

Russia? What Russia?

Russia's Identity Within the International System Through the Prism of the Nagorno-Karabakh and the Transnistrian Conflicts

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Abstract

With Russia's invasion in Ukraine in February 2022, the popular question on the sources of Russia's behavior went farther from a fixed answer. Answering this question has become more challenging because of the conventional and limiting explanations of Russia's behavior in the international system defining it as geopolitical aspirations and neo-imperialism. This thesis views Russia's behavior through the prism of identity and suggests that for understanding what Russia *does* it is crucial to understand what Russia *is*. Based on this, the contribution of this research is two-fold: first, it argues that the central pillar for understanding Russia's actions in the international system is through the *continuity* and *relational performativity* of its identity, and, secondly, it demonstrates that there is no fixed identity of Russia, and that it displays different identities in different issues and circumstances. Methodologically, this thesis relies on a discourse analysis of the official statements of Russia's leaders vis-à-vis two conflicts with Russian involvement—the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the Transnistrian conflict. The results showcase that, along with each separate case, Russia's role in the international system and its foreign policy is multifold and supports the concept of the multiplicity of Russia's identity. Relying on a relational analysis of Russian foreign policy and the continuities of its identity development, this research adds novel insights to the existing body of literature on Russia's role in the international system.

Key Words: Russia, foreign policy, identity, geopolitics, Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria.

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List of Abbreviations

CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CSCE	Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EEC	Eurasian Economic Community
ENP	European Neighborhood Policy
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NK	Nagorno-Karabakh
NKR	Nagorno-Karabakh Republic
OSCE	Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe
OSCE MG	Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe Minsk Group
PMR	Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

*Whither, then, are you speeding, O Russia of mine? Whither?*¹

- Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol

*The system is always momentary; it varies from one position to the next.*²

- Ferdinand de Saussure

Introduction

In February 2022, in a press conference, Joe Biden explained Vladimir Putin's ambitions in Ukraine as follows: "He wants to, in fact, reestablish the former Soviet Union. That's what this is about."³ Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia's engagements in different issues were viewed through the same explanation.

At first glance, this argument may seem a simple geopolitical explanation to sophisticated developments in the international system. Yet, this explanation is not only simple, but also fallible: it generalizes Russia's behavior in various issues and views them as homogeneous and identical. If the premise of the Soviet restoration is valid, and if it is alarming for the world, then Russia's actions and interests in other post-Soviet states and issues are identically alarming. However, the international community's relatively affirmative reaction towards Russia's involvement and interests in the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict cannot be identical to the reactions towards, for example, Donbass or Transnistria. So what *is* Russia: a stabilizer, a peacemaker, an aggressor, or a state with imperial nostalgia? These questions suggest that "the definition of the national interests

¹ Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol, *Dead Souls*, (The Project Gutenberg EBook, 1842), accessed May 10, 2022, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1081/1081-h/1081-h.htm#link2HCH0011>.

² Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*., (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 88.

³ CBS News (@CBSNEWS), "Biden says Putin has much larger ambitions than Ukraine," *Twitter*, February 24, 2022, 8:04 PM, <https://twitter.com/cbsnews/status/1496924074483847172?lang=de>.

of a state is bound up with the formation of its national identity.”⁴ Only through understanding Russia’s identity it is possible to examine and analyze Russia’s interests and actions in the international system. Identity creations constitute national interests and, hence, certain foreign policy decisions and actions. The Russia in 2022 is a conglomeration of different relational processes of identity creations. The processes are relational towards different circumstances and issues and “the constitution of the Russian self is not the product of a single binary relation but is more complicated...there is more than a single Russian identity.”⁵ Thus, it is important to view Russian identity as multidimensional and approach it through the prism of various relational processes. How can multiple identities be conceptualized vis-à-vis different processes? As Richard Lebow argued, “national identifications are multiple and rise and fall in their relative importance as a function of context and priming and the skill of the agents who propagate them.”⁶ Thus, to understand Russia’s behavior in the international system holistically, two factors should be taken into account: firstly, it is the multiplicity of Russia’s relational identity in different issues of the international system and, secondly, it is its analysis through the prism of specific and continuous definitions constructed by the agents—Russia’s political elites.

This thesis analyzes Russia’s foreign policy identity developments through official discourse on the Nagorno-Karabakh and the Transnistrian conflicts. Arguing against the dominant explanation that sees Russia’s role in the conflicts as a balancing power aiming for status quo, the thesis instead suggests a constructivist approach analyzing what Russia *does* in the conflicts through understanding what Russia *is* in them. Both the Nagorno-Karabakh and the Transnistrian

⁴ Anne Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia’s Resurgence: Aspirations, Identity, and Security Interests*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2009), 3.

⁵ Ted Hopf, *Understandings of Russian Foreign Policy*, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 12.

⁶ Richard Ned Lebow, *National Identities and International Relations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 180.

conflicts are unsettled post-Soviet conflicts and have contrasts (different historical backgrounds and Russia's different *raison d'être* in the conflicts) and resemblances (Russia's aim of carrying a leading role in the conflict management process, Russian peacekeeping operations and Russian soft power present in both regions) which illuminate the importance of understanding the relational continuity of Russia's identity through its involvement in multiple issues. Methodologically, the findings are based on a discourse analysis of Russia's official statements on the key developments of the Nagorno-Karabakh and the Transnistrian conflicts from the period of 1991 to 2021—in line with Russia's foreign policy and identity developments through different periods.

This thesis develops as follows: arguing against the conventional geopolitical explanations of Russia's behavior and using Lebow's theory of states' multiple identifications as a reference point, Chapter 1 analyzes the evolution of Russia's foreign policy development after the dissolution of the Soviet Union based on identity performativity and continuity. Chapter 2 analyzes the general patterns found in Russia's foreign policy developments as defined by different leaders, and the justification of its identity (s) in the international system. Chapter 3 proceeds to applying the conceptual framework of Russia's contemporary foreign policy and identity formations on the Nagorno-Karabakh and the Transnistrian conflicts—with the key events of the two conflicts in the contemporary times. The conceptual framework is accompanied by a discourse analysis of Russia's leaders' (presidents, Ministers of Foreign Affairs, the State Duma) official statements on the two conflicts to understand Russia's foreign policy and identity dynamics. Following the chapters, the thesis discusses the key findings and avenues for future research.

Chapter 1 – What is Russia?

The process of understanding Russia's foreign policy can be summarized into two core questions: *What is Russia?* and *What does Russia do?*⁷ The first question relates to Russia's understanding of its identity shaped by historical contexts and agents' conceptualizations. The second question focuses on the behavior of Russia, its role in the international system and whether its role, actions, and foreign policy decisions are driven by pure geopolitical interests, identity, or both. This chapter, thus, argues that while geopolitics can be a cover of foreign policy decisions, Russia's actions are largely shaped by its identity formations.

1.1 Geopolitical Concealment

Russia's foreign policy decisions have mostly been analyzed through the prism of its geopolitical interests and aspirations. However, interests are constituted by identities since "it is only once we know who we are that we can know what we want."⁸ Since the making and remaking of national identities is "inherently geographical because they are associated with particular places,"⁹ questions of geography and identity are interconnected, and Russian geopolitical culture has long been shaped by a clash and debate of different interpretations of Russian identity. For understanding the correlation and possible affiliation of Russia's identity and geopolitical interests, the framework of critical geopolitics is taken as a basis of analysis. The conventional conceptualization of geopolitics—"geography of politics where material factors usually provide the structural background within which agents make their hopefully optimal decisions"¹⁰—

⁷ Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia's Resurgence*, 2.

⁸ Erik Ringmar, *Identity, Interest and Action: A Cultural Explanation of Sweden's Intervention in the Thirty Years War*, Cambridge Cultural Social Studies, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 53.

⁹ Klaus Dodds, *Geopolitics: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 71.

¹⁰ Stefano Guzzini, *The Return of Geopolitics in Europe?: Social Mechanisms and Foreign Policy Identity Crises*, (Cambridge Studies in International Relations: 124. Cambridge University Press 2012), 14.

constitutes significant restrictions. Geography is considered a fixed variable, however, to adjust the famous statement, geography is what actors make of it. Proponents of critical geopolitics, such as Gerard Toal and Stefano Guzzini argue that “the sign *geopolitics* does not have any essential meaning over and above the historical web of contextualities within which it is evoked and knowingly used,”¹¹ and suggest that “critical geopolitics problematizes geography itself: it is about the politics of geography, geography’s role in supporting foreign policies, as well as its political and ideological function.”¹² In this sense, geopolitics serves as a political tool for understanding and (re)claiming a state’s role and recognition in the international arena. More precisely, in the times of major political changes, geopolitics becomes a tool for a possible spatial explanation and support over the anxiety of the new—the identity crisis. While acknowledging the fluctuating essence of Russia’s geopolitical reactions is important, it is also important to acknowledge the inherent geopolitical determinism of Russia. Russia’s geopolitics has served only as a quick response to crises and the construction of security imaginary, but never a solution to and a sole cause of crises. While geopolitics may be used as a possible socio-cognitive explanation for political processes, the core question remains the matter of identity.

1.2 There is No Single Russia: The Multiplicity of Identities

Understanding contemporary Russia’s foreign policy and national interests is possible through understanding its identity, or, more precisely, multiple identities. The thesis argues that there is no need (and it is not effective) to conceptualize a single identity of Russia, for the multiplicity of identities is what constitutes it. In other words, to answer the questions *What is Russia?* and *What Russia does?* one needs to examine Russia’s cultivated identities and their

¹¹ Gerard Toal, *Critical Geopolitics*, (London: Routledge International Thomson Publishing company, 2005), 146.

¹² Guzzini, *The Return of Geopolitics in Europe?*, 14.

implications for its actions and interests in the international system. In this framework of analysis, identity is viewed through the social-constructivist prism which argues that “rather than conceptualizing identity as a unitary entity that precedes actions ontologically, it is understood performatively, that is, as an ongoing, always incomplete series of effects of a process of reiteration.”¹³ Viewing Russia’s identity from the social-constructivist spectrum has been the main focus of leading scholars in the field—Ted Hopf and Anne Clunan—who reject conventional realist approaches to the analysis of Russian foreign policy and propose identity as the central point of reference. Based on the wendtian paradigm stating that “interests are dependent on identities and so are not competing causal mechanisms but distinct phenomena,”¹⁴ identity is considered as a dynamic, socially constructed variable for analyzing national interests. By considering the constructivist premise that “the contingent nature of discrete events occurring over the *longue durée* ¹⁵ hold greater explanatory power than repeated patterns,” ¹⁶ the thesis argues that understanding Russia’s identity as a *continuity* and a relational *performativity* allows us to see nuanced aspects of Russia’s national interests and behavior in the international system. The reason for viewing identity as performative and continuous is because of two factors: firstly, external developments largely shape the performance and reflectivity of state identity; secondly, internal debates over identity construction make it a multidimensional *process*, rather than an outcome. Moreover, the two factors are strictly interconnected: internal debates and identity construction by

¹³ Bernd Bucher, and Ursula Jasper, “Revisiting ‘Identity’ in International Relations: From Identity as Substance to Identifications in Action,” *European Journal of International Relations* 23, no. 2 (June 2017): 395, Accessed March 10, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066116644035>.

¹⁴ Alexander Wendt, “Collective Identity Formation and the International State,” *The American Political Science Review* 88, no. 2 (1994): 385, Accessed March 1, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2944711>.

¹⁵ The general meaning of the term refers to the long term of past events.

¹⁶ Iver B. Neumann, “Russia in international society over the *longue durée*: lessons from early Rus’ and early post-Soviet state formation” in *Russia's Identity in International Relations: Images, Perceptions, Misperceptions*, Ray Taras, (1st ed.), Routledge (2012): 24, Accessed April 23, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203112427>.

agents are not, as Karl Marx put it, “conducted in circumstances of their own choice”¹⁷ and are linked to external developments.

With reference to the first factor, identity construction is analyzed through the prism of formative moments which, as defined by Erik Ringmar, are periods of “symbolic hyperinflation”¹⁸ and moments that *require* and *assume* a particular response. The formulation and establishment of new identities in the formative moments is continuous. The formative moment framework is applicable to Russia: as Henrikki Heikka suggests, identity construction “becomes especially acute in times of turmoil, when the borders defining the collective’s identity are called into question. Russia’s search for identity after the Soviet collapse would of course be such a period.”¹⁹ Indeed, in this period, Russia had to conceptualize its identity within the international system with part of its “historical legacy being dispensable in the new times and new circumstances.”²⁰ Was it about to join the Western stream, create a *sovereign* image, how would it define its role in the post-Soviet space, and, most centrally, its role as *a state*? With the void of a reference point, there was a long process of identity construction preceded by a stage of nonidentity²¹ and an identity crisis— “anxiety over a newly questioned or a newly acquired self-understanding or role in world affairs.”²² Since during identity unavailability actors do what it takes to establish one,²³ agents (mainly the elites) proceed to constructing them vis-à-vis external developments and their own imaginaries.

¹⁷ Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia’s Resurgence*, 28.

¹⁸ Ringmar, *Identity, Interest and Action*, 85.

¹⁹ Hopf, *Understandings of Russian Foreign Policy*, 8.

²⁰ Stanislaw Bielen, “Identity Problems in the New Russia,” *Polish Foreign Affairs Digest* 5, no. 1 (2005): 116-117, accessed May 5, 2022, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/pofad5&div=9>.

²¹ Henrikki Heikka, “Beyond Neorealism and Constructivism” in *Understandings of Russian Foreign Policy*, ed. Ted Hopf, (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 80.

²² Guzzini, *The Return of Geopolitics in Europe?*, 46.

²³ Ringmar, *Identity, Interest and Action*, 90.

The second factor assumes that agents interpret a state's identity based on external developments by accepting certain identities as self-defining. Hopf particularly emphasizes the role of the domestic socio-cognitive roots of state identity²⁴ and Clunan argues that "human agents are capable of changing their identities to align better with new experiences and information and changing notions of appropriateness."²⁵ Thus, identity is, eventually, constructed at home. Defining a state's identity and foreign policy priorities during an identity crisis raises internal disputes: "a foreign policy imaginary is not shared in the sense that it produces just one opinion: there are always many scripts and different subject positions."²⁶ Different actors, such as the elites, academia and media may have varying foreign policy imaginaries. For a narrow scope of analysis, the thesis focuses on the foreign policy imaginaries of the elites. Generally, for necessary modifications and alterations of a national identity, elites conduct 'validation checks' of their contemporary foreign policy patterns with historical appropriateness and relations with friends and foes. In foreign policy and identity construction, allusions to the history support flexibility to the new realities since "the events of the past are only something when inserted into the context of the narrative."²⁷ On the other hand, the creation of 'the Other' and the threats fix meanings to things, "an identity to 'the self' and others, and the relationships that are thus instituted."²⁸ Thus, national identities, as defined by the elites, are not only dynamic but also flexible and chameleon-like as they are able to adjust to new realities. Considering the new realities of the post-Cold War era, novel historical developments and the changing essence of 'the Selves' and 'the Others,' Russia's identity construction raised an internal discursive struggle "over different conceptualizations of

²⁴ Ted Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics. Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999*, (New York: Cornell University Press), 2002.

²⁵ Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia's Resurgence*, 28.

²⁶ Guzzini, *The Return of Geopolitics in Europe?*, 53.

²⁷ Ringmar, *Identity, Interest and Action*, 28.

²⁸ Joelien Pretorius, "The Security Imaginary: Explaining Military Isomorphism," *Security Dialogue - SECUR DIALOGUE*. 39. (2008): 100, doi:10.1177/0967010607086825.

the new collective identity.”²⁹ Because of internal debates and multiple conceptualizations of Russia’s identity, the Russia today is characterized by a pluralism of identities—with simplified symbolism defining Russia as a former superpower and imperial greatness.³⁰ Considering identity as a homogeneous and single entity is inherently erroneous: there is no universal identity conceptualization of a state. Rather, as Lebow put it, states have multiple identifications and “so-called identities are really composites of multiple self-identifications that are labile in character and rise and fall in relative importance.”³¹ Thus, the answer to the question *What is Russia?* is that there is no Russia per se: the multiplicity of Russia’s identity is what constitutes its identity.

²⁹ Olga Malinova, “Russia and ‘the West’ in the 2000s: redefining Russian identity in official political discourse” in *Russia's Identity in International Relations: Images, Perceptions, Misperceptions* (1st ed.), ed. Ray Taras. (London: Routledge, 2013), 73.

³⁰ Bielen, “Identity Problems in the New Russia,” 111.

³¹ Lebow, *National Identities and International Relations*, 7.

Chapter 2 - Russia's Identity Developments

The thesis moves forward to understanding Russian foreign policy developments vis-à-vis its identity visions. Foreign policy evolves “with the rise and fall of various identity visions, as advocated by different social and political groups.”³² Thus, for this analysis, the thesis will discuss Russia's strategic culture and foreign policy narrative developments as defined by different leaders and their identifications of Russia. As Mette Skak argued, “strategic culture refers to the ideational dimension of foreign and security policy... on the level of the political elites, and concerns their views on the use of force and their perception of their country's strategic vulnerabilities and options, or perhaps even its destiny.”³³ The framings by the political elites have determined the trends of Russian foreign policy and security imaginary developments and its role in the international system. The general trends found in the analysis, the pattern of Russia's shift from “dissolving in its own identity in the liberal environment” to constructing identity via national values in foreign policy ³⁴ illustrate the relational continuity of Russia's identity developments.

As argued earlier, to understand what Russia does, it is central to understand what Russia is: the answer to the latter constitutes an analysis of the way (s) Russia wants to be perceived and the narratives constructed to address that. This construction process was peculiar for post-Soviet Russia: the collapse of the Soviet Union was the ultimate period—the formative moment—when new metaphors and reactions to changes in the international system were needed. Given the void of novel security imaginaries, Russia faced possibilities of self-narration. On the other hand, the

³² Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's foreign policy: change and continuity in national identity*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 17.

³³ Mette Skak “Russia's New Monroe Doctrine” in *Russian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century*, ed. Kanet, D. Roger, (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 140.

³⁴ Sergei Medvedev, “Power, Space, and Russian Foreign Policy,” in *Understandings of Russian Foreign Policy*, ed. Ted Hopf, (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 42.

new realities and the freedom for interpretations led to an identity crisis. Astrov and Morozova define the 1990s as a period of an ontological crisis the extent of which “is perhaps best appreciated when viewed in the light of the subsequent failure of Russian foreign-policy elites to fall back on any readily available security imaginary.”³⁵ As they mention, this does not necessarily mean that there were no options of a possible security imaginary, not to mention a lack of foreign policy narratives: it is just that the available structures were not firmly agreed upon among the elites.

As an identity-fix, the newly established leaders presented a variety of reactions for establishing possible foreign policy and strategic culture narratives. It is important to note that they were shaped both by external crises and self-definitions. Andrei Tsygankov conceptualizes three distinct traditions of Russian foreign policy thinking – “Westernist, Statist, and Civilizationist.”³⁶ With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia’s new liberals turned to a pro-Western trajectory of foreign policy with the champions of President Boris Yeltsin and the Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev. As a core of the new trajectory, “geopolitics seemed irrelevant, while Westernization seemed inevitable and imminent.”³⁷ Besides the rapid membership to the ‘Western club,’ the newly established framework of national interest suggested isolationism from the former Soviet states, as “the new leadership believed that, just as Russia had suffered from isolation from the West, it had also taken on the excessively heavy Soviet imperial burden.”³⁸ The solution was to have a limited economic, political, and cultural influence over the post-Soviet region. From the security perspective, as put by Alexander Pikayev, there were

³⁵ Alexander Astrov and Natalia Morozova, “Russia: Geopolitics from the heartland” in *The Return of Geopolitics in Europe?: Social Mechanisms and Foreign Policy Identity Crises*, ed. Stefano Guzzini, Cambridge Studies in International Relations: 124, (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 197.

³⁶ Tsygankov, *Russia’s foreign policy: change and continuity in national identity*, 20-21.

³⁷ Ibid., 57.

³⁸ Ibid., 59.

four specific goals that the Kremlin sought to accomplish: the fastest possible withdrawal of Russian troops from outside Russia; tacit support of the control introduced by governments in the former Soviet republics on the former Soviet troops; ignoring separatist tendencies within individual CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) states and maintaining relations with the central governments; and inviting foreign participation in settling conflicts in the post-Soviet region.³⁹

Table 1: *Summary of Russia's Post-1991 Foreign Policy and Identity Developments*⁴⁰

Proponent	Principal School of Thought	Perceived World <i>(as defined by Tsygankov)</i>	National Interest <i>(as defined by Tsygankov)</i>	Main Strategy	Identity
Yeltsin/Kozyrev	Westernizers	Western institutional dominance	New thinking; Dialogue; Cooperation; Inclusiveness in the 'club'	Isolationism	Identity mimicking
Primakov	Statists	U.S. power hegemony; Post-Soviet influence restoration	Balancing against the U.S.; Combatting security threats in the near abroad	Great power balancing; Eurasianism; <i>Derzhavnost'</i>	Identity crisis; Geopolitics as a cover
Putin I	Statists; Westernizers	Economic competition	Pragmatic cooperation with the West; More integration with the post-Soviet states	Great power pragmatism	Core Russian values and a mix and match of Westernist and Statist thoughts
Putin II	Statists; Westernizers; Civilizationists	U.S. unilateralism	Assertiveness; Geopolitical revival	Assertive pragmatism; Great power normalization; Hypernationalism	Mix and match of Westernist and Statist thoughts

³⁹ Alexander A. Pikayev, "The Russian Domestic Debate on Policy towards the 'Near Abroad,'" in *Peacekeeping and the Role of Russia in Eurasia*, ed. Lena Johnson and Clive Archer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), 52.

⁴⁰ The compilation of the table is my own work. Composed according to and inspired by Andrei Tsygankov's conceptualizations of Russia's foreign policy developments.

By mid-1992 few steps were undertaken to implement isolationist strategies, such as Yeltsin's order of withdrawing troops from Nagorno-Karabakh, "while simultaneously asking for the deployment of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] troops as a peacekeeping force there."⁴¹ The isolationist thinking was challenged by an emerging conflict spill-out threat to Russia and a possible power vacuum in the region. Russia's intervention in the 1992 Transnistrian crisis was critical for Russia's security, and, eventually, "established the precedent for further interventions in Tajikistan, Georgia, and elsewhere."⁴² The sense of insecurity shifted Russia's understandings of foreign policy priorities vis-à-vis the ex-Soviet states with Kozyrev proclaiming the post-Soviet region as a zone of special responsibility and interest.

The challenge of the Westernist thought and, possibly, the reason for its non-dominance can be found in Kozyrev's statement that "Russia has no national interests as such"⁴³— which ultimately highlights the diminishing essence of an identity and the need of identity creation. The new identity trajectory constituted ideological collision with the West: however, the remains of the Soviet past and the aspects of geopolitical conditions and external engagements had to be considered in identity construction. Mimicking the established Western ideology on a basis of Soviet remains was not an act of a novel identity construction, but a mix and match of several identities and self-perceptions—sometimes alien, mostly borrowed.

In October 1995 Sergey Kortunov published an article on Russian national identity (*Natsional'naya sverkhzadacha; Opyt rossiyskoy ideologii-National supertask; The experience of Russian ideology*)⁴⁴ with a central argument that Russia's "foreign and domestic policy should be

⁴¹ Tsygankov, *Russia's foreign policy: change and continuity in national identity*, 79.

⁴² Ibid., 80.

⁴³ Medvedev, "Power, Space, and Russian Foreign Policy," 37.

⁴⁴ For more information on the article, please refer to https://sites.ualberta.ca/~khineiko/NG_95_97/1145885.htm (available in Russian).

based on a unique national mission, ingrained in Russian culture and traditions, of leading all countries and civilizations to peaceful unity.”⁴⁵ One can see the presupposed *special* and *unique* role that Russia ought to play in the international system. This idea of a unique ‘great power’ was central in the post-isolationist period of Russia’s foreign policy development.

The Statists (led by presidential advisor Sergei Stankevich and then the chief of foreign intelligence Yevgeni Primakov) presented the main opposition to the Westernists, by sharing “the old line of Statist reasoning, according to which all reforms had to be subjected to the main objective of strengthening the state”⁴⁶ and by relying on conventionally Civilizationist geopolitical conceptualizations. There was an apparent clash in the understandings of Russia’s great power status—a preferred identity-fixer that Russian foreign policy elites were consistently returning to.⁴⁷ Indeed, the reemergence of the great power narrative served as a possible formula for Moscow for conducting international affairs. Accordingly, while the Westernists were trying to come up with variations on the ‘normal great power’ theme,⁴⁸ the new Statists identified a need to *prove* and *defend* Russia’s great power status. Primakov advocated for a balanced approach to the Western influences believing that “Russia's new liberal values did not erase the need to maintain the status of a distinct Eurasianist great power.”⁴⁹ Here geopolitics served as a ground for claiming something distinctively Russian.⁵⁰ The Statists articulated it in the form of Eurasianism. As a unifying ideology, they returned to the idea of *derzhavnost’*—“aspirations of a strong state and a great power status where state is above the society.”⁵¹ However, viewing *derzhavnost’* as a novel

⁴⁵ Heikka, “Beyond Neorealism and Constructivism,” 93.

⁴⁶ Tsygankov, *Russia’s foreign policy: change and continuity in national identity*, 18.

⁴⁷ Astrov and Morozova, “Russia: Geopolitics from the heartland,” 197.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 199.

⁴⁹ Tsygankov, *Russia’s foreign policy: change and continuity in national identity*, 19.

⁵⁰ Astrov and Morozova, “Russia: Geopolitics from the heartland,” 204.

⁵¹ Medvedev, “Power, Space, and Russian Foreign Policy,” 42.

identity conceptualization is problematic: the ideology was more of a rudiment from the Soviet past adjusted to contemporary geopolitical narratives.

The reliance on geography did not serve as an ideational, but more of a political tool—depriving the state of the opportunity of having a defined identity. Yet, in the early 1990s, the idea of Eurasianism turned out to be more compelling, largely because of the prevalence of security threats. The context of external and internal crises fostered this phenomenon, or, more precisely, Statists framed that context as a trigger for the dominance of Eurasianism, as “newly emerged instabilities and conflicts in the former Soviet republics and inside the country (Chechnya) in the early to mid-1990s made it extremely difficult for Westernizers to sustain their policies of disengagement from the periphery.”⁵² Under Primakov, Russian foreign policy paid more attention to the geographical spectrum of the former Soviet Union—shifting from isolationism to active foreign policy (*aktivnaya vneshnaya politika*). For example, Primakov “addressed the new security threats through intense diplomatic involvement in the former Soviet region, particularly in the areas of military confrontations and civil wars (Tajikistan, Moldova), and through the initiation of economic and security projects aimed to tighten the ties among the former Soviet republics under the leadership of Russia.”⁵³ As a result, the post-Soviet space faced a new Russian hegemony “with Russia as a center, Belarus as a small brother, Kazakhstan, Kirgizia, and Armenia in the first circle of integration, Ukraine (as a whole, or part of it), Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova in the second circle, and Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan as its most remote components.”⁵⁴ The exclusion of Russia’s integration into NATO further strengthened the need to construct an *alternative* identity and a *special* role in the international arena. The return of realist thinking and

⁵² Tsygankov, *Russia’s foreign policy: change and continuity in national identity*, 19.

⁵³ Ibid., 20-21.

⁵⁴ Medvedev, “Power, Space, and Russian Foreign Policy,” 45.

great power pragmatism can be best noticed in Russia's Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 conceptualizing Russia as "a great power... with a responsibility for maintaining security in the world both on a global and on a regional level" and warned of a new threat of "a unipolar structure of the world under the economic and military domination of the United States."⁵⁵ One can notice how a heavy reliance on the past geopolitical dominance and the focus on 'the Other' constituted the new understandings of Russia's identity. Yet, built on an exclusively quasi-geopolitical spectrum with no clear definitions of 'the Self,' this approach did not give any substantial reasons for defining and understanding Russia's identity (s).

Eventually, the need for a clearer identity concept emerged. This was marked by the arrival of Vladimir Putin as the new president who insisted on preserving Russia's 'great power' status, however, unlike the Westernizers and the Statists, "explicitly sided with Europe and the United States and insisted that Russia was a country of European and Western, rather than Asian, identity."⁵⁶ In fact, the Primakov-led geopolitical Eurasianism was not effective in the long-term, since there is also a Westernist component of Russia's cultural identity. Putin's mix and match of both Westernist and Statist thinking seemed to play a double game of improving Russia's relations with the ex-Soviet republics and other states and orienting Russians to adjust to the West while preserving their own cultural legacy. The earlier years of Putin's leadership assumed a pragmatic approach to the 'great power' status with a strong emphasis on Russia's economic growth and modernization assuming that "geo-economics gained the upper hand over geopolitics, and thus Russia had to learn to defend its national interests by economic means."⁵⁷ The economic reforms were presented in the veil of a moral and ideological task with an allusion to the 'Russian Idea'—

⁵⁵ Tsygankov, *Russia's foreign policy: change and continuity in national identity*, 99.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 20-21.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 133.

the concept that “Russia has its own independent and intrinsic tradition which places it outside the West and ensures its future prosperity.”⁵⁸ In the post-Soviet space, this narrative was conceptualized via intensive regional cooperation. Gradually, this narrative turned into assertive great power pragmatism. One can observe these trends in Dmitri Medvedev’s 2008 Foreign Policy Concept and National Security Strategy (*Kontseptsiiia vneshnei politiki Rossiskoi Federatsii 2008, Strategiia natsional’noi bezopasnosti Rossiskoi Federatsii*).⁵⁹ Among the key objectives of the document are

creating good relations with Russia's neighbors and eliminating hotbeds of conflict in the adjoining regions and other parts of the world, [and] defending the rights and interests of Russian citizens and compatriots abroad and promoting the Russian language and the cultures of Russia abroad.⁶⁰

The 2009 National Security Strategy (*Strategiya natsional’noi bezopasnosti, 2009*)⁶¹ further reinforced these points by prioritizing developing relations with the CIS, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) Member States. The document highlighted a guarantee of security in the state borders to avoid military escalations: “high-tech defensive military complexes were envisioned on the borders of Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, in addition to upgrading facilities in the Arctic zone, the Caspian region, and the Russian Far East.”⁶² Often this assertive great power pragmatism shift was described as a possible Russian Monroe Doctrine. While analyzing these documents, Ambartsumov and Karaganov highlighted that in the cooperation within the international system,

⁵⁸ Bielen, “Identity Problems in the New Russia,” 117-118.

⁵⁹ For more information on the document, please refer to <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116>.

⁶⁰ Ingmar Oldberg, “Aims and Means in Russian Foreign Policy,” in *Russian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century* ed. Roger, E., Kanet. (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 31.

⁶¹ For more information on the Strategy, please refer to <http://mepoforum.sk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/NDS-RF-2009-en.pdf>.

⁶² Charles E. Ziegler, “Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus after the Georgia Conflict” in *Russian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century*, ed. Roger, E., Kanet, (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 157.

Russia's "target is to reach their understanding of the fact that this region is above all a Russian zone of interests."⁶³ Thus, after a brief period of cohabitation of Westernist and Statist thoughts, Russia turned to a period of assertiveness and establishment of a dominant stance in the post-Soviet space.

In later periods of Putin's return to presidency, a new identity debate on great power normalization emerged with the objective to defend national interests with "an increasing cooperation with the world's economic and political system, but not at the expense of Russia's traditional security interests and preservation of statehood."⁶⁴ With Putin's leadership, Russia's identity was adjusted to his understanding of the balance of power and great power normalization. In Foucauldian terms, the normalization period posits "an optimal model that is constructed in terms of a certain result... trying to get people, movements, and actions to conform to this model."⁶⁵ The internal understandings of Russia's identity as a great power were fixed and the external understandings were expected to conform to them. Unlike the previous periods, this time the identity debate was not internal but external as the external understandings of Russia's security and national interests were contested and did not necessarily coincide with Russia's own understandings. This, in turn, led to identity construction based on external variables and a struggle for recognition.

Russia's identity construction was a mix of Westernist and Statist thoughts: in terms of the relations with the West, there is a constant struggle for recognition. For the rest of the world and, especially, for the ex-Soviet states, there is an apparent quasi-geopolitical return that does not (and cannot) necessarily explain Russia's identity. While the 'Russian idea' and the nostalgia over the

⁶³ Skak, "Russia's New Monroe Doctrine," 145.

⁶⁴ Tsygankov, *Russia's foreign policy: change and continuity in national identity*, 204.

⁶⁵ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 58.

great power narratives fill the ideological void,⁶⁶ they constitute a vague path of identity construction with a “Manichean vision of reality, viewed in the binary category of to be or not to be.”⁶⁷ What we face is a contemporary Russia with multiple identities structured along the post-Cold War period, narrated by different leaders and built upon the rivalry with the West and the remains of the Soviet past.

⁶⁶ Bielen, “Identity Problems in the New Russia,” 120.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 124.

Chapter 3 - Russia in the Nagorno-Karabakh and the Transnistrian Conflicts

Approaching identities from an abstract point of view rejects their performativity and relational continuity towards various implications. In the same logic, generalizing Russia's involvement in post-Soviet conflicts and explaining them through the prism of geopolitical aspirations will prevent us from seeing contemporary Russia's relational identity—a palette of various identity formations. Instead, through the prism of the Nagorno-Karabakh and the Transnistrian conflicts, and Russia's involvement in them, this last chapter analyzes some of the multiple identities Russia has in the international system.

3.1 Data and Methodology

The chapter approaches Russia's foreign policy developments and identity formations as a discursive practice: that said, it represents Russia's officials' statements throughout the key developments of the Nagorno-Karabakh and the Transnistrian conflicts and conducts a discourse analysis to understand Russia's identity developments vis-à-vis the conflicts. This is done in respect to the poststructuralist conceptualization of identity, arguing that “identities need to be articulated in language to have political and analytical presence and they are thus dependent on political agency for their ontological and epistemological significance.”⁶⁸ In this regard, the framework of analysis is based on Tsygankov's conceptualization of Russia's foreign policy developments and suggests four eras (Yeltsin/Kozyrev Era, Primakov Era, Putin Era, and Putin Era Modern) in line with identities constructed and main foreign policy strategies proposed by each leader. Based on Jennifer Milliken's argument that “discourses define subjects authorized to

⁶⁸ Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (1st ed.), (New York: Routledge, 2006), accessed March 1, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203236338>, 21.

speak and to act” as a result of the social productivity of discourse,⁶⁹ the logic behind the chronology of the abovementioned four eras is not built around the leaders, but the key periods and discourses they characterize. The official statements illuminate key developments of Russia’s foreign policy and aim to understand patterns, if any. Because of availability limitations, six and four official statements on the Nagorno-Karabakh and the Transnistrian conflicts were chosen, respectively. The official statements were extracted from the archives of the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and direct quotes of leaders’ statements from news channels and newspapers reports⁷⁰. The analysis focuses on identifying change and continuity in Russia’s foreign policy developments and the multidimensionality of Russia’s identity. Thus, it proceeds with an interpretative discourse analysis of official statements and supplements them with relevant theoretical and historical developments of the four eras conceptualized by Tsygankov.

3.2 Apples and Oranges: Why the Nagorno-Karabakh and the Transnistrian Conflicts

Both the Nagorno-Karabakh and the Transnistrian conflicts are unsettled issues sharing the following common features: “a set of governing political institutions distinct from the official parent state; limited or no recognition from the outside world; extreme security dependence on an external patron (usually Russia); their own currencies and economic orientation; and their own self-identification as part of a different social and normative orientation from that of their parent

⁶⁹ Jennifer Milliken, The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods, *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 2 (1999): 229, accessed May 3, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066199005002003>.

⁷⁰ As for some periods there was limited or no access to official statements’ archives, some of the statements were extracted from news channels/newspapers’ reports directly quoting Russia’s leaders’ official statements.

state.”⁷¹ Amid these general patterns, the conflicts are different: the origins, developments, and Russia’s involvement in the conflicts constitute a valid basis for analyzing its unfixed identity and for avoiding further generalizations. This chapter further analyses the general patterns of Russia’s foreign policy in the conflicts, then proceeds to analyze them separately vis-à-vis the process of Russia’s identity formations and continuity.

The concept of ‘near abroad’ (*blizhnee zarubezhe*) “refers to the fourteen non-Russian former Soviet republics which became independent states when the Soviet Union collapsed.”⁷² Internally, Russia’s perceptions over these states evolved from the confusion over how to treat them as independent entities to the question on how to build up real borders over imaginary lines of the former empire. From a geopolitical perspective, Russia has long approached its near abroad as “a territory crucial to its own interests.”⁷³ Instead of viewing it as a matter of geopolitical proximity, the thesis suggests viewing Russia’s foreign policy on the near abroad as an internal struggle, rather than an external one: Russia’s foreign policy decisions over the near abroad reflect the evolution of its identity (s) construction. The near abroad is not constructed as ‘the Other’ but rather a concept close to ‘the Self.’ The foreign policy towards it is not an imperial resurgence but a reflection of Russia’s internal and external identity construction processes.

⁷¹ Alexander A. Cooley, “Whose Rules, Whose Sphere? Russian Governance and Influence in Post-Soviet States,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2017, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/06/30/whose-rules-whose-sphere-russian-governance-and-influence-in-post-soviet-states-pub-71403>.

⁷² Robert Donaldson, Joseph Noguee, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, (M. E. Sharpe, Armonk, New York, London, England, 1998), 155.

⁷³ Sergei Markedonov, “Russia’s Evolving South Caucasus Policy: Security Concerns amid Ethno-political Conflicts,” *Berlin: Forschungsinstitut der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik e.V.*, (2017): 9, accessed April 5, 2022, <https://nbnresolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-56001-4>.

3.2.1 The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Historically, rooting back to the imperial times, Nagorno-Karabakh has been an important strategic pillar of Russia's southern security. Although several regional and global actors are directly or indirectly involved in the conflict (the European Union (EU), Turkey, the United States, Iran), Russia's role in the conflict both as an independent actor and as a co-chair of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe Minsk Group (OSCE MG)⁷⁴ is dominant. Unlike the conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has not been one where the interests of Russia and the West were remarkably different. Both the EU and the United States cooperate with Russia in the management of the conflict and acknowledge each other's interests in the process. Russia's mediating role within the OSCE MG is supported by France (representing the EU) and the USA. The reason behind it is that the Kremlin follows the policy of 'selective revisionism': "while it has recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it has chosen not to recognize the Armenian-run Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) and even blames any electoral campaigns held there on the de facto authorities in NKR."⁷⁵ Also, unlike other post-Soviet conflicts, the issue in Nagorno-Karabakh "does not involve protecting ethnic Russians, because few live in the regions."⁷⁶ Instead, Moscow is interested by economic factors which, in some cases, are perceived as mutually beneficial for all parties involved.

Russia's mediation is welcome by both Armenia and Azerbaijan and Russia uses the conflict to construct influence over both countries: "Moscow played little role in sparking the initial dispute, but it has vigorously monopolized the mediation and peacekeeping efforts to settle

⁷⁴ The OSCE MG was formed in 1992 and is co-chaired by France, Russia and the United States.

⁷⁵ Markedonov, "Russia's Evolving South Caucasus Policy: Security Concerns amid Ethno-political Conflicts," 5.

⁷⁶ Donaldson and Noguee, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, 179-180.

the conflict.”⁷⁷ Russia is performing a balancing act between Armenia and Azerbaijan considering the established strategic alliance with Armenia (due to its membership in CSTO and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the well-established economic cooperation with Azerbaijan and the large number of Armenian and Azerbaijani diasporas in Russia. Moreover, unlike Georgia, neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan has distinct anti-Russian and pro-Western sentiments in their political discourse which contributes to Russia’s balanced approach to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In the post-2020-war period, Russia established a direct influence in the Republic of Artsakh⁷⁸ as well with placing Russian peacekeeping forces, as well as expanding its soft power (for example, Russian was recognized as an official language in the unrecognized republic).

Table 2: *Main Developments of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict*

Year	Development
1987-1988	Mass demonstrations, Karabakh movement
1990	Black January
1991	USSR collapses, Nagorno-Karabakh declares independence
1991-1994	First Nagorno-Karabakh War
1992	OSCE Minsk Group established, Russia, France, the US are the co-chairs
1994	Ceasefire, Bishkek Protocol
1994-2020	Continuous border clashes
1996	Russia proposes a package solution to the NK conflict
2001	Key West talks
2007	OSCE Minsk Group introduces Madrid principles
2011	Kazan mediations
2015	Lavrov plan introduced
2016 April	Four Day War
2020 July	Armenia-Azerbaijan border clashes
2020 September 27	2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War
2020 November 10	Russia-brokered ceasefire, Russian peacekeepers arriving to NK

⁷⁷ Donaldson and Noguee, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, 179.

⁷⁸ Formerly the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR).

3.2.2 A One-Man Show: Russia in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Although one can argue that Russia's interests in the South Caucasus have "remained largely constant, its policies and strategies to safeguard them have changed"⁷⁹ via external changes and foreign policy narrative shifts.

Yeltsin/ Kozyrev Era: Isolationism and Westernism

Despite the isolationist patterns of Russian foreign policy, in the early 1990s, the Yeltsin administration demonstrated its keen interest in conflict management in the Transcaucasus. Democratic Russia continued "the historic policy of the Soviet Union and Imperial Russia in viewing the Transcaucasus as a dagger pointed toward the heart of Russia."⁸⁰ In a news conference with President Clinton in 1994, Yeltsin reiterated the need to help their 'neighbors' by stating that "they [Nagorno-Karabakh] asked us that we help them, that we participate in the resolution of this conflict, just like we resolved it in Moldova, just like we set up peacekeeping forces between Abkhazia and Georgia, and there bloodshed stopped."⁸¹ Yeltsin's statement was brought up in light of a comparison between the United States' and Russia's spheres of influence reassuring Clinton that "we [Russia] have helped them financially just as you [the USA] help other countries, Latin America, Africa."⁸² Yet, Yeltsin's justification of *the need* to intervene constituted a mimicry of the West and an attempt of mirroring the two countries' causes and scopes of influence. Yeltsin reiterated Russia's commitment to international law and closer cooperation with the West. It would be naïve to conclude that Russia isolated itself from the conflict. Instead, Russia's active

⁷⁹ Markedonov, "Russia's Evolving South Caucasus Policy: Security Concerns amid Ethno-political Conflicts," 9.

⁸⁰ Donaldson and Noguee, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, 1998, 180.

⁸¹ "The President's News Conference With President Boris Yeltsin of Russia," The American Presidency Project, September 28, 1994, accessed April 25, 2022, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-with-president-boris-yeltsin-russia-1>.

⁸² Ibid.

involvement in and support of the OSCE MG was a step towards an integrated and inclusive solution to the problem.

Primakov Era: Eurasianism

With Primakov's Eurasianist foreign policy, Russia's involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict became more systematic. In 1996, within the scope of the OSCE MG, Russia proposed a package solution⁸³ suggesting a procedural approach to the issue with the involvement of international peacekeeping forces—with the OSCE as the implementer and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as a guarantor. Under Primakov, Russia performed a balanced approach and closer economic and military relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan. This can be observed both in Primakov's regular statements and in the content of the package solution. Reiterating both Armenia's (self-determination) and Azerbaijan's (territorial integrity) main theses on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as well as reflecting the main conclusion of the package solution, Primakov argued that Russia is "interested in the stabilization of the situation and the resolution of the problem of Nagorno-Karabakh through compromise...supporting Nagorno-Karabakh's right to self-determination and local self-rule, but only within Azerbaijan."⁸⁴ Nevertheless, the package solution was not agreed upon by the conflicting parties and no compromises were reached. The conflict entered the Putin era with no solutions and Russia's increased integrated relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan.

⁸³ For more information about the package solution, please refer to <https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/4b2ddb/pdf/>.

⁸⁴ "Russia says Nagorno-Karabakh Must Remain Part of Azerbaijan," Reliefweb, December 9, 1996, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/azerbaijan/russia-says-nagorno-karabakh-must-remain-part-azerbaijan>.

Putin Era: From Great Power Pragmatism to Assertive Pragmatism

In comparison to the Yeltsin times, and as a continuation of Primakov's balancing act, Putin had a more neutral stand towards Armenia and Azerbaijan acting as a mediator rather than a party of the conflict, as "Putin's choice is all of Caucasus, not parts of it; better relations with Azerbaijan yield worsened relations with Armenia, and the other way around."⁸⁵ With systematic cooperation with the Western members of the OSCE MG, Russia was playing an equal role of a *dialogue facilitator* and a *mediator*. With joint forces of the OSCE MG, the Key West talks between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan—Robert Kocharyan and Heidar Aliyev—are considered to be the closest point to the successful conflict resolution. Reflecting on the Key West talks, Igor Ivanov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia reiterated Russia's core role as a mediator by mentioning that "Russia's intensive involvement would help reach an agreement aimed for a peaceful resolution of the conflict... it is important that the dialogue between the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan is continuing."⁸⁶ In 2007, with Russia's active participation, the Madrid Principles⁸⁷ were introduced by the OSCE MG that were long the core pillar of the conflict settlement accepted by all mediators. Russia seemed to be more efficient and willing to act as a mediator within the OSCE MG than an independent actor, and its role as one (specifically the initiation of the Kazan Summit under Medvedev) was not successful.

During Medvedev's presidency and with the expansion of Russia's great power assertiveness, the assurance of Russia's dominance in the conflict was a general tendency in the

⁸⁵ Bertil Nygren, *The Rebuilding of Greater Russia: Putin's Foreign Policy towards the CIS Countries*, (New York: Routledge 2008), 109.

⁸⁶ "В американском курортном городе Ки-Уэст начнутся армяно-азербайджанские переговоры по Карабаху" ("Armenia-Azerbaijan negotiations over Karabakh will start in an American resort town Key West"), Perviy Kanal (1TV), April 3, 2001, accessed April 15, 2022, https://www.1tv.ru/news/2001-04-03/280367-v_amerikanskom_kurortnom_gorode_ki_uest_nachnutsya_armyano_azerbaydzhanskije_peregovory_po_karabahu.

⁸⁷ For more information about the Madrid Principles, please refer to <https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/0b80bb/pdf/>.

official discourse. It is important to note that the assurance was not conducted at the expense of other parties but with their approval and Russia's special role in the conflict. Sergey Lavrov, the Foreign Minister of Russia reiterated this: referring to the 2011 Kazan Summit, he stated that Russia, by "taking into account the special ties with Armenia and Azerbaijan, on behalf of the co-chairs took the initiative to hold in a trilateral format (the presidents of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan), a series of consultations with a view to finding concrete agreements on the basic principles for a settlement...and this initiative was supported."⁸⁸ Moreover, Lavrov's argument that "the real tool in the negotiation process is not the Minsk Group as such, but its co-chairs"⁸⁹ only reasserts the emerging discourse of a less holistic approach to the OSCE MG and a more assertive approach to the individual role of Russia as a mediator, and, gradually, an indirect party.

Amid the internal developments, assertiveness of Russia's sentiments towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should be viewed through the prism of external engagements as well: the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004-2005), the Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003) and the narratives of Russia's diminishing influence in the post-Soviet space (in this case, in the South Caucasus specifically) created new realities that required the reassurance of Russia's dominance. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was the only one where conflict of interests was not noticed, thus, the reassurance of dominance was conducted through a more integrated cooperation with the conflict parties and a more assertive and domineering cooperation with the West.

⁸⁸ "Remarks and Response to Media Questions by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at Joint Press Conference Following Talks with Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian, Moscow, July 6, 2011," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, July 6, 2011, accessed April 12, 2022, https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/1589463/.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Putin Era: Assertive Pragmatism + Great Power Normalization

Gradually establishing itself as a dominant power, Russia's role beyond the OSCE MG dramatically increased with the rising hostilities between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. In the aftermath of the 2015 hostilities, the so-called Lavrov Plan⁹⁰ was introduced. The Lavrov Plan has long been on the table of negotiations and the main ideas of the Plan are currently being implemented in the post-2020-War Nagorno-Karabakh. The ceasefire signed after the four-day war in April 2016 was also initiated by Russia. By then, Russia still had not developed a holistic model for working with the South Caucasus and limited its scope to stabilization.⁹¹ In the Strelina trilateral (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia) meeting in June 2016, after the four-day-war, Russia led discussions that were, as put by Lavrov "in a spirit of constructiveness, trust and openness, showing that [they] have all it takes to provide an additional impetus to the negotiation process."⁹² While Lavrov also mentioned that "the co-chairs of the OSCE MG, ambassadors-at-large of Russia, the US and France, as well as representatives of the OSCE Secretariat" were only invited to *attend* the final part of the meeting,⁹³ he still reiterated the OSCE MG's approval of all the steps and its central role in conflict management. Acting as an ad-hoc mediator, being an active (and, at the same time, mostly independent) member of the OSCE MG, and performing a balancing act between conflicting parties was the main role of Russia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, until 2020.

⁹⁰ For more information about the Lavrov Plan please refer to specific paragraphs in <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/83202>.

⁹¹ Markedonov, "Russia's Evolving South Caucasus Policy: Security Concerns amid Ethno-political Conflicts," 6.

⁹² "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's comment on the outcome of the meeting between presidents of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia on the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement, St Petersburg, June 20, 2016," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, June 20, 2016, accessed April 5, 2022 https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/1530422/.

⁹³ Ibid.

In the aftermath of the 2020 NK War, “Russia reacted unexpectedly calmly to Baku’s invasion. Most surprisingly, it repeatedly rejected Yerevan’s request for military assistance on procedural grounds.”⁹⁴ This reinforced Russia’s balanced approach to the conflict and established the need of not gaining any more adversaries in the fragmented South Caucasus. After several failed attempts by other OSCE MG co-chairs, Russia’s dominance in the conflict settlement was proven by a successful establishment of a ceasefire. In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, this point was, perhaps, the sharpest with regards to the coordination between Russia and the OSCE MG co-chairs. As Lavrov mentioned in a post-2020 war interview, “we sensed a degree of disappointment on their part because we had not updated them on the details of the process.”⁹⁵ He justified this by the intensity of the process and reminded about the continuous and full coordination with the co-chairs’ positions. Yet, in this period, Russia’s dominance was still approved by the OSCE MG co-chairs and Russia continued enjoying the privilege of asserting its dominance without major challenges.

With growing regional actors interested in the conflict—such as Turkey—Russia’s sole influence in the outcomes of the conflict diminished. The relations between Russia and Turkey and their regional implications are different from the relations between Russia and the West: they are neither confrontational nor biddable but, as Sergey Markedonov put it, constitute “competitive cooperation”⁹⁶ characterized by disagreements in some regions of the world complemented by

⁹⁴ Dumitru Minzarari, “Russia’s Stake in the Nagorno-Karabakh War: Accident or Design?,” *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, 2020, accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/russias-stake-in-the-nagorno-karabakh-war-accident-or-design>.

⁹⁵ “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with Russian and foreign media on current international issues Moscow, November 12, 2020,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, November 12, 2020, accessed March 20, 2022 https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/1446544/?lang=ru.

⁹⁶ “С. М. Маркедонов: Международное измерение конфликта в Нагорном Карабахе” (“S. M. Markedonov: The international dimension of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh”), Moscow State Institute of International Affairs, *Youtube* video, 1:16:18 hour, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i0T1BtXaByM>.

cooperation in others. In Nagorno-Karabakh, as Lavrov mentioned, “Russia and Turkey have common tasks...our Turkish partners are well aware of this. We will continue to collaborate with them, including in other areas of global politics.”⁹⁷ Acknowledging the rising multidimensionality of regional actors’ involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Russia established its presence in the region through peacekeeping forces and as a dominant mediator—recognized both by the conflicting parties and the international community.

⁹⁷ “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with Russian and foreign media on current international issues Moscow, November 12, 2020,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, November 12, 2020, accessed March 20, 2022 https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/1446544/?lang=ru.

Table 3: *Evolution of Russia's Discourse on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict* ⁹⁸

Actor	Supposed Principal School of Thought	Era	Year	Key Event	Main Discourse	Identity
Boris Yeltsin	Westernism; Isolationism	Yeltsin/Kozyrev	1994	Ceasefire, Bishkek Protocol	Neighbor support; Sphere of influence; Western mimicry	Identity mimicking
Yevgeni Primakov	Great power balancing; Eurasianism; <i>Derzhavnost'</i>	Primakov	1996	Russia proposes a package solution to the NK conflict	Increased integration; Balanced approach	Geopolitical and economic cover of interests
Igor Ivanov	Great power pragmatism	Putin I	2001	Key West talks	Dialogue bridge; Active mediator	Western and Russian values; active member and contributor to cooperation with the West
Sergei Lavrov	Assertive pragmatism	Putin II	July 2011	Kazan mediations	The struggle for Russia's recognition as a dominant and powerful separate actor within and in parallel to the OSCE MG	Assertiveness; struggle of recognition; Statist
Sergei Lavrov	Assertive pragmatism; Great power normalization	Putin II	June 2016	Four Day War	Reiteration and establishment of Russia's dominance in the issue	Statist
Sergei Lavrov	Assertive pragmatism; Great power normalization; Hypernationalism	Putin II	November 2020	Russia-brokered ceasefire, Russian peacekeepers arriving to NK	Cooperation with emerging regional actors; Recognized and proven regional hegemony	Statist thought; A recognized regional hegemony by multiple parties

⁹⁸ The compilation of the table is my own work. Composed according to and inspired by Andrei Tsygankov's conceptualizations of Russia's foreign policy developments.

3.2.3 The Transnistrian Conflict

The case of Transnistria (also known as the unrecognized Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR) is significantly different from Nagorno-Karabakh, and this contrast is vital for understanding Russia's identity formations and implications for different conflicts. Located in the West of Russia's near abroad and being in the frontline of the Russia-NATO standoff, Transnistria represents a crown jewel of the often-cited *Novorossiia*—the romantic ideal constituting Transnistria as part of the patrimony of the Russian Empire.⁹⁹ With Russia's deep and uninterrupted historical ties to Transnistria, it is “another region, like Crimea, with a majority of Russian-speaking population within a non-Russian speaking state dominantly inhabited by non-ethnic Russians.”¹⁰⁰ With Russian as the official language, the communist hammer-and-sickle on the flag, and as a “Soviet open air museum,”¹⁰¹ Transnistria today constitutes Russia's increased influence in the conflict. Because of soft power, as well as, compared to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, less consensus between the West and Russia over the conflict settlement, the Transnistrian conflict is an interesting prism for understanding Russia's identity. The contested nature of the conflict being “referred to as a civil or elite conflict, as an interstate confrontation initiated by Russian aggression, and even as an entirely artificial issue resulting from malign Russian influence”¹⁰² paves a way of tracing continuity of Russia's foreign policy and identity formations.

⁹⁹ Gerard Toal, *Near Abroad: Putin, the West and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), doi:10.1093/oso/9780190253301.001.0001, 242.

¹⁰⁰ Reggie, Kramer, “Transnistria Primer,” *The Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 2016, accessed May 1, 2022, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2016/10/transnistria-primer/>.

¹⁰¹ Angela Munteanu and Igor Munteanu, “Transnistria: A Paradise for Vested Interests,” *SEER: Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe* 10 (2007): 58, accessed April 15, 2022, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43293238>.

¹⁰² Victoria Rosa, “The Transnistrian Conflict: 30 Years Searching for a Settlement.,” *SCEEUS Reports on Human Rights and Security No. 4*. (2021), accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.ui.se/forskning/centrum-for-osteuropastudier/sceeus-report/sceeus-report-no-4/>.

Table 4: Main Developments of the Transnistrian Conflict

Year	Development
1991	Declaring the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic
1990-1992	Transnistria-Moldova War
1992	Battle of Tighina (Bender) resulting in a Russian-backed Transnistrian victory
1992	Ceasefire signed
1997	"Memorandum on the principles of normalization of the relations between the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria", also known as the "Primakov Memorandum" signed under the OSCE
2003	" <i>Memorandum ob osnovnykh printsipakh gosudarstvennogo ustroistva objedinennogo gosudarstva</i> ," also known as Kozak Memorandum introduced
2005	Establishment of the 5 + 2 format (Transnistria, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE, plus the United States and the EU)
2006	Referendum in Transnistria
2016	Decree No. 348 "On the implementation of the results of the republican referendum held on 17 September 2006" ¹⁰³
2018	Vadim Krasnoselsky (Transnistrian leader) announces his commitment for Transnistria to join Russia in the future

3.2.4 Play by My Rules: Russia in the Transnistrian Conflict

Amid the established OSCE 5+2 model ¹⁰⁴, the academic scholarship mostly agrees that “the negotiations have gifted Russia a degree of international legitimacy in its push for greater influence in former Soviet states...enabling Russia to leverage its political and cultural influence in Transnistria to maintain and expand its influence in Moldova.”¹⁰⁵ Moreover, Russia has explicitly indicated increased military and economic assistance to Transnistria—with “Russian peacekeepers clearly supporting the Tiraspol regime in strengthening its military capabilities and

¹⁰³ For more information on the Decree, please consult <https://www.vesti.ru/article/1638847> (available in Russian).

¹⁰⁴ The OSCE 5+2 model presents Transnistria, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE, plus the United States and the European Union.

¹⁰⁵ Ryan Cimmino, “The Transnistrian Gambit: Russia in Moldova,” *Harvard International Review*, 2019, accessed April 9, 2022, <https://hir.harvard.edu/the-transnistrian-gambit-russia-in-moldova/>.

creating a ‘Transnistrian Army’ outnumbering the Moldovan Army.”¹⁰⁶ In addition, Russian officials have repeatedly claimed that they had to protect the Russian minority in Transnistria. It seems that Russia’s intervention in the conflict coincides with Elaine Holoboff’s general argument on the conditions of Russia’s military intervention for “protecting Russians residing in the near abroad, including military personnel and their families,” and “maintaining Russia’s great power status.”¹⁰⁷ While discussing Russia’s foreign policy in the Transnistrian conflict, it is important to consider not only general patterns, but also specific internal and external developments of Russia’s identity.

Yeltsin/ Kozyrev Era: Isolationism and Westernism

Initially, a quadripartite mechanism (Russia, Ukraine, Romania and Moldova) for conflict management was established, with the four presidents agreeing on establishing security zones and corridors in June 1992. In this period, “the Russian ambassador to Moldova praised the contribution of Romania and Ukraine to the settlement of the conflict.”¹⁰⁸ Initially taking a cooperative stance, President Yeltsin’s constructive statements gave hope for a win-win situation for all parties. In August 1992, during the Russian-Moldovan agreement, Yeltsin argued that he was advocating “for Moldova to be whole and indivisible and for Pridnestrovie to have its own

¹⁰⁶ Andrew Sprague, “Russian Intervention Patterns: A Comparison Of Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, And Transnistria, Russian Meddling In Its Near Abroad.: The Use of Frozen Conflicts as a Foreign Policy Tool,” *Institut Barcelona d’Estudis Internacionals (IBEI)* (2016):17, accessed March 18, 2022, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep14215.8>.

¹⁰⁷ Elaine M. Holoboff, “Russian Views on military intervention: benevolent peacekeeping, Monroe doctrine, or neo-imperialism?,” in *Military Intervention in European Conflicts*, ed. Lawrence Freedman, (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 156.

¹⁰⁸ Cristian Urse, “Transnistria: Prospects for a Solution,” *The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies*, 2007, accessed April 5, 2022, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/occasional-papers/transnistria-prospects-solution>.

status, sovereignty, but within Moldova.”¹⁰⁹ However, hopeful moments for Moldova did not last very long.

After the agreement, the quadripartite mechanism came to an end, “leaving Romania outside the process of negotiation, as Russia no longer considered it needed to consult Bucharest or Kiev.”¹¹⁰ This was an assertive and domineering turn that could be explained by, on the one hand, Russia’s will of seeking Western partners in conflict management, and, on the other hand, the assurance of dominance due to the urgency of a perceived security threat to Russia. However, the conflict resolution was not proactively led by Russia, with the CSCE/OSCE taking over the process with “Russia as a guarantor in 1993.”¹¹¹ On the other hand, the internal narratives over the conflict were extremely assertive and characterized by military interests. Yeltsin’s decisions on Transnistria were majorly affected by the imperatives of Russia’s Ministry of Defense and the Supreme Court. For example, “the Supreme Soviet passed a resolution authorizing the use of the 14th Army¹¹² as a “peacemaking” force and accusing Moldova of a policy of genocide in July 1992.”¹¹³ Thus, internally, there was a push for an increasingly assertive foreign policy, and cooperation with other parties was diminishing.

Primakov Era: Eurasianism

As a result of the post-Chechen War military weakening, Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs led by Primakov asserted the need to increase efforts in settling the post-Soviet conflicts.

¹⁰⁹ “Президенты хотят погасить приднестровский конфликт” (Presidents want to resume the Pridnestrovian conflict”), Kommersant, July 1992, accessed April 1, 2022, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5673>.

¹¹⁰ Urse, “Transnistria: Prospects for a Solution,” 2007.

¹¹¹ Adrian Rogstad, “The next Crimea? getting Russia’s Transnistria policy right. Problems of Post-Communism,” *LSE Research Online* (2016): 10, doi:10.1080/10758216.2016.1237855.

¹¹² The 14th Army played a key role in the conflict. In 1992, amid Moldova’s attempts to transfer the Soviet 14th Army to newly emerging Moldovan defense forces, Yeltsin declared it officially as under the Russian command. The 14th Army intervened in favor of the separatists and played a big role in the battle of Tighina.

¹¹³ Rogstad, “The next Crimea?,” 11.

Following the Eurasianist thought, steps were taken to establish deeper economic and security cooperation between Russia and the post-Soviet states. This was illustrated by the Memorandum on the principles of normalization of the relations between Moldova and Transnistria¹¹⁴ proposed by Primakov in 1997. Russia also pursued friendly relations with Moldova increasing military and economic cooperation and soon “a Treaty of Friendship and Co-operation was signed, with a mention in the preamble about Russia’s commitment to solving the Transnistrian conflict while maintaining Moldova’s territorial integrity.”¹¹⁵ Tied with economic maneuvers and cooperation-seeking sentiments peculiar to Eurasianism, this period seemed to bring a solution to the Transnistrian conflict.

Putin Era: Great Power Pragmatism to Assertive Pragmatism

Indeed, the nearly-signed Kozak Memorandum¹¹⁶ in 2003 proposed by the deputy head of the Russian presidential administration Dmitriy Kozak was close to solving Transnistria’s status “ensuring the establishment of a Russia-friendly Transnistria as an autonomous region within a unified Moldova.”¹¹⁷ The Memorandum was conducted in parallel with OSCE mediations and aimed to ensure Russia’s dominance over the region, declaring Moldova as a neutral state, and ensuring a military guarantee by Russia: “Transnistrian president Smirnov demanded that Russia guaranteed (by treaty) the continued presence of its troops for 30 more years.”¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, Vladimir Voronin, the President of Moldova, refused to sign the memorandum in the last minute. This led to the end of a cooperative period of Russian foreign policy, as it interpreted the failure

¹¹⁴ For more information about the Memorandum, please refer to <https://www.osce.org/moldova/42309>.

¹¹⁵ Rogstad, “The next Crimea?,” 12.

¹¹⁶ For more information about the Kozak Memorandum, please refer to <https://regnum.ru/news/polit/458547.html> (in Russian).

¹¹⁷ Rogstad, “The next Crimea?,” 12.

¹¹⁸ John Löwenhardt, “The OSCE, Moldova and Russian diplomacy in 2003,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 20 (2004):105, doi:10.1080/1352327042000306075.

of the Kozak Memorandum as “due to emerging new realities 'on the ground', i.e., a more assertive west, interested in bringing peace and stability to its peripheries.”¹¹⁹ The post-Kozak coercive turn took several shapes including troop withdrawal suspension, Russia’s political and economic support towards Transnistria and economic restraints towards Moldova, and the 2006 referendum in Transnistria expressing “97% support for independence and the “subsequent free accession of Transnistria to the Russian Federation.”¹²⁰ Internally, the 2006 statement by the State Duma suggested state leaders to perform more assertive measures in foreign policy vis-à-vis Transnistria and to push towards the results of the referendum justifying the importance of normalizing relations with Moldova, ensuring access to Russian education and culture for Russian compatriots, and bringing stability to the region via peacekeeping.¹²¹ The extensive reliance on the concepts of ‘the free will’ of the people in Transnistria and the calls to the international community to ‘ensure peace and human rights in the region’ constitute a mimicry to the Western standards and showcase an assertive voice in the need to prove *Russia*’s role as a stabilizer. Although Transnistria returned to OSCE-led mediations in 2011, the assertiveness of Russia’s foreign policy was still in place due to not only internal narratives, but also intertwined global and regional factors, such as the situation in post-Orange Revolution Ukraine and post-Rose Revolution Georgia, as well as the EU’s increasing influence in the region through its European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership Program (EaP). Moreover, the volatile developments in Ukraine were alarming for Russia not only because of the threat of becoming a precedent for other post-Soviet states, but also

¹¹⁹ Munteanu and Munteanu, “Transnistria: A Paradise for Vested Interests,” 62.

¹²⁰ Rogstad, “The next Crimea?,” 14.

¹²¹ “Государственная Дума Федерального Собрания Российской Федерации Заявление об итогах референдума в Приднестровье 17 сентября 2006 года” (“Russia’s State Duma Statement on the September 17, 2006 Transnistrian Referendum”), Kodeks, 2006, accessed March 31, 2022, <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/902006424>.

because of geographical proximity and strategic closeness to Transnistria and Russia's western spectrum of influence.

Putin Era: From Assertive Pragmatism to Great Power Normalization

Putin's return to presidency reinforced the trend of assertive foreign policy and the need to prove its dominance in conflict management. It was mainly conducted via the promotion of Eurasian integration that put Russia "on a collision course with a Moldovan government pursuing closer and closer relations with the EU" through the Eastern Partnership ¹²². Moreover, Russia repeatedly criticized and considered the unilateral steps taken by other members of the 5+2 format to be destructive. As Lavrov mentioned in his 2016 statement, "instead of stockpiling new difficulties, we should move along the road of the peace settlement."¹²³ The extensive usage of the phrases "common cause"¹²⁴ and "goodwill of all parties"¹²⁵ accompanied with the stance on the importance of *Russian* peacekeeping and *Russia's* involvement carries an imperative of assertive dominance seeking.

Russia imposed economic restraints on Moldova and Russia's foreign policy vis-à-vis Transnistria continues to assert support to the pro-Russian forces in Transnistria. Increasingly affected by external developments, Russia's foreign policy dwells in the spectrum of the Russia VS the West nexus. Transnistria has become another pillar of the Russia-the West battleground—often translated to the same dimension as Ukraine and Georgia. This can be vividly seen in

¹²² Rogstad, "The next Crimea?," 17.

¹²³ "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration of the Republic of Moldova Andrei Galbur, Moscow, April 4, 2016," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, April 4, 2016, accessed March 17, 2022 https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/1525564/.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Lavrov's 2021 statement, arguing that "the mechanism for settling the Transnistrian conflict does not work because, first of all, the Americans are trying to push everything for themselves and make Moldova another issue in the post-Soviet area."¹²⁶ More than ever, nowadays the Transnistrian conflict seems to reflect Russia's identity construction vis-à-vis the West and the quasi-geopolitical understanding of its near abroad.

¹²⁶ "Лавров о Приднестровье" ("Lavrov on Pridnestrovie"), TCB, *Youtube* video, 3:03 minutes, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r03TxNaoNag>.

Table 5: *Evolution of Russia's Discourse on the Transnistrian Conflict* ¹²⁷

Actor	Supposed Principal School of Thought	Era	Year	Key Event	Main Discourse	Identity
Boris Yeltsin	Westernism; Isolationism	Yeltsin/Kozyrev	1992	Battle of Tighina resulting in a Russian-backed Transnistrian victory, ceasefire	Cooperation; Win-win solution; Increasing assertiveness	Identity mimicry; Westernism; Assertiveness
State Duma	Great power pragmatism	Putin I	2006	Referendum in Transnistria	Increased political, economic and cultural support; Increased sphere of influence; 'Sovereign' understandings of international relations	Assertiveness; Mimicking the West
Sergei Lavrov	Assertive pragmatism	Putin II	2016	Decree No. 348 "On the implementation of the results of the republican referendum held on 17 September 2006"	Reiteration and establishment of Russia's dominance in the issue; Zero-sum game	Statist; Struggle for recognition as a dominant actor
Sergei Lavrov	Assertive pragmatism; Great power normalization; Hypernationalism	Putin II	2021	Vadim Krasnoselsky (Transnistrian leader) announces his commitment for Transnistria to join Russia in the future	Parallels with other conflicts in the near abroad; Russia VS the West nexus	Statist thought; Assertive monopolization; The West as a Threat

¹²⁷ The compilation of the table is my own work. Composed according to and inspired by Andrei Tsygankov's conceptualizations of Russia's foreign policy developments.

3.2.5 Discussion

The discourse analysis of Russian leaders' statements on the Nagorno-Karabakh and the Transnistrian conflicts illustrates how Russia's identity formations regarding the conflicts were continuous vis-à-vis internal developments and relational towards external parties. Moreover, proving Russia's leading role in the attempt to manage both conflicts was a key source of Russia's national self-esteem as defined by the political elites.¹²⁸ Both the main differences and similarities between Russia's identities in the Nagorno-Karabakh and the Transnistrian conflicts were shaped by the stance of the West. The essence of the West has been largely influenced by the levels of its recognition of Russia, reactions towards various issues, and Russia's changing perceptions of it. Here *the West* has gone through various formations—starting from serving as an ideational reference point, turning to competition, confrontation, and, more vividly in the case of Transnistria, to a threat. In both cases, early identity construction began as a mimicry to the Western standards. Gradually, this pattern turned to a need of establishing Russia's *own* standards. With increasing security threats, there were patterns of asserting sovereignty and greater involvement in the conflicts through economic cooperation and integration. This served not as a means of going back to the traditional sphere of influence (which is a very geopolitical explanation to the Eurasianist turn), but as a need of turning from 'the Other' (the West) with limited recognition to the 'the Self' (the near abroad that has been constructed as part of 'the Self') with more or less established recognition. Throughout the developments of the Transnistrian conflict, Russia had the challenge of proving its identity vis-à-vis the external patrons leading to a reinforcement of the Russia VS the West nexus. On the contrary, in the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Russia did not

¹²⁸ Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia's Resurgence*, 222.

need to justify its identity: without much external objections and challenges, Russia was able to assert its special role in the conflict. This may explain why, as opposed to Transnistria, in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia viewed the relations with the West as more or less constructive. It is also important to note that external engagements with other post-Soviet states and conflicts (such as the cases of Georgia and Ukraine) were intertwined with Russia's identity developments in the two conflicts and led to more assertive assurance of dominance in both cases. As the West challenged Russia's identity as a dominant actor in the post-Soviet space, it was constructed and perceived as a threat in the two conflicts. In this regard, different levels of the West's recognition of Russia's role in the conflicts led to different levels of Russia's assertive tone in them—more aggressive in the case of Transnistria and less drastic in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Amid the contrasts, in both cases identity construction became focused exclusively on external relations at the expense of domestic processes and internal debates. This is especially vivid in the official statements from the *Great power normalization* period when Putin's understanding of the balance of power and Russia as a great power became internally fixed and externally contestable. With different levels of external challenges, new developments in other post-Soviet states and emerging actors, both the Nagorno-Karabakh and the Transnistrian conflicts became platforms for proving the internal imaginaries of Russia's identity.

The contrast between Russia's identity in both conflicts justifies the hypothesis that Russia's identity towards different conflicts in the post-Soviet space is not the same: it cannot be generalized into a single category. Instead, those are different relational, performative and continuous processes of internal identity formations vis-à-vis external changes and reactions. To understand Russia's identity within the international system, it is important to understand identity development processes, differences and patterns in various cases.

Conclusion

This thesis viewed Russia's actions in the international system through a constructivist prism by taking Russia's identity developments as a core. Russia has constructed different narratives on the Nagorno-Karabakh and the Transnistrian conflicts because of two factors. Firstly, the two conflicts vary in their historical implications representing different levels of interest for Russia vis-à-vis the external patrons involved and internal narratives cultivated. This implies that each conflict has a specific dynamic and should not be generalized to a single understanding of Russia's actions in the post-Soviet space. In both cases, simple fixed geopolitical explanations were shown invalid, as the geopolitical discourse remained a part of the socio-cognitive structure in Russia, while the central question in the political process was: *who are we?*—the matter of identity.¹²⁹ This leads to the second factor, which is that the patterns of Russia's identity formations have been implied in various directions in each conflict—again, depending on the external patrons involved and the internal narratives cultivated. The discourse analysis of Russia's official statements has shown that the cultivation of Russian identity has not only been dynamic, but also multidimensional. Through the processes of internal developments, as well as external engagements and the construction of the West as 'the Other,' Russia's identity appears as relational.

Rejecting the 'black and white' view on Russia's identity, the research contributes to understanding the multidimensionality of Russia's identity and, hence, actions and interests in the international system. The thesis may serve as a solid and novel reference point for tracing continuity and multiplicity in the shaping of Russian identity for a more comprehensive

¹²⁹ Вячеслав Морозов (Vyacheslav Morozov), *Россия и Другие: идентичность и границы политического сообщества*, (*Russia and Others: Identities and Borders of Political Community*), (Москва: Новое литературное обозрение, 2009), 194.

understanding of Russia's national interests and identity formations, and with an expanded number of official statements from all periods.

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Appendices

Table A. *People in Russian Foreign Policy (Heads of State, Foreign Ministers)* ¹³⁰

Position	Name Surname	Years in Position	Principal School of Thought
Minister of Foreign Affairs (USSR/Russian Federation)	Andrei Kozyrev	1990-1996	Westernism; Isolationism
President of the Russian Federation	Boris Yeltsin	1991-1999	Westernism; Isolationism
Minister of Foreign Affairs (Russian Federation)	Yevgeni Primakov	1996-1998	Great power balancing
Minister of Foreign Affairs (Russian Federation)	Igor Ivanov	1998-2004	Great power pragmatism
President of the Russian Federation	Vladimir Putin	2000-2008 2012-Now	Great power pragmatism; Assertive pragmatism; Great power normalization
Minister of Foreign Affairs (Russian Federation)	Sergey Lavrov	2004-Now	Great power pragmatism; Assertive pragmatism; Great power normalization
President of the Russian Federation	Dmitry Medvedev	2008-2012	Assertive great power pragmatism

¹³⁰ The compilation of the table is my own work. Composed according to and inspired by Andrei Tsygankov's conceptualizations of Russia's foreign policy developments.

