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National identity and Foreign policy:  
a brief analysis of their connection  
in Russia

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## *National identity and Foreign policy: a brief analysis of their connection in Russia*

### *Abstract:*

*This paper analyses how Russia's national identity influences its foreign policy. Particularly, it focuses on how these identitarian factors shape President Vladimir Putin's foreign policy choices. Briefly and swiftly it goes over the country's history in order to establish the bases on which national identity is founded. Later on, it studies Russia's identity construction as opposed to the West —being the “West” the “Other” against which Russia has built its image of “self”. Finally, the four questions regarding identity— who we are, how do we assume ourselves, how are we perceived and what do we aspire to – are addressed and commented upon, leading to the conclusion.*

### *Keywords:*

*Russia, national identity, foreign policy, re-emergence, President Vladimir Putin.*

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## Introduction

Multiple factors have a primary role in the construction of a State's foreign policy. It can be argued that, although it is not completely decisive, the national identity of a country contributes to the setting of objectives and shapes the course or plan of action proposed for its foreign policy.

The national identity of a State expresses 3 characteristics: first, a "historical reality", national identity is based on a series of situations, experiences, milestones, etc. As with people, a State does not just have one national identity. It may have different allegiances, one side of its "identity" may manifest at a given moment and not at another, etc.<sup>1</sup> This means that identity is dynamic, that is, it presents a series of changes and continuities throughout history. Second, national identity involves a context that derives in an institutional framework, that is, it is built through a set of events through time and it ends up being materialized in the conformation of some given state institutions and policies, the arising of certain political personalities, different from those of other states. And third, it expresses a "relational reality", identity is not created in a complete void, it requires interaction, contact and communication with various external actors. Nations answer to the question "who are we" by somehow setting themselves apart or felling like the rest of the states. Moreover, how "others" perceive and act towards a given state can be of much influence in that state's identity<sup>2</sup>, and its foreign policy conformation.

In summary, national identity results from both domestic processes and interactions with counterparts located abroad. Therefore, its construction is related to both self-perception and self-representation issues and to the perception and representation of the "others". Taking these considerations into account, we will analyse identity referring to four basic interrelated questions: who we are, how do we assume ourselves, how are we perceived and what are our aspirations. These questions provide for a brief but clear framework to structure the analysis of something as complex as a country's identity. The answers to these "identity questions" show changes and continuities over time.

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<sup>1</sup> MAALOUF, Amin. In the name of identity: violence and the need to belong, *Penguin Books*, (2013), p. 5

<sup>2</sup> Id.

As the identity of a State affects the definition and scope of national interests and, consequently, the outline and profile of its foreign policy, a cohesive national identity contributes to a better, easier and more active defence of the vital interests of a country. This issue is key to the definition and redefinition of the strategic options that a state has amidst of the changes in the global system. The greater national cohesion, the lower the costs and the greater the potential benefits that this country can obtain in the international arena<sup>3</sup>.

With the aim of analysing how the construction of national identity is projected from the foreign policy of a State onto the international arena, we will study the Russian case focusing on answering the four questions, which were explained above, and making emphasis on how its answers manifest under the presidency of Vladimir Putin. The identity, foreign policy relationship in the case of Russia is quite interesting because, given its demographic and geographical size, its economic strength (particularly in energetic resources), its military and political aspirations, the country is usually in the category that many academics call “emerging power”. As such, it is assumed that it aspires to change the balance of power in the international system and acquiring leadership roles in global governance institutions. However, there is a gap between a country’s aspiration and its ability to achieve those goals. In order to have a successful leadership, resources and ambition are not the only requisites; a country must acquire the support of followers<sup>4</sup>. The lack of support from neighbouring countries is a strong limitation on Russia's ambitions to become a great power once again. This “problem” is related to the Russian’s identity, their historical relations with those countries and their foreign policy objectives.

Russian identity and foreign policy were formed under different external and internal contexts, while responding to a wide variety of national security challenges. This combination of elements shows a series of changes and continuities<sup>5</sup>, which partly determine their relationship with the rest of the world since ancient times —under the Tsarist empire—, until today in Putin’s government.

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<sup>3</sup> PAUL A. Kowert, "National Identity: Inside and Out," *Security Studies* 8, Nos. 2/3 (1998/99), p. 1

<sup>4</sup> SCHRIM, Stefan A. “Leader in Need of Followers: Emerging Powers in Global Governance”, *European Journal of International Relations* 16(2): 197-221, (2010), p. 199

<sup>5</sup> TSYGANKOV, Andrei P. “Russia’s Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity”, pp. 1-31. *Langham: Rowman & Littlefield*, (2013), p. xiii-xxvi

This paper is structured as follows: firstly, we will very briefly go over Russia's history in order to comprehend the bases of its national identity. Afterwards, we will study Russia's identity formation in relation and sometimes in opposition to the West. Later on, we will focus on answering the four questions regarding Russia's national identity and how they manifest on Putin's foreign policy decisions. Finally, we will proceed to the conclusion.

### **Brief historical recount on Russia's national identity formation**

Currently, the rise of Russia is understood from a Western point of view, as that of an "emerging power", comparable to the rise of Brazil or India. However, from the Russian perspective (like the Chinese perspective of itself), the country is "re-emerging"<sup>6</sup>. This is absolutely central to understanding Russia's identity formation and its foreign policy today. Russia went from being an empire (under the Tsars regime) and a superpower (during the Cold War period) to being, at present, simply "another" power. Its "emergency" in the western key, ignores the enormous impact that the loss of international power has had on the country's self-esteem and in the setting of its current objectives. Without having this in mind, there is no way of understanding Russia's behaviour in today's international system.

In this respect, it is necessary to comprehend that territory and the "protection" of their population has always been at the core of Russia's national identity. Since the XV century, under the tsarist empire, the country knew the value of territorial expansion and the importance of border protection. Being at the centre of the Heartland<sup>7</sup>, their domains expanded throughout history, reaching their peak at the end of World War II. Under the period of the Soviet Union it's feeling of exceptionalism and greatness grew, confirmed by the role Russia self-attributes as the "saviour of Europe" at the price of great sacrifices in the Second World War<sup>8</sup>. Even through the Western decolonization process of their ultra-maritime colonies, the Russian "empire" with an almost perfect "national

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<sup>6</sup> SRINIVAS, Janguru. "Re-emergence of Russian foreign policy under Putin regime". *Indian J. Soc. & Pol.* 04(03): 69-73, (2017), p. 69

<sup>7</sup> BASSIN, Mark, and Konstantin E. Aksenov. "Mackinder and the heartland theory in post-Soviet geopolitical discourse". *Geopolitics*, (2006), p. 101-102

<sup>8</sup> PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José María. "Historia, identidad y estrategia en la Federación Rusa", *bie3: Boletín IEEE*, no 5, (2017), p. 4

amalgam” maintained its territorial integrity. Russia’s imperial conscience, which creates a hierarchical view of its relationship with other nations, has generated their historical and current claim for the status of great power<sup>9</sup>.

Around the 1990s, everything changed. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, there were no doubts about the triumph of the West, particularly the United States and its liberal values at the international level. The Soviet Union had disappeared as a contender. In the process, it lost an enormous part of its territorial domain, some of which contained many Russians that were now separated from the “Mother land”. The humiliation caused by the national “atomization”, was seen by the Russians as the greatest expression of a defeat without any battles<sup>10</sup>. The victory of the United States was conclusive, inexorable and probably permanent. The unipolar moment allowed the United States to develop an international reorganization plan under its own rules<sup>11</sup>, without considering the interest, concerns and fears of other powers.

However, for some time now, the international landscape has been changing. We are now witnessing the rise of Asia and the transit of power from the West to the East, of which Russia is also part. We are moving from unipolarity to multipolarity, where emerging, re-emerging and intermediate powers are starting to play a significant role in the determination of rules and on the change or stability of international arena. Amidst this transition logic, the Russians have an opportunity to fulfil their ambitions, and pressure for the recovery of power they have lost. This will be done through occupying seats in the most important world level organizations, and exerting influence over its “exclusive” zone (neighbouring countries, ex-Soviet Union members), among other hard power and soft power strategies. On the other hand, Russia will seek Europe’s recognition of the place it believes it deserves in the international arena. In this respect it will face an important challenge. It remains to be seen up to which point the West is prepared to accept Russia as a full member of the power concert<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibidem

<sup>10</sup> SERRA I MASSANSALVADOR, Francesc. “Identidad y poder: la cohesión del Estado ruso y su relación con la conformación de la Unión Europea como actor internacional”. *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*, (2004), p. 58-59

<sup>11</sup> IKENBERRY, John. MASTANDUNO, John, Michael, WOHLFORTH, William C. “Unipolarity, state behavior, and systemic consequences.” *World Politics* 61.1: 1-27, (2009), p. 1

<sup>12</sup> SERRA I MASSANSALVADOR, Francesc. “Identidad y poder: la cohesión del Estado ruso y su

Despite these ambitions, to achieve its objectives, Russia needs to make a huge effort to create a strong national consensus and gain support from some countries of the international community. It seems as if, until today, it has found quite some difficulties in creating cohesion among its main influence zone, the space occupied before by the Soviet Union.

To summarize, in order to understand Russia's strategy, it is necessary to consider the changing contexts and situations faced in the past and being faced in the present. We are in the presence of country that considers itself an empire that lost almost all its power, its regional, world influence and its “allies” (the countries in which it exerted influence in the past). This has shaped and shapes its identity, its foreign policy and its re-emerging strategy.

### **The Russian “me” versus the Western “others”**

The collective national identity changes over time. In the Russian case, despite domestic and geopolitical changes —the fall of the Tsarist Empire, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and now Putin’s government— transformations in its national identity have been surprisingly slow. This has made it seem as particularly rigid<sup>13</sup>.

With regard to self-perception, there is no denying that “the West” has played a prominent role in creating the system of belief and the meanings under —and sometimes against— which Russia has defined its national identity and international decisions<sup>14</sup>.

Several authors believe the Russian national identity is divided between Slavish and Occidentalism components<sup>15</sup>. However, others believe there are three schools which create the thinking and behavioural patterns of Russia’s foreign policy<sup>16</sup>. For the sake of

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relación con la conformación de la Unión Europea como actor internacional”. *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*, (2004), p. 58-59

<sup>13</sup> ZEVELEV, Igor. “Russian National Identity and Foreign Policy”, *Centre for Strategic International Studies (CSIS)*, (2016), p. 18

<sup>14</sup> TSYGANKOV, Andrei P. “Russia’s Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity”, pp. 1-31. *Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield*, (2013), p. 1

<sup>15</sup> PARDO DE SANTAYANA, José María. “Historia, identidad y estrategia en la Federación Rusa”, *bie3: Boletín IEEE*, no 5, (2017), p. 6

<sup>16</sup> TSYGANKOV, op. cit. p. 4

being more comprehensive in our analysis, we will follow this trend. All these three schools are closely related with the Russian perception of the West. Their precepts have remained constant throughout history, marking continuity in the way in which the national identity of this country is moulded.

Firstly, we identify the “western” school of thought. It recognizes the similarities between Russia and the West and sees the latter as the most viable and progressive civilization. This school is in favour of westernization of Russia. Secondly, there is the “statists” school. This is the most influential school of thought within Russia. It fully relies on the ability of the State to govern and preserve the political and social order. It considers the values of power, stability and sovereignty as more important than those of democracy and freedom. For this trend of thought, the notions of security threats to Russia are critical. This does not imply that it is inherently anti-western; but it simply seeks for the West to recognize Russia as a great power, by emphasizing the military and economic capabilities of the country. Finally, we have the “civilizationist” school. It considers that Russian values are different from those of the West, and therefore, that it is necessary to expand them abroad. They seek to challenge the West's value system by insisting on the cultural distinction of Russia<sup>17</sup>.

From the combination of the three lines of thought it follows that the process of self-definition and redefinition of foreign policy in the Russian case is shaped by: first, self-confidence, derived from hegemonic sentiment, which seeks to impose autonomic and nationalist solutions - all this, typical of the “statist” and “civilizationist” schools; and second, the inferiority complex dominated by the perception of exclusion from the civilized world - typical of the Western school. In this respect, today we can see how the need to be respected in the international arena, and the Russian reaffirmation of power, moved by insecurity sentiments, are recurrent topics in the government's policies and speeches<sup>18</sup>.

As for the perception and representation of the “other”, the West and particularly Europe, have played the primary role of “significant other” in the creation of Russian

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<sup>17</sup> TSYGANKOV, op. cit. p. 4-8

<sup>18</sup> LARUELLE, Marlène. "Nacionalismo y construcción estatal en Rusia: Un consenso social debilitado/Nationalism and state control in Russia: A weakened social consensus." *Revista CIDOB d'afers internacionals*: 63-79, (2011), p. 66

identity. Historically, Russia has sought to be recognized by the West and modernize just as the West has done<sup>19</sup>, but keeping its own cultural and identitarian particularities. At the same time, Russia has seen and sees the West, and especially Europe —due to its territorial proximity—, but also the United States, as potential sources of threats to its national security and interests. The ambition for recognition and the feeling of exclusion by the West are combined to create a certain national resentment and an aggressive and revisionist foreign policy of the status quo. The clearest example of this refers to the Russian perception about the expansion of NATO and the European Union: the decision to expand these alliances to Eastern European countries was seen in Moscow as a hoax, as an expression of lack of trust in Russia, as an act of hostility and attempted isolation, and finally as a serious challenge to Russian security<sup>20</sup>. These “inconsiderate” Western policies of Russian interests, security and identity can serve as catalysts —or excuses— for Russian aggressiveness in foreign policy, which is reflected in, for example, the annexation of Crimea. This territory (and the whole state of Ukraine) was not only historically part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, but in it lived an important minority of people who considered themselves Russian. Acting in defence of two of its main identitarian components —territory and “population protection”— against the Western intromission in their area of influence, Russia found the perfect excuse to annex said region.

All in all, the West plays an important role as the “Other” from which Russia takes some components of its identity and against which it defines itself and its foreign policy.

### **The four questions about identity in the Russian case**

To understand how Russian national identity shapes its foreign policy and national objectives, we will now move on to analyse some key aspects of the four questions about identity that were referred to in the introduction. These questions matter given that they refer to the fact that a cohesive, coherent and consistent national identity

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<sup>19</sup> TSYGANKOV, op. cit. p. 18

<sup>20</sup> FREDERICK, Bryan, MATTHEW Povlock, Stephen WATTS, Miranda PRIEBE, and Edward GEIST, Assessing Russian Reactions to U.S. and NATO Posture Enhancements. *Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation*, (2017). Retrieved from [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1879.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1879.html).



contributes and helps build a fruitful foreign policy and advance geopolitical objectives. Conversely, a poorly cohesive, or inconsistent identity does not contribute to further the objectives of a states' foreign policy. If the four answers to the questions are aligned, then the country will probably succeed in its foreign policy objectives.

On another note, we have to keep in mind that none of the factors encompassed by these questions are immutable —given the complex and dynamic nature of identity— however, in the Russian case, we can find an important series of continuities throughout time.

### ***Regarding the “who are we” question***

This question refers to the series of factors that make up the “objective” view that Russia has of itself, how it was in the past, how it has evolved, and how it is now. Culture, resources, political system and institutions, geographical and demographical factors, make up the objective reality that shapes a states' self-representation and identity. As an example, we can mention that fact that a state with more resources or bigger geographical dimensions —and the military capacity to control it— may feel more powerful than one that does not have that. Therefore, the identity of said state will probably have, for example, components of greatness.

These factors are related to each other and have influenced the behaviour of all Russian political regimes, from the Tsarist Empire to the present. We will now move on to exploring some of them, which are key in defining the Russian national identity, and we will focus on the way they influence Putin's worldview and foreign policy choices.

#### Culture. Nationalism and pan-Slavism

Culture —as a component of identity— informs and in many ways determines the priorities of a State when defining its foreign policy objectives. But culture does not exist in a void; it is shaped by material, historical, relational experiences, etc. In turn, culture influences national interests both material (affected by the behaviour of the “others”) and non-tangible factors (such as principles or values) considered vital for that State<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> SHAFFER, Brenda (ed.), “The Limits of Culture: Islam and Foreign Policy”, *Cambridge: The MIT Press*:

Moscow's current attempts to expand its influence and power at the international level were historically nourished and are now fed by the cultural nationalist and pan-slavist sentiment<sup>22</sup>. Russia grew based on the ideas of being a great and proud nation, where all the people shared a cultural and ethnic background. In the XIX century, specifically around the 1860's pan-Slavism became really popular in Russia. The Russian Pan-slavs believed that given that Europe was culturally crippled, it was Russia's destiny and mission to help and save them by gaining political dominance over it, with the support of all Slav peoples, even those who leaved outside of Russia<sup>23</sup>. During the years of the Soviet Union, a "russification" process began by teaching the Russian language in the schools, moving populations from one area to another, etc. in order to create what Stalin thought was the "Soviet people"<sup>24</sup>. Since the demise of the Soviet Union, ethnic nationalism has been on the rise. This sentiment is further fuelled by the Russian feeling of having been relegated from the game of the great civilizations and the need to re-obtain the recognition it believes it deserves from Europe and the West.

As a result we have the drivers for Putin to, on the one hand, invest in the military field, where he knows that Europe must recognize Russia's superiority, and on the other, to claim notions, principles and values related to pan-Slavism, ethnicity, national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The best example of the manifestation of Putin's perspective is the Ukraine crisis, which allowed him to "recognize" that there was a gap between the territorial body of Russia and its "cultural" body, its self-perception as a "nation". To justify the annexation of Crimea, Putin used arguments related to history, the status of Russia as a great power, the accomplishments of the Russian army in Eastern Europe during Second World War. He also emphasized the existence of Russian speaking people and Russians living separated from the "Mother land".<sup>25</sup>

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1-13, (2006), p. 1-2

<sup>22</sup> A 19th century movement which recognized the common ethnicity shared by the Slav peoples of both Eastern and east central Europe. Its objective was to unite those people in order to achieve a great nation with similar cultural and political goals. As explained in "Pan-Slavism", Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed December 5, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Pan-Slavism>

<sup>23</sup> "Pan-Slavism", Enciclopedia Britannica, accessed December 5, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Pan-Slavism>

<sup>24</sup> SANCHEZ GARCIA, Raquel. "Nacionalismo ruso y régimen soviético", *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma, Serie V, H. Contemporánea*, t. 12: 303-334, (1999), p. 311

<sup>25</sup> LARUELLE, Marlene. "Russia as a "Divided nation," from compatriots to Crimea: A contribution to the discussion on nationalism and foreign policy." *Problems of Post-Communism* 62.2: 88-97, (2015).

All this can be synthesized in the in the idea of Russia as a “divided nation”. Putin uses this notion as the perfect instrument to justify and legitimize Russia’s interventions in neighbouring countries, such as Ukraine.<sup>26</sup>

## Geography

Geography matters, it shapes the geographical imagination of the people and it is part of the national identity. Russia is a half European and half Asian state, this means its identity is also parted between these two continents<sup>27</sup>. In turn, this implies that their main relations and their neighbouring states have very different cultures and worldviews. Russia must deal with various political, social, economic cultures along its borders. In turn, it is a country that has a large amount of territory and a large amount of population.

This reality translates into the imperative need to protect its great borders, which are one of the fundamental aspects of national security. Therefore, Putin so fervently makes claims of national territorial sovereignty defends the principle of non-intervention and its power over its designated “area of influence”. Feeling threatened by the European Union due to the inclusion of states that are increasingly closer to their borders, makes Russia react negatively. According to the Kremlin’s spokesman, Peskov, “the gradual expansion of NATO’s military structure towards our borders (...) does not contribute in any way to security and stability on the continent, on the contrary, these expansionist actions inevitably lead to a response from Russia to maintain the parity that is so often

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<sup>26</sup> LARUELLE, Marlene. “Russia as a “Divided nation,” from compatriots to crimea: A contribution to the discussion on nationalism and foreign policy.” *Problems of Post-Communism* 62.2: 88-97, (2015). Retrieved from [http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=95386540-3ebf-48dc-8222-468cc1debfd%40sdc-v-  
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<sup>27</sup> BARANOVSKY, Vladimir. “Russia: A Part of Europe or Apart from Europe?”, *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, Vol. 76, No. 3, *Europe: Where Does It Begin and End?*, pp. 443-458 (2000), p. 443

broken”<sup>28</sup>. Similarly, although in the beginning Russia fully backed “One Belt One Road” Chinese initiative, Putin’s concern grows everyday regarding it, given that it may reduce Russia’s influence over its neighbours<sup>29</sup>. For the time being the two countries share a geostrategic alliance, but given it is an alliance based on political, ideological and contextual convenience, one must wonder if it will last, or if eventually Russia will react negatively given its loss of power in its neighbouring region.

### *Politics and political personalities*

Political regimes, institutions, and those in charge of them, also influence the national identity. The current situation in today’s world includes the existence of a paralysis and even of several setbacks of democracy as a political system. These setbacks allow the rise of alternative models to the traditional western concept of liberal democracy, among which we find Putin's Russia. Nowadays, many international organizations —such as Freedom House— regard Russia as one of the least democratic countries<sup>30</sup>. There is a very fragile rule of law - there are periodic elections, but the basic liberal components of a democracy are not respected, there is an elite that has much better living conditions than the rest of society, etc. However, the Russian administration does not admit that democracy is in decline in their country; on the contrary they defend their political system by claiming that it is a “majoritarian democracy”, different from the Western democracy type<sup>31</sup>. Despite this “debate”, it is undeniable that Putin’s political control and power has been increasing since his last election. But this comes as no news for the Russian people. In Russia there is a culture that supports the existence of very strong leaders, from the tzars, the great revolutionary figures like Lenin and Stalin, and now President Putin. History shows that these figures are necessary to unify the country and allow for its progress, both in the domestic and international levels. Whenever there

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<sup>28</sup> SPUTNIK NÓVOSTI – EFE, “Expansión de la OTAN hacia Rusia provoca respuesta desde Moscú”. *Telesur*, March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.telesurtv.net/news/expansion-otan-rusia-respuesta-moscu-20180528-0015.html>

<sup>29</sup> TASS. “Russia’s president comments on One Belt, One Road concept’s prospects”. *TASS, Russian News Agency*, June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Retrieved from <https://tass.com/economy/1008158>

<sup>30</sup> “Russia”, Freedom House, accessed December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/russia>

<sup>31</sup> Bill of Rights in Action. “Putin’s Illiberal Democracy”, *Constitutional Rights Foundation*, Vol. 31, No. 4, (2016), p. 4

were no great, powerful leaders, the Russian state fell into deep crisis or face turmoil, which in turn implied a loss of power at the international level. This is exemplified under the administration of President Boris Yeltsin. Not showing the “enough personal power or strength”, the country’s economic assets went into decay, the KGB and the military power declined, and the political system was in chaos<sup>32</sup>. The country was simply broken. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the Russian population supports and prefers strong leaderships to democracy<sup>33</sup>. Confidence in Putin’s leadership has been consistently strong throughout his mandates and the people are satisfied with the direction the country is taking<sup>34</sup>.

A strong leader can impact positively or negatively on foreign policy. The personal traits of individuals, their psychopathologies influence their perceptions and impacts in decision making<sup>35</sup>. When authority is highly centralized or in the process of being so, like in the case of Russia, the risks are much higher. For example, we could see Putin as a leader with a paranoid psychopathology exacerbated by Russian history and national identity. We can see in some of their behaviours a widespread suspicion that the “others” (the West) are inherently malevolent. This can be attributed to the Russia-European relations after the fall of the USSR and the impact they have had on the formation of the Russian national identity. Russia’s strategic behaviour —always on the offensive or on the defensive—, an anti-globalization position and a nationalistic perspective, are good examples of how paranoia influences the formation of Russian foreign policy.

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<sup>32</sup> GOODRICH, Lauren. “Russia’s Evolving Leadership”, *Stratfor*, July, 5th, 2011. Retrieved from <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russias-evolving-leadership>, accessed on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> N.A. “Russians prefer a strong leader to a democracy”, *The New York Times*, January 5, 2006. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/05/world/europe/russians-prefer-a-strong-leader-to-democracy.html>, accessed on December 1, 2019.

<sup>34</sup> VICE, Margaret. “Russians Remain Confident in Putin’s Global Leadership”, *Pew Research Center*, June 20, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2017/06/20/russians-remain-confident-in-putins-global-leadership/>, accessed on December 11, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> PETTMAN, Ralph. “Psychopathology and World Politics”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vo. 23, No. 3, 2010. Retrieved from <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=b99483de-5ce5-4077-844e-c8132df4bd7b%40sdc-v-ssessmgr03&bdata=Jmxhbm9ZXMmc2l0ZT1laG9zdC1saXZl#AN=53921560&db=aph>, accessed on December 5, 2019.

In summary, being an illiberal democracy and having a culture that permits the existence of strong leaders create a foreign policy in Russia. On some issues its foreign policy resembles that of authoritarianisms. Examples of this are the role of Russia in Ukraine, Syria, Chechnya and its alleged interference in the US elections<sup>36</sup>. These actions have strengthened the Kremlin's position in the interior of the country, by creating the feeling that Russia is taken seriously in the world, fulfilling the country's historical ambition.

### Military and economic power

These two factors are key to understand the way a foreign policy is constructed based on national identity. Russia's geographical position creates the need to develop adequate strategies and actions towards both Europe and Asia. As part of Asia, Russia has been involved, throughout history, in an area full of juxtaposed and asymmetric security dilemmas. There are many nuclear powers and it is a region where there is great proliferation or temptation of nuclear proliferation. It is also a quite unstable region of the world<sup>37</sup>. Being in such fertile ground for possible nuclear escalation or military confrontation, Russia has the need to build up its military power. Added to this and considering the expansion of NATO which threatens Russia's national security and "hurts" its ego and pride, it is not surprising that they are concerned with huge military and defence spending. For Putin, military power is one of the main ways Russia must "impose" itself to Europe and pressure them to recognize its importance and its "rightful" place in as a great power in the international landscape. Therefore, the country defence budget remains the third largest in the world, much higher than those of the European nations combined<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> Bill of Rights in Action. "Putin's Illiberal Democracy", Constitutional Rights Foundation, Vol. 31, No. 4, (2016), p. 4

<sup>37</sup> ACHARYA, Sukanta. "Security dilemmas in Asia." *International Studies* 44.1, pp. 57-72, (2007), p. 57-58.

<sup>38</sup> KOFMAN, Michael. "Russian defense spending is much larger, and more sustainable than it seems", *Defense News*, May 3rd, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2019/05/03/russian-defense-spending-is-much-larger-and-more-sustainable-than-it-seems/> Accessed on December 13th, 2019.

In turn, its economic power, especially in the energy sector, has recently become one of the most powerful weapons used by the Kremlin to negotiate in its relations with other countries. Since Putin came to power, his goal has been rebuilding the economy as another way of regaining the international position that, according to their national identity, Russia “deserves”. During his first 2 tenures, he boosted the economic growth, due, partially to a surge in oil prices worldwide, one of the countries’ main exports. Added to this, Russia became the largest natural gas supplier in the world, being its main buyers, the European Union<sup>39</sup>. This allows the country to have an important bargaining power over its adversaries. It fuels the nationalistic sentiment and the pride the people feel on their country.

#### External forces. Relationship with other great powers

As said before, the “others” against which a country defines its national identity are key to understanding their foreign policy manifestations. Russia had traditionally been “close” to European countries. Despite historical issues, it has always been European recognition what Russians have sought. Against their expectations after the Cold War period and the destruction of the old regime, to be welcomed back by the Western powers, especially the European communities, into the “club of civilized countries”, this did not happen. Russia felt physiologically and politically prepared to enter the community of the “international elite” and to be recognized as a re-emerging power<sup>40</sup>. However, the hope did not last, Russia comprehended that it would always be treated as an outsider. Politically this placed Russia on the defensive. In identitarian terms, this fuelled the nationalistic sentiment, the pride in the “Mother land” and pushed the “Slav people” closer together.

Currently, Putin's foreign policy has managed to diversify relations and break the closed Eurocentric vision which believed that Russia “needed Europe”, even though this region had continuously turned its back on them. He even almost turned it into a “Europe needs Russia”, given their dependence on Russian gas. European powers know that

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<sup>39</sup> Bill of Rights in Action, op. cit. p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> BARANOVSKY, Vladimir. “Russia: A Part of Europe or Apart from Europe?”, *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, Vol. 76, No. 3, *Europe: Where Does It Begin and End?* pp. 443-458 (Jul. 2000), p. 447.

there are certain limits to their manoeuvre in the international landscape regarding Russia —for example, the sanctions they imposed on it due to— what the EU considered —the “illegal” Crimea annexation— given this reliance on the supply of Russian gas.

Cleverly, Putin has also sought to strengthen ties with other emerging powers such as China and India. An example of this diversification of relations is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) initiative, which has been classified by some as an anti-OTAN Asian alliance<sup>41</sup> and its creation of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, in which many former Soviet Union republics take part.

### ***Regarding the “how do we assume ourselves” question***

This question can help understand if there is a perception gap between what a country genuinely or “objectively is”, and what it can do with it in the international landscape. If there is a genuine gap between the “conditions” and the “expectations” of a country, then a sense of frustration, turmoil and aggressiveness can appear. From the Russian actions and decisions in international politics, its history, culture, politics, etc., some criteria can be delineated about how Russia assumes itself and the means to reach its “destiny”. It is noteworthy that, as in the question about “who we are” in this question there were no major changes due to the “rigidity” of Russian identity and its slow pace of change.

Notions of “greatness” have always surrounded Russia. It has been considered in the past —when it was an Empire— and is currently considered a great power, especially in the military and civilization field (regarding the Slav-culture). After Putin came to power, the country started developing again ideas of “Russia is rising from its knees” for it will become an “energetic superpower once again”. Therefore, the country —and President Putin— assumes that it should be treated as such in the international arena. In this respect there is no gap between what Russia “is” and what the country “assumes it is”, it is certainly a great power (and growing one with each passing day) and it assumes itself

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<sup>41</sup> N. A. “¿Elaboran Rusia, China y la India una respuesta conjunta a EEUU?”, Sputnik Mundo, June 15th, 2019. Retrieved from <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/politica/201906151087642560-elaboran-rusia-china-y-la-india-una-respuesta-conjunta-a-eeuu/>, accessed on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019.



as a great power. Implications are that Russia considers that it is a key player and should be taken seriously for the definition of the global rules of the game. However, this is denied in many cases by the Western countries, creating frictions, given that it is impeding Russia from fulfilling its objective: occupy its rightful role<sup>42</sup>.

These conceptions help to understand why Russia's foreign policy objectives focus on maintaining national sovereignty, increasing its prestige on the world level and revising or even modifying international rules, sometimes using not-so-peaceful methods for it.

### ***Regarding the “how are we perceived” question***

This question addresses the topic of how other States perceive a given country in the international arena – its behaviour, its policies, its ambitions and aims, etc. It allows us to establish an outside view on the general cohesion or congruence between the who are we question and how do we assume ourselves question. Sometimes outsiders' perception of a given country can clash with its own perception and assumptions. This will ultimately create conflict in the international level.

Generally speaking and taking into account the obvious Western bias in the dominant international relation theories, Russia's international image has been and is today much more negative than positive. In general, the western world complains about the Russian's authorities lack commitment regarding basic civil liberties and human rights. Added to this, Russia is perceived as a player who seeks to impose rules and rejects the prevailing status quo. This is regarded quite negatively by Western countries, which generally support a different set of way to do negotiation, agreements and strategies, especially in the international arena. Few countries would trust Putin when it comes to international affairs, it is known that this political leader makes alliance of convenience (such as the current one with China), to achieve a certain goal. Obviously, the most critical opinions about this country are located within the United States and Europe (both during the Cold War —when the face the menace of the communist empire— and nowadays, under Putin's rule), while the rejection is more diluted in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> SERRA I MASSANSALVADOR, op. cit. p. 84

<sup>43</sup> VICE, Margaret. “Publics Worldwide Unfavorable Toward Putin, Russia. But few see Russian power

Despite Russian's claims of power, most countries do not see the power and influence of Russia as a fundamental threat to their nations<sup>44</sup>. A survey conducted in 26 countries provided evidence for this. Only 40 % of the people living in them perceive Russia as a threat<sup>45</sup>. Not even Russian nuclear threats are taken much seriously. Recently Putin threatened with pointing all Russia's nuclear power towards United States territory if said country placed middle and long-range missiles in Europe. The United States treated the threat as mere "Russian regime propaganda"<sup>46</sup>. There is therefore a gap between how Russia perceives itself and how other countries in the international system perceive it. As expected, conflict has emerged and will continue to do so due to it.

On an end note, it should be clarified that the member states of the European Union and most states located near the border of Russia do perceive Putin's aggressive acts as dangerous and even in terms of an existential threat<sup>47</sup>. The seizing of Crimea set a dangerous precedent and created fear among many neighbouring Russian states. However, the NATO alliance —despite being currently contested by President Donald Trump— is still in place and continues to play as a shield on the region. Therefore, Russia's threatening power and its ability to instigate fear, is high but not fully credible.

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and influences as a major threat", *Pew Research Center*, (2017), p. 2

<sup>44</sup> VICE, Margaret. "Publics Worldwide Unfavorable Toward Putin, Russia. But few see Russian power and influences as a major threat", *Pew Research Center*, (2017), p. 3

<sup>45</sup> POUSSHTER, Jacob, HUANG, Christine. "Climate change still seen as the top global threat, but cyberattacks a rising concern", *Pew Research Center*, February 10, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/02/10/climate-change-still-seen-as-the-top-global-threat-but-cyberattacks-a-rising-concern/>, accessed on December 23, 2019

<sup>46</sup> EFE. "EE. UU. responder a la temible amenaza de Putin", *Telemundo Arizona*, February, 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.telemundoarizona.com/noticias/eeuu/Estados-Unidos-responde-a-las-amenazas-del-presidente-ruso-Vladimir-Putin-sobre-apuntar-sus-misiles-506149151.html>, accessed on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

<sup>47</sup> N. A. "Introduction: Assessing Threats to U.S. Vital Interests", *Heritage Organization*, October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.heritage.org/military-strength/assessing-threats-us-vital-interests>, accessed on December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019.

***Regarding the “what do we aspire to” question***

This question examines a country's aspirations in the international level, given its identity and foreign policy objectives. It is based on the two questions of who we are and how do we assume ourselves.

Historically, Russia has aspired to be a great power and be recognized as such. Having been a great empire has impacted the country's identity. In turn, this marked Russia's understanding over the concept of sovereignty, making it seek to be a “secure power” capable of controlling all countries located close to its borders and those in its influence area. Therefore, in its neighbouring area, Russia sees “order” in terms of “stability” where it can be in control of all issues. Another important pillar of Russia's identity has always been the notion of pan-Slavism. Russia still aspires to unite all the Slavs under the same banner. These ambitions have not changed throughout time and through the different type of political regimes, which makes them core precepts of Russia's national identity. At present, one of Putin's priorities has been to give back Russia's prominence in the international arena and above all to show its citizens that Russia is a “strong country” and that it is no longer in the hands of West. At the same time, he has used the pan-slavish speech —the idea of “protecting their own”— to expand the country's border.

All in all, Russia's aspirations coincide perfectly with the two first questions. However, in order to fulfil these aspiration, and despite all the political, economic, military might that the country may have, the rest of the world will not easily allow for it to have “the place it wants and it supposedly deserves”. Russia is nor regarded as a leader, nor as a serious threat by many countries (besides its neighbours and some European Union members). These means that will not be able to impose itself by “good” or legitimate means, and it seems as if its hard power will also not be enough as to impose its will on the international arena.

**Conclusion - Russia's foreign policy profile formation: national identity roots**

Russia does not perceive itself as an emerging power, but rather perceives its rise in terms of re-emergence. National identity, combined with other sets of elements, provides for a specific framework to develop a specific strategy of resurgence in foreign policy.

The combination of three previously analysed schools of thought allows us to get a sense of the relations we can expect from Russia with the outside world. This is reflected in several of Putin's policy objectives.

Firstly, we have Putin's idea of recovering the status and influence that had been lost, through the reconstruction of the capabilities —especially in the military and energy fields— that Russia has when it was a superpower<sup>48</sup>. In identity terms, this is related to the nationalistic sentiment and obtaining the recognition it deserves from Europe.

Secondly, we must emphasize Russia's policy of opposition to the "others" —the West—, which is influenced by the sentiment of having been the loser of the Cold War and later on having been isolated by the European powers. The collapse of the Soviet Union was used by the West to push geopolitical borders closer to Moscow, to open an economy that was still very fragile after the collapse, and to allow the IMF to control key resources within the Russian economy. It is therefore only logical that there is an anti-western component within Russia's national identity. This component can be seen in Russia's current conviction that Europe and the United States aim to prevent its attempts to become a great hegemonic power once again. Most of the Western policies are seen from Moscow as an attempt to deny Russia its historical mission, its identity and its true place in the international system.

Thirdly, Russia feels it has a mission in the territory of the former Soviet Union: to integrate this space and protect the rights of Russians in the new post-Soviet states. Although pan-Slavism is a key component of Russia's national identity, currently Putin is using it as a political, strategic tool to acquire important territories where Russian minorities live.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> ZEVELEV, Igor. "Russian National Identity and Foreign Policy", *Centre for Strategic International Studies (CSIS)*, (2016), p. 2

<sup>49</sup> LARUELLE, Marlene. "Russia as a "Divided nation," from compatriots to Crimea: A contribution to the

Finally, there is Putin's revisionist vision of the international system. Not only does Russia show itself as an unsatisfied power but it also seeks to change the rules of the game in their favour. All these objectives resonate within the country and are critical for the legitimacy of Putin and the regime in general.

It remains to be seen if Putin will be able to fulfil these objectives in the long term. Returning to what we mentioned at the beginning, a cohesive national identity contributes to a better and more active defence of the vital interests of a country and to a more coherent foreign policy strategy. Russia has never been a stranger this issue. Its leaders always sought to obtain the support of the nation – by many different means – to maximize the benefits of its actions in international politics. Putin has been a very capable agent to exploit this condition. From his perspective, the power and influence of a State: “depends on whether the citizens of a given country consider themselves a nation, to what extent they identify with their own history, values and traditions, and whether they are united by common goals and responsibilities. In this sense, the question of finding and strengthening national identity really is fundamental for Russia”<sup>50</sup>.

We can conclude then that although there is no great discontinuity between the formation of the basic principles of Russian national identity – between its self-perception and its aspirations; the discontinuity does manifest between these conceptions and how it is perceived by the rest of the world (especially because it does not seem to be seriously considered a “great power” or one that has the capacities to impose its will over others). To achieve its objectives —to fully “re-emerge” and regain its lost status (historical maximum objective of Russia as a country)—, Putin has to obtain the support of its neighbours, at a minimum, and some relevant countries of the international community, at the most. With the country's current strategy (given as it is perceived by the rest of the world) —derived from conceptions of its national identity—, it seems that this will not be so easy to achieve.

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discussion on nationalism and foreign policy." Op. Cit.

<sup>50</sup> N. A. “Meeting of Valdai International Discussion Club”, *President of Russia*, September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Retrieved from <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>, accessed on December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019