocated and role theory is proposed as an alternative approach which unites individual and state levels through a focus on state's top leadership. Furthermore, it is uniquely positioned to examine the interplay between foreign policy makers and the constraints imposed by domestic and international environment. In second part of the article role theory is applied to the Russian annexation of Crimea. The analysis shows that the leadership mainly saw Russia as an advocate of states' sovereignty and defender of compatriots living abroad. The close examination of sources of these national role conceptions demonstrates that the combination of various external and internal as well as ideational and material factors influenced leaders' perceptions of Russia's duties and responsibilities and determined Russian foreign policy decisions during the Ukraine crisis.

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## Introduction

Russian foreign policy (RFP) has often been seen as enigmatic. Frequent twists and turns in Russia's international behaviour make its analysis even more difficult but due to the conflict in Ukraine, Moscow's engagement in Syria and many other tensions between the West and Russia, the need to study it is as urgent as ever. Although RFP decisions are widely known, their causes are the subject of fierce debate. There are numerous competing perspectives and explanations of how Russia acts in the international arena.

This article presents the main theoretical approaches to the analysis of RFP and assesses their contributions. Due to their salience and recognition, I examine strengths and weaknesses in the analysis of RFP of three main International Relations (IR) theories: realism, liberalism and constructivism. This list of explanations is not complete but it includes the most important accounts of Russia's international activity. I argue that although RFP has been broadly analysed, these three main theories leave much unexplained, like interactions between domestic and foreign factors and their interplay with and understanding of Russia's perceptions. Consequently, I contend that role theory provides an alternative approach to capture both external and internal as well idealational and material factors. Furthermore, it is helpful in understanding domestic actors' perspectives on their state's role in the international arena.

This article begins with an overview of major studies of RFP in realism, liberalism and constructivism, followed by an assessment of their strengths and limitations. The second part presents role theory and its main concepts. In the third section role theoretical approach is briefly applied to the Russian annexation of Crimea. The final section discusses the results linking role conceptions to Russia's foreign policy behaviour.

## Russian foreign policy in main theories of International Relations

### Realism

Realism was widely present in the analysis of Soviet foreign policy and the same applies to studies of Russia's international activity. According to realists, due to the overarching anarchy, states are susceptible to power politics and are mainly interested in pursuing their national interests which trumps all other political goals<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> E.H. Carr, M. Cox, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919–1939: Reissued with a New Preface from Michael Cox*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2016.

In general, realists agree that Moscow pursues its national interests in the international arena and often explain Russia's actions as a natural reaction to policies led by the West, such as NATO enlargement and US missile defence plans<sup>2</sup>. For instance, Larrabee contends that Russian actions are largely defensive and explains that Moscow's goal is to retain its position in the post-Soviet space<sup>3</sup>. Writing about the 2013–14 Ukraine crisis, Sakwa blames the triumphalist Western policy towards Russia<sup>4</sup>, while Lukyanov notes that the Kremlin wanted to ensure the presence of the Russian fleet in the Black Sea<sup>5</sup>. Other realist scholars point to Russia's efforts to restore its power. Fraser, long before the Euromaidan crisis, argued that behind Russia's efforts to dominate Ukraine were plans to recover Russia's strength and influence<sup>6</sup>. Frolovskiy notes that intervention in Syria was undertaken to restore Russia's global position<sup>7</sup>.

Realism is useful for understanding some general trends in RFP but it struggles with accounting for particular decisions and changes. Consequently, it does not explain, for example, why, although NATO expansion into the former Soviet sphere of influence had begun in 1999, Russia intervened in Ukraine in 2014. Furthermore, because realists blackbox the state, they disregard many important dynamics which may affect international behaviour. Indeed, the main drawback of many realist accounts is their exclusive attention paid to external drivers and omission of Russian internal factors<sup>8</sup>. That said, this argument is not applicable in its entirety to neoclassical realism which takes into account domestic drivers<sup>9</sup>. However, even this current of realist theory does not pay due attention to internal

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<sup>2</sup> B. Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, London: Chatham House; Washington: D.C. Brookings Institution Press 2015, p. 14; See also: J. Mearsheimer, *Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault*, «Foreign Affairs» 2014, Vol. 93, No. 5, pp. 1–12; R. Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, London: I.B. Tauris 2015.

<sup>3</sup> S.F. Larrabee, *Russia, Ukraine, and Central Europe: The Return of Geopolitics*, «Journal of International Affairs» 2010, Vol. 63, No. 2, pp. 33–X.

<sup>4</sup> R. Sakwa, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> F. Lukyanov, *Putin Has Stumbled in Ukraine*, «The Moscow Times» 10 August 2014, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/putin-has-stumbled-in-ukraine-38161> (15.07.2019).

<sup>6</sup> D. Fraser, *Taking Ukraine Seriously: Western and Russian Responses to the Orange Revolution*, [in:] O. Schmidtke, S. Yekelchyk (eds.), *Europe's Last Frontier?: Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine between Russia and the European Union*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2008, pp. 157–73.

<sup>7</sup> D. Frolovskiy, *What Putin Really Wants in Syria*, «Foreign Policy» 1 February 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/01/what-putin-really-wants-in-syria-russia-assad-strategy-kremlin> (16.05.2019).

<sup>8</sup> For example: J. Mearsheimer, *Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault...*; R. Sakwa, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> For an interesting neorealist account of RFP, see: E. Gotz, *Putin, the State, and War: The Causes of Russia's Near Abroad Assertion Revisited*, «International Studies Review» 2017, Vol. 19, No. 2, pp. 228–253.

factors treating them as intervening variables, whereas numerous Russia scholars emphasise their key importance for understanding Russia's international actions<sup>10</sup>.

## Liberalism

Liberal theory of IR stresses the importance of economic interdependence, institutions, democracy and human rights<sup>11</sup>. In this interconnected world hard power is significantly less important. Consequently, Russia liberal scholars argue that realist explanations are limited and the Russian domestic situation is paramount in the analysis of Moscow's international behaviour. One can divide their explanations into two main approaches. The first points to (lack of) democratisation and its influence on RFP, while the second speaks about diversionary arguments. Bugajski and Shevtsova point to domestic authoritarianism as a driver of Russian aggressive foreign policy<sup>12</sup>. These authors argue that the shortage of democratic mechanisms and domestic authoritarian culture determines Russian expansionist foreign policy. The second approach speaks about more assertive international behaviour that is designed to distract the public attention from internal problems, such as economic slowdown and corruption. In addition, analysts write about the need to consolidate the regime's support and 'rallying round the flag' to improve the President's approval ratings<sup>13</sup>.

The above mentioned sources and the diversity of arguments that they raise demonstrate the importance of liberal approaches. However, it is not often clear how they link domestic situation and foreign policy. Russia analysts note that a direct relationship between international behaviour and domestic situation is often taken for granted and that there is no automatic link between internal authoritarianism and an adversarial foreign policy<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, diversionary

<sup>10</sup> See L. March, *Nationalism*, [in:] A. Tsygankov (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy*, Oxon: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group 2018, p. 83.

<sup>11</sup> M.W. Doyle, *Liberalism and World Politics Revisited*, [in:] C.W. Kegley (ed.), *Controversies in International Relations Theory. Realism and the Neoliberal Challenge*, New York: St Martin's Press 1995, pp. 83–106; M.W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism, and Socialism*, New York; London: Norton 1997.

<sup>12</sup> J. Bugajski, *Dismantling the West: Russia's Atlantic Agenda*, Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books 2009; L. Shevtsova, *Resetology*, «The American Interest» 1 November 2010, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2010/11/01/holiday-note-resetology> (23.05.2019); L. Shevtsova, *The Russian Factor*, «Journal of Democracy» 2014, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp. 74–82.

<sup>13</sup> R. Allison, *Russian "Deniable" Intervention in Ukraine: How and Why Russia Broke the Rules*, «International Affairs» 2014, Vol. 90, No. 6, p. 1291; D. Cadier, M. Light, *Conclusion: Foreign Policy as the Continuation of Domestic Politics by Other Means*, [in:] D. Cadier, M. Light (eds), *Russia's Foreign Policy. Ideas, Domestic Politics and External Relations*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2015, p. 206.

<sup>14</sup> L. March, *Nationalism*, op. cit., p. 87; B. Lo, op. cit., pp. 14, 36.

arguments do not account for more assertive foreign policy turn in the mid-2000s, that is when Russian economy was recovering.

## **Constructivism**

For constructivists norms, ideas and identities rather than material capabilities and institutions are critical to international relations. Consequently, interests cannot be evaluated apart from ideas and identities and it is impossible to understand actions without knowing the norms and rules by which they are driven<sup>15</sup>. Russia constructivist scholars write about the country seeking a new national identity since the collapse of the Soviet Union<sup>16</sup> and focus on the influence of identities on Russia's international behaviour<sup>17</sup>. They note that different identities define Russia's interests and this evolving and incoherent sense of national identity is behind Russia's changing foreign policy behaviour. Some constructivist studies point to the significance of Russia's perceptions<sup>18</sup>, while others emphasise the importance of status and acknowledgement of Russia's international position and argue that what Putin wants is respect for Russia<sup>19</sup>.

Constructivism increases its explanatory power of RFP by including in the analysis ideational factors and explaining the influence of national identity on foreign policy behaviour. However, being good at the macro accounts of international behaviour and identity due to structural focus, constructivism is weaker on the micro-level, for example, in explaining various processes and foreign policy decision-making mechanisms<sup>20</sup>. Furthermore, constructivists do not clarify why RFP began to be more assertive in the mid-2000s despite the fact that a statist, pragmatic identity had been already central for about ten years.

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<sup>15</sup> See A.E. Wendt, *Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics*, «International Organization» 1992, Vol. 46, No. 92, pp. 391–425; M. Bevir et al., *Introduction: Interpreting British Foreign Policy*, «The British Journal of Politics and International Relations» 2013, Vol. 15, No. 2, p. 165; A. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy Change and Continuity in National Identity*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 2016.

<sup>16</sup> See R. Legvold, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Twenty-First Century and the Shadow of the Past*, New York: Columbia University Press 2007.

<sup>17</sup> A.L. Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia's Resurgence: Aspirations, Identity, and Security Interests*, Baltimore: MD: John Hopkins University Press 2009; A. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy...*

<sup>18</sup> See I. Gretskiy et al., *Russia's Perceptions and Misperceptions of the EU Eastern Partnership*, «Communist and Post-Communist Studies» 2014, Vol. 47, No. 3–4, pp. 375–383.

<sup>19</sup> F. Hill, *This Is What Putin Really Wants*, «Brookings» 24 February 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/this-is-what-putin-really-wants> (01.07.2019).

<sup>20</sup> J.T. Checkel, *The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory*, «World Politics» 1998, Vol. 50, No. 2, pp. 324–48; M. Bevir et al., op. cit.; L. March, *Nationalism...*

## Framework for understanding: role theory

The above review demonstrates that the main IR theories paying attention to different drivers of Russia's international behaviour contribute to our understanding of it but at the same time, focusing on one level of analysis, they do not allow us to grasp the full picture. These accounts often neglect important factors or do not explain interactions between different causes. Indeed, Russia scholars note that the interplay of different drivers of RFP has not been sufficiently explored, and argue that the nexus of internal-external factors should be analysed thoroughly<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, except for a few constructivist studies, the main IR theories do not pay enough attention to Russia's perceptions whereas foreign policy analysis (FPA) scholars point out that perceptions partially determine foreign policy choices and can be useful independent variables<sup>22</sup>. Herrmann defines a perception as a concept that describes the construction of reality in which an individual makes foreign-policy decisions<sup>23</sup>. As such, the ignorance of these domestically shaped meanings may result in misunderstandings of states' actions. Russia analysts write about different views and understandings of various important issues and point out that Western studies do not examine Russia's set of perceptions sufficiently and more attention should be placed on the analysis of the Russian leadership's understanding of Western actions<sup>24</sup>.

Consequently, as approaches focusing on one level of analysis leave much unexplained, there should be more research into RFP that use multi-level approaches<sup>25</sup>. Eclectic studies enable scholars to take into account different drivers of foreign policy behaviour and analyse their interactions. As such, multi-causal explanations may offer an in-depth analysis of relations between different external and internal factors without neglecting domestically shaped perceptions. Role theory (RT) is an approach that promises multi-level analysis as the individual and state levels are united through a focus on the state's top leadership<sup>26</sup>. Furthermore, it is uniquely positioned to examine the interplay between

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<sup>21</sup> See C. Pursiainen, *Russian Foreign Policy and International Relations Theory*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2000; E. Gotz, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> R. Herrmann, *The Power of Perceptions in Foreign-Policy Decision Making: Do Views of the Soviet Union Determine the Policy Choices of American Leaders?*, «American Journal of Political Science» 1986, Vol. 30, No. 4, pp. 869, 873.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 843.

<sup>24</sup> D. Cadier, *Policies towards the Post-Soviet Space: The Eurasian Economic Union as an Attempt to Develop Russia's Structural Power?*, [in:] D. Cadier, M. Light (eds), *Russia's Foreign Policy...*, pp. 156–174; A. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy...*

<sup>25</sup> Multi-level frameworks are also advocated by: E. Gotz, op. cit.; L. March, *Nationalism...*

<sup>26</sup> C.G. Thies, *Role Theory and Foreign Policy*, [in:] R.A. Denemark (ed.), *The International Studies Encyclopedia*, Oxford: Wiley 2010, pp. 6335–6356.

foreign policy makers and the constraints imposed by domestic and international environment<sup>27</sup>.

## **Role Theory in Foreign Policy Analysis**

Role theory was introduced to FPA by Holsti who argued that leaders have beliefs and perceptions about their state's role in world politics and these national role conceptions may influence state's foreign policy behaviour<sup>28</sup>. Before his publication, the theory had been used in sociology, social psychology, and anthropology<sup>29</sup>. RT recently regained popularity among FPA scholars<sup>30</sup> but has been rarely used in the analysis of Russia's international behaviour<sup>31</sup>.

Hermann points out that roles are 'decision makers' expectations about the pattern or configuration of foreign policy activity that their government will follow in certain situations'<sup>32</sup>. According to Walker, role theory may be especially useful in FPA because of its descriptive, organisational and explanatory value. The descriptive value comes from the theory's rich conceptual language which can be helpful in describing states' foreign policy behaviour. Its organisational value allows for the examination of different levels of analysis (individual, national and systemic), while the explanatory value comes from role theory's capacity to adapt and use its concepts with other theoretical approaches<sup>33</sup>. Breuning notes that the conceptual framework of the theory promises to bridge agent and structure as it provides tools for the analysis of the impact of structure on agents' perceptions

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<sup>27</sup> M. Breuning, *Role Theory in Foreign Policy*, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Foreign Policy Analysis*, The Oxford Encyclopedia of Foreign Policy Analysis 2017.

<sup>28</sup> K.J. Holsti, *National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy*, «International Studies Quarterly» 1970, Vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 233–309.

<sup>29</sup> C. Thies, op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> See S. Harnisch et al., *Role Theory in International Relations: Approaches and Analyses*, London: Routledge 2011; C. Cantir and J. Kaarbo, *Domestic Role Contestation, Foreign Policy, and International Relations*, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group 2016; L.E. Wehner, *The Narration of Roles in Foreign Policy Analysis*, «Journal of International Relations and Development» 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-018-0148-y> (26.07.2019).

<sup>31</sup> For exceptions, see: G. Chafetz, *The Struggle for a National Identity in Post-Soviet Russia*, «Political Science Quarterly» 1997, Vol. 111, No. 4, pp. 661–88; M. Grossman, *Role Theory and Foreign Policy Change: The Transformation of Russian Foreign Policy in the 1990s*, «International Politics» 2005, Vol. 42, No. 3, pp. 334–51.

<sup>32</sup> C. Hermann, *Superpower Involvement with Others: Alternative Role Relationships*, [in:] S.G. Walker (ed.), *Role Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis*, Durham: NC: Duke University Press 1987, p. 220.

<sup>33</sup> S.G. Walker, *The Relevance of Role Theory to Foreign Policy Analysis*, [in:] S.G. Walker (ed.), *Role Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis...*, pp. 1–4; C. Thies, op. cit., p. 1; L.E. Wehner, op. cit., p. 5.

and decisions and the impact of agents' actions on the structure and changes occurring in it<sup>34</sup>.

A national role conception (NRC) is a notion on which role theoretical research in FPA is based. In his seminal article Holsti defined NRCs as 'the policymakers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system'<sup>35</sup>. Hirata notes that RT has the potential for presenting the causal relationship between NRCs and a state's foreign policy behaviour<sup>36</sup>. Indeed, Holsti and Wish demonstrated in their research that NRCs are good indicators of states international behaviour<sup>37</sup>. Since then, NRCs have been used in various studies which seek to explain foreign policy decisions<sup>38</sup>.

There may be different sources of NRCs<sup>39</sup>, which include both external (international structure, geopolitical location) and internal (economic situation, cultural aspects) factors. Consequently, by using the NRC framework, the article aims to understand how changes in NRCs were influenced by interactions of different domestic and international sources. In order to attain this goal, the suggested framework will use Russian leaders' perceptions of these sources because, as Breuning argues, external and internal factors do not have a direct influence on foreign policy actions but are mediated and interpreted by policymakers<sup>40</sup>. As such, 'decision makers' perceptions of their state's role in the international environment form an

important cue to the motivations and objectives that determine the policies they pursue<sup>41</sup>. For role theorists, as for constructivists, the inclusion of perceptions in the analysis is important because 'what matters is how the policy maker imagines the milieu to be, not how it actually is'<sup>42</sup>. Furthermore, it allows scholars to analyse how leaders perceive the roles that their states should perform in the world stage.

Tsygankov stresses the significance of understanding of Russian perceptions and notes that 'even when Russia's actions seem similar to the behaviour of other

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<sup>34</sup> M. Breuning, *Role Theory in Foreign Policy...*

<sup>35</sup> K. Holsti, op. cit., p. 245.

<sup>36</sup> K. Hirata, *Role Theory and Japanese Security Policy*, [in:] C. Cantir, J. Kaarbo (eds), op. cit., pp. 55–71.

<sup>37</sup> K. Holsti, op. cit.; N.B. Wish, *Foreign Policy Makers and Their National Role Conceptions*, «International Studies Quarterly» 1980, Vol. 24, No. 4, pp. 532–534.

<sup>38</sup> See M. Breuning, *Words and Deeds: Foreign Assistance Rhetoric and Policy Behavior in the Netherlands, Belgium, and the United Kingdom*, «International Studies Quarterly» 1995, Vol. 39, No. 2, pp. 235–54; M. Grossman, op. cit.

<sup>39</sup> See K. Holsti, op. cit.; S.G. Walker, *Role Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis...*

<sup>40</sup> M. Breuning, *Role Theory Research in International Relations: State of the Art and Blind Spots*, [in:] S. Harnisch et al. (eds), op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>41</sup> M. Breuning, *Words and Deeds...*, p. 236.

<sup>42</sup> H. Sprout and M. Sprout, *Environmental Factors in the Study of International Politics*, «Journal of Conflict Resolution» 1957, Vol. 1, No. 4, p. 328.

members of the system, they originate from a culturally distinct source and can have a different meaning<sup>43</sup>. Other scholars also point to perceptions when writing about RFP. Mearsheimer notes that for the West it might have been clear that after 2008 there was no question of NATO expansion but the Russian leadership perceived this situation in a different way<sup>44</sup>. Osipova argues that perceptions have an equally significant impact on the lack of trust between Russia and the United States as security issues<sup>45</sup>.

The following section applies RT to the analysis of Russian annexation of Crimea. The study was based on content analysis of statements (speeches, press conferences, interviews) delivered by Russian leaders: President Putin, Prime Minister Medvedev and Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov. All statements made by these leaders from November 2013 to April 2014 were included in the analysis and coded manually. Coding, following role theory scholars<sup>46</sup>, was mainly inductive and roles were identified when ‘Russia’ or pronouns like ‘we’ or ‘us’ were mentioned in relation to the leadership conceptions of the state’s duties and responsibilities in the international system.

## **Role theory and the Russian annexation of Crimea**

The analysis of Russian leaders’ references to duties and responsibilities of their state reveals five main NRCs (see table 1). However, due to their salience, the article focuses on the first three roles.

The most often used NRC by Russian leaders was that of advocate of states’ sovereignty, which accounted for more than 20% of all coded assertions. This role was referred to specifically by such statements as

Russia sticks strictly to the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign countries, respect for the right of the people to choose the ways of their development [...] freely and independently.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> A. Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin Honor in International Relations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012, p. 8.

<sup>44</sup> J. Mearsheimer, *Mearsheimer Replies*, «Foreign Affairs» 2014, Vol. 93, No. 6, pp. 167–78.

<sup>45</sup> Y. Osipova, *US-Russia Relations in the Context of Cold War 2.0: Attitudes, Approaches, and the Potential of Public Diplomacy*, [in:] A. Albright et al. (eds), *Beyond Cold-War Thinking: Young Perspectives on US-Russia Relations*, Washington, D.C.: Centre on Global Interests 2015, p. 41.

<sup>46</sup> See M. Hansel, M. Moller, *Indian Foreign Policy and International Humanitarian Norms: A Role-Theoretical Analysis*, «Asian Politics & Policy» 2015, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 79–104.

<sup>47</sup> S. Lavrov, *Interview by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov*, 13 November 2013, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/88078](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/88078) (18.05.2019).

Russian leaders spoke about non-interference in internal affairs and respect for sovereignty in reference to different states such as Egypt or Syria. These references to the Middle East resulted from the recent Arab Spring which was perceived by President Putin as US meddling in internal affairs of other states and generally, had a huge influence on Russian leaders<sup>48</sup>.

**Table 1.** Russian NRCs during the Ukraine crisis

National role conception (duties and responsibilities)	Nov 2013	Dec 2013	Jan 2014	Feb 2014	Mar 2014	Apr 2014	Total
Advocate of states' sovereignty	5	6	2	4	0	2	<b>19 (22%)</b>
Defender of compatriots living abroad	0	2	1	0	5	7	<b>15 (17%)</b>
Promoter of the Great Europe with indivisibility of security	1	5	0	3	2	2	<b>13 (15%)</b>
Supporter of Ukrainian people	0	3	2	0	4	4	<b>13 (15%)</b>
Supporter of international law	1	4	1	0	2	2	<b>10 (11%)</b>
Miscellaneous	3	7	2	3	1	2	<b>18 (20%)</b>

Source: own study.

Nevertheless, the main source of this NRC was the upcoming signing of the Association Agreement (AA) between Ukraine and the European Union, followed by protests in this country that began after President Yanukovych's refusal to sign the above agreement. This NRC was used in reference to Ukraine eleven times, i.e. more than half of coded assertions. Russia perceived the EU as exerting pressure on Ukraine to sign the AA and the West generally as meddling in the internal affairs of the sovereign state<sup>49</sup>. Such statements indicate that Russian leaders did not consider situation in Kyiv as a grassroot uprising, but attributed these events to Western efforts to remove the Yanukovych regime from power<sup>50</sup>.

Consequently, if it was not a popular uprising but a Western backed 'coup', Russia's responsibility was to support Ukraine's sovereignty. Furthermore, after the experience of the Colour Revolutions, the Euromaidan demonstrations deepened the Kremlin's concerns of regime change in Russia. Indeed, a former Putin

<sup>48</sup> See P. Baker, *The Putin Files: Peter Baker*, 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/interview/peter-baker/> (19.07.2019).

<sup>49</sup> See S. Lavrov, *Speech by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov*, 19 November 2013, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/87582](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/87582) (22.07.2019).

<sup>50</sup> L. Delcour and K. Wolczuk, *Spoiler or Facilitator of Democratization?: Russia's Role in Georgia and Ukraine*, «Democratization» 2015, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 459–78; D.R. Marples, *Russia's Perceptions of Ukraine: Euromaidan and Historical Conflicts*, «European Politics and Society» 2016, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 424–437.

advisor points out that ‘Putin believes that the United States organized and orchestrated the Maidan uprising as part of a plot to bring about his downfall’<sup>51</sup>. As such, the support for Ukraine’s independence and opposition to the regime change was not only about Ukraine but also about non-interference in Russia’s internal affairs and preventing similar events at home. In addition, the Kremlin perceived a potential successful transformation in Ukraine as a threat to the Putin’s regime due to common history and similar socio-economic conditions. As another former Kremlin’s spin doctor notes, Russian authorities

spent a long time convincing Russians that our troubled history [...] is the reason why living standards here are so much lower than in, say, England or France. [...] But if Ukrainians, who share a common past with Russia, can now build a prosperous, democratic country, then this will prove a real problem for Putin.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, one has to remember that when Vladimir Putin came back to power in 2012, he had to face large popular protests which demonstrated that also in Russia there is a potential for mass anti-governmental actions. In this context, events in Ukraine could have been a dangerous example of a situation in which the president is removed from power by street protests. All in all, the analysis of Russian leaders’ statements suggests that the situation in Ukraine was the main factor behind NRC of supporter of states’ independence. However, it is difficult not to link this role with Russia’s domestic situation and a perceived threat of regime change at home.

The second most frequent role, defender of compatriots living abroad, signals the leadership readiness to stand for Russians and Russian-speaking minorities living in other states. This NRC may seem contradictory to the first one and indeed, it gained prominence in the second part of the Ukraine crisis when Russian leaders spoke less often about non-interference in Ukraine’s internal affairs. That said, these two roles have some common sources, such as Western actions (see below). At the beginning of protests Russia’s role was presented as a rather peaceful defender of status and equal rights of compatriots but the meaning of this NRC changed as the situation in Ukraine escalated. There were numerous speeches delivered after the February clashes in Kyiv in which Russian leaders emphasised the responsibility to protect compatriots living abroad. The number and content of statements indicate that the revolution in Kyiv and growing instability in Ukraine were seen as a threat to Russian compatriots living there and as such, were the main source of this role and evolution of its meaning. Lavrov, for example, talked about the extremely dangerous situation for Russians and ‘threats

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<sup>51</sup> G. Pavlovsky in M. Bennetts, *I’m Going to Ruin Their Lives*, ebook edition, London: Oneworld Publications 2016, p. 274.

<sup>52</sup> M. Guelman, [in:] M. Bennetts, op. cit., p. 265.

of violent action on behalf of ultranationalists, who endanger the life and legal interests of Russians and the entire Russian-speaking population<sup>53</sup>.

The analysis of these speeches suggests that the perception of the new Ukrainian leadership as very hostile to Russia strongly contributed to the salience of this role. This perception stemmed not only from the general anti-Russian position of the new leadership but also from their seizure of power as a result of mass protests, a scenario which the Kremlin feared at home, and Russia's conviction of Western support for it. The perception of the nationalist Svoboda party was especially negative. Leaders from the Kremlin spoke about the party members who 'say that Russian and Russian-speaking people are Ukraine's enemies, that they should be shot and killed, that they are not people, but "beings"'<sup>54</sup>. In addition, there were opinions in Russia that the West cooperated with Ukrainian nationalists to attain a geostrategic victory<sup>55</sup>. As far as the West is concerned, Russia analysts note that after his return to the Presidency in 2012, Putin considered Western interference (especially American) as the main destabilising factor in the world<sup>56</sup>. Consequently, at the beginning of the protests the Russian leadership mainly spoke about non-interference in Ukrainian affairs. However, after the fall of the Yanukovych government and chaos that followed, there were more and more statements about the need to protect Russian compatriots living in Ukraine before it was too late. It is worth mentioning here that an analysis of Putin's core beliefs revealed that he sees chaos and state weakness as the main existential threats<sup>57</sup>, which could have influenced his perception of the situation and subsequent decisions.

Finally, speaking about protecting compatriots, Russian leaders also emphasised the need to defend Russian soldiers based in Sevastopol<sup>58</sup>. These statements can be easily linked with Russia's security interests and anxiety about the future of the Black Sea Fleet, especially since Russia might have had grounds

<sup>53</sup> S. Lavrov, *Speech by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov*, 3 March 2014, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/72642](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/72642) (22.07.2019).

<sup>54</sup> S. Lavrov, *Speech by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov*, 25 April 2014, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/63438](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/63438) (22.07.2019).

<sup>55</sup> See D.R. Marples, op. cit., p. 426.

<sup>56</sup> See D. Ofitserov-Belskiy, A. Sushenstov, *Central and Eastern Europe*, [in:] A. Tsygankov (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy...*, pp. 282–294; F. Lukyanov, op. cit.

<sup>57</sup> See S.B. Dyson, M.J. Parent, *The Operational Code Approach to Profiling Political Leaders: Understanding Vladimir Putin*, «Intelligence and National Security» 2018, Vol. 33, No. 1, p. 93.

<sup>58</sup> See V. Putin, *Russian Parliament Authorizes Putin's Request to Use Military in Ukraine*, «Ynetnews» 3 January 2014, <https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4493855,00.html> (19.07.2019).

for such concerns, in case of pro-Western opposition taking power, because in 2006 Yushchenko had already refused to extend the agreement under which the fleet stationed in Crimea<sup>59</sup>. This factor was acknowledged by President Putin who explained after the annexation that Russia's actions were also guided by the potential threat of NATO ships one day docked in Sevastopol<sup>60</sup>.

The revolution in Ukraine was the main but not the only source of this NRC. The strong emphasis on the duty to protect Russians and Russian speaking minorities living abroad might arise from Putin's conservative turn in 2012 and the regime's search for a new support base<sup>61</sup>. Apart from interests of compatriots abroad, this increasingly conservative ideology emphasised Russia's unique position in the post-Soviet space and brotherly closeness with Ukraine. Furthermore, Russia analysts point out that in the period preceding the events in Ukraine Putin's support had been decreasing. As his message of stability was less and less relevant to a new generation that did not remember the chaotic 1990s, the President needed to consolidate society<sup>62</sup>. As such, in this internal context, the rallying round the flag

effect was created and the role of external threat was imposed on the Ukrainian opposition which was termed the 'ultranationalist elements' and 'Banderovites'<sup>63</sup>.

Third in order of importance, the NRC of promoter of the Great Europe with indivisibility of security indicates Russia's wish to create a common economic and humanitarian space with one security system. Russian leaders numerous times spoke about the need to implement the principle of indivisibility of security in the Euro-Atlantic space, which would help in fighting terrorism or drug trafficking<sup>64</sup>. Furthermore, the establishment of the Great Europe is officially included as one of Russia's objectives in the state's foreign policy concept<sup>65</sup>.

<sup>59</sup> S.F. Larrabee, op. cit.; J. Biersack, S. O'Lear, *The Geopolitics of Russia's Annexation of Crimea: Narratives, Identity, Silences, and Energy*, «Eurasian Geography and Economics» 2014, Vol. 55, No. 3, p. 256.

<sup>60</sup> V. Putin, *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*, 17 April 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/20796> (23.07.2019).

<sup>61</sup> See L. March, *Revolutionary Times in Kyiv: The Current Political Situation in Ukraine*, 5 April 2014, <http://basees.org/conference-talks> (14.07.2019).

<sup>62</sup> See M. Bennetts, op. cit.; A. Kolesnikov, [in:] S. Rainsford, *Crimea Tension: What Is Russia's End Game?*, «BBC News» 14 August 2016, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-37074732> (25.05.2019).

<sup>63</sup> 'Statement by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Regarding the Statements by the US Secretary of State about the Situation in Ukraine', 3 March 2014, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/72762](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/72762) (12.05.2019).

<sup>64</sup> S. Lavrov, *Speech by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov*, 11 August 2013, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/88790](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/88790) (3.07.2019).

<sup>65</sup> *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*, 18 February 2013, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186) (6.05.2019).

Russia's perception of neglect of its interests by the West and overall dissatisfaction with the state of Euro-Atlantic relations were among the general sources of this role. Although definitely more pro-cooperative than the previous two, this NRC also partly stems from the crisis in Ukraine. Lavrov, for example, at the beginning of protests in Kyiv suggested that instead of creating new divisions over this country, Russia and the EU should return to the idea of the development of a common economic and humanitarian area in Europe<sup>66</sup>. The EU's Eastern Partnership project is another source of this NRC. Already in 2009, when the programme was launched, it was interpreted in Moscow as a geopolitical challenge to Russian plans of reintegration of Western post-Soviet states<sup>67</sup>. This geo-economic competition deepened with Russia's project of the Eurasian Economic Union, in which Ukraine was supposed to be a vital part. Consequently, the upcoming AA between Ukraine and the EU as well as the beginning of the Euromaidan protests only strengthened Russian perception of tearing neighbours from Russia as the main goal of the Eastern Partnership initiative<sup>68</sup>. As such, Russia promoted the idea of the Great Europe which, in Lavrov's words,

would allow the removal of the problem of selecting the vector of development of the states located between Russia and the EU.<sup>69</sup>

Secondly, Russia was supporting the creation of a single space of security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic space. From this standpoint, the appearance of this role points to Russia's feeling of insecurity. In Moscow, Western actions in Ukraine (as well as 2008 conflict in South Ossetia) were understood as the progressive approaching of the West to the Russian borders. Lo even mentions 'an abiding sense of insecurity'<sup>70</sup> which in 2013/14 was deepened by the crisis in Ukraine, which after Yanukovych's loss of power could have led to Ukraine's rapprochement with NATO. Such a scenario would have meant for Russia not only the loss of an important buffer zone but also of the Black Sea Fleet. In Russian perceptions the West was not interested in security cooperation but in increasing its influence in the post-Soviet space, in this case in Ukraine, thus Russia was advocating a different security agenda.

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<sup>66</sup> S. Lavrov, *Answers to Questions from the Mass Media by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov*, 5 December 2013, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/85162](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/85162) (2.07.2019).

<sup>67</sup> See R. Allison, op. cit.; T. Forsberg, H. Haukkala, *The European Union*, [in:] A. Tsygankov (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Russian Foreign Policy...*, pp. 269–281.

<sup>68</sup> S. Lavrov, *Interview by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Russia-24 TV-Channel*, 14 December 2013, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/84098](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/84098) (2.07.2019).

<sup>69</sup> S. Lavrov, *Speech by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, at the 50th Munich Security Conference...*

<sup>70</sup> B. Lo, op. cit., p. 36.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

From the above analysis, a number of points emerge. First, it demonstrates that at the beginning of the examined period NRCs used by Russian decision-makers had a rather general character. They spoke about the sovereignty of different states and advocated peaceful way of solving conflicts (included in the ‘miscellaneous’ category). The structure and sources of NRCs began to change with the development of events in Ukraine. Russian leaders started to speak about the duty to protect Russian compatriots and rather than talking about supporting states’ sovereignty in general, they began to refer specifically to Ukraine. Consequently, around February–March 2014 one can notice a decrease in the number of speeches that supported states’ independence and a significant increase in those that talked about the responsibility to protect Russians and Russian-speaking population living abroad. This change to a contradictory NRC was possible because when Russian leaders ceased to advocate Ukraine’s sovereignty, they began to speak not only about the duty to protect compatriots, but also about Russia’s responsibility to support Ukrainian people (fourth most popular NRC).

Second, the analysis of NRCs suggests that leaders’ perception of Russia’s role at the beginning of the Euromaidan crisis was rather passive and Russia wanted neither to engage nor to be dragged into Ukrainian affairs<sup>71</sup>, hence so frequent statements emphasising Ukraine’s sovereignty. This perception did not change until President Yanukovych lost power and Russia reassessed its role and duties and responsibilities arising from it.

Third and related, the analysis of public statements delivered by Russian top decision-makers shows their lower public activity in the second half of February 2014 and almost no comments on Ukraine in the period when the decisive events were taking place in this country. That implies that the chain of events in February 2014 surprised Russian leaders and made them quickly reassess Russia’s role and consider the most appropriate reaction (even if some plans of potential annexation had existed beforehand<sup>72</sup>). Indeed, President Putin himself admitted that the decision regarding Crimea was made on the night of February 22–23<sup>73</sup>. This is consistent with the distribution of NRCs over time as the frequency of using the

<sup>71</sup> See also: D. Trenin, *Russia’s Breakout from The Post-Cold War System The Drivers of Putin’s Course*, Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2014; E. Surnacheva, A. Gabuev, S. Sidorenko, *Mnogoglavyy Orel Kto Vliyal Na Ukrainskuyu Politiku Kremlja (Many-headed Eagle that Influenced the Kremlin’s Ukraine Policy)*, «Kommersant Vlast» No. 8, 3 March 2014, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2416461> (20.05.2019).

<sup>72</sup> See: *The Putin Files: Gleb Pavlovsky*, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yp84TerPgyI> (21.05.2019).

<sup>73</sup> V. Putin in D. Gal’perovich, ‘*Eksperty: Resheniye Putina Anneksiroyat’ Krym Bylo Impul’sivnym*’ (*Experts: Putin’s Decision to Annex Crimea Was Impulsive*), «Golos Ameriki»

defender of compatriots role increased significantly since the beginning of March. Furthermore, speeches of Russian leaders indicate that until the very last moment they calculated on implementation of the agreement being negotiated in Kyiv and reduction of tensions in Ukraine.

Consequently, when it became clear that such a scenario was no more possible in light of events in Ukraine and Russia was faced with a prospect of pro-Western government and a potential loss of the Black Sea Fleet, perceptions of Russia's roles changed and the Kremlin decided to 'kill two birds with one stone': ensure the security of compatriots living in Crimea and taking advantage of the turmoil in Ukraine, gain strategically important Crimea, thus securing access to the Black Sea Fleet. Furthermore, leaders' speeches indicate that a general disappointment with western actions and a sense of betrayal after the West did not ensure the agreement of February 21 (which, as Zygar notes, Putin told Yanukovych to sign<sup>74</sup>) were additional factors behind the change in perceptions of Russia's duties, enactment of defender of compatriots role and the decisions regarding Crimea. In his speech marking the incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation, Putin said that what happened was aimed against Ukraine, Russia and Eurasian integration and that Western leaders 'have lied to us many times, made decisions behind our backs, placed us before an accomplished fact'. More importantly, he added that 'our western partners have crossed the line, playing the bear and acting irresponsibly and unprofessionally'<sup>75</sup>. Last but not least, frequent statements about the need for a new security agenda in Europe show that Russian decision-makers considered the events in Ukraine as a threat to their fundamental interests.

Along with the above factors, one should remember about internal sources, which were described in more detail in the previous section. Indeed, even if the decision to annex Crimea was triggered by the collapse of Yanukovych's government, the internal context of conservative turn and patriotic mobilisation made the annexation thinkable and natural. In addition, the Russian leadership must have been aware of the public support of 85–90% for the reincorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation<sup>76</sup>. Finally, it is important to note that NRC of defender of compatriots was also used after the annexation as a justification for Russia's actions. For instance, Putin said that Russia had no other choice but to help Crimeans after having received their request for support and protection<sup>77</sup>.

<sup>74</sup> 10 March 2015, <https://www.golos-ameriki.ru/a/dg-putin-crimea-experts/2674973.html> (23.07.2019).

<sup>75</sup> M. Zygar, *All the Kremlin's Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin*, New York: Public Affairs 2016, p. 267.

<sup>76</sup> V. Putin, *Address by President of the Russian Federation...*

<sup>77</sup> Sotsiologicheskoye issledovaniye ФБК: Украина и Крым (FBK opinion polls: Ukraine and Crimea), 27 March 2014, <https://navalny.livejournal.com/915621.html> (20.05.2019).

<sup>77</sup> V. Putin, *Address by President of the Russian Federation...*

To conclude, the combination of various external (the Arab spring, the AA, the revolution in Kyiv, views of the Ukrainian opposition) and internal (2011–12 protests in Russia, the conservative turn, huge support for the annexation) as well as ideational (strong threat perception, sense of injustice and betrayal by the West) and material factors (Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet as military, strategic assets) influenced leaders' perceptions of Russia's duties and responsibilities and determined RFP decisions during the Ukraine crisis. Taking into account these various factors and combining three levels of analysis (individual, state, international), RT contributes to and enriches explanations offered by the main IR theories. That said, future research should strengthen some of the above arguments by including domestic role contestation processes and analysing whether elites and public opinion supported NRCs held by the leadership.

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