WHEN OIL DESTROYS EMPATHY: HOW THE WEST MISREAD RUSSIA IN THE COURSE OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR?

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Abstract

This paper explores how Western misperceptions about Russia's intentions contributed to the failure to anticipate Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The thesis argues that this misreading stems from a lack of strategic empathy, or an inability to understand the specific internal drivers of the Kremlin's behavior, particularly its nature as a petrostate. Using Zachary Shore's theory of strategic empathy and Alexander Etkind's concept of Russian paleomodernity as a framework, the study reveals how the West underestimated the influence of Russia's fossil fuel dependency on its domestic and foreign policies. Through examinations of the post-Cold War liberal international order, the evolution of Western-Russian relations, and Russia's neomercantilist exploitation of energy policy, the thesis demonstrates that Moscow's aggressive actions were logical extensions of long-standing patterns, not an unexpected deviation. The research concludes that Western optimism, rooted the idea of liberal universalism, blinded policymakers to the warning signs ingrained in Russia's petro-authoritarian trajectory. Understanding this dynamic is critical to reassessing past policy failures and shaping future responses to petrostate aggression in an era defined by climate crisis and systematic disorder.

Author's declaration

I, the undersigned, Stefan Stoyanov, candidate for the MA degree in International Relations declare herewith that the present thesis titled "WHEN OIL DESTROYS EMPATHY: HOW THE WEST MISREAD RUSSIA IN THE COURSE OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR?" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright.

I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 21.05.2025 Stefan Stoyanov

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Introduction

Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine on 24 February 2022 is generally regarded as the ultimate turning point in relations between Russia and the West (Williams 2022; Brunk and Hakimi 2022, 687; Floyd and Webber 2024). Not only did this event brought war back to the continent, but it also significantly changed Europe's priorities – Sweden and Finland ended their long-standing neutrality and joined NATO, the EU increased its ambitions for strategic autonomy and a greater role on the world stage, and energy trade is no longer seen as a basis for cooperation, but as leverage and vulnerability (European Commission 2022). But these shifts in thinking and policy have implications not only for Europe, but for the world – from being a "green leader" hoping to bring global impact by example, Europe now moderates its green ambitions and retreats to a defensive posture (Weise 2025). Europe and the West have moved from green idealism to a zero-sum game.

The Russian-Ukrainian war is rooted in more than 30 years of dynamics between the U.S.-led West, which thrives on its hegemony on the world stage, and Russia – a revisionist power that is not satisfied with the current world order, yet benefits from the growing global cooperation that results from it. It is evident with the increase of authoritarianism in the Kremlin, Moscow challenged the status quo multiple times (Kanet 2018, 177-180). Still, the West didn’t do much in policy to counter Russia’s aggressive behaviour and defend its privileged position on the world stage (Minzarari 2022). Russia didn't just keep challenging the international order and the West; it deepened the rift in relations. We can observe that this Russian behaviour is not a particular pattern break, but rather a continuation of Moscow's established practice of asserting dominance in the post-Soviet region in the context of confrontation with the West (Charap et al. 2021). This was possible mainly because of the dominating post-Cold War optimism for cooperation and multilateralism and Europe’s

dependency on cheap Russian oil and gas (Etkind 2023). A context, that mainly highlights a failure of strategic empathy on the part of the West, rather than a fundamental shift in Russia's approach.

By combining Zachary Shore's theory on strategic empathy and pattern break (2014) and Alexander Etkind's concept of Russian paleomodernity (2023), this paper will give a new perspective on the evolution of the relations between Russia and the West and support the argument that a full-scale invasion was premeditated in light of the ongoing Putin's foreign policy and the changes in the world energy market in the era of Anthropocene. Both theories offer explanations for Russia's motives, but both have some gaps. Strategic empathy illustrates the evolution of the relationship from a global standpoint but neglects the specifics of domestic politics and the nature of the system and its transformations. Petrotheories focus primarily on the implications of resource dependence for the system's nature and resulting politics. However, this resource determinism overlooks other global or internal factors that influence the system's transformation and its institutions. This paper aims to combine these two theories to provide a more complete picture of the resulting events. The research question is to determine why Western countries largely ignored Russia's potential to invade Ukraine in 2022, despite a decade of increasingly assertive behaviour from the petrostate. Our preliminary hypothesis is that this was due to a lack of strategic empathy towards the Kremlin regime, suggesting that the Russian political elite is driven by similar interests as Western countries, ignoring its dependence on fossil fuels and the features that come with it.

This work's research framework will follow the top-down approach. First, we will briefly examine the international context and the evolution of the post-Cold War order. The so-called liberal international order (LIO) is driven by the primacy of the West, their views of proper development, and the presumption of their universality and non-alternativity

(Mearsheimer 2019, 7-9). An example of this type of politics is the green idealism that has emerged in response to climate change. The Western agenda is strongly influenced by the idea that it is in all countries' interests to address this global issue together. However, several countries are not only uninterested in a global response to climate change but also view such policies as a threat to their regimes' existence. These countries are called petrostates and Russia is a prime example of a country, whose welfare is heavily dependent on the extraction and export of carbon fuels.

The second part will focus on the development of relations between the West, especially the U.S., and Russia over the last 30 years, considering the evolving world order. To this end, we will examine the dynamics between the two sides in two aspects: signals of cooperation and confrontation. To accomplish this, we will use Z. Shore's theory of strategic empathy and paternal breaks, which vividly illustrates the West's misunderstanding of Russia's nature as a petrostate and not just an ordinary regional power. Although both sides have attempted to reduce confrontation and tensions at certain times, Russia has systematically deepened its confrontation with the West by seeking new alternatives and undermining the current world order.

The third and final part will address the question of what is at the center of this Moscow behavior. To understand this, we will examine the Kremlin's policy through the lens of its dependence on carbon fuels, which lies at the heart of the regime's subsequent neomercantilist policies. As A. Etkind (2021, 250) demonstrates, dependence on oil and gas money not only shapes the current regime but also influences foreign and trade policy, turning the country into a typical petrostate. In this regard and the overall development of the Russia-West relations, the emerge of the Green Deal, which represents a reduction in Europe's dependence on Russian fuels and will influence the future stability of the petroregime, is one of the last instruments

that deter Russia from further escalation in some of the ongoing conflicts, including Ukraine. This extends the escalation of Moscow's hostility that has been ongoing for years, as well as the West's inability to correctly interpret the Kremlin's signals.

The conclusion should an answer the research question. Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine ought not to be considered as an unexpected event, but rather as a coherent continuation of the Kremlin's long-standing policies. Whether we perceive these actions as routine or focus on the pattern breaks over the past 30 years, the West has failed to properly read Moscow's intentions. Furthermore, both objective and subjective signals pointed to Putin's intent regarding the invasion of Ukraine. All of this suggests that the West lacks significant strategic empathy towards Russia.

Chapter 1 – Theoretical and Contextual Ground

The Era of Green Idealism

The end of the Cold War also marked the end of the bipolar model of the international system. This transition was accompanied by the dissolution of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the emergence of the United States as the predominant superpower, wielding influence across all domains of politics and international relations. This period is often referred to as the "end of history," a notion coined by the American scholar and thinker F. Fukuyama (1989). He posits that liberal democracy and the free market have become the predominant practical alternatives. This notion is evident in the attempted democratization of numerous countries and the increased global cooperation in various spheres, particularly under the auspices of Western democracies and their narratives. However, this new world comes with its global challenges, including climate change, terrorism, and the digital sphere.

This spirit of Fukuyama is not only shared by him – it has become a dominant opinion not only in academia, but also among the political elite. For instance, the historian J. Gaddis (1991, 121) acknowledges the likelihood of challenges and subsequent fragmentation in the emerging global order. However, he posits that the integration of nations will emerge as a predominant force in addressing the shared challenges confronting humanity. For him, the world market and collective security are products of the Cold War, but they will gain a new perspective in the new world, where Western democracies and especially the United States will play a leading role. J. Ruggie (1994, 569-570) reaches similar conclusions about how critical this time is and pays more serious attention to the role of the US in the new world order. It is Washington's involvement in multilateralism and international institutions that will ensure not only their successful functioning but also the stability of the new system. However, this new

world of peace and prosperity is not destined for the United States alone. According to van Evera (1990, 7-9), Europe is "primed for peace," guaranteed by the increasing democratization of the continent as well as increasing economic dependence based on deeper integration.

Indeed, the United States has begun to pursue an active global policy, yet this has not guaranteed the system's stability. In his work, J. Ikenberry (2005) discusses the characteristics of this new liberal international order (LIO), which is built on open markets, international institutions, and democratic governance. In his view, the United States' dominance in international institutions and organizations leads to embedded U.S. leadership within a rules-based system. In later works, the author examines the sustainability of this order in the context of rising emerging powers, such as China, and the challenges to internationalism. Despite his argument that the U.S. is losing its leadership, the LIO is, for the time being, without an alternative and sufficiently sustainable due to its advantages and, to some extent, its necessity in dealing with global problems, including climate change (Ikenberry 2011). This is further confirmed in his later writings (Ikenberry 2018).

Yet, this post-Cold War optimism was not shared by everyone. The new LIO has been criticised by many, but realists in particular. For example, since the collapse of the bipolar system, J. Mearsheimer (1990, 5-7) has predicted an increase in the number of conflicts and the return of the security dilemma, especially on the old continent. As he points out, this would largely depend on the US behaviour and the extent to which it chooses to remain engaged with Europe. Another argument against is that the decline of bipolarity will surely lead to multipolarity, as this is the natural order in international relations. As C. Layne (1993, 7-8) further argues, there may be cooperation between states. However, this comes in parallel with rivalry in a number of key areas, such as security and economics, with other rising powers. In the later stages of LIO, I. Krastev and S. Holmes (2019, 7-8) show that the rise of illiberalism

is not a rejection of liberal values itself, but a backlash against the perceived dominance and arrogance of the West by countries that use imitation as a tool for Westernizing.

This is the context of optimism in which the broader fight against climate change is developing – global problems call for global solutions. The area that became a symbol of the institutional approach taken by most countries, but also the optimism that common sense will prevail and lead to cooperation rather than competition. Lynton K. Caldwell (1991) pioneered the idea that environmental protection lies at the heart of future international relations. In his view, the growing threat of climate change will require collective action not only at the state level, but also through the involvement of international organisations and non-state actors. This "globalisation of environmentalism" will lead to a complete change in policy-making and increased cooperation among all. Later, a group of scholars concluded that environmentalism has become embedded as a global social and political norm (Frank, Hironaka, and Schofer 2000). Another example is R. Falkner (2021), whose book traces the transformation of environmentalism from a peripheral concern to a core norm of international relations that shapes international politics. At the heart of this phenomenon is the institutionalisation of environmental norms, which leads to a change in the international legitimacy and political responsibility of states in the international arena. This is an extension of his thesis of the "greening of the international community" (Falkner 2012, 503).

Common to all these articles is the notion that the looming climate threat facing the world will act as a natural unifier for the international community. But this unification needs its driving force. The ambition for such a role is most often associated with the European Union and the Green Deal adopted in 2021 (European Commission 2019). The aim of this deal is not only to reduce emissions and reach net-zero, but its application extends to the entire foreign policy of the Union and its members. This is changing not only the rules themselves (Gravey, Viviane, & Moore 2019), but also the relationship between Europeans and other countries. Not

only is the EU beginning to set the rules by which it will conduct its policy towards the rest of the world, but it is also prepared to use its economic weight to force other countries to go green if they want to continue to cooperate with the Union (Leonard et al. 2021). It is the Green Deal that shapes the EU's role as a green normative power in global climate governance, promoting European environmental standards and values in the global arena (Fusiek 2021). This requires a change in both the diplomatic toolbox (Velasco, Jackson, and Pilsner 2023) and the narratives used by countries and the Commission (Domorenok and Graziano 2023).

The post-Cold War international system was characterized not only by the dominance of liberal democracies and free markets but also by the shared optimism of multilateralism and institutionalism. Western liberal countries, and the United States in particular, took the role of leaders in this new world, promoting and navigating key norms and narratives. One of these is climate change and environmental concerns, which have evolved from a peripheral issue to a central norm in international relations. The EU has also played a major role in this in recent years, through leading initiatives and because of the universal scope of the problem, the EU has sought not only to tackle climate problems but also to enhance its role in international relations, promoting its vision and interests.

Climate Politics

The system of international relations consists not only of different elements and the relationships between them, but also of the constantly changing environment in which actors implement their policies. While different theories prioritise different factors in their analysis, the exclusion of certain factors does not negate their impact; rather, it leads to an incomplete understanding of the world. In this context, and as we observed, climate change represents one of the most significant and global changes affecting our daily lives and international political

landscape (Halden 2007, Foreign Policy 2020). A challenge that is frequently addressed in analyses but is typically regarded as a subject of study within conventional theoretical frameworks.

This leads to the necessity of re-evaluation of our understanding of the world and the approaches in which we examine international politics. It is beyond dispute that climate change is primarily the result of the rapid economic growth that started with the Industrial Revolution and the utilisation of fossil fuels as the predominant source of energy (United Nations 2022). However, it is precisely this path of development and prosperity that serves as the foundation for the modern states and social relations that exist today (Mitchell 2011, 1-2). The domination of a single resource over the entirety of the economy and social life is not a novel phenomenon, as revealed by A. Etkind (2021) in his book. Nevertheless, the dominance of carbon fuels has a profound impact not only on a specific country but on the entire planet.

Climate can be seen as the foundation for development, or a threat to a country's security, or indeed both (Barnett & Adger 2003, 333-334). However, as climate change and its ramifications intensify, there is a growing emphasis on collaboration and partnership between actors in the international sphere, particularly states and international organizations, to confront this global crisis that affects us all (Paterson 2013). Here the European Union sees its niche for global leadership. This commitment not only shapes Europe's image as a green leader but also plays a pivotal role in shaping its perception of the world and its policies towards other countries and regions, including Russia (Oberthür and Kelly 2008, Leonard et al. 2021, Oberthür and Dupont 2021).

As O. Sending and I. Øverland (2020, 184) assert, climate politics still have a relatively minor focus in the broader field of international relations literature. Less than 1% of the articles in the five most esteemed IR journals address a subject that has a significant global impact. As

previously mentioned, the majority of climate politics articles address the subject within the context of other prominent IR trends or theories, rather than as the central focus of their framework (Sprinz & Luterbacher 1996, Bodansky 2001, Stripple 2005). These articles usually see climate change as a new security issue for countries or as an opportunity for international cooperation to promote global welfare. However, some works try to go beyond this usual way of thinking and look at climate change and its impact on international relations differently and more dominantly. For instance, the French scholar and thinker B. Latour (2017) delves into J. Lovelock's concept of Gaia, seeks to reimagine our interaction with the planet, and find an approach to better navigate the current climate crisis. According to Latour, Gaia should not be regarded as a static phenomenon or a passive entity, nor should it be perceived as a "God of Totality". Instead, it is a dynamic, emergent system that warrants consideration as an independent entity. This understanding can be extrapolated to the realm of IR, signifying that climate should not be regarded as a mere component of analysis; rather, it should be recognized as a fundamental element in comprehending the dynamics of the entire system.

In another article, R. Beardsworth (2020) considers not only what is politically necessary to respond empirically to the climate challenge, but also tries to identify some of the key features of climate politics. For example, because of its global character, climate change demands a global response – this is why the key actors are not only the states (or the national), but also international organizations (the international) as a platform for cooperation. Another important contribution is the climate understanding of time and development, as he points out past, present, and future are brought together by the scientific fact of climate change and its effect (378). In some sense, this is a rethinking of our usual understanding of time – if realists see the world going in circles, idealists believe in progress, then climate politics is mainly driven by the inevitable collapse of the status quo, whose roots are based in our previous actions and today's ignorance.

Another topic in climate politics is the contrast between nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Ideally, because of its global character, climate politics cannot be nationalistic. Instead, it combines the efforts of all countries, organizations, and even individuals in pursuing climate neutrality. However, A. Lieven (2020, 124–143) doesn't fully agree. Climate change affects nations and national interests, so reaching carbon neutrality is a matter of national interest. States should be more involved in climate politics and make it a key point in their agenda, not because of world welfare, but at least because of their interests. This idea and others like it have their limitations and critics, but they do lead to more nuanced analyses of the international situation. They all put climate politics at the center of their framework, offering a new perspective on the matter. However, they remain relatively niche. Climate politics is still not a full-scale IR theory, but it is often seen as a supplement to an existing theory.

In most cases, the role of climate in international relations is examined through conceptual frameworks of mainstream IR theories, namely realism, idealism, and constructivism. This subject has been extensively discussed in the articles of Khan (2016), B. Habib (2011), O. Sending & I. Øverland (2020), among others. For instance, climate policies function as a complement to realism in terms of survival and security. However, realism posits that the primary objective should be the survival of one's own country or nation, rather than the survival of the world as a whole. The distinction between climatism and realism hinges on the differing emphases on self-interest and national goals (Khan 2016, 2). This also leads to a rough division between countries into two distinct categories: those that advocate for change and are firmly committed to a zero-net future, and those that do not seek a significant change to the status quo as petrostates (Sosa-Núñez & Atkins 2016, 1-2). The result is the formation of new partnerships and the emergence of opposing alliances (O. Sending & I. Øverland 2020).

If realism tends to see climate policy through the lens of interests, idealism tends to see it as a value. In this sense, cooperation at the global level plays a key role in green idealism, regardless of the economic or political features of each country (Imber and Vogler 1996, 22). However, this does not invalidate the hypothesis that democratic regimes are more likely to take action and address climate change more seriously than non-democratic ones. A case in point is petrostates, where the will of the people has been replaced by the will of the leader, or at best the bureaucracy, and the climate fight is a risk to the future of the regime. But, as Khan notes in his analysis, this sphere is currently dominated by the spirit of neoliberalism that underlies both the economic development of poorer countries and the international organisations and regimes that focus on climate (the Kyoto Protocol, the UNFCCC, etc.). It is the spirit of cautious optimism, cooperation, and economic and institutional development that lies at the heart of climate idealism.

As far as constructivism is concerned, some of the postulates are quite close to those of idealism – climate change is a danger that affects everyone, thus everyone needs to tackle it. But if in the former case the climate struggle is a value, in constructivism it is a norm, socially constructed through consensus (Imber and Vogler 1996, 22). It is norms that have been addressed by Sending and Øverland (2020, 188) where they note that many climate coalitions and collaborations are formed based on accepted norms, and accordingly, these shape the behaviour of states in one direction or another. Another important feature is the influence of a country's identity on its behaviour on the climate map – in the EU we see a similar approach to the creation of a common green identity that not only serves to unify domestic politics and further integration, but also serves as a conduit for norms internationally and in contacts with other countries. However, as B. Habib (22-23) points out, the green identity may eventually be replaced by another, more nationalistic one, and that it will discourage cooperation between states, even when it is in their mutual interest.

In essence, climate change represents a substantial challenge for all actors within the international relations system. Due to its increasingly evident effects on the politics of nations and the lives of individuals, climate change compels us to extend our established paradigms of global politics and to explore new explanations and perspectives in our analyses of international politics. It is evident that attempts to exceed existing theoretical frameworks do exist; however, they remain niche within the discipline. Most analyses treat climate change as just another subject of study or use mainstream theories to make sense of reality, failing to fully integrate the complexity and interdisciplinary nature of the phenomenon.

Petrostates and Petroagression

As demonstrated previously, the new theoretical approach in international relations also requires a new categorization of states. While the power of a country and its engagement with international institutions are important for climate politics, more impactful are the actions that reshape the global climate landscape. In this regard, we can divide countries into two categories – those that advocate for climate action and those that favour preserving the status quo. Formally, there are no countries that deny climate change, but this does not stop them from taking actions that worsen the situation. Within the group of "pro-status quo stability", there is a special group that not only significantly harms nature, but this harm is also the foundation of their regime – the petrostates.

The ongoing existence of these regimes is dependent on the exportation of fossil fuels and their by-products. As T. Karl has observed, "Petro-states...rely on an unsustainable development trajectory fuelled by an exhaustible resource – and the very rents produced by this resource form an implacable barrier to change" (Karl 1999, 31). Despite their varying degrees of power and locations on different continents, these petrostates are unified by a common trait:

their reluctance to acknowledge and act on their substantial contribution to climate change. In the emerging climate divide, these countries oppose the green transition and advocate for preserving their profitable and prosperous status quo.

In essence, a petrostate is a country that encounters the "resource curse" or the "paradox of plenty," whereby substantial oil wealth can precipitate economic instability, corruption, and deficient democratic institutions. As J. Colgan (2013, 2) points out, these states are among the most violent ones and their revenues from oil exports are at least 10% of GDP by definition. They possess several attributes: 1) a heavily dependent economy on the export of natural gas and/or oil, 2) an elite minority with highly concentrated economic and political power, and 3) weak political institutions (Roy and Cheatham 2024). In her book, E. Ashford (2022) presents a typology of the petrostates, dividing them into three plus one groups: oil-dependent states, oil-wealthy states, super-producer states, and a small group of super-exporter states. The first two groups predominantly influence the domestic sphere, while the next two groups have more pronounced international dimensions. Russia falls within the purview of all four groups, thereby underscoring the profound impact of fossil fuels on its domestic and foreign policy.

This argument is also confirmed by T. Dunning (2008, 1-2) who argues that the presence of a dominant resource has a significant influence on the political system of a state, in line with preceding historical, economic, and social features. In his book, *Nature's Evil*, A. Etkind (2021) goes even further in detail, demonstrating how one dominating resource becomes the backbone of the entire political, economic, and even social system, including the significant influence of oil and gas for Russia. For R. Gidadhubli (2003, 2025-2026), this pivotal role of fossil fuels in the Russian authoritarian system is not surprising given the centralized political traditions of the Russian system. As Dunning (5-6) proceeds, the influence of resource rents on regime outcomes is shaped by their impact on redistributive pressures and economic inequality. In highly unequal societies, such as Russia, resource rents can diminish the demand for

redistribution that sustains authoritarianism. This phenomenon serves as a foundational element for the emergence of a loyal bureaucratic layer and the capacity to allocate resources unchecked to enhance military capabilities (Ali & Abdellatif 2015, 11-13).

This is the link to foreign policy and international relations. Due to concentration of power in few, petrostates are much more likely to use force to solve their problems. This is the conclusion of J. Colgan (2013, 4) in his theory of petroaggression – oil is not only a magnet for greed but has multiple effects. Moreover, oil revenues have more negative consequences for peace if the state is led by a government with aggressive intentions or ambitions. The security provided by oil revenues, as well as the increasing importance of fossil fuels in many regions and countries, enables petrostates to engage in riskier behaviour, thereby contributing to the destabilization of peace and the global system. This argument has both its supporters, but also critics: as A. Antony and W. Thompson (2023) observe, the relationship between the petrostates and militarized conflict is weaker than assumed. While they do not deny the influence of natural resources, they argue that much of the evidence is based on a few high-conflict cases that are influenced by other factors. Moreover, oil price fluctuations do not systematically drive conflict – the most conflict-prone oil producers are a minority rather than a broad trend among oil-rich countries.

All this makes it difficult to dispute the claim that modern Russia is a typical petrostate. In his book, *Petrostate: Putin, Power, and the New Russia*, M. Goldman (2008) traces the path by which Vladimir Putin established his power in Russia and managed to restore the country's global status in international politics. Goldman concludes that Putin's internal and external influence would not have been possible without the exploitation of vast oil and gas reserves. The Russian authorities' establishment of control over companies such as Gazprom and Rosneft, in addition to their use as a carrot and stick for both supporters and opponents of the Kremlin, underscores this linkage between oil and gas and power. This linkage is so strong that

for the elite, it is beginning to become part of Russian identity, both inside and outside the country. However, as P. Rutland (2015) points out, this analogy does not quite apply to Russian citizens themselves.

However, this does not imply that fossil fuels do not impact their lives; in his recent book, *Russia against modernity*, A. Etkind (2023) demonstrates the political and social aspects of life in the petrostate. The high dependence on a single resource enables the elite to consolidate their power, but it also renders them vulnerable. The consequences of the petrostate are felt not only by its citizens but also by its neighbors. In his analysis, Jakob McKernan (2015) describes Russia as a revolutionary petrostate – a country with a government that emerged from irregular transitions and significantly altered its domestic social and political structures. It is the peculiar security for the system provided by petrodollars that serves as the basis for some adventurist decisions, such as the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

In essence, the concept of petrostates offers a critical lens for examining the connection between natural resource exploitation, political structures, and international behaviour. Russia, a prime example of a petrostate, illustrates how a reliance on oil and gas influences both domestic and foreign politics. The consequences of this dependency include not only the undermining of institutions, but also undermining the embedded rules and norms in the international arena.

Chapter 2 – Strategic Empathy and Pattern Breaks between the West and Russia

Strategic Narcissism and Strategic Empathy

In the aftermath of the Cold War era, a period of renewed optimism has emerged, accompanied by a notable absence of an obvious second pole to challenge the dominant influence of the United States and the West. This not only led to the peak of the idea of liberal democracy and the neoliberal economic order, but it also provoked a negative reaction from those who disagreed with it. This period of domination can be characterized in a variety of ways; however, for this analysis, we will use a definition often common to countries that are more powerful than the others in the international arena – strategic narcissism. Building upon the contributions of H. Morgenatu and E. Person (Cassam 2021), H.R. McMaster conceptualizes the post-Cold War era as a period of strategic narcissism by the United States. In his analyses, he shows how the prevailing assumption of global dominance, coupled with an overestimation of foreign countries' aspirations for progress and development, resulted in invalid assumptions regarding the post-Cold War era. He identifies strategic narcissism as the tendency to define challenges to national security as we would like them to be and to pay too little attention to the agency that others have over the future (McMaster 2020, McMaster 2021, 4).

As McMaster himself asserts, the antipode of strategic narcissism is strategic empathy. This tool enables countries, and their leaders understand the driving forces and interests of their opponents or competitors, to more clearly navigate their actions and predictions in the international environment. This approach does not result in the establishment of solidarity or the justification of the other and their intentions. Instead, it is primarily focused on our policy and understanding the international environmental context (McMaster 2020, 689-697). The

theoretical framework of strategic empathy was developed by the historian Z. Shore (2012, 32-37), who himself defines in his book *A Sense of the Enemy*. According to Shore, strategic empathy is defined as the ability to abstract from one's interests, historical experiences, and views, and to put oneself in the other's shoes. Strategic empathy does not stem from the pattern of past behavior; rather, it emerges from the behavior at pattern breaks.

In this part of his analysis, Shore introduces another important concept for the term – pattern breaks. According to him, this is merely a deviation from the routine, which can involve sudden spikes of violence or disruption from the norms. The correct reliance on pattern-break events or pattern-break behaviors lies at the heart of correct policy towards our and our adversaries' priorities. The meaningful pattern breaks are those that expose an enemy's underlying drivers or constraints and reveal what they value the most. This may not include a change in their policy or actions but shows the overall direction of their politics and interests.

As previously stated, this is not a novel concept. During the Cold War, political psychologist R. White (1967) contended that the West required a more thorough observation of the Soviet Union to understand its motives and fears. This is what he calls "realistic empathy". For White, empathy should not be equated with compassion; rather, it is a pragmatic quality that enables a realistic assessment of a situation without illusions or self-deception. In her essay, C. York (2022) not only traces the development of the concept of empathy in political psychology, political science, and international relations, but also goes beyond the usual framework and suggests more expansive empathy in a country's grand strategy. She advocates for a wider, more inclusive, non-US-centric approach, considering not only the adversary, but also multiple other actors, who can influence the environment or decision process. Furthermore, York observes that this strategy is not linear and should not be regarded as such. It is iterative and contingent upon the capacity of decision-makers to adapt and respond to complex security issues and environments.

The importance of strategic empathy is also shown empirically. In his book, Z. Shore gives numerous examples of successfully established empathy and its failures. In his reflections, R. McNamara (2017) concludes that if the Americans had correctly assessed the motives and beliefs of the Vietnamese, they would have understood that the war was unlikely to have a benign ending for them. In another more recent example, M. Waldman (2014) draws a similar conclusion about the American mission in Afghanistan. In his view, it was a lack of strategic empathy and misjudgments about the enemy's motives that lay at the heart of the American failure. One more example is M. Bennett (2023, 7), who focuses on the overall American policy in East Asia and shows how the lack of strategic empathy leads to so-called strategic surprises. It is the concepts of strategic narcissism and strategic empathy that give us a new perspective on past events and help us see critically some of the causes of foreign policy failures.

Timeline of Cooperation between Russia and the West

To trace the development or lack of strategic empathy between the West, mainly the United States, and Russia, a timeline of the main events that were or could have been understood as a provocation or confrontation signal to the other side will be constructed. The primary objective is to determine the key pattern breaks between the two sides that signaled a significant shift in their policies. However, the relationship between the West and Russia is not a simple, linear progression; rather, it was marked by the post-Cold War optimism and spirit of cooperation, constantly shifting to periods of escalating tension. This is why the chapter will first trace the timeline of cooperation between the two sides. Both timelines are constructed using previous research and periodization of Western-Russian relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Smith 2018, Khudoley 2022, Menkiszak 2023, Dugas et al. 2025).

After the collapse of the USSR and the establishment of the Russian Federation, the US committed to providing support for Moscow's transition toward a democratic system of governance from the beginning (Cox 1994, Goldgeier & McFaul 2003). Not only did the U.S. commit itself to Russia's membership in international organizations and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and to supporting the country's economic stability and market model, but it also provided direct financial assistance (Schmemann 1992). Subsequently, in 1997, again with U.S. help, Russia joined the G8, although formally far from the standards of the other members. In 2019, after the ensuing tensions, President Trump proposed Moscow's return to the G7 to gradually warm relations (McBride & Berman 2023). This notion is not unprecedented, as in 2012, Russia rejoined the WTO with the help of the United States, to warm relations and integrate Moscow more deeply into the institutions that serve as the backbone of the LIO (Sushentsov & Afontsev 2022).

This desire for cooperation is reinforced by numerous treaties and agreements between the United States and Russia. There have been three waves of treaties to reduce tensions, mostly in the military sphere. The Strategic Offensive Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) was signed in the last months of the USSR and subsequently extended by Russia. Disarmament efforts continued with START II in 1993 (Cohen 1997). The next wave of de-escalation came after the end of the Georgian War in 2008, when a "reset" in their relations was announced, and later the New START, which aimed to reduce the nuclear arsenals of both countries. But this reset was severely limited after the annexation of Crimea. Nevertheless, the Minsk agreements were new steps toward de-escalating tensions and limiting confrontation between the West and Russia (Åtland 2020).

But the most significant line of cooperation for Russia's security is with NATO. As early as 1991, the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) was established as a forum for dialogue and cooperation with NATO's former Warsaw Pact adversaries, primarily Russia

(NATO 2022). This step toward rapprochement was followed by treaties such as Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) and even consideration of the possibility of Russia one day joining the Alliance as an equal member. In 1997, the NACC evolved into the NATO-Russia Founding Act, aimed at strengthening cooperation between the two countries, and in 2002, the NATO-Russia Council was established, which functioned until the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Pierre & Trenin 1997, Rachwald 2011). Even before the war began, we can read the US's signs as a desire for peace and to prevent escalation between Russia and Ukraine.

Russia has also expressed a willingness to cooperate and engage in dialogue with the West. The most significant of these signals pertain to the four instances of the country's possible accession to NATO (1991, 1995, 2000, and 2001). The first two signals were sent at the beginning of the era of liberal optimism, inspired by both a new beginning for Russia and a new Democratic administration committed to improving relations between the two countries (Baker 2002). The latter two attempts were made under V. Putin, considered then as a reformer, and were aimed at reducing the consequences of the Yugoslav conflict and the NATO bombing of Belgrade (Forsberg & Herd 2015). However, this idea did not develop in time, and dialogue and cooperation developed mainly within the framework of the NATO-Russia Council.

After that, two waves of Russian-initiated efforts to improve relations followed. The first was after the war in Georgia, aimed at neutralizing the negative consequences for Moscow of aggression against its Caucasian neighbour. In 2008, President Medvedev announced the New European Security Treaty and later a "reset" in relations between the two sides (McNamara 2010). The next wave coincides with President Trump's first mandate, but also with Europe's intensifying plans to diversify its energy sources – Russia not only proposes the extension of the New START Treaty, but also publishes a draft Security Treaty, indicating its future vision of the security architecture in Europe and the bilateral US-Russia relations in the new multipolar world (Minzarari 2022).

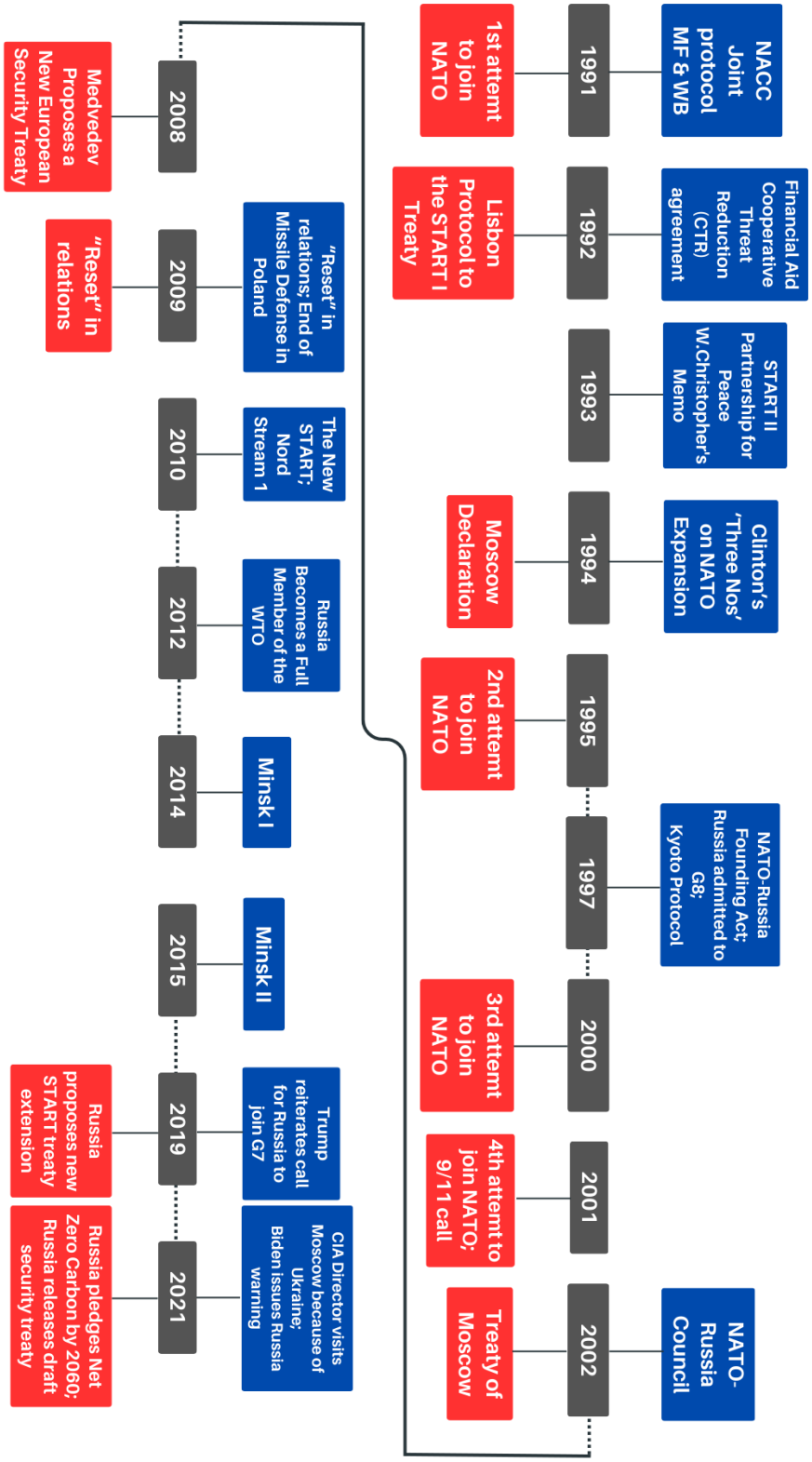

Figure 1: Timeline of Signals of Cooperation between the West (blue) and Russia (red)

Timeline of Confrontation between Russia and the West

In both the line of cooperation and the line of confrontation, we see several events initiated by both sides that can serve as signals for overall policy changes. From a Western perspective, particularly that of the United States, four categories of actions are identified as unwelcome and defiant to Russia. These categories include military interventions, the expansion of NATO and military infrastructure to Russia's borders, colour revolutions and regime change, and the climate agenda.

Military interventions under the concept of R2P began in the early 1990s, with the first US intervention in Somalia in 1992, followed three years later by Western intervention in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The bombing of Belgrade and interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq followed. The most recent such actions in local conflicts are Libya and Syria, following the Arab Spring and the outbreak of civil wars in the region. As Badescu and Weiss (2010) note, while R2P has a normative constituency, it is the failed examples of its application that lead to a spiral of subsequent events and set a precedent for other states to intervene at the expense of international law. Russia's position on the concept of intervention for the protection of human rights is not one of opposition. However, there are significant concerns regarding how such interventions are executed, their legitimacy, and their true purpose (Chen & Yin 2020). From Moscow's perspective, Western countries, particularly the United States, are leveraging the discourse on human rights protection for their geopolitical agendas. Specifically, Russia perceives the United States as seeking to overthrow regimes that pose a challenge to its interests. Furthermore, the Russian Federation has subsequently employed analogous arguments in support of its military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, invoking the precedents established by the Western world (Averre & Davies 2015, Pupcenoks & Seltzer 2021).

The second group of signals is related to NATO's expansion and the proximity of NATO military infrastructure to the Russian border. Despite the assertion by the then-US Secretary of State D. Baker to M. Gorbachev that NATO would not expand "not an inch" eastward (Sarotte 2021), by the onset of the full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022, the alliance had undergone five expansions (1999, 2004, 2009, 2017, and 2020), resulting in the addition of 14 new Eastern European states. The Kremlin has repeatedly expressed its concerns regarding the increased presence of NATO infrastructure in proximity to Russian borders, which was perceived as a serious disregard for the country's interests and even as a provocation to Moscow that cannot go without a reciprocal response (Putin 2007, Putin 2021, Lavrov 2014). These are the classic problems of the security dilemma that many believe lie at the root of the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West and the growing confrontation that has over time led to military action against two potential future members of the Alliance, Ukraine and Georgia (Larrabee 2008, Mearsheimer 2014, Tsygankov 2018, Priego 2019). It must be acknowledged that this is not the sole explanation for the events in question. However, it is the explanation that the Kremlin has chosen to employ to justify its actions.

The third group of signals causing concern in Moscow is the so-called "colour revolutions" in countries neighbouring Russia or their potential partners. According to the Kremlin, these waves of protests are not only sponsored by the West, but are also aimed at violating the constitutions and established legal regimes in the countries. The first such case was in Serbia in 2000, and subsequently we have seen the 2003 'Rose Revolution' in Georgia, the 2004 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine, and the 2005 'Tulip Revolution' in Kyrgyzstan. In a similar category, we can add the Arab Spring and the subsequent Western stance on regime change in the Middle East and the 2013 Kiev Maidan. While the reasons for such civil society activism in these countries are rooted in their self-initiative and grassroot organization, the Kremlin sees them as externally organized coups aimed at shaking state stability (Finkel &

Brudny 2014). In Moscow's view, this is not only a rehearsal for similar actions on Russian territory (as the 2012 protests were), but also an attempt to reduce the country's sphere of interests by hitting at "near abort" countries (Wilson 2013).

The fourth and final set of signals can be linked to climate change and zero-carbon policies, and restrictions on the use of carbon fuels. These signals may seem insignificant compared to rising military tensions, but it is the trade and dependence on carbon fuels that underpin Russia's wealth as a petrostate and the stability of the Kremlin regime (Goldman 2008, Rutland 2015, Etkind 2023). It is the messages of decarbonization, mostly coming from Europe, that represent a strong signal of breaking dependencies on Russia, ending its main commercial advantage used as a political weapon, and a corresponding opportunity for a more hawkish Western policy towards the Kremlin regime (Karnitschnig 2022). Movement in this direction began in 1997 with the signing of the Kyoto Protocol, but the first real step by Europe was the introduction of the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS), which aimed to limit carbon trading through the quota principle (Verde & Borghesi 2022). Later, after the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the EU and the US not only introduced sanctions against the aggressor but also decided to suspend the South Stream project, which was aimed at further strengthening energy cooperation between Europe and Russia. However, the most significant development for Moscow is the 2019 adoption of the Green Deal, which aims to eliminate the use of carbon fuels and achieve energy autonomy in Europe through the utilization of renewable energy sources. Furthermore, after the implementation of the Fit for 55 package in 2021, the de facto legal foundation for the new energy transition is being established (Schlacke et al. 2022).

While most observers recognize that this would negatively impact the Russian economy, they also emphasize that this development creates new opportunities for cooperation between the two sides (Westphal & Dobrovidova 2021, Makarov 2021, Piskulova 2021, Rytövuori-Apunen 2022). But as noted earlier, exports of carbon fuels are the essence of the

petrostate, and the regime cannot exist without them. It is precisely this misunderstanding that lies at the heart of Western policy toward Russia – the country cannot adapt to the new realities because it cannot continue to exist within them. This leads to a new policy and behavior, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

However, the West's actions do not take place in a vacuum, but often in response to tensions that Russia has already created. Moreover, over the years, Moscow has sent various signals to the West, from speeches to gas cutoffs, which are challenging to categorize. Instead, the country's actions can be divided into periods, with a clear trend toward deteriorating relations and increasingly confrontational policies. From the very beginning of the new state, A. Kozirev and B. Yeltsin warned the West that Russia was not ready to blindly follow its new partners, but sought to be an equal and full participant in international politics (Kempster 1994). In his 1995 article, the Russian Foreign Minister stressed that Russia wanted a genuine partnership with the United States and Europe, emphasizing democratic reforms and integration into global political and economic systems, but the West treated Russia with suspicion and isolation, shifting the blame for the crisis to Western neglect (Kozyrev 1995). Meanwhile, while Moscow was fighting two wars with Chechen separatists, it also began to build alternative Western-led structures such as the CSTO (Nikitina 2012). The clearest escalation under Yeltsin was Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov's so-called U-turn over the Atlantic and the small Russian special-force operation in Kosovo (Heller 2014).

Following V. Putin's rise to power, there was a visible warming of relations, supported by the strengthening of energy cooperation, which was at the heart of the country's economic success after the 1998 financial crisis. Despite Moscow's disapproval of American intervention in Iraq, a new wave of verbal warnings regarding confrontational policies by the West towards Russia about to the possible admission of Georgia and Ukraine into NATO emerged, predominantly from 2006 to 2007 (Putin 2007). During this period, the Kremlin first employed

its energy resources as a political instrument to exert pressure on European nations, particularly Ukraine (Van de Graaf & Colgan 2017). A considerable number of scholars and analysts regard Putin's 2007 Munich speech and the subsequent suspension of the implementation of the CFE agreement as the genesis of the authentic confrontation between the West and Moscow (Keating 2022, Baev 2022, Smirnova et al. 2023). However, escalation in the strict sense of the term is not the 2007 speech but the direct military intervention against neighboring Georgia in violation of legal norms and under pretenses, mirroring the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia. Although Russia had previously intervened in Kosovo, in 2008 the country carried out full-scale aggression against a neighboring country, sending a clear signal that Moscow had no intention of blindly following international order and norms. The Georgian War represented a critical juncture in the relationship between the West and Russia, whereby the conflict escalated beyond the scope of a mere signal, thereby becoming an irreversible moment in the geopolitical landscape (Cornell 2008, Mikhelidze 2009, Pallin & Westerlund 2010). The consequences of these actions were twofold. On the one hand, the West was not opting for a sharp reaction; rather, it was seeking reconciliation. However, this course of action does not result in reconciliation; rather, it functions as a symbol of impunity. Russia's actions in the international arena have not been limited to mere provocations. The country has taken the initiative to instigate a second gas war with Ukraine and has begun the preliminary steps of integrating the Eurasian political space, thereby creating a counterbalance to the Western world.

The absence of a substantial response in the form of policies has enabled Moscow to once more invade a neighboring country and annex a portion of its territory. The 2013 Maidan in Kiev materialized in the immediate aftermath of the unsuccessful anti-Putin protests and signifies a grave threat to the Kremlin regime, as it exemplifies the possibility of democracy and civil society in a country adjacent to Russia (Svoboda 2019, Chaban, Elgström, & Gulyaeva 2017). At the same time, Russia's new foreign policy concept came out, which

directly rejects the US-led unipolar world and advocates multipolarity, challenging the West (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2013, Monaghan 2013). This was the context during the annexation of Crimea and the unrest in Donbass and Lugansk in 2014. Since the de facto start of the war in Ukraine, Russia has also "returned to the larger geopolitical arena" with its intervention in the Syrian civil war on the side of Bashar al-Assad (Mason 2018). This was followed by a series of provocations against the West, such as interfering in US elections, poisoning regime opponents on European soil, declaring the liberal idea "obsolete," and more (Sakwa 2020). As the event timeline constructed by the Belfer Center (Dugas et al. 2025) has subsequently shown, tensions between the West and Russia have been steadily rising in recent years before the outbreak of full-scale war, coinciding with Europe's plans to reduce its energy dependence and Russia's building of alternative ties and institutions to counterbalance the Western world.

The examination of these two timelines of cooperation and confrontation reveals three key insights. Firstly, it is evident that the relationship between the West and Russia has been experiencing a marked decline over the past three decades This is reflected not only in the reduction of cooperation due to Russia's search for alternative structures and partners and Europe’s plans to decarbonize itself, but also in the increase of provocations against each other. From time to time, there is a mutual desire on both sides to ameliorate relations and "restart" cooperation. However, as will be examined in the subsequent chapter, a pertinent question is whether Russia's aspirations for enhancing relations are genuine or merely an extension of its dependency, thereby influencing the regime's capabilities.

Second, although Russia is using various means to send signals that it is not willing to be second to the West, Moscow is adopting increasingly severe and hazardous actions. Kremlin’s actions have gone from speeches and statements, to limited actions such as sending troops to Kosovo's airport, to war against a neighboring country. The war in Georgia is a critical

juncture that demonstrates the extent to which the Kremlin is willing to go in its efforts to reshape Western policy toward itself. The absence of a definitive and resolute reaction to this aggression, as evidenced since 2022, has enabled Russia to repeatedly employ analogous tactics against Ukraine.

Thirdly, these fails and flows in relations and their gradual deterioration over time indicate the lack of an adequate overall strategy on the part of Western countries towards the changing situation in the international environment. The European Union and the United States have taken measures to address the situation, although many member states continue to hold a favorable outlook, anticipating a collaborative partnership with Russia and the emergence of a mutually beneficial dynamic. This assertion has been demonstrated to be inaccurate, a conclusion that aligns with the repeated warnings issued by mainly Eastern European countries.

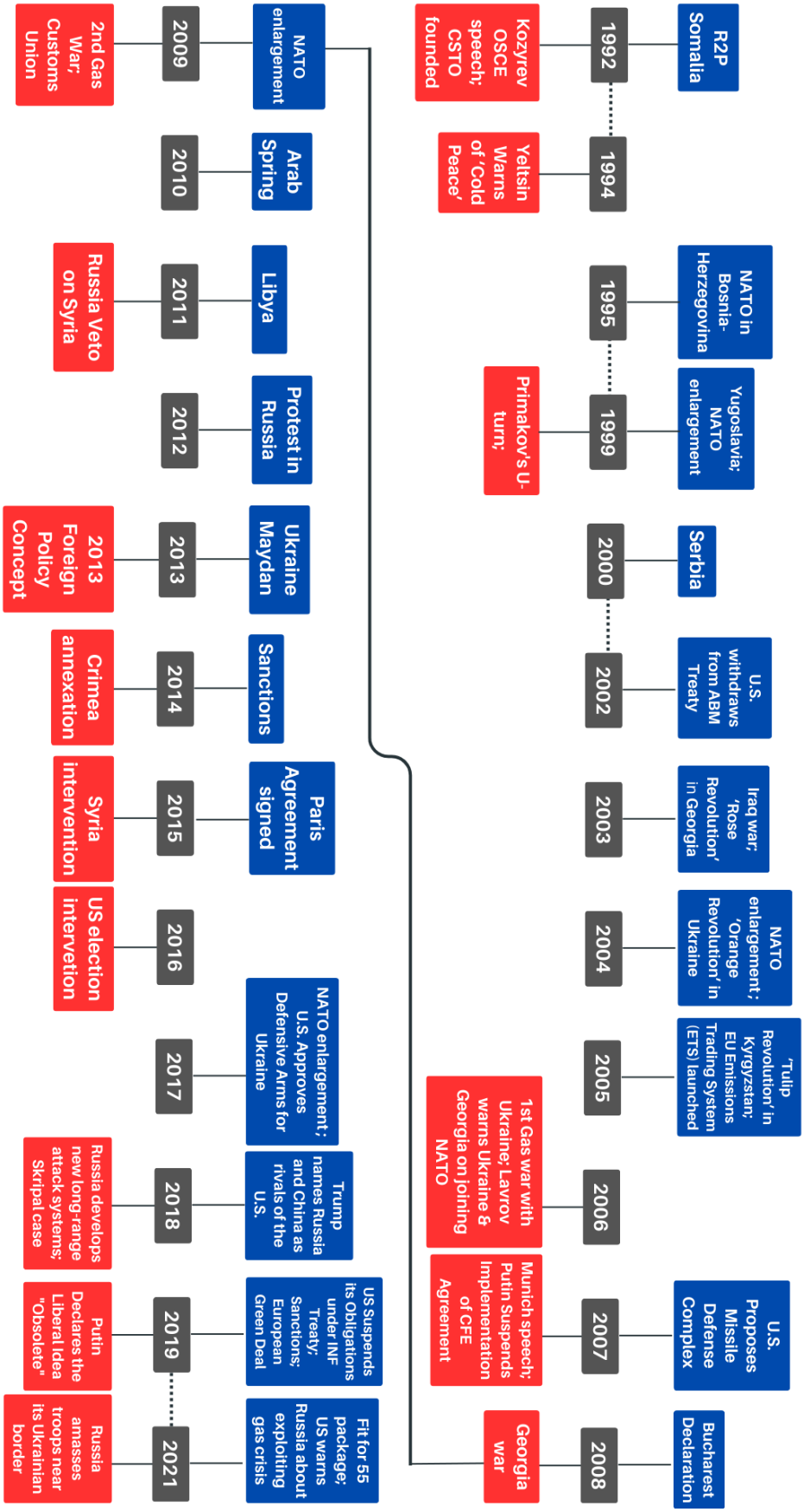

Figure 2: Timeline of Signals of Confrontation between the West (blue) and Russia (red)

Chapter 3 – Profit and Power: The Role of Fossil Fuels in Russian Policy

In the first two chapters, we observed the prevailing global conditions and circumstances of the confrontation between the West and Russia before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, this analysis did not provide a comprehensive explanation for Russia's decision to further escalate the conflict in Ukraine to a full-scale war in 2022. As already stated, the petroagression theory posits that petrostates, such as Russia, possess the capabilities and means to exhibit greater levels of aggression compared to other states. The pivotal extracted and exploited resource serves as the cornerstone of the entire statist system, exerting profound influence on both politics and society. However, it is not oil or gas itself that engenders Russia's aggression; rather, it is the institutions that control these resources and possess the capacity to mobilize them in a particular direction that are at the core of Russian politics. The preeminent role of the state in Russian history, politics, and economics is long-standing, as evidenced by the contemporary "state-backed illiberalism" era of the Russian Federation across various domains, including the economy and foreign policy (Laruelle 2020, 116-119). As demonstrated by Alexander Etkind (2023) in his recent book, *Russia Against Modernity*, the fossil fuel sector plays a pivotal role in the Kremlin's playbook, impacting both foreign and domestic policies and objectives.

Neomercantlilist Russia

Economic theory often presents two opposing perspectives on the main drivers of economic activity. One emphasizes the importance of market forces (Hayek 2013), while the other focuses on external factors, especially government intervention and institutional

dynamics (Polanyi 2002). In recent years, we see both patterns of development in Russia – on the one hand, since the collapse of the USSR, the market has been determining the economic development, but on the other, federal authorities often intervene to mitigate the created severe inequalities. These inequalities are also the product of strategies of foreign trade for enriching the state, while not enriching the people itself. This policy of strategic intervention for "the good of the people", including economic relations with other states, is closer to neomercantlism than anything else (Connolly & Hanson 2016, Matveev 2020).

Neomercantilism is often presented as the middle ground between liberalism and Marxism, the dominant theories in IPE. However, as E. Helleiner (2021, 4-10) highlights in the introduction of his book, this is far from simple. According to him, any policy choice may be a neomercantilist, provided it aligns with national interests. This includes introducing *strategic* protectionist policies or other forms of state activism aimed at increasing state power and welfare. Neomercantilism is characterized by its adaptability, shifting in response to changing geopolitical dynamics, domestic political pressures, and/or leadership styles, while maintaining a core objective of enhancing national economic strength (Helleiner 2019, 1113-1115). In another work with A. Pickel (2005) they demonstrate that neomercantilism has not only not lost its relevance in a globalizing world, but, on the contrary, economic nationalism is constantly evolving and often becoming a response to global economic pressures. In practice, any economic or financial policy that differs from the mainstream and is justified by national interests can be presented as neomercantilist. In this sense, it is not the typical realist zero-sum game paradigm, where we have a clear opposition and a clear winner (and loser), but a far more adaptive and changing vision of benefits and costs, both political and economic.

Neomercantilism, in essence, signifies a strong state willing to intervene in economic activity to achieve predetermined objectives. As M. Wigell (2016, 137) demonstrates, such

approaches are utilized not only by illiberal countries but are also part of the international playbook. Furthermore, these instruments are gaining popularity, particularly among regional powers such as Russia that seek to maximize their competitive advantages in various areas to bolster their overall standing in the international arena. In this sense, the specific world and system context matter. As B. Hettne (1993, 211-213) illustrates, free trade has its advantages for all, but in an era of "regionalization," there is an increasing need for greater control to achieve political objectives. This necessity is particularly evident in a period of shifting global dynamics and the rise of new regionalisms. The neomercantilist worldview does not always prioritize short-term objectives; rather, it reflects a comprehensive understanding of international politics and economics. In this context, strategic assets can be utilized not only for profit but also for control and/or influence (Collins & Dermot 2023, 635-636). In essence, neomercantilism necessitates substantial state intervention and prioritizes the realisation of national objectives as the foundation of its foreign and economic policy. Neomercantilism is not a one-time event, it is a long and ongoing process, that is in a clear contradiction with the post-Cold War optimism, centred around free trade, globalisation and cooperation.

In this context, it is essential to assert Russia's position on the neomercantilism map. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the bankruptcy of the Soviet economic system, Russia took the path of globalisation and the free market. As A. Åslund (1999) notes, the economic reforms initiated by B. Yeltsin did not yield the desired outcomes. Indeed, these reforms contributed to the intensification of crises across various sectors of social and economic life, including an increase in inequality and the erosion of the state's capacity to fulfil its social commitments. The rapid and radical transition from state control to market liberalization has not garnered widespread approval from most of the society. Following his rise to power, Vladimir Putin sought to realign the nation's priorities, focusing on stability and

the resumption of the state's traditional role rather than the absolute domination of the market (Desai 2005).

Putin did indeed initiate positive change, but not as a result of his economic program. As. A. Mansurov (2005, 183) writes, Russia's economic position improved not only as a result of domestic mobilization of economic resources, facilitated by oil revenue, but also in terms of its global standing. This latter development can be credited to the advantages offered by globalization and the free market, which resulted in political changes within the country, as the Kremlin's central role as a key institution in the redistribution of these goods has increased. However, the shift is not limited to domestic politics; it also affected foreign policy. Due to its historical economic gap behind developed countries, Russia was compelled to employ various neomercantilist strategies to capitalize on the globalized economy. This does not imply exclusion from global economic processes; rather, it entails seeking an optimal balance between openness and state intervention in the economy, enhance the state's economic and political standing (Krickovic 2016). Moreover, it is the carbon sector that plays a pivotal role in this strategy.

As Wigell (142-143) asserts, under Putin's leadership, Russia has utilized its energy sector for geostrategic purposes, namely to enhance its regional and global influence. This has resulted in an increased reliance on oil and natural gas by neighbouring countries, which has in turn led to a corresponding shift in their political alignments towards Moscow. This strategy, which has been described as "neo-imperialist," is not primarily about maximizing national economic interests. Instead, it is about achieving broader political objectives. This is occurring primarily due to the influence of state-owned energy companies (Lukoil, Gazprom, Rosneft, etc.), which are becoming not only the foundation of the Russian economy but also a significant factor in Russian foreign policy (Ziegler 2010). However, this strategy serves not only an

"offensive" function, whereby Russia exerts control over other countries and governments (including through corruption), but also a defensive one, whereby Russia reduces its dependencies in other sectors where it lags behind Europe and later China (Diesen 2019).

As demonstrated, the concept of neomercantilism encompasses a range of policies and practices, distinguished by its adaptability and pragmatism. Despite its frequent criticism of globalization and the perceived inequities of the free market, Russia continues to reap substantial benefits from these processes, thereby reinforcing its strategic advantages as a petrostate. The strategic importance of Russia's vast oil and gas reserves, coupled with the state's institutionalised comprehensive oversight of these resources, forms the cornerstone of Moscow's ability to formulate foreign and domestic policies.

Oil Money and Domestic Politics

In their 1996 paper, James Alt et al. examine various models of the influence of a country's leading resource in international trade and the influence it has and receives from the country's political institutions. While acknowledging the uniqueness of each case, the authors underscore the pivotal role of institutions and groups in shaping a nation's trade policy, with the resource itself serving as the primary instrument. As already mentioned before, Timothy Mitchell (2009, 5) goes even further. He illustrates how the interaction between capital and labour forms the basis of social relations within a state and its society. As he points out, unlike other similar studies, his research is about democracy as oil: *„The transformation of oil into large and unaccountable government incomes is not a cause of the problem of democracy and oil, but the outcome of particular ways of engineering political relations out of flows of energy“*. The availability of a vast stock of easily accessible and relatively inexpensive resources, for which there has been no clear market alternative for decades, has become the

foundation not only of Russia's economic system but also the greatest instrument of its illiberal political structures as a petrostate.

In 2023, Russia is the third-largest producer of oil in the world, with an output of 10.75 million barrels per day, representing 11% of global production (U.S. Energy Information Administration 2024). Additionally, Russia is the second-largest producer of natural gas, with an output of 586.4 billion cubic meters and the largest known reserve in the world (Williams 2023). Russia is undoubtedly one of the major players in the global energy market, and the various changes in resource trade between countries have significant implications not only for the market but also for the countries themselves (Sun et al. 2024).

Under the USSR, all this wealth "belonged to the Soviet people" but was de facto exploited only by specific institutions – the Soviet state companies. With the advent of democracy and the free market, sectors of the Soviet economy were privatised by far-sighted Komsomol members who eventually became businessmen and oligarchs, many of them close to the government and the security services (Belton 2020). However, relinquishing control of such a strategic resource, which offers immense opportunities for personal or state development, was not in the plans of Putin's new administration. As R. Gidadhubli (2003, 2025-2026) demonstrates, the dominance of private business in the resource sector represented a serious opportunity to influence the Kremlin and its policies. This has led to an aggressive state policy of nationalising the sector, or at least bringing private oil and gas companies under control. The confrontation between the administration and private business ended in a clear victory for the Kremlin, and the biggest victim became Mikhail Khodrokosvkiy's Yukos giant at the time, which eventually became the basis for Rosneft and Gazprom (Ivanenko 2008, 71-73). Currently, state companies dominate the production and exploitation of this sector, while the remaining large private companies, such as Lukoil or Novatek, are close and loyal to the

government (Desjardins 2015). These changes affect not only the political system as a whole but also, as D. Rogers has observed, oil and oil companies are beginning to extend their influence and dependencies to the local level (Rogers 2015). This development shows that not oil money is the problem, but rather the people and institutions controlling it.

This leads us to consider probably the most important consequence of the Russian state's oil exploitation: the formation of the federal budget. As several studies have shown, oil and gas revenues constitute a significant share of the country's total revenues (Martínek 2017, Yermakov 2024, Prokopenko 2024). In 2000, these revenues accounted for about 9% of total revenues, while in 2014 they reached 50%. In 2023, about a third of the budget will be derived from the exploitation of these two specific natural resources. These figures represent the average proportions over the years. It is important to note that the majority of revenues do not come from exports to other countries, but from corporate profit taxes, both private and public (i.e., mineral extraction tax) (Yermakov 2024). Nevertheless, oil and gas have become the backbone of the Russian economy.

This fact has led to a steady growth of the federal budget and therefore, growth of the spending part, including for social reasons. This trend has continued since the 2000s, with a few exceptions, such as the financial crisis of 2008, the Crimean events of 2014 and the subsequent Western sanctions, and the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the depreciation of the Russian ruble against the US dollar must be taken into account. This whole process reduces the state budget in dollars, but not necessarily in rubles. Two budget items showed the highest growth in the period 2003-2014: spending on national security and law enforcement increased from 8 percent to 11 percent, while social spending increased from an average of 4 percent to 25 percent (peaking at 31 percent in 2012) (Polivanov & Dmitriev 2013). In the wake of the confrontation with the West over the occupation of Crimea, defense and social spending

continue to account for the largest share of the budget. This is attributable to both the failing foreign policy situation and the necessity to compensate for the loss of real income and support for the poorer yet politically active population (Gould et al. 2023).

As previously demonstrated, the Russian economy is heavily reliant on revenues from the oil and gas sector. However, both Russia's participation in the global economy and the carbon sector are susceptible to downturns and crises. In this regard, the federal government decided in 2008 to establish the National Welfare Fund in response to the adverse effects of declining oil and gas prices and the government's inability to fulfil its social obligations, particularly the pension payment issue. The Fund's initial capital was set at USD 32 billion, a figure that, in light of the prevailing financial crisis, was seen by Russia as a crucial investment in future economic stability. Since then, the Fund's reserves have remained at approximately USD 85 billion, with a decline observed after 2014 due to the utilization of a portion of the funds to neutralize sanctions imposed on the country. However, in 2020, there was a sharp spike, with the value of reserves jumping nearly threefold to over USD 180 billion in just two years. In the context of a confrontation with the US, the Fund has been de-dollarizing its reserves in recent years, with the primary reserves now comprising euros, gold, and yuan (Afanasiev & Shash 2021).

The Fund's distinguishing characteristic, which sets it apart from analogous entities in other petrostates, is its unique role within Russia's political and economic system. As with its counterparts, the Fund is heavily reliant on global market prices and demand; low prices strain its resources, while high demand bolsters its performance (Sohag 2023). The artificial shortage of energy resources that preceded the war in Ukraine has had a beneficial impact on Russian sales in the period following 2022. Moreover, the Fund had a pivotal role and served to subsidize critical sectors (Martínek 2017) and acts as a financial buffer during crises (Afanasiev

& Shash 2021). However, its most defining feature is the extraordinary concentration of power within the Kremlin, coupled with the near absence of effective checks and balances. As E. Kislova (2020, 55-56) notes, both the replenishment and deployment of the Fund are closely tied to the prevailing political and economic priorities of the presidential administration. These factors contribute to the Fund's role as a pivotal instrument in preserving the stability of Russia's economy and political system, particularly in the context of its protracted confrontation with the West.

As has been demonstrated, oil and gas revenues constitute a significant component of the Russian economy. The centralized control of these resources by state-owned enterprises enables the allocation of profits toward strategic objectives, including the funding of significant sporting events and the mitigation of economic inefficiencies through subsidies. This underscores the pivotal role of oil and gas in sustaining the stability of the regime and ensuring Russia's economic stability.

Profit and Power: Russia’s Energy Relations with Europe

In a globalized world economy, it is common for neighbouring countries/regions to engage in trade with each other, leveraging their respective economic and production capabilities to achieve mutual benefits. Liberal theory posits that such economic integration will not only enhance welfare but also reinforce peace. This phenomenon, coupled with the historically well-established energy routes along the West-East line, forms the core of the energy cooperation between Russia and Europe, positioning the country as the continent's primary energy supplier (Kuzemko 2013, 59-60). For the EU countries alone, Moscow supplies one-third of gas consumption and one-quarter of oil consumption (McBride 2022). In addition, Russia is allocating substantial resources to the development of infrastructure, including

pipelines and storage facilities, on the European continent, thereby ensuring the sustainability of this economic relationship (Gross and Stelzenmüller 2024). This leads to Europe's dependence on Russian resources, but also to Moscow's dependence on European money. This scenario, in principle, should be characterized by peace and mutual understanding.

As we know, the course of history is different. Interdependence was weaponized and became not a means of peace but an instrument of blackmail to get a strategic advantage (Farrell & Abraham 2019). The prevailing paradigm of neomercantilism offers a comprehensive framework to understand this search between profit and power. Russia has strategically leveraged Europe's energy dependency on multiple occasions, including the 2008 Ukraine crisis and the 2014 sanctions against the fossil fuel sector, which were comparatively minimal, as well as corruption scandals. In contrast, Europe has demonstrated a lack of initiative in diversifying its energy sector, despite Russian actions, as evidenced by events in Georgia (2008), Crimea (2014), and Syria (2015) (Rossbach 2018). In the long run, this dynamic led to growing interdependence for both, however, Russia managed to temporarily counter the effect by accumulating reserves from the fossil money in its NWF. As J. Sharples (2013, 684-686) shows, these events were occurring in the context of a growing understanding that Europe and the world need to find a new alternative way of obtaining energy that does not harm nature. A strategy that puts Russian influence and profit under serious test.

In 2019, the European Union (EU) initiated the European Green Deal, a comprehensive policy initiative aimed at achieving climate neutrality by 2050 and establishing itself as a leader in this sector. The removal of the "eco-element" suggests that climate quotas and policies can be regarded as disguised tariffs intended to enhance the competitiveness of European production (Almeida et al., 2023). This development signifies a notable setback for EU economic partners, particularly Russia, given Europe's strategic shift away from reliance on fossil fuels. The potential loss of a substantial portion of the Russian economy and its associated

influence could not only give rise to geopolitical instability but also prompt Moscow to take measures to stop or at least delay the deal (Leonard et al. 2021). This period marks a notable shift in the EU's overall policy toward Moscow, particularly concerning green policies and the energy transition (Romanova 2021, 121-122). The recent rise in political will, in conjunction with the actions undertaken by the European Union to address the consequences of the pandemic through additional capital and investment, renders the possibility of an energy transition not only theoretical but increasingly tangible, in contrast to Moscow's interests.

As A. Etkind shows in *'Russia against modernity'*, it is precisely this change of circumstances that prompts Putin to take extreme actions, because of one simple reason: they had no more strings with the potential loss of their weaponized interdependence. In the summer of 2021, Gazprom reduced gas supplies to European customers, thereby increasing demand and the price of its product. This allows for the replenishment of the budget and strategic reserve while simultaneously creating a shortage due to the inability to fill storage facilities on the continent. This price increase has led to a pressing need for European governments to allocate funds directly to their citizens in an urgent manner. It has also led to a growing dependency on natural gas, as Europe has been unable to swiftly diversify its energy sources (McWilliams 2024). Furthermore, this was not an isolated signal but rather part of a broader trend of "big decoupling" and autonomy of Russia from the West. Russia not only initiated its financial infrastructure and strengthened its cooperation with other non-Western and emerging economies, but also for years now Moscow has been reducing its debt, diversifying its reserves, especially in gold, supporting key industries such as agriculture and the military sector, and stockpiling essential goods like chips. These processes were manually controlled by state bureaucrats and economists from the Central bank over more than 15 years, including during periods of economic turbulence (Pleines 2022, Prokopenko 2023).

This is the context of events leading up to Putin's decision to invade Ukraine. The circumstances surrounding the decision are not entirely clear; however, it is known that the decision was made to achieve a swift and decisive victory, rather than engaging in a prolonged and costly conflict in the heart of Europe (Institute for the Study of War 2023). Oil, gas, and dependency are at the heart of this decision – on the one hand, they guaranteed the necessary reserve resources for the functioning of the system and for dealing with the possible consequences of sanctions (based on old experience) and the possible reorientation of the Russian economy towards Asia. On the other hand, they will focus European attention less on economic development and energy transition and more on security investments. This would hardly make Moscow a desirable and reliable long-term economic partner, but Europe was already looking for an alternative, yet not completely able to find a sustainable one. The longer the green transition is postponed, the more robust Russia's position becomes, both financially and politically (Milov 2024). While this dynamic does not exclusively explain Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, it does underscore the potential for diminishing Russian wealth and political influence through energy resources, thereby enabling the Russian president to pursue alternative political objectives with greater decisiveness.

The Russian state's neomercantilist strategy, which is deeply rooted in the exploitation and control of its vast oil and gas resources, has played a pivotal role in shaping both domestic and international policies. This approach has enabled Russia to assert its influence on the continent, leverage energy dependence for political power, and sustain its economic stability. However, the increasing aspirations of the EU's green transformation and global transitions towards alternative energy sources present a challenge to this model. These challenges, coupled with geopolitical tensions, provided Moscow with an opportunity to act assertively, including leveraging its energy dominance and escalating military actions. Ultimately, Russia's reliance on energy as a dual tool of profit and power underscores its insecure position in a rapidly

changing global economic and political landscape. Ukraine was the latest victim of Russia's dependency on fossil fuels and ambition.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this work, Vladimir Putin's decision to initiate a full-scale war in Ukraine should not be regarded as unexpected. Rather, it can be understood as a logical progression of Russia's long-standing policy of confrontation with the West and the decoupling from the Western-dominated international system. Using a top-down approach, we were able to trace the Western general policy line and attitude regarding the post-Cold War world order, with a particular focus on Russia.

The end of the bipolar system resulted in the establishment of a new global context, predicated on the tenets of the free market, democratic development, and international cooperation. The liberal international order was characterized by an optimistic outlook on the imminent termination of significant conflicts, accompanied by a growing awareness of the advantages associated with a more open global system. However, it should be noted that not all participants in this system shared these views. In fact, while benefiting from the system, many states have attempted to follow alternative models, such as a neomercantilist policy aimed at reducing their dependence on the dominant West.

One of the symbols of the established order is the collective effort to combat climate change, a global problem that affects all countries and people. This effort necessitates a unified solution and cooperation among all nations. Nevertheless, we observe division, since the abandonment of carbon-based fuels poses a direct threat to the existence of several regimes whose budgets rely on oil exports – the petrostates. In this case, it would be a mistake to assume that the interests of these regimes align with those of democratically elected governments. Russia, as has been demonstrated, is not merely another petrostate; rather, it is one that actively seeks to reduce Western dominance in the global order, maintain its influence by creating dependency on its energy resources.

This leads to examination of the broader development of relations between the West and Russia. As evidenced by both constructed lines, both sides engage in provocative actions toward one another, yet concurrently send signals for cooperation. This observed instability in the bilateral relations is not an isolated incident; however, it is noteworthy that Moscow continued adopting an increasingly aggressive action. The pivotal pattern break was the 2008 war in Georgia. However, the Western response proved ineffective in deterring such actions, as they were reiterated in Ukraine and manifested in other forms. According to Z. Shore's theory, it becomes evident that Russia was transmitting robust signals indicative of a marked distancing from the Western-orientated world and an escalating confrontation between the two sides. However, the subsequent actions taken by the U.S. and Europe suggest that they did not interpret these signals in the same way.

One possible explanation for this phenomenon is the pervasive post-Cold War optimism that is delineated in the initial chapter. The second reason is closely related: the misunderstanding of the nature of the Russian regime as a petrostate. The neomercantilist policy, which aims to increase Russia's autonomy from the Western-centric international economic system, combined with its ambition to preserve the carbon-based status quo in energy trade, forms the core of the modern Russian regime's interests. The Kremlin's loss of its leading energy power status would entail a significant diminution of its leverage over Europe and a substantial portion of its revenues, which underpin the Russian social system. This direct threat to the regime appears increasingly probable in light of the EU's adoption of the Green Deal and the evident global trend toward decarbonization.

This series of events does not justify Russia from its primary responsibility for the war in Ukraine. The Russian regime, mired in its paleomodernity, is predominantly motivated by the pursuit of self-preservation rather than by the well-being of its citizens or the integrity of

the state itself. This observation highlights a conspicuous absence of strategic empathy and understanding from Western nations concerning Russia's petrostate character.

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