

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

DECODING RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

By

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida

May 2017

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MOULIOUKOVA, DINA
Decoding Russian Foreign Policy

(Ph.D., International Studies)
(May 2017)

Abstract of a dissertation at the University of Miami.

Dissertation supervised by Professor Roger Kanet.
No. of pages in text. (171)

The traditional notion of security in international relations theory assumes that nation-states have one driving goal in their relations with other states – their own survival. Therefore states should calculate their foreign policy decisions solely with that goal in mind. While physical security is important to states, sometimes, however, states structure their actions in materially costly ways. These actions satisfy the self-identity needs of the states. In case states avoided these actions their sense of self-identity would be radically disrupted, and such a disruption is just as important to the states as threats to their physical integrity. While physical security is important to the states, in some instances ontological security is more important because its fulfillment affirms a state’s self-identity: it affirms not only its physical existence but primarily how a state sees itself and secondarily how it wants to be seen by others. States pursue their needs through social action, not to impress external society so much as to satisfy their internal self-identity needs. Nation states seek ontological security because they want to maintain consistent self-concepts, and the “self” of states is constituted and maintained through a narrative that gives life to routinized foreign policy actions.

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Introduction

Why do states choose policies that threaten their security? Why did Russia proceed with gas disputes with Ukraine instead of avoiding them? Gas wars undermined Russia's reputation as a reliable supplier, prompted its consumer states to seek diversification of supply, and threatened Russian economy, which is heavily dependent on energy resources. Russia engaged in Syrian conflict when its material capabilities and ability to project power were diminished. Its economy was debilitated by the fall in energy prices, economic sanctions and ongoing conflict in the Ukraine. Its involvement in military operations further isolated the country in the global system. What stands behind these calculations?

These perceived inconsistencies make Russian foreign policy quite unpredictable to its Western partners. While in some instances, such behavior can be explained with rational strategic considerations, it often seems to be hardly compatible with well-calculated, strategic foreign policy interests.

One can argue that all these events illustrate Churchill's famous quote on Russia: "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma..." (Churchill 1939, 6161). This quote seems to capture the very essence of Russia as an international actor that, at times, goes beyond the conventional principles of rationality and logic. The second less known part of the quote however might provide the key to Russia's understanding: "...but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest." In this dissertation, I would argue that, at times, a traditional approach to security is not sufficient to understanding some of the choices that Russia makes in the international arena. While physical security is important to Russia, in many cases

national interest in the preservation of its ontological security prevails. At times, Russia gives preference to its ontological security needs because their fulfillment affirms Russia's self-identity. It affirms, not only its physical existence, but primarily how it sees itself, and secondarily, how it wants to be seen by others.

My research, therefore, seeks to contribute to the debate by anchoring the concept of ontological awareness to the concept of security. It proposes to apply an analysis of embedded and historically routinized narrative of Russia as a great power to its foreign policy calculations.

This dissertation is structured in the following way. The first Chapter locates the concept of security in traditional security studies with emphasis on physical survival, ensured by material capabilities and the projection of power. Chapter Two challenges these assumptions with the concept of ontological security and its focus on continuity of identity. It provides insights into ontological security's take on systemic pressures and its effect on a state's behavior. The following chapter, Chapter Three, gives an overview of the study of identity as the basis of ontological security. In particular, its formation, contestation and routinization through habitual actions. Chapter Four applies the theoretical concepts from the previous sections to the study of Russian identity. This section outlines the importance of the biographic continuity of a great power narrative embedded in the country's ontological awareness. This narrative has been supported by the current regime through the activation of various ontological discourses, such as "Russia as a strong state", "the role of the West" and "Russia as an empire". The following two chapters apply theoretical foundations of the previous sections to the study of Russian foreign policy with two case studies. Chapter Five analyzes Russia's

involvement in gas wars with the Ukraine and Chapter Six studies Russia's engagement in the Syrian conflict. The standoff with the Ukraine took place at the time of economic growth caused by increases in energy prices. Russia's participation in the conflict, however, damaged its short and long term economic interests, as well as its ability to project power. Unlike the case of gas wars, Russia engaged in the Syrian Civil War within the context of diminished material capabilities and thus, it further strained its ability to project power. Despite this important difference in the Kremlin's ability to project power, both cases were consistent in supporting the biographic continuity of Russia's great power narrative, regardless of the consequences. My research seeks to explain these inconsistencies. The dissertation concludes with the overview of the findings, their practical applications, and suggestions for the future investigation.

Chapter 1: Concept of Security and Traditional Security Studies

...not if you are sensible. This is no fair fight, with honor on one side and shame on the other. It is rather a question of saving your lives and not resisting those who are far too strong for you...

Thucydides

The main aspiration of this dissertation is to complement existing theoretical approaches in security studies in explaining Russia's choices in its foreign policy. Different theories analyze security as an interplay of distinct notions. Traditional security studies that center on realist theory focus on material capabilities and the ability to project power as means to safeguard security. Constructivism and critical security studies expand the field by emphasizing the importance of norms, institutions, identity and culture. Despite their differences, these theoretical approaches converge on considering physical survival as an ultimate goal of state's security. The preference for any action in a global system, therefore, is calculated against this priority. One can argue that, at times, Russia's policy choices go against known assumptions of security theories. Instead of enhancing them, they undermine a country's ability to safeguard its security and physical survival. How can we explain such inconsistencies?

In this chapter, I provide a literature review of traditional security theories and their principles. This chapter is divided into three main parts and has the following structure. At the beginning, I outline a brief discussion on the contested nature of the term security. The following section underlines basic concepts of realist theory that are associated with security and the contributions of other theories, such as economic an

institutional liberalism. In the final part, the reader is introduced to alternative views on security. These include: critical theory, strategic culture, the Copenhagen school and constructivism. Despite divergent views among these theoretical approaches, they all consider survival as an ultimate goal in an international system.

The Concept of Security

National security has been an important concept in the field of international relations. However, despite its importance, it has been largely overlooked. In order to understand security, we must first understand the concept of security. Buzan (1991) states that the difficulty of discussing security stems partially from weakness of its definition. Buzan notes a subsidiary role that security has traditionally played to the concepts of power and peace. While the literature on power has a well-developed body of theoretical writing, the same could not be said until recently about defining the concept of security with full clarity. The persistent underdevelopment of thinking about security could be explained, according to him, in at least five different ways.

The first could be that the idea of security overall has proven to be too complex to attract analysts who, therefore, neglected in the past the concept of security in favor of other more easily definable concepts. A second and more convincing explanation, however, is the overlap between the concepts of security and power under conditions of “acute confrontation.” A crude realist model of international politics has been perceived as struggle for power that drove the states. Security, therefore, was perceived as a mere derivative of power, especially military power. It was conceptually diminished in two ways. These were either how well any state or group of states were doing in the struggle for power; or the stability of the balance of power. It is important to note, however, that

power and security were not interchangeable concepts. They merely appeared to be that way. This appearance, according to Buzan, was sufficiently convincing to diminish the analysis of security as an independent concept.

Another reason for the underdevelopment of security lay in various theoretical challenges to realist “orthodoxy” until the end of the 1970s, one of them was a concept of interdependence, was caused primarily by America’s economic troubles at that time. The main emphasis, therefore, was mainly on economic issues. Military related issues were considered less important than the outcomes involving interdependency. Another reason was methodological upheaval, which became prominent in the field of international relations at that time when scientific, quantitative methodology was unfit for the analysis of essentially contested concepts which were dominated by behaviorism.

A fourth reason for the conceptual underdevelopment of the security concept was the nature of strategic studies. As a policy-oriented field that analyzes predominantly defense needs, strategic studies is empirically centered. It is, therefore, constrained and does not go beyond pressing issues of national policy. Despite extensive use of the term security in strategic studies, it is used predominantly within the context of a realist vision of the struggle for power. Buzan (1991) lists the appeal of symbolic ambiguity for the term security to be used by policymakers and state practitioners. Both the former Soviet Union and the United States, for example, have benefited greatly from the exaggeration of threat levels that they posed to each other. This ambiguity of the term security has, therefore, allowed policy makers to disguise their malevolent motives under the pretenses of national security.

Based on the analysis above, I would argue that security is an “essentially contested concept” (Gallie 1962). As argued by Schulze, “the concept of national security does not lend itself to neat and precise formulation. It deals with a wide variety of risks, about whose probabilities we have little knowledge, and of contingencies whose nature we can only dimly perceive.” (Schulze 1973, 529-530). Security as a concept requires a referent object. We need to denote the term security to ensure that we share the same definition. According to Buzan, one soon discovers that security has many potential referent objects, on several different levels, as one moves down through the state to the level of individuals (Buzan 1991, 26).

The nature of security, therefore, requires an agreed-upon definition. Despite the fact that numerous writers have attempted to define it, consensus has not been reached.

Some researchers center the definition of security around the concept of threat:

John E. Mroz: (Security is) the relative freedom from harmful threats (Mroz 1980, 105).

Others associate security with ability to pursuit of national interests:

Penelope Hartland-Thunberg: (National security is) the ability of a nation to pursue successfully its national interests, as it sees them. (Hartland-Thunberg 1982, 50)

Another group of analysts considers security to be closely tied to the concept of values:

Lippmann: a nation is secure to the extent to which it is not in danger of having to sacrifice its core values if it wishes to avoid war, and is able, if challenged, to maintain them by victory in such a war. (Quoted in Wolfers 1962, 150).

Wolfers: Security, in any objective sense, measures the absence of threats to acquired values, in a subjective sense, the absence of fear that such values will be attacked. (Wolfers 1962, 150)

Tager & Simonie: National security is that part of government policy having as its objective the creation of national and international political conditions favorable

to the protection or extension of vital national values against existing and potential adversaries. (Tager & Simonie 1973, 36)

These definitions point out some of the criteria for national security, such as the centrality of values, the importance of threat and the political nature of security. With the aim to provide more clarity, these definitions leave some questions unanswered. For example, how can we define “core values”? Should they be considered a fixed or changing reference object? Is national security really *national* or the expression of the will of dominant groups? The inadequacy of these definitions should not be discouraging, however (Buzan 1991, 18). The same challenges existed in finding precise definitions of concepts such as power and justice. Although the precise definition would always be controversial, the general sense of the term is clear. In the case of security, most analysts agree that, in general terms, it could be understood as freedom from threat. Security, therefore, is the ability of states and societies to maintain independent identity and functional integrity.

Classical Security Theory

Most writers agree that the term security is a “contested concept”. Many agree that it implies a freedom from threats, but there is a major disagreement whether the main focus should be on “individual”, “national” or “international” security.

Hobbes, Clausewitz and Thucydides laid the foundation for security studies. Hobbes rooted security in the problem of just being human, in human biological and psychological make-up. For Hobbes, humans use, or threaten to use, force in a cycle of violence and counter-violence to get what they want. Therefore, the concept of security is central to the human condition (Kolodziej 2005). In turn, von Clausewitz and Thucydides exposed the security dilemma among states and societies and considered it as embedded

in the nation-state system. They extended the argument and concluded that states, like individuals, live under conditions of perpetual conflict. Unlike individuals, states, however, cannot submit to a Leviathan to escape conflict since they are Leviathans themselves (Kolodziej 2005).

The traditional approach to studying security, therefore, centers on nation states as the main actors in the international system. From the *Treaty of Westphalia*, states have been considered “the universal standard of political legitimacy”, with no higher authority to regulate their relations with one another. For realists, the key factor in regulating states’ behavior is power in its principal form – military power. This material capacity of a state constitutes its ability to influence decisively, not only the behavior of other states, but of the system itself. Other forms of power (economic, technological, etc.) are seen as subordinate to the use of force. According to realists, states in the international system are expected to choose their actions to address risks when power is threatened. States are mostly worried about the military power of other states. It is important to note that realists and neo-realists alike consider the imperative of pursuing power to be imposed on the states. It is exogenous and outside of a state’s capacity to ignore. Therefore, states cannot change this systemic condition. Hence, inter-state relations are seen as a struggle for power, as states attempt to take advantage of one another.

In the self-help world, there is no alternative for the states but to seek their own protection. The traditional notion of security in international relations theory, therefore, assumes that nation-states have *one driving goal in their relations with other states – their own survival*. Therefore, they calculate their foreign policy decisions solely with that goal in mind. In addition, classical security theory takes for granted the universally

rational nature of states as agents in the international system. In the context of perfect information, this shared rationality arguably allows states to calculate one another's actions and predict the outcomes. As rational agents, states would make their calculations, considering survival as their priority.

Another assumption of the traditional approach to national security concerns the anarchic nature of the international system. According to realist and neo-realist theories, the international system is anarchic. Anarchy implies that there is no central authority capable of controlling state behavior. This creates uncertainty and, therefore, there is a lack of trust among states, as they can never be sure of their neighbors' intentions. Physical survival, therefore, is the basic driving force that influences a state's behavior. It is the anarchy of the system that, according to neo-realists, compels states to seek power over all other competing values. For realists, the acquisition and preservation of power is the overriding aim of a state's action. Theorists, such as Morgenthau (1948), envision a wide range of ways that states can enhance their notion of power. Neo-realists put their emphases on the concept of security that ensures the survival of the state in a system of anarchy through military capabilities. For example, Waltz (1979) notes that survival is a necessary prerequisite for achieving any goals of the state. Survival is the essence of the traditional concept of security, the highest aim in a world of anarchy. Only when survival is ensured can the state seek other goals (Mearsheimer 2001). Therefore, the very system of international relations encourages states to seek security.

Neo-realists, or structural realists, have exogenous explanations of the foreign policy choices of states when ensuring security. They focus solely on the structure of the international system in explaining outcomes of international interactions. According to

neo-realists, the international system is anarchic by nature and it is characterized by self-help and zero-sum gains in relations among different states. According to Waltz (1979), the creation of a world government, one that would imply the peaceful settlement of world disputes, is unattainable. Thus, Waltz opted for realist theory, where anarchic competition is taken as an unquestioned reality and the use of force is seen as a legitimate instrument for creating order in the international system. It is this structure, according to Waltz, that determines the predatory behavior of states. Therefore, the only unit-level event of interest to neo-realists should be changes in states' material capabilities; these result in distribution changes of the capabilities in the international system.

From the neo-realist point of view, the emergence of a more assertive Russian policy is a natural outcome of “pushing and shoving created by the structural pressures of the international system” that Waltz (1979) called “socialization of the system.” Therefore, it could be argued that the nature of the international system itself predetermines Russia's behavior as an international actor. Moreover, the changes and shifts in Russia's foreign policy choices can be explained by the structure of the international system and its pressures.

Different schools of thought, within realist tradition, have different understandings of the means to ensure physical survival. Offensive realism considers anarchy as an incentive for expansion. States strive to maximize their power relative to other states. Only the accumulation of power could guarantee that other states would not harm or conquer them. This encourages states to improve their power capabilities relative to others. Defensive realists differ in their beliefs. The central issue of security in defensive realism is relational and lies in the understanding of security dilemma. Under

conditions of anarchy, an increase in power of some states causes other states to feel less secure. As a result, states may pursue purely security seeking strategies that instead generate hostility and conflicts. Defensive realism therefore provides a more nuanced study of security policies and advocates moderate strategies (Taliaffero 2000, 129).

Despite the centrality of power for realists Morgenthau (1948) emphasizes the importance of other aspects that assist in understanding of security, such as national character and morale. Therefore, Morgenthau's version of realism is not divorced from profound moral foundation (Pham 2008, 258). For Morgenthau, national character and national morale stand out among other qualitative factors. In spite of their seeming elusiveness, they exude decisive influence upon the character of a nation. These qualities set one nation apart from others and show a high degree of resilience to change. Such characteristics are important, both on the national and the individual levels. National character cannot fail to influence national power because of the role that it plays in shaping the perceptions and decisions of elites in the political process. Those who act for the nation in peace and war, formulate, execute and support its policies, elect and get elected, mold public opinions, produce and consume bear the imprints of those intellectual and moral qualities that make up national character.

Morgenthau (1948) notes the extreme importance of considering national character and morale in foreign policy calculations. National character, with a strong commitment to ethical imperatives and restraints, determines the choice of national interests that are in the center of foreign policy analysis (Pham 2008, 257). All nations, therefore, should aspire to allocate their resources rationally with clear understanding of the distinction between the necessary and variable elements of national interest. The

priority is given to those elements of national interest attainment of which is necessary for a nation's survival (Pham 2008, 263). In turn, the objectives of foreign policy must be defined in terms of the national interest and must be supported with adequate power (Morgenthau 1948). They have to be taken into account, however difficult it may be, to access such elusive and intangible factors. Failure to do so would lead to errors in judgment and policies. (Morgenthau 1948, 128).

Russia for Morgenthau, for example, is characterized by “elementary source and persistence” with a tradition of obedience to the authority of the government and traditional fear of the foreigner have made large permanent military establishments acceptable to the population (Morgenthau 1948, 128). He considers Russian values in the camp of militaristic nations. These nations are able to plan, prepare and wage war at the moment of their choosing. More importantly, they can start a preventative war whenever they see it fit for the cause with more ease than governments of pacifist nations (Morgenthau 1948).

In his book, *National Security and Core Values in American History*, Walker III (2009) offers a different reading of the importance of national character for the security of any state. According to Walker, the existence of distinct American character requires constant safeguard and nurturing in an arguably hostile world. Therefore, core values do not only determine the state's national power, as noted by Morgenthau, but they also influence its state of security. For Walker, objective security, as a defense of core values domestically, is enhanced by the projection of these values internationally. Americans, for example, who imagine that their country is in a prominent position on the world stage, think about the protection of liberty in tandem with the pursuit of security. The United

States, therefore, promotes selectively as part of its foreign policy, core values, such as the universal appeal of democracy, the market economy and limited government. The effort to export these values internationally, therefore, is encouraged to enhance the nation's security.

Walker III (2009) introduces the concept of security ethos¹ and what defines it. Three factors explain the connection between core values and a security policy in Walker's analysis: political economy, fear and military power. Fear is the basis of resorting to the use of armed forces. Moreover, fear mobilizes people to give support to dubious policies and it can prevent a dispassionate assessment of presumed threats to the nation's security. A political economy addresses the structural demands of expansive capitalism in search of new markets with reflexive attachments to foreign trade, both by elites and the general public. The export of core values, therefore, assists the United States in reconciling the domestic inconsistencies of a capitalist society. Williams' concept of Open Door imperialism seeks to explain how the United States engages with the world. He writes: "Expanding the marketplace enlarged the area of freedom. Expanding the area of freedom enlarged the marketplace." To guarantee security "one needs first a continent, then a hemisphere, next the world." (Williams 1976, 42)

Other schools of thought have provided various contributions to classical security studies, despite the differences in their approaches from that of the realist school. For instance, economic liberalism, while offering a powerful explanation that goes against the basis of realist theory as to why the states do not resort to force to get their way, provides

¹In Sociology, ethos is defined as the fundamental character or spirit of a culture; the underlying sentiment that informs the beliefs, customs, or practices of a group or society; dominant assumptions of a people or period.

one of the most valuable methodological contributions to classical security studies. The liberal economic assumption of the rational self-interested actor is drawn from micro-economic theory. Rational actors, according to economic liberals, apply cost-benefit analyses to their calculations when determining the desirability of action. They choose strategies in allocating their scarce resources to maximize gains with the least costs and risks. This allows actors to calculate the effectiveness of means to reach particular ends. The model of rational behavior, therefore, is expected to produce strategies that most effectively advance an actor's aims. It is expected, as well, to project logical and predictable consequences of a cause of action. Any deviation from the perfect model is considered to be less than optimal (Kolodziej 2005).

Institutional liberals share some major assumptions with realists, such as the centrality of the state, conditions of anarchy in the international system marked by great uncertainty with states, like individuals, behaving "as if" they were egoists. Unlike realists, however, they consider the fact that states have a wide variety of choices between cooperation and conflict, instead of the realists' constant expectation of conflict. Further, the liberals widen the notion of international relations. By widening the scope of state interests, institutionalists have to include a large number of actors and factors that impact the decisions of a state. Transnational actors (multinational corporations, inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations) and domestic level regimes and actors (interest groups, networks, etc.) are included in the analysis. Keohane and Nye (1977) summarize these interactions in a complex interdependence with the networks of exchanges between states and non-state actors with continuous bargaining. What matters for liberal institutionalists in these exchanges are absolute, rather than relative, gains. For

liberals, states' advancements in military capabilities do not necessarily translate into damage to another state's interests. Their view of power, therefore, presents a more nuanced view, where a relative increase in a state's gains does not necessarily have to be viewed as threatening.

Alternative Views on Security

In this section, I would provide a brief analysis of theories that differ from the traditional ones in their perceptions of security. These include: constructivism, the Copenhagen School, strategic culture and critical security studies (CSS).

Constructivism

According to constructivists, the fundamental structures of international politics are social rather than material. Unlike realists, who concentrate on the material capabilities of states, constructivists put great emphases on principles and rules in anarchic system. They believe that the fundamental structures of international politics are socially constructed and, therefore, can be changed by the way we think about international relations by putting emphasis on shared knowledge and practices. Constructivists believe that dominant social science assumptions about static and unchanging interests and identity severely limit social inquiries to means-ends or narrow self-serving instrumental thinking (Kolodziej 2005).

In contrast to neo-realists, constructivists have different perceptions of the causes of foreign policy of a state. Unlike neo-realists, who have exogenous systematic explanations of foreign policy choices, constructivists consider the main causes to be endogenous. A Wendt (1992) noted that international security systems can vary between

cooperative and competitive depending on “the extent to which and the manner in which the self is identified cognitively with the other”.

Moreover, as Hopf (1998) argues, constructivism promises “to return culture and domestic politics to international relations theory.” He further notes that any identity that the state has in world politics is in part the product of the social practices that constitute the identity at home. Constructivist research, therefore, devotes special attention to identity formation, with connections to history, tradition, and culture. These constructed identities and interests that correspond to them are fundamental to constructivist analyses, since responses to these questions precede strategic analysis and means-ends thinking. Moreover, changing actor identities and differentiated interests are open to questions and are therefore problematic (Kolodziej 2005). Hopf argues that a state’s collection of identities, its understanding of itself, can affect how that state, or more precisely its decision makers, understands itself. This collection of Self Identities might affect identities of others in international affairs (Hopf 2002).

Despite the differences listed above, mainstream constructivists share some of the same assumptions as classical writers with regard to security studies (Steele 2008). Some constructivists accept the fact that states are key in the study of security, with the anarchic nature of international politics and physical survival as one of major national interests (Wendt 1999). Therefore, they, too, share the “survival” notion (Steele 2008) of security. I conclude, therefore, that, despite their valuable contributions to broadening our understanding of relations among states and their focuses on endogenous factors that drive a state’s security, constructivists consider traditional security as the driving force of states’ behaviors. Therefore, constructivism cannot provide viable explanations to the

puzzle of my research, namely why states behave contradictorily to the survival priorities of traditional security studies.

Copenhagen School

The Copenhagen school provides valuable contributions to the study of security that go beyond the military element and state conceptualization of security. As a part of the post-positivist movement in international relations, that gained momentum after the End of Cold War, it provides a critical analysis of classical security studies. The Copenhagen school focuses on three major concepts: sectors of security, regional security complexes and securitization.

Its founders expand the notion of security by putting emphases on its social aspects. In their primary book, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde (1998) break the concept of security into different “sectors”: military/state, political, societal, economic and environmental. They define sectors as different issues (societal, environmental, etc., alongside military and political) that can be the focus when speaking of security (Buzan 1998). The authors seek to construct a more radical view of security studies by exploring threats to referent objects and the securitization of those threats. The Copenhagen school, therefore, widens the definition of security by introducing an agenda that extends to a broad range of issues that go beyond the mere survival of the state.

Based on the concept of securitization developed by Wæver, “security” can be analyzed as a speech act with prominent consequences within the context of international politics. In the process of “framing,” the actor securitizes the topic of concern to the audience as a “threat,” thereby legitimizing extraordinary measures against the threat.

The very concept of the threat, therefore, is socially constructed and framed by the actor for the audience. A security issue, therefore, is not an objective threat, but rather something that has been “defined” as a threat. The conceptualization of the threat goes beyond the idea of “objective” and “material” that lies at the heart of classical security studies. Security, therefore, for the Copenhagen school is a self-referential practice. However, to successfully securitize the issue a presentation of an issue as an existential threat (securitization move), it has to be accepted by the targeted audience. Only through the acceptance of an issue by the audience can the issue be moved from normal politics to emergency measures.

The analysis of securitization of the Copenhagen school, as well as constructivism’s study of identity, provides important insights to understanding endogenous factors relevant to a state’s perception of security. However, as with traditional security scholars, the members of the Copenhagen school share the traditional “military” understanding of security as an existential threat to some object’s survival. As well as constructivism, therefore, the Copenhagen school cannot serve as a theoretical approach that might explain why Russia’s foreign policy in some instances prioritizes its ontological security in favor of policies essential to its physical survival.

Strategic Culture

Much of the research in strategic studies is consistent with the conclusions of Nye and Lynn-Jones (1979) that strategic studies have been characterized by American ethnocentrism and the neglect of “national styles” of strategy and security. Snyder (1977) argued that culture could affect significantly grand strategy and state behavior. He coined the term “strategic culture” and brought it into security studies.

Snyder defines strategic culture as a “set of semi-permanent elite beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral patterns socialized into a distinctive mode of thought.” Snyder argues that different states have different strategic preferences that are rooted in the early or formative experiences of the state, and are influenced to some degree by the philosophical, political, cultural, and cognitive characteristics of the state and its elites (Snyder 1977; Leites 1951). Objective or “ahistorical” variables such as technology, or relative material capabilities are of secondary importance. It is strategic culture that gives the meaning to these variables. Historical experiences and historically-rooted preferences tend to constrain responses to change the “objective” strategic environment and produce unique responses to security threats. If strategic culture changes, it changes slowly. Scholars contend, therefore, that political culture has both anthropological (language, religion, customs, etc.) and historical origins in shared experiences and interpretation of common memories (Lantis 2002, 90-98).

The theory was an attempt by Snyder to challenge the unitary rational actor assumptions in security policy studies. This does not imply, however, that it necessarily rejects rationality. Strategic culture is compatible with the notions of rationality.² What it argues is that factors other than the material can also play a role in influencing policy decisions and behavior. It is incompatible, however, with game theoretical approaches. In game theory, strategy focuses mainly on the choices based on the expectations of what

² Snyder’s first work on the topic appeared in 1977 and he published quite a bit on the subject, as have more recent authors who refer to his work. Nathan Leites in his work (1953) introduced the idea of the operational code of the Politburo as means of cognitive analysis of Soviet decision-making. Leites’ work has influenced a number of scholars such as Alexander George and Ole Holsti to study cognitive and motivational factors in political psychology.

other players will do; in a strategic culture approach, it is implied that choices of behavior by the state are not necessarily contingent upon the behavior of others. Instead, a historically-imposed inertia on choice makes responses less sensitive to specific contingencies. Therefore, rather than rejecting rationality per se, the strategic culture challenges the ahistorical, non-cultural neorealist framework for analyzing foreign policy choices.

Hence, strategic culture is based on convictions that domestic conditions shape a state's strategy as an international actor. It argues that elites articulate a wider manifestation of public opinion into a distinctive mode of strategic thinking. The focus of strategic culture, therefore, is on analysis of the national style of strategy. While insights of strategic culture provide a culture-sensitive and nuanced study of security, built on constructivist foundations (Lantis 2005), this theory does not directly address the issue of a state's preference for its ontological security in times of crisis.

Critical Security Studies

Critical Security Studies (CSS) is understood in two distinct ways in the theory of international relations. First, CSS serves as an umbrella to all approaches critical of the prevailing realist inspired view of security. Secondly, it is a distinct theory. As a theoretical approach, Critical Security Studies requires thinking about alternatives. It could be considered as a mode of thought that exposes the current common doctrines as inadequate when dealing with global problems and tries to find other elements that could be thought of as alternative explanations (Brincat, Lima and Nunez 2012). The idea of being critical is bound with the concept of emancipation, since it criticizes an established way of thinking. According to critical theory, the established way of thinking is usually

the one that works for the benefit of established social structures and power. Critical thinking, therefore, comes with an implication of change that could be made to existing beliefs and structures. It implies that you do not accept the existing world as it but rather what it could be after the change.

According to Booth (2005), CSS is a theory of world security that is different from mainstream approaches. It does not advise “the Prince,” but rather stands “outside the contemporary situation as far as possible and holds a mirror” in order to show to people what the world is like and what it will continue to be like if the behavior continues to be dominated by the traditional ideas that made us. Booth provides a clear distinction between critical versus problem-solving concepts of security. CSS offers “a security studies that goes beyond problem solving within the status quo, and instead seeks to help engage through critical theory with the problem of status quo”.

There are a number of differences between traditional and critical security theories. First, a driving agenda of critical theories of security has been that threat, danger, security, and risk are not objective conditions, but instead are social constructs that are shaped by dominant discourse (Weaver 1995; Buzan *et al.* 1998; Williams 2003). Further CSS expands definition of security beyond supremacy of the state and encompasses individuals, human rights, culture, the environment and economy. Moreover, CSS views human security as more fundamental than security of the states (Williams 2004, 148). It is built on a Kantian understanding of security as promoting emancipation and individual justice. Another important difference, therefore, is in the notion of emancipation in security. Emancipation and security are closely connected. For Booth (2005), emancipation signifies “freedom of oppression and opportunity to explore

being human” while security is a mean of attaining emancipation through “reduction of threat that impose life threatening conditions of insecurity”. To practice security therefore is to promote emancipation. However, emancipation is not a state of being, but rather a condition of becoming (Williams 2004) as it is built on the Kantian notion that no one can be fully emancipated until everybody is emancipated. Therefore, CSS shifts the focus from the concepts of power prevalent in classical security theory. Finally, CSS has a different understanding of the notions of states, identity and security. Traditional security studies, along with constructivists, consider states and identity to be primary and security as an extension of the interactions in international system. Critical scholars have a reverse approach. For them, the need for security is primary reason for the creation of the states, and social construction of shared identity that glues society inside the boundaries of any state.

In conclusion, even though the above mentioned alternative approaches to security studies enhance the classical security framework in analyses of threats to a state’s security, they do not provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for my research. These approaches either fail to address directly a state’s preferences concerning its ontological security, as in the case of strategic culture and CSS, or side with traditional security studies on the centrality of physical survival as the main motivational factor of a state’s behavior as in case of Constructivism or the Copenhagen School. There is a need, therefore, for a different approach that might provide an explanation to my puzzle -- the concept of ontological security.

Chapter 2: Ontological Security

Chapter 2 builds on the discussion in previous section. In chapter 1, I reviewed traditional and alternative views on security. In spite of many important differences. These approaches all converge in considering policies that ensure physical survival as an ultimate priority of agents in international system. Therefore, these theories cannot provide viable explanations as to why, at times, states make preferences for policies that undermine their ability to provide security and ensure physical survival. This chapter seeks to fill in this gap of the previously discussed theories.

This chapter has the following structure. At the beginning, I introduce the definition and important assumptions of ontological security, along with arguments that support treatment of states as individuals. These justifications are the basis to apply ontological security as a concept borrowed from psychoanalysis to international relations theory. Following this, I outline how ontological security relates to physical security, and in what instances these securities converge and diverge. The next section will explore the relationship between ontological security and the system of international relations. This connection is twofold: on one hand, different ontological concepts, such as “shame” and “honor”, could constrain an agent’s behavior in the system. On the other hand, exogenous systemic shocks could inflict trauma to state’s ontological security. As the result of these shocks a state’s embedded ontological narratives could either rupture or consolidate the continuity of the state’s ontological security.

Main assumptions of ontological security

The term, ontological security, was introduced by R.D. Laing, a Scottish psychiatrist (1969). Laing considered a person to be ontologically secure when he or she is capable of socializing and integrating in the world holistically. Moreover, an ontologically secure person when encountering another, does so without the loss of identity. An ontologically insecure person is one who does not possess a strong degree of confidence in his autonomous existence in the world, and therefore constantly questions his identity and autonomy. He therefore interprets every day occurrences through a different symbolic hierarchy (Laing 1969).

Giddens (1991) further developed and expanded the concept of ontological security. According to Giddens, ontological Security is essential for the survival of any individual. Important aspects of human ontological security are *trust and routine*. Basic trust forms the original nexus from which a combined emotive-cognitive orientation towards the other, the object-world, and self-identity emerges. As developed through the loving attentions of early caretakers, basic trust links self-identity in a fateful way to the appraisals of others. The trust which the child vests in caretakers can be seen as a sort of emotional inoculation against existential anxieties. It is the trust that serves as a protection against future threats and dangers, and it allows an individual to sustain hope and courage in the face of whatever debilitating circumstances the person might later confront.

Trust in itself by nature is in a certain sense creative, because it entails a commitment that is “a leap into the unknown”. The establishing of basic trust, therefore, is important condition of the elaboration of self-identity.

A concept closely related to trust or more accurately its lack is *anxiety*. Every human individual could, in principle, be overwhelmed by anxieties about risks which are implied by the very business of living. Anxiety is to be understood in relation to the overall security system that the individual develops, his ability to trust, rather than only as a situationally specific phenomenon connected to particular risks and dangers. Anxiety has to be distinguished from fear. Fear is a response to a specific threat and therefore has a definite object. Anxiety, in contrast, disregards the object. In other words, being highly subjective, anxiety is a generalized state of the emotions of the individual. It depends, to a large degree, on a person's knowledge and sense of power and trust vis-à-vis the external world. Anxiety, therefore, is fear which has lost its object. It is of endogenous origin and tied to individual's perceptions.

One of the ways to avoid anxiety is through the creation of routines - the other important element of human ontological security. The discipline of routines helps to constitute a "formed framework" for existence by cultivating a sense of "being". Moreover, the *maintaining of habits and routines is a crucial bulwark against threatening anxieties*. The routines create cognitive and behavioral *certainty and predictability*. Day to day routines come to be invested with emotional significance. The need for sense of security emerges very early in life and "is much more important in human being than the impulses resulting from a feeling hunger or thirst" (Giddens 1991). All individuals develop a framework of ontological security based on the routines of various forms. These routines create confident expectations, even if probabilistic, about the means-ends relationships that govern social life (Mitzen 2006). People handle dangers, and the fears associated with them, in terms of emotional and behavioral

“formulae” which have come to be part of their everyday behavior and thought. Routines, therefore, are important in relation to the ontological security of individuals.

Security comes from the caretakers’ approvals, while anxiety is the manifestation of disapproval of self. Anxiety attacks the core of the self, once a basic security system is set up. It is through a basic security system, the origin of ontological security, that the individual experiences self in relation to a world of person and objects. This is organized through basic trust. Trust, therefore, is the basis for security in general and ontological security in particular. The lack of trust creates anxiety and negatively effects ontological security. To be ontologically secure is to possess, on the level of unconscious and practical consciousness, “answers” to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses. These answers are highly subjective and are contingent upon the ontological awareness of an individual.

Ontological awareness is not the same as awareness of self-identity, even though the two are closely linked. It does not just accept reality, but instead creates ontological reference points. One such point is tradition that offers an organizing medium for social life. The other aspect is the relationship with others. We are aware of other persons’ feelings and experiences only on the basis of empathetic inferences from our own. An important part in relations with others is played by trust. Trust in others begins in the context of individual confidence in caretaking figures. Another type of existential question concerns self-identity and presumes reflexive awareness and presupposes “self-consciousness”. Self-identity therefore is not something that is given, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual. It

presumes continuity across time and space. Self-identity is such a continuity as *interpreted reflexively* by the agent.

According to Giddens (1991), ontologically insecure individuals exhibit a couple of similar characteristics. The first is the lack of consistent feeling of *biographical continuity*. The second is a response to the *external environment* where people approach the future with apprehension of possible risks to their existence and are paralyzed in terms of practical action. Third, the person may fail to develop *trust in his own self-integrity*. The individual feels morally “empty” because he feels the lack of warmth of “loving self-regard.” Often, as a result of that, the actor subjects his or her actions to constant self-scrutiny. The individual with a healthy sense of self identity has a feeling of biographic continuity, the person establishes a protective cocoon that filters out many of the dangers which in principle can threaten the integrity of the self.

As we can see from above, the concept of ontological security has been used in the field of psychology with the end goal to understand individuals. Its assumptions and findings have been adopted by Giddens, who provides a sociological interpretation which can be consequently applied to the study of states in international system. A question therefore arises on the validity of using state as a level of analysis in ontological security. A couple of moments have to be noted in this respect. First of all, political science has not been opposed to use research similar to ontological security, but sees its utility mostly as supplementing existing theory (Steele 2008, 15). In other words, the role of such theoretical approaches was seen mostly in refinement of “rationality assumptions that pervade the discipline” (Finnemore 2003, 154). Secondly, as has been noted by Steel, using the individual to interpret collective behavior is a “level of analysis problem”

prevalent in IR (Steele 2008). Ontological security scholars therefore suggest strategies on how to deal with the dilemma. One of the ways to address it is to point out the ubiquity of individual-to-state recognition in IR noted by Wendt (2004). In “State as Person in IR”, Wendt states that such attribution “pervade social science and IR scholarship in particular” (Wendt 2004, 289). The approach, therefore, could be described as “everybody does it, so I can do it” (Steele 2008). The third explanation, suggested by Steele, is in the shift from individual to emotion as a level of an analysis. He notes that all mainstream IR theories such as realists, neoliberalists and conventional constructivists, make assumptions of some kind of emotion operating on the level of the states. For example, Crawford notes that “fear” as an emotion is the driving force of neorealist and neoliberal approaches (Crawford 2000, 120-123). In addition in rationalist approaches, states are attributed “cold and calculating” characteristics. To follow, Mitzen (2006b) offers another explanation of attributing human behavior to the states in ontological security. She notes that inter-society routines assist in framing identity coherence for each group, this in turn “provides individuals with a measure of ontological security” (Mitzen 2006b, 352). She therefore states that the ontological security of a state satisfies the ontological security of individuals. These ontological securities therefore are closely connected. The fifth explanation is offered by McSweeney (1999) when he outlines that states are not people. Despite that it would be methodologically correct to treat them “as if” they were people. Although states are the units of analysis in an international system, it is state leaders that decide on state actions. The action therefore is implemented by an individual and it depends on the capability of individual to make a difference to pre-existing state of affairs (Giddens 1984). Steele, as well, adopts this

position: because state agents represent the state they “are the state” because of moral burden of making policy choices and the capacity to implement these decisions (Steele 2008, 18). While individuals might differ in their ontological needs, they all have collective commitments to state self-identities. Based on this discussion, I would conclude that, despite some shortcomings, ontological security is a valuable theory to explain a state’s behavior in an international system.

For the states, as in the case with the individuals, ontological security is the “sense of who one is which enables and motivates actions and choice” (Mitzen 2006). Certainty, therefore, is an important component of states’ behaviors in the system. It entails, according to Steele, what one is doing and more importantly “why one is doing it” (Steele 2005, 526). This nature of the sense of self is perceived differently among scholars in ontological security. While some of them, like Steele, consider the basis of identity to be mostly endogenous, others, like Mitzen and Roe emphasize relational aspect of identities (Rumelili 2015, 56). In response to these distinct approaches, Prozorov underlines that external (relation to the Other) and internal (through domestically construct biographic narratives) aspects of self cannot be disassociated from one another (Prozorov 2011). The search for ontological security, therefore, combines both exogenous and endogenous aspects and can be perceived as explanatory, both to structures and the properties of units (Krolikowski 2008, Rumelili 2015).

As an essential element of ontological security of states, self-identity is continually reproduced. As is the case with individuals, such reproduction is highly subjective. The task the states face is not to “accept reality, but to create ontological reference points as an integral aspect of “going on” in the context of day to day life”

(Giddens 1991, 52). These points are not the truths that overcome the test of time, but rather they are subjective ideas that are constantly produced and enshrined through the routinized practices of the states. It is these routinized practice, and the narratives that form around them, that become central in any state's capacity to act, to have sufficient confidence in its space, and narratives about being able to make choices (Giddens 1991, 53-54).

Trust type, according to Krolkowski (2008), differentiates ontologically secure states from insecure). The notion of trust is, as well, at the basis of the relationship with the Other. Mitzen (2006) argues that all states satisfy their ontological needs by routinizing their social interactions; however, states differ in their attachment to routines: "some actors rigidly repeat routines, while others participate more reflexively" (Mitzen 2006, 342). The ontological security of a state, therefore, is achieved by *routinizing behaviors* with significant others where actors become attached to these relationships. The degree of "routinization" however depends on agent's level of basic trust (trust in continuity of others and object-world).

Basic trust of a state is established in the formative stages and is influenced by relations with others during these times. Mitzen defines healthy basic trust as a feeling of being at home: "home provides refuge from the threats and surveillance of the outside world. Homes provide constant, stable spaces to perform the routines of daily life and thus to reproduce self-conceptions. Knowing there is a space in which it is possible to be ones' self provides the confidence necessary to assert one's self and to experiment with new identities" (Mitzen 2006, 274). A healthy level of trust enables states to reflexively adapt their behavior to new information. This ability allows states to modify their

conduct, based on changed information, rather than retreating into habituated behaviors (Mitzen 2006, 350). States with flexible attachment styles are capable of pursuing “higher order goals” such as “sociation and development” (Mitzen 2006, 350).

As a result of healthy attachment style, ontologically secure states have a capacity to experience themselves as autonomous (Rossdale 2015). As has been noted by Laing, ontologically secure subjects are self-consciously authentic, consistent, and autonomous. They have a sense of continuity that allows them to encounter hazards of life “from a centrality firm sense of his own” as having a sense of “basic unity” (Laing 2010, 39). Autonomy is important component in defining the style of relationship. As Laing notes “uncertainty about the stability of autonomy lays open to the dread test in any relationship” where one can lose autonomy and identity (Laing 2010, 44). He further notes that “within the territory of ourselves there can be only our footprints” that is the core of ourselves which remains untouchably us (Laing 2010, 37).

States that lack healthy attachment styles have a “blind commitment to established routines” (Giddens 1991, 40). This behavior is “born out of unmastered anxiety” when breaking out of routines, even the ones that are physically harmful causes actors great paralyzing anxiety). Such state of anxiety can be replaced by blindly following the routines as patterns of behavior that “swallow up” the underlying anxiety (Giddens 2008, 43). As a result, a state with unhealthy attachment styles would blindly follow established routines even if they were detrimental to its physical survival. This goes against realist assumptions that states want to escape the security dilemma, however uncertainty prevents them from doing so. According to ontological security, the routines that states have established, both domestically and internationally, may drive states to

repeatedly engage in conflicts. In this instance, even dangerous for survival routines could create the sense of ontological security and make rational security seekers attached to the conflict. Ontological security, therefore, could shed light on a state's attachment to seemingly irrational conflict (Mitzen, 2006). When the ontological security of a state is challenged, states often "attempt to securitize subjectivity, which means search for one stable identity (regardless of its actual existence)" (Kinnvall 2004, 749). The securitization tends to assert identity of self and other in ways which achieve ontological security at the expense of others (Rossdale 2015, 373).

To summarize, if the instance of the ontological security of a state self-experiences is certain, consistent and stable existence enables a state to remain in control of its identity and capacity for action (Rumelili 2015, 58). Different variants of a state's basic trust could generate predictions on how states would behave in their interactions (Krolikowski 2008, 115). Actors with healthy basic trust exhibit a flexible sense of identity with a capacity for rational deliberation, and the ability to learn and adapt. Unlike ontologically secure states, the countries that are not secure experience instability and uncertainty which is caused by low basic trust. Biographic continuity of ontologically insecure states could be easily disrupted. As a result, these states lose their ability to answer questions about doing, acting and being. They clearly define their identity. To gain a sense of ontological security, these countries have to combat anxieties by rigidly repeating routines with others. They are unlikely to learn from their own experiences and therefore cannot easily update their biographic narratives (Krolikowski 2008). At times, these attachments to ontological routines may diverge from a state's interests of physical survival.

Relation between ontological security and physical security

Giddens defines ontological security as a “sense of continuity and order in events” (1991). Unlike the traditional concept of security that centers on survival, ontological security is a security of being. For Giddens, to be ontologically secure means to have answers to the fundamentally existential questions. Individual agents monitor their actions on a regular basis. When these actions are reproduced as routines they create a sense of continuity and order. Agents create routines that provide them with the sense of “security and order” that is important to their sense of self.

Ontological security is threatened with the *rupture of continuity*. This, as a rule, happens in critical situations or radical disjuncture of an unpredictable kind that affects substantial numbers of individuals and threatens to destroy institutionalized, “normal” routines (Rossdale 2015, 373). These situations produce anxiety and represent threats to identity. Unlike fear that is tied to a particular situation anxiety comes with the challenge to one’s identity (Giddens, 1986).

The following table can assist in conceptualizing major differences between ontological and traditional concepts of security that were discussed in the previous chapter. In addition, this table states the elements of ontological security that are important for my research.

Two concepts of security (Steele, 2008)

	Traditional Security	Ontological Security
Security as	Survival	Being
Agent structured by	Distribution of power (exogenous)	Routines and self-identity (endogenous)
Challenge/source of insecurity	Fear (in the face of threat)	Anxiety (Uncomfortable disconnect with Self)

Outcome of incorrect decisions in the face of challenge	Physical harm	Shame/dishonor
Measurement of outcome	Change in material capabilities; deaths; damage	Difference between biographical narrative and actual behavior; discursive remorse
Structural change	Change in distribution of power	Routinized critical situations; change in self-identity; change in agent routine

As we can see from the table above, the pursuit of ontological and physical securities is characterized by different dynamics, acts and discourses (Rumelili 2015). It challenges “exclusive association between security and survival, physical threat and defense”. One of the differences between ontological and physical securities is in the relationship with the *other*. Ontological security requires both differentiation and relationship with the other. While it stems from the relationship with the other, it *does not require the securitization of other as a threat*. Unlike ontological security, the pursuit of physical security, according to critical studies, presupposes identification of threats to survival that often entail *securitization of other* and the development of measures to defend oneself against an Other as a threat (Rumelili 2015, 54). Despite their differences however, physical and ontological security constitute two different but *interconnected* layers that relate to each other.

Rumelili (2015) argues that actors in an international system seek both physical and ontological securities. They are closely interlinked and the relationship between them determines different states of security. It means, therefore, that the state of security, of any given country, could be *determined by a state of its physical and ontological securities*. Rumelili, therefore, puts forward an analytical framework based upon two layers of security both ontological and physical. These states are not static, and at

different times, states can find themselves in different states of security. A country, therefore, according to the table below, could be in a state of different security: 1) ontologically and physically secure; 2) ontologically and physically insecure; 3) ontologically secure and physically insecure; and 4) ontologically secure and physically insecure.

For instance, the state of *ontological and physical insecurities* is when a country experiences both threats to its physical survival, instability and the uncertainty of its being. As argued by Campbell (1992), the threat of ontological insecurity tempts actors to frame others as threatening and inferior. In this case, ontological and physical insecurities support each other. Conversely, actors seek physical security by securitizing the other as the threat. Securitization of the other is supported by discourse of moral inferiority and threat of the other (Rumelili 2015).

In the case of *ontological security and physical insecurity*, actors have a stable sense of self in a relationship, where the Other is constructed as a threat to the survival. As a result, they are locked into a conflict, producing routines to maintain their certainty of being (Mitzen 2006). Both the state of physical and ontological insecurities, along with ontological security and physical insecurity, are securitized states. The major difference between them is in the securitization of the threat. While in the context of ontological insecurity, countries have ruptured the continuity of the narratives that they have to consistently reconstruct, in the instance of ontological security, the biographic narrative is consolidated. It gets reproduced in the process of securitization of the existing differences (Rumelili 2015).

In the case of *ontological insecurity and physical security*, it is the case where self does not perceive the other as a threat to its physical survival. Despite that, it experiences the instability and uncertainty of being in a relationship with the other. Rumelili (2015) argues that this state is highly unstable. This instability of being could be easily mobilized, manipulated and securitized into a concern about survival.

The state of *ontological and physical securities* is the most attractive state of security. In this instance, countries preserve their identities by maintaining us/them distinctions that are important for self while maintaining the state of physical security. In this instance, conflicts are sustainably resolved. Moreover, the issues that have caused the conflict, in the past, are successfully settled or are being negotiated through political channels (ibid).

Table 1 States of ontological/physical security (Rumelili 2015, 59)

	Physical security	Physical insecurity
Ontological insecurity	The Self experiences <i>instability and uncertainty</i> of being <i>Does not experience concern</i> about physical harm	The Self experiences <i>instability and uncertainty</i> of being Experiences <i>concern</i> about physical harm
Ontological security	The Self experiences <i>stability and certainty</i> of being <i>Does not experience concern</i> about physical harm	The Self experiences <i>stability and certainty</i> of being Experiences <i>concern</i> about physical harm

We can conclude, from the discussion above, that physical and ontological securities have a number of fundamental differences. Despite these distinctions, they co-exist and mutually reinforce each other. Because of this connection, Rumelili (2015) proposes a two layered framework of analysis of security that includes both physical and ontological aspects. As suggested by Rumelili, this approach substantially expands the study of security and it provides a more nuanced approach to its understanding. Moreover, it allows us to better explain the shifts from physical security to insecurity, and vice versa, through the needs of a state's ontological security.

Ontological security and other types of security in critical security studies

Ontological security is an independent theory. In spite of some similarities with other non-traditional concepts of security, under aegis of Critical Security Studies (CSS), such as human security and societal security, there are important differences that set theory of ontological security apart. One of the distinctions is associated with the perception of the term security. McSweeney (1999) stresses a positive connotation of the term that performs enabling function as a "property of a relationship, a quality making each secure in the other" (14-15). In ontological security however, an agent could feel ontologically secure when the Self and the other are in a negative relationship of animosity as well as in the positive one of friendship (Roe 2008).

Human security is another branch of critical security studies. It has emerged as a theoretical framework of security policy problems in the post-Cold War Era within the context of ethnic conflict, humanitarian disaster and human rights violations. As a result, a consensus emerged in the 1990s: the need to focus on the individual as the subject of security. This view challenged the state's claim as the sole referent object of security

studies. Human security, therefore, extended the framework of analysis with a wider spectrum of security threats both within and outside the state (Hudson, Kreidenweis and Carpenter 2013). Unlike human security that applies to individual actors, ontological security applies both to individual and collective agents (Roe 2008). Besides, ontological security does not seek to empower the individual it instead centers on the needs of stability and recognition. Human security on the other hand seeks mostly to satisfy physical human needs, such as freedom from violence, poverty, etc.

In terms of societal security, this concept was developed by the Copenhagen School and refers to "the ability of a society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions and possible or actual threats" and centers predominantly on threats to national and societal identities (Wæver 1993, 23). Rumelili (2015) notes at least two distinctions between societal and ontological types of security. First, societal security, as well as physical security, puts survival as the central concept of security. It defines security in the context of threat, danger and harm. This is unlike ontological security that could be satisfied within the context of physical insecurity with the satisfaction of embedded self-narratives. Secondly, societal security is preoccupied predominantly with threats to identities, while ontological security is not limited to a specific referent or sector of security (Rumelili 2015).

We can conclude, therefore, that despite some similarities, ontological security is a distinct theory under the aegis of critical theory and it has its own distinct set of theoretical believes.

Ontological security narratives as determinants of foreign policy choices

Ontological security focuses on “biographical continuity” (Giddens 1991, 53) and solid narratives of the self (Kinnval 2004, 746). Biographic narrative, as Giddens understood it, is a “narrative of self”. It is a story or stories by which identity is reflexively understood by self and others (Giddens 1991, 243). In other words, it is a way state justifies its actions, or “talks” about its deeds in identity terms because “only in the telling of the event it acquires meaning, the meaning that makes such event politically relevant” (Lang 2002, 13). Based on that, Steele defines biographic narrative for the purposes of ontological security as “specific “tellings” which link by implication a policy with a description of understanding of a state “self” (Steele 2008, 10). Narrative, therefore, becomes a starting point that allows scholars to analyze how a state perceives itself and how such perception constrain and enable the state’s actions. Narratives play an important role in the political life of any state. It is narratives that help us make sense of the world and create our own identities (Somers 1994, 606). There are a few properties of narratives worth mentioning for the role they play in ontological security.

First, narratives are crucial for political action. They influence how we perceive reality around us and how we respond to the world. In this respect, narratives play a critical role in the construction of political behavior. People create and use narratives to understand the political realities around them (Patterson and Monroe 1998, 321). Therefore, narratives act as foundational cognitive frameworks that give meaning to political action (Subotic 2016, 4).

Second, narratives are purposefully constructed and contested. The construction of state narrative is a complex and elaborate process. It involves multiple political and cultural actors. Narratives are mostly a constructed interpretation of past events and the

general place of the state in an international system. Narratives, therefore, fix the meaning of the past. By doing so, they limit the opportunities for different interpretations through narrative contestation. A constructed narrative reaches a tipping point when a critical mass of social actors accepts and buys into it as commonplace (Jackson 2003). The selected narrative becomes hegemonic. Through discursive coercion, political actors rhetorically trap one another in the hegemonic narrative.

Narratives are selective. Purposefully constructed by agents, they omit some parts of the story while emphasizing others. The process of telling, therefore, has ideological and emotional value, based on what we hear and how we choose to act on it (Franzosi 1998). Political actors use this aspect of narratives for the advancement of their political goals. As narrative entrepreneurs they emphasize some parts of the story while conveniently forget the others to advance their political goals (Subotic 2016, 2). The ontological nature of narratives builds on autobiographies. They classify particular events as successes, failures and critical junctures, good luck and misfortunes (Hankiss 1981).

Third, state narratives need to be coherent in order to be socially powerful. Despite that, they contain inherent contradictions. Narratives, therefore, could be competing with one another domestically. By focusing our analysis on only one narrative, we are running a risk of “homogenizing the national self” (Delehanty and Steele 2009, 526), when we fail to note competing biographical narrative. Therefore, different narratives of the state can constitute the Self in very different and consequential ways. Political actors could strategically activate or deactivate some of the narrative elements for their own personal ends. The overall narrative schematic template therefore can be crafted in a way that emphasizes some parts, while conveniently forgetting the others to

make sense to the public. Subotic places it in the “strategic social construction” where political actors strategically manipulate shared cognitive narrative frames for their own political ends (Subotic 2016, 2).

Fourth, narratives do not exist in isolation. They are not mere tools of interpretation, but are rather embedded in everyday discourse and dialogue. Therefore, they exist in a mutually contested relationship (Wertsch 2000, 516). Moreover, they are fundamentally normative in nature and carry a desire for a particular social order and a particular set of social practices and policies.

We can conclude that biographic narratives of a state play important role in a state’s ontological security. They bring us together, as a group, by providing a compelling story of where we came from, and what are our purpose and aspirations are. Such a secure autobiography provides us with the sense of stability, understanding of who we are and ability to move forward. These fundamental stories are ontological narratives and they help us function as social actors (Patterson and Manroe 1998). These stories structure the images we have of ourselves and they create a worldview that constrains our interests (Hankiss 1981). They are contested and therefore they are fluid. Embedded biographic narratives are deeply connected with state’s ontological security needs.

As a reflection of a state’s ontological security needs, biographic narratives can assist us in the study of how ontological security influences a state’s behavior in the system. Such a relationship is twofold. On the one hand, a state’s ontological security needs constraint its choices in an international system. On the other hand, however, systemic changes can influence a state’s biographic narratives by either consolidating or rupturing them.

Shame and honor: ontological security – as a determinant of foreign policy choices

In his book, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, Steele (2008) underlines biographic narratives of “shame” and “honor” as two of main driving forces in the ontological security of any state. He argues that, since it proves difficult to measure emotions on the collective level of states, the best way to measure their influence is by studying the effect these emotions produce (Steele 2008, 13). “Shame” and “honor”, among others, push states to adopt materially costly policies that influence their “relative capabilities in materially costly ways”. In the next chapter of my dissertation, I will provide a brief overview of the importance of emotions to Russian identity and its ontological security needs.

Shame is essentially anxiety about the adequacy of the narrative by means of which individual sustains a coherent biography. It is stimulated by the experiences in which feelings of inadequacy or humiliation are provoked. Shame depends on the feeling of personal insufficiency. Shame, therefore, should be understood in relation to the integrity of the self. Giddens and Lewis distinguish between “overt, undifferentiated” shame and “bypassed” shame. Bypassed shame is the correlate of unacknowledged guilt: it is a shame that comes from unconsciously experienced anxieties about inadequacy of self. As described by Lewis, bypassed shame is linked directly to the concept of ontological insecurity: it consists of repressed fears that the narrative of self-identity cannot withstand engulfing pressures on its coherence or social acceptability. Shame and trust are very closely bound up with one another, since an experience of shame may threaten or destroy trust. Shame is a negative side of the motivational system of the agent.

The other side of shame is pride, or self-esteem: confidence in the integrity and value of the narrative of self-identity. A person who successfully fosters the sense of pride (internally both as an individual and a part of the community) is one who is able psychologically to feel that his biography is justified and unitary.

Another important concept of ontological security is “honor”. Tsygankov (2012) defines honor as a moral value associated with the readiness to preserve dignity and assume moral commitment to the relevant social community. In traditional IR theories, it is assumed to operate only on the level of great powers, as a type of “prestige” (Gilpin 1981) that allows states to control others without using force and could be understood as a reflection of economic and military power. A couple of assumptions about honor are worth mentioning for the purposes of this analysis.

First, honor has exogenous and endogenous elements and can be constructed on the premises how “honorable” a state perceives itself to be and how “honorable” it is perceived by others. Externally honor affects state behavior in a community since “honor obliges its possessor to show others that he possesses honor” (O’Neil 1999, 245). To be impactful, however, it is not sufficient for a state to act honorably its doings also have to be *perceived* by other states as honorable. As has been noted by Lebow (Lebow 2004, 347), honor is “only meaningful if it is recognized by others”.

Second, Steele argues that honor exists in a constitutive relationship with self-identity. This means that what we find honorable on the individual level is contextual and shaped by our sense of who we are and what we have been. If identity influences what it honors by performing “honorable” actions, it helps an agent to enforce or adjust an agent’s sense of who he or she is and what he or she stands for (Steele 2008). In this

respect, identity and honor become self-constitutive – both collective identity and self-identity shape our sense of “honor”. The idea of the honor gets channeled through true self and become a part of identity.

Finally, honor could be used to advance survival needs of a state and converge with its physical security interests. “Honorable” actions could gain an agent a certain reputation or credibility. It is argued by O’Neill (2001), for example, that when states take stake in their national honor on a policy their commitments become more credible. In this instance, honor could be applied as a currency in international system. As a result, a state can advance its agenda and ensure survival based on interests. At times, however, the needs to satisfy the state’s honor have been known to compromise its physical survival (Steele 2008). Preserving honor, therefore, may require physical risk (O’Neil 1999). In this case, ontological and physical security needs could diverge and the satisfaction of ontological narrative of “honor” could jeopardize a state’s physical survival.

I can conclude that shame and honor play significant roles in a state’s ontological security. They are closely connected to identity and they are important for a state’s perception of self. At times, the need to satisfy these elements of identity could diverge from physical survival needs. In these instances, states face the choice between their ontological and physical securities. These choices determine a state’s behavior in an international system.

The relationship between ontological security and system is twofold. On the one hand, as has been demonstrated above, the state’s ontological security affects its

decisions as an international actor. On the other hand, systemic pressures themselves influence a state's identity and its perceptions of self.

Rupture and consolidation in ontological security

Ontological security is threatened with the rupture of continuity. This, as a rule, happens in critical situations or radical disjuncture of an unpredictable kind that affects substantial numbers of individuals and threatens to destroy institutionalized routines. These situations produce anxiety and represent threats to identity. Unlike fear that is tied to a particular situation, anxiety comes with the challenge to one's identity (Giddens 1986).

Innes and Steele (2013) define these exogenous pressures as traumas. They perceive trauma as an instance that, when experienced, creates radical ontological insecurity. In other words, it calls into question the self as it is conceived and conceptualized (Innes and Steele 2013, 17). In addition, trauma creates a situation that is differentiated from normalcy. Traumatic moments are hypersensitive and indelibly mark a state's image (Becker 2013, 62).

Trauma can have different implications on a state and can serve as a springboard to political contestation of an existing order. As a result, it can create space for a biographical narrative to be either reaffirmed or rewritten through political action (Steele 2008). By doing so, it crafts and shapes present and future political choices. Trauma is therefore deeply embedded in the issue of national identity, its creation and transformation, and it becomes important in understanding a state's foreign policy choices (Becker 2013, 62). In addition, trauma is two dimensional. On one level, it constitutes physical material harm and emotional harm to biographic narrative. On the

other hand, traumas are highly subjective and depend on how they are perceived inside a given community.

Different states therefore could have different responses to trauma. Some analysts argue that trauma could affect ontological security in two major ways through *rupture or consolidation* (Subotic 2016). Rupture upsets nation's idea of itself, its certain understanding of the collective biographical narrative. As a result, the actor finds this situation threatening to its sense of self. In this instance, the actor could revise or update its routine.

Another state's response to external pressures could be *consolidation*. In this instance external pressures could provide "increasing rootlessness and loss of stability" Such social dislocation provokes an ontological insecurity and desire to form stronger social community bonds to overcome such insecurity. Collective trauma therefore could not only rupture ontological security but could strengthen it by *bringing a collective together* and be formative for collective identity of a nation.

Kinnvall argues that the sense of national identity maintains its ontological security by providing consistency to social and material environment. Exogenous factors can breed ontological insecurity where boundaries of identity are challenged. Kinnvall argues that economic and political interconnectedness of modern times make states more vulnerable to systemic challenges (Kinnvall 2004, 741). One of the main responses to such uncertainty has been to *draw closer to identifying signifiers* that are stable enough to reduce such insecurity and existential anxiety. She names nationalism, along with religion, as one of the most powerful responses. Nationalism therefore it is more likely than other identity constructions to arise during crises of ontological insecurity.

Kinnvall considers nationalism as “securitized subjectivity” that, at times, difficulties and alienation is utilized by leaders to channel the existential uncertainties of people. The construction and reconstruction of historical symbols, myths and carefully chosen traumas supply a set of beliefs to combat insecurities. This is done by providing powerful stories and beliefs (discourses). These discourses convey a picture of security of home “safe of intruders”. The securitization of subjectivity is however an intersubjective process (Kinnvall 2004, 763). It applies that “the other” is involved in the process. Increasing ontological security for one person or group of people implies decreasing security for those excluded from nationalist and religious discourse.

Subotic (2016) offers a different focus of analysis of a state’s behavior during the time of external pressures by shifting her attention to framing of biographic discourse. She argues that, in times of great crises, the state autobiographic narrative can remain essentially the same. The policy change, however, that is brought up by external challenges could be explained by putting emphases on some parts of the broader narrative (“activating them”) while downplaying the other (“deactivating the other”). Subotic, therefore, centers her research on the complexity and multidimensional character of the narrative itself, which political actors selectively activate and deactivate at times of great ontological stress. Narrative therefore gets reconstituted at times of trauma to “discursively bridge the gap between solving the physical security challenge that requires a policy change, and the continuation of the biographic narrative necessary for preserving state ontological security (Subotic 2016, 6).

In conclusion, in this chapter I introduced the theory of ontological security and its main concepts. This part of my research concludes that a state’s self-identity needs to

provide important insights in understanding its foreign policy choices. In this respect, ontological security overlaps greatly with and builds on constructivism and its theoretical assumptions. The readiness of states to undermine their physical survival in favor of biographic continuity is central to ontological security's claim for its distinctiveness. In his book on ontological security, Steele (2008) analyzed one of these instances. The validity of such a premise, however, is contingent on providing additional case studies.

Hence, the future of research would demonstrate whether ontological security takes a distinct theoretical space or provides valuable insights into state behavior under the umbrella of constructivism. The next chapter will introduce main theoretical aspects of identity as basis for Russia's ontological security.

Chapter 3: Identity as a Basis for Ontological Security

This chapter builds on conclusions reached in chapter 2, where I introduced the main aspects of ontological security theory. It argues that ontologically secure agents integrate in the world in a holistic way, without the loss of their own identity. A stable sense of identity therefore is one of the central concepts necessary to satisfy the ontological security needs of an agent. This chapter seeks to provide insides into theory of identity and serves as a bridge between chapter 2 that introduces the concept of ontological security and chapter 4 that centers on the core elements of Russian identity.

While there is a consensus among social scientists on the complexity of identity as a social phenomenon, I will argue that, despite such complexity, there are predominant discourses that have been historically prevalent, habitually routinized and deeply embedded in every country's biographic narrative. I will further assert that, in Russia, this discourse centers on the country's self-perception as a great power vis-à-vis the West. This belief historically has been the basis for Russia's ontological security needs and it has determined and constrained Russia's behavior as an international actor. Moreover, this understanding of itself as a great power, in the case of Russia, is subjective, highly perceptual and normatively different from the views in the West. Despite shifts in biographic narratives, the country has historically embedded a few core ontological beliefs that support its "great power" discourse: Russia as a strong state, Russia as an empire and Russia's opposition to the West.

This chapter has the following structure: first, I will provide a brief overview of the social study of identity, its content, relational nature, contestation and the importance of its reiteration through habitual action. In the next part, the reader will be briefly introduced to a discussion on great power and status in international relations theory with the emphasis on the subjective and perceptual nature of great power discourse. I will pay special attention to the perceptual gap on what actions could benefit and damage the status between the West and Russia.

Identity

Political science, along with other fields, examines and attempts to define and measure identity rigorously. Other disciplines, most considerably psychology, have long measured and tested different models of identity in their attempts to create and establish valid and reliable instruments to study human behavior (Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston and McDermott 2009, 2). Rogers Smith even noticed that identity based politics has become “among the most normatively significant and behaviorally consequential aspects of politics” (2002). Despite such importance of identity, the social sciences have not witnessed consensus on its definition.

Despite many identity studies in international relations, for the purpose of my research, I will narrow my examination to two analyses that, in my opinion, complement each other. The first is the study by Rawi Abdelal (2009) and the second by Ted Hopf (2002). While Abdelal provides a broad and comprehensive study of identity, specifically its content and contestation, Hopf concentrates on the importance of identity *reiteration* through habit and discourse.

Content of Identity

According to Abdelal, social identity scholarship suffers from two sets of problems: coordination gaps and conceptual issues. In respect to coordination issues, there is a lack of clarity and consistency in defining and measuring identities, together with a lack of coordination of identity research at the cross-subfield and cross-disciplinary levels. In terms of conceptual issues, Abdelal suggests that the field needs to address more clearly and precisely how we can compare and operationalize different types of identity (Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston and McDermott 2009, 18).

Abdelal offers a definition of a collective identity as a social category that varies along two main dimensions – *contestation and content*. The building blocks of *content* are constitutive norms, social purposes, relational comparisons and cognitive models. All of them provide a meaning for identity and can take the form of nonexclusive and interconnected types.

- 1) *Constitutive norms* refer to the *formal and informal rules* that define group membership

Abdelal considers norms to be the very basis of identity. For the author, norms specify rules of identity that can emanate from multiple centers of authority. These norms can be unwritten or codified. They set collective expectations of the members of the group. These expected practices make collective recognizable and therefore put obligations on the members of the group. Constitutive norms are two-dimensional. Endogenously, they define appropriate behaviors for a specific identity (Monroe, Hankin, and van Vechten, 2000). On the exogenous level, they lead others to believe that an actor has a particular identity (Katzenstein 1996; Ruggie 1998). Therefore, constitutive

expectations are socially constructed and perceptual. They do not determine preferences of the group but rather define practices and boundaries that identify the group.

2) *Social purposes* that identify *goals* that are shared by members of a group.

Abdelal (2009) stresses the purposeful nature of identity. The author emphasizes that the content of the identity might be purposeful in the case when the group attaches specific goals to its identity such as messianic, for example. It therefore helps to define group interests, preferences and goals. The goals and identity are linked to each other, since *what a group wants depends on who the group thinks it is*. Therefore, identities can lead actors to endow practices with group goals and to interpret through the lens defined partially by these purposes (Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston and McDermott, 2009, 22).

3) *Relational comparisons* the way the collective views other identity groups and therefore identifying what it is not.

In this section Abdelal (2009) notes two important relational components of identities: level of exclusion and the quality of the relationship to the other. In the first instance, identity could completely exclude the other and can have *hostility towards other identities*. In terms of its relational component, Michael Barnett provides a relational definition of identity as "...not personal or psychological...fundamentally social and relational, defined by the actor's interaction with and relationship to others; therefore, identities may be contingent, dependent on the actor's interaction with others..." (Barnett 1999, 9).

4) *Cognitive models* refer to worldviews or understandings of material and political circumstances and interests that are constructed by identity.

In its broad sense, a cognitive model could be thought of as a framework that allows members of a group to make sense of social, political and economic conditions. It therefore means that cognitive content of collective identity describes how group membership could be associated with understanding how the world works (Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston and McDermott 2009, 25). Some scholars consider the “cognitive” aspect to be one of the crucial aspects in the study of identity. Cognitive models affect our worldviews, as well as our understanding of group, self and the other. Abdelal concludes that cognitive content, instead of implying an alternative theory of action, implies a theory of *interpretation*. The attention to cognitive models demonstrates how, on the one hand, identity affects how actors understand the world, and on the other hand, how identity influences actors’ preferences of material or social incentives (Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston and McDermott 2009, 27). Identities therefore become “different mental universes” that differentiate one group from another.

Another important element of identity is contestation. The collective meaning of identities is neither fixed nor predetermined. The content of identities, therefore, is the process of its contestation within the group. Abdelal (1999) notes important aspects of identity contestation. First, contestation of identity is referred to as a process rather than an outcome. Therefore, it appears to be difficult to provide its exact measurement. Second, identity has both internal and external dimensions. As a process that occurs within groups, it is ultimately up to them to define its content. Within countries, however, different groups and political authorities often attempt to influence the meaning of collective identities within the state. This process does not happen in a systemic vacuum. Identities of nation states are formed in constant interaction with other nation states.

Third, contestation of identities can be either implicit or explicit. Explicit contestation of identities is self-evident. Implicit contestations of identity happen among members of the group without them consciously seeking to revise the meaning of their identity.

Currently, there are constant claims and counterclaims, in casual conversations and written communications, that do not seek to contest the nature of identity. In general the media, political debates, party platforms, and scholarly analysis designed to evoke a sense of collective self, are seen as examples of collective contestation (Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston and McDermott 2009, 28-29).

To sum up, the content of identity according to Abdelal is multilayered with closely interconnected endogenous and exogenous elements. Its actual basis is constituted by norms that define and bring a group together endogenously, while setting it apart from others exogenously. These norms are socially constructed and subject to change. One of the ways to foster such endogenous coherence is by attaching socially constructed goals to the members of the group. To be socialized, the goals have to be appropriately framed and accepted by those sharing the identity. Such acceptance of norms and goals is contextual and relational (highly contingent on an agent's exogenous environment and relations with other actors in an international system). All these elements together constitute different cognitive maps or "universes" that affect agents' perceptions of the world. In short, Abdelal views identity as socially constructed, constantly contested and highly subjective dependent on an agent's environment and relations with the "other".

Reproduction of Identity

While Abdelal stresses the complex nature of what constitutes identity, Hopf underlines the importance of its reproduction. This reproduction takes places through the

embedding of *state routines and practices* that have dual relations with identity (Hopf 2002, 2010). On the one hand, they are construed by identity itself and determined by it. On the other hand, however, these practices and routines contribute to the social construction of identity. According to Hopf, an important part in the reproduction of identity is not norms but rather habits and practice (Hopf 2002, 10). It is important to note that Hopf's study of identity reproduction builds upon the logic of habituation. In this instance, identity norms are internalized so deeply that there is no conscious deliberation in applying them. Rather, they are acted upon unconsciously.

The importance of habit in study of identity has been noted by different scholars. Max Weber (1968), for example, listed habit as one of the important categories for social action which is separate from rational analysis). Durkheim (2014) further argued that humans are not driven by "ideas, sentiments or consciousness" but rather by embedded, repeated and routinized practices or habits are "the real forces that govern us." Hopf concurs that habitual action accords most closely with his own social cognitive account of identity: the unthinking, unintentional and automatic reproduction of Self and Other through a collection of discursive practices (Hopf 2002, 11).

Such a focus on subconscious habit rather than conscious analysis, is not due to the unimportance of the latter, but rather because of the primary role habit plays in rational deliberations. Cognitive neuroscientists tend to agree that any reflective thoughts and actions happen within the context of habitual perception and attitudes that have made these reflections possible in the first place (Graybiel 2008). This occurs even at a time when an agent is reflecting upon what action will yield the most benefits, or correspond to the agent's normative commitments. What he or she does occurs against a taken-for-

granted background of habit. This structure of habit constrains the actor's imaginable outcomes, even while leaving room for reflection.

The importance of habits rests in the neuropsychology of the human brain (Graybiel 2008). Physiological features of the brain habits tend to evoke self-fulfilling and validating behaviors from actors. Habits are located in the "automatic system" of the brain. They are perceptual, effortless and evoked automatically. Habitual stereotypes, therefore, ease the cognitive load of reflection when we need to perform more than one task at a time (Chen and Bargh 1997; Snyder and Swann 1978; Wegner and Bargh 1998). Adherence to habits as well facilitates mutual intelligibility in words and actions between agents and therefore it avoids possible violations of normative standards of a given community (Weber 1968; Durkheim 1965). Habits free actors to be agents, but they are not agential themselves (Hopf 2010, 546).

As stated in a previous chapter, habits and practice³ link identity to ontological security. Habits that reiterate identity are treated as mechanisms that assist humans to have a predictable sense of self and other. In this respect, habits and practices eliminate uncertainty between and among the states as they presuppose certainty about oneself and others. This occurs even if, objectively, such certainty could not be "complete" in the absence of perfect information (Waltz 1979).

To sum up, embedded habits and practices play an important role in an agent's identity in a number of ways. First they consistently reiterate and, therefore, deepen an agent's identity and they get stored as cognitive structures of the brain (Bourdieu 1977;

³ Hopf differentiates between the logic of habit and practice. Despite similarities the major difference in my opinion lays in concept of agency. The logic of habit, unlike the logic of practice, denies agency to actors who act habitually (Hopf 2010, 546).

Bourdieu 1990). Second, they constrain an agent's reflective choices, since habitual stereotypes are automatically evoked and create a cognitive foundation for self-fulfilling prophecies (Show 2006). In this respect, habits and emotions are closely connected, as both of them are "automatic and not reflective" (Hopf 2010, 541). McDermott argues that emotional response many times is evoked before and sometimes even "instead of high level cognitive functioning" (McDermott 2002, 692).

What about change? Hopf (2010) notes that habits are both paradoxically vulnerable to many sources of change and at the same time are very durable and well defended. One of the ways that breaking habits occurs is when the cost of following them becomes too high. Also, habits can be broken if they are normatively unacceptable. There seems to be a consensus among many theorists that habits of mind and practice would likely change only when they are exposed to powerful (instrumentally and/or normatively costly) and unassimilable exogenous events (Widmaier, Blyth, Seabrooke 2007). As noted in the previous chapter, however, these pressures could have different effects on identity. Kinnvall (2004), for example, argues that such exogenous shocks could either further consolidate or alter biographic continuity of a state. Endogenously habits and practice could be altered as well. The basis for endogenous change lies in an agent's deliberate reflective rejection of embedded practices. However, because they are physiological features of the brain, reflection may override habits, but it may not be able to destroy them completely. Habits remain as neural pathways until they *erode with time, through disuse* (Burton 2008; Ledoux, 2002). From this section, we can conclude that, in its content, identity is socially constructed, perceptive and relational. Socially constructed goals, attributed to identity, provide the coherence of the group. Identity is subject to

constant contestation, both exogenously and endogenously, and it is sensitive to both systemic and agent changes. Identity becomes embedded through its constant reiteration by habitual use and it is difficult to change. The more dominant a discourse of identity, the more embedded it will be within the state, between the state and its society, and between two distinct states as they interact. When this occurs, the more unlikely it is that habitual perceptions, practices and attitudes will be challenged to the extent that change of the habit would occur (Hopf 2010). Despite this observation, endogenously-driven change of identity is possible. It requires deliberate reflection by the group who shares this identity. To paraphrase Cox (1981) identity is always for someone and for some purpose. The change is likely to occur if it serves the interests of those who will benefit from such changes in shared identity beliefs and are capable to promote changes. This is particularly crucial, since changing - habits requires reflection. However, getting people to reflect, when preservation of *status quo* satisfied their interests, is rare and very difficult.

Great Power Status

Abdelal (2009) and Hopf (2002) provide important insights into an understanding of identity. How well would they fit in the case of Russia? In particular, what aspects would constitute content of Russian identity? How contested and embedded are they? Who is interested in the preservation of the existing *status quo* and what are the possibilities of change?

Social scientists concur that the notion of Russian identity is complex and contested. Despite its manifold nature, there seems to be a consensus on a few narratives that dominate the country's biographic discourse. One of them is Russia's self-perception

as a great power (Adomeit 1995; Hopf 2002; Mankoff 2009; Kanet 2007; and Neumann 2008).

What stands behind the notion of great power? As in the case of identity, there seem to be different perceptions of the characteristics of a great power. Great power discourse has been dominated by the realist school that highlights *material resources* and the ability to project power, especially military power. Weber (1968) defined a great power as a combination of material capabilities, ability to use them in the international arena and being “bearers of power prestige”. Morgenthau (1985) further underlines that great power status is defined in equal measure by *material capabilities and by other less tangible factors*). Many scholars in international relations theory have been unclear about defining the concept of great power and have settled on Waltz’s assumption that you know a great power when you see it (Waltz 1979). Competing accounts of greatness, as analyzed by Durkheim (2014), departs from material and instead fastens on moral dimension. The scope of validity in this case is ideational. Durkheim therefore claims that states may or may not be great in a moral sense. This adds a different dimension to the notion of prestige as some moral superior quality. Therefore, as in the case of identity prestige is perceptual and can go beyond pure material overwhelming force.

Levy (1983) further expanded understanding of major power by including in the definition capabilities of foreign policy activity and interests, a broad geographical sweep and substantial recognition by other states. Thomas Volgy (2011) finds the definition provided by Levi as the most comprehensive, and by modifying it, underlines the following aspects of great power: as a major power that 1) has unusual capabilities with which to pursue its interests in interstate relations, b) uses those capabilities to pursue

unusually broad and expansive foreign policies, beyond its immediate neighborhood or region, and c) seeks to influence the course of international affairs, relatively independently of other major powers.

Based on the above definitions of great power, we can make a few conclusions. First, the great power is a combination of objective capabilities and their subjective perceptions. Therefore, there is distinction between *being* a great power and *being attributed with major power status*. A state is attributed a major power status if it is perceived by policymakers of states in an international system to be powerful and is willing to influence global affairs (Volgy et al. 2011). Larson further expands definition of status as a set of collective beliefs about a given state's ranking on valued attributes (wealth, coercive capabilities, culture, demographic position, sociopolitical organization and diplomatic clout (Larson, Paul and Wohlforth 2014). Status, therefore, cannot be read merely from a state's material attributes, but rather it depends on other states' perceptions.

Second, great power status has both endogenous and exogenous characteristics. Exogenous attribution of status can occur when the states in the system recognize another state as having achieved the status of being a major power. Such status attribution can be in a-group or global. Status attribution can manifest itself in two distinct, but closely related, ways: as a membership in the club of powers in an international system, and as a position of hierarchy within the club. Larson highlights the collective, subjective and relative nature of status that is recognized through voluntary deference of others. Status transcends individual state perceptions, where states may slightly disagree over the ranking of a state in relation to others in the system. As a ranking, therefore, status is

measured in relation to others. Despite such disagreements, there is an overall consensus on what - the major powers in the system are and the members of the various status clubs (Larson, Paul and Wohlforth 2014, 8).

Endogenously, to be a great power a state has *to think of itself in terms of being great*. State attribution therefore is firstly *self-referential*, as status is typically not attributed by others if it is not claimed by the actor in question (Sylvan, Graff, and Pugliese 1998). Because status is subjective, both endogenously and exogenously, status-seeking behavior seeks to influence perceptions by acquiring status symbols. For the most part, these are observable qualities and assets. As examples of status-seeking behavior, scholars name: space programs; high profile explorations in remote areas (such as oil exploration in Arctic), *development of high-technology weapons, major diplomatic initiatives and military operations*. These actions require substantial investment, organization and training that only great powers can afford.

While major powers can receive status, consistent with their capabilities and actions, there are times when perceived status attribution can be inconsistent with their capabilities. In his analysis, Volgy (2011) underlines distinctions between power consistent and power inconsistent states. He notes that status inconsistency occurs under different circumstances that might complement each other. It can happen when power attribution is not in synchrony with a state's capabilities. Another instance is when foreign policy pursuits of a state do not correspond to state's status and capabilities. Finally, if states can be inconsistent with the awarding of another state a status of major power. Further, Volgy (2011) clarifies between status overachievers and underachievers. Overachievers are states that, despite lacking the attributes associated with major powers,

are given a status of great power. The latter are countries that, despite their capabilities and desire to act as major powers, are in fact not capable of projecting the influence expected of a great power. This can occur even though the status has been attributed to this state by the international community.

It could be argued that status is connected to the perceptions of power outcomes, authority and honor. Building on Robert Dahl's definition, states with great power status have a relationship of influence over other states in the system; therefore they have the ability to get others do what they would not have otherwise done. The key in the relationship between power and status, however, is the voluntary nature of deference in cases of status that might not always correspond to the material aspect of a "power base". Power shares with authority the ability to seek compliance from others. While the use of power could be illegitimate, the use of authority makes status-based compliance legitimate by others (Kemper 1978). Another concept related to status is prestige. These two concepts relate to the public recognition of an actor. Through their close connection, prestige has more evaluative qualities, while status refers predominantly to hierarchical ranking. Status is also related to the concept of honor. While both terms are subjective and perceptual, honor nevertheless is not relational. It resembles "face" or a particular code of conduct following Weber's theory. Honor cannot be the object of bargaining; it is not competitive as status and therefore it has nothing to do with hierarchy.

It is important to note why status matters to both the status seeker and its perceiver. Larson (2014) argues that there are a few interconnected reasons for the importance of status. The first is that the very human nature centers on its hierarchical nature. This is so ingrained in human nature that people automatically size up others'

relative status, through body language or cues, without even being aware of it (Moors and De Houwer 2005). Larson concludes, in this respect, that what is true within human groups is also true in interstate settings. Hierarchies of status recur in world politics. - It occurs in every international system that we are aware of (Larson, Paul and Wohlforth 2014). Secondly, higher social group status enhances collective self-esteem (Luhtanen and Crocker 1992). National status and the self-perception as a great power has been a - way to consolidate a population's approval behind developmental goals (Greenfeld 1992). Vulajic (2015) argues that identities are constructed and exist because they satisfy somebody's needs.¹ Identity brokers, like elites, contribute to the creation and - sustainability of particular identities. By doing so, they present- a vision of the world that suits their interests and justifies their very existence. As Volgy argues, Peter the Great and Vladimir Putin have successfully used great power discourse in Russia to advance their objectives.

In his research, Volgy operationalized great power status attribution by assigning to great powers the following objective criteria: a) military and economic capacity, where economic capacity is measured by gross domestic product to reflect the size of a state's economy, b) the pursuit of unusual foreign policy activities, outside great power's region, where states engage in both conflict and cooperation. Volgy further highlights that status attribution is a perceptual phenomenon that requires particular behavioral consequences and that should reflect choices made by states to seek routinized contacts and consultations with other great powers. These would likely influence their security and well-being (Volgy, Corbetta, Grant and Baird 2011).

Despite such objective measures, great power attribution is highly subjective. Externally, this subjectivity is reflected in an inconsistency of status attribution between different states in the system. Domestically, what could be considered as enhancing great power status by one state, could be considered diminishing by another. Forsberg (2014), for example, argues that one of the issues in the relations between Russia and the West stems precisely from misperceptions of what factors and actions contribute to Russia's status. Forsberg notes that, traditionally, the West considered Russia's energy leverage, military capacity and economic growth as "yardsticks of power" (Forsberg 2014, 328). In addition, Russia's diplomatic interventions and use of military power have also been seen in improving the country's status internationally. In some instances however, Forsberg argues that Russia's actions were considered as status-enhancing by Russia, while perceived as status- diminishing by the West. As an example, he writes of Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The incident, according to some Western analysts, was perceived as a defeat that revealed Russia's isolation, which was more than Russia would like it to be. In Russia, however, the same event was considered as re-establishing the country as a major international player, capable of defending its interests. This example demonstrates a profound gap between great power perception in Russia and the West.

In this chapter, I introduced the main concepts of identity theory as the basis for any state's ontological security. Readers were introduced to the content of identity and its contestation. I also noted that a stable sense of identity is achieved through consistent repetition and reiteration. Identity, therefore, is socially and repeatedly constructed as a response to objective environments and the subjective aspirations of identity

entrepreneurs. Hence, identity is both stable and protean. Its change is highly contingent upon external pressures and the political will of those in power. The self-perception of a great power has historically been embedded in Russia's self-identity. At times, however, its understanding of what enhances its -power status has been normatively different from that of the West. In the next t chapter, I will - further explore core elements of Russian identity as the basis for the country's ontological security.

Chapter 4: Russia as a Great Power⁴

It would be naïve to attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of Russian identity in one short chapter. Russian identity is complex, multidimensional and broad. As noted in the previous chapter, any identity is not static but rather is in the continual process of formation and contestation. Despite its manifold nature, there seems to be a consensus on a few narratives that dominate a country's biographic discourse. One of them is Russia's self-perception as a great power (Adomeit 1995; Hopf 2002; Mankoff 2009; Kanet 2007; Neumann 2008).

This chapter builds upon two previous theoretical sections and my research. In this part, I will argue that great power status is important for Russia. Moreover, self-perception as a great power is one of the fundamental aspects of Russia's identity and its sense of ontological security.

I will further assert that the great power narrative ties together ontological and physical securities in the country's history. Initially, Russia's identity and sense of ontological security were constructed in response to its physical security needs. With

⁴ This chapter builds primarily on the literature that, among other aspects of Russian identity, highlights the country's exceptionalism as one of the aspects of its ontological awareness. Under President Putin Russia's leadership socially re-constructed the idea of Russian exceptionalism as one of central narratives of the country's great power discourse. Historically, however, there have been no consensus among scholars on the core of Russia's ontological security. Current generation of Russian history researchers reject the idea to organize themselves around one issue. As noted by Mr. David-Fox the new generation of researchers reject the primacy of anything as the single key to the "entire phenomenon". As a result, that there has been extensive research and investigation debating the validity of Russian exceptionalism.

time, repeated use of this biographic narrative of great power got embedded into Russian identity.

This unconscious ontological awareness made addressing physical security needs contingent upon the continuity of the country's biographic narrative of great power. I call such dependency the "ontological trap". I will argue that, at times, the "ontological trap" dictates Russia's foreign policy choices and threatens its physical security. As noted by Stephen Kotkin (2016), Putin's foreign policy stance is less the reaction to external pressures but rather a recurrent pattern driven by internal factors - embedded routines of the country's ontological security.

Chapter 2 outlined two important points in the construction of an agent's ontological security. First are the experiences that influence the formation of the agent's ontological awareness during its formative years. Second is the degree of routinization of these experiences. With time, this ontological awareness gets further embedded through routine and practice that creates predictability and allows agents to avoid the anxiety of the unknown. The more routinized these experiences are, the more embedded they become into the agent's ontological security and agents apply them less consciously when making decisions. Therefore, the experiences of the emerging Russian state in defending its physical security needs and projecting power created a basis for its ontological self-awareness as a strong power capable of projecting influence (great power). To become the basis of its ontological security, these experiences had to be embedded through habitual use.

Such routinization is subjective and it is prone to social construction. What is particularly important is the fact that it is determined by whomever serves as the

custodian of the collective memory of a polity. Since memory is highly selective, the custodian determines what experiences should be further routinized (Prizel 1998). The custodian, therefore, has ability and power either to deepen the use of ontological practices or erode them through disuse (Burton 2008; Ledoux, 2002).

This chapter has the following structure: at the beginning, I provide an overview of the importance that geography has historically played in determining the nature of Russia's physical security threats, both economic and geopolitical. Following that, I will analyze how Russia's response to these threats affected the construction of its ontological security in three distinct and interconnected ways. First, I will explore the emergence of Russia's ontological beliefs in a consolidated state, personified by a strong leader as a guarantor of physical security and power status. This belief is important within the context of the historically communal nature of Russian society that has low regard given to individual rights. Second, I will study the emergence of Russia's imperial identity, shaped by physical security threats and the ways that they connect to Russia's power status. I will specifically note that, unlike other empires, imperial expansion in Russia was taking place at the time of its emergence as a consolidated state. Imperial identity, therefore, is deeply engrained in the sense of Russia's ontological security. Third, I will introduce the reader to the role that the West plays in the content of Russia's ontological awareness as a great power. In this part, I will pay special attention to the role played by Russia's relations with the West. This chapter will conclude with an analysis of the rupture in Russia's biographic continuity, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the profound effect that it had on Russian identity politics, ontological security and the perception of its physical security needs.

It has been noted by different analysts that Russia's perception of itself as a great power is one of crucial elements of its identity (Adomeit 1995; Thorun 2009; Neumann 2008). Christian Thorun (2009), for example, stresses that, among many, one narrative has been prevalent among Russia's leadership: discourse on great power status. He further notes that, despite the fact that sources of greatness and their implications have changed significantly from civil, historical to geopolitical and economic, the discourse itself has stayed for the most part consistent. Hopf, (2002) as well, notes the continuity of the great power discourse that survived not only the historical evolution of the country, but also its ideological shift from the USSR to Russia. In 1955, while the former Soviet Union considered itself to be a great power during the Cold War, it seemed to feel the need to reassure other states that, despite being a great power, it was not a traditional one ideologically. ⁱⁱAs Soviet Foreign Minister Semenov responded to the concerns of Egypt regarding its close relations with the USSR, "Egypt can be certain that the Soviet Union isn't a crocodile which can suddenly unleash its jaws and gobble up Egypt". In 1999, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this differentiation from other great powers was not at the top of the country's agenda. The Great Power discourse, however, continued maintaining its dominant position despite the ideological shift (Hopf, 2002, 157).

Russia continued its great power discourse despite economic and political challenges after the end of Cold War and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union. In 1996, when the government's approval ratings were in single digits, Evgeny Primakov, as Russia's new Minister of Foreign Affairs, saw his primary role as strengthening the effort "to protect Russia's national interest" as a great power and having a policy that reflected this status. (Reuters, 1996). Primakov's vision of opposing US hegemony was

a drastic change from that of his predecessor, Andrey Kozyrev. Despite their vocal disagreements on what it meant for Russia to be great, they both concurred that it was “doomed to be a great power” by virtue of being Russia (Kozyrev 1994, 62).

While great power status is important for both Russia and the West, it seems they understand it differently. A Russian scholar, Veronika Krasheninnikova (2007), puts emphasis in her analysis on the perceptions of the Western states. She argues that status misunderstandings and gaps between Russia and the West stem predominantly from systemic misinterpretations by the West of conditions in Russia (Krasheninnikova 2007). Krasheninnikova further notes that Western depictions are so distorted that Russians hardly recognize their country from the accounts presented in the West.

Unlike Krasheninnikova, Forsberg centers his arguments on perceptual inconsistencies of both agents. He simply notes that conceptually both actors have different understandings of what it means to be great power. As noted in the previous chapter, the author attributes issues between Russia and the West to the gaps in perceptions of the factors that contribute to Russia’s status (Forsberg 2014). Therefore, while Russians consider some aspects of their country’s identity to be status-enhancing, Western analysts consider them to be status- diminishing.

Leichtova (2014) attributes the great power status of Russia to a variety of objective factors. Her focus, however, is on the country’s geographic location. Russia is considered to be the *largest country in the world* and it stretches over two continents. Therefore, security threats in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Arctic and Pacific regions are within Russia’s borders and in reach of Russia’s security and economic interests. Therefore, a sphere of Russia’s interests is “geographically ordered” across the majority

of the Northern Hemisphere (Leichtova 2014). Thus, Russia's identity as a great power is closely connected with the Russian state in a geographical and geopolitical manner. In particular, it is tied up to the territory of the Russian state, more importantly the massive size of it.

Along with Leichtova, Richard Pipes (1995) considers geography to be one of the crucial factors in the construction of the country's perception of itself and the world around it that form part of Russia's ontological awareness. He ties this ontological awareness to the nature of Russia's geographically-determined physical security, both economic and geopolitical. In the realist school of thought, great power status is closely linked to a state's ability to withstand threats and to project power. I argue that the nature of physical threats in Russia called for the consolidation of power into a strong centralized state, represented by a strong leader capable of withstanding threats and to project power. As well, geographically determined geopolitical influences from Asia further contributed to the establishment of a strong patrimonial state in Russia. While physical security threats allowed for the emergence of ontological need for a strong leader, the communal nature of Russian society, with its low regard for individual rights, allowed it to further embed and routinize this belief. The perception of a strong leader in Russia, therefore, is one of a guarantor of a strong state and great power status. The leader is one who ensures physical security to its citizens externally, while exercising unlimited power domestically.

Many scholars note the continuity of this belief throughout Russian history. They argue that the political regime established in Russia between the 12th and 17th centuries, with certain modifications, survived to the present day (Pipes 1995; Tsygankov 2014;

Mankoff 2009; Trenin 2002, etc). This regime, characterized by a strong, consolidated state, has been historically embedded in the notion of Russian identity. In pre-revolutionary times, the strong state manifested itself in Russia through an autocratic monarchy. In Soviet times, it was replaced by an equally strong Single Party state with a strong monopoly of power. In contemporary Russia, this notion has been constructed in a unique definition of sovereign democracy that, according to Andrei Tsygankov, reflects the distinct nature of Russian culture (Tsygankov 2014).

Another historically embedded characteristic of Russian authority is the network nature of its state. Conceptualized as a means of less formal interaction, networks link individuals and groups that share similar interests and allegiances. As a rule, the members of the networks do not operate from the outside, exerting the influence on the state. Rather, almost always, they hold high ranking positions within the state and are its integral part (Kononeko 2011, 6). Historically networks permeated almost all areas of policy in Russia; currently they influence and shape the relations between the federal center and the regions, foreign policy and the military. As result, as noted by Kononenko (2011), these allegiances cut across bureaucratic structures and they cover defunct institutions, defining the current state in the country. Hence, the policy making rhetoric of “strong state” and “national interest” are infused with “special interests” of the state-private actors.

In its present manifestation, the “*sistema*”, as the current political regime, is referred to by the noted Russian political analyst Gleb Pavlovsky (2016) ,with its complex practice of decision-making and power management, is one of the core elements of the country’s ontological security. The “*sistema*” for Pavlovsky, combines the idea that

the state enjoys unlimited access to all national resources, both public and private, and that it turns people into operating resources in a breach of their rights. It is a “deep seated facet of Russian culture that goes beyond politics and ideology” and could persist long after the end of Putin’s rule (Pavlovsky 2016, 14). Its establishment in Russia can be traced to the country’s response to - economic security needs.

Russia’s geographic location compelled people who inhabited it to operate within a very narrow band of options. A harsh climate and the unequal distribution of rainfall are the major reasons why Russia has averaged one bad harvest out of every three with very low yields. The highly unproductive and wasteful nature of Russian agriculture pushed Russians toward constant agricultural expansion in the search for virgin lands. The solution, therefore, was to put more land under cultivation, in the practice of extensive rather than intensive agriculture. Since the rich and desirable soil was in the steppe, under the control of Turkic and Mongol tribes, the constant conflicts with them were attributed by Russian historians to be defensive in nature. However, they were often the result of Russian colonists’ pressures to secure physical survival. Colonization, therefore, became a fundamental feature of the Russian state considered by some Russian philosophers and historians to be its very essence. As noted by Kliuchevskii (1937) in *The History of Russia*, Russian history is the story of a country “which colonized itself”. This process continued throughout history, where the major process for 400 years was to carry the Russian population outward from the forest zones, mostly towards the east and south, causing them to expand into the areas inhabited by nations of other races and cultures.

Military organization under centralized rule was a necessity to carry out expansionist policies that were crucial for Russia’s economic survival (Pipes 1995, 20).

As Pipes, Alexander Herzen, a well-known Russian populist, considered the strong state essential to overcoming Russia's economic challenges. Russia was faced with a dilemma. Its economic security required it to organize in a highly efficient manner. However, its economic capabilities made it challenging to do so. Pipes argues that solution of the emerging Russian state was in the consolidation of power and the creation of the patrimonial regime, personified by a strong autocratic leader (Pipes 1995, 21). Tsygankov (2014) further notes that, while Russia's economic weaknesses could explain the country's reliance on autocracy, the nature of its geopolitical threats made this reliance entirely rational.

Another contributing factor to the ontological need for a strong state, represented by a strong leader in Russia is the geopolitical area. As noted by Dmitri Trenin (2002), in the geographic sense, Russia lacks any defined boundaries that would separate it from its neighbors and, thus, it had little protection from its enemies. In the East, the emerging Russian state was exposed to an advanced Asian empire of the Golden Horde that dominated the territories of the Slavic tribes for over two centuries. In modern times, most of the invasions that the country experienced came from the West, such as Poland and Sweden. This had important consequences for a country that was very vulnerable at the time of its weakness, and unstoppable at the times of its strength (Trenin 2002). Such vulnerabilities required an authority capable of consolidating power and mobilizing resources to withstand these geopolitical threats. In other words, physical security threats shaped in Russia an ontological need for a strong leader, capable of mobilization. This ontological necessity survived through the centuries. It is a final driver of current foreign policy in Russia. Stephen Kotkin (2016) notes that strong state willing and capable to act

aggressively in its own interests is still considered to be the only guarantor of Russia's security.

This capacity for mobilization became a distinctive feature of autocratic rule in Russia and came with a price. As noted by Veljko Vujačić (2015), Russian rulers established and embedded an intimate connection between external protection and expansion and internal subjugation. In other words, external threats to physical security initially called for, and with time were, used as a pretense to subordinate all strata to the patrimonial ruler. This trend got embedded in the formative stages of Russian ontological security and started with the rule of Ivan the Great and his grandson Ivan IV, known as the founders of the Russian state. According to Tsygankov (2014), unlimited political power allowed Russian rulers not only to defeat the weakened Mongol empire that ruled the region for centuries, but also to establish their sovereignty over other Slavic tribes. Such consolidation was possible because of the unlimited political authority and "divinity" of the ruler who gained independence from the church.

The mobilization of power in the face of physical threats has been routinized and embedded in Russian ontological security throughout the centuries by many rulers, such as Peter the Great and Joseph Stalin. Despite ruling at different times, they both used consolidation of the state as a way to advance, while addressing external threats, real or perceived. As noted by Tsygankov (2014), Stalin's rule could be characterized by a terror against people considered disloyal to the new regime and it forced the modernization that cost millions of lives. Though extreme, his methods were a continuation of Russia's ontologically accepted pattern. This pattern, characterized by a strong state, personified by a strong leader capable of mobilization in the face of external

threats, often found the necessary support from below. This support continues to the present day. According to a recent poll by the Levada (2015), conducted at the end of 2015, there are twice as many people in Russia who view Stalin in a positive, rather than a negative light, despite his historical record.

Another reason Russians perceive a strong leader as an important element of great power status is in the country's Eastern history. Many Russian analysts underline the profound effect that this Eastern influence played in Russia's treatment of authority. (Vernadsky 1963; Goumilev 2000).

George Vernadsky (1963), for example, considered the Mongol conquest to be a pivotal development in the course of Russian history. Pipes concurs with Vernadsky in considering Mongol rule during the establishment of the Russian state in the 13th century as an extremely important "shattering external event" (Pipes 1995, 54). Pipes further argues that the Mongol Khan became Russia's first undisputed sovereign. The Asian style of governance that the early Russian state was exposed to, at the initial stages of its formation, had a profound effect on the country's ontological security. The success with which Mongols governed a vast empire was manifested in coping with a number of Mongol political and administrative institutions under Mongol (Turkic) names in Russia, such as "kazna" or treasury. Mongol Khans were absolute masters of Russia's fate for more than two centuries. Under Mongol rule, Russian princes learned the operations of absolute monarchy, of "authority with which one cannot enter into agreements but must unconditionally obey" (Sergeevich 1908, 34). More importantly, though, it was under Mongol rule that Russians learned a concept of politics which limited the functions of the state to the collection of tribute (taxes), maintenance of order, and preservation of

security, but was “entirely devoid of any sense of responsibility for public well-being” (Pipes 1995, 75). Michael Cherniavsky (1959) further argues that with the emancipation of Moscow’s princes from Mongol tutelage what actually transpired was not the liberation of Russia but rather “a change of dynasty”. He concurs with Pipes that the image of the khan was probably the most prominent in the idea of the Russian ruler “as a conqueror of Russia and its people, responsible to no one” (Cherniavsky 1959, 65-74). As a result of the Mongol rule, Russia blended native and Mongol elements in a peculiar type of a political authority that arose in Russia, once the Golden Horde loosened its grip - the patrimonial state (Pipes 1995, 57).

Pipes attributes such distinctiveness of Russia’s political regime to the historical relationship between property and political power in the country. For Pipes, this is the main distinction that separates Western from non-Western regimes. For Western regimes, private property exists as a realm over which public authority normally exercises no jurisdiction. It came as a result of an evolution of law and institutions that began in Ancient Rome. During that time, process authority exercised as sovereignty and authority exercised as ownership split. Pipe’s main argument, therefore, is that such a separation in Russia occurred very late and was very imperfect (Pipes 1974, xxii).

Pipes further argues that Russia could be referred to as a patrimonial state. Weber (1947) defined a patrimonial system as a variant of personal authority, heavily based on tradition, but in its exercise makes the claim of full personal. One of the characteristics of the patrimonial state is the fact that the economic element absorbs the political. Hence, the rights of the sovereignty and those of ownership blend and become almost indistinguishable. This makes the sovereign exercise his political power in the same

manner as he uses economic power. In other words, the essential quality of Russian politics for Pipes is the “proprietary” way of looking at political authority on the part of those who happen to be in power. In examples of a patrimonial state, such as “sultanism”, the authority entails complete ownership of land and mastery over its people. In patrimonial states, therefore, political authority is an extension of the right of ownership of the sovereign that extends both to the realm and its proprietors. There exist no formal limitations on political authority, and no individual liberties or rule of law.

The existing communal nature of Russian society, with its low regard to individual rights, provided favorable conditions for further embedding the ontological need for a strong leader. A challenging climate made peasants rely on one another and discouraged individual farming. The collective nature of Russian labor influenced the structure of the peasant family and the village (Pipes 1995). As a result, the basic social unit of the ancient Slavs was a tribal community, related by blood, who worked together as a team. With time, this community dissolved, giving a way to an organization based on joint ownership of land, called a mir or obshina.

According to Russian romantic nationalists, the “Slavophiles,” this peasant commune was a manifestation of Russian people historically lacking the individualistic “bourgeois” impulses that were characteristic of the West. In Russia, the pride of an individual was traditionally derived from the pride of the group to which the individual belonged (Leichtova 2014, 28). Therefore, the need for individual rights in achieving self-fulfillment was long ignored and considered unimportant (Pritzel, 1998). Moreover, both Konstantin Aksakov, and Mikhail Bakunin, the founders of Russian anarchism, concurred in considering the Russian people fundamentally apolitical (Vujačić 2015).

Their deeply rooted religious beliefs allowed them to accept Christian postulates to “render unto Caesar the things that were Caesar’s”. The people, therefore, left politics and matters of external security to the state (Aksakov 1966, 230-252). These beliefs in the prevalence of communal needs, over individual ones, have been historically routinized and embedded in Russian’s ontological security. In a recent survey in November 2014 of Russia’s independent polling center, Levada (2014) confirmed this argument. In their answers to the question “in which country would you rather live: a country with social equality or a country where you have the opportunity to prove yourself and attain a more successful life?” an overwhelming majority of Russians (61% vs 36%) chose the first option. Interestingly, these answers have been consistent since the last poll in April of 2000.

These communal tendencies and entrustment of political life to the state and its leader have been routinized in Russian perceptions of authority throughout the centuries. It has been historically embedded in Russian ontological security to perceive a strong state as a guarantor of physical security and political stability. Many Russians, therefore, are in no hurry to abandon autocracy in favor of the competitive system of the West. Given Russia’s historical insecurities and economic weaknesses, this reliance is entirely rational (Tsygankov 2015, 6). Some analysts argue, therefore, that the essence of Russian history has been in the subjection of society to the ever-mightier state, personified by its leader – one of the pillars of Russia’s ontological security (Vujačić 2015, 257).

In conclusion, the continuity of the ontological narrative of Russia as a strong state could be seen in the current style of leadership under President Putin. This Russian president gained popular support by “rescuing” an ontologically embedded notion of

Russia as a strong state. This is the notion that has been routinized throughout the country's history as its "highest value" (Kotkin 2016, 8). The resurrection of this ontological continuity was especially important given the "weakness of the state" that marked Yeltsin's presidency. This rupture in biographic continuity was one of the reasons Boris Yeltsin's approval ratings dropped to single digits in 1999 (Lipman 2016, 39). Despite its ontological importance, the "strong state" narrative both enables and restrains the current regime. Analysts note that there is fear and a lack of certainty regarding the future of the country when Putin is gone. The Kremlin has "no clue" what they will do in their leader's absence (Pavlosky 2016, 17).

Empire

Another aspect in Russia's ontological security lies in its ability to project power and address physical security needs through imperial expansion. As in the case of the strong state, personified by a great leader, it is closely tied to Russia's space and history. In 2003, Putin noted that a country like Russia "can survive and develop within the existing borders if it stays as a great power. During all of its time of weakness... Russia was invariably confronted with the threat of disintegration" (Putin 2003). Leichtova (2014) further notes the connection between imperial geographic domain and Russian self-perception as a great power, where territorial vastness serves as evidence of moral magnitude and power. Leontiev, a Russian philosopher, noted the almost fatalistic perception of Russia's expansionism when he wrote that Russia was "doomed to grow, even despite itself".

Both the economic and geopolitical grounds for Russia's expansionist policies have merged in its imperial conquest. In addressing economic threats, the overlap

between imperial expansion and peasant colonization was virtually indistinguishable, where the “land hungry peasantry moved into new territories that sometimes predated and sometimes followed the ever-new frontiers of the state, blurred the boundary between colonization and imperial expansion” (Raeff, 1971, 22-43). The country’s expansionism, therefore, was a way to ensure that Russia’s peasants received access to richer soil and to provide the means necessary for the survival of the Russian population.

As in the consolidation of power in a strong state, imperial expansion happened as a response to Russia’s physical threats. As noted by Trenin, territorial expansion in Russia was the result of the challenges for physical survival (Trenin 2002, 33). The decision to become an empire was a reaction by the Russian state to its almost constant state of war, since Russia “was invaded more often and with more force than any other early modern empire”. Therefore, it was the logic of competition that made Russia wage war and forced it to expand its territory (Tsygankov 2012, 23). Russians either had to perish or address their adversaries through force and then develop the seized lands to their advantage. The strengthening of borders, therefore, became the ground for colonization. Russian security has been inclined to moving outward in the spirit of preempting external attacks.

Vernadsky (1963) attributed the emergence of the imperial Russia to its interactions with Eastern tribes, specifically Mongols. He argued that Mongols were responsible for the ability of Russians and East Slavs, to expand their domain to the East and to emerge as an imperial state. Together with Vernadsky, Kliuchevskii (1937) considered the colonization of the Eurasian plain and the rise of the Principality of Moscovy as the most consequential events in Russian imperial history. Beginning with

the consolidation of the state of Moscovy under Ivan Grozny, Russia managed to expand at the rate of approximately 50 miles a day for hundreds of years, eventually covering one sixth of the earth's landmass (Kotkin 2016, 2).

The main peculiarity of Russian imperial expansion was not only in its magnitude. Pipes (1996) argues that, ontologically, the Russian Empire differs considerably from other empires that existed in the past. While in the case of other empires such as the Roman, British, Spanish, etc. empires, imperial expansion happened sequentially after the rise of the national state. In the case of Russia, it happened concurrently and not in sequence, as it happened in the West (Pipes 1996/1997, 8). Hence, Pipes argues that, in Russia, the ontological consciousness of an empire came at the same time as the idea of a nation.

The early imperial expansion to the East started in the 16th century when Ivan the Terrible captured Tatar cities of Kazan in 1552. A few years later, in 1556, Astrakhan and incorporated the large number of people who neither shared the same religion nor spoke the same language as the Russians. This conquest took place only a few decades after the Kingdom completed its own consolidation as a state through the "gathering of the Russian lands". This process was a conscious drive by Moscovy to annex neighboring territories. Within 200 years, Moscow's royalty increased their geographic domains by annexing through the armed force or acquiring, in other ways, the territory of divided Slavic principalities. This process was completed with absorption of Pskov in 1510 and Ryazan in 1521. Moskovy, therefore, was still undergoing the process of domestic consolidation, and at the time, it inherited the imperial domain of two khanates a few decades later. Its imperial conquest, therefore, took place at the time of the very

consolidation of the Russian state and the formation of its ontological awareness.

Therefore, the very idea of the imperial domain for Russia, unlike other states, is closely tied to its very identity as a state and its ontological awareness. As noted by Hoskings, in one of his review articles, “Britain had an empire, but Russia was an empire and perhaps still is” (Hosking 1995, 27).

The campaigns of conquering Kazan and Astrakhan began Russia’s expansion into Siberia, annexing a large Muslim population and turning Russia into a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state. This resulted in the formation of an imperial identity in Russia, concurrently with its national individuality.

Russia’s drive to acquire new territories and new peoples, the constant process of defining and building an empire, left the establishment of Russia as a state and a nation in a state of perpetual change. Consequently, this led to a sense of incompleteness. As a result, the multitude of different ethnic groups, with distinct languages, cultural traditions and religious beliefs that were annexed to Russia, due to its expansionist aspirations, further complicated the definition of Russian identity.

The importance of imperial identity for the country’s ontological security could explain Russia’s extreme sensitivity to any issues that are related to its geographic influence, as they seem to attack its very core as a state. Such imperial beliefs have been further embedded and framed into deliberate discursive constructions by Russian emperors, such as Peter the Great and Catherine. Peter considered imperial discourse to be targeted primarily to Russia’s outside neighbors, namely the West. He attempted to assert Russia’s position in the region. Conversely, Catherine emphasized the size of

Russia as a powerful empire and a tool for securing the safety and well-being of its citizens and stability in international relations (Leichtova 2014).

These crucial events, driven by Russia's physical security needs, had a profound impact on its ontological security. As noted by Vujačić, the transformation of Russia into an empire was, from the very beginning, closely connected to the subordination of all social strata to the patrimonial ruler. The external imperial expansion in the country was accompanied by a domestic consolidation of power that became characteristic of the Russian state: "a double triumph ...over his own people and ethnically and religiously alien people – the leitmotif of imperial Russian history" (Vujačić 2015, 100).

Despite such subordination, imperial ontological awareness is deeply rooted among Russian population. Trenin (2002), in his book, *The End of Eurasia*, argues for the centrality of a special dimension among Russians for the country's ontological awareness as a great power. In a poll of Moscow high school students, conducted at the time that Putin became the president, over 50% of the respondents said they favored restoration of the Russian Empire within its Soviet time or pre-revolutionary borders. Trenin noted that the desire for territorial revanchism among Russian youth was alarming and could be easily explained. For many Russians, the former USSR was not just an empire, but it was also a state with geographic magnitude that "was feared and therefore respected," noting the direct ontological connection between space and power in Russian identity (Trenin 2002, 27).

Ontological perceptions of Russian identity are not static and they are subject to constant change and reiteration. The role that space plays in the way Russians perceive superpower status has fluctuated, as well. In answering the question, "What makes a

country a superpower?,” the size of the country was almost as important for Russians as respect and authority in the world and quadrupled in its importance since 1999 being ahead of civil rights (Levada 2014.)

The Role of the West

Relations with the West play another important role in embedding the content of great power discourse in Russian ontological security. Geographic proximity to the European nations and their economic and geopolitical significance have been influencing Russia’s ontological awareness for centuries in a number of different ways.

First, the West has played an important role in determining the content of Russian identity. The West has historically served as Russia’s Other, as a measure of determining and comparing Russia’s uniqueness (Leichtova 2015, 28). Russian and Western thought and culture seem to differ from each other in fundamental ways.

Unlike Western culture, Russian is characterized by the “predominance of synthesis over analysis, idealism over pragmatism, imagery over logic, intuition over reason, the shared over private” (Surkov 2006). Hence, the difference between Russian and Western perceptions seems to be irreconcilable on the fundamental level. Such a difference has been historically embedded through the work of Russian philosophers, historians and thinkers such as Tolstoy (1828-1910), Kireevskiy (1806-1856), Leontev (1831-1891), and others.

Moreover, the debate over the West’s influence on Russian identity between Slavophiles, Westernizers and Eurasianists has been at the very core of the country’s biographic narrative. Westernizers put the emphasis on Russia’s similarity with the West and view the West as the most viable and progressive civilization in the world. The

emergence of this school can be traced back to Peter the Great's reforms. However, some authors argue that Russia's deep cultural connection to the West began from the time it adopted Orthodox Christianity and became a student of Byzantium's faith (Tsygankov 2012, 3). Europe, according to Tsygankov, has always been Russia's "significant other", figuring prominently in domestic debates. The West created the context in which Russia's rulers defended their core values. Like Tsygankov, Westernizers believe that Russia had always been an integral part of the Western cultural mainstream (Pritzel 1998, 160).

As a school of thought, Slavophilism emerged in response to Westernism (Tuminez 2000, 63). Unlike Westernizers, Slavophiles saw Russia as a unique civilization that combines the virtues of the Orthodox faith, Slavic ethnicity, and communal institutions. They believed in the Messianic nature of Russia that was called to heal by the power of its example, both the social divisions inside Russia and the spiritual wounds of Europe which were ravaged by Revolution and War (Billington 2004, 13). Slavophiles saw all of human history as a struggle between spiritual and material forces. Broadly speaking, they argued that Russian identity and destiny lay in faith and family and in the spiritual institutions of rural Russia. Slavophiles supported autocracy as the legitimate expression of Russian political power, since it was founded on mutual trust between the sovereign and its subjects.

As a result of the defeat in the Crimean War in 1856, and the feeling of humiliation that the Russian elite felt because of what they viewed as the betrayal of the European powers, panslavism emerged as an external projection of Slavophile ideas. In a nutshell, panslavism advocated for unity among Slavs with the ideological and political

center in Russia. Panslavs formulated their image in contrast to “the other” collective West or greater European powers. Danilevskii whose book on Russia and Europe, became a symbol of panslavism argued about Europe’s intrinsic enmity towards Russia in the context of the Crimean War. He argued that Europe’s position was not a product of tactical considerations, but rather a deeply rooted enmity of Roman Catholic European civilization that sought to dominate the rest of the world (including Slavs). Danilevskii (1869) compared different civilizations to “living organisms” and the conflict between them to nature itself and therefore it was inevitable. Besides Danilevskii, other well-known Russian thinkers, Herzen and Bakunin, saw the West as the embodiment of a rational and cold Gesellschaft in contrast to the organic Gemeinschaft of Russia. Their rejection was not rooted only in the resentment of West’s bourgeois path, but it was also rooted in the hope that Russia’s backward people could, with time, become a source of Russia’s superiority.

As well as Pan-Slavism, Eurasianism or Civilizationism depicts Russian ontological awareness as different from those of the West. The essence of this movement was in its view of the uniqueness of Russia. Eurasianists considered Russia as more of a civilization rather than as a nation with unique ontological awareness. Such uniqueness, they argued, is reflected in Russia’s geographic, linguistic and historical background (Savitskii 2003, 653-699). Their motto, articulated by Savitskii (2003), was, in comparison with any nation to the uniqueness of an individual person. Therefore, the Russian nation does not have to aspire to be like others, but rather it has to be like itself, with its own sense of ontological awareness and biographic continuity. Eurasianists saw a strong concentration of centralized power in Russia as one of the important features of

Russian identity. They argued that such a form of state construction was inherited by Russia from prior nomadic empires, and, in Russia, everything is to be done in the name of the state, and, in particular, its ruler. Therefore, Eurasianists attribute great importance to statism and see in it the foundation of Russian history. In their view of the West, Eurasianists are largely skeptical of its importance for the future of Russia. They have argued that, despite the West's might in a political and cultural sense, Russia's integration into Europe has always been followed by the sense of its inferiority. Were Russia was treated as a European periphery with the sense of disdain from Europe for its European backyard.

Second, this lack of acceptance of Russia, as an equal among Western European powers, plays an important role in the construction of the Russian biographic narrative and the basis of country's ontological awareness.

As noted in the previous chapter, to be a great power, it is not sufficient for a state to think of itself in terms of being great. The attribution of status has to occur when other states in the system, especially other great powers or members of influential clubs of powers, perceive the status seeker as a great power. Because of its proximity to powerful European states, their recognition of Russia's status was essential for the external validation of Russia's self-perception as a great power. As noted in the previous chapter, domestically, such recognition enhances collective self-esteem and it consolidates the population's approval for developmental goals. Internationally great power status infers influence over other states in the system and, therefore, it can enhance the physical security of a state. The external projection of power to the Western states was arguably one of the major reasons for Peter the Great's imperial expansion. Historically, Europe

was also influenced by Russia. However, there was hardly any recognition of Russia as an equal in the international system. Instead, Europeans viewed Russia as a backward, almost barbaric, society with a repressive political system. For much of Europe, Russia was the antimodel, the antithesis of what an enlightened society should be, as noted by the Marquis de Custine:

If ever your sons should be discontented with France, try my recipe; tell them to go to Russia. It is a useful journey for every foreigner: whoever has well examined the country will be content to live somewhere else (cited in Stent 2007, 404).

As noted by Neumann (2008), Russia's self-referential axiom of seeing itself as a great power has been present in Russian identity politics for a very long time. He concludes that the persistence of the theme, and its intensity in Russian identity politics, leads one to conclude that Russia's quest for great power status has not been a successful one. Because, in the case of its success, it would have formed part of the political debate, rather than be its substance. Recognition of Russia's great power status had to be by other great powers. Historically these powers for Russia have been the European states (Neumann 2008, 129). This lack of recognition arguably embedded ontological anxiety over its great power recognition in Russia's biographic narrative.

A third important aspect of the role the West plays for Russian ontological security is in the attachment to the conflict between Russia and the West. As noted in Chapter 2, Mitzen and Roe emphasize the importance of the relational aspect in the construction of a state's ontological security. According to them, ontological security, embedded in established routines, provides a sense of predictability and the avoidance of anxiety in international relations. Therefore, the routines that states have established, both

domestically and internationally, may drive them to repeatedly engage in dilemmatic conflict. In this instance, even routines that are dangerous for survival can create the sense of ontological security and help to make the decisions of security seekers who are attached to the conflict rationale (Mitzen 2006, 341).

In his book, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin*, Tsygankov (2012) noted three distinct trajectories in Russia's relations with the West: cooperation, defensiveness and assertiveness. He underlined that Russia's resorting to assertiveness has been embedded in the country's ontological security through the centuries (Tsygankov 2012, 262). Most of the military conflicts that Russia has been involved with historically have been with Russia's Western neighbors (wars with Poland in the 17th century; Sweden in the 18th century; the Napoleonic War; the Crimean War in the 19th century; the Great Patriotic War; and the Cold War). These conflicting relations got further embedded after the end of Cold War. According to many analysts, Western states have contributed to the deepening of disagreements (Kanet; Mankoff; Trenin; Tsygankov, etc). One of the reasons for this was the insistence by the West that it had defeated the former Soviet Union in the Cold War (Razyvayev 1992). Moreover, economic aid promised by the West was not delivered to Russia, due to the West's assessment that Russian progress in economic performance was unsatisfactory. Internally, however, it was perceived in Russia that a former Great Power had been reduced to the humiliating level of begging the West for handouts and caving in to International Monetary Fund policies.

This humiliation has been one of the leading themes in the re-construction of current identity within the context of Russia's relations with the West. It has been

supported by a dominant narrative of a deeply embedded mistrust of Russia on the part of the West. The West holds the image of Russia as inherently expansionist and imperialistic. This narrative found a forceful representation in the idea of “sovereign democracy”, as a comprehensive ideology, designed to strengthen socio-political cohesion inside the country. Its main idea is that democracy is perceptual and would reflect differently the needs of distinct states at different times. More importantly, these needs are rooted in each country’s ontological awareness through historical legacies and geopolitical conditions, taking away the monopolization of democracy by the West.

Hansen (2016) argues that the current Russian biographic narrative discourse of great power consolidates the state around Russia’s traditional values and norms. These are formed in the context of the country’s opposition to the West (Hansen 2016, 359-375). While some of the discussion is politically engineered and skillfully manipulated, it is nevertheless rooted in embedded perceptions that Russians have. These historically routinized perceptions have become an important part of Russian identity its vision of itself and the world. Attachment to the conflict with the West, therefore, provides a feeling of familiarity and predictability for the Russian electorate. Ironically, as argued by ontological security, conflict with the West brings internal identity coherence and biographic continuity for the Russian population. In present day Russia, these fears have been used by Russian elites to consolidate the power in the face of external pressures and economic challenges.

Despite the embeddedness of Russia’s “othering” of the West, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin sought to rupture the continuity of this ontological narrative. Then a new Russian state, led by President Yeltsin and Foreign

Minister Kozyrev, saw one of their essential goals to put an end to decades of Russian isolation from the West (Kanet and Birgeron 1997). The emphasis was on the desire for Russia to abandon its Messianic ideology and become a “normal power” in the West-constructed international system (Tsygankov 2016). As a result, there was a substantial rupture in Russian biographic continuity that manifested itself in attempts to decentralize the power of the Russian state, to abandon its messianic and imperial ideology and to replace it with aspiration to become a “normal power”. Hence, the geopolitical focus was shifted from the historical spheres of interest in Russia’s near abroad and countries of the Muslim and Asian world, to Western International Institutions and Western States, in particular United States and European countries.

However the enchantment with the West did not last long. To start with the level of promised and implied economic aid was not delivered due to the West’s assessment that Russian progress in economic reform was unsatisfactory. Internally, however, it was perceived in Russia that a former Great Power had been reduced to the humiliating level of begging the West for minute handouts and caving in to IMF policies. Moreover, the change in the balance of power in international system left the United States as the uncontested hegemon. A number of actions that were taken by the United States and other Western countries have prompted Moscow to complain that the West had the tendency to dictate its own terms in the international arena. As Trenin (2006) argues, the West invited Russia to join it, but left the door half-open. Therefore, the project of Russian integration into Western Institutions was still-born from its interception.

There are numerous examples of such flawed integration. In the case of NATO, while other former Warsaw Pact countries were being drawn into the expanding West,

Russia was offered new arrangements, but it was kept at arm's length. Moreover, with time, NATO deployed its military forces close to Russian borders (Freire 2008). When Georgia and the Ukraine expressed their desire to join the organization, this added substantially to the sense of Russia's strategic insecurity. Despite the change brought on by the end of the Cold War, the NATO security structures remained impermeable. Instead, they were further enlarged and deepened, preempting Russia from becoming a full-fledged member of the security community (Sakwa 2015). Especially unsettling for Russia were soft power projects, such as the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP), initiated by the European Union in Russia's near abroad. The chain of color revolutions, analyzed in more detail in the following chapter, has been perceived in Kremlin as blunt and aggressive encroachment on country's historic spheres of interest initiated by the United States. That brought a unified sentiment of Western deceit in Russian society that was quite damaging to the image of the West. Hence, instead of rupturing this, ontological awareness got further consolidated around the country's biographic signifiers of opposition to the West.

Break in Biographic Continuity

As discussed in Chapter 2, biographic narratives of a state play a significant role in a state's ontological security. These narratives consolidate people as a group by providing a compelling story. Such a biographic continuity provides a sense of stability and it confronts existential anxiety that helps us function as social actors (Patterson and Manroe 1998, 325). These stories structure the image of who we are and the world around us (Hankiss, 1981). Embedded biographic narratives are deeply connected with a state's ontological security needs.

Narratives are selectively activated by political actors (Subotic 2015, 1). These political actors strategically manipulate shared cognitive narrative frames for their own political ends (Payne, 2001). When, in 2005, Putin stated that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was “the largest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century”, he was referring to a profound rupture in the country’s biographic continuity, both domestically and internationally (Putin 2005). At the same time, this narrative was to serve as a justification for Russia’s aspiration to re-establish itself, both as a great power and as a re-assessment of relations with the West. This narrative was widely accepted by the Russian population who struggled to come up with a coherent identity after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

In the post-Soviet period, there was an initial desire to rupture such continuity by drawing a sharp line between the Soviet past and the non-Soviet present. This trend exhausted itself by the middle of the 1990s (Oushhakine 2007, 452). Such a shift was caused by a variety of factors, both of an endogenous and exogenous nature.

Internationally, Russia was stripped of its superpower status, and mistreated by the West that proclaimed its victory in the Cold War. Domestically the financial default of 1998, the Chechen War and the overall lack of social stability brought escapist sentiments that evoked a reflective nostalgia for Soviet times. As noted by Boym, “the past in contemporary Russia has turned into a kind of perfect or future imperfect (both are clear deviations from Russian grammar). There was a great confusion about what is to be commemorated and what is to be forgotten” (Boym 1995, 152).

In the 1990s, both in government and in overall society, there emerged a demand for the kind of past that would make one proud. It seemed as if restoring the biographic

continuity of greatness would compensate for the unsatisfactory present. The empire was torn by domestic conflict and a weakening state; increasingly, it needed a unifying idea to preserve its integrity. Thus the state became actively involved in the shaping of Russia's collective memory (Gorbachev 2015). During Putin's time in office, the state was actively reviving the continuity of the country's biographic narrative of great power. The biggest change from post-Soviet times was in the erosion of the ideological line that separated pre-Soviet and Soviet pasts. The Russian government, as a most influential memory custodian, took an active role in restoring the continuity of great power discourse. Eventually the terms, "continuity", "stability" and "conservatism" replaced the word "modernization" in Russian official rhetoric. Modernization implies a leap to the future through reforming the past, while nostalgia selectively idealizes the past and preserves the historical continuity (Gorbachev 2015, 184). It, as well, could be perceived in different ways. For example, Boym (1995) explains aspirations for great power status, turning to old ideas of sobornost (communal values) advocated in Russia in the past. On the other hand, Oushakine (2007) considers nostalgia for Soviet times to be a form of "aphasia" – turning to the old ideas in the absence of new ones (Boym 1995). In his study, he gives the example of the New Year's Eve show, *Starye pesni o glavnom* (Old Songs about the Most Important Things). In the show, popular artists performed Soviet-era songs against the background of a Soviet film. For Oushakine, this show is a vivid example of "aphasia", a meaning which permeates Russian society where, in the absence of new system-creating concepts, society reuses the old ones.

Another project, *Namedni*, on Russian television, became a hallmark of post-Soviet nostalgia. The television version showed the period from 1961 to 2003 and the

books cover the years from 1946 to 2010. The idea of the project was to comprehend the history through personal recollections. Despite Parfenov's (author of *Namedni*) efforts not to evoke nostalgic sentiment, it became an important part of the project where history is overshadowed by memory and its images of the past (Gorbachev 2015, 187).

The nostalgic domain of the series ends in 1991. The dissolution of the Soviet Union marks a distinct border, "a point of transition" from happy past to unsatisfactory present – forming a ground for nostalgic sentiments (Abramov & Chistiakova 2012). The stories of the 1960s through to the 1980s, produce much more positive emotions than the stories of later times. They exhibit coherence, consistency and a sense of predictability that marks that period and evokes memories and values that are familiar, and for the most part pleasant, to the majority of the current generation. With the beginning of Perestroika, such coherence feels broken with kaleidoscope-like style of narration, marking the breaking of the system (Gorbachev 2015, 188). Therefore, despite its aspiration to address collective memory in a reflective way, *Namedni* could be seen as a powerful tool in the state's overall effort to reconstruct common identity signifiers. It helps create a nostalgic myth for older generations and it creates a continuity of the narrative among different generations. If the program is watched by the whole family, the youth could be initiated in to the attractiveness of the Soviet myth. The main reason for the program's success, therefore, is its capacity, not only to satisfy the collective nostalgic demand, but as well to socially reconstruct narrative continuity of the myth that unifies and unites the nation.

In this chapter, I have provided research on Russia's exceptional position in the global system, one that is adopted by the country's current leadership. This

exceptionalism plays an important role in the construction of a great power discourse for Russian ontological security. This discourse has been historically embedded and it supports the country's biographic continuity. Subjective and perceptual Russian great power discourse differs from the one in the West. Initially conceptualized as the response to the country's physical security needs, with continued use, it became embedded and it became a part of Russia's ontological security. Its rupture caused a profound identity crisis for the Russian people and the state. In recent years, the country's political leadership has been skillfully manipulating the great power narrative by selectively reactivating, for their political ends, discourses on "Russia as a strong state"; "Russia as an empire"; and "Russia in opposition to the West".

The next two chapters will illustrate the interplay of ontological security in Russia's current foreign policy based on two cases: Russia's gas wars with the Ukraine and Russian engagement in Syria. These cases seek to reflect the activation of predominant ontological trends under Putin's presidency. Despite their similarities, they take place within the context of distinct material capabilities for Moscow and they have different global reaches. While gas wars with Ukraine occurred in the country's "near abroad," the conflict in Syria had a more global outlook. The following Chapter provides the analysis of ontological grounds for Russian engagement in the gas wars with Ukraine. I argue that ontological narratives activated during this standoff, for the most part, have been present in Russia's current policy in the Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea.

Chapter 5: Undermining Status and Material Capabilities the Case of Gas Wars with Ukraine

This chapter builds on theoretical framework introduced in the previous sections. It seeks to analyze the reasons behind Russia's engagement in gas wars with the Ukraine. The energy related issues between two states started in the early 1990s. Considering the importance of the relationship, and despite its contentious nature both Moscow and Kiev, the two countries had managed to resolve their disagreements and maintain the *status quo*. In 2006, however, both Moscow and Kiev took the decision to escalate the conflict. For Moscow, this choice was made despite the important short-term and long-term consequences it had on the country's material capabilities. In Russia energy is considered a strategic resource and a "value pump" for the country's otherwise uncompetitive economy. As a result of the standoff, Russia lost credibility and this signaled its long-term consumers to seek a diversification of supply. The decision to engage in the conflict, therefore, undermined Russia's material capabilities and its ability to project power for safeguarding its physical security. Moreover, it eroded the country's reputation as a reliable partner and it diminished its status in the international system. These actions go against the foundations of security studies discussed in Chapter 1. What caused Russia to engage in gas disputes with the Ukraine?

In this chapter, I argue that the systemic pressures, caused by the Orange Revolution, threatened to rupture the biographic continuity of Russia as a great power narrative. To justify the validity of the regime to the Russian public, and further to consolidate power in the face of exogenous challenges, Russian elites utilized the country's embedded ontological beliefs for

political ends. As a result, Moscow drew closer to the country's identifying signifiers of "Russia as a strong state"; "Russia as an empire"; and "Russia's opposition to the West".

The conflict, however, revealed the dual nature of ontological security: while enabling agents it constrain the policy choices available to them. The very ontological narratives that were skillfully used by Moscow created a trap (an ontological trap) that constrained the foreign policy choices accessible to Russian leadership in gas disputes. As a result, the Russian elites opted to preserve the country's biographic continuity as a great power instead of considering the country's business interests. Consequentially, the engagement in the conflict negatively affected the country's material capabilities and its ability to project power and status in the international system.

Structure

This chapter has the following structure: at the beginning, I provide a brief outline of Russia's capabilities at the time of the gas wars with the Ukraine. I pay special attention to the importance of the energy sector for the Russian economy and the role of the Russian gas monopoly Gazprom. In the following section, the reader is introduced to the background of the 2006 and 2009 standoff between Russia and the Ukraine over gas transit with special emphasis on energy relations between these two countries. The next part of the chapter locates the concept of exogenous pressures caused by the Orange Revolution. It studies their effects on Russia's ontological security and the country's foreign policy choices. The following section analyzes Russia's involvement in the conflict from a Rational Choice perspective by weighting costs and benefits of the engagement. For this section, I draw on the work of Pami Aalto (Aalto 2012) that examines Russia's behavior in its energy policy from the perspective of distinct analytical

frames of reference. Following this, I provide an overview of the biographic narratives of Russia as an empire, Russia as a strong and Russia's opposition to the West that supported engagement in the dispute. I conclude this chapter with the findings and suggestions for further research.

The Importance of Energy

In the international system, energy is not considered as a normal commodity, but as a strategic resource. It is used to increase power, influence and geopolitical advantages (Kropatcheva 2014, 2). From the Realist perspective in International Relations, in a situation where the international system is perceived as being composed of hostile states as the main actors, the use of "self-help" methods to increase power are prevalent (Burchill 2001). Realists consider states to be rational actors interested in increasing their power capabilities, such as energy and security. Energy, therefore, is considered to be one of the vital components of national power, national interest and of the balance of power (Dannreuther 2010, 3). If the energy sector of a state is suffering, it will negatively impact the overall power of the state.

As has been noted by the International Energy Agency. Russia's energy sector plays an essential role in its domestic and global energy security (IEA, 2014). Energy, therefore, has had a tremendous impact on Russia, both economically and geopolitically. From an economic perspective, the price increase in oil to US \$130 per barrel in 2008, helped lift Russia out of its drastic post-Soviet economic decline and led it toward an almost miraculous economic recovery. The Russian GDP went from \$200 billion in 1999 to \$1.26 trillion in 2007. As a result, Russia moved from being the 20th largest economy in the world to the seventh. Moreover, the energy-induced revival of Russia's GDP

further enhanced its economic position by lifting it to the status of one the emerging powers within the framework of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and a member of the G8. Russia's dependence on its energy production, at the time of the conflict, was so extensive that exports of the country's energy resources amounted to almost 70% of its overall exports.

Moreover, the energy-driven revival of the economy provided Russian leadership with an opportunity to reframe the country's image domestically, while reconstructing a positive perception of its identity. Russia went through a profound identity crisis following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which manifested itself, among other things, in the negative perception by the population of Russia's role in the world, as well as in low hopes and expectations for the future. For example, according to a poll conducted by the Russian polling agency Levada Center, before the economic recovery, over 72% of Russians did not consider Russia to be a great power. Over 62% of Russians felt insecure about their futures. This number dropped significantly in the years following the petroleum boom of 2008. Another poll by the Levada Center demonstrated that the number of Russian citizens who considered their country a super power, had tripled from 1994 to 2008 (2014). Moreover, in the year 2009, Russia's National Security Strategy articulated Russia's changed self-perception by referring to Russia as "a key player within evolving multipolar international relations" with aspirations of returning to a "position as world leader"(Security Council of Russian Federation, 2009).

Another important implication of energy for Russia was in providing Russia with geopolitical leverage. With the decline of its military might, ideological allegiances and the control over leaders of many satellite states, Russia lost most of its instruments of

influence. Left with limited choices in the advancement of its geopolitical goals, Russia perceived energy as one of its most viable options. According to Bugajski, energy is what provided the necessary basis for Russia to construct a new approach of “pragmatic re-imperialization” in its foreign policy. In this “pragmatic re-mineralization”, Russia sought to build a new global order with Moscow as a major pole of power by recreating its dominant role in post-Soviet space (Bugajski 2010).

Energy, therefore, plays an important role for Russia economically, ideationally and geopolitically. Accounting for over 70% of its overall exports, energy supports Russia’s ability to project power and status in an international system. Domestically, energy is especially vital to consider, given that the Russian economy could be characterized by its “virtual” nature. It is supported by a set of informal institutions that permit the production and exchange of goods that are value subtracting (worth less than the value of the inputs used to produce them) {Gaddy and Ickes 2002}. According to Gaddy and Ickes, the state of the Russian economy has been and continues to be structurally inefficient and impossible to modernize. The economic structures bequeathed by central planning cannot compete in a market setting. A few years before the gas conflict, in 2001, nearly 40% of industrial enterprises in Russia were in the red. To remain afloat, the Russian economic system needed a source of value infusion. For Gaddy and Ickes, the Russian fuel and energy sector is this value-pump. In 2011, the non-oil sector current account deficit reached a record 13 % of GDP, confirming the central importance of the energy and the country’s dependence towards Russia’s energy export sector (the World Bank 2012). The performance of the Russian energy sector is the crucial to support an otherwise unsustainable economy. Moreover, in addition to driving

the Russian economy, this “value pump” finances the security net to millions of citizens ,who are employed by nonviable enterprises and who depend on the state for heavily subsidized health and educational systems.

Kremlin’s dependence on energy revenues could be seen in country’s capabilities during the gas wars. A steady increase in their price has been essential to Russia’s economic growth at the time of the first conflict in 2006. According to the World Bank, the Russian annual GDP growth that year was at 8.53% (World Bank, 2015). In 2009, the sharp drop in oil prices weighed heavily on its economy. The economy contracted by 7.821%. This drop was especially drastic, considering that in 2008, the economy had grown by 5.6%. The senior emerging market economist at Capital Economics, Neil Shearing, considered this fall to be the biggest since 1994, surpassing even the drop in 1998 (Lesova 2010).

Gazprom and state capitalism

One of the key players in Russian energy sector and the “value pump” for the country’s economy is the gas monopoly *Gazprom*. In 2006, 90% of the gas sector was in the hands of this state controlled company. *Gazprom* was founded in 1989 as a successor of the Ministry of Gas Industry and it was initially designed to operate within a quasi-legal framework. It enjoyed full control over the domestic gas production chain from its extraction, processing to storage and distribution to its customers. This position was a consequence of the status of a state owned and controlled monopoly. Its privileged role was granted to the company in exchange for providing cheap energy to domestic consumers, as well as currency to the state’s budget (Vavilov 2015, 3). In 1993, pursuant to the Russian Government’s resolution and President’s decree, the *Gazprom State*

Concern ceased to exist and it was reorganized into the Joint Stock Company RAO *Gazprom* with the Russian government holding a majority stake. Despite the change in its legal status, this Russian monopoly continued exercising a special role in country's economic and political life. Federal Law No. 117 on Gas Exports from July of 2006 provides *Gazprom* with a monopoly on pipeline gas exports. *Gazprom* considers one of its major strengths the fact that it controls a unified export channel.

Kryshtanovskaya and White (2011) argue that, from its very inception, *Gazprom* was created as a company run by Russia's ruling group (network), rather than as a functional state institution. The formation of the networks can be best located at the nexus of state and business. In the case of Russia, therefore, networks historically have had a tendency to identify themselves with the state. This makes it difficult to distinguish between the two. This makes Russian networks arguably both owners and operators of the state in Russia. As a major part of the Russian economy, the energy sector is one of the cornerstones of the networks. The gas and strategic infrastructure belongs to non-distributed resources, and access is restricted to the state and its direct representatives.

The importance of the state in the energy sector increased under Putin (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2011, 29). It came as a result of policies that the president supported. The role of such companies as *Gazprom* and *Rosneft* rose, and the boards of these companies were joined by people from very close to Putin's circle. In 2004, the government made a decision to transfer a series of the largest Russian companies to the direct control of the government itself (Wilson, 2004). People from Putin's team began systematically to join the boards of directors of these companies. Some of these officials have a visible public profile. For example, then chief of staff, Dmitry Medvedev, became

chairman of the board of *Gazprom*, and presidential aide Victor Ivanov became the Chairman of *Aeroflot*. (Kryshtanovskaya and White 2011).

Russia n today, therefore, could be referred to as “state capitalism” wherein the state dominates the markets. Some claim that such dominance is primarily for political gain (Bremmer 2010). However, business diplomacy matters to Russia. It is usually through economic means that foreign policy objectives can be met by influencing other countries to align their policies with those of Russia (Tsygankov 2006). This has been argued to be the case in many instances with the Russian energy policy.

Gas market, consumers

Russian energy security (especially security of demand) is important both to country’s business and political interests. For over- 40 years, *Gazprom*’s key consumers have been European states. Deliveries to Europe were built up in Soviet times through a unified transmission system without regard for regional borders. Moscow controlled the whole pipeline through the former Soviet Union. Naturally, the internal borders of the USSR were not considered in the planning process. Therefore, the pipeline carries gas in a straight line through Russian territory all the way to the Ukraine. In addition, the Ukraine has significant gas storage facilities that, during Soviet times, were under the control of Moscow. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Ukraine inherited an important position for the transit and storage of Russian gas, destined for European consumers. As a result, in the post-Soviet era, the transit of gas through its territory became a substantial source of revenues for the Ukraine (Skalamera 2015, 399). Transit states, therefore, emerged as important variables in the security of supply and demand for both Russia and the European Union.

Gazprom's exports to its European partners account to more than half of the company's revenues and one third of the EU's overall supplies. According to information provided by the Ministry of Statistics of the Russian Federation, member states of the EU are Russia's largest trading partners. This makes their significance as geopolitical neighbors difficult to overestimate (Vatansever 2010). For Europe, Russia has been important, mostly as the largest provider of oil and gas. The dependence of the European States on Russian energy supplies grew steadily over time. According to *Eurostat* (2009) in 2004 Russia was the largest gas supplier to the EU member states and provided its member states with 29% of overall gas consumed in the European Union. In 2006, only two years later, this number increased by almost 10% with 31.9% of the EU's population relying on supply of Russian gas (*Eurostat* 2009). Angela Stent shared the common sentiment prevalent in the EU at the beginning of the 21st century that Russia's economic significance as an energy provider for Europe would likely grow in the next decade (Stent 2007, 425).

From this section, I conclude that, at the time of the gas wars with the Ukraine, energy played a vital role for Russia. It subsidized the country's otherwise inefficient economy and provided a security net for its citizens. As a strategic resource, it was essential for the country's material capabilities, as well as its ability to project power and status in an international system. In 2006 the main consumers of Russian gas were member states of the European Union. The analysts predicted the deepening of energy related dependency between Russia and its European consumers in the future.

Gas wars with Ukraine: The background of the conflict

The predictions on growing role of Russia as Europe's energy supplier were disrupted by the series of disputes that deeply impacted both European and Russian energy security. These energy crises, or so-called "gas wars" of 2006 and 2009, between Russia and Ukraine, were the result of several developments. The "gas relationship" between Russia and Ukraine began during the Soviet period and is characterized by deep co-dependence. For the Ukraine, its industrial and urban infrastructures use gas as the main energy source. Initially it came mainly from the Ukraine itself, but its supplies declined over time. By the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Ukraine became heavily dependent on gas from the western Siberian fields. On the other hand, Russia was almost completely dependent on the Ukraine for gas transit to Europe. As mentioned above, the pipelines were built on the assumption that the two republics of the Soviet Union would continue to collaborate under the Soviet umbrella (Stern 2006). Most exports of Russian gas transit through the Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova were arranged through preferential agreements with Russia.

The Ukraine holds a pivotal geographic position with more than 80% of Russian gas exports to Europe delivered via that country in 2004. The essence of the dispute addressed natural gas supplies, prices, and debts between the Ukraine and Russia. The contentious relations in gas transit started in the early 1990s, right after the breakup of the Soviet Union. The majority of the debt was accumulated in 1992-1994 when the Ukrainian government had no well-defined economic policies (Balmaceda 1998). On January 1, 1997, the Ukraine's debt to its main gas suppliers Turkmenistan and Russia rose to \$4.205 billion (*Zerkalo Nedely* 1997). This debt reduced the field of action for the

Ukraine in other areas as well. To maintain relations with Russia, as its vital energy supplier, the Ukraine had to pay for its debts with concessions on Black Sea Fleet and other strategic areas. One of the ways to resolve the Ukraine's indebtedness, proposed by Moscow, was the possibility of debt-for-share swaps. It implied that Ukrainian debts would be forgiven by giving Russian companies equity in key Ukrainian enterprises. The idea behind the proposed action, if carried out, was to symbolize the "virtual reunification" of the Soviet Union's oil and gas system by taking over facilities located in transit states as compensation for fuel debts (*Ukrinform* 1995). Moscow, therefore, used energy as a tool to advance its interests in the region and deepen the Ukraine's dependence. Despite the wide array of energy-related issues, both Moscow and Kiev have been successful in resolving the tensions and maintaining the *status quo*.

The Orange Revolution of 2004 weakened the position of Russian-favored political forces in the Ukraine, as well as the election of pro-Western president, Viktor Yushchenko. Yushchenko undermined Russian-Ukrainian energy cooperation. A new administration in the Ukraine was in stark contrast to Leonid Kuchma's regime, himself seen as a channel for Russian influence in the country. Yushchenko's aspiration to move from the Russian sphere of interest, and to integrate the Ukraine more closely with the EU and NATO, signaled a drastic change in country's foreign policy priorities.

A few major developments should be highlighted in order to understand the conflict fully. First, at the outset of the conflict, the Ukraine refused to release gas that was legally stored by *Gazprom* in storage reservoirs there (the gas either disappeared or was stolen). Secondly, it was appearing as though the Ukrainian intent to break the existing agreement with Russia, for subsidized transit charges, and to start charging

transit at “European” rates. This step was immediately condemned by the Russian parliament which, in response, required the Ukraine to pay “European prices” as well for its own Russian gas supply (RT). According to Jonathan Stern (2009), both parties equally contributed to the escalation of the conflict. The Ukraine insisted on an increase of transit fees. Russia reciprocated immediately by demanding that the Ukraine pay higher prices for Russian gas.-The Ukrainian government, and its transit company (*Naftogaz Ukrainy*), showed that they were prepared to use their near monopoly of Russian transit to Europe as the ultimate bargaining chip (Pirani 2009).

Despite escalated tensions, the nature of contentious issues between Russia and the Ukraine in the energy sector, during Yushchenko’s presidency, remained the same as with previous Ukrainian administrations. It was characterized by a further accumulation of debts and accompanying demands for favorable contracts. This interrupted the gas flow through the Ukraine from Russia. The ontological context of the relationship, however, had changed.

Orange Revolution and Exogenous pressures on Russian biographic continuity

The Orange Revolution marked a pivotal change in the relations between Russian and the Ukraine. The events of 2004 threatened the continuity of the Russian biographic narrative of great power. In response to these exogenous pressures, Moscow could have either ruptured or drawn closer to Russia’s identifying signifiers.

As noted in Chapter 2, Innes and Steele (2013) define exogenous pressures as trauma. They perceive trauma as an instance that, when experienced, creates radical ontological insecurity. In other words, it calls into question the Self as it is conceived and conceptualized (Innes and Steele 2013, 17). In addition, trauma creates a situation that is

differentiated from normalcy. Traumatic moments therefore are hypersensitive and they indelibly mark a state's image (Becker 2013, 62).

Trauma can have different implications on a state and it can serve as a springboard to political contestation of an existing order. As a result, it creates space for a biographical narrative to be either reaffirmed or rewritten through political action (Steele 2008). By doing so, it crafts and shapes present and future political choices. Trauma is therefore deeply embedded in the issue of national identity, its creation and transformation and it becomes important in understanding a state's foreign policy choices (Becker 2013, 62). In addition, trauma is two-dimensional. On one level, it constitutes physical material harm and emotional harm to a biographic narrative. On the other hand, traumas are highly subjective and depend on how they are perceived inside a given community.

Different states therefore could have different responses to trauma. Some analysts argue that trauma could affect ontological security in two major ways through *rupture or consolidation* (Subotic 2015). Rupture upsets a nation's idea of itself, its certain understanding of the collective biographical narrative. As a result, the actor finds this situation threatening to its sense of Self. In this instance, the actor could revise or update its routine.

Another state's response to external pressures could be *consolidation*. In this instance external pressures could provide "increasing rootlessness and loss of stability" (Kinnvall 2004, 743). Such social dislocation provokes an ontological insecurity and a desire to form stronger social community bonds as compensation for the insecurity.

Collective trauma therefore could not only rupture ontological security, but it also could

strengthen it by *bringing a collective together* and be formative for collective identity of a nation.

Catarina Kinnvall (2004) argues that the sense of national identity maintains its ontological security by providing consistency to social and material environment. Exogenous factors can breed ontological insecurity where boundaries of identity are challenged. Kinnvall writes that the economic and political interconnectedness of modern times make states more vulnerable to systemic challenges (Kinnvall 2004, 741). One of the main responses to such uncertainty has been to *draw closer to identifying signifiers* that are stable enough to reduce such insecurity and existential anxiety. She names nationalism along with religion as one of the most powerful responses. Nationalism, therefore, is more likely than other identity constructions to arise during crises of ontological insecurity.

Kinnvall considers nationalism as “securitized subjectivity”, that, at times, difficulties and alienation are utilized by the leaders to channel the existential uncertainties of people. The construction and reconstruction of historical symbols, myths and carefully chosen traumas supply a set of beliefs to combat insecurities. This is done by providing powerful stories and beliefs (discourses). These discourses convey a picture of security of home, “safe from intruders”. The securitization of subjectivity is however an intersubjective process (Kinnvall 2004, 763). It applies that “the other” is involved in the process. Increasing ontological security for one person, or group of people, implies decreasing security for those excluded from nationalist and religious discourse.

Subotic (2015) offers a different analysis of state’s behavior during the times of external pressure by shifting her attention to the framing of biographic discourse. She

argues that, in times of great crises, the state autobiographic narrative can remain essentially the same. The policy change, however, that is brought up by external challenges could be explained by putting emphases on some parts of the broader narrative (“activating them”) while downplaying the other (“deactivating the other”). Subotic therefore centers her research on the complexity and multidimensional character of the narrative itself, which political actors selectively activate and deactivate at times of great ontological stress. The narrative, therefore, gets reconstituted at times of trauma to “discursively bridge the gap between solving the physical security challenge that requires a policy change, and the continuation of the biographic narrative necessary for preserving state ontological security (Subotic 2015, 6).

To follow this analysis, I argue that a regime change in the Ukraine threatened sense of Russia’s ontological security. The Orange Revolution came as a shock to Russian elites and it had a tremendous impact on the country’s biographic continuity. On an international level, the change of regime in the Ukraine revealed Russia’s weakening influence in the region (Saari 2014). It exposed the vulnerability of the Kremlin’s soft power projects in the neighborhood and it challenged Russia’s ability to support the continuity of its great power narrative. The choice by the Ukraine, in favor of a pro-Western course, could have either ruptured or further consolidated the continuity of Russia’s biographic narrative. To avoid existential anxiety and create a sense of stability, Moscow drew closer around Russia’s embedded ontological signifiers: “Russia as a strong state”; “Russia as an empire”; and “Russia’s opposition to the West”.

As a result, the change of regime in the Ukraine was framed as a consequence of Western influence, rather than a choice made by its people. Putin (2007) interpreted the

events in Kiev as the result of democracy promotion by the EU and the U.S. The U.S. was labeled as a chief instigator that worked behind the scenes in manipulating the events. Gleb Pavlovsky, a close advisor to the Kremlin, and Valentin Falin, former Soviet diplomat, assessed the Orange Revolution as a way by the U.S. to encroach upon the traditional to Russia sphere of interest and to accomplish “their long term economic and political tasks at Russia’s expense” (OSC 2006).

The events of 2004-2005 marked a crucial turning point in framing of post-Soviet ontological awareness in Russia. As a consequence, the Kremlin reactivated the “Russia as a strong state” narrative. This justified the pursuit of a more aggressive foreign policy in the neighborhood. This policy aimed to prevent Russia’s geopolitical rivals from encroaching on its spheres of interest. This narrative was framed as Russia’s ontologically embedded responsibility to maintain stability in its neighborhood (Tsygankov 2010).

Domestically, the Orange Revolution challenged the very core of the Russian identity attractiveness of its ontological project. Moscow saw the outcome in the Ukraine as a rupture in common biographic continuity. This was the result of - of Russia’s image projection negligence after the dissolution of the USSR. At that time, the Kremlin sought to establish closer ties with the West and it articulated a rather incoherent narrative of the common space in its neighborhood, one that lacked meaningful identity markers (Feklyunina 2016, 781). For Russian elites, the events of 2004 were the outcome of such negligence and this signaled a need for reactivation of the shared ontological narratives that historically united Moscow and the Ukraine. What happened in Ukraine in 2004, therefore, mattered for the Kremlin, not only because of the country’s economic and

military security, but also due to importance of biographic continuity for the collective Russian identity (Molchanov 2002).

In response to the Ukraine's shift to the West, Moscow consolidated around historically-embedded signifiers of its identity. This consolidation re-activated a number of overlapping narratives for a wider community. They emphasized adherence to ontologically embedded traditional values with Russia as being at the heart of the resistance to the corrupt influences of the declining West. Hence, what links these discourses is the emphasis on civilizational distinctness and normative superiority vis-à-vis morally declining West (Tsygankov 2010). Rooted in existing cultural structures, these narratives were reinforced and promoted by various public diplomacy actors and Russian soft power TV channels, such as *RT*. Feklyunina (2016) notes that these narratives, such as contested understandings of Europe and Eurasia, were frequently invoked in Moscow's dealings with post-Soviet states. These narratives found receptive audiences, not only in the neighboring states, but also among some groups in the West (Feklyunina 2016, 783).

From this section, I can conclude that the Orange Revolution produced an exogenous shock that consolidated Russia's biographic narrative. As a result, Moscow drew closer to its embedded ontological signifiers of "opposition to the West"; "Russia as a strong state"; and "Russia as an empire". This consolidation had a profound impact on the country's ontological awareness and calculations in its energy policy.

Analysis of the dispute

In the midst of the gas dispute with the Ukraine, Moscow and its state-controlled gas monopoly *Gazprom* had a choice of various policy options, corresponding to a

specific set of interests and priorities. Russia had a variety of possible action scenarios that it could have taken during the dispute.

I will limit my discussion to two of them. The first action scenario is driven by the advancement of interests associated with the business frame of Aalto's (2012) "model," where the behavior of Russia is based on profit-making interests. The profit-making interests of any industry, including the energy sector, can be achieved by maximizing revenues (volume of sales) and by minimizing the costs associated with activity. Therefore, for the advancement of the interests associated with its business frame, Russia sought to accomplish at least two tasks. The first was to take actions that would maximize the current profits of its business activity by increasing or maintaining the level of energy sale, and decreasing or maintaining its costs (short term interest). The second was to secure stability and preferably to increase profits in the future by ensuring preference for Russia, as a supplier among consumer states, and by lowering the costs associated with energy production and transit (long-term interest).

Through the prism of profit-making interests, Russia lost more in its gas disputes with the Ukraine than it gained. There are several consequences of the "gas wars" that support this argument. First, from a revenue standpoint, Russia's sales to Europe were reduced. Pirani estimates these losses to have reached around \$100 million per day. Moreover, Russia could have faced the payment of damages that would have even increased these losses (Pirani 2009, 33). Besides, as a rational actor, Russia was well aware, given the state of the Ukrainian economy, that the Ukraine was not capable of paying the gas prices proposed by *Gazprom*. Therefore, I can conclude that, in terms of short-term business interests, Russia did not act as a rational player, in terms of its

expectations from the Ukraine it incurred substantial financial losses as a result of the strategy it chose.

More importantly, as a result of the crisis, Russia damaged its more than 40-year reputation as a reliable energy supplier in the eyes of its European partners. The importance of the reputational factor in this conflict cannot be underestimated, considering that energy revenues are vital for the Russian economy, and that the European states represent its major customers. The negative impact of the disputes with the Ukraine on Russia's reputation damaged both its immediate and long-term business interests. First, it contributed to the intensification of the discourse, inside the EU, about the need for the diversification of its gas supplies with the goal of decreasing its dependence on Russia. As a result of such diversification, the EU member states increased the number of imports of liquid natural gas (LNG) with more terminals opening in Eastern and Central European states (Umbach 2014). The Southern Gas Corridor project that will bring gas from Caspian region, bypassing Russia, is scheduled to open in 2018 (*Trans Adriatic Pipeline*). Secondly, the escalation of the conflict negatively affected the long-term strategic business interests of *Gazprom* in gaining access to additional consumers. According to Feklyunina (2012), *Gazprom* had some success in obtaining access to gas distributional systems in Southern Europe and the Netherlands. However, when it attempted to bid for the UK's largest distribution company, *Centrica*, it faced a wave of negative publicity that prevented it from successfully establishing its position in the UK. Therefore, the question remains: Why was Russia prepared to take such a risk?

Pirani (2009) argues that Russia was not driven by pure business calculations. If it were, despite the fact that Russia believed that it was legally and contractually in the right, Moscow would have stepped back and negotiated lower prices from the Ukraine. That would have meant, however, that Russia would have “lost face” politically. Pirani adds that, in his opinion, Russia’s actions indicate that, for its government and specifically for then Prime Minister Putin pursuing its dispute with the Ukraine, even punishing it for its behavior, was more important than securing Russia’s long term business interests (Pirani 2009, 34).

Instead, Russia’s behavior, during the gas wars, can be best explained by applying the power frame of Aalto’s (2012) framework. Aalto associates the power frame with state actors and their presumed interests in seeking influence through the exercise of energy policies. He argues that, within the context of power frame, energy policies can also support the great power discourse embedded in agent’s ontological awareness. In Russia’s energy dispute with the Ukraine, to affirm the great power narrative Kremlin activated three ontological themes that form part of Russian historic continuity – “Russia as a strong state”, “Russia as an empire” and “Russia’s opposition to the West”.

Russia as a Strong State

Historically, Russians associated the might and pride of their country with the establishment of a strong state. This belief got historically embedded and routinized in the country’s biographic narrative. In the interpretation of Russians, as argued separately by Heller and Tsygankov (Heller 2010, Tsygankov 2012) among various attributes of a strong state one of the central elements is respect for Russia as an international player and its honorable treatment. A strong Russian state is respected and honored, not only

domestically, but internationally as well. Moreover, Russia's actions as an international player are the reflection of its ontological perceptions of itself as an important international actor. Therefore, Russia's position during the dispute with the Ukraine was an important international projection of an ontological vision of how a strong state should behave, both from the point of view of - the Russian leadership and the population.

Feklyunina adds that re-activation of the biographic narrative of Russia as a strong country has become an extremely important element among the Russian political elites and Russian society in general (Feklyunina 2008, 605-629). Since the dispute with the Ukraine was a central topic in Russia's media campaign at home, it would have been very difficult for Moscow to justify an early compromise with Kiev during the dispute. The compromise would have undermined Russia's domestic discourse of a strong state capable of imposing its will. Moreover, it can be argued that Russia had to project assertive behavior during the crisis to substantiate the aggressive domestic public relations campaign that followed (Zawadski 2009). This campaign was, in part, meant to demonstrate to the Russian population the strengths and leadership of their country and to confirm the narrative of Russia as a great power resilient to external pressures.

A 2009 poll conducted by *VTsIOM*, a respected Russian polling center, demonstrated that almost 90% of respondents knew about the dispute and 63% argued that the Ukraine was responsible for the crisis, while only 17% believed that the responsibility rested with both Russia and the Ukraine (*Russian Public Opinion Center*). Feklyunina (2008) adds another important component of the domestic dimension to the biographic continuity of Russia as a great power. She notes that the re-activation of the strong state discourse in support of the great power narrative was used by the regime to

confirm its legitimacy in the eyes of the Russian electorate. Putting an emphasis on the re-activation of the great power discourse was important for the leadership, especially in the face of a latent economic crisis of 2008. At this time, the main attributes of Russia's regime, such as stability and economic prosperity, were losing their validity.

From an international perspective, Russia demonstrated to the world that it was ready to defend its national interests aggressively, even if such actions in support of the great power narrative conflicted with its business interests. This strategy sends a powerful message to its neighbors, especially when those countries depend on Russia for most of their energy supplies. By remaining intransigent throughout the "gas war" with the Ukraine, Russia asserted that it was aware of its strength and might, particularly in terms of regional energy security. Russia also proved that it was ready to use energy as a lever to advance its geopolitical interests in the purest traditions of realpolitik (Rahman 2009; Nygren 2007; Lough 2011).

More recent events, leading to Russia's military intervention in the Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, support its focus on the projection of great power and strong state narratives. These events support Russia's willingness to use coercion to accomplish its objectives, despite the backlash of the international community. Russia sent two distinct messages to its partners in the global system. The first was intended for the countries of the former Soviet Union and it delimited Russia's strategic sphere of interest. It also demonstrated its willingness to be strong and assertive towards states looking to the West and drifting away from their traditional alliances with Russia, as in the case of the Ukraine. Russia's dispute with the Ukraine proved that Russia would not provide economic assistance or preferential agreements to states that left Russia's orbit.

Rather, Russia would negotiate with them as it would with its Western partners and implement tough sanctions, even cutting off of resources, if necessary. Russia decided to send a very powerful message to its neighbors which largely depended on its energy supplies. The timing of such conflict is essential to understanding Russia's strategy, as the EU had launched several soft power institutional projects such as the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership. These projects targeted the republics of the former Soviet Union and sought to bring them closer to the Union economically, politically and to diffuse the EU normative framework.

The second message was intended for Russia's Western partners and was twofold. First, as in the case of gas disputes with the Ukraine, Russia showed that it valued its biographic continuity as great power over its business interests. Therefore, if the West was interested in having productive relations with Russia, it should first and foremost treat it with honor and respect with regards to its biographic continuity. The gas disputes also revealed the energy security vulnerabilities of the European countries and reminded them of their dependency on the Russian energy supply. Therefore, such political vulnerability requires the European states to take into account Russia's assertiveness in support of its re-activated great power discourse when it comes to energy.

At the domestic level, the support of this biographic continuity of the strong state in the gas wars with Ukraine had important implications for Russian energy policy and its overall economy. As Tsygankov (2012) notes, Russia's vision of its great power status has historically been associated with the notion of a strong centralized state, controlling the domestic political and economic situation and providing the necessary social protection for its citizens. On the economic level, emphasis on the re-activation of the

ontological narrative of the strong state allowed elite networks to further embed the notion of state capitalism and the “virtual economy” that it supported. At the time of the gas wars with the Ukraine, “state-managed network capitalism” was undergoing a process of consolidation. In the fall of 2005, a few months before *Gazprom* cut off gas to the Ukraine, the former chairman of *Yukos*, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, was sentenced to prison. Many analysts viewed this trial as the state’s attempt to regain dominance over energy resources controlled by oligarchs that became powerful during Yeltsin’s presidency. Initially, at the beginning of Putin’s presidency, oligarchs attempted to influence the state. However, the state and *siloviki* prevailed and many oligarchs, such as Roman Abramovich and Vladimir Potanin, sold their valuable assets to the state (Puffer & McCarthy 2007). The projection of a strong state narrative in the gas wars enabled Moscow to send a powerful message, not only to its foreign business partners, but as well to top Russian owners and managers. The narrative of a strong state in the gas conflict with the Ukraine, therefore, provided further justification for the embedding of the existing form of Russian governance.

With time, the Russian narrative of a strong state in its relations with the Ukraine became further embedded in the country’s ontological discourse. The Orange Revolution has shifted the discourse from Russia’s projecting its power on its neighbors to Russia’s opposition to the West. As a result, the disputes between Russia and the Ukraine were placed in the context of another ontological theme historically embedded in Russian biographic continuity. In Putin’s speech on the annexation of Crimea, the president emotionally stresses: “Our Western partners led by the United States of America...have come to believe in their exclusivity and exceptionalism, that they can decide the destinies

of the world, that only they can ever be right. In 2004 to push the necessary candidate through at the presidential elections...” He further emphasizes that “...they (the West) are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position...And with Ukraine, our western partners have crossed the line.” (Putin 2014, 1-14). In his speech Putin did not merely summarize Western mischiefs with the Ukraine. Instead, he skillfully activated a strong power narrative, asserting Russia as a strong independent pole of power willing and capable to fight for influence in Ukraine “Today, it is imperative...to accept the obvious fact: Russia is an independent, active participant in international affairs; ...it has its own national interests that need to be taken into account and respected.”

Russia as an Empire

Another ontological theme in support of the biographic continuity of the great power narrative is that Russia as an empire. Historically, imperial self-identity was attributed to the country’s vast territorial domain, as a reflection of its great power status and ability to project influence in global affairs. As part of Russian empire and a Republic of the Soviet Union, the Ukraine, as well as other newly independent states, has been ontologically perceived in Moscow as one of its imperial domains. In the case of the Ukraine, however, the ontological significance for Russia runs deeper than for many other independent states.

One of the dominant ontological themes of the Russian nation has been that the Russians, as a nation of all Eastern Slavs, are united by a common origin and culture. Therefore, ethno-cultural similarities and a common past are viewed by current Russian elites as the main markers of Russian identity. This idea is not novel and it has been

adopted and re-activated by Russian elites, from the Russian historiographer of the nineteenth century Klychevsky (Tolz 1998, 995). In his work, Klychevsky argued that, along with Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians form the Russian nation. This has been justified on the grounds of alleged common historical origins between Russians and the other ethnic Slavs, as well as the ethno-linguistic similarities between them.

Klychevsky, therefore, argued that three branches of the Slavic people originated in Kievan Rus. They historically broke off as a result of external pressures coming from the Tatar Mongol yoke on the East and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Poland in the west (Tolz 1998, 999). In the 17th and 18th centuries, these three branches of the Russian people were reunited again by Moscow.

In 1990, a prominent Russian philosopher and Nobel Laureate, Aleksander Solozhenitsyn, re-iterated this idea and called for the preservation of the biographic continuity of Russia's ontological awareness. The sharing of the language and common past in this interpretation became a cornerstone of Russia's biographic narrative of "three brotherly Slavic peoples" that regarded a common past as an important marker of national identity (Tolz 1998, 1000). This attributed primordial qualities to an understanding of the Russian nation and it rejected the idea of a nation as voluntary membership. As a result, whether Ukrainians shared this belief was of no relevance. These views were articulated by Putin during a Munich speech and NATO Summit, where he expressed his views to then President George Bush that Ukrainians are "not people" and his territorial claims to Eastern and Southern Ukraine, what was then framed as Novorossiia, or "New Russia" (Riabchuk 2015, 1). With time, this ontological aspiration became the justification of Russia's engagement in Eastern Ukraine. The

Russian invasion was carried out on the premise that it is not a real nation and Russia's actions were advancing the interests of the so-called "Russian world" (Goble 2015, 2).

Ukrainian historians disputed this point of view by noting that, despite linguistic similarities based on historic-political differentiations, the Russian and Ukrainian people have different identities (Szporluk 1986, 164). To support this view, Ukrainian historians. Kostomarov and Hrushevskyi argued that the roots of the Russian nation are in the Moscow principality, which was first mentioned in the 12th century and not in Kievan Rus. Another Ukrainian scholar, Mykola Riabchuk, further notes that the belief in the common roots of Eastern Slavic Nations was important for Russia ontologically. It was socially constructed to legitimize Russia's imperial conquest and it laid the foundation for the "thousand year" Russian history, stemming from Kievan Rus. In addition, it attributed a superior role to Russian colonizers and a subjugated place to its "younger brothers," the Ukrainians and Belarussians (Riabchuk 2015, 8).

While some of the Ukrainians were assimilated and accepted this biographic narrative, others, especially those residing in the Western Ukraine have been resistant to embrace this ontological theme. As a result, Russia's imperial ontological belief has historically been challenged by an array of Ukrainian nationalists. One such nationalist, is Symon Petilura, who resisted the Bolsheviks after the October Revolution. Another is Stepan Bandera, the leader of the Underground Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists during the Second World War.

Riabchuk (2015) concludes that the root of disputes between Russia and the Ukraine lay in the discrepancy between Russia's ontologically embedded imagination, and the real Ukraine that, in some of its parts, "evolved as a bold denial" of the "younger

brother” stereotype. Torbakov (2014) further notes that the significance of the conflicts is in the shift in ontological preferences towards Western values, where Western based identity appears in Ukraine. These ontological changes shake the very core of Russia’s re-activated ontological project and they pose the most troublesome dilemma for the Kremlin. The numerous conflicts with the Ukraine (such as the gas wars, the Orange Revolution and the ongoing crisis of 2014) exposed the ontological fragility of Russian identity. The Orange Revolution’s preference of a pro-Western government, or 2014’s importance of the EU-centric over Russia’s integration projects, attack the very core of the Russian ontological myth, and rupture the biographic continuity of its identity. Hence, there is a common theme that connects Russia’s conflicts with the Ukraine. All these disputes are based on disconnect of deeply rooted ontological perceptions, both in Russia and the Ukraine. They are centered on two main questions. The first is whether or not Russia constitutes the Ukraine’s ontological other and whether there is an ontological coherence between them. The second is the role Russia plays in Ukraine’s ontological future in relation to the West (Barkanov 2015, 210). This ontological self-awareness, that determines a country’s geopolitical orientation towards Russia and the EU, might be the most fundamental social cleavage in contemporary Ukraine (Barkanov 2015, 215).

Hence, the discourse on the gas wars with Ukraine is embedded in the larger narrative of the relations between these two states. *Gazprom’s* Chairman, Alexey Miller, on various occasions, discussed the dispute in rather technical terms. However, despite these technicalities, his addresses reflect the ontological undertones of Russia’s biographic narrative. In his interview in 2009 on the Russian TV Channel *Vesti*, Miller activated various ontological discourses relevant to the Russian biographic continuity as a

great power. One of them is acknowledgement of the special place that the Ukraine, along with other Slavic nations, plays for the gas giant when the *Gazprom* CEO referred to “three countries which are very close to us – Belarus, Ukraine and Serbia...three Slavic countries” (Miller 2009). With reference to Ukraine’s ability to pay, Miller noted its solvency has been supported by the West, namely by the *International Monetary Fund*, hinting the important role West has been playing in Russia’s “brotherly” nation “...Ukraine has money... we know about the credits granted to this country by the International Monetary fund Miller, as well, activated the imperial frame of Russia’s ontological awareness in his assessment of the disputes with the Ukraine. When referring to *Gazprom* partners in the newly independent states, he referred to them as FSU countries (former countries of the Soviet Union). This reference stressed their dependent role on the Russian gas monopoly: “*Gazprom* in fact subsidized the economies of several FSU counties. Note that we do not always see their readiness to react appropriately when avoidable difficulties arise. A vivid example of this is the relationship of *Gazprom* and of partners in the Ukraine.”

Despite this discourse, most of the narrative of Russia’s relations with the Ukraine have been in the political domain. The most vivid activation of the imperial frame in Russia’s relations with Ukraine is in Putin’s speech on the annexation of the Crimea. Symbolically, Putin gave his address under the double-headed *Eagle of the Russian Empire*. This coat of arms grasps in its right claw an imperial scepter with an imperial orb in its left claw. Adopted from the Byzantine Empire, it was adapted by Ivan the Terrible, during his imperial conquest of gathering Russian lands and it serves as an ultimate symbol of Russian imperial ontology.

It is not surprising, therefore, that imperial ontological narratives played one of the dominant roles in Putin's address. The Russian president opened his speech, addressing the audience in a rather informal and warm manner, as friends. At the very beginning of his speech, Putin made a direct reference to the ontological theme of Orthodoxy that unites the "peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus" and "predetermined the overall basis of the (their) culture, civilization and human values" (Putin 2014, 1). Putin's speech is significant, not only because of the activated ontological narratives, but because of their strong emotional underpinnings that appeal to Russian audiences and make the message more potent and powerful (Remizov 2015, 49). This emotional language allowed Putin to convey the ontological traumas of rupture in the country's biographic continuity: Russia's separation from the Ukraine as its imperial domain and ontological cradle. In his narratives he activates the ontological traumas of separation and emphasizes that "it pains our hearts to see what is happening in Ukraine." Putin proceeds in calling for the lost unity with the Ukrainians, stressing the special nature of the relations between these two nations, the common ontological root that brings together both Russia and Ukraine "...we are not simply close neighbors but, as I have said many times already, we are one people". Moreover, it is not only their commonality, indisputable in Russia's view, but also the ontological root that binds Russia and the Ukraine together and it forms the basis of the relations. In conveying his message of common ties, Putin skillfully activates parallels with this statement: "Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus is our common source and we cannot live without each other" (Putin 2014, 12). Putin concludes on the hopeful note for the future that would

restore historical equilibrium of “peace and harmony...but it would take only Ukrainian people to put their house in order”.

The break in this biographic unity is portrayed as a deep trauma for both Russia and the Ukraine. In the portrayal of this disconnect, Putin activates another important narrative of Russian ontological security – the country’s opposition to the West. It is the West that Russian president blames for the break in the historic continuity of the relations between the two Eastern Slavic nations. Putin puts a powerful metaphor of the Ukraine as a “mirror...the situation in Ukraine reflects what is going on and what has been happening in the world” (Putin 2014, 8). Russian president is referring to a “whole series of controlled “color” revolutions” where “standards were imposed ... that did not correspond to their way of life, traditions, or ...cultures”. He notes this strategy by the West “unfolded in Ukraine... in 2004.” Putin places the developments in the Ukraine within the context of a broader Western strategy, “aimed against Ukraine and Russia and Eurasian integration” where the West has “lied to us... made decisions behind our backs” (Putin 2014, 9).

As in the case of the ontological narrative of Russia as a strong state, the focus of Russia as an empire has shifted to Russia’s relations with the West. As a result, Russia’s opposition to the West, with time, became a predominant lens of Russia’s policy in the Ukraine.

Conclusion

In this chapter I sought to find the answer to the question what explains Russia’s engagement in gas wars with the Ukraine. The standoff of 2006 coincided with steady growth of energy prices. As a value pump to the Russian economy, energy is essential to

the country's material capabilities. Why was Russia ready to risk its short and long term business interests by taking part in the standoff, instead of avoiding it? The conflict undermined Russia's security of demand and it had a negative impact on its capabilities and ability to project power and influence. The Kremlin's actions go against assumptions of traditional security studies, as introduced in Chapter 1. This chapter proposes the ontological security's take on the conflict. It argues that the embedded and routinized historical beliefs that form part of Russia's ontological awareness provide insights into Moscow's engagement in the standoff.

In my analysis, I emphasized the dual nature of ontological security that, on the one hand, enables the actors to gain popular support for their policy choices by selectively activating embedded ontological narratives. On the other hand, however, sustaining biographic continuity traps agents into opting policies that support the ontological narratives of a polity and it precludes them from applying more prudent foreign policy choices. In the case of the dispute with the Ukraine, Russian elites chose to support the continuity of the country's biographic narrative of great power. This narrative was supported by the historically-embedded ontological themes of Russia as a strong state; Russia as an empire; and Russia's opposition to the West. These themes "trapped" Moscow into engaging in the conflict with the Ukraine, instead of rationally avoiding it.

The next section of this dissertation will illustrate Russia's behavior within the context of diminished capabilities, using the example of Russia's engagement in Syrian conflict.

Chapter 6: Aggressive Foreign Policy in the Context of Low Capabilities the Case of Syria

This chapter continues an analysis of Russian foreign policy behavior introduced in a case study on gas wars with the Ukraine. It seeks to further challenge the traditional security study assumptions by demonstrating the Kremlin's responses to exogenous systemic pressures within the context of diminished capabilities.

The gas dispute with the Ukraine in 2006 took place with growing energy prices that translated into steady economic growth, elevated material capabilities and the ability to project power. In the case of the conflict in Syria, however, Russia engaged in the dispute in the background of the fall in energy prices and Western sanctions, following the annexation of Crimea. These exogenous pressures diminished the country's material capabilities and strained Russia's biographic continuity as a great power. As a result, the country's ontological self-awareness as a great power could have either ruptured, or further consolidated, around its biographic signifiers. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, self-identity as a great power is important for a country's ontological awareness and the preservation of Russia's biographic continuity. These embedded identity beliefs, just as in the case with gas wars, created an ontological trap that constrained foreign policy choices in favor of the preservation of great power status.

As result, despite the country's diminished ability to project power, the Russian leadership chose to engage in a costly military operation, instead of avoiding it. To consolidate power in the face of systemic pressures, Russian elites skillfully encoded in their discourse three embedded and routinized ontological beliefs, which are analyzed in Chapter 4: the role of the West; Russia as a strong state and a pole of power; and the

trauma of rupture in the country's biographic continuity after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The present chapter has the following structure. The first section provides a brief overview of Russia's material capabilities at the time of its engagement in Syria. Then the reader is introduced to a brief analysis of Russia's involvement in Syria from a Rational Choice perspective, by weighing costs and benefits of engagement in the conflict. The following section contextualizes the constraints of exogenous pressures, which were caused by the drop in oil prices, on Russia's biographic continuity. This chapter concludes with an analysis of how Russian official leaders-- dealt with such constraints by selectively activating the country's ontological narratives.

Diminished Capabilities

Considering the importance of energy for Russia, the recent changes in the global energy market had a dramatic impact on the country. Analysts offer different explanations of the drastic drop in the price of oil. However, one of the contributing factors, indisputably, is the shale revolution that allowed producers access to reserves that had been unattainable previously and, therefore, considerably increased production. The global shale revolution has affected both gas and oil in Russia in a variety of ways.

On the one hand, as noted in the previous chapter, it provided an opportunity for Russia's gas customers, especially in Europe, to diversify their supply, therefore creating more competition for Russia. Russians are concerned, in particular, with the rising trade in liquefied natural gas (LNG) as a consequence of the advancement of relevant technologies and the shale revolution in the US. This has made the inflexible regional

gas market more flexible in allowing it to move away from pipelines. This has particularly affected the states in Eastern Europe which are most dependent – sometimes up to 100% - on deliveries from Russia (Ratner et al. 2013). As a result, *Gazprom* has lost some of its market share in the EU from 31,8% to 26% in two years. An increase in LNG, therefore, is a serious challenge for Russia. An oversupply of LNG will result in downward pressure on gas prices across the globe.

Another impact of the shale revolution is how it revealed the institutional weakness and inability of Russia's business and political sectors to respond to the changes. As Putin admitted, "Whether *Gazprom* slept through the shale revolution, or not, is a difficult question. There is no answer to it yet." (Kravchenko and Shirayevskaya 2013). Years of mismanagement and politically driven expansion are catching up to the Russian state-owned natural gas company *Gazprom*. Output in 2015 is forecasted to be the lowest in its history, pipeline projects are floundering and it is not doing well in Europe as its key market diversified its supply chain (Bershidsky 2015).

To sum up, while the security of supply is increasing for the EU, the security of demand has been declining for Russia. Even though Russia has tried to act self-confidently in the European market, by imposing its own rules, the Russian media, such as *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, warn that Russia's belief that Europe is handcuffed to Russia's gas pipelines could be dangerous for Russia (Kulikov 2012). The shale gas revolution has been weakening Russia's energy capabilities, a fact that has become especially obvious in Russia's relations with the EU.

The shale revolution has impacted Russia's oil sector, as well. Despite unclear long-term prospects and consequences of the expansion of the production of shale oil, the

unconventional oil sources have become a game changer. One of its most important consequences is increased competition to Russian oil (Novak 2013) According to BP Projection, the US may become self-sufficient in satisfying its energy needs until 2020-2030 (Handley 2013). This means that the US would no longer consume oil from the Middle East. Middle Eastern oil, therefore, would lose its North American market and would start competing with Russia for its share in the global energy market.

PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC 2013, 2) is warning that, because of shale oil developments, Russia could see a significant decrease of its trade balances.

Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov further stresses that the importance of oil for the Russian economy is so considerable that the fall in energy prices deprived the Kremlin of \$180 billion in income in 2015 alone (*The Moscow Times* 2015). This is especially important to consider, given that the Russian economy could be characterized by its “virtual” nature, as analyzed on the case of gas wars with the Ukraine. For Gaddy and Ickes, the Russian fuel and energy sector was and continues to be the «value pump» of its economy. In 2016 the non-oil sector current account deficit amounted to nominal terms to US\$92 billion and 10.4 % of GDP, revealing vulnerability of the economy to terms of trade shocks (*World Bank* 2016). This confirms the central importance of the oil and gas and the country’s dependence on Russia’s energy export sector. The performance of the Russian energy sector is crucial to support an otherwise unsustainable economy. Moreover, in addition to driving the Russian economy, as mentioned in the previous chapter, this “value pump” finances the security net to millions of citizens, many of whom are employed by nonviable enterprises and who depend on the state for heavily subsidized health and educational systems.

Revenue losses are also damaging the country's foreign trade position, already under pressure from Western sanctions imposed against Russia in the wake of the Ukraine crisis (*The Moscow Times* 2015). While the media widely interpreted Moscow's energy deals with Beijing last year, as evidence of a deepening alliance, they actually reflect an increasingly imbalanced partnership. Negotiations between the two governments began in the early 1990s, but it was not until last May when an internationally isolated Russia finally agreed to supply gas to China at prices much closer to Beijing's liking than its own. Tumbling oil prices further widened the gap between these countries, because China is the largest net importer of petroleum in the world, benefitting at Russia's expense.

As the oil slump continues, it is becoming increasingly clear how much of Russia's military, economic and political clout depends on the value of a few interlinked resources. The energy markets have handed the country a crushing combination of setbacks while its friends exploit it and its rivals grow more independent (*The Moscow Times*, 2015).

Based on all that has been said above, I can conclude that recent developments in the energy sector provide considerable exogenous pressures to Russia. These pressures reveal the country's institutional and technological shortcomings, diminish its material capabilities and its ability to project power. Their impact is strong enough to threaten the country's economic well-being and to undermine its geopolitical leverage. Hence, the fall in energy prices undermines the overall security of the Russian state.

Regardless of these challenges, the Russian elites opted for engagement in the Syrian conflict. This is the same assertiveness that the country's leadership demonstrated

in the annexation of Crimea. However, despite the time proximity of these cases (the Crimean intervention took place in March 2014; the decision to engage in the Syrian conflict was taken in September 2015), there is a drastic change in Russia's underlying capabilities (see table below).

	<i>Crimean Annexation</i>	<i>Syrian Conflict</i>
Dates	March 2014	September 2015 – ongoing
Price of oil	\$ 97.00	\$45.23
Ruble exchange rate to dollar	1\$=28 rubles	\$=66 rubles
Inflation rate	6.92	15.68
GDP	\$1,860.6 billion	(estimate) \$1,235.86 billion
Federal reserves	\$493.326 million	\$366.343 million

At the time of Russia's involvement in Syria, its economy felt the impact of the decline in oil prices and Western sanctions caused by the annexation of Crimea. As a result, the country's federal reserves shrank from \$493.326 million in March 2014 to \$366.343 million in September 2015. Inflation tripled, and the dollar exchange rate climbed from 28 to dollar to 66 rubles. Despite these challenges, however, Russia's leadership chose to take part in the Syrian conflict. Russian engagement in Syria, therefore, was not constrained by the change in its material capabilities.

This undertaking in Syria was a preferred course of action for Russian elites. From a rational choice point of view, when faced with several courses of action, agents choose the one that most effectively fulfills its desires. Hence, for Russia's leadership, involvement in Syria was an end, or utility, that was preferred to avoiding the conflict. The next section will discuss the possible goals of such engagement.

Rational Choice

Russia's official position in Syria remains practically unchanged since the start of the conflict. Russia has been a strong supporter of the Assad regime, despite its negative perception by the West. Among Russia's military interests is the Syrian port of Tartus that hosts Russia's naval supply and maintenance station. Its location allows Russian warships to refuel in the Mediterranean, without returning to its bases in the Black Sea. The possible regime change in Syria most likely would cause eventual termination of the contract and the closing of the Russian stations. Russian Navy-Commander in Chief Vice Admiral Viktor Chirkov noted on the importance of maintaining the station, that as long as, "The Russian Navy performs missions in the Gulf of Aden, and in the Mediterranean Sea, the base is critical for us." (*Central Navy Portal* 2012). However, as noted by Bagdonas, considering the state of the Russian Navy, and the balance of power at the sea, currently the importance of the station is purely symbolic (Bagdonas 2016, 62).

Another explanation of Russia's involvement in Syria is in its long term economic interests. These ties were established during the former Soviet era and they have a long history. In 2011, according to the *Damascus Chamber of Commerce*, Russian investments in Syria amounted to \$19 billion. It is believed that the investments increased by

\$1billion since 2011 (the year the Syrian uprising against President Bashar Assad's regime started). The most considerable Russian investment in Syria is in gas and oil. Soyuzneftgaz, for example, has signed a contract for offshore drilling, development and production in Syrian territorial waters. This deal allows for exploration in the Mediterranean, with Russian partners covering the costs which, are estimated at \$90 million (*The Arab Weekly* 2015). However, the overall long term benefits of these contracts for the Russian economy are questionable. Following Russia's operation in the Ukraine and Crimea, European nations suspended work on the "South Stream" natural gas pipeline, designed to bring energy to Russia's largest consumer market in Europe. In response, Russia shifted its focus on the "Turkish Stream" that would skip Eastern Europe, and deliver gas to Russia's clients through Turkey. However, as a result of Russia's involvement in Syria, the Turkish government, that strongly opposes Assad's rule, formerly froze all talks over the project (*The Moscow Times* 2015).

Russia's lucrative arms contracts have been named as another important factor of its involvement in Syria. Russian exports of major weapons are significant part of the country's economy. They have been gradually increasing since 2009 and grew by 37% from 2010 to 2014 (*SIPRI* 2015, 2). Russia, therefore, became the second largest arms exporter in the world after the US. The deliveries of weapons from Russia are quite concentrated with major consumers, such as China, India and Algeria, accounting for almost 60% of the exports. Syria has been an important market for Russia. However, the volume of arms trade, despite its drastic increase since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, has not been substantial or important enough for the Russian economy overall. Moreover, Syria has not been the most reliable payee with \$9.8 billion out of \$13.4 billion in Cold

War debt that was forgiven by Russia. The current fragile economic and political state of Assad's regime makes it unlikely for it to honor its financial obligations (Trenin 2013). Besides, as has been noted, Syria has reportedly been having difficulties producing cash to honor its financial obligations. Therefore, it is unlikely that Russia is driven purely by fear of losing the Syrian market for its arms sales.

Taking into account these considerations, Russia was losing more than gaining from its decision to get involved in Syria. From the material point of view, Russia's oil and gas contracts in Syria are not as substantial as the potential loss of the "Turkish Stream", and its arms sales are unlikely to be paid for. The costs of the involvement are considerable for Russia and by some conservative estimates amount to \$ 2.4 to \$4 million a day (*The Moscow Times* 2015). In addition, the country's engagement in the Syrian conflict contributed to further alienation from the US and its European partners – major consumers of Russian commodity exports. These factors, in the context of the Western sanctions and the fall in oil prices, make Russia's involvement hard to justify. Therefore, I conclude that material factors are an unlikely driving force of Russia's actions in Syria and could not justify the utility of country's engagement in the conflict.

The other explanation of Russia's position in Syria could be geopolitical. Different analysts provide distinct views on the geopolitical utility of Russia's engagement in the Syrian conflict. The most frequently declared explanation of Russia's engagement in Syria was the fight against international terrorism. It centers on Russia's efforts to bolster Assad's regime as the essential force in fighting the Islamic State, whose insurgents could eventually trickle to Russia's own territory. In this instance, Moscow's leadership considers that the Assad regime is the only force in the country,

capable of combating the Islamic State and the terrorism that it promotes (Barzegar 2015). This would imply that Russian airstrikes in Syria would target the areas occupied by the Islamic State, as these groups have hosted thousands of international jihadists, including those from Russian Muslim areas. In his analysis Souleimanov (2016), however, argues that 70 to 90 % of Russian-led airstrikes mostly bypassed the Islamic State. Instead Moscow sought to attack Western areas where the Syrian army was capable of operating on its own. These areas were controlled by other moderate anti-Assad groups that were supported by the US and its allies (Souleimanov 2016, 108). He concludes that, from the start of its military operation, Russia did not seek to systematically combat the Islamic State, but rather, it thought to use Syria as a leverage in its negotiations with the US. Kozhanov (2016) concurs with Souleimanov. Commenting on Putin's announcement in March of 2016 of Russia's plans to withdraw from Syria, Kozhanov notes that combating terrorism and ISIS were hardly a priority for the Russian president from the start. He argues that Putin declared a military pullback while Islamic State still retained control of a larger part of Syrian territories. Hence, Kozhanov concludes that military intervention in Syria was instead largely about making the West look "flat footed" and assuring that the pro-Russian regime of Assad remain in power (Kozhanov 2016).

Mohseni (2015) offers a distinct explanation of Russian geopolitical objectives with its involvement in Syria. He argues that Russia was driven by regional interests and the strengthening of its geopolitical leverage. In particular, Putin sought to defend Assad's regime in an effort to align itself strategically with Iran and its positions in the region. To advance this goal the Russian army conducted operations in Syria to capture Syrian territories in conjunction with Hezbollah and Iranian forces. Moreover, Russia

established a joint intelligence center with Iran, along with Iraq and Syria, to exchange information and coordinate military efforts. By doing so, argues Mohseni, Russia sought to consolidate the ties between these two countries and to impede Iranian factions that wish to cooperate more closely with the US (Mohseni 2015, 6). Wakim (2015) further argues that joint engagement in the Syrian conflict allowed Iran and Russia to advance their common interests and foster their alliance. Both the Russian leadership and Iranian hardliners concur in considering the US operation in Syria to be a continuation of its history of support for color revolutions. Leaders of these countries perceive these soft power projects as a means by the West to achieve its political objectives, through supporting revolutions against existing regimes, including the one in Syria (Wakim 2015, 29). Joint engagement in Syria, therefore, could be viewed by both Iran and Russia as a way to counterbalance American influence in the Middle East, and to increase their countries' regional and international roles and leverage. Iran considered Russia's unexpected intervention as a disruption on power rivalry in the region, capable to shift policies of its main rivals, Saudi Arabia and Turkey (Barzegar 2015, 13). For Putin, the alignment with Iran and Syria was the way to diminish the influence of the US in the region and utilize the "Iranian axis as a gateway for Russia's entrance into the Middle East" (Mohseni 2015, 6).

Others consider Russia's intervention in Syria as a way of shifting the attention of the international community and its own population from the situation in the Ukraine that is turning into a frozen conflict. Syria, therefore, provides an important deviation from Russia's inability to project power in successfully resolving a conflict in its neighborhood (Sage and Daivs 2015). *The Economist Data Team* confirms, with their

data analysis, that Russia's engagement in Syria is a successful diversification technique. They argue that, by engaging in Syria, Russian president planned to distract attention from the war in the Ukraine and swing attention to Syria instead. According to data on *Google* searches and *Wikipedia* pages, the number of news stories swung away from the Ukraine and towards Syria. (*The Economist* 2015). Ivan Nechepurenko of *Moscow Times* concurs with this opinion. He argues that, at the time of Russia's airstrikes in Syria more than 16,000 *Tweets* were posted on the topic of Russia and Syria. At the same time, only 1,074 *Tweets* mentioned Russia's role in the Ukrainian crisis. Nechepurenko (2015) argues that the situation was drastically different in previous months. At that time the Ukraine was well above Syria in *Twitter* coverage. An independent analyst, Oreshkin concludes that, in Russia's calculation, Syria is considered be a bigger problem for the West. The Kremlin, therefore, used its engagement in Syria as a distraction and exit strategy from the conflict in the Ukraine.

Despite such an array of geopolitical considerations, most analysts agree that Russia's actions have been driven by common objectives. First, Russia's involvement in Syria positioned it, yet again, as a *great power and a global player* in the international system, capable of shifting the balance of power in the region and of asserting its interests. It was because of Russia's direct military interventions in Syria that Western European and US leaders adjusted their position, for the first time since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, and declared their willingness to consider Assad's regime to remain in power (Wakim 2015, 29). As noted by Haddad, "Russian leadership is trying to establish its intervention in Syria as a crown on the country's ascension to global power", in a way as an attempt to "establish a Russian moment" that is eager to be heard loud and clear

(Haddad 2015). Secondly, prompt involvement in the conflict, despite very vocal opposition from the West, confirmed Russia's position as a *strong state*, capable and willing to assert itself, internationally and to defend its interests. The Syrian issue is primarily a national security matter for Russia, one that it is ready to defend, despite the way it compromises its position with the West. Trenin concurs with this position, noting that Russian leadership took a clear position on Syria, and it has not shied away from strong disagreements with the US and Europe (Trenin 2013, 1). Lastly, Russia's involvement has vividly demonstrated *geopolitical rivalry* between Russia and the West. As noted by Haddad, the West has been "outraged" and "disconcerted" about Russia's involvement, despite its own multiple "brutal" interventions in the region that are expected to be taken "as the norm" (Haddad 2015). The involvement in Syria, therefore, revealed a deeply rooted and continuously widening disconnect between the perceptions of the world order by the West and Russia.

To understand this disconnect, NATO's analysts focused their assessment of Russia's role in Syria on its historic continuity. In their article, "Understanding Russian Strategic Ambiguity in Syria", Sage and Davis (2015) focus on Russia's behavior, through the lenses of embedded historical beliefs and symbolism. They see the country's involvement in Syria as a continuity of Russia's earlier engagements, such as annexation of Crimea. In their analysis of the Crimean conflict, Sage and Davis draw parallels between the double-headed eagle on Russia's coat of arms, under which Putin chose to enter the ceremony, announcing the annexation of Crimea and the Byzantine Empire, from which it was inherited. The double-headed eagle was first adopted during the reign of Ivan the Great, the Grand Prince of Russia. Ivan the Great was also known as the

“Gatherer of Russian Lands” and the proponent of a consolidated state, personified by a strong leader. He aspired to build Russia into a great power as grand as the Byzantine Empire had been (Sage and Davis 2015).

Sage and Davis rightfully picked up on the importance of historic continuity in Russia’s decision-making. Skillfully selected narratives of Russia, as a strong state and a pole of power fighting against systemic injustices, within the context of historical traumas to country’s ontological security, are important templates of political discourse of the current Russian leadership. Recent systemic changes, discussed above, diminished the country’s capabilities to project power and strained its ontological awareness as a great power. The next section will explore how the theory of ontological security could assist in explaining Russia’s response to these challenges.

Systemic Pressures and Russia’s Position on Syria

In the case of Russia, the fall in global energy prices strongly impacted its physical security. As noted above, the country’s economy that heavily relies on revenues from energy exports was profoundly affected by the developments in global energy markets. In addition, economic sanctions, caused by Russia’s annexation of Crimea, further contributed to economic challenges that resulted in falling GDP and high inflation. As a result, Russia’s capabilities have declined steadily. These diminished capabilities threaten Russia’s ability to project power in the international system and to safeguard its physical security. In addition, these challenges strain the continuity of Russia’s biographic narrative as a great power.

As a rational international actor, Russia's leadership had different choices in formulating their country's response to these systemic challenges. The first choice was to accept the unsustainability of its biographic narrative as a great power, and to reframe its identity discourse. In this instance, Russia had to reconsider its position in the global system, and to follow more prudent foreign policy. The second choice was to continue supporting Russia's ontological awareness as a great power despite its diminished capabilities. These ontological needs created a trap (ontological trap) that constrained foreign policy choices, in favor of satisfying the country's biographic continuity. In order to satisfy that continuity, the Russian leadership had to consolidate further around Russia's identifying signifiers domestically, and to continue projecting great power status internationally.

In the case of Syria, the Russian leadership made a choice to consolidate around Russia's ontological awareness, as a great power instead of rupturing it. Rather than adjusting Russia's biographic narrative to match its diminished capabilities, the country drew closer to its identity beliefs that have been historically embedded and routinized in its domestic discourse. This process is twofold. Domestically, Russian elites opted to reaffirm strongly, through their discourse, the country's ontological awareness as a strong state and a pole of power, as opposed to Western hegemony. These beliefs were encoded by political speakers, and they were successfully decoded by the public in a variety of discourses. Such historically embedded signifiers are stable enough to reduce ontological insecurity and existential anxiety, within the context of systemic pressures. Internationally, such consolidation reflected in a more vocal opposition to the country's ontological "other" – the West personified by the US. The notion of the West, historically

dominant in Russian identity discourse, was further emphasized in the case of Syria. Moreover, it became emotionally charged with feelings of injustice, victimhood and hypocrisy of the international system that it created.

These ontological messages have been successfully activated by the Russian leadership in the country's official discourse. As a discourse produced by politicians as elected or appointed agents, political rhetoric is constructed on the basis of social representation. Hence, it is more ideological in its nature than other discourses, and it is closely tied to the ontological awareness of the country. In this respect, it helps to identify priorities, important beliefs and a core set of values in the country's biographic narrative. In the section below, I will examine two discursive addresses on Syria by the Russian leadership. The first is by Russian president to *The Valdai Discussion Club*⁵ on October 22nd 2015; and the second is a news conference by Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergey Lavrov on performance of Russian diplomacy in 2015⁶.

Activation of Russia's Biographic Narratives

The Russian leadership's discourse on Syria is positioned within the country's larger ontological narratives (Russia as a strong state; the role of the West; and trauma from historic injustices and the rupture of country's biographic continuity) introduced in Chapter 4. The central narrative, activated by officials, is the criticism of the West (personified by the US) and the "injustice" of the international system that it constructed.

⁵ Since 2004 Valdai Discussion Club has been used by Putin as a platform to voice Russia's position on its role in the world to domestic and international audiences.

⁶ I chose the official discourses of these politicians for a number of reasons. First both President Putin and Minister Lavrov are the crucial agents in formulating country's foreign policy. Second, these official discourses address both domestic and international audience.

This narrative is a continuance of the “opposition to the West” theme, historically embedded in Russian ontological awareness. Such critical discourse has been consistently activated by the Russian leadership since Putin’s Munich speech and got skillfully re-activated in the case of Syria. This re-activated discourse on Syria is placed within the context of another embedded ontological narrative – the West’s treatment of Russia after the dissolution of the Soviet Union -- and framed on both geopolitical and economic levels.

Geopolitically, both Putin and Lavrov blame the conflict in Syria on West’s domination in the international system. Russian officials argue that this superiority causes imbalances in the global order. For the Russian president the current unipolarity implies domination and a threat to global security. In his speech, he voiced how damaging US hegemony has been to the world, as it, “attempts to promote a model of unilateral domination ... that has led to an imbalance in the system... which means there is a threat, and political, economic or military competition may get out of control” (Putin 2015, 2). In a similar manner, Lavrov (2016), in his answer to the question about the main global challenges, named “creating a fair democratic international system” to cure the injustices of the current world order to be global priority.

To illustrate this systemic imbalance, Putin brings an example of the unilateral withdrawal by the US from the *Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty*. This Treaty was considered by Russian political leaders to be the cornerstone of a new global order, negotiated by the then Soviet Union and the US after the end of Cold War. For Russian elites, this withdrawal signaled an attempt by the US to go back on the principles of an agreement, to reduce the “nuclear capabilities of all countries but the US”. In this instance, in

addition to “criticism of the West” theme, Putin skillfully activated “Russia as a strong state and aspiring pole of power” narrative. In his choice of words to describe Russia’s reaction to the US’s “injustices”, Putin stressed his country’s position as a strong state. The Russian president emphasized that Russia is capable to openly articulate its position and challenge the hegemony: “It means we were right when we argued with our American partners...It was about attempt ...to change the balance of forces in their favor not only to dominate, but to have the opportunity to dictate their will to all...”.

The situation in Syria is framed by Putin as a continuation of this deeply rooted imbalance in the international system. For the Russian president, the US uses unipolarity to advance its international agenda. In particular, he notes the hypocrisy of the Western position on Syria, where the US “declares war on terrorists and simultaneously tries to use some of them to arrange the figures on the Middle East board in your (West’s) own interests.” He further criticizes this strategy by noting that “we should not break down the terrorists into moderate and immoderate” (Putin 2015, 4).

Disregard by the West, of state sovereignty, is another ontological assessment by the Russian leadership of the current global order. In his speech, Putin openly opposes the West’s interference in the domestic affairs of other states that became acceptable under the current international system. On Syria, he notes that it is Syrians who must decide their fate (Putin 2015, 4). The Russian president further stresses that, “whether al-Assad should go or not...I think it wrong to even ask this question. How can we ask and decide from the outside whether this or that country’s leader should stay or go.” (Putin 2015, 9). In his narrative, Putin builds parallels between the US’s interference in Syria, with its stance during the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Though he considers the collapse of the

USSR to be mostly the result of “internal reasons”, he notes that the US played a “helping hand” in this process of disintegration of the Soviet Union – another important theme of the country’s ontological narrative. Putin continues that in the case of the former Soviet Union as well as in Syria “geopolitical adversaries were (not) standing idle” but rather actively contributed to the “unquestionable tragedy” that affected “individual people and families” (Putin 2015, 6). He sees the continuity of this Western strategy in Iraq, Libya and Syria, a strategy that threatens human security in the region and the world.

The low threshold for the use of force in the global system is a final theme of Russia’s ontological narrative. Putin activated this discourse in 2007 when he noted that “the threshold for the use of force has gone down noticeably”, infringing on the concept of sovereignty and non-interference as a result of “greater and greater disdain of the principles of international law” exercised in the global system (Putin 2007). The Russian president notes that, from the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the threshold for the use of force in the international system has gone down substantially. The very perception of the war under the West-dominated system has changed, becoming an “entertaining media picture”, immune from sentiments of pain and suffering, “as if nobody dies in combat, as if people do not suffer and cities and entire states are not destroyed” (Putin 2015, 2). Echoing Putin’s criticism of the Western geopolitical strategy, Lavrov considers US policy in Syria to be “unconstructive and dangerous”, “short sighted” and destabilizing (2016). He notes its continuity and describes it as “inertia driven attempts” to contain other states in the international system. Lavrov sees

this strategy as an unsustainable and outdated approach that belongs to the “archives” of history.

Both Putin and Lavrov support an ontological criticism of the West in their discourses with a variety of linguistic tools. The words, “mislead”, “lying”, “dominate”, “dictate”, “unconstructive” “dangerous”, “short sighted”, “inertia”, are used by Putin and the Lavrov in describing Western actions. These words carry strong a negative connotation and reflect the country’s embedded biographic continuity of opposition to the West.

As a contrast to Western actions in the global system, Putin and Lavrov assert Russia’s position as an international player. In doing so, they seek to activate the narrative of Russia as a strong state, capable of balancing US hegemony in the international system. This discourse supports another element of the country’s biographic narrative that Russia will rise again. All that is lost will be vindicated, what has been mourned will be celebrated, by bringing back Russian glory. The rise of Russia would benefit, not only Russia, but the international system overall. It is implied that Russia will rise by nobly defending the interests of the whole developing world. This idea is not novel in the country’s biographic narrative. It is reminiscent of Russia’s perception of itself as a Messianic nation, a third Rome: an exceptional state called to cause the spread of ideas and values. Hence, Russia’s engagement in Syria is formulated as a response to “...reach(ing) out to us for support”. Moreover, the Russian president frames his motives as altruistic, where his country was called upon to “help restore peace”. In this role Putin further asserts Russia’s willingness to serve as a pole of power, in a global system, will be by bearing the costs of the military operation, in Syria, for the benefit of other states

and its willingness to “help all nations who are certainly in danger if these terrorists return home”.

Therefore, another dominant narrative of Putin’s speech is to introduce a different approach to a currently “imbalanced” global order. Russia seeks to champion an ontologically “different” vision from that of the West (Putin 2015) that “respect(s) the diversity of cultures and civilizations and the right of nations to decide their own destinies”. In this vision Russia is to regain its ontological greatness and to serve as a balancing pole of power (Lavrov 2016). To accomplish this goal, Russia will shift the focus of its diplomacy from the West to the developing world. Lavrov names relations with countries in the Asia-Pacific Region (APR), cooperation with Latin America, Caribbean and African countries as the focus of Russian diplomacy in the 21st century (Lavrov 2016). In addressing the conflict in Syria, Putin proclaims selected principles of this new ontological order that could be beneficial for the successful resolution of the conflict. The first is the departure from Great Power politics, where people fall hostage to foreign powers that take decisions on their behalf. Putin stresses that it is a matter of “respect” that is “long overdue” (2015). Another point is ontological. It centers on cultural sensitivity and a more nuanced approach to the embedded beliefs and value systems of distinct people in the region. The Russian president stresses that the international community needs to “distinguish between genuine Islam whose values are peace, family, good deeds and helping others” from “lies and hatred” under the “guise of Islam” (Putin 2015).

The official discourse on Russia’s engagement in Syria skillfully activates ontological narratives of the West’s injustices in the global system. These narratives have

been historically embedded in Russia's biographical discourse. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the enchantment with the West did not last long. To some extent, unrealistically high expectations of the Russian leadership are to blame. Russian elites envisioned that their accelerated rapprochement with the West would result in the blossoming of trade and massive financial aid (Kozhemiakin and Kanet 1997, 47). Western states, as well, contributed to the change in their relations with Russia. The promised economic aid was not delivered, due to the West's assessment that Russian progress in economic performance was unsatisfactory. Internally, however, it was perceived in Russia, that a former great power had been reduced to the humiliating level of begging the West for minute handouts, and in caving in to *IMF* policies (Kozhemiakin and Kanet 1997, 47). Moreover, the change in the balance of power in the international system left the US as an uncontested hegemony and a number of actions that were taken by the US and other Western countries have prompted Moscow to complain that the West had a tendency to dictate its own terms in the international arena. As Trenin (2006) argues, the West invited Russia to join it, but left the door half-open). Therefore, the project of Russian integration into Western institutions was still-born from its inception.

As outlined above, activation of its ontological narratives is an important part of Russia's official discourse. Furthermore, its biographic continuity is one of the central pillars in its overall security strategy. In 2015 Russia's *Strategy of National Security* listed consistent activation of shared ontological narratives as one of country's security priorities. Article 11 notes that consolidation of society in Russia around shared embedded ontological beliefs and values forms the very basis of country's statehood. Echoing the official discourse Russia's reiterates opposition to the West as one of the

building blocks of its current ontological core. Article 17 of the frames Western systemic influence as a threat to country's national security "The West's stance aimed at ...exerting a negative influence on the realization of Russian national interests."

Moreover, *Security Strategy* places the conflict in Syria within the ontological theme of global systemic imbalances created by the Western hegemony: "The emergence of the terrorist organization calling itself Islamic State and the strengthening of its influence is the result of the policy of double standards to which some states adhere in the sphere of the fight against terrorism "(article 17).As one of the responses to these systemic threats, the Russian leadership sees consolidation around the country's biographic signifiers through "strengthening the unity of Russian society" (article 26).

This strategy of ontological consolidation, in the case of Syria, was a success. Biographic narratives, activated in Russian official discourse, were successfully decoded by the Russian population. As a result, the majority of Russians supported their country's engagement in the costly conflict, despite domestic economic challenges. According to the Russian independent polling center, , the majority of Russians viewed positively Russian military involvement in Syria: 53% of the polled were in favor with 22% opposed. Moreover, the answers to the poll demonstrated that Russians are ready to support their government's actions in Syria, despite the impact they have on the country's relations with the West. Of those polled, 58% considered that attitudes towards Russia worsened, as a result of the country's airstrikes in Syria (Levada 2016).

Conclusion

This part of my research explores Russia's response to systemic pressures in the context of diminished material capabilities. In this chapter, I conclude that, despite conventional security studies, the fall of energy prices that undermined Russia's ability to project power in the international system, has not affected the Kremlin's projection of great power status. As in the case with the gas wars with the Ukraine, systemic shocks did not rupture the country's biographic continuity, but further consolidated it around shared biographic signifiers. As a result, in its foreign policy, Russia fell into the ontological trap of its identity needs and engaged in Syrian conflict. To support its position in Syria, the Russian leadership skillfully activated embedded biographic narratives of opposition to the West and Russia as a strong state and pole of power, within the context of systemic injustices after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The poll conducted by independent polling center confirms that these ontological narratives were successfully decoded by the Russian population and embedded in its current ontological awareness.

The next section provides the conclusions to my research.

Conclusion

This dissertation has sought to accomplish three major tasks. The first is to contribute to the study of the state's behavior in the international system by filling in the gaps of traditional security studies. The second goal is to apply ontological security as a viable framework that provides valuable insights in explaining these gaps and inconsistencies to the example of Russia's behavior in the international system. The third task is to identify the practical applicability of the findings of this dissertation and their projections for future research.

Inconsistencies of existing security theories

To attain these goals, I analyzed two case studies: Russia's engagement in the Syrian conflict and Russia's gas wars with the Ukraine. I was puzzled by Russian behavior, as an international actor, that seemed to contradict basic assumptions of security studies. Despite the wide array of theoretical approaches, both traditional and critical security studies converge on the centrality of physical survival as the ultimate goal for any state in the international system. Every state's decision, in weighing different foreign policy options, therefore, is the extension of this ultimate existential quest. This quest for physical survival is contingent on the ability to project power. As a result, it calls for states to safeguard industries that are vital to the economy and to conduct a less aggressive foreign policy in the face of economic decline.

Ontological security as a tool in explaining foreign policy

How can we then explain Russia's engagement in the gas wars with the Ukraine? Both the conflict of 2006 and 2009, between Russia and the Ukraine had a drastic impact on the energy industry that serves as a vital "value pump" for the country's economy and finances the safety net of its population. The engagement in gas disputes undermined the economic viability of the current regime, its ability to project power and to safeguard its physical security. As well, how can we understand Russia's engagement in Syria? Russia became a part of a costly military conflict during an ongoing economic crisis that considerably diminished its capabilities and ability to project power. These instances seem to contradict the basic theoretical assumptions of security studies.

In my dissertation I argue that ontological security provides a viable explanation for these inconsistencies. Despite damaging consequences that the engagement in the gas wars and the Syrian conflict had on Russia's material capabilities and ability to safeguard its physical security, both cases supported Russia's great power narrative. Russia's identity as a great power has been embedded and routinized in the country's history and it forms an important part of its sense of identity. In his work on the role of habit in international relations, Hopf (2002) argues that historically embedded and routinized self-identity beliefs are applied by agents in international system subconsciously, and they lodge an imprint on the decision-making process. Giddens (1991) considers these historically embedded identity beliefs to form a country's ontological security and they become the driving force behind an agent's actions, as they re-affirm the agent's sense of identity. Ontological security, therefore, creates a sense of familiarity that allows agents

to avoid existential anxieties of the unknown. As a result, in some instances, states take actions that support the biographic continuity of their identity over other strategic considerations. In my work, I argue that Russia's ontological awareness as a great power at times plays an important role in its security considerations. Ironically, as has been demonstrated throughout the dissertation, the centrality of ontological identity beliefs of Russia as a great power translate into Moscow's *realpolitik* perception of the international system. As a result, despite "filling in the gaps" of traditional security theories, ontological security supports its assumptions about Russia's dealings with other states in the international system.

Duality of ontological security

Ontological security plays dual role in Russian policy. On the one hand, it is used as a tool by the current Russian regime to advance its political objectives. To achieve its goals Moscow skillfully re-framed and re-activated some of the embedded historical beliefs, routinized throughout Russian history, that form the country's ontological awareness. This provides the current leadership with the opportunity to secure the support of the population by consolidating the public around the country's biographic signifiers. Through activation of these beliefs, Moscow seeks to combat the existential anxieties that Russia suffered during its identity crisis, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. One of these main biographic narratives, activated by the country's elites, therefore, is re-claiming Russia's position as a great power. This great power narrative has been supported by a number of historically embedded ontological discourses.

In the case of the gas wars with the Ukraine, Moscow activated three ontological themes to secure popular support for engaging in the gas standoff: Russia as an empire:

Russia as a strong state; and Russia's opposition to the West. The routinization and embedded nature of these narratives assisted in the process of their securitization. As a result of the standoff, Moscow further consolidated power and confirmed the validity of the current regime in the eyes of the Russian population that welcomes the return of the embedded ontological narratives that had been traumatically ruptured after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

In framing the discourse on the Syrian conflict Russian political elites activated similar ontological narratives, such as: Russia as a strong state; Russia's opposition to the West; and the trauma of rupture in biographic continuity, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Activation of these narratives allowed Moscow to frame its position as a strong state with an independent foreign policy, as an alternative pole of power capable of counterbalancing Western domination. These narratives, historically embedded in the country's ontological awareness, allowed elites to consolidate power further in the face of economic challenges.

On the other hand, however, ontological security "traps" agents' behavior in the international system by constraining available foreign policy choices. As a result, states take actions that support the continuity of embedded biographic narratives, despite their contradiction with other strategic interests. In the case of the gas disputes, Russian elites were driven by the great power narrative in their foreign policy calculations. Concessions to the Ukraine as a vital transit state, would have signaled to European partners the stability of Russia as a reliable energy supplier, capable of sustaining long-term contractual obligations. It would have further consolidated Russia's already strong position in European markets. As a result, Russia would have secured its short-term and

long-term business interests, in support of its otherwise fragile economy. Doing so, however, would have signaled for Russia a loss of face” – that historically has been labeled in Russia as “weakness”, incompatible with the embedded interpretation of Russia’s great power narrative.

Russia’s engagement in the Syrian conflict took place within the context of a challenging economic situation. This was caused by the drastic drop in energy prices and Russia’s deepening alienation from the West, as well as the imposition of Western economic sanctions. It has further strained Russia’s economy, negatively affected its material capabilities, and ability to project power. Diplomatic engagement could have assisted Russia in re-establishing relations with its Western partners, under the existing *status-quo* and the lifting of economic sanctions. It would have signaled, however, that Moscow was ready to engage in the conflict under the very terms imposed by the West, that it has been opposing. As a result, the Russian leadership chose to pursue a risky strategy that supported its great power narrative.

Practical application

As argued throughout the dissertation and summarized here, ontological security, as a theoretical framework, can provide valuable insights for traditional security studies. For practitioners, it allows - policymakers to develop a more nuanced approach in assessing those factors that enable and constrain foreign policy choices of other states.

Future analysis

Independent of the importance of ontological security, in the analysis of states’ behavior, there is a need for further research to fully discover the potential of this theoretical

framework. While ontological security assists in understanding the continuity of a state's policy, based upon the sustaining an embedded historical narrative, how would it explain change? What tools, narratives and mechanisms can ontological security offer in the study of de-securitization of previously securitized issues? For example, how would Russian elites deal with a possible retreat of the West, as a dominant force in the global system, when opposition to the West had become a dominant ontological narrative in Russia? How would Moscow de-securitize its relations with Washington? What is the interplay of competing ontological themes in the formulation of state's foreign policy? What determines that one ontological theme prevails over - another? Moreover, a further study of the interplay, between physical and ontological securities, could be beneficial for a more nuanced analysis insecurity studies

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