

THE DYNAMICS OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE 2014 CRIMEAN CRISIS

ASSESSING THE EMPIRICAL AND THEORETICAL COMPLEXITIES

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Abstract

In early 2014, Russian forces entered Crimea and after a successful referendum, annexed the territory to Russia. The dynamics of Russian foreign policy towards Crimea are complex and multifaceted. There is extensive amount of international relations literature that discusses Russian foreign policy that led to the 2014 Crimean War. Neorealists argue that this was a response to Western policies of NATO expansion, EU enlargement and democracy promotion in Eastern Europe. Constructivists blame the history of hostile relations between Russia and the West shaping a Cold War mentality, as well as the threats that Moscow believes Russian citizens faced from Ukrainian radicals and extremists after Euromaidan. Liberalism makes it all about competing economic interests of Russia and the EU. However, there are many other theoretical and empirical complexities and nuances that can help explain Putin's decision to annex Crimea. This paper will explore the relative theoretical and empirical understandings of the international crisis in Crimea under the international relations theories of neorealism, constructivism and liberalism and disclose the variations and complexities that are inherent within and outside these explanations, as discussed by intellectuals, political experts and media.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Introduction.....	1
CHAPTER 1 NEOREALISM.....	5
1.1 Theory, Discourse and Analysis.....	5
1.2 Complexities, Nuances and Challenges to the Neorealist Explanation	11
1.2.1 The Role of Neoclassical Realism.....	15
CHAPTER 2 MODERN CONSTRUCTIVISM.....	21
2.1 The Role of Identity in Russian Foreign Policy	24
2.1.1 Identity Crisis and Russian Foreign Policy	26
2.1.1.1 Forging a National Identity out of Foreign Policy	27
2.1.1.2 East or West?	32
2.2 The Cold War “Mentality” in Russian Foreign Policy	34
CHAPTER 3 LIBERALISM	39
Conclusion	45
Bibliography	50

Introduction

The developments in Ukraine grabbed the headlines of global media ever since the Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich declined to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union during the Vilnius Summit of 2013. This agreement would have brought Ukraine into a closer form of economic cooperation with the EU, but the president chose to form a stronger association with Russia instead. However, Yanukovich's decision disappointed the Ukrainians to the extent that it led to the Euromaidan civil demonstrations in Kiev starting in December 2013, during which the protestors demanded a closer integration with Europe and the resignation of the president. The government tried to use coercion to control the situation, but it ended up with serious casualties on both sides exacerbating the level of resentment among the people. Yanukovich fled to Russia when he realized that the situation was beyond his control. Russia labeled the events in the Ukrainian capital as a coup d'état against a legitimate government and blamed the West, particularly the US and EU, for giving support to nationalist and extremist elements in Ukraine.¹ This made a prominent divide between the pro-western demonstrators in Kyiv who wanted to form a new government in Ukraine and the pro-Russian demonstrators of the Crimean region. Putin emphasized that there was a dire urgency to protect the Russian-speaking ethnic minorities in Ukraine, particularly in the Crimean region. In February 2014, Russian military troops entered Crimea, where Crimea voted to secede from Ukraine in a referendum and the local parliament declared independence and annexed the territory to Russia. In the process, the military presence of Russia in the region kept increasing,

¹ di Elmar Mustafayev, "Ukraine in Crisis," *Geopolitica*, Feb 4, 2015, accessed May 22, 2015, <http://www.geopolitica.info/ukraine-crisis/>.

as a result of which the United States imposed sanctions on Russia. However, Putin's strategy to cause instability in Ukraine persisted such that Russian troops still have a strong presence in Eastern Ukraine. To this day, Moscow provides support to Russian-speaking nationalists and separatists in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Eastern Ukraine, where they are fighting Ukrainian military forces to gain control over the territory. However, this is a very peripheral overview of the situation in Ukraine and Russia's role in it. There are many overlooked nuances and complexities regarding Putin's behavior and Russia's foreign policy discourse towards Ukraine that deserve further elaboration.

The international crisis in Ukraine led to a several influential theorists and scholars to situate the conflict under the banner of international relations and world politics and come up with both theoretical and empirical understandings of the crisis. This paper strives to explore the relative theoretical understandings of the international crisis in Crimea under the international relations theories of neorealism, constructivism and liberalism as well as evaluate the effectiveness of these theories in explaining the empirical hypotheses involving the various nuances of Russian foreign policy towards Ukraine. In doing so, we will illuminate the complexities and limitations of these theories in explaining the empirics of the conflict and provide alternate explanations that the international relation theories fail to take into account or fall short of providing a sufficient explanation for. It will eventually be observed that no single political theory can address all the variations that exist in the Crimean narrative. The paper will cross-tabulate the empirical and theoretical discourses of Russian foreign policy and the domestic social and political elements with non-discursive facts to find out the complexities

regarding what made Crimea possible. The goal is to explore why Russia invaded Crimea in 2014, leading on to why Moscow is still creating tensions in Eastern Ukraine.²

There is much deliberation among intellectuals and political experts about which factors prompted Moscow to pursue such a foreign policy towards Ukraine in Crimea. This paper will attempt to address various theoretical and empirical complexities and nuances of the Crimean crisis through three main chapters. The approach taken would involve the analysis of the international conflict in Ukraine through the lens of the three main political theories of international relations: neo-realism, constructivism and liberalism. The first chapter would address the neorealist aspects of the Russian foreign policy in the Crimean crisis and then look at it through the lens of the theoretical observations of both offensive and defensive neo-realists, which would involve the works of John Mearsheimer and Kenneth Waltz respectively. Once the neorealist discourse of the conflict is laid out, we will explore in detail the complexities, nuances and limitations of this explanation to provide a comprehensive picture of the crisis and the factors that precipitated it. Subsequently, the second chapter will highlight the constructivist argument in which Alexander Wendt's modern constructivism will emphasize the importance of how the actors involved in the crisis namely Ukraine, Russia and the EU self-identify themselves and each other in the social platforms where these states interact. Particular attention will be paid to the role of post-Cold War Russian identity crisis and the persistence of a Cold War "mentality" in shaping an aggressive foreign policy towards Crimea. Finally, the third chapter will briefly demonstrate the liberal argument with Andrew Moravscik's work on *Taking Preferences Seriously* serving as a foundation. In the process, we will talk about the role of economic interdependences, interests of domestic actors and potential role of international

² These two questions are part of the same story, but the factors prompting these events do not always run in parallel.

institutions in influencing Moscow's decision to engage in a military conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Finally, a conclusion will be presented that would assimilate all theoretical and empirical understandings of Russian foreign policy towards Ukraine since 2014. We will start with the theoretical narrative of neorealism regarding the international conflict in Crimea.

CHAPTER 1 NEOREALISM

Neorealism has proved to be the most popular framework used by international relations scholars to explain Russia's actions in Crimea. This chapter will examine and analyze the neorealist discourse of the conflict in Ukraine and address any gaps or shortcomings that may be present in the analysis. The approach taken involves a brief introduction into the neorealist theory itself, before delving into the empirical understandings of the conflict under the lens of neorealism. An argument would be made here that Putin's behavior in Crimea was a response to the trio of Western policies: NATO expansion, EU enlargement and democracy promotion in former Soviet states. However, the next portion of the chapter will argue that this is not necessarily the case and provide counterarguments that expose the fault-lines of the neorealist explanation. The nuances and complexities this would illuminate would show that the neorealist discourse of the Crimean war does not provide a comprehensive explanation and is fraught with gaps that require explanations under alternate frameworks. We start off by defining the theoretical framework of neorealism.

1.1 Theory, Discourse and Analysis

The theory of neorealism was first introduced by Kenneth Waltz in 1979 and even though it was built on Morgenthau's version of classical realism, there were significant variations between the two theories. The reason is that, unlike Morgenthau, Waltz was able to define the very structure of international political systems and in doing so, he establishes the autonomy of international politics, something which Morgenthau was unable to do because he never considered the international system as the domain of discussion. When it comes to power, "neorealism sees power as a possibly useful means, with states running risks if they have either

too little or too much of it”.³ The idea is that a great level of weakness of a state would motivate a rival to attack it, as opposed to a situation in which the state possessed a greater level of strength. However, a state having excessive strength may lead to rival states feeling threatened and increase efforts against the powerful state. Both neorealists and classical realists consider power and power assimilation as crucial tools for statecraft, such that it is assumed that rational statesmen will tend to pursue power. Where they differ is the amount of power a state requires. For Waltz, the “the ultimate concern of states is not for power, but for security. This revision (from Morgenthau’s classical realism) is an important one”.⁴ However, the evolution of neorealism literature introduced categories of realism in which this was not always the case. Neorealism has been divided into two subsections by international relations literature: defensive and offensive. Both divisions of the theory have certain features of neorealist theory in common, such that it introduced the international system as the domain for analysis, in which there was no sole dominant authority that governed all great powers, thus limiting the guarantee that one state will remain safe from the other and creating a need for each state in the system to accumulate enough power to protect itself in case it is attacked or threatened by another state.⁵ It is assumed that the international system exists in a state of anarchy where the state is the primary unit which acts rationally and in accordance to its placement in the system, not by virtue of its intrinsic qualities.⁶ For realists, international politics is an ongoing struggle of the states with the objective of gaining security and power relative to the other states. Furthermore, neorealism contends that it is structure that influences the actions and outcomes, in that it is emphasized that “international

³ Kenneth N. Waltz “The Origins of War in Neorealist Theory,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 4 (1988): 615-28, accessed May 22, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/204817>.

⁴ Waltz, *The Origins of War*, 616.

⁵ John J. Mearsheimer, ed., “Structural Realism,” in *International relations theories: discipline and diversity*, 3rd ed., ed. Timothy Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶ Waltz, *The Origins of War*, 618.

politics can be understood only if the effects of structure are added to the unit-level explanations of traditional realism⁷. It reconceives the causal link between interacting units and international outcomes⁸.

Majority of the international relations literature available on the crisis in Crimea tends to provide neorealist explanations for the conflict and John J. Mearsheimer, an international relations theorist, is one of the key spokesperson for the realist explanations of the war. Looking at the international conflict in Ukraine under the guise of neorealist theory would classify it as a zero-sum game because it presents an “uneasy state of affairs... exacerbated by the familiar security dilemma⁹, wherein measures that enhance one state’s security typically diminish that of the other’s”.¹⁰ The claim made by realists would be that the West, presumably the EU, USA and NATO, presented a security threat to Moscow by expanding eastwards in Europe and taking steps to integrate Ukraine more closely into its fold. Russia’s response in Crimea was thus an attempt to increase its power until it feels secure from the West. The beginning of the Crimean crisis led to a number of American scholars and government officials, like John Mearsheimer and Henry Kissinger, providing realist explanations to the conflict by placing it in an environment where “states behave rationally to maximize their interests in the international system by warding off potential threats or taking actions to protect core interests”.¹¹

However, there is a difference between the two categories of neorealists regarding the level of power needed by a state in order to feel secure. Defensive realists like Waltz allege that

⁷ Traditional realism talks about how human nature exhibits an innate lust for power that leads to war.

⁸ Waltz, *The Origins of War*, 617.

⁹ Robert Jervis describes the security dilemma as “a situation in which (a state’s) attempts to increase its security threaten the security of its neighbor; when this occurs, the neighbor often takes countervailing action to protect itself, whereupon the first state perceives a threat, and a spiral of escalating hostility results”.

¹⁰ Waltz, *The Origins of War*, 615-628.

¹¹ Chris Dunnett, “A Reply to John Mearsheimer: Putin is Not a Realist,” *Ukraine Crisis Media Center*, September 11, 2014, accessed May 22, 2015, <http://uacrisis.org/reply-john-mearsheimer-putin-realist/>.

states should not seek to maximize their power but only the security by maintaining the existing balance of power, because power-maximizing strategies can cause insecurity which is self-defeating.¹² Therefore, this category of neorealists would argue that the main reason of Moscow's policy towards Crimea was in fact the Russian effort to maintain the status quo of its position in the international system. This status quo was threatened when the EU made steps towards closer economic relations with Ukraine through the Association Agreement with involving Russia in the process and Moscow intervened in order to ensure its own security and survival. In November 2013, the then-president Yanukovich declined a major economic agreement he was negotiating with the European Union and entered into a new deal with Russia worth \$15 billion. This raised concerns in the Kremlin because Russia wanted to be the key economic and trade partner with Ukraine and the EU. The prospect of this change in the status quo threatened the economic interests of Russia which would be seen as an economic security threat by defensive realists. Moscow's actions in Crimea were thus meant to retain or regain Russia's level of security from the EU.

On the other hand, offensive realists like John Mearsheimer argue that the state will always try to gain more power until it becomes the hegemon of the system; the international system is fraught with an insecurity condition in which great powers have to pursue expansionist offensive strategies in order to feel secure.¹³ Mearsheimer's version of offensive realism that is evident in his literature on the Crimean crisis would make the argument that the situation in Ukraine presented both EU and the Kremlin with an opportunity to gain more power over the other. In addition, offensive realism states that "the international system forces great powers to

¹² Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 15-38.

¹³ Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, 15-19.

maximize their relative power because that is the optimal way to maximize their security”.¹⁴ Mearsheimer writes that Putin “has made it clear that he will wreck or destroy Ukraine before he will let it become part of NATO”.¹⁵ In his article *Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault*, Mearsheimer argues that the Ukraine crisis is the fault of the West in the sense it was the West that provoked Moscow's aggression in Crimea: “Russian leaders have adamantly opposed NATO enlargement, and in recent years, they have made it clear that they would not stand by while their strategically important neighbor turned into a Western bastion. For Putin, the illegal overthrow of Ukraine's democratically elected and pro-Russian president- which he rightly labeled a ‘coup’ - was the final straw.”¹⁶ Thus, the legacy of the NATO-Russia relations in the Cold War still shapes mutual perceptions between the two actors.

Russia continues to perceive the Alliance as an anti-Russian rival that presents a major threat to its security, despite NATO's assurances that its actions are purely defensive in nature.¹⁷ After the culmination of the Cold War, Russia preferred NATO to remain in order to maintain the peace and stability of a reunified Germany, but they never wanted NATO to expand further and had assumed that the West would consider their concerns in any future security policy. However, according to Mearsheimer, it was NATO's expansion eastwards, especially towards Georgia and Ukraine, that raised security concerns for Russia and prompted Putin to respond. Moscow's concerns eventually found expression in the 2008 invasion of Georgia, which made it evident that Putin would never tolerate Georgia and Ukraine becoming members of NATO.

¹⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2001), 21.

¹⁵ *Foreign Affairs*, Conference Call with John Mearsheimer On the Ukraine Crisis, September 4, 2014, 1, accessed May 22, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/press/conference-call-john-mearsheimer-ukraine-crisis>.

¹⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014 Issue, 1, accessed May 22, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>.

¹⁷ Oksana Antonenko and Bastian Giegerich, “Rebooting NATO–Russia Relations,” *Survival* 51, no. 2 (May 2009): 13-21, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00396330902860751>.

Thus, NATO expansion in the east of Europe “attempted to wrest Ukraine from Russia’s sphere of influence, thereby forcing Vladimir Putin to defend Russia’s legitimate strategic interests by going to war with Ukraine”.¹⁸ At the same time, EU expansion to the east and the introduction of the union’s Eastern Partnership initiative¹⁹ in 2008 exacerbated the threat that the Russian leaders felt they faced from the West. Finally, the West has been making extensive efforts to promote its values and democracy in Ukraine as well as other post-Soviet states. These efforts are mostly funded by Western individuals and organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy. In fact, in December 2013 Victoria Nuland estimated that “the United States had invested more than \$5 billion since 1991 to help Ukraine achieve the future it deserves”.²⁰ All in all, offensive realists claim that it was the West’s triple package of policies involving the promotion of democracy, EU expansion and NATO enlargement that prompted such a response from Putin. Offensive realists show that Russia still evaluates security in terms of *realpolitik* and geography.

Thus, according to the realist line of argument, Moscow’s foreign policy towards Ukraine, which involves the Crimean annexation and the provision of support to pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine, is part of a larger strategy to destabilize Ukraine and lead the state towards civil war. In doing so, Russia would significantly decrease the prospects for any gains that the EU and NATO gain could hope to accomplish from integrating Ukraine into their fold and thus limit their interest in a politically unstable country. This view is taken a step further by Timothy Snyder, a history professor at Yale University, who writes that “Russia’s Ukraine

¹⁸ Alexander J. Motyl, “The Myth of the West’s Threat to Russia: Did NATO Provoke a War By Trying to ‘Take’ Ukraine From Russia?,” Atlantic Council, March 5, 2015, accessed May 22, 2015, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-myth-of-the-west-s-threat-to-russia>.

¹⁹ The Eastern Partnership Initiative is a program to foster prosperity in countries such as Ukraine and integrate them into the EU economy.

²⁰ Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault.”

policy is not really about Ukraine. It's really about Europe. The attempt to destabilize Ukraine is part of a larger attempt to destabilize Europe".²¹ At the same time, this would increase Russian gains from Ukraine relative to the EU because it demonstrates Moscow's power to the international community, getting rid of the benign image of the Kremlin that had dominated the world since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 and reviving its great power status once again. However, there are many complexities, nuances and limitations in these arguments that neorealism does not take into account.

1.2 Complexities, Nuances and Challenges to the Neorealist Explanation

A handful of academics and political experts like Alexander J. Motyl, Michael McFaul, Stephen Sestanovich, among many others, challenge the realist explanations of the international crisis in Ukraine. Under this explanation, Putin is seen as a realist who is hyper-aware of external threats. In one of his recent interviews, Henry Kissinger, one of the former secretary of state of the US, challenges the realist arguments as to why Putin decided to invade Crimea. He states that the fact is Putin spent billions of worth of dollars on the Winter Olympics that were held in Sochi with the purpose of showing that Russia is a progressive state that has associations with the western world and in fact wants to be a part of it. Assuming this to be true, it does not make any logical sense for Putin to attack Crimea just a week after the Olympics if that was his intention all along. Something changed between the Olympics and the Crimean invasion that produced a shift in Moscow's foreign policy towards Ukraine. Therefore, according to Kissinger, it was the

²¹ Timothy Snyder, "Timothy Snyder: Ukrainian Crisis Is Not About Ukraine, It's About Europe," *KyivPost*, Nov 13, 2014, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://www.kyivpost.com/opinion/op-ed/timothy-snyder-ukrainian-crisis-is-not-about-ukraine-its-about-europe-371743.html>.

West which provoked Putin to act out of “strategic weakness masked as tactical strength”.²² The realist approach to understand the conflict in Crimea makes three main unsupported assumptions about some key factors of the conflict which involve the factors influencing Russia’s decision to intervene, the very nature of Russia’s interests and the West’s (alleged) support for Ukraine.

Firstly, the likeliness of Ukraine joining NATO after the Euromaidan has significantly declined. Even though former Ukrainian leaders had expressed a desire to join, there is no evidence to indicate that the alliance had ever given serious consideration of integrating Ukraine. NATO never pushed Ukraine to join the alliance because “it was, and still is, unready to make the commitment, under its Article 5²³, to rush to Ukraine’s assistance in case of an attack by Russia”.²⁴ When Motyl visited the NATO headquarters in 2014, the officials there expressed the alliance’s fears that were a member state were to be invaded, it is improbable that other member states would rush to its assistance, thus exposing the Article 5 to be hollow and irrelevant.^{25 26} Thus any event of Europe engaging in a concerted military action is unimaginable. When the government of Yushchenko made a request to the alliance to make a membership action plan in 2008, NATO showed its unwillingness to do so and made vague promises to talk about it. Furthermore, the desire of Ukrainian population to join NATO is clearly overstated in realist interpretation of the crisis. Razumkov Center, the polling agency of Ukraine, found in April 2014

²² “Interview with Henry Kissinger,” Spiegel Online, November 13, 2014, accessed May 22, 2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-henry-kissinger-on-state-of-global-politics-a-1002073.html>.

²³ Article 5 says that the Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defense recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.

²⁴ Motyl, “The Myth of the West’s Threat to Russia.”

²⁵ Motyl concludes that NATO is a “paper tiger”

²⁶ Alexander J. Motyl, “The Ukraine Crisis According to John Mearsheimer: Impeccable Logic, Wrong Facts,” KyivPost, October 31, 2014, accessed May 22, 2015, <http://www.kyivpost.com/opinion/op-ed/alexander-motyl-the-ukraine-crisis-according-to-john-j-mearshimer-impeccable-logic-wrong-facts-370293.html>.

that over 41 percent of the people in Ukraine did not support their country becoming a member of the alliance and it was merely a 36 percent that were in support of Ukraine's membership into NATO. In this way, Russia taking a realist approach does not make much sense because any form of aggression towards the Ukrainians would push them further towards the West, which would be even more counterproductive for Russian interests as compared to a situation in which they do not act at all. In fact, Crimea has made Russia the biggest security threat to Ukraine. This is evident from the mobilization of NATO forces on the Russian border, created shifts in the defensive posture of the alliance and revived its sense of purpose at a point in time when NATO's future was uncertain. "If Putin was trying to undermine NATO and prevent its expansion, he's instead triggered the very opposite effect".²⁷

The realist interpretation of the Crimean crisis also tends to overemphasize the significance that the West holds for Ukraine. This is indicated by the lack of Western military response to the Russian invasion of Crimea. For the West, the invasion was just a distraction from other international issues that were of more concern to them and neither the US or EU did much to vigorously oppose Russia's actions in the conflict, except for imposing economic sanctions that is hardly an adequate response.²⁸ If the West had considered Ukraine of any significant strategic importance, we would have seen much more direct involvement of USA, EU and NATO in Ukraine during and in the aftermath of Crimea. However, the West has not provided the Ukrainian armed forces with military support to fight against Russian aggression. Kissinger argues that "nobody in the West has offered a concrete program to restore Crimea (and) nobody is willing to fight over eastern Ukraine".²⁹ Therefore, it can be observed that the

²⁷ Dunnett, "A Reply to John Mearsheimer."

²⁸ Dunnett, "A Reply to John Mearsheimer."

²⁹ "Interview with Henry Kissinger," Spiegel Online.

EU and US do not feel threatened by Putin's intervention in Ukraine and thus, are not prepared to take any direct action against Russia. In fact, Alexander J. Motyl, a professor at Rutgers University, writes that ironically it was "the West's deep and long-lasting indifference to Ukraine's security- and, in 2008, to Georgia's security- (that) encouraged Putin's aggression".³⁰

This shows that the assumptions made by neorealists to explain the Crimean crisis fall short of fully explaining the nuances and complexities of the empirical realities. Even the key work of Mearsheimer, most prominently his article *Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault* is fraught with numerous flaws when looked at through the lens of neorealism. This is evident from the works of scholars and experts like Motyl, McFaul and Sestanovich, who specifically criticize Mearsheimer's arguments about neorealism explaining the circumstances surrounding the war. Mearsheimer writes that Ukraine consists of a "huge expanse of flat land that Napoleonic France, imperial Germany, and Nazi Germany all crossed to strike at Russia itself" and since Ukraine is considered as a "buffer state of enormous strategic importance to Russia... no Russian leader would tolerate a military alliance that was Moscow's mortal enemy until recently moving into Ukraine". In the same way, no "Russian leader (would) stand idly by while the West helped install a government there that was determined to integrate Ukraine into the West" because by realist logic "great powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home country".³¹ By bringing in previous invasions, he is going beyond the analytical framework of realism- that makes the assumption that objective threats would be seen as such by the rational observers- and brings in other factors related to Russian ideology, political culture and historical memory of perceptions. It can be argued that these factors can be better explained through the theoretical lens of constructivism, rather than neorealism. Motyl argues that "once perceptions enter the

³⁰ Motyl, "The Myth of the West's Threat to Russia."

³¹ Motyl, "The Ukraine Crisis According to John Mearsheimer."

picture, we leave the realm of realism's logical rigor and introduce factors that contradict the objectivity and rationality assumption of realism³² and implode Mearsheimer's theoretical framework".³³ Furthermore, Mearsheimer calls NATO expansion as the "taproot of the trouble", but it doesn't explain why Russian troops were kept outside of Ukraine for over a decade long period of NATO enlargement between 1999 and 2014, even though Russia had the military capability to do so, as is evident from the two Chechnya wars that required much more military capabilities than Crimea did.³⁴ In order to fully validate his arguments, Mearsheimer needs to address these counterarguments.

It can be observed that much of the neorealist arguments introduced so far, the limitations of those arguments and the complexities and nuances of the realist chain of thought fail to take into account the role of the domestic politics and society of Russia in shaping Putin's decision to invade Crimea or interfere in Eastern Ukraine. This gap in the neorealist explanation can be accounted for by looking at the crisis in Ukraine through the theoretical lens of neoclassical realism.

1.2.1 The Role of Neoclassical Realism

The application of neo-classical realism in the Crimean conflict shows that the Russian foreign policy towards Ukraine served the interests of Putin, rather than those of the Russian Federation. The theory of neoclassical realism provides the specificities of how the Russian foreign policy towards Ukraine was shaped during the Crimean conflict. These include the role played by decision-makers, elites and social groups in influencing foreign policy in a way that

³² The theory of realism, in Motyl's words, claims that all rational observers, regardless of nationality, would assess national interests and power relations in approximately the same way.

³³ Motyl, "The Ukraine Crisis According to John Mearsheimer."

³⁴ Michael McFaul, Stephen Sestanovich, and John J. Mearsheimer, "Faulty Powers: Who Started the Ukraine Crisis?," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2014 Issue, 1, accessed May 22, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/eastern-europe-caucasus/2014-10-17/faulty-powers>.

made it more expansionist. To explore this perspective, an understanding of neoclassical realism is essential. “Neoclassical realism is often criticized by non-realists for being an ad hoc and theoretically degenerative effort to explain away anomalies for neorealism”, but Ratburn argues that it is a logical extension and necessary tool for the advancement of neorealism.³⁵ There exist many variations in which some states would respond to seemingly similar challenges and these can be attributed to the preferences of the social and political actors as well as the structural systems of the society and government that determines the nature of boundaries and opportunities for these actors. The theory of neoclassical realism is summed up by Gideon Rose in the following words: “neoclassical realists reject the assumption that states’ sole aim is security; instead, states attempt to use their power to direct the international system towards their own goals and preferences. Therefore, states that are more powerful will prosecute foreign policies that are more far-reaching. Unit level factors also matter, though factors such as state structure and élites’ psychology refract international politics and determine responses”.³⁶ Schweller provides a model of domestic-politics which explains why some states that are under a certain threat are not able to adequately adjust to any dangerous changes in their strategic environment. In this model, he provides three key factors that determine a state’s response to external threats and each of these factors conform to the theoretical underpinnings of neoclassical realism. These include elite consensus, regime vulnerability and social cohesion³⁷ and among these, regime vulnerability can best explain Moscow’s expansionist foreign policy towards Ukraine, though elements of the other two factors are certainly present as well.

³⁵ Brian Rathbun, “A Rose by Any Other Name,” *Security Studies* 17, no. 2 (May 2008): 294-321, accessed May 22, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09636410802098917>.

³⁶ Gideon Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (October 1998): 144-72.

³⁷ Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints On the Balance of Power*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), 1, accessed May 22, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/j.ctt7rkxt>.

The neorealist empirical narratives of the crisis fail to take into account that the interests of Putin do not necessarily complement the interests of Russia because they take a state-centric approach to political analysis. According to the Ukraine Crisis media center, “Putin’s actions in Ukraine have endangered the very interests that Mearsheimer claims that Russia is defending”.³⁸ Motyl summarizes Putin real motives as “to prevent revolutionary contagion, to punish revolutionaries, and to take advantage of their weakness to make territorial gains”.³⁹ But rather than increasing the level of security for Russia, the actions of Putin have put the long-term existence of a unified Russia in danger by running the risk of fracturing the state along socio-cultural or geographic lines. This is because the Kremlin’s decision to annex Crimea, advocating the right of self determination for the people in that region and equipping separatists in the region with arms, has produced doubts about Russia’s future administration of the minority regions existing within its own federation.⁴⁰ Therefore, Putin’s actions were an attempt to gain popularity and support for his government, which was essential to stay in power after the Euromaidan revolution threatened to overthrow his regime because it represented a growing dissatisfaction of the masses with authoritarianism and corruption. The nature and structure of the Russian political system made it necessary for Putin to take this approach to stay in power. According to Barkanov, “Russia is a hybrid system that combines elements of authoritarianism and pluralism. State-sponsored repression, though now growing, has been selective and relatively limited. Intense elite competition, elections, and public opinion are managed, but they matter more than the conventional wisdom holds. This means a successful solution has to accommodate an attentive public, as well as domestic elites’ various security, economic, and ideological

³⁸ Dunnett, “A Reply to John Mearsheimer.”

³⁹ Motyl, “The Myth of the West’s Threat to Russia.”

⁴⁰ Dunnett, “A Reply to John Mearsheimer.”

interests”.⁴¹ By discrediting the political changes in Ukraine as fascist and launching an operation in Crimea, Putin successfully regained the capability to crush any dissent or opposition from civil society at home, even if it came at the expense of compromising the security interests of Russia as a state. Chris Dunnett argues that “far from being a realist policy maker, Vladimir Putin is a myopic autocrat” and that his actions in Ukraine can best be described as “pro-Putin, not pro-Russian”.⁴² Stephen Sestanovich, a senior fellow at Council on Foreign Relations, agrees that “Putin made impulsive decisions that subordinated Russia’s national interest to his own personal political motives”.⁴³ There are two ways in which the international crisis in Crimea actually threatens the security interests of the Russian state. Putin’s actions in Ukraine have given impetus to nationalist tendencies at home and this has limited the ability of Russia to separate itself from a situation in Ukraine that is counterproductive to its political, economic and cultural interests. “By unleashing the forces of hypernationalism and separatism in Russia, Putin has engendered a combustible mix of political tensions that undermines Russia’s strategic flexibility and might eventually threaten the country’s territorial integrity”.⁴⁴ In addition, it has driven Ukraine closer to the Western security system which is a direct threat to Russia’s security interests in the region.

The role of Putin in determining an expansionist foreign policy can thus be seen as a case of what neoclassical realists call regime vulnerability. In a very general meaning of the concept, government or regime vulnerability in neoclassical realism can be seen as something that “asks what is the likelihood that the current leadership will be removed from office” or at an even more

⁴¹ Boris Barkanov, “How Putin’s Domestic Audience Explains Russia’s Behavior,” The Washington Post, March 13, 2014, accessed May 26, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/13/how-putins-domestic-audience-explains-russias-behavior/>.

⁴² Dunnett, “A Reply to John Mearsheimer.”

⁴³ McFaul, et al., “Faulty Powers.”

⁴⁴ Dunnett, “A Reply to John Mearsheimer.”

basic level it makes an attempt to see how the relation between the ruler and ruled is defined at a certain point in time; this addresses questions that go to “the heart of a government’s effectiveness and political authority and trade-off between external security and internal stability”.⁴⁵ Putin’s regime was weaker than ever after the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine because it presented an image in which a pro-Russian government was toppled by the revolutionaries. This fuelled the dissenters and oppositionists of Putin’s regime in Russia and it was very possible that Putin could face a similar revolution at home if he did not act quickly. In his trade-off between external security and internal stability, he picked the latter. Therefore, Putin’s actions in Ukraine represented his own political preferences rather than that of the Russian state. It was an attempt to find legitimacy for his regime in the eyes of the Russian society by arguing that fellow Russians in Eastern Europe were under threat from the fascist regime in Ukraine as well as the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU. This is supported by what neoclassical realists say about political actors that their main objective is not to gain security, but they act out of their own preferences in order to achieve their own goals. This is evident from how the Crimean war has placed Russian security in more of a threat than it was before. For Putin, the political crisis in Ukraine was more of an opportunity rather than a threat, according to neoclassical realists; an opportunity to increase the popularity of his regime at home. Neoclassical realists would argue that the state apparatus certainly exploited the society’s power in this case by having a more expansive foreign policy that was needed with the goal of greater state power, even if it came at the expense of national power. According to Gideon Rose, “decision-makers’ beliefs strongly affect the relationship between relative power and foreign policy. These beliefs may be incorrect or cause distortions unforeseen by the structural realist”.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Schweller, *Unanswered Threats*.

⁴⁶ Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy.”

Another case in which such distortions were evident was when Gorbachev destroyed the Soviet Union in the process of making various attempts to strengthen it. Thus, the decision-makers' beliefs and preferences play a key role in determining the foreign policy and how this policy relates to power of the state or that of the regime. However, there are situations in which not only decision-makers and elites influence how foreign policy is shaped, but there are social interactions within civil society that defines the role of the state in question in international politics. This can best be explained by the various strands existing within the international relations theory of constructivism.

CHAPTER 2 MODERN CONSTRUCTIVISM

The constructivist argument of the Ukraine crisis introduces some new nuances of Russian foreign policy that may not be evident under other international relations theories. There are various strands of constructivism that present discursive contexts in which the conflict can be discussed. This chapter primarily focuses on two strands of constructivism that relate to the construction of the Russian foreign policy towards Ukraine. The first focuses on the identity crisis Russia faces at a domestic and international level, while the second one comprises of the presence of Cold War mentality between in Russian foreign policy. The chapter will start off by explaining the relevant strands of constructivism, with a particular focus on Wendt's work on modern constructivism. By looking at the Crimean crisis under the lens of constructivism, we will venture into elaborate discussions on the role of Cold War "mentality" and identity in determining Putin's decision to engage in military action in Eastern Ukraine. In the process, we will shed light on the weaknesses of these constructivist accounts as well as the complexities and empirical dimensions of the story that they miss.

Wendt's conception of modern constructivism takes into account the idea of 'social construction' of world politics, which involves the claims that "the fundamental structures of international politics are social rather than strictly material"⁴⁷ and that "these structures shape actors' identities and interests, rather than just their behavior".^{48 49} Wendt's work on constructivism was inherent with key criticisms towards the neorealists and liberal international schools of thought, among which the main one was the problematic commitment of these theories towards a very crude structure of materialism. He challenged the realist assumptions

⁴⁷ A claim that opposes materialism

⁴⁸ A claim that opposes rationalism

⁴⁹ Alexander Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," *International Security* 20, no. 1 (Summer 1995): 71-81, accessed May 22, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2539217>.

about the idea of power politics that alleged that there is lust for power accumulation in human nature, but Wendt argued that even such realist ideas about power are formed by social construction and they can also face transformations due to the social practices and interactions, in which case it would also involve a process of re-construction of social relations of power in order to adjust to the changes. He says that “the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature”.⁵⁰ Wendt’s breakthrough with constructivism paved the way for many more international relations scholars to address issues through the lens of constructivism. Constructivists argue that the idea of a social reality, which is non-materialist in nature, cannot be considered as external to international affairs and that this social world falls within a realm of human consciousness where the external behavior of a state depends on the ideas, norms and beliefs as well as shared understandings of the domestic actors of the state in question.⁵¹ In highlighting the “social” aspect of the international system, Wendt is not disproving the neorealism argument about the importance of state survival and material capabilities, but rather he is saying that the identity of the state in question is essential to how it interacts with the social order of world politics and that it is the repetitions of past interactions that determines the identity of the state in relation to the other states in the system.⁵²

In this way, constructivists like Iver Neumann, Margot Light, Alla Kassianova, among many others, would look at the Ukrainian crisis in terms of how the actors involved in the crisis would identify themselves relative to the other. Looking at the history of interactions between

⁵⁰ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.1

⁵¹ R. Jackson and G. Sorensen, “Social Constructivism,” in *Introduction to International Relations and Approaches* (London: Oxford University Press, 2006), 160-77.

⁵² Wendt, “Constructing International Politics,” 71-81.

Russia and Ukraine as well as Russia and the EU, constructivists can argue that these past relations between the two states have defined their individual identities and in turn, their behavior or actions taken towards each other. For example, in an *Address by President of the Russian Federation on the reunification of the Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol with Russia*, Putin said that “in people’s hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia. This firm conviction is based on truth and justice and was passed from generation to generation, over time, under any circumstances, despite all the dramatic changes our country went through during the entire 20th century”.⁵³ In another statement by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it was stated that “if Ukraine is just a territory for geopolitical games for individual western politicians, then for us it is a fraternal country, with which we have many ages of shared history”.⁵⁴ Thus, constructivism accounts for the history as well as shared experiences of norms and values that shape the identity of an actor. When applied to the Crimean case, constructivism helps explain many aspects of Moscow’s behavior in the international crisis in Ukraine. Firstly, we focus on the influence of identity, or rather the lack thereof, in how Russian foreign policy towards Ukraine was shaped. The following section argues that it is the domestic politics of Russia that defines its external aggression towards Ukraine.

⁵³ Vladimir Putin, “Address by President of the Russian Federation,” Kremlin, March 18, 2014, accessed May 26, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

⁵⁴ “Statement by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Regarding the Statements by the Us Secretary of State About the Situation in Ukraine,” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, March 3, 2014, accessed May 26, 2015, http://mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/3CCDD7E24055793344257C92001E21F8.

2.1 The Role of Identity in Russian Foreign Policy

Primarily, constructivists would argue that it was the notion of a Russian identity that prompted Crimea to make a vote in favor of Russia during the referendum. Therefore, after the 2014 revolution in Ukraine overthrew Yanukovich's government, Moscow's decision to send armed forces to the Crimean region was motivated by the desire to protect the Russian-speaking minorities in Ukraine, who might be Ukrainian but define themselves as Russians. In response to the remarks of the NATO Council on 2 March, 2014 that Moscow is responsible for the intensification of military activity in Crimea in direct violation of international law, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded that the Kremlin has no interest in the internal politics of Ukraine, but they must protect the Russian citizens in Crimea from the extremist and radical elements in Ukraine.⁵⁵ Ukraine and Russia have a long-standing history of co-existence under the USSR, due to which when Putin took a strategic electoral turn to the right, the nationalists and Russian orthodox emphasized that Ukraine was a sacred place that lay "at the very heart of the origin myth of the Russian nation and civilization".⁵⁶ Moscow's foreign policy towards Ukraine is underlined with the strong connection that historically exists between the social orders of the two states in that Russia felt its interests were being threatened with the revolution because it placed the Russian ethnics in Ukraine in danger of marginalization, unfair treatment and discrimination. In this way, we see the social structures of international politics determining the behavior of Russia towards Ukraine. This social order comprises of the identity Russia has constructed for itself relative to Ukraine, the EU and even the US.

⁵⁵ "Comment by the Information and Press Department of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Regarding the Question Put by the Mass Media About the Statement of the Nato Council On the Situation in Ukraine," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, March 3, 2014, accessed May 26, 2015, http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/BCD6844687A85A1F44257C92004F35FE.

⁵⁶ Boris Barkanov, "How Putin's Domestic Audience Explains Russia's Behavior."

However, Putin's rhetoric that Crimea was an attempt to protect the Russian citizens in Ukraine is fraught with fault-lines and it presents more questions than answers. Evidence seems to indicate that it was just a single Russian who was killed off in Ukraine and that too was not because of oppression from the Ukrainian protestors, but rather due to a sniper's bullet while he was fighting in Ukraine's revolution.⁵⁷ One dead Russian citizen during the revolution does not mean that all Russian-speaking minorities are being oppressed and are under threat. There is also the issue of which of these people in Ukraine actually identify themselves as Russians, since their identity had more to do with the Soviet Union than Russia. "Some citizens of Ukraine of course do see themselves as Russians- about 17 percent of the population- but this does not mean that they are subject to discrimination or indeed that they identify with the Russian state".⁵⁸ To take matters further, the Russian citizens living in Ukraine have denied that they made any claim to get protection for Russia. In fact, Timothy Snyder brings to light a petition in which the Russian citizens of Ukraine asks Putin to leave Ukraine on its own to solve its problem; this petition was signed by 140,000 people.⁵⁹ This suggests that the motivation behind Putin's foreign policy towards Ukraine was not about protecting the Russian minorities or their identities in the region, it was about something else entirely. Post-Cold War, Russia is facing an identity crisis which has had a negative impact on the shaping of foreign policy or the definition of a national identity in accordance to which a policy could be formed to deal with external threats. This identity crisis tells a different story than the one Putin tells.

⁵⁷ Timothy Snyder, "Crimea: Putin Vs. Reality," *The New York Review of Books*, March 2014, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2014/mar/07/crimea-putin-vs-reality/>.

⁵⁸ Timothy Snyder, "Crimea".

⁵⁹ Timothy Snyder, "Crimea".

2.1.1 Identity Crisis and Russian Foreign Policy

The crisis in Ukraine is one of those instances in which it was the tensions that existed at an internal level that eventually faced internationalization and led to one of the most serious crisis in Europe since the culmination of the Cold War. The post-Cold War order was fraught with inconsistencies and asymmetries between Russia and the West, such that it alienated Russia from the European alliance system. This view is supported by Richard Sakwa in his book *Frontline Ukraine* where he writes that “the failure to establish a genuinely inclusive and equal European security system imbued European international politics with power stress points, which in 2014 produced the international earthquake that we call the Ukraine crisis”.⁶⁰ NATO expansion was one of those key stress points, as evident from the view presented by the Russian President Boris N. Yeltsin in 1994 when he said that the plan of the Clinton administration to broaden NATO threatens to plunge Europe into a “cold peace”.⁶¹ There was not even a peace conference that took place after the end of one of the most major wars that Europe has ever seen, and instead an “uneven peace” was imposed on Europe in which the USSR disintegrated in 1991 and Russia emerged as what Sakwa calls a ‘continuer state’.⁶² Since 1991, Russia has shown resentment towards the reluctance of the USA to acknowledge the status to which it feels it deserves, especially after the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 and Crimea in 2014. “Russia did not consider itself a defeated power, (but) this did not prevent the alleged victors after the Cold War believing that the Soviet collapse vindicated not only the institutions that had been created to

⁶⁰ Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

⁶¹ Norman Kempster and Dean E. Murphy, “Broader NATO May Bring 'Cold Peace,' Yeltsin Warns Europe: Russian President Accuses U.S. of Being Power Hungry. Speech Comes as Nations Finalize Nuclear Treaty.,” *Los Angeles Times (LA)*, Dec 6, 1994, accessed May 23, 2015, http://articles.latimes.com/1994-12-06/news/mn-5629_1_cold-war.

⁶² Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine*.

wage the struggle but above all the ideology in whose name it had been fought”.⁶³ However, the way that Russia identified itself in relation to the West in international politics is not as straightforward as that. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia faced an identity crisis that will now be examined through the lens of constructivism. “The content and dynamics of collective identity on the state level are assessed through studying the discourse on part the part of political leaders, intellectuals and countless others, who engage in the process of constructing, negotiating, manipulating or affirming a response to the demand... for a collective image”.⁶⁴ The process of construction of a collective Russian identity (or rather the crisis involving this process) involves two key debates: this involves the process of constructing a national identity of Russia and whether Russia’s identity is more inclined towards Eurasia or the West.

2.1.1.1 Forging a National Identity out of Foreign Policy

If we look at the relation between Russia and the West from a constructivist point of view and look at the domestic social construction of Russian foreign policy and national identity, it can be observed that post-Soviet Russia is victim to an identity crisis. This has been pointed out by a number of scholars including Tsygankov and Suny⁶⁵ and it questions the authenticity of the constructivist argument that the protection of Russian identity in post-Soviet states was a key factor in the Crimean conflict, when Russia itself is facing an identity crisis at a domestic level. In addition, a counter-argument can be made that it was precisely this identity crisis in Russian foreign policy that prompted the war, in that Putin was trying to forge a distinct national identity

⁶³ Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine*.

⁶⁴ Bill McSweeney, *Cambridge Studies in International Relations*, vol. 69, *Security, Identity, and Interests: a Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 212-13, accessed May 23, 2015, <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/description/cam029/99011332.html>.

⁶⁵ For more details, read A. Tsygankov, “Projecting Confidence, Not Fear: Russia’s Post-Imperial Assertiveness”, *Orbis*, 50 (September 2006); R. Suny, “Living in the Hood: Russia, Empire, and Old and New Neighbors”, Legvold, R. (ed.) (2007).

in relation to the West by attacking Crimea and playing the narrative of protecting Russian minorities in former Soviet states. In doing so, Putin was trying to protect the stability of his own regime at home which is in danger after the Euromaidan revolution. Therefore, this matter goes far beyond the historical interactions and relations of past hostility between Russia and the West during the Cold War that is emphasized by the constructivist perspective.

Many intellectuals and politicians have engaged in wide-ranging debates about Russia's national identity and the identity crisis it faces over the foreign policy, but the idea of a Russian identity remains rather ambiguous.⁶⁶ The breakup of the Soviet Union was a geopolitical catastrophe for Russia and pushed it to search for a new identity. In his *Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation* in April 2005, Putin said: "the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century. (For) the Russian nation, it became a genuine drama. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory. Moreover, the epidemic of disintegration infected Russia itself".⁶⁷ This crisis was caused by uncertainty over how to build the framework of the domestic political system and economy as well as confusion over the position and role of the country at a global level. Many intellectuals⁶⁸ were of the opinion that defining principles of the Russian foreign policy would reveal the national identity itself and this in turn, would illuminate that what domestic policies are necessary. In defining these principles in this way, the contradictions and confusions over Russian national identity are precipitated even further and policy is left without a solid

⁶⁶ This is evident from the works of Alfred B. Evans, Robert Legvold, Margot Light, Andrei Piontkovsky as well as many others.

⁶⁷ Vladimir Putin, "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation," Kremlin, April 25, 2005, accessed May 23, 2015, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2005/04/25/2031_type70029type82912_87086.shtml.

⁶⁸ See for example, K. Eggert, *Izvestiya*, 7 Aug. 1992.

conceptual foundation.⁶⁹ Talking about foreign policy as an ongoing process of self-definition and a channel of engagement with the external environment, Alla Kassianova says that the alleged linkage that exists between the identity and foreign policy present various analysis that take into account the co-constitutive characteristic of that relationship, such that the study of foreign policy might be imbued with identity-producing practices as well as identity being considered as an essential variable in the process of making foreign policies.⁷⁰ Taking the approach of constructivism, the academic literature produced on identity is about development, evolution and construction, such that identity is seen as an ever-evolving process, which may have certain characteristics like cultural attributes that may be seemingly stable, but even those are flexible enough to adjust to changes and transformations.⁷¹ As far as studying Russian collective identity is concerned, intellectuals divide the Russian political society into groups in accordance to their ideology and then trace this identity through the domestic and foreign policy agendas of these groups. In studies of identity discourse in Russia, scholars have broken it down to three groups: the Liberal Westernists, the Pragmatic Nationalists and the Fundamentalist Nationalists.⁷²

A debate between these domestic groups presented more discord rather than reaching an agreement regarding the new post-Soviet identity of Russia. Disagreements over domestic economic and political matters led to a political crisis in 1993, such that President Yeltsin ended up suspending the constitution. Even though the process of reaching a consensus on a national

⁶⁹ Margot Light, "In Search of an Identity: Russian Foreign Policy and the End of Ideology," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 19, no. 3 (September 2003): 42-59, accessed May 23, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13523270300660017>.

⁷⁰ Alla Kassianova, "Russia: Still Open to the West? Evolution of the State Identity in the Foreign Policy and Security Discourse," *Europe-Asia Studies* 53, no. 6 (July 2010): 821-39, accessed May 23, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09668130120078513>.

⁷¹ Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997), 6, accessed May 23, 2015, <http://www.myilibrary.com?id=246108>.

⁷² Details on these groups can be found in Margot Light, "In Search of an Identity," 43-48.

identity was a terrible failure, the domestic political groups had more success when it came to Russian foreign policy. Among the three groups, it was eventually the Liberal Westernists who gave way to the nationalist ideas, such that these view started influencing the definition of principles upon which a foreign policy can be based.⁷³ As a result, Russian interests were defined as being in conflict with those of the countries that had successfully adopted democratic principles and this in-turn led to an increase in anti-Western views within the Russian society. The foreign policy concept of 1993 provides evidence for these trends because it displayed a much less benign view of the external environment of Russia as compared to that of the Liberal Westernists.⁷⁴ It was eventually the Pragmatic Nationalists- who became the foreign policy elites- and the Fundamentalist Nationalists that determined political goals, influenced policies and shaped preferences of the state. The Fundamentalist Nationalists were vehemently opposed to the foreign policy of the Russian government and opposed the break-up of the Soviet Union; in fact they “called Yeltsin and his government the ‘destroyers of Russia’ and criticized them for making futile and unnecessary concessions to the West”.⁷⁵ These elites propagated the significance of the “ideological purity... of the Cold War era”.⁷⁶ This did not mean that the Russian foreign policy being defined by the elites was anti-Western, but the main goal was to construct a Russian identity that was non-Western. These ideological wars between the Liberal Westernizers, Pragmatic Nationalists and the Fundamentalists Nationalists had a major influence on how the foreign policy of the later years was formulated.

⁷³ Light, “In Search of an Identity,” 45.

⁷⁴ Light, “In Search of an Identity,” 46.

⁷⁵ Light, “In Search of an Identity,” 47-48.

⁷⁶ Andrei Piontkovski, *East or West? Russia's Identity Crisis in Foreign Policy* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, 2006), 1-4.

The construction (or production) of a national identity out of the foreign policy of a state can be dangerous because it means that the identity of the country is being shaped by something that exists in an external environment. Relating it to the 2014 international crisis in Crimea, it was the struggle to find the Russian identity that Putin and the political elites formed a foreign policy towards Ukraine that was aimed to strengthen the collective identity of Russia by presenting two narratives. Firstly, Putin became the bastion for protecting Russian interests abroad by presenting the narratives that he was protecting Russian minorities in former Soviet states. This was definitely not the case since, as we have examined, Russia was going through an identity crisis in itself. However, the narrative presented by Putin talked about the historical experiences, interactions and values shared between Ukraine and the USSR. Secondly, the government presented the narrative of external threats arising from the constitutional crisis in Ukraine and the movement of the West towards Eastern Europe towards countries that were of strategic importance to Russia.⁷⁷ Putin had hoped that this would mobilize the society by formulating a collective identity that would automatically crush any dissent or opposition, the likelihood for which had increased after the revolution in Ukraine. In short, the main point to note here is that the rise of nationalist groups- in which nationalism is a powerful intersubjective force that captures key decision-makers as well as the public- in the post-Cold War Russian politics led to national identity being defined by the foreign policy, rather than the other way around. It was due to this trend that the Russian foreign policy towards Crimea was formed in order to form a more coherent national identity at home. Thus, the co-constitutive interrelationship between foreign policy and national identity played a key role in determining state preferences and political decisions that led to Crimea.

⁷⁷ This is a realist narrative approach that helps achieve a constructivist end.

2.1.1.2 East or West?

After the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, when Russia began searching for a new identity, a question arose about whether this new identity would be Eurasian or Western. This involved a choice about “whether to emulate the example of the West in order to advance their country’s development or to preserve the Russian separate values and customs at the risk of denying it the capacity to compete with Europe”.⁷⁸ When Putin became the President in 2000, he attempted to find an explanation regarding the place of Russia in the world. Even though his attitude towards the West seemed highly ambivalent, he recognized the importance of having relationships with USA and the EU, but not at the cost of Russia’s own core values and goals. According to Evans, Putin emphasized that Russia should be considered a part of Europe, but at the same time was wary of importing foreign models into the country, which made it clear that “Putin (wanted Russia) to be accepted into the community of Western democracies on its (Russia’s) own terms, which he (saw) as necessary to preserve Russia’s distinct identity”.⁷⁹ This view is supported by the Liberal Westernizers within the Russian foreign policy elite, who now recognize that the Cold War era is over and that the West does not pose a military threat anymore. However, the problem is that “not only are Russian leaders unable to translate it into a practical idea, but they fully understand that Russian values cannot translate abroad until those values are revitalized, sold to their own people and made intelligible to others”.⁸⁰

There are two main assumptions held by intellectuals and experts that are problematic when applied to this debate. The first is that Russia needs to make a choice between East and the West, in that by expanding relations with the emerging Asian powers like Japan, India and

⁷⁸ Alfred B. Evans, “Putin’s Legacy and Russia’s Identity,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, no. 6 (August 2008): 899, accessed May 23, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09668130802161140>.

⁷⁹ Evans, “Putin’s Legacy and Russia’s Identity,” 908.

⁸⁰ Robert Legvold, “Russia’s Unformed Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2001, accessed May 23, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2001-09-01/russias-unformed-foreign-policy>.

China, Russia's ideological orientation is also following that same path. This assumption brings back the debate to the context of ideology where the main point of discussion becomes whether Russia will accept or reject Western values. The second assumption is that in cooperating with the West, Russia is compromising its own national identity. However, Russia's new diplomatic framework is multidirectional in a way that combines its traditional European orientation with its interests in Asia and links the "firm protection of national interests with a consistent search for mutually acceptable solutions through dialogues and cooperation with the West".⁸¹ This shows that Russian foreign policy is effective in balancing its Asian and European interests.

Constructivists may argue that the history of socio-political interactions between Russia and the West will certainly have an influence on how the Russian foreign policy is shaped. However, Ivanov makes a counterargument and says that "present-day Russia resolutely rejects any 'neo-imperial' ambitions and firmly advocates the creation of a democratic system of international relations... (in which) Russian diplomacy objectively has emerged as a complex synthesis of elements of the Soviet legacy, the now-revived diplomatic traditions of the old Russia, and the new attitudes emerging from radical democratic changes both in the country and on the international scene".⁸²

In the debate about Russia's inclinations towards the East or the West, Piontkovsky's key policy finding is that "only by facing westwards can Russia achieve its foreign policy goals and secure a European identity for the twenty-first century".⁸³ He goes on to say that it is not the security threat emanating from NATO enlargement in Eastern Europe that has provoked such an emotional reaction from the political elites of Russia, but rather it is the double nature of Russian

⁸¹ I.S. Ivanov, "The New Russian Identity," *The Washington Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 11, accessed May 23, 2015, https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/washington_quarterly/v024/24.3ivanov.pdf.

⁸² Ivanov, "The New Russian Identity," 10-11.

⁸³ Piontkovskiĭ, *East or West*, 1-4.

identity that has disturbed the foundations of the political consciousness of Russia. The answer to the East vs. West question was never resolved by Russia. Before a resolution to the East vs. West debate can be found and Russia can define its identity in relation to the West, it is important for Russia to first establish a collective identity imbued with its norms and values internally. All sections of the civil society, opposition groups and political elites must agree on what constitutes a Russian identity. In the case of Putin, constructivists would argue that Crimea gave him the opportunity to do exactly that.⁸⁴ Hence, he took the approach of trying to assimilate and protect the collective interests of Russians abroad where they live in minorities and trying to import that collective Russian identity from the outside in. In doing so, he also wanted to (re)define Russia's place in the world because Russia's identity in international politics had become rather ambivalent after the break-up of the Soviet Union. However, there is an alternate constructivist argument that dictates that rather than identity, the Russian foreign policy towards Ukraine was determined by the presence of a "Cold War Mentality" that is still alive today.

2.2 The Cold War "Mentality" in Russian Foreign Policy

The remnants of the Kremlin's past interactions with the US and EU during the Cold War still determine Russian foreign policy, such that Putin is still holding on to the Cold War "mentality" in accordance to which he defines Russia's external behavior in the dimension of international politics. This view is supported by Obama who alleges that "there have been times where (Russia) slips back into Cold War thinking and Cold War mentality; what I continually say to them and to President Putin is that's the past".⁸⁵ Talking along similar lines Stephen Harper, the current Prime Minister of Canada, states that "as unfortunate as it sounds, it's

⁸⁴ Boris Barkanov, "How Putin's Domestic Audience Explains Russia's Behavior."

⁸⁵ Edward-Isaac Dove, "President Obama Http://www.politico.com/story/2013/08/barack-obama-vladimir-putin-95268.html: Vladimir Putin Slips Into 'Cold War Mentality' Read More," Politico, June 8, 2013, accessed May 27, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/story/2013/08/barack-obama-vladimir-putin-95268.html>.

increasingly apparent to me that the Cold War has never left Vladimir Putin's mind; I think he still thinks in those terms”.⁸⁶ The antagonistic relationship that NATO has held with the Soviet Union during these years shaped the interests and behavior of both sides in a manner that invites distrust and lack of mutual cooperation. This is because each side identifies the other as a direct threat and the movement of the EU and NATO towards Ukraine was seen in exactly that same light by the Kremlin. Moscow considers US, EU and NATO as the enemy because of historical interactions during the Cold War and will continue to do so. The Cold War had changed the relations between Russia and the West in some fundamental ways. During the Cold War, the Western actors in the conflict called for greater military expenditures as well as advocated a tougher position to be taken with regard to Russia, which made it difficult for Russia to forms any channels of cooperation and rapprochement with the West.⁸⁷ For the two sides, this led to everything being “progressively viewed through the lens of who gains more power and who manages to more successfully weaken the opponent”.⁸⁸ Wendt’s idea of anarchy in international politics dictates that “anarchy is what states make of it”.⁸⁹ Therefore, the presence of anarchy itself in the international system does not mean that war is probable; it just means that the possibility of war is there. Wendt says that “anarchy as such is not a structural cause of anything. What matters is its social structure, which varies across anarchies. Anarchy of friends differs from one of enemies, one of self-help from one of collective security, and these are all constituted by structures of shared knowledge”.⁹⁰ It was the discursive condition of possibility

⁸⁶ Lee-Anne Goodman “Harper to Germany: Putin Trapped in Cold War Mentality,” Huffington Post, March 26, 2014, accessed May 27, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2014/03/26/harper-germany-putin-cold-war_n_5032963.html.

⁸⁷ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc 2010)

⁸⁸ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy*, 31-32.

⁸⁹ Wendt, “Constructing International Politics,” 77.

⁹⁰ Wendt, “Constructing International Politics,” 77.

which made Putin's gamble possible. Looking at the arguments made by modern constructivists, it can be seen that Russia and NATO look at the state of anarchy in relation to each other as rivals, but that this rivalry is imbued with a certain level of restraint. Therefore, Wendt would attribute the Crimean war to how the European Union and Russia's identification in relation to each other as that of rivals because their history of hostile shared interactions makes war probable.

This does not mean that constructivists do not take into account change; in fact many constructivists claim that they do study change under the analytical umbrella of social interaction. In this analysis of change, constructivists can cooperate with liberals on things like the possibility that international institutions can help find common ground between conflicting actors that involve finding common norms, interests or values that can help create "ideas of cooperation".⁹¹ Looking at Russia and the European Union, such institutions can play a significant role in building trust, cooperation and communication links between the two actors so that they no longer identify themselves as rivals in their social constructions of international politics. Mearsheimer, in his conference call on the Ukraine crisis with *Foreign Affairs* magazine said that "if you were to talk to Mike McFaul, Mike McFaul, who was the ambassador to Russia, believes fervently that NATO expansion was a benign form of behavior. He believes that the United States is a benign hegemon and that moving the alliance eastward is not directed at Russia and it is not at all linked to sort of geopolitical thinking".⁹² This would bring about a significant transformation in the definition of Russia in relation to the EU and even the US. There is ample evidence to indicate steps being taken by international institutions and states to increase cooperation between US and Russia after the Cold War. NATO claims that it has taken

⁹¹ Jackson and Sorensen, *Introduction to International Relations*, 174

⁹² *Foreign Affairs*, Conference Call with John Mearsheimer

significant steps to form a cooperative relation with Russia since the 1990's and that far from marginalizing the Russian state, it has been seen as a strategic and privileged partner.⁹³ In 1997 for instance, *the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security* between NATO and the Russian Federation was signed in Paris, France. It stated that "NATO and Russia do not consider each other as adversaries. They share the goal of overcoming the vestiges of earlier confrontation and competition of strengthening mutual trust and cooperation. Making this political commitment at the highest political level marks the beginning of a fundamentally new relationship between NATO and Russia... (based) on the principles of democracy and cooperative security".⁹⁴

However, none of these efforts have actually succeeded which goes to show there is a particular reason for why the actors are reluctant to agree to any framework of cooperation. Thus, all in all, the theoretical strands of constructivism alleges that the war over Ukraine is directly relevant to how the past interactions of Russia and the West during the Cold War has shaped the way each state sees itself in relation to the other in terms of hostility. This does not mean that international institutions cannot help the two actors achieve common goals and interests, but first they need to acknowledge and address the main problem. Another thing that constructivism falls short of explaining is that why has Russia chosen now to take such a huge risk by attacking Crimea when it has not taken any similar action ever since to culmination of the Cold War. If the Russian foreign policy towards Crimea was due to this Cold War "mentality", then the presence of this mentality should have been consistent in Russia's international politics throughout. But there has been no evidence since the end of Cold War to indicate that this was

⁹³ "Russia's Accusations - Setting the Record Straight," NATO, April, 2014, accessed May 25, 2015, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_109141.htm.

⁹⁴ "Founding Act," NATO, May 27, 1997, accessed May 23, 2015, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm.

the case until the Crimean crisis. The question is that why Russia chooses to see the West as enemies and maintain this Cold War mentality in its foreign policy, when there have been no instances of direct conflict since the Cold War and maintaining such views could provoke the West and NATO and actually threaten the security interests of Russia. Also, if the matter was only related to how Russia identifies itself in relation to NATO in international politics, then constructivism does not explain why diplomatic talks between the two actors failed to remove Russia's concern about the EU as a potential threat. Therefore, there are many questions that are unaccounted for in the constructivist arguments. There can be multiple explanations for these questions as presented above like Russia still thinks with a Cold War mentality and no amount of negotiations or talks will change that or that the Crimea War was never about a security threat but rather it was an economic concern because Russia could not let itself become isolated from the economic trade between the European Union and Ukraine. The role of economic interdependence in Russian foreign policy can best be explained by the theory of liberalism.

CHAPTER 3 LIBERALISM

Many international relations scholars argue that the main reason behind Moscow's annexation of the Crimean region is hidden in the economic interdependence and interconnectedness between Russia, EU and the USA. Looking through the lens of liberalism, this chapter argues that it was the economic interest of domestic actors in Russia that prompted the war. We start off by examining Moravcsik's conception of liberalism and its role in international politics.

In general terms, "liberalism is committed to the steady, if uneven, expansion of human freedom through various political and economic strategies, such as democratization and market capitalism, ascertained through reason and, in many cases, enhanced by technology".⁹⁵ Liberals, unlike the realists, do not consider the state as a unitary actor in the international system, but for them it is rather the "domestic and transnational civil society"⁹⁶ that determines the behavior of the state. The liberal international theory, as defined by Moravcsik, emphasizes the importance of state-society relations in determining the behavior of the state in global politics; this involves "the relationship of the states to the domestic and transnational social context in which they are embedded".⁹⁷ Liberalism comprises of an environment of interdependence in which it is the various self-interested groups existing within a state as well as inter-state interactions that determines the state behavior in the international system. Interdependence is instrumental for a

⁹⁵ Mark W. Zacher and Richard A. Matthew, "Liberal International Theory: Common Threads, Divergent Strands," in *Controversies in International Relations Theory: Realism and the Neoliberal Challenge*, ed. Charles W. Kegley (New York: St. Martin, 1995), 111.

⁹⁶ Andrew Moravcsik "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (Autumn 1997): 516, accessed May 23, 2015, <https://www.princeton.edu/~amoravcs/library/preferences.pdf>.

⁹⁷ Moravcsik "Taking Preferences Seriously," 513.

liberal system and it means “mutual dependence, not necessarily symmetric, which brings benefits for all parties involved”.⁹⁸

In the case of Ukraine, liberalism’s idea of economic interdependence represents competing interests of the European Union and Russia over Ukraine at an economic level and these competing interests became even more prominent when EU attempted to acquire further economic integration with Ukraine through the signing of the Association Agreement, without involving Russia in the agreement process. Ukraine is a key energy partner of the EU in that “its transportation network, until recently comprising 4,600km of pipelines running through its territory, makes it the largest transit country for hydrocarbons into Europe”.⁹⁹ Russia is the main supplier of this huge level of energy into Ukraine and Moscow perceived the steps towards the signing of an agreement between Ukraine and the EU without its involvement, as a direct threat because it wanted to remain the key provider of gas to Ukraine and the EU. This is evident from the fact that the region in Ukraine where most of the fight is being conducted between pro-Russian separatists and the Ukrainian forces is the Donetsk territory in Sloviansk, which is “one of the richest sources of unconventional gas in Europe (and can) transform import dependent Ukraine into a fuel exporter”.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, for the liberals, economic interests represent the main factors that prompted Russian actions in Crimea and are still defining Russian foreign policy towards Eastern Ukraine.

Russia is one of the main trading partners of the European Union as well as its member states, as a result of which the EU states are divided on whether to place sanctions on Russia

⁹⁸ Helen V. Milner and Andrew Moravcsik, eds., *Power, Interdependence, and Nonstate Actors in World Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), accessed May 23, 2015, <http://muse.jhu.edu/books/9781400830787/>.

⁹⁹ Olesia Ogryzko, “The Energy Triangle: The EU, Ukraine and Russia,” *World Commerce Review*, June 2014, 50-52, fride.org/descarga/23.06.2014_WorldCommerceReview_OO.pdf.

¹⁰⁰ Ogryzko, “The Energy Triangle,” 50-52.

after Crimea. “The European sanctions consist in first, agreeing on a list of Russians and Crimeans to target; and second, on freezing their assets and visas. Not only can member states not agree on the list and severity of the sanctions, but the ambassadors at the Political and Security Committee of the Union (PSC) are not failing to do so”.¹⁰¹ The economic interdependence that comes with liberalism presents a situation in which the prospective economic losses and gains between two states during a conflict can make the dependent state reluctant to take action against one that can be a potential power resource. Therefore, in the case of the Crimean crisis, it can be argued that the EU has many economic incentives and pressure to quickly reach a level of cooperation with Russia that protects its economic interests. Liberalism helps clarify many points about the international conflict in Ukraine where the explanatory power of realism falters. For example, neorealism fails to explain the presence and continuation of economic cooperation between Russia and the EU despite the conflict, because its theoretical framework looks at both Russia and the European Union as units. Also, neorealism cannot account for why Putin decided to militarily intervene in the Crimean peninsula when it is clear that NATO’s military capabilities far outweigh those of Russia’s. Looking at the liberal arguments of these areas that are not accounted for by the neorealists, it firstly argues that the very presence of economic interdependence between the European Union and Russia will diminish the likelihood of the two countries engaging in a military conflict; in fact, it will be in the interest of both countries to find common ground as soon as possible. Furthermore, liberals would tend to suggest that the European Union is much more economically dependent on Russia than Russia is on the EU. The reason is that Russia is the main supplier of gas to the Union, so the Kremlin can apply (economic) pressure on the EU by cutting down its supply of natural

¹⁰¹ Maxime H.A. Larivé “Crimea or the Future of the Liberal World Order,” Foreign Policy Association, March 16, 2014, accessed May 23, 2015, <http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2014/03/16/crimea-or-the-future-of-the-liberal-world-order/>.

resources to the EU, until it agrees to remove sanctions. The member states of the Union would thus prefer to resolve the conflict, rather than antagonizing Russia by placing extreme sanctions, because the EU would not want to lose its main source of supply of gas.

This empirical explanation is supported by Moravcsik's liberal view which says that "even where capability-based threats and promises are employed, preference-based determinants of the tolerance for bearing bargaining costs, including ... (the) willingness to accept punishment, remain central".¹⁰² Moscow is aware of the economic leverage it holds over the EU and US and it uses this to attain its political and military benefits and fulfill high demands. Simon Tisdall from *The Guardian* writes that "Russia set out a series of tough conditions... for agreeing a diplomatic solution to the crisis over its annexation of Crimea, demanding that the US and its European partners accept its proposal that ethnic Russian regions of eastern and southern Ukraine be given extensive autonomous powers independent of Kiev".¹⁰³ Looking at this issue for cooperation, it must be noted what Moravcsik writes about preferences: "the willingness of states to expend resources or make concessions is itself primarily a function of preferences, not capabilities" as a result of which the "bargaining outcomes reflect the nature and relative intensity of actor preferences".¹⁰⁴

All in all, the theory of liberalism takes into account the significance of the economic interests of the domestic actors in generating the conflict over Crimea. According to this theory, both main actors in the conflict, Moscow and the European Union, are expected to behave with rationality in accordance to the economic preferences of each respective actor as well as the

¹⁰² Moravcsik "Taking Preferences Seriously," 523-24.

¹⁰³ Simon Tisdall, "Russia Sets Tough Conditions for Diplomatic Solution in Crimea," *Guardian*, Mar 30, 2014, accessed May 23, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/30/russia-ukraine-john-kerry-sergei-lavrov-paris>.

¹⁰⁴ Moravcsik "Taking Preferences Seriously," 523.

limitations of the economic interdependencies between both of them. Even though international institutions can play a crucial role in defining the framework of economic interdependence between the two actors based on cooperation and trust, the issue of the reputation of the United States and the EU is on the line. If they do not respond to Russian aggression in Ukraine in some way, the US and EU will compromise its prestige and reputation in the international community and such a lack of response would prompt Putin to behave even more aggressively in Eastern Ukraine, which it seems he is already doing. It seems that Putin has formed a “commitment to the goal of consolidating Russia’s influence around its periphery (as well as developing) the capabilities of the Russian military”.¹⁰⁵

For Putin, it has become more important than ever to protect the economic interests of Russia in post-Crimea. The reason is that he is losing support among the political elites and opposition against him is growing after the Euromaidan. The reason for this is that the domestic political actors in Russia have no interest in the neo-tsarist ideology that Putin has developed and the main factor that prompts these actors to support Putin depends largely on the fulfillment of their economic interests regarding the financial resources over the country. Initially, they were loyal to Putin because when he assumed power in 1999, he was able to balance the economic growth of the country and fulfill the interests of these political elites at the same time. However, this is not the case anymore. With two costly military conflicts in Chechnya and Crimea respectively already underway, the fall in prices of oil and increasing Western sanctions, it seems that the Russian economy is collapsing.¹⁰⁶ Thus, Putin is left with only two options: firstly, to cut down military spending and alienating the elites from dipping into state treasury or second, to

¹⁰⁵ Judy Dempsey, “Is the West Prepared for Putin’s Next Move in Ukraine?,” April 9, 2014, accessed May 23, 2015, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/?fa=55288>.

¹⁰⁶ Alexander J. Motyl, “Goodbye, Putin,” *Foreign Affairs*, Feb 5, 2015, 1, accessed May 23, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2015-02-05/goodbye-putin>.

form channels of cooperation with the West and undo the damage caused by Crimea as soon as possible, so that the sanctions may be lifted.

Conclusion

The dynamics of Russian foreign policy towards Crimea are far more complex and multifaceted than originally meets the eye. There is extensive amount of international relations literature that has widely discussed Russian foreign policy towards Ukraine ever since the Crimean conflict in 2014. This literature provides some very stimulating debates about the war in both a theoretical and empirical context. However, it is the literature available outside of international relations literature that when integrated with the former understanding, provides a more comprehensive narrative of the entire conflict by taking into account the complexities and nuances of Russian foreign policy that are not easily visible at first. The idea is that there is no single way that could take all the variations into account, so an attempt has been made to assess those variations themselves to observe what sort of explanations are out there for the war. A relative comparison of the three traditional international relations theories serve as the foundational framework from which all the complexities and nuances are evaluated. Since the Crimean Crisis is termed as an international conflict with international repercussions, it is of utmost importance to see how effectively the theoretical literature available in this field of study helps to understand the empirics.

Most scholars and political experts have relied on the theory of neorealism to explain why Russia attacked Crimea. The inclination to do so is understandable, considering the history of rivalry between Russia and the West during the Cold War. The argument presented is that Russia was facing a security dilemma due to the West's triple package of policies of NATO expansion, EU enlargement in Eastern Europe and democracy promotion in former Soviet states like Georgia and Ukraine. Defensive realists would argue that the EU efforts to further economic integration with Ukraine through the Association Agreement was seen as a threat to the

geopolitical status quo by Russia and thus Putin's decision to annex Crimea was an attempt to restore or rather rebalance the status quo in a way that would protect its economic interests and security in the region. Offensive realists, however, are of the view that it was Western provocation and disregard for Russia's strategic interests in Eastern Europe that led to Moscow's aggressive foreign policy towards Ukraine. For them, *realpolitik* is in play here in which it is no longer just about security, but rather it is about the instrument of power that Russia is using to assert its strategic interests in Europe and to re-define its place as a great power in the region that it had lost after the Cold War. In this perspective, Putin wants to destabilize Ukraine to the extent that it would lose its appeal to the West.

There are some nuances and variations to the neorealist explanation, however, which the theory just cannot account for. For starters, it had become very unlikely that NATO would even want to integrate Ukraine as a member after the Euromaidan demonstrations. It had previously indicated reluctance to make any concrete promises regarding NATO membership for Ukraine at many occasions. Neorealism overemphasizes the importance that the West holds for Ukraine. This is evident from the lack of direct Western military response after the Russian invasion of Crimea. To put it simply, Ukraine seems to be a very low priority for Western governments considering their lack of response. Furthermore, neoclassical realism tries to take into account the domestic political factors of Russia that are discounted by original neorealist theories. The argument it presents is that if the West has no interest in Ukraine, as indicated by their behavior, it makes no sense for Russia to invade Crimea according to the neorealist argument because doing so would just aggravate the West and raise the possibility of their increased involvement in Ukraine, military or otherwise. Neoclassical realism asserts that the Russian foreign policy was in the interest of Putin, rather than that of the Russian Federation, because his regime was

vulnerable from internal threats, the annexation of Crimea was expected to increase his popularity at home and protect his rule.

The second international relations theory of constructivism is fraught with its own set of complexities. Looking at the history of past interactions between Russia and the West during the Cold War, constructivists would claim that the way that Russia identifies itself at an international political level involves a relation of shared rivalry with the West. The argument is that this history of hostility has produced distrust between the two sides and that is what prompted Russia to perceive Western involvement in Ukraine as a security threat. Another factor is that after the overthrow of the pro-Russian President Yanukovich in Ukraine, Putin felt that the identity and well-being of the Russian minorities living in Ukraine is under threat. This identity was part of the history of social interaction between Russia and Ukraine when they were a part of the Soviet Union, so Putin had to intervene to make sure that these minorities would be protected against the political instabilities and the threat of the West emerging in Kiev. The constructivist argument presents more questions than answers. For instance, it does not explain the numerous steps taken towards increasing cooperation between Russia and the West like the *Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security* between NATO and the Russian Federation in 1997, for example. Furthermore, it does not explain why Russia chose to take such a big risk of aggravating the West at this particular time, especially just days after it held the Sochi Olympics on Moscow which can be seen as steps towards increasing Russia and Western cooperation.

Another key factor that constructivism fails to effectively take into account is the identity crisis facing Russian national identity and foreign policy in post-Cold War. It raises the question that why would Putin want to protect the identity of Russian ethnic minorities in Ukraine when Russia's own identity was not determined. The rise of nationalist tendencies after the Cold War

had produced anti-Western sentiments among the political elites of Russia. There was no definite answer to what constituted the national identity of Russia, so there was a trend in which Russian foreign policy was the factor determining the “Russian identity”. Thus, Putin’s foreign policy towards Ukraine is an attempt to form a collective identity back home that would maintain the increasing unrest within the civil society and political elites. Simply put, it was the rise of nationalist tendencies in Russian society at a domestic level that determined the aggressive foreign policy towards Ukraine in 2014. In addition, ever since Putin came to power, he has strived to introduce democratic principles in Russia, as long as they don’t compromise Russian values. The foreign policy that came out of Moscow was imbued with a new identity that was inclined to balance Russian interests in both the East and the West. However, the West has been reluctant to identify Russia’s place in Europe after the Cold War and even though Russia identifies itself as a part of Europe, the EU has avoided integrating Russia. The resentment produced by what Russia sees as unfair treatment by the EU is another factor precipitating Moscow’s decision to annex Crimea. There could be two possibilities to this strategy: first, to show the EU how it would be like to have Russia as an enemy rather than a partner and second, to give the message to the West that Russia is not the benign defeated power that it perceives it to be. Another argument presented by constructivism is that Russia still maintains a Cold War “mentality” due to history of hostile interactions with the West and this mentality played a crucial role in shaping Russian foreign policy towards Crimea.

Lastly, the theory of liberalism provides its own set of explanations by making the Crimean conflict all about the competing economic interests of Russia and the EU. Russia wanted to remain the main supplier of hydrocarbons to Ukraine, but the emergence of the possibility of the Association Agreement between EU and Ukraine without the involvement of

Russia was a direct threat to Moscow's economic interests, which led Putin to engage militarily in Crimea. Furthermore, Russia is also one of the key trading partners of the EU. This liberal conception of economic interdependence presents a situation in which the EU is actually dependent on Russia for power resources and any tendencies of the EU to place sanctions on Russia could lead to the latter cutting off supply, leaving EU to fend for alternate more costly sources of imports. Thus, power production capabilities, especially natural gas, give Russia bargaining leverage when it comes to international politics, particularly with countries that are dependent on imports from Russia. However, where the liberalism argument falters is that economic interdependence should diminish the likelihood for military action, which is not what happened in this case. Since Russia could apply economic pressure on the EU, military action was unnecessary if Crimea was just about economic factors.

All in all, it is impossible to determine which theoretical and empirical factors were responsible for shaping Russian foreign policy towards Crimea in 2014. It is mostly likely a combination of factors in domestic and international politics where the answer lies. An exploration of the empirical understandings of the conflict under the three international relations theories provides a very comprehensive overview of the crisis. However, in order to identify further nuances, more research needs to be conducted by scholars and experts to find explanations outside the field of international relations. For now, Moscow continues to produce unrest in Eastern Ukraine by assisting the pro-Russian separatists in the region. There are two possible scenarios this could lead to: international institutions will step in to resolve the crisis and form concrete channels of cooperation between Russia and the West or this could lead to a new Cold War which could be catastrophic for Europe.

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