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Master's Thesis

Russia-West Relations through the Crises in Georgia, Libya and Syria

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Table of Contents

Introduction

At the beginning of the 1990s, the end of the Cold War inaugurated a profound reconfiguration of the international order and confronted the Russian Federation with a dual challenge: the reconstruction of its domestic political identity and the redefinition of its international role, especially in relation to the Euro-Atlantic space. The collapse of the bipolar system was widely interpreted as both a geopolitical victory for the West and the opening of a new historical phase characterised by the expansion of liberal democracy, market economies, and multilateral governance. Within this framework, post-Soviet Russia was frequently portrayed as a state destined to follow a path of gradual integration into the Western-led economic, institutional, and security architecture, becoming a cooperative stakeholder in a shared liberal international order. Early scholarly and political debates thus rested on the expectation that Russia–West relations would evolve toward structures of stability and interdependence. Multilateral institutions, arms-control regimes, and cooperative security frameworks were assumed to provide the foundations for a post-bipolar order in which former antagonisms would be progressively overcome. In this sense, the relationship between Russia and the West was constitutive of the broader international system: its success or failure would shape European security, global governance, and the credibility of international law itself.

However, from the very outset of the post-Cold War period, attempts at cooperation were accompanied by recurring tensions, diverging perceptions of the rules governing the new international order, and growing mutual distrust. Developments such as NATO's intervention in the Balkans and its eastward enlargement revealed underlying asymmetries in power and normative authority. While these dynamics were largely justified in Western discourse as necessary responses to instability and human rights

violations, they were increasingly perceived in Moscow as signals of exclusion, marginalisation, and the erosion of Russia's strategic influence.

The rise of Vladimir Putin to the leadership of the Kremlin further crystallized these tensions, gradually consolidating the regime around sovereignty, security and great-power status. Moscow began to present itself as a more assertive and, in certain domains, revisionist actor, particularly when its security interests and sphere of influence were at stake. At the same time, Western conduct, especially that of the United States, was frequently interpreted by Russian elites as increasingly unilateral, further widening the gap between the expectations surrounding the post-bipolar order and reality.

Within this context, the first decade of the twenty-first century constituted a critical turning point in the evolution of Russian foreign policy toward Western powers. The initial aspirations of integration and partnership gradually gave way to more structured forms of confrontation, as Russia repositioned itself within an international environment marked by the weakening of post-Cold War multilateralism and the re-emergence of strategic competition.

Russia was among the earliest state actors to identify the fragility of the liberal international order and to frame this crisis not as a systemic failure, but as the outcome of Western dominance and normative imbalance. The Russia–West relationship therefore cannot be reduced to a simplistic opposition between a revisionist Russia and a status-quo West. Rather, it represents a central arena in which competing conceptions of international order, sovereignty, and the legitimate use of force are articulated and contested.

Despite the centrality of these dynamics, much of the existing academic literature on Russia-West relations has primarily focused on the Ukrainian crisis – beginning with the Maidan protests and the annexation of Crimea – as the decisive catalyst of Russia's rupture with the Western liberal order. Earlier episodes of tension – most notably the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, the NATO-led intervention in Libya in 2011, and the Syrian civil war from 2011 onward, are often treated as isolated antecedents, rather than as constitutive parts of a broader positioning and transformation process. This focus entails a significant analytical limitation: by privileging rupture over process, the risk is portraying Russian antagonism as reactive or contingent. Yet, the pre-2014 crises functioned as critical laboratories in which institutional practices and responses were refined and consolidated. Overlooking these earlier crises therefore limits our understanding of how Russia redefined its relations with the West. If Russia's post-2014 posture is interpreted primarily as a reaction to Ukraine alone, the longer trajectory through which antagonism to Western-shaped international relations became embedded in foreign policy remains under-explored.

While the Georgian crisis in 2008 marked an early turning point, being Russia's first major cross-border military operation since the collapse of the Soviet Union, subsequent developments further deepened the rift between Moscow and the West. The brief "reset" policy promoted by the Obama administration revived expectations of cooperation, yet it was soon overshadowed by the upheavals of the Arab Spring and, in particular, by the Western-led intervention in Libya under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 (2011), followed by the escalation of the Syrian conflict. These crises re-exposed and intensified core strategic and normative divergences concerning sovereignty, the principle of non-interference and the legitimacy of the use of force under international law. Whereas the case of Georgia challenged the post-Cold

War security architecture in Russia's "near abroad", Libya directly confronted Moscow's interpretation of international legal mandates and humanitarian interventionism. The Russian experience in Syria, in turn, consolidated the "lessons learned" from those experiences, translating earlier tensions into an immovable operational posture, to the extent of Moscow's direct military intervention to assist Assad in his effort to counter domestic opposition forces.

During Vladimir Putin's tenure as prime minister and later as president, this trajectory was coupled with the increasing explicit rejection of Western unilateralism in crisis management and the externally driven political change. He openly articulated resentment toward practice of forced democratization and interference in political processes abroad – a stance that became even more pronounced in response to US support for the Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. This marked a shift away from Russian conditional willingness to cooperate with the West – provided its privileged role within its traditional sphere of influence was recognized. This pivot became particularly evident during the later stages of the Arab Spring, when the overthrow of Muammar Ghaddafi reinforced Moscow's perception of humanitarian intervention as a vehicle for externally imposed regime change. This experience contributed to Russia's firm alignment with the Assad regime in Syria, despite sustained Western criticism and pressure for direct intervention.

Against this background, this thesis reconstructs the evolution of Russia's stance toward the West across the three major international crises in Georgia (2008), Libya (2011) and Syria (2015). Taken together, these events allow for the reconstruction of how Russia-West relations evolved across different theatres of crisis, exposing the broader shift from conditional cooperation to structured antagonism.

Although geographically and geopolitically distinct, the Georgian, Libyan and Syrian crises reveal both elements of continuity and transformation in Russia's foreign policy. These cases are linked by a common normative core centred on sovereignty, rejection of interventionism (such as the Responsibility to Protect doctrine) and resistance to Western dominance in global governance.

By drawing primarily on sources from United Nations debates, strategic doctrines of the Russian Federation and official discourses, this research contributes to the academic debate about Russia's international role in the twenty-first century in the face of the emerging multipolar order. More broadly, it offers insights into the erosion of post-Cold War cooperative engagement between Russia and the Western countries, underscoring the dynamics through which normative contestation, mutual mistrust and strategic rivalry have reshaped the contemporary international system.

Research Question

This study investigates how Russia-West relations evolved between 2008 and 2016 through the crises in Georgia, Libya and Syria. The first decade of the twenty-first century marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of Russia's foreign policy towards Western powers, reflecting a broader shift away from cooperative engagement towards confrontation and structural antagonism. In particular, the analysis focuses on the official rhetoric employed by the Russian leadership against the West, especially around the three above-mentioned crises.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, bilateral relations continuously oscillated between moments of cooperation and confrontation, undergoing several attempted "reset" phases. In light of the latest developments in Russia-West relations, particularly the consequences of the full-scale invasion launched on February 24th, 2022, in Ukraine, this thesis focuses on the path that led to the final rupture, whereby antagonism became Moscow's dominant foreign policy posture. This thesis examines how this narrative evolved in response to key international crises directly involving both Russia and the Transatlantic alliance: the war in Georgia (2008), the NATO-led intervention in Libya (2011) and the Russian military engagement in Syria (2015), selected as moments in which the recurring concepts of sovereignty, legality and threat perception became particularly visible. In each of these episodes, the Russian leadership progressively portrayed the West as a systemic threat to the international order and to the principle of legitimate sovereignty.

While the Georgian crisis marked an early turning point, being the first major cross-border military operation since the collapse of the USSR, the brief reset policy

promoted by the Obama administration was soon overshadowed by the emergence of the Arab Spring—particularly in Libya and later Syria—which re-exposed the core strategic and normative divergences between Moscow and Washington, especially Russia's strong aversion to US-backed regime change interventions in so-called "sovereign democracies".

These shifts were not linear, and they unfolded discursively through three interrelated strategies: securitization, portraying NATO initiatives as a global threat to sovereignty; preventive legitimation for unilateral actions (e.g. Crimea, Syria) through shifting the threshold for what is allowed according to international norms; identity construction recasting Russia as a great power within a multipolar world order. Therefore, the research aims to contribute to the understanding of the Russian Federation's evolving posture, grounded in domestic sovereignty, multipolarity and strategic resilience. The aim is to emphasize how official rhetoric creates a vocabulary of crises, normalizes the exception, and helps defining Russia's identity as a major power.

The research contributes to the academic debate about Russia's international role in the twenty-first century by situating its evolving posture amongst emerging multipolar power balances. While much of the existing literature focuses primarily on the Ukraine crisis after 2014, this study backtracks to earlier confrontation moments, treating them as critical laboratories for examining the Russia's evolving international stance towards the West.

Methodology

This thesis adopts an analytical approach which combines contextual diplomatic history with qualitative analysis of primary sources, in order to reconstruct the Russian leadership's evolving identity and posture in relation to the West. Official discourse and strategic documents are employed as key sources to analyse shifts in political positions, national identity, threat perception and legal justifications across time. In this sense, discourse represents a useful tool through which analysing Russia–West relations alongside concrete geopolitical events. This approach is particularly well-suited to investigate the Russian case, where official narratives accompany broader geostrategic and ideological objectives, including claims to great power status within an emerging multipolar world order.

The close reading of official speeches, diplomatic statements in multilateral *fora*, interviews with Russian leaders (namely Vladimir Putin, Dmitry Medvedev, Sergey Lavrov, Vitaly Churkin) and strategic doctrines from the period 2008-2016 enables the identification of recurring ideological themes and narrative frames. The corpus includes:

I. The *Foreign Policy Concept* (2008, 2013, 2016), the *National Security Strategy* (2015), and the *Military Doctrines* (2010, 2014) of the Russian Federation;
II. Records of UN Security Council debates related to the three case studies;
III. Interviews and declarations by representatives of Russian political institutions.

The analysis of strategic doctrines is supported by a keyword-based mapping of official discourses. Alongside exact matches, the study includes conceptually equivalent expressions such as synonyms, paraphrases, adjectival variations. The quantitative

dimension is systematically integrated with qualitative interpretation, alongside historical contextualisation. The keywords have been grouped into four semantic clusters.

Sovereignty and statehood:
Sovereignty; Independent foreign policy; National interest; Territorial integrity; Centralization/strengthening of the state; Protection of Russian citizens/compatriots/allies; Russian sphere of influence.

Security and military strategy:
Security; threats to Russian Federation's security; stability (strategic/regional/international/economic); NATO enlargement & military potential; other states'/alliances' ambitions for domination or military superiority; article 51 UN Charter.

International law and order:
Role of Russia in international affairs/competitiveness; supremacy/adherence to international law; creative/arbitrary interpretations of law/norms/mandates; violations of international law and accords; multipolarity/multilateralism/polycentrism; equality & civilizational diversity; globalization/interdependence/cooperation/partnership/dialogue.

Geopolitical challenges and confrontation with the West:
restrictive measures/sanctions against the RF; instability/unpredictability/deterioration of international relations; R2P; regime-change; Western monopoly; interference/external intervention/destabilization/overthrowing legitimate regimes; new dividing lines in

Europe; emergence of far-right nationalism; Western support for the Ukrainian coup d'état; "Russia as an enemy"; ideological external influence/confrontation; serious crisis between Russia and Western countries; other states' influence on politics.

The analysis engages with Russian-language material alongside official English translations and translation produced by the researcher. Russian terms are used to enhance analytical precision, while the focus remains on qualitative interpretation within the historical context. The corpus is based on a targeted selection of texts most relevant to the purpose of the research.
The analysis focuses solely on statements that that explicitly or implicitly refer to Russia's relations with Western actors, whether in terms of NATO enlargement, interferences and intervention in other states, as well as indirect references framed in terms of geopolitical competition. On this basis, relations with non-Western partners (China, India, BRICS, SCO, etc) are excluded unless directly connected with the three crises under investigation.

Chapter I. The Evolution of West-Russia relations

I.1 Between Transition and Marginalization: Russia and the Post-1992 Order

The relations between Russia and the West represent one of the main trajectories of contemporary international politics, which combines geopolitical ambitions, ideological and identitarian divergences, as well as systemic disequilibrium. By the end of the Cold War, many analysts and politicians hypothesized Russia's future would have followed the path of democratization and of Euro-Atlantic integration. However, since the early '90s, the early signs of growing fracture started to become manifest: on the one hand, the West was consolidating his own sphere of influence through NATO and EU enlargement; on the other hand, post-soviet Russia found itself increasingly humiliated and marginalized from its traditional (imperial) sphere of influence, incapable of projecting an equal power in regulating global affairs. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR, relations between Moscow and Western institutions and governments seemed to enter a new phase based on cooperation, mutual security and inclusion into the international liberal system. The dissolution of the USSR was received in the West with a widespread sense of ideological triumph: in this climate of unipolar optimism, it was stated that post-Soviet Russia could be fully integrated into the existing Euro-Atlantic architecture, gradually adapting to the principles of representative democracy and the market economy. However, from the very beginning, the balance between expectations and reality appeared fragile and asymmetrical: while the West pursued a strategy of institutional enlargement-from NATO to the European Union, Russia was experiencing a decade of internal disintegration, systemic economic crisis, and geopolitical marginalization.

The decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union saw the new Russian Federation facing a condition of extreme fragility, both political and economic. The transition towards a market economy, corroborated by the 1998 default crisis, determined dramatic consequences in terms of social cohesion and institutional legitimacy. Moreover, the financial difficulties led to growing structural dependence on the International Monetary Fund and on the World Bank.
Russia under President Yeltsin experienced a traumatic transition that, combined with the explosion of social inequalities, the collapse of state power, and dependence on Western financial institutions generated a widespread sense of humiliation and helplessness in the country. The rhetoric of "strategic partnership" with the West clashed with Moscow's systematic exclusion from crucial decision-making processes. In particular, NATO's progressive eastward expansion, presented as a peaceful process of democratization of Central Europe, was perceived by Russian elites as a betrayal of informal commitments made after 1989 and as the extension of a Western sphere of influence into areas considered vital to Russian national security.

"Successful partnerships is predicated not only on the capacity to deliver, but also on the partners understanding of who they are and what they want" (MacFarlane, 2001).

Russia proved to be undecided about a definition of its identity as part of the Western democratic-liberal world order, given its profound ties with Asia (to the extent of identifying today as a "Eurasian" country). Debates about this issue were corroborated by internal difficulties, namely the uneasy path of economic and social integration of the federative regions of Russia – that coupled with independence processes taking place at the Russian borders – made international integration far more difficult. The issues concerning the internal security architecture of the Russian Federation,

following the independence processes of its neighbours, inevitably played a role in shaping Russian relations with the West. First, the NATO intervention in the Kosovan conflict in 1999, the first military deployment outside of the Alliance borders, was perceived from Russia as a perilous derailment. Secondly, the perception shared by many Russians, that the NATO enlargement was taking place at the expense of Russian influence, taking advantage of the chronic vulnerability of the Federation. The Western attitude toward Moscow was inherently ambivalent: Russia was part of the broader European community, but the late twentieth-century events inevitably undermined the idea of integrating Russia together with NATO, the result being a military alliance which progressively approached Russian borders without agreeing on Russia taking part in it.

I.2 Strategic Cooperation and Underlying Tensions: from the War on Terror to the Color Revolutions

Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 2000 occurred in a context of political and economic turmoil. Since his first speeches, President Putin emphasized the urgent need to restore the legitimate sovereignty of the State (by countering the disorder generated by the dissolution of the Soviet Union), while also reaffirming Russia's international role through alignment with the Transatlantic community.
The year 2001 marked a period of successful balance between the Russian Federation and the West: the 09/11 attacks seemed to elevate dialogue to an unprecedented level, as both were ideologically and strategically aligned in the global War on Terror. Until then, Moscow had not perceived its Western partners recognizing its "great power status", neither in the first attempt of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC, 1991) nor the subsequent one of the Partnership for Peace (PfP, 1994). The NATO-Russia Council (NRC), established at the Pratica di Mare summit in 2002, enabled joint decision-making on an equal basis.

"Contrary to the conservative position on legal innovation it had held during the late 1990s, Russia was now more open to rethinking the scope of self-defence and the preventive use of force. However, Moscow insisted on the centrality of the UN to ensure that 'there should be no legal vacuum in the process. International law can and should adapt, but Russia was to retain a voice over its development. Second, Moscow sought to prevent states from using UN mechanisms to berate Russia for violating international norms." (Lynch, 2015).

Besides being an optimal solution to strengthen cooperation, Vladimir Putin understood it as a tool to strengthen his own domestic position and reassert state control over Chechnya. Thanks to the new climate of tolerance, Putin managed to

conduct the Second Chechen War with no real international opposition, where the rhetoric of the war on terror provided the Kremlin with a useful framework for depicting Chechen instability as a power vacuum to be filled to safeguard the security and stability of the Federation. The concept of a "power vacuum" became a recurring element in the justification of foreign policy and security actions: the perception that an unstable area, not controlled by a strong sovereign state, would inevitably be filled by hostile forces—be they extremists, separatists, or eventually Westerners.

Meanwhile, in January 2001 President George W. Bush publicly framed the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty as constituting cornerstone of the global strategic architecture, stressing the shared responsibility of Moscow and Washington in the preservation of peace. However, the United States unilaterally withdrew from the treaty only a year later because new terrorism and so-called “rogue states” required the construction of new anti-missile bases for self-defence purposes, a step that profoundly shocked the Russian leadership.

The US-Russia partnership proved to be heavily reliant on the personal rapport between the two Presidents, and deep-seated tensions soon come to the surface. In particular, Moscow was increasingly alarmed in the face of NATO’s expansionism, given the lack of any formal security guarantee to calm its concerns regarding the Alliance’s military nature.

Two issues remained at the core: the second round of NATO Eastward enlargement and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

At the Prague Summit in 2002, NATO announced a new enlargement plan to include former Warsaw-Pact countries, a move that Putin framed as a breach of the "red lines". He warned that NATO would have undergone a reform – abandoning its collective-defence identity under Article V – before any Baltic accession could be tolerated. At the

same time, tensions over the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 revealed a rare geopolitical alignment between Moscow, Paris and Berlin, a moment of "multipolar resistance" to American unilateralism. Yet beyond temporary alignment, the Iraqi case contributed to the justification centred on counterterrorism: framing military intervention as a necessary response to transnational security threats increasingly became a shared narrative across major powers. If on the one hand Washington used the idea of the war on terror to legitimize regime change in Iraq, Moscow started using similar arguments to justify its own use of force. Those parallel developments – other than reinforcing Moscow's belief that legal principles were subordinated to power and selective interpretation – display growing convergence in the instrumental use of security narratives to ensure enough room for unilateral action.

By the end of Putin's first presidential term Russia was experiencing an unprecedented economic recovery thanks to the rise in energy prices, while also witnessing the stabilization of the internal political situation. Meanwhile, the international context provided a fertile ground for straining relations with Western partners: Moscow concluded it had given the West too much room for action in the former Soviet Union area, the so-called "Near Abroad". Conversely, many in the Bush administration started proposing to take Russian concerns less seriously than they had previously done. Whether Russia expected the recognition of its great power status by the Euro-Atlantic Alliance, the latter was increasingly involved in other external challenges in the MENA region and in South-east Asia. By the beginning of President Bush second mandate, the United States had not developed any real coherent guideline, nor a proper risk assessment of what would be the consequences for bilateral relations with Moscow stemming from the actions undertaken in Georgia and in Ukraine (Stent, 2015).

Multiple converging interests were at stake, among which three were the most relevant ones: the enlargement of NATO, the question of deployment of Ballistic missiles in Czechia and Poland, and what would later be referred to as the “Color revolutions”. As highlighted by the former American diplomat and US National Security Council senior director (until 2007), Thomas Graham, Putin started to speak about forces that were instrumentalizing terrorism to gain “juicy bits” of Russia by imposing a unipolar organization to global foreign policy (Graham, 2008).
The NRC had failed to achieve concrete effects on creating a more close-knit window for dialogue, and the growing mutual discontent could not be overshadowed by sectorial cooperation.
US leaders grew more critical of Russia selling weapons to rogue states, as well as of the instrumentalization of energy as a geopolitical tool, which eroded the partnership from within since it was based on the shared commitment to democracy and free market values. In 2003, the Bush administration independently decided to invade Iraq without consulting Russia.

On the European stage, particularly disturbing for Russia was the direct entry of the NATO and the EU in what had been the Russian imperial and state space, combined with the idea that the Bush administration was aiming to bring other former Soviet territories into its sphere of influence.
At the same time, the activities of Western NGOs in Russia started to be regarded with suspicion by Russian leaders, who believed their stars and stripes counterpart was exerting its soft power through those civil society movements. These organizations were for Moscow a tool of power projection paving the way for pushing the NATO agenda, while eroding the traditional sphere of Russian influence. As a consequence, their activities were restricted and then banned. The perception of a coordinated

Western campaign was amplified by the 2004 round of NATO enlargement, which included the Baltic states, which Putin had already labelled as a breach of Russia's "red lines". Perhaps, the democratic backtracking of Russia in terms of increased authoritarianism and violations of human rights aroused skepticism around Western tables. The wave of Color revolution that took hold in the "Near Abroad" of Russia in the early 2000s became the final straw in already strained Russia-West relations.

In November 2003 Georgian presidential elections confirmed Gorbachev's former foreign minister, pro-Russian politician Eduard Shevardnadze, as president, a position he had held since 1995. The electoral results were contested by the anti-Russian nationalist and liberal opposition, which included Mikheil Saakashvili, a politician who had studied in America and was closely linked to circles of the American establishment. After mobilizing the streets for several days, the opposition also occupied Parliament during the first session of the new legislature in the «rose revolution», and Saakashvili was elected president in January 2004.
After the Rose revolution, Georgia became a huge source of contention between the United States and the Russian Federation. The President Saakashvili's intention to join NATO and the EU as soon as possible was coupled with active cooperation with Washington: Georgian troops were deployed to Iraq - where the US had declared war without consulting Russia - to support the Americans, the same conflict that according to Arbatov (a former Duma deputy) had dismantled the "international security system". Georgia's soldiers also took part in the US "Global Terrorism Entry Point" (GTEP) programme for counterterrorism, while the country benefited from sound USAID loans. During his visit in 2004, Saakhashvili was greeted in Washington as a major successful example of the Freedom Agenda, the American programme for democracy promotion. Georgia was also important as a secure vector for energy

security, thanks to the project of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which avoided the transit of gas in Russian territories.
On the contrary, relations with Putin soon soured, especially because of the Georgian leader plan to reincorporate the pro-Russian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Putin did not look favourably on Georgia and Ukraine's westward orientation, and this further reinforced the belief that the promotion of democracy was used by the West as a pretext for geopolitical encroachment. In his view, the Rose revolution was a Western-orchestrated conspiracy (where Soros and the CIA were cast as co-conspirators) to secure a strategic foothold to project power in Asia and into the Middle East.

A similar scenario played in Ukraine, where NGOs and relevant authorities were in charge of overlooking the lawfulness and compliance of the electoral process. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in the 1990s Ukraine joined the Commonwealth of Independent States, surrendered its nuclear arsenal in exchange for Russian security guarantees, while also signing agreements with Moscow on the permanence of the Black-Sea fleet and the lease of Sevastopol base to Russia. The first round of the 2004 presidential race saw Viktor Yushchenko, former central-bank governor and leader of the moderate nationalist "Our Ukraine" coalition, narrowly ahead of the pro-Russian incumbent prime minister Viktor Yanukovych. Neither reached the required 50 %. The official second-round rally declared Yanukovych the winner, but OSCE observers reported massive irregularities, ballot-stuffing and media bias. Opposition supporters adopted the orange scarf as their emblem and flooded Kyiv's Independence Square with nightly sit-ins, a "great political marathon" that lasted months, which also caused the shutdown of governmental buildings.

International backing was decisive: U.S. senator John McCain, former CIA chief James Woolsey, ex-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and the philanthropist George Soros publicly endorsed the protesters; also Polish and Lithuanian presidents visited Kyiv; the EU, led by High Representative Javier Solana, mediated a cease-fire. The Supreme Court of Ukraine declared the second-round results null and void. The new elections, held on 26 December 2004, resulted in Yushchenko's victory with 51.9 % to Yanukovych's 44.2 %.
Moscow interpreted the Orange Revolution as a Western-engineered "color revolution", mirroring Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution. Putin, who had backed Yanukovych, framed the outcome as a personal affront and warned that continued Western meddling threatened Russia in its near-abroad security sphere. This perception hardened Russian foreign-policy, for example, when in 2006 Russia exploited the energy dependence of Ukraine and cut off gas supplies as a mean for retaliation against Yushchenko's government and his Western-oriented policies. In that occasion, the Kremlin's decision was miscalculated and resulted in a negative outcome since Ukraine answered by shutting down the pipelines that deliver energy from Russia to Europe, taking gas for itself.

Another friction point, even if to a lesser extent, stemmed from the dispute over Bishkek, where the US held the Manas airbase, whose rental amounted to 50 million dollars per year. The Kyrgyz President Karimov tried to take distance both from Russia and from The United States, but eventually also participated in the American-led "Extraordinary Rendition Program". Although the US saw Russia as a secondary concern, Putin became progressively more wary about American intentions in Eurasia, which he viewed as addressed to undermine Russia's security and regional hegemony. The asymmetry in the perception of threat and in strategic priorities became ever more

pronounced: whereas the Kremlin initially hoped that cooperation with Washington would help to restore Russia's global prestige (via accession to the WTO, the lifting of Cold-War sanctions and above all the functional recognition as an equal partner), by the mid 2000s those expectations had been widely disappointed. In parallel, Georgia and Ukraine accelerated diplomatic drives for NATO and EU membership, heavily supported by the United States but met with caution from the European ally. Germany, France and Italy feared Russian retaliation and resisted further eastward enlargement, a tension that surfaced at the 2008 Bucharest NATO summit where US pressure for immediate accession clashed with German-brokered compromise that postponed Georgia's and Ukraine's entry, while admitting Croatia and Albania. The failure of the Russian objectives, coupled with the humiliation from the events in Kiev and Tbilisi, marked the beginning of a deep and prolonged estrangement phase for Russia-West relations, providing a fertile ground for more confident Russian foreign policy moves in the following years.

I.3 Between Partnership and Confrontation: Russia's Strategic Shift and the Road to Munich

Moscow and Washington continued cooperating on key issues (like in Afghanistan after the return of the Taliban, the management of the Iraqi internal situation and ties with Teheran), the Transatlantic alliance's actions in Ukraine and Georgia discouraged Russia to get involved in more tightening relations. The 2006 G-8 summit, hosted in Petersburg, was conducted on good neighbourly relations, but many countries urged Russia's accession to the WTO, which confirmed what Putin meant to communicate: the Russian comeback as a major world power after years of sickness, which required respect from the other nations.
During the Vilnius Conference the former US vice-president Dick Cheney gave a speech against Putin and his regime's actions outside the Russian borders. He accused the Russian leadership to use natural energy to blackmail neighbouring nations that follow a Westward orientation. In Cheney's memoire, he wrote "we are right to expand NATO and offer membership to former Soviet client states like Poland and Romania" (Cheney, 2011), reflecting the Bush administration's commitment to extending influence in the area, irrespective of Russian objections. From Moscow's perspective, however, such discourses confirmed that American democracy promotion functioned less as a normative project and more as a instrument for geopolitical leverage. This determined critics about the foundation of the Freedom agenda, based on fundamental hypocrisies since there was no real difference with the Realpolitik program that Moscow was also trying to realize.

At the international level, the consequence was Russia's inward orientation, placing the post-Soviet territories as its top priority through the tool of economic integration.

The integration attempt was carried out through the creation of the Eurasian Economic Community, a unified economic space that emerged from the CIS countries, as well as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Strategic cooperation with alternative powers, like China and the BRICS, also marks this shift in foreign policy. The Russian attempts to use those sorts of organizations to re-assert influence in the area of the former Soviet Union, were contrasted by the United States. This happened mostly through the support of the GUAM organization (including Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova): rather than promoting cooperation over common issues, the American approach was centred on a containment policy towards Moscow. The new political trajectory reflected on the inside the development of Russia's real identity, which could not be subjugated to Western-injected dominant models, but it had to display the uniqueness of the Russian Federation, with which nobody could interfere. The centralized authoritative framework of Russia was promoted in opposition to the universalization of Euro-Atlantic values, where the term "sovereign democracy" contrasted with that of "liberal democracies".

For the first time, in 2007 Russia "suspended" the legally binding arm control agreement, the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), first ratified in 1990. That same year, the Estonian government wanted to remove monuments from the Soviet period, and after moving a statue their systems had suffered from systematic DDOs cyber-attacks, showing limits to the *reprochement,* only if the partners accept Russian will and its interpretation of history. Russia's foreign policy re-orientation increased military cooperation with China and India, signalling that the Russian government was no longer willing to become part of the West, it would rather reassert its own status of a great power. Russia also kept on cooperating with the Iranian government on nuclear energy and

arms trade, opposing the United States in the imposition of sanctions to their uranium-enrichment program.

At the domestic level, the Russian government increased control and contrasted opponents of the regime, with reference to the priority of maintaining regional stability. Clear examples of this assertive attitude are the assassination of Anna Politkovskaya, a journalist critical of President Putin and of the Chechen leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, not to mention the detention of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a Russian anti-Putin oligarch and entrepreneur. The shutdown of political opponents, coupled with the construction of the 3rd largest currency reserves in the world and with the centralization of the governmental authority, inaugurated a new season of assertiveness in Russian foreign policy in relation with the Euro-Atlantic countries. This was determined by NATO's and the EU's approach to enlargement and the multiple regime-change attempts, that became particularly alarming for Russia (which kept drawing red lines closer to its borders), especially in the face of the underperformance recorded in multilateral institutions such as the NRC and the G-8.

"The new EU member states that have emerged from the ranks of Soviet Socialist Republics or the Warsaw Pact have proven to be a significant lobby for policies blocking extensive cooperation with Moscow. Key European states have reacted badly to human rights abuses and the perceived unreliability of Russian energy supply. The EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), designed to create a "common space" in the central European corridor between Russia and the EU proper, has generated considerable resentment in Moscow, where it is perceived as yet another form of encroachment on Russia's legitimate sphere of influence. The ENP has also closed the door to realistic prospects for membership on the part of western leaning polities such as Georgia and Ukraine. In some measure, these failures are due to the EU's inability to overcome its chronic deficiencies as a strategic actor" (Nation, Trenin, 2007).

At this point, bilateral relations between Russia and the West were characterized by a growing dialectical rivalry, that culminated in Putin's public address at the Munich Conference on Security Policy. In that occasion, the Russian President condemned the unipolar model of international affairs, where the United States behave "as a lawless power, which although it constantly lectures Russia about democracy, behaves in a very undemocratic way in the international system. He accused the USA of the almost unrestrained use of force in the international arena, and of consequently engendering further conflicts" (Aldis, Smith, 2007).
Following a nostalgic remark about the balance of power ensured by Cold-War bipolarity, Putin tried to warn other states against American aggressive policies, while inciting them to react against the presence of a sole centre for decision-making, which threatens the sovereignty of all states. The unilateral model is, in Putin's view, doomed to failure compared to the high growth rates of the BRICS countries, and it is also the primary cause undermining the international security framework. In that occasion, Vladimir Putin still left room for dialogue with the EU, while the harsh criticism against the United States and NATO enlargement pushed Russia to adopt a more assertive attitude in foreign relations.

In 2008 Putin defied the expectations of the power-replacement process when he handed over leadership to Dmitry Medvedev, while he became Prime Minister. The desire of the newly elected American President, Barack Obama, to "reset" relations with the Russian Federation, combined with the presence of a new, more conciliatory figure at the helm of the Kremlin, entertained hopes for a renewed phase of security cooperation. However, these hopes were quickly dashed by the Russian military intervention in Georgia in August 2008.

I.4 The question of Ballistic Missile Defence

The question of missile defence played a huge role in the definition Russia-West relations in the XXI century, becoming a symbol of mutual strategic mistrust. The Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM, 1972) was first signed in the midst of the Cold War between Presidents Richard Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev. Its main purpose was mostly aimed at containing the missile defence capabilities of both countries to stop the proliferation of offensive nuclear weapons. As previously mentioned, in 2002 the American President George W. Bush unilaterally withdrew from it in the name of the global war on Terror. The withdrawal was followed by the announcement by the U.S. State department of the "European Phased Adaptive Approach" (EPAA, 2005), to station radar tracking systems and interceptor missiles in the former Warsaw Pact states of Poland and the Czech Republic. While the United States framed the deployment as a purely defensive response against rogue states (like Iran and North Korea) or emerging threats from West Asia, both Moscow and Beijing harshly criticized the US initiative, and started to enhance their nuclear deterrence, while also issuing more coercive nuclear doctrines. The plan intensified Russian security anxieties, prompting Moscow to issue a "National Security Strategy" that explicitly warned of a potential degradation of the strategic balance caused by US missile-defence installations near its borders. Concurrently, Washington sought to mitigate Russian concerns by offering technical cooperation, but these proposals were met with skepticism by Russian elites: the narrative about the United States leveraging security architecture for dominance, rather than for defence purposes, took hold in Russia.

"Russia's objections to U.S. missile defense systems in Europe hinge on the assumption that, at some future stage in their development, they will be capable of reducing the effectiveness of

strategic missiles launched from Russia. […] Russian officials note that once any technology is fielded, the United States can decide at any time to increase the number of deployed interceptors or modify existing equipment. […] Even if technical discussion behind closed doors can reach agreement on immutable physical realities, Russia apparently does not find this possible in public debate." (Giles, Monaghan, 2014).

The missile defence issue featured prominently in Vladimir Putin's landmark 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference. In Putin's eyes, the development of missile defence installations in Eastern Europe was not only a strategic threat but also a political provocation that, once again, was aimed at undermining Moscow's interests in its neighbouring countries. When that same year the European members of NATO called for the installation of a complementary missile system (other than the American one), President Putin warned about the risk of a new arms race and threatened to withdraw from the 1990 CFE Treaty. As negotiations stalled, by the end of the year Russia suspended its participation to the CFE, explicitly linking the move to missile defence deployment. Russia had subjugated its participation to the ratification of the adapted version of the treaty by all NATO countries; on the other hand, NATO declared that they would have done so only if Russia withdrew from Moldova and Georgia, which eventually did not happen. This steady escalation—spanning diplomatic protests, military countermeasures, and public warnings—transformed what had started as a narrowly scoped defence initiative into a global symbol of American expansionism.

During the 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit, negotiations within the alliance moved on, resulting in August in the American-Polish agreement about the deployment of part of the defence system in the territory of Poland (as well as in the Czech Republic, in Turkey and in Romania). The intersection of missile defence plans, NATO

enlargement, and US support for Ukraine and Georgia's membership had crystallized into a broader narrative of systemic Russian encirclement from the West. As a response, the Kremlin threatened a missile deployment in the exclave of Kaliningrad. The Georgian war in August 2008 marked the definitive end of any optimism about partnership with the West. Missile defence, once framed as a technical question of deterrence, had become entangled with a narrative that underpinned Russia's more assertive foreign-policy posture and its operationalisation of force in the 2008 Georgia. The election of the new democratic American President Obama determined an halt in the process of deployment of long-range missile defence in Eastern Europe; defence will be provided instead by the deployment of the United States integrated naval weapons system of Aegis. In response, President Medvedev relegated back about the possibility of placing missile defence systems in Kaliningrad.

The Obama administration seemed to consider Russian concerns, by halting the deployment process of strategic BMD in 2008. Far from posing a real threat to Russia's deterrence facilities, the objection to BMD stems from historical and geopolitical observations: the status of great power was intertwined with the presence of nuclear facilities. The Russia's status had to be preserved, especially in the face of the global financial recession of 2008-2009 (the Russian Federation economy had the worst performance of any major oil-related economy).
The year 2010 is mostly remembered for the informal meeting between Obama and Medvedev, when the two Presidents shared a fast-food meal during Medvedev's visit in Washington, starting the so-called "Cheeseburger diplomacy". On that occasion, the two chiefs of State discussed a number of common issues, fundamentally stating their reciprocal willingness to continue to cooperate, despite still colliding on certain issues. Even if the two countries continued to disagree on certain issues, such as Georgia, they

were committed to move forward in other common issues benefiting regional and global security. Medvedev sought Obama's support for his country to enter the WTO, which would arrive at the price of promoting accountability, transparency and Rule of Law in the Russian economy.

"The reset largely exhausted its agenda by 2011. At the NATO Lisbon summit in November 2010 the Western nations proposed to focus on modern challenges such as terrorism and cyber-attacks, yet they failed to positively respond to Russia's security proposal. The Western nations further indicated that they expected more cooperation from Russia globally, while the Kremlin expressed frustration with what it saw as insufficient cooperation on part of the West. Concerned about Washington's plans to deploy elements of the missile defense system (MDS) in Europe, Medvedev (2010) issued a warning that a new arms race may take place should Russia and the Western nations fail to agree on a "full-fledged joint mechanism of cooperation" on MDS. The president also showed signs of frustration with lack of progress on his initiative on European security" (Tsygankov, 2018).

Despite repeated warnings by the Kremlin and threatens to use force if its interests were not considered, by 2012 the NATO-led process of creating a coherent system to ensure the full protection of its member states from ballistic missile attacks reached its "interim" capability (meaning it had been tested and was fully operational). The defensive system had its headquarter in Germany, and it also involved the inclusion of American interceptor ships and Turkish radars under the command of the Euro-Atlantic alliance. Russia felt encroached by US-led forces and radars in Europe, Asia and in Middle that, coupled with the EPAA programme, alimented fear for eventual American retaliation.

I.5 Humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in Russian Foreign Policy

The principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) was developed during discussions at the United Nations, as regards the conflict between the ban on the use of force under international law and the necessity to address mass atrocities through joint humanitarian intervention. After the UN Charter came into force, cross-border military interventions aimed at safeguarding citizens of another state from human rights violations by their own government were deemed unlawful, a position that prevailed throughout the entire Cold War period. However, starting in the 1990s, state actions began to challenge this limited interpretation: the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999 was defended as an operation intended to avert a humanitarian catastrophe, despite lacking the explicit authorization by the Security Council. In the view of many states, Kosovo represented a troublesome precedent, revealing deep divisions among the international community over the legitimacy of humanitarian justifications for the use of force.

R2P was subsequently embedded in a set of documents adopted at the UN level, grounded in the principle of sovereign responsibility, according to which States bear the primary obligation to protect their populations, while the international community retains the residual responsibility to assist in prevention and, if necessary, react when a State is unable or unwilling to ensure effective protection. Under certain conditions, this responsibility to react may involve the use of force, subject to authorization by the Security Council, and dependent on a case-by-case consensus. Despite its endorsement at the UN level, R2P has remained vulnerable to divergent interpretations and has frequently been denounced as an *ultra vires* act, exceeding

legal constraints, giving rise to reservations among many countries about its instrumentalization risks.

"The assumption that states act according to their national interests is confirmed. With many conflicts in the world left unresolved, alliances and coalitions created for humanitarian intervention and peacekeeping show that they are simply interest related. The state's self-interested and individualistic behavior often exploit humanitarian intervention to gain benefit. If the operation in Libya was intended to achieve peaceful ceasefire and a change of regime, why was it carried out with military means, and why did power politics still dominate international relations?" (Spassov, 2014).

This extract captures a line of reasoning that closely aligns with how Russian leaders framed their narrative regarding humanitarian intervention in the post-Cold War international system: Spassov understands humanitarian operations as interest-driven arrangements, rather than genuine universal norms. Russia conceives the international order as highly competitive and shaped around power asymmetries, particularly with regard to Western external ambitions (Tsygankov, 2018). In this light, the practice of humanitarian intervention is viewed with suspicion, as the risk is the establishment of normative hierarchies capable of legitimizing power imbalances. Russia explicitly warned against:

"military interventions and other forms of external interference which undermine the foundations of international law based on the principle of sovereign equality of states be carried out on the pretext of implementing the concept of 'responsibility to protect' (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2013).

The invocation of R2P in Libya reinforced long-standing concerns about the selective application of international law. From Moscow's perspective, the uneven enforcement

of legal principles contributed to a broader condemnation of Western crisis management as legally ambiguous, and politically motivated, ultimately undermining trust in international norms. Beyond normative objections, the overthrow of Ghaddafi acquired a broader meaning as a warning against the externally legitimized removal of a sitting sovereign authority. As such, R2P could be mobilized to justify regime change, ousting undesirable leaders, thereby consolidating the narration of regime change as an existential threat to sovereignty itself.

"From another perspective, however, the Syrian conflict has graphically illustrated Russian resistance to the notion of humans as subjects of international law (despite its abusive use of humanitarian claims over Crimea). Moscow's rigid focus on Syrian sovereignty, has accompanied its dismissal of egregious violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) by Damascus (including evidence of regime complicity in the use of chemical arms). Indeed, Russia contributed to those violations through its own bombing campaign in Aleppo and other Syrian regions inhabited by civilians. Russian officials have criticised 'the politicization of human rights and humanitarian topics' in Syria, over 'alleged' civilian deaths as a result of strikes by Russian forces" (Allison, 2019).

Soon after the presidential elections, in February 2012, Russian state media announced that security services uncovered a plan to kill Vladimir Putin – and these claims were instilled in the public opinion. Regardless of the accuracy of such allegations, Putin's third presidential term coincided with a period of internal unrest, marked by large demonstrations regarding alleged election fraud and concerns about political stability. During Medvedev's presidency, certain segments of the population encountered a limited but blatant expansion of the political debate, hoping for a gradual path toward liberalism. In this context, the official message portrayed Russia's governors as a target of external violence, and Russia itself as being under constant threat from hostile

forces. This framing amplified concerns about regime change as a practice that could eventually take place in Russia, a line of argument that reinforced a broader framework in which external interference, regime change operations and sovereignty risks were presented as interconnected phenomena, that had to be countered. This interpretation would inform Russia's determination to prevent the repetition of such a scenario in subsequent crises, most notably in Syria.

"The Russian position on international norms, which does include a responsibility to protect, derives from this programme. It describes 'humanitarian intervention' as contradictory to the UN Charter and its reformulation, the 'so-called responsibility to protect', as an object of international 'speculation'" (Kurowska, 2014).

Russia did not vehemently oppose R2P, yet it abstained from voting on abstracts resolutions in 2005 and 2009, as well as in the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly, privileging prevention over intervention, interpreting this practice as the very last resort. After 2011, Moscow systematically objected forceful democratization, elevating the country as the protector of the intrinsic values of the UN Charter – taking the lead of those marginalized in the international community – and exposing the Western "double standards" and their unique interpretations of international law. International law thus became a central instrument to counter unilateralism pursued by the West under the banner of multipolarity, opposed by Russian sovereignty. From the Kremlin viewpoint, while the end of the Cold War marginalized the Russian Federation, it opened space to the "unipolar moment" of the United States which promoted interdependence but not pluralism.

Taken together, Russian engagement with the Responsibility to Protect does not reveal a rejection of international law *per se*, but rather a redefinition of its strategic positioning. Within this framework, legal justifications increasingly acquired a political dimension not only as opposition against alleged Western-shaped normativism, but as a broader responsibility

toward preserving global order and representing those marginalized in the international decision-making. The consistent emphasis on sovereignty, non-interference and legality was embedded in the counternarrative against Western and United States hegemony. R2P is portrayed as part of the liberal model of political transformation, where humanitarian intervention becomes equal to externally imposed regime change, an interpretation that heightened Russian anxieties surrounding domestic and regional stability. The rejection of humanitarian intervention thus evolved into a central pillar of Moscow's identity, especially in the context of the colour revolutions and the Arab Spring. This objection shaped both Russia's diplomatic obstructionism at the United Nations and in its relations with Western partners.

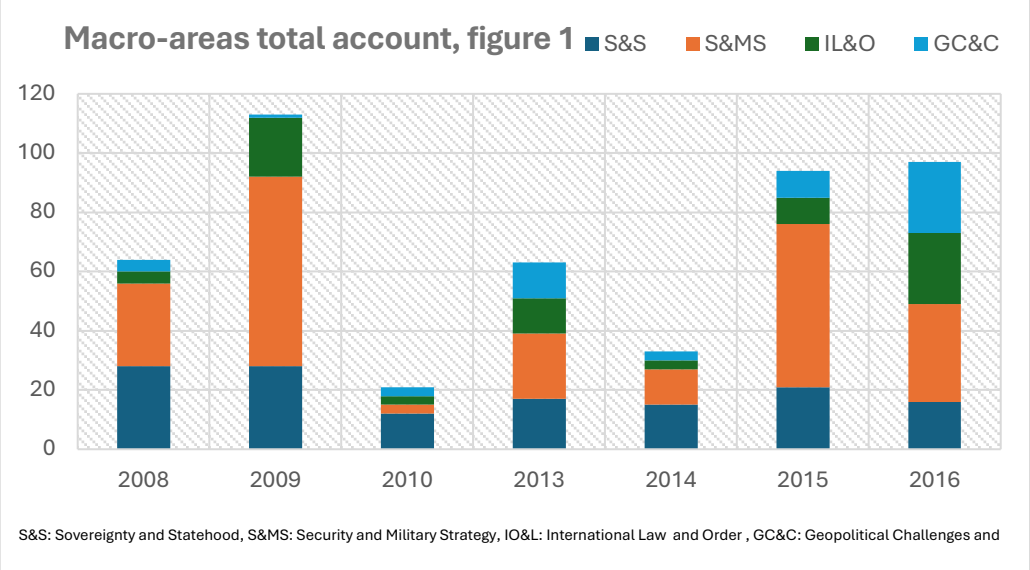
Chapter II. The Strategic Doctrinal Framework of the Russian Federation (2008-2016)

II.1 Reading the Code: How Strategy Speaks

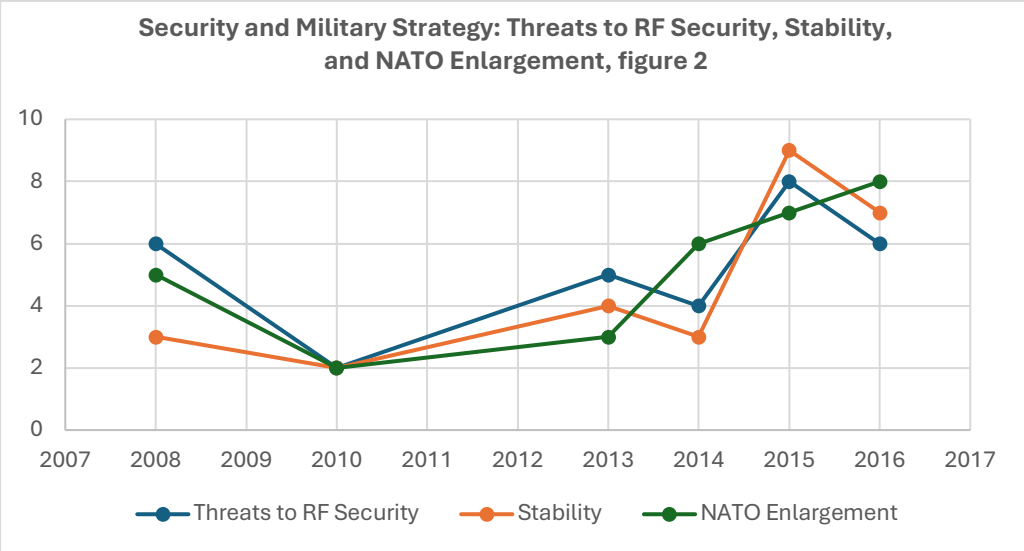
This section draws on strategic doctrines as instruments that shed light on the Russian worldview, suggesting how the preparation of political action takes place. The analysis of the strategic documents adopted by the Russian Federation between 2008 and 2016 is useful to detect important shifts in the frequency and relevance of recurring concepts, which provide a reliable insight to track the evolution of foreign policy over time – encompassing its framing of security, international order and interactions with other powers. The doctrinal analysis provides the semantic framework that will emerge in the following chapters, where these trends are tested in relation to Russia's response to the crises in Georgia and in the MENA region.

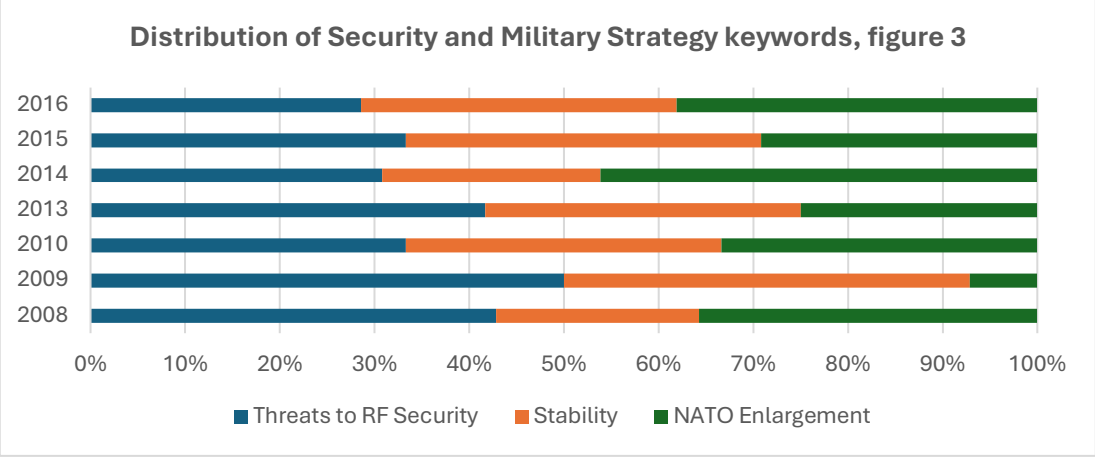
The trajectory of Russia's doctrinal discourse (Figure 1) shows a significant intensification in discourse density for our categories in 2009, peaking not only in the absolute volume of occurrences, but also in the variety of topics addressed by the strategic documents The sovereignty and statehood cluster remains consistently salient throughout the entire period, confirming the centrality of keywords such as "sovereignty" and "national interest" as structural foundation in the Russian doctrine. Thus, while quantitatively stable, the qualitative meaning of sovereignty evolves with Moscows's crisis perception: in the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian war references to sovereignty frame it defensively against NATO encroachment, while following the events in Libya it becomes a defensive tool to delegitimize "regime change" operations led by the West under the banner of R2P. Ultimately, the intervention in Syria elevates

sovereignty from a principle of non-interference in the affairs of "sovereign democracies" (a definition coined by the Kremlin opposed to Western "liberal democracies") to the very foundation of Russia's claim to legitimacy in opposing interventionism.



In contrast, the security and military strategy cluster displays sharper oscillations (Figures 2, 3). After a relatively marginal role in early documents, security-related language suddenly surges in 2014-2015 – with references to the "threats to Russian security", "NATO enlargement", and "strategic stability" increasing two or threefold. This escalation reflects the growing securitization of the Kremlin's discourse, a process which is closely linked with the deterioration of relations with the West after the Ukrainian crisis and the launch of military operations in Syria. What was initiated in Georgia as a doctrinal readjustment becomes, by 2015, the primary prism through which the Russian Federation perceives the international order.





The macro-area concerning international order and law exhibits a more gradual yet steady growth. From 2009, mentions of "multipolarity", "sovereign equality" and "adherence to international law" rise steadily, peaking again in 2016. Yet these terms gradually shift in tone: whereas early formulations stressed cooperation and predictability, later texts accuse the West of systematic manipulation of international norms, and position Russia as the defender of the "correct" legal order. The NATO-led intervention in Libya – and the coalition's interpretation of UNSC Resolution 1973 – actes as a catalyst for this discursive transformation.

The most evident shift concerns the cluster "geopolitical challenges and confrontation" (Figure 4). Virtually absent before 2013, references to "external interference", "destabilization" and "Western monopoly" become embedded into Russia's strategic identity. This new vocabulary instituzionalises the idea of confrontation with the West while reconfiguring the country's international posture in explicitly antagonistic terms.

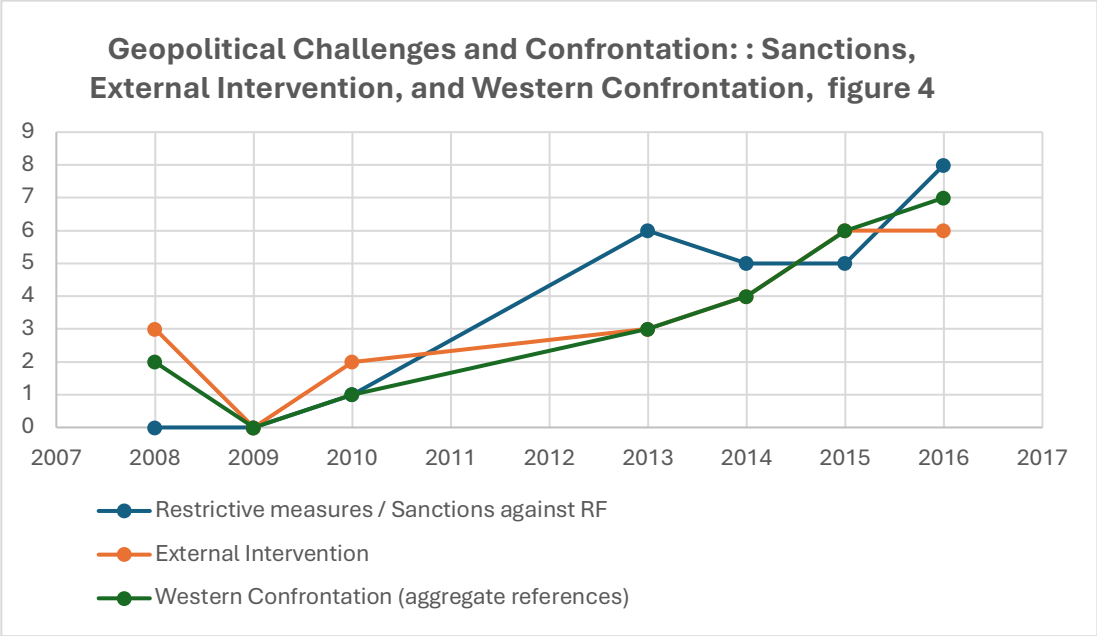


Figure 5 displays this transformation by tracking the comparative trend between the two categories of "confrontation[1]" and "adherence to international law". From 2009

[1] In Figure 4, the line "Western confrontation" represents an aggregated indicator combining several recurring keywords under the umbrella of "Geopolitical challenges and confrontation" (e.g., Western monopoly, external intervention/Western interference, R2P, regime change, Western support to the Ukrainian coup d'état, Russia as an enemy, ideological external influence/confrontation, serious crisis between Russia and Western countries), thus offering a concise measure of Russia's discourse vis-à-vis the West. Rather than a strict ratio, the chart illustrates the growing imbalance between normative references to legality and antagonistic framing.

onward, confrontational language progressively outpaces the legal references. The two do not exclude each other (legality is increasingly mentioned to delegitimize the West), yet their relative weight is progressively overshadowed by antagonistic narratives.

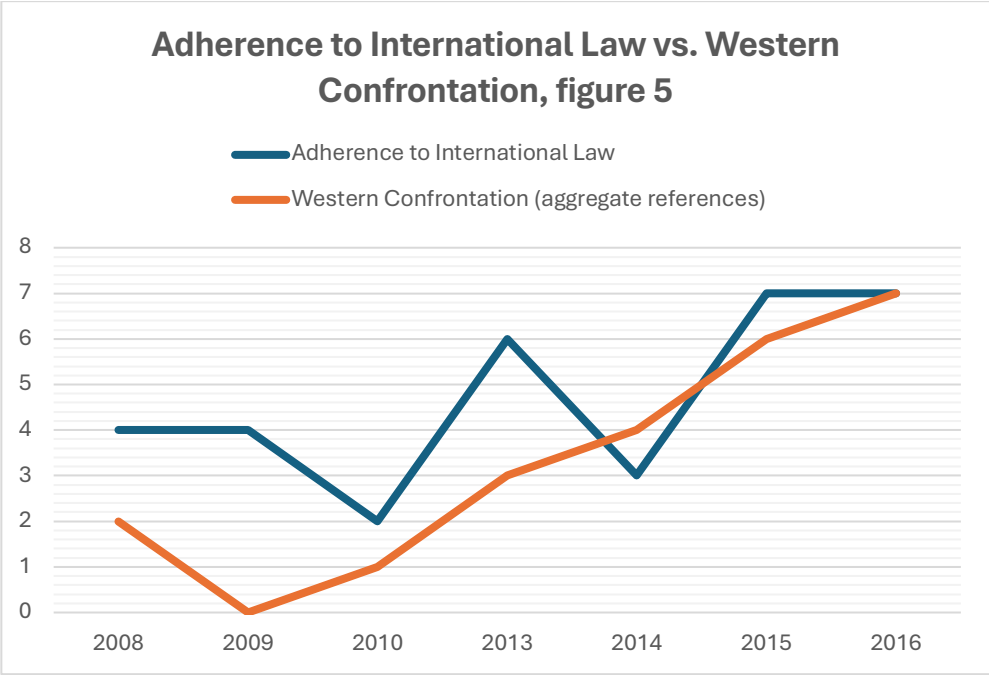
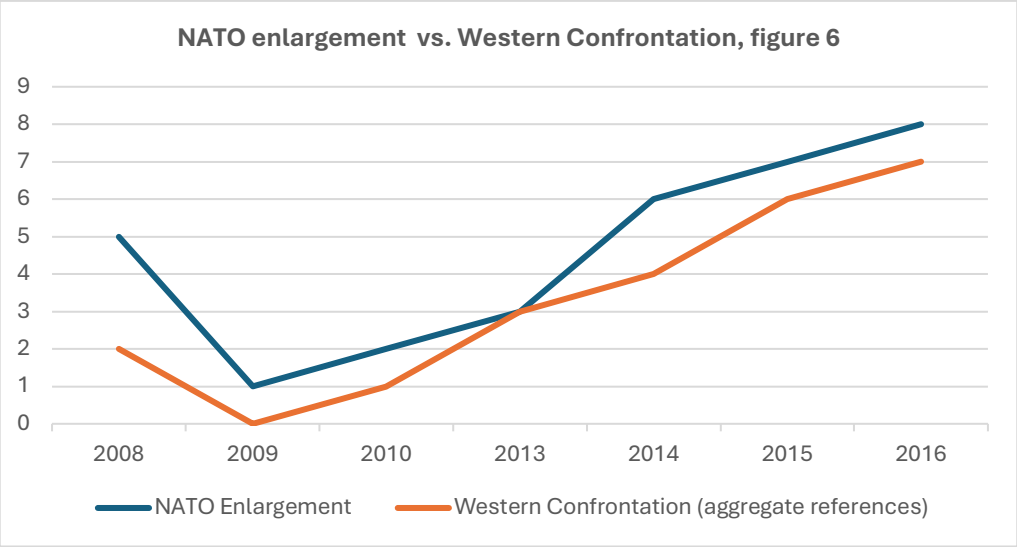
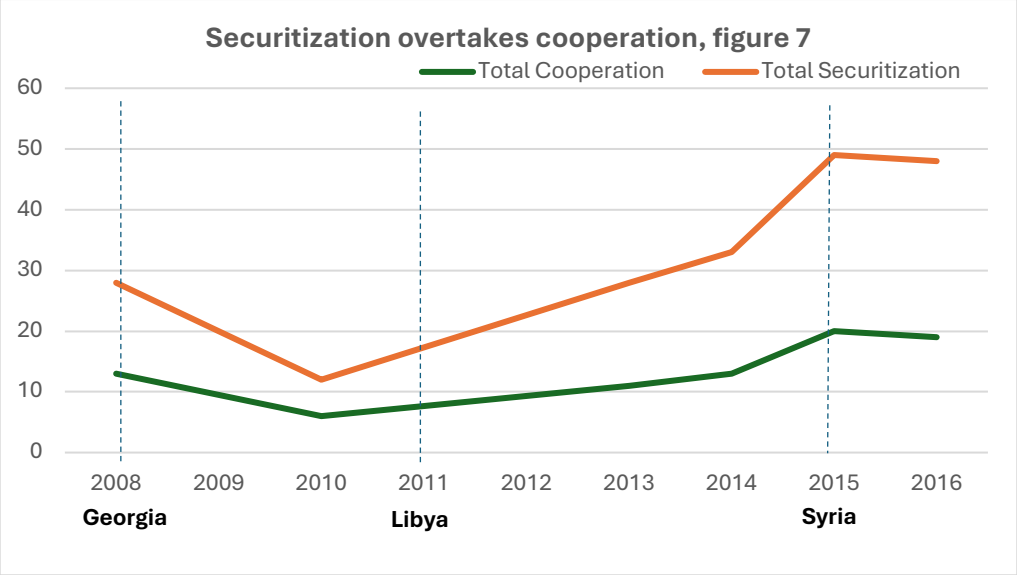


Figure 6 further sharpens this contrast by comparing trends in “NATO enlargement” and “Western confrontation”, showing how their frequencies and trends are deeply intertwined, where the role of NATO is reinterpreted from a military threat to being the embodiment of Western hegemony. In addition, Figure 7 additionally demonstrates the inverse correlation between securitization and international partnerships: despite both categories rising, securitization expands at a significantly faster pace, relegating cooperation to a secondary, conditional role.





Overall, the evolution of Russia's strategic doctrines follow three main trajectories. First, the concept of "sovereignty and statehood" remains a stable feature across all documents, yet its meaning changes significantly over time: initially framed in defensive terms – primarily in response to NATO's expansion – it gradually transforms into a tool to delegitimize Western democratic propaganda. Secondly, security and military strategy becomes increasingly prominent in the official discourse: from 2014 onwards, and especially afer the Syrian operation, these elements become the primary framing lens through which interpreting international affairs. Thirdly, the emergence

of a vocabulary centred on geopolitical confrontation as the dominant narrative signals a deeper transformation: beginning with the deposition of Ghaddafi and intensifying after the Maidan events, the West is gradually portrayed as an adversary. This antagonism actively shapes Russia's strategic posture as deduced from the strategic documents, where the "revisionist" Western bloc is cast as a threat to global (and regional) stability, undermining the principle of sovereignty – principle that Moscow now seeks to defend.

II.2 From Partnership to Paranoia: Sovereignty, Security and Legality

The doctrinal evolution of the Russian Federation allows for a better understanding of how Moscow perceives checks and balances in the international arena, the role it claims for itself within it, and especially the potential "threats". As Margot Light argues (Light, 2014), while it remains uncertain to what extent these texts directly shape decision-making, they nonetheless provide crucial insights into the Russian worldview and directly shape its strategic thinking.

II.2.1 Sovereignty from Defensive Principle to Political Tool

> "What is the meaning of state sovereignty, the term which has been mentioned by our colleagues here? It basically means freedom, every person and every state being free to choose their future. [...] We are all different, and we should respect that. Nations shouldn't be forced to all conform to the same development model that somebody has declared the only appropriate one" (Putin's address at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly, 2015).

The 2008 Foreign Policy Concept, published at the end of President Putin's second term, still balances the traditional distrust of Western powers with selective cooperation on common security issues, where the emphasis fell on internal "strategic stability" and "security". As observed by Light in her essay "Russian Foreign Policy Themes in Official Documents and Speeches: Continuity and Change", the 2008 Foreign Policy Concept understands *suverenitet* (sovereignty) as embedded in a discourse that reaffirmed Russia's adherence to international law, where Russia declares to "always act to strengthen legal principles of international relations" (Light, 2015).

This formulation presents Moscow's foreign policy as "open, predictable and pragmatic", and emphasizes the development of "international cooperation on the basis of equality, mutual respect [...] and mutual benefit" (Russian Federation, 2008, sec. II). At same time, it continues by introducing a conditional clause: should international cooperation fail "Russia, in order to protect its national interests, will have to act unilaterally but always on the basis of international law (ibid.), a wording which already signals a functional interpretation of legality, subordinated to national strategic objectives.

A central topic in the strategic documents is the recognition of external threats to Russia's security, a matter that evolves dialectically in both tone and content between 2008 and 2016. Released right before the Russo-Georgian war, the Foreign Policy Concept already adopts a defensive tone, where sovereignty is as a shield against NATO encroachment in Russia's near abroad. The text expresses a "negative attitude towards the expansion of NATO, notably to the plans of admitting Ukraine and Georgia [...] as well as to bringing the NATO military infrastructure closer to the Russian borders" (Russian Federation, 2008, sec. IV, p. 21). While NATO is still not cast as an immediate threat, tensions are clearly rising.

The 2009 *National Security Strategy* builds on this by introducing a sharper tone. It warns against the risks stemming from the deterioration of international stability and formally codifies NATO enlargement and the destabilizing potential of globalization among the primary threats to Russian security. The *2010 Military Doctrine* crystallizes this shift by implicitly linking it to resistance against unlawful great-power activism. Moreover, the document adopts an expanded understanding of the protection of Russian citizens and compatriots

abroad of the sovereignty principle, declined against great-power activism from the United States (Trenin, 2011). The document identifies "the desire to endow the force potential of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization with global functions carried out in violation of international law" (Russian Federation, 2010, §8 (a)) as one of the key external threats. The war thus marked a turning point in Russia's security narrative, after which NATO was increasingly portrayed as a proximate and destabilizing actor. According to Trenin, "the five-day war in August 2008 signified the lowest point in Europe's security levels since 1988" (Trenin, 2011). Terms such as *ugroza* (threat) and *destabilizatsiya* (destabilization) begin to dominate, signalling the solidification of more blatant antagonism from Moscow's side.

In parallel, the evolution of Putin's discourse reinforces this trend. He released a series of foreign policy articles between 2011 and 2012, where he reiterated that Russia's independence and sovereignty have been elevated to supreme national values. Those same values are cast as the only means "for preserving Russia's distinct identity in a highly competitive global environment" (ibid.), a shift from a pragmatic defense of sovereignty as existential prerogative for national survival and identity.

The Libyan crisis mark and NATO's implementation of UNSC Resolution 1973 was used to transform sovereignty from a defensive notion into a normative tool for resisting liberal interferences. This is the moment when the Kremlin started promoting the concept of "sovereign democracy" as a counter-narrative to Western liberalism, affirming the right of states to resist external impositions. If in 2008 the defence of sovereignty is relatively linked to multilateral cooperation, in 2015-2016 the same concept became the cornerstone of Russian defensive narrative. As observed by Morris, "NATO's chosen means of implementing its UN mandate has

been seized upon by those sceptical towards R2P in order to delegitimize this concept" (Morris, 2013).

II.2.2 Securing the State

The 2013 Foreign Policy Concept attributes particular weight to the principle of non-interference: Section 15 stresses that "some concepts that are being implemented are aimed at overthrowing legitimate authorities in sovereign states under the pretext of protecting civilian population" (Russian Federation, 2013, §15). This is framed in the wider context of "growing instability in international relations" (ibid., sec. II §6), recasting the European security space as increasingly polarised. The year 2013 portrays the Russia-West polarisation by mentioning "the emergence of new dividing lines in Europe" (ibid., sec IV, §63). In the same document, the Russian leadership denounces the illegitimate use of *miagkaia sila* (soft power) as a mean to "interfere in internal affairs [to] destabilize their political situation [and to] manipulate public opinion" (Russian Federation, 2013, §20). The re-emergence of words like *vmeshatel'stvo* (interference) and *destabilizatsiya* is reminiscent of a Cold War style, updated to the needs of 21st century Russia.

The 2014 Military Doctrine reads NATO's intervention in Libya (2011) as an act of illegitimate intrusion into sovereign's states affairs, and as a dangerous precedent for future "regime change" initiatives (Morris, 2013). The deposition of sovereign ruler as Ghaddafi deeply influenced the decision to intervene in Syria in 2015, the correction of Western past actions. Unlike NATO operations, Moscow's military engagement was presented as *zakonny* (lawful) and *legitimny* (legitimate), carried out at the request of the Syrian "legitimate" ruler, Bashar al-Assad. In this light, NATO is no longer described just as a strategic competitor for the *dividi*

et impera game for influence, but as a major source of instability. The text generically refers to attempts "to destabilize the situation in individual countries and regions" (Russian Federation, 2014, §12 (b)); a subsequent paragraph then refers to the "use of information and communication technologies in the military-political purposes for acts contrary to international law" (ibid., §12 (k)). Notably, the 2014 Military Doctrine underscores the cognitive dimension of modern conflicts by outlining the integrated use of military and non-military measures (including ICT for military-political purposes). Russia refuses to adopt the Western term "hybrid warfare", preferring the definition of *informatsionnnoye protiborstvo / informatsionnnoye voyna* (information warfare).

By 2016 the narrative culminates in the Foreign Policy Concept's acknowledgement of a "serious crisis between Russia and the Western states" (Russian Federation, 2016, sec. IV, §61), codifying geopolitical confrontation as a structural condition of Russia's external policy.
The increased frequency of mentions to interference and destabilization peaks in 2016 when it's recorded the highest peak of references to 'interference / external intervention / destabilization / overthrowing legitimate political regimes", confirming the Kremlin's emphasis on the threat posed by Western expansion.

II.2.3 Law and Legitimacy

"What we actually propose is to be guided by common values and common interests rather than by ambitions. Relying on international law, we must join efforts to address the problems that all of us are facing and create a genuinely broad international coalition against terrorism" (Putin's address at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly, 2015).

The Russian strategic doctrine undergoes a clear shift in its legal stance on international law, from a cooperative register to a more sovereignty-centric reading of international law. The Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 explicitly warns against "arbitrary and politically motivated interpretations of fundamental principles of international law" (Russian Federation, 2013, §31 (b)), a statement read by scholars as a direct critique of Western operations carried out under the Responsibility to Protect doctrine (Allison, 2014). Building on this, the 2014 Military Doctrine document condemns the use of military force from foreign actors "in violation of the Charter of the United Nations and other rules of international law" (Russian Federation, 2014, $12 (h)). This development reflects what scholars identify as "normative instrumentalism", whereby law is no longer treated as a neutral or universal constraint but rather as a strategic asset, embedded in Russia's geopolitical posture. As Mälksoo explains, this turn corresponds to a tradition of legalism in Russian practices, inherited from its Soviet past – where law is formally invoked but instrumentally applied to political ends (Mälksoo, 2015, pp. 36, 115). This logic found its most obvious application in the Syrian conflict, when Moscow insisted that its military operations were compliant with the principles of international law because they were conducted "at the official request of Syrian legitimate authorities", as opposed to Western operations carried on without consensus or a UN mandate (Allison, 2017, p. 820).

The *2015 National Security Strategy* further expands the Russian perception of vulnerability, warning against the adoption of restrictive measures by Western countries. Section II of the document states that "the implementation of an independent foreign and domestic policy [by Russia] is giving rise to opposition from the United States and its allies [...]. The policy of containing Russia that they

are implementing envisions the exertion of [...] pressure" (Russian Federation, 2015, sec. II, §12). The reference to the term *sderzhivanie* ("containment") deliberately echoes Cold War rhetoric for the second time, suggesting Russia's negative view of Western efforts to isolate through diplomatic and economic means – particularly via economic sanctions.

In this context, sovereignty was elevated into the very foundation of legitimacy claims. In the 2015 National Security Strategy, along with the 2016 Foreign Security Concept, sovereignty is inherently intertwined with a rhetoric centred on national interest, centralisation of state control and protection of Russian citizens. These concepts are here elevated to an essential component of national official discourse, where the besieged State of Russia is thus justified in intensifying internal control (Allison, 2014). The document accuses the West of destabilizing neighbouring regions, mentioning "the support of the United States and the European Union for the anti-constitutional coup d'état in Ukraine" (Russian Federation, 2015, sec. II, §17). Furthermore, the Russian government again accuses "the practice of overthrowing legitimate political regimes and provoking intrastate instability and conflicts" (ibid., §18), as regards to tensions in the Near and Middle East and in Africa. The overarching narrative builds a dichotomy between Moscow's aim to carry out sovereign, independent foreign policy and the "opposition from the United States and its allies, who are seeking to retain their dominance in world affairs" (ibid., §12) through a policy of *sderzhivanie* (containment) against Russia. Containment is not merely geopolitical but existential and allows the Kremlin to take appropriate countermeasures.

II.3 Doctrines in Action

The trajectory of Russia's doctrine is marked by mistrust and the perception of encroachment. The West is blamed for the progressive deterioration of international relations, and it is described as the main agent of destabilization, responsible for the rising probability of a conflict (Lilly, 2022). NATO enlargement, military exercises near Russian borders, support to Colour Revolutions and regime-change operations, coupled with the question of ballistic missile defence (BMD), are framed as interconnected strategies of containment directed against Moscow. These dynamics progressively reinforced a narrative of strategic siege, feeding both security anxieties and ideological disillusionment with the Western model of democracy promotion. The evolution of Russian strategic doctrine reflects a cumulative process in which growing mistrust toward Western governance converges with a reconfiguration of sovereignty as the core organizing principle of domestic and foreign policy. The Western legal instrumentalization, interventionism and political interference strengthened Moscow's conviction that international norms were increasingly subordinated to power politics.

Within this framework, Russia did not reject international law but, in turn, progressively instrumentalized it to defend sovereign prerogatives and counter Western influence. From Chechnya to Crimea and Syria, Moscow consistently invokes legality, consent and sovereignty to legitimize unilateral action while exposing the selective application of norms by Western powers. This repositioning is accompanied by a broader ideological narrative that elevates the Russian state as the guardian of order, stability and multipolar balance against the destabilizing

export of liberal values. The dataset tracks these shifts: West-facing indicators rise in tandem from 2013, and the share of securitization stabilizes around 60% of the coded lexicon from 2013 to 2016 (except from 2015 where it stays at 59%). These trends contributed to the repositioning of Russia's posture toward the West, where official documents display Moscow's willingness to reverse the liberal norm of intervention, presenting itself as a supporter of the international order rather than a revisionist actor.

In conclusion, this evolution unfolds in a highly contested environment, where Russian leaders and officials argue that Western propaganda seeks to shape international opinion by advancing its own legal agenda and to the detriment of Russia's legitimacy and strategic standing. These dynamics determined the adoption military countermeasures and tighter controls over information to safeguard its sacred regional sphere of influence, responding with a diversified set of instruments that extend beyond military force.
In doctrinal terms, this translates into the elevation of the information domain to a continuous battleground, combining technical instruments of cyber operations, media control and strategic communication with psychological mechanisms aimed at shaping perceptions, legitimacy and threat narratives. As Giles (2016) observes, contemporary Russian information warfare operates simultaneously on the technological level of infrastructure and on the cognitive level of influencing public beliefs, emotions and political behaviour. The information warfare practices no longer just accompany military action; rather, they are conceived as autonomous tools capable of generating disruptive effects beyond conventional force.

Chapter III. Georgia, 2008 – The Near Abroad and Red Lines

The Presidential elections both in Russia and in the United States opened to new possibilities for cooperation and dialogue, promoted by Barack Obama's initiative to "reset" bilateral relations. This new approach was part of a broader revision of the American foreign and security policy towards Russia, by promoting cooperation on a number of issues, not without being critical of the country's growing authoritarianism.

When Dmitry Medvedev took office in 2008, he projected himself as a more liberal and conciliatory figure compared to his predecessor. Nevertheless, the political programs of the two were completely aligned: he was a nationalist whose main aim was to fill the Russian economic gap (compared to Western states) and to elevate the country to the rank of a global power. The hard line followed by the President became more evident with the Russian response to the Georgian invasion of South Ossetia.

III.1 Georgia as a Geopolitical Battleground

The Five-Day war between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia in August 2008 marked Russia's first resort to large-scale military force outside its borders since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although short and geographically limited, the Russo-Georgian war transcended the boundaries of a regional confrontation, becoming a pivotal moment for Russia's posture toward the West and its engagement with the liberal international order. The re-emergence of Russian military power -following years of economic recovery and reduced dependence on Western financial assistance – signalled a broader transformation in Moscow's willingness to challenge the post–Cold War security order in Europe.

This shift unfolded against the backdrop of NATO and the Western presence in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, which progressively reshaped the regional balance of power. The growing proximity of Western military infrastructure, combined with its expanding political involvement in the area, fed Russian perceptions of structural encroachment and exclusion from its "natural" sphere of influence. Within this context, Georgia emerged as the first theatre in which Moscow tried to pose concrete limits on further Western expansion. In this light, the war in Georgia represented a great challenge to bilateral relations between the two entities, when Russia employed the use of force to redefine the boundaries of acceptable Western involvement in neighbouring countries.

On the occasion of the 2008 Bucharest Summit Russia coupled a cautious openness to dialogue with NATO with its more forceful ambition to consolidate its central role in shaping international affairs. The Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Georgia and Ukraine to access NATO, strongly endorsed by the United States – was framed as a non-negotiable "red line" for the Alliance enlargement process. Despite the Franco-German opposition that prevented the MAP during the Bucharest summit (they believed that those states lacked internal political favourable conditions and feared a Russian retaliation), the final declaration announced that "Georgia and Ukraine will become members of NATO" (NATO, Bucharest Summit Declaration, April 3, 2008, §23). If the West sought to secure Georgia's alignment to guarantee a strategically valuable territory from which projecting power into the West Asia and guarantee access to Caspian oil, the Russian Federation interpreted this movements as yet another manifestation of the Euro-Atlantic expansion eastward, recalling the experiences of Color revolutions and the first major wave of European Union enlargement in 2004 (which concerned the access of Poland, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania,

Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia), and the second in 2007 (Bulgaria and Romania). From the Kremlin's perspective, the growing proximity of Western reinforced a sense of vulnerability and encorachment.

While Russia was trying to preserve its role to act unilaterally within its perceived sphere of privileged influence, the conflict extended far beyond the South Caucasus, "marking the most significant challenge to Europe's security architecture since the end of the Cold War" (Cornell, 2008). The United States under President Bush became top partners of Georgian foreign policy when tensions between Georgia and Russia were escalating. The US provided Tbilisi with financial and military aid, as well as political support: from President Bush's "beacon of liberty" speech in Tbilisi (in the spring of 2005) to becoming one of the main recipients of United States loans. Benefiting from American support and closer ties with NATO, coupled with the Georgian armed forces' participation in international operations in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan, allowed a leap in quality in terms of manpower, training and modernisation of Tbilisi's military capabilities.

On the EU front, the Commission provided €400 billion in economic aid to Georgia in the years from 1992 to 2004, while notably some larger member countries (like Germany and the United Kingdom) were involved at different degrees in peace efforts on the Abkhaz issue. Overall, the European Union saw a gradual increase in its economic and political engagement in Georgia, but it was still trying to uphold a cautious stance with regard to sensitive security matters. The choice of adopting a less intrusive approach can be explained by focusing on the strategic role of Georgian territory for energy transportation to Europe, namely for the South Caucasus pipeline /Baku Ceylon pipeline – which connected the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea via Georgia. The Union's interest in preserving regional stability in Georgia was directly linked by

the presence of this infrastructure capable of guaranteeing Europe's access to vital energy resources. Consequently, the EU sought to maintain peaceful relations with Georgia, while avoiding any potential friction with the Russian Federation.

III.2 From Frozen Conflicts to Open War: the Five-Day War

The conflict's *casus belli* lays its foundations in the rising tensions between Georgia and the breakaway region of South Ossetia, which by August 2008 culminated from sporadic reprisals and mutual fire into the Russian descent into war, with a full-scale military intervention on August 8th. The so-called "frozen conflicts" in South Ossetia and Abkhazia (as well as in Transnistria) had long provided Moscow with a leverage to discourage Georgia's integration into NATO and the EU, two paths that would have marked a definitive shift away from Russia's sphere of influence towards the West (Matsaberidze, 2025).

Since the early 1990s, in the wake of Georgia's independence, the Kremlin had deployed peacekeeping forces in the two separatist regions. The Russian presence was then granted by the Sochi Agreement, ratified in 1992 between Boris Yeltsin and Eduard Shevardnadze. The treaty inaugurated the Joint Peacekeeping Forces (JPKF) for South Ossetia, consisting of up to 500 servicemen each from the Russian, Georgian and Ossetian sides, all under Russian command. In parallel, the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) and subsequently an OSCE Mission (December 1993) were deployed to monitor and support the peace process. The Russian reinforcement of its troops – while remaining below the threshold of 3,000 soldiers – further deepened the rift with Tbilisi, who accused their presence not of maintaining peace, but rather supporting the separatist forces. By the spring of 2008, analysts were already warning of the likelihood of an armed conflict, with some even predicting that it could break out in August of that year (Cornell, 2008).

Following President Mikheil Saakashvili's rise to power in 2004, Russia began applying steady political and economic pressure on Georgia, precisely because of its

priority of solving the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, coupled with his open advocacy for EU and NATO membership: the decision to use force against Georgia stems directly from this. Russia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Vitaly Ivanovich Churkin, during a press conference at the UN Security Council defined those Western entities as the "external patrons" (United Nations Security Council, 2008) of Saakashvili. That same year, Moscow imposed discriminatory passport policies on Georgians, while simultaneously distributing Russian citizenship and passports to Abkhaz and South Ossetian residents through a simplified procedure entrenched in the 2002 *Russian Law on Citizenship*, in blatant violation of international law and challenging Georgian sovereignty. This instrument subsequently allowed Russia to claim the right to act as the protector of all Russian citizens claiming Russian belonging, and who resided in the states that emerged from the dissolution of the USSR – a dynamic that can be also observed in the ongoing confrontation in eastern Ukraine.
Moscow started placing Russian officers in key security and defence positions within the administration of the two separatist regions. Georgian foreign policy turned towards like-minded allies, such as Kiev after the Orange Revolution, increasing the military spending from below 1% of GDP to 8% of GDP.

The Georgian foreign policy orientation soon rose tension with Moscow, who enforced its policy of active containment to warn both Tbilisi and Washington against the militarization of Georgia, to the extent that President Saakhashvili condemned Russian imperialism and its unwillingness to accept Georgia's independence and sovereignty. Economic retaliation soon followed: in 2006, Russia banned Georgian wine imports, cut energy supplies, and then imposed a full embargo after Tbilisi arrested four Russian spies operating within Georgian territory: Georgian citizens living in Russia started to

be subjected to harassment, Russian forces were deployed in South Ossetia and all transport links with Georgia were closed. Meanwhile, Moscow gradually intensified military provocations, first in 2007, when Russian helicopters shelled administrative buildings in the Kodori Gorge, as well as Georgian radar station near South Ossetia in the summer; that same year an unexploded bomb on Georgian territory was later identified by international observers as Russian. The inauguration of consular relations between Russia and the two republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, together with the construction of a railroad to connect the latter with Russian logistic and military bases, was the first real threat of Moscow's readiness to engage in a war from the Euro-Atlantic bloc perspective. In July, when the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Tbilisi, four Russian fighter jets violated Georgian airspace and – unlike past occurrences – openly claimed responsibility for the act, an episode interpreted as a deliberate message to deter the deepening of American-Georgian cooperation. At the same time, Tbilisi accused Moscow of gradually increasing its unofficial presence in South Ossetia, supplying rebels with weapons and welcoming volunteers from North Ossetia, further destabilizing the already fragile status quo.

The document *Review of the Russian Federation Foreign Policy* (2007) showed its readiness to pursue great power pragmatism by becoming an active character of the international arena, opposing unilateral initiatives with multipolarity: references to cooperation and multipolarity are frequent in the 2008 Concept , but they interestingly disappear from the official statements of the Russian leadership in the analysed documents for 2008 (spanning from April 4th to October 6th), except for three mentions during the meeting with the members of the Valdai club.
In this period, great power assertiveness is still balanced with pragmatism, with

President Medvedev presenting Russia as a global player but still advancing propositions to cooperate with the West by moving forward and leaving NATO expansion and the conflict in Kosovo behind. Any cooperation can thus take place only under the stringent conditions of full respect for the interests of the Russian Federation and complete adherence to international law and accords.

Tsygankov analysis of Russia's behaviour through the lenses of honour may be helpful: Russia, already dissatisfied with the failure of previous attempts at cooperation and equal partnership, perceived the development American special relations with Georgia increased its sense of humiliation, to the extent that it was now ready to take decisive action to change this situation (Tsygankov, 2019). Despite repeated calls for moderation from Western partners, on the night of August 7-8, 2008, Georgian forces launched an assault near Tskhinvali. Moscow invoked the protection of its peacekeeping forces and of Russian citizens (which had become such following the policy of "passportization") and, within hours, transferred elements of the 58th Army through the Roki Tunnel into south Ossetia. The confrontation combined the inter-state conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi, and the intra-state fighting between South Ossetians together with Abkhaz fighters and the Georgians.
The Russian response was immediate and highly coordinated, to the extent of prompting discussions about who actually initiated the conflict. This haste reaction was enabled by the prepositioning of the *Kavkaz-2008* military exercises held in July 2008 – that had left troops and equipment in immediate readiness. The campaign was short and high-paced: air strikes and armoured vehicles pushed Georgian units back, while opening a second axis from Abkhazia in the upper Kodori Valley; within ten days, Moscow controlled the entire territory of South Ossetia.

Russia's official narrative as regards its "peace enforcement operation" combined sovereignty and non-interference claims with humanitarian interventionism, framing its military campaign as a peacekeeping operation whose primary purpose was the protection of Russian citizens and *sootechestvenniki* (compatriots) – depicted as victims of a genocide perpetrated by Georgian forces. Russia's use of sovereignty as an insurmountable principle refers to a particular usage: Moscow employed the term "sovereign democracy" in response to the pro-democratic Colour Revolutions of the early 2000s, as an alternative to the "liberal democracy" promoted by the West in the Russian near abroad (Matsaberidze, 2015). At the same time, Moscow leveraged long-standing South-Ossetian aspirations for closer association – eventually integration – with Russia (bolstered by the above-mentioned widespread passportization process) to recast the use of force for defending a community which "naturally" belonged to the *russkiy mir* (Russian world), where Russia intended to preserve its role of ultimate security arbiter. In this light, then-President Medvedev claims that the events of August 8th, 2008, constitute for Russia "a trauma comparable to the September 11, 2001, attacks for the United States" a moment that implied "a transformed and indeed resurgent Russian foreign policy" (Allison, 2008).
This posture becomes even more significant when taking into account Russia's own self-defined privileged sphere of interest: while formally declaring that "Russia is not the Soviet Union" (Medvedev, 2008), and thus rejecting the idea of ideological succession, President Medvedev nonetheless emphasized that "there are regions in which Russia has privileged interests" with which they "share special historical relations" (Medvedev, 2008).

The response of Western governments and institutions was weak, offering little if no solution beyond mild rhetorical condemnation to these violations of Georgia's

territorial integrity. This tepid response emboldened Moscow and left Georgia increasingly vulnerable in the months leading to war. Cornell recalls that Western governments have repeatedly discouraged Saakashvili from taking any kind of military action against the separatist republics and to “exercise restraint” in the face of Moscow's provocations (Cornell, 2008).

On August 12th a ceasefire agreement brokered by the then-EU President Nicolas Sarkozy – acting on behalf of the European Union – was reached, though the overall Western reaction was only verbal, without any substantive action, and Russia showed little intention to fulfil its commitments. The EU was pushing Russia to reduce its forces on the ground to the minimum and to enable EU observers to access to the security zones, while Russian negotiators even tried to remove the stipulation regarding the withdrawal of troops to the position they held before the start of the conflict. To this end, Russian and South Ossetian forces continued the advancing and the occupation for some days after the ceasefire.

The European Union appeared divided during the tense EU-Russia negotiation process: countries like the United Kingdom and most Central-Eastern members urged stronger action, while southern and western states (especially Italy, Germany, Spain, the Benelux countries and France) were more skeptical to adopt measures that would have bittered relations with the Kremlin. Russia’s violation of UN treaties and of Georgia’s territorial integrity and sovereignty was condemned by NATO, which eventually did not take any substantial measures on this regard. Conversely, the Bush administration in the United States offered rhetorical condemnation and pledged financial assistance for Tbilisi. Overall, the absence of unified decisive measures emboldened Moscow, reinforcing the perception of a weak and inconsistent Western posture.

In the press conference following the meeting with the OSCE chairman, Foreign Minister Lavrov argued that the United States had failed to "fulfil the function of restraining this regime [which eventually went] out of control" (Lavrov, 2008). Through its direct involvement, the Kremlin sought to warn both Tbilisi and the West that they were no longer willing to tolerate Western (and especially American) disregard for Russia's vital interests in the region (Tsygankov, 2012). In the aftermath of the Five-day war, in his interviews Lavrov described the Saakhashvili government as a "special project" of the United States (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008).

Russia's recognition of South Ossetia has often been justified by Russian leaders by reference to the 1999 precedent of Kosovo: during his speech at the NATO-Russia Summit in April 2008 Vladimir Putin underlined how the recognition of Kosovan independence by Western nations was carried on in flagrant violation of international law. This argument was subsequently reiterated by President Medvedev during his interview with BBC in August 2008, when he stressed that Moscow's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia followed the "same course of action as other countries took with regards to Kosovo", grooming that if Kosovo was considered "a special case, this is also a special case" (BBC, 2008).

"Diplomatically the West's argument about the uniqueness of Kosovo was a double-edged sword that Moscow now used to pursue its own interests. Its message was clear: uniqueness in the Balkans will be uniqueness elsewhere. If the West could act with impunity against Moscow's wishes in the Balkans, the Kremlin would show that it could act with impunity in the Southern Caucasus" (Asmus, 2010).

When questioned by the BBC about whether he was worried about worsening of relations with the West, short after the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia,

President Medvedev immediately referred to the fact that Russia had "taken the same course of action as other countries took with regard to Kosovo and a number of similar problems" (idem). One of the main issues for Moscow therefore concerns the perception of using of double standards in the application of international law, especially when it comes to Russia or to the Euro-Atlantic coalition, a conduct that (in the eyes of Russian leaders) adheres to the United States unilateral approach to the international order.

Notably, during the UN Security Council meeting on 19 August (S/PV 5961, 2008), Russia's Permanent Representative to the United Nation, Vitaly Churkin, accused some Western members of the Council to carry out propaganda and disinformation activities to the detriment of Russia. This statement was then followed by the Russian veto against the French-drafted resolution proposing the enforcement of the Six-point Agreement and the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops, arguing that the document was politically biased as an anti-Russian propaganda instrument itself, aimed at absolving Georgia and manipulating international opinion.

The attempt of justifying its actions through the example of Kosovo and the use of the word "genocide" (first mentioned by Vladimir Putin and then reiterated by other leaders) with regard to the Georgia conduct in South Ossetia and Abkhazia provides an interesting insight about the use of the normative instrumentalism. Russia went to war against Georgia under the "protection of [Russian] national minorities in neighbouring countries" cemented into the security concept note of the Russian Federation.

These choices "suggest an extraordinary volte-face in the official Russian attitude to the idea of humanitarian intervention and Moscow's characterization of it as a western political instrument" (Allison, 2008). In the words of the *porte-parole* Vitaly Churkin on 26 August, Abkhazia and South Ossetia "had many more reasons and much better

legal ground for their independence than Kosovo" (Press Conference by Russian Federation, 2008), reiterated at the UN Security Council meeting after two days. Those sessions held at the UN Glass Palace show that Moscow rarely aligns with Western positions, showing minimum engagement for multilateralism and increasingly depicting Western diplomacy as normatively inconsistent and coercive. While before August 8th its behaviour is still described as "supportive", aimed at cooperation by aligning with Western powers, from that moment onwards Russia shifted towards selective legalism and opposition, culminating in the use of its veto powers to oppose French-led proposal for the resolution of the conflict. In his scrutiny, Roy Allison underscores how Russia was hardly driven by R2P imperatives since the intervention was justified with the protection of Russian citizens and compatriots, rather than civilians. He further notes that:

"the defence of nationals 'has been the basis for all kinds of interventions in the past that were not humanitarian'. Russian officials have blurred the distinction between the responsibility of a state to protect its population inside its borders, and the responsibilities a state maintains for populations outside its borders [...]. Russia's insistence on its right to defend by force its citizens outside its borders is open to manipulation. Even if we disregard the R2P criteria, a justification under the provision for self-defence in article 51 of the UN Charter would be received sceptically 'when a country first confers its citizenship on a large number of people outside its borders and then claims it is entitled to intervene coercively to protect them.

Russia portrays itself as a country that fully adheres to the principles of international law, whereas Georgia and the West (referring both to the support granted to Georgia and to West's own conduct in past events) are accused to instrumentalize or to violate legal norms, by relying on so-called "creative interpretations", with references to other states' influence on politics, as well as destabilization attempts in the Former Soviet

Union area. This progressive tightening of the Russian official discourse is directly linked to the growing distrust in a possible cooperation with the West and with the Russian perceived unfair treatment. Furthermore, Russian officials repeatedly framed Western communication as deliberate disinformation, designed to pave their way for future institutional interferences in the Caucasus.

III.3 The Obama-Medvedev Interlude

What began as a small conflict in the Southern Caucasus eventually represented a turning point in Russian foreign policy, highlighting the exponential growth of an increasingly antagonistic narrative towards Western involvement in the Former Soviet Union space, and thus reshaping the Kremlin's posture towards NATO, the United States and – to a lesser extent – the European Union. The conflict showcases the growing rigidity of Russia and its acknowledgement that the liberal international order does not respect any of the red lines imposed by the Kremlin. Despite earlier attempts of cautious engagement with the West and cooperation on common issues, the Five-day War shattered previous illusions of a prosperous dialogue, setting a precedent difficult to overlook. Russia's perceived vulnerability and isolation in international affairs led to a shift in its strategic position from pragmatic engagement to active containment, a pivot that is visible through the concrete actions and is reflected in the new narrative, where the rhetoric of cooperation is replaced by one of confrontation. While claiming its adherence to international legal principles, Russia's behaviour in Georgia reflected a new posture of international revisionism, where the claims of protection of sovereignty, territorial integrity and of Russian citizens are embedded in a discourse that does not reject international law, but rather reinterprets and stratifies it to justify Russian reactions, to highlight the hypocrisy of other states' conducts and to make claims about sovereign parity with other actors. In this light, the multilateral stage of the United Nations proved to be less a springboard for cooperation and dialogue, and more a battleground for advancing competing narratives. The multiple accusations to the Western use of propaganda and disinformation campaigns, coupled with the use of its veto power, solidify the departure from the cooperative

multilateralism of the early 2000s, that started crumbling already in the years before 2008. In conclusion, the Russo-Georgian war acted as a litmus test for Western resolve and coherence, while on the other hand consolidating the emergence of a newly assertive Russian foreign policy based on red lines linked to sovereign prerogatives and on contesting Western normative hegemony.

Contrary to his predecessor, President Obama was willing to re-engage Russia through pragmatic cooperation, beginning with the renewal of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, which expired in December 2009. Medvedev and Obama met in Prague in 2010 to sign the "New START" treaty, marking a symbolic reset in bilateral relations. Although Obama was criticized for being "too soft" on Russia, his administration prioritized a pragmatic approach based to pursue the real strategic interests of Washington, over ideological confrontation. The American administration looked positively on Medvedev, who was promoting himself as distinct from Putin, opening space for cooperation after the Georgian war experience. During the Munich Security Conference in 2009, Vice President Joe Biden relaunched mutual cooperation:

"The last few years have seen a dangerous drift in relations between Russia and the members of our Alliance. [...]. The Americans see an important partner in Russia. And they are ready to cooperate with us on many things, including contentious issues'. With a short phrase, the American vice president had changed the terms of the debate and offered to reengage Russia." (Stent, 2015)

The American approach was accompanied by a policy recalibration, including reduced public criticism of Russia's domestic governance, the resumption of governmental and non-governmental dialogue, and a temporary softening of the debate surrounding NATO enlargement or harsh Western statements about their position on Georgia and

Ukraine, all of which made Moscow satisfied. In 2009, Medvedev responded to the American *appeasement* by trying to stabilize relations with Western partners in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. At a moment of economic vulnerability, Russia tried to avoid further isolation from Western financial networks.

Chapter IV. From Observation to Reaction– Libya and Syria in the Redefinition of Russia's Strategy

IV.1: Russia and West Asia

The Soviet Union maintained privileged relations with several regimes in West Asia, within the broader Cold-War framework of competition and strategic bargaining. These partnerships were largely grounded in material interests – most notably military cooperation, arms transfers and strategic hubs – rather than in strict ideological convergence. The Assad regime represented the most stable partner for Moscow in the region: Syria benefited from long-standing diplomatic, military and political support, while the USSR – and later the Russian Federation – secured its strategic access to the Mediterranean through the naval facility in Tartus. On the other hand, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya of Colonel Ghaddafi occupied a more ambiguous position. Following the 1969 coup d'état, Muammar Ghaddafi sought Soviet backing as a counterweight to Washington, yet Moscow never regarded Libya as an accountable ally. The Soviet-Libyan relationship was largely opportunistic and transactional, with Libya benefiting from extensive arms imports of Soviet weapons.

When Putin came to power, Russia tried to reassert its presence in the MENA region as part of a broader project of great-power restoration. This ambition, however, was overwhelmed by the eruption of the Arab Springs, probably one of the most consequential geopolitical developments of the early twenty-first century. Beginning in Tunisia in late 2010 and spreading across Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen and beyond, the Arab uprisings were marked - despite national specificity of each movement – by mass mobilization against the ruling authoritarian regimes and demands for political

reform and accountability.

These movements further contributed to the strain of Russia West relations, starting from the modalities of intervention in the Libyan conflict and even more in Syria. As Malashenko (2013) underscored, “the Arab Spring has also given Islamism a seal of legitimacy as a permanent factor in politics in the Muslim world, a development that has ramifications for Russia’s domestic stability”. The unprecedented spread of Islamist extremism, coupled with Western intervention Libya in response to human rights violations, led Moscow to adopt a more critical stance towards what it saw as Western backing of political mass mobilization and regime-change dynamics in the Arab world.

The Arab Springs exploded in parallel with a moment of acute domestic sensitivity in Russia: the protests surrounding the 2011 Duma elections and the comeback to power of Vladimir Putin’s reinforced elite fears of external meddling in mobilizing masses. Russians started also contesting the alleged rigged elections, accusing the autocratic path followed by their government. The convergence of internal unrest and external upheavals accelerated a shift in Moscow’s official discourse. As pointed out by Laine and Silvan, this moment coincided with a shift of the official discourse, which stopped referring to common values with the European Union, in favour of a narrative emphasizing Russia’s distinct civilizational identity and sovereignty (Laine, Silvan, 2021). This reorientation was later codified in the strategic documents of the Russian Federation: the 2015 National Security Strategy elevates the preservation of “traditional values” to a national strategic objective.

While the evolution of protests in Tunisia and Egypt elicited limited concern in the Russian leadership, the situation changed dramatically with the escalation of violence in Libya and Syria. Unlike most of other regional actors, Muammar Ghaddafi and

Bashar al-Assad responded to popular mobilization through repression, rather than accommodation. The NATO-led intervention in Libya, authorized by the UN Security Council and culminating in the overthrow and killing of the Libyan leader, proved significant in reshaping Russia's posture in the MENA region. Libya became a cautionary precedent, demonstrating how Western-backed humanitarian interventions could result in regime change, and state collapse. Following the Libyan case, Russian leaders were increasingly convinced that they could no longer allow political developments to unfold under Western humanitarian justifications. In 2013, drawing parallels with the Colour Revolutions, Putin argued that democratic models cannot be mechanically transplanted in societies with different cultures, traditions and beliefs. This position was further consolidated in the promotion of the concept of "sovereign democracy", elaborated by presidential advisor Vladislav Surkov, which rejected Western universalism in favour of a state-centric policy.

Rather than engaging with popular demands as such, Moscow challenged "the very legitimacy and efficacy of Western promotion of liberal democracy" (Dannreuther, 2015). This shift deepened the fracture between Russia and the West, bringing the Obama-Medvedev reset to an end by 2011. Moscow's growing dissatisfaction with NATO expansion, the question of missile defence systems to its borders, and Western crisis management determined a greater and perhaps irreversible detachment.

IV.2 Libya and Russian Responses to Humanitarian Intervention

The Libyan uprisings erupted in Benghazi in January 2011, following the arrest of a human rights activist, and quickly escalated into a broader revolt against the Libyan leader, Muammar Ghaddafi. The violent response of the Libyan security forces to demonstrations, including the use of heavy weaponry against civilians, prompted widespread international condemnation. As repression intensified, segments of the international community initially exerted diplomatic pressure, then openly supported the rebel forces who were opposing the regime. The United Nations Security Council issued Resolution 1970 on 26 February 2011, expressing "grave concern" over the developments in the Libyan territory, and imposing an arms embargo on the nation while simultaneously attacking the senior officials and individuals through assets freeze and travel bans.

Russia found itself at a crossroads between preserving relations with its Libyan ally and confronting mounting Western pressure for humanitarian intervention. The Kremlin leadership was mindful of events in Bosnia (1995), Kosovo (1999) and especially about the latest developments in Georgia and Ukraine. By 2011, mistrust with the West had at that time become a *leitmotiv* of the Russian strategic thinking, and conspiracy theories about the Western alleged strategy to overthrow Putin took hold after the beginning of his third presidential term, in 2012. President Medvedev however believed that the preservation of good relations with Washington was crucial for the continuation of the "reset" agenda, for Russia to enter the WTO and the new START treaty.

After the further deterioration of the Libyan context, on 17 March 2011 the Security Council adopted Resolution 1973: by invoking the powers under chapter VII of the Charter, it authorized the use of "all necessary measures" – short of military occupation – to protect the Libyan civilians from the pro-Ghaddafi forces, while also establishing a no-fly zone over Libyan airspace. The Security Council condemned the "gross and systematic violations of human rights, including arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, torture and summary executions" (United Nations Security Council, 2011). On that occasion, Russia abstained instead of using its right to veto (as the other BRICS countries did) – despite its traditional hostility towards regime change operations, especially when carried out by Western powers. The Russian abstention "marked a short-lived exercise in increased foreign policy cooperation with the West, at the expense of a local sovereign leader" (Ishetiar, 2019).
In the preliminary discussions, Russia and other Council members raised a number of questions regarding the effects of the Resolution. As Ambassador Churkin pointed out, most of them remained unanswered; in his view, the text wording risked to "opening the door to large-scale military intervention", proposing instead an immediate ceasefire as the most viable path to ensure long-term stability and protection of the Libyan citizens, a position reflected in a draft proposal submitted by Russia on 16 March, which however was not welcomed. He later referenced to "the passion of some Council members for methods involving force [...]. This is most unfortunate and regrettable. Responsibility for the inevitable humanitarian consequences of the excessive use of outside force in Libya will fall fair and square on the shoulders of those who might undertake such action. If this comes to pass, then not only the civilian population of Libya but also the cause of upholding peace and security throughout the

entire region of North Africa and the Middle East will suffer. Such destabilizing developments must be avoided" (United Nations Security Council, 17 March 2011).

The United States was receptive of the UN call to protect the Libyan people: a multinational coalition involving the League of Arab States, NATO allies and partners gathered under Operation Unified Protector, under American leadership. Two days later, NATO mobilized its naval assets to cut off "the flow of weapons and mercenaries to Libya by sea" (NATO, 2012), as well as starting military action to protect civilians. The Russian decision to abstain became a source of friction between Putin and Medvedev: Putin denounced the intervention as a "medieval summons to a crusade", criticizing the disproportionate discretion granted to the so-called "coalition of the willing". Medvedev harshly criticized the use of such an evocative expression by its Prime Minister: in a statement released in March 2011, he underscored the initial belief on the real humanitarian aim of the resolution. The decision conveyed by Churkin to abstain was a "result of Libyan leadership absolutely intolerable behaviour" (Medvedev, 2011), but he then acknowledged that the destruction of civilian sites and the killing of innocent people had departed from the original humanitarian intent. The Russian concern increased when they acknowledged the absence of "common plans for how to establish peace and order in Libya". When the decision of NATO defence ministers and partners to take "all necessary measures" to enforce Resolution 1973 was taken, after ten days the Kremlin openly denounced "the Western campaign of air-strikes, exceeding the UN mandate" (Medvedev, 24 April 2011), accusations rejected by Rasmussen, secretary general of NATO. The Russian foreign secretary, Sergey Lavrov, insisted that Libya needed a political solution led from within the region, particularly by the African Union, rather than from outside actors, stating that "the UN has not authorised regime change." After three days, then-Prime Minister Putin

sharply condemned the coalition's intention to kill Ghaddafi, whose actions did not justify – in his view – foreign interference.

Putin saw the intervention as a dangerous precedent, commenting that the resolution was "a call for everyone to come and do whatever they want" (Putin, 2011), implying the economic interests of coalition's countries in the regional riches. The collapse of the Libyan State damaged Russian interests in the domain of arms, energy and infrastructure, while also contributing to a steep rise in energy prices, which also in turn affected the economy of the Russian Federation. In a speech at the news conference in Copenhagen on 27 March Putin questioned the nature and legitimacy of the intervention. In his statement, he denounced the application of double standards by ignoring equally repressive regimes in the region: "are we going to intervene in internal conflicts everywhere? Look at Africa, what's been happening in Somalia for many years. [...] Are we going to bomb everywhere and conduct missile strikes?" (Putin, 2011).

The practice of humanitarian intervention "legalized" by the R2P doctrine is seen by many as a threat to the principles of diplomacy and international relations, especially the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states (Belloni, 2002). These arguments closely resonate with the concerns expressed by Russian officials in the aftermath of the intervention.

Some other scholars argue that it contributed to the erosion of international law, making it an uncertain value, while also reinforcing the protection of human rights (Chersternut, 2002), a tension often echoed in Russian diplomatic discourse. As Hehir underscored, the "responsibility to protect" mentioned both in Resolution 1970 and 1973 does not refer to the international community's responsibility, rather on the negative obligation on the Libyan authorities to protect its own citizens (Hehir, 2013).

Given the inability of Libyan forces to do so, the “willing” countries – among which France, the United States and the United Kingdom – attempted to provide a legal basis for justifying the intervention. This was first time in history when the UN ordered a military intervention against the express will of the state’s government. The humanitarian inspiration of the coalition of the willing did not entirely conceal the economic objectives of some countries. This was mentioned by the Russian State Duma, which on March 23 concluded that some countries had used the humanitarian pretext for “other purposes”.

“Russia and the West's disagreements over the Middle East further added to the Kremlin's sense of strategic vulnerability. Many in the Kremlin viewed the Arab Spring and the subsequent instability in Egypt, Libya, and Syria as a continuation of the colored revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine and were convinced that the real threat for Russia had to do with the U.S. and NATO attempts to change regimes across the world” (Tsygankov, 2018).

Recent historiography underscores how the massacres of Libyan people, escaping via Tunisia, were instrumentalized by Western medias and governments to justify the intervention. Forces hostile to the Colonel’s rule – especially France and the United Kingdom – appeared to be leading the rebels in their anti-dictatorial impetus. Not only were they interested in the appointment of a more cooperative leader, but also in the redefinition of economic relations between Libya and Western powers, especially as regards to Libyan oil depots. Benghazi was at that time the third oil exporter to European countries (after Russia).
Hehir (ibid.) suggests that the intervention was possible because of a “confluence of factors”, because the strategy pursued by Western countries coincided with UN values. The same condemnation for the violence perpetrated in Syria (where protests began in February 2011) was vetoed with unusual emphasis by both Russia and China. After a

meeting on 13 July with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Foreign Minister Lavrov emphasized the success of cooperation between Russia and the United States in many fields, especially counterterrorism, non-proliferation programme of the START treaty and Russian access to the WTO. When asked whether Libya was part of the discussions, Lavrov stressed that this question was the only case where "Russia and the United States are not quite the same". Therefore, NATO strikes in Libya did not appear as a major source of friction with Washington at that point, and Lavrov further stressed that "on this subject we have with the United States much less controversy than with some European countries" (Lavrov, 2011).
In early summer, Russian officials asked Ghaddafi to backdrop and accept a ceasefire: after months of manhunt, Ghaddafi was ready to accept a ceasefire, but it was too late: in October 2011 he was captured and executed, while the National Transition Council (CNT) – backed by Western countries – took the power in Benghazi. Russia condemned in the strongest terms what it defined as the unlawful deposition of a sovereign ruler. Such developments inevitably worsened Russia's relations with Libya, and Moscow was only the 73rd to recognize the CNT as the legitimate dialoguer.

"There is no longer any force in Libya that looks to Russia for support, and there is no sense of gratitude toward Moscow for forgiving Libya's $4.5 billion debt to Russia in April 2008. The view in Tripoli is that this act of debt forgiveness was directed not at Libya itself but at Qaddafi specifically. The new Libyan government did not honor the $10 billion worth of contracts that Russia had concluded with Qaddafi and instead declared that these agreements would undergo a revision. Tatneft and Gazprom, two major Russian energy companies, ended up having to abandon their Libyan contracts. Alexei Kokin, an analyst from the leading Russian financial corporation Uralsib, said that "Russia has been left empty-handed; the Libyan oil market is

going to Italy's [multinational oil and gas company] ENI." American and European companies have also stepped in to take the Russian companies' place" (Malashenko, 2013).

Libya started its descent into chaos – which evolved into a civil war enduring up to contemporaneity, with critical consequences on the local population. Russia harshly criticized the inability (or perhaps reticence) of the Western coalition to restore peace and order in Libyan territory. As argued by Ishetiar R2P, which had been successfully used in front of the UN to justify major international action, became a reference point through which Russian officials evaluated Western cross-border military efforts (Ishetiar, 2019). In this framework, it was inevitable to draw parallels with previous international responses to the conflict in Georgia. This in turn reinforced Moscow's perception of double standards in the international community for justifying selective application of humanitarian principle.

"After the overthrow of Gaddafi the chief of the Russian general staff, Army General Nikolai Makarov, bluntly claimed that 'the leaders of some countries' were continuing to use the technique of the 'colour revolutions' to advance their strategic interests by removing undesirable political regimes (in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen). He predicted that the same techniques might later be applied to Russia and its allies" (Allison, 2013).

IV. 3 Syria 2015: Sovereignty, Legitimacy and the Return of Military Power

The uprisings of the Arab Spring reached Syria in March 2011 and rapidly evolved into a protracted civil war, which only came to an end in December 2024. Demonstrators initially expressed solidarity with protests movements in other Arab countries – including Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Tunisia – while calling for political reforms. Unlike the Libyan case, however, the uprisings did not result in the collapse of the incumbent regime. Following the overthrow of Muammar Ghaddafi, Bashar al-Assad remained Moscow's only key partner in West Asia, an interlocutor for Russian interests in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Dmitri Trenin underlies that Assad was not a genuine "ally" of the Kremlin: Syria ranked only as seventh-largest arms client, and in his words "Tartus is a naval resupply facility rather than a naval base" (Trenin, 2012). Nevertheless, the outbreak of civil war in Syria prompted Moscow to adopt a hard line against any attempt to sanction the Assad regime or to endorse external intervention. In the Russian view, the collapse of the Syrian government would have produced consequences even more destabilizing than those observed in Libya, potentially affecting neighboring countries and undermining the of the Iranian ally. Moscow was particularly concerned that sustained Western pressure on Damascus could pave the way for a direct confrontation between the United States and Iran, possibly involving Israeli retaliation and drawing Russia into an unintended escalation (ibid.).

At the early stages of the crisis, US Secretary Hillary Clinton defined Assad as a potential reformer, expressing hope for a partial liberalization of the regime. Those expectations were quickly disappointed as the Syrian leadership relied increasingly on military repression, while maintaining its strategic alignment with the Islamic

Republic of Iran. From the outset, however, Syria acquired a significance that went well beyond its domestic dimension, becoming a focal point of confrontation between Russia and Western powers over the principles of sovereignty, intervention and regime change.

The Syrian protests did not originate in Damascus, but rather in peripheral cities and districts. Violence escalated on 24 March 2011, when Syrian security forces deliberately opened fire on demonstrators in Dar'ā. After a brief attempt at mediation, Assad's intransigent stance became manifest with the deployment of tanks to suppress dissents and rejecting dialogue with opposition forces. The repression carried out by the police and by military units deepened internal fractures within the Ba'ath regime and triggered reactions from the European Union and the United States, which introduced sanctions aimed at constraining Damascus. The geographically scattered protests allowed the regime to frame the unrest as the product of foreign infiltrations, a narrative that became central to its domestic and international politics. On 18 August 2011 Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron jointly called for Assad's resignation, while progressively recognizing opposition structures formed abroad, the so-called "Doha cartel", as legitimate interlocutor.

Russia adopted a markedly different interpretation of the events, portraying the unrests as the outcome of external interference – in line with Assad's interpretation – and warning against the destabilizing effects of foreign involvement. According to Moscow's reading of the R2P doctrine, Syria's future had to be determined by its own population, and any external imposition was deemed inadmissible. On the meeting of 13 March between Lavrov and Hillary Clinton, when asked about the Russian veto at the UN the foreign Minister commented that "Diplomacy does not exist solely to

condemn and score quick political points. It must tackle problems. By condemnation alone, without a positive agenda, we will not achieve anything either in Syria or anywhere else" (Lavrov, 2011). The Western support for opposition rebels contributed to the internationalization of the conflict and to the delegitimization of Assad, reinforcing perceptions of a broader clash between Russia and the Western States.

"There is another explanation of Russian commitment to the Assad regime in terms of Russian state order. The argument here is that Putin's external policy in the Syria crisis, the justifications he offers for the support of incumbent illiberal regimes, his aversion to projecting external standards (democratic or otherwise) for the legitimacy of rulers and his insistence on the illegality of policies promoting regime change all reflect his preoccupation with central political control in Moscow. All this is expressed in Russian statements privileging 'constitutional order" (Allison, 2013).

Determined to prevent the repetition of the Libyan scenario, the Russian Federation adopted a firm position at the UN Security Council. On 4 October 2011, Russia – alongside with China – vetoed a draft resolution submitted by France, Germany, Portugal and the United Kingdom condemning the repression in Syria and envisaging undefined coercive measures against Assad's regime. Ambassador Vitaly Churkin stressed that "the situation in Syria cannot be considered in the Council separately from the Libyan experience," accusing the same Western members that submitted the draft of having "distorted the Libyan resolution, blatantly violating its provisions" (UN Security Council, 2011). Russia and China instead submitted an alternative draft resolution grounded in the "logic of respect for the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria as well as the principle of non-intervention" (ibid.). After enumerating all the negative consequences of Libya under Operation Unified Protector, Churkin stressed that "these types of models should be excluded from global

practices once and for all" (ibid.). When the "Group Friends of Syria" was created outside the UN framework to overcome the Council *impasse*, Russia compared it to the Libya Contact Group and condemned that "such self-organized groups violate[s] international law and the UN Charter since they are established for the purpose of [...] military intervention" (Bogdanov, 2012). In Moscow's view, Western initiatives on Syria were following the same trajectory as Libya, namely the gradual marginalization of UN bodies in favour of *ad hoc* coalitions.

More broadly, Russian concerns regarding the Arab Spring were also closely linked to the interaction between energy sources, regional stability and the rise of Islamist movements. According to media reports, the numbers of terrorists were fairly high, with up to a thousand Chechen fighters taking part in the Syrian conflict, alongside opponents of Assad (Vysotsky, 2014). Russia's antagonism against Islamist terrorism crystallized further in the protection of Assad, a stance that increasingly antagonized several Arab countries and also generated domestic dissent. This is the reason why Russian officials and Putin himself consistently emphasized the presence of extremist groups among the rebels, whilst the majority of them is actually mostly associated with the Sunni majority.

"There is still interest in Russia in the Arab world and the wider Muslim world. In particular, Russia has real a chance to take part in developing and establishing a regional security system that would not only help to preserve stability in the Middle East but would also have a positive effect on the situation in Russia's neighboring countries. The Arab Spring made it clearer that any upheavals, especially if linked to active use of religious slogans and ideas, tend to spread geographically, crossing the borders into neighboring countries" (Malashenko, 2013).

At the diplomatic level, Russia portrayed itself as a mediator in the Syrian crises and remained actively engaged in international discussions, supporting a peaceful resolution of contrasts. While President Medvedev had already been cautious in openly affirming its support for Assad, this became truer when Putin began his third presidential term on the 4 March 2012. Only eight days after his re-election, Russia exercised the second veto at the Security Council, this time without the backing of the BRICS – with the exception of China. The draft resolution under consideration was adopted in a moment when global attention was focused on the repression of rebels in Syria. Although carefully worded to avoid an explicit confrontation with Moscow and Beijing, the resolution nevertheless singled out the Syrian government as the only responsible for those atrocities. This framing – aimed at delegitimizing Assad as interlocutor – was inacceptable for Moscow, which made clear that it would veto any resolution that did not explicitly rule out the possibility of external military intervention. As Ambassador Churkin explained "the draft resolution voted down today sought to send an 'unbalanced' message to Syria, since it did not accurately reflect the situation there. No proposal had been made to end attacks by armed groups, or their association with extremists" he said, adding that his delegation had, therefore, voted against the text (UN Security Council, 2012). Despite rumours of a possible agreement between Obama and Putin in May 2012, negotiations ultimately stalled, as Western positions continued to hinge on Assad's removal.

Russia has repeatedly asserted that its reasons for defending Assad were based on international law, particularly the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state, but strategic factors played a primary role. Putin sought to present Russia as a reliable arms supplier, believing that strategic partnerships contribute to the promotion of civilization and the of foreign policy interests. However, Moscow has

at least another reason to support Assad: according to SIPRI reports, the weapons utilised by Syria derived at 72% by Russian imports in the period 2007-2011. In 2012, its arm shipment contracts amounted to approximately $500 million (Allison, 2014). Russia continued its deliveries throughout the crisis, claiming that these were "defensive" weapons, and therefore did not contravene international law. It also considered Israeli and Turkish concerns about the regional effects of these defence systems; as a result, Moscow did not satisfy all Damascus' requests. For instance, it did not provide Assad with MiG-31 advanced fighter jets, nor the Igla defence system (ibid.).

Given Syria's difficulties in servicing its debts, Russia could not realistically expect significant revenues from the Syrian oil extraction, since production had declined over years and gas deposits were extremely limited compared to other regional actors, many of which had distanced themselves from Moscow following its unconditional support to their enemy. Nevertheless, Syria was considered an interesting territory for pursuing a gas pipeline project crossing Arab countries, from Egypt to Turkey.
As for strategic access to the Mediterranean, a long-standing *fil rouge* of Russian foreign policy over the past three centuries, the Tartus naval facility was the only of its kind located outside the CIS borders, evoking Russian past greatness and revealing nostalgia for that past. More a symbol of Russian influence, it functioned primarily as a logistic resupply point rather than a full naval base, whose strategic relevance became even less pronounced following the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Putin's unconditional support for Assad also had an ideological dimension. He identified with Assad, as well as with the former Libyan leader – Muammar Ghaddafi, as authoritarian rulers seeking to preserve order and traditional values in multi-ethnic and multi-confessional societies. From this perspective, externally driven

democratization – especially when pursued though the weaponization of rebel forces that the Kremlin portrayed as extremists – was seen as a misconception likely to exacerbate violence rather than resolve it. In an article published in *The New York Times* on 12 September 2013, Putin warned that an American strike would further destabilize the region and would also be inopportune, since most rebel groups were not really seeking democratization, and were instead terrorists, most of whom belonged to Al-Qaeda (Putin, 2012).

Western governments were well aware that a direct intervention would have determined a strong reaction from Russia, but forecasts of Kremlin's internal analysts showed a little likelihood of an escalation, yet diplomatic tension rose significantly over the years of the Syrian civil war. Despite its reservations, Russia participated to the Action Group for Syria, which produced the "Geneva communiqué" in June 2012 for the implementation of the Six-Point plan presented by Special Envoy Kofi Annan and endorsed by Resolutions 2042 and 2043 of the same year. The Communiqué was adopted to overcome the diplomatic stalemate at the multilateral level, showing real compromise between the Western coalition, Russia and other regional actors, like Saudi Arabia and Türkiye. Aimed at interrupting the grave human rights violation, the Communiqué reaffirmed that "the members of the Action Group are committed to the sovereignty, independence, national unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic" (United Nations, 2012).
The Geneva II Conference was widely perceived in Moscow as a diplomatic success, as it avoided both targeted sanctions against Assad and the adoption of coercive measures. On the other hand, Western governments interpreted the same framework as a way to oust Bashar al-Assad, revealing persistent divergencies.

The tremendous chemical attack that took place in Ghouta on 21 August 2013 provoked general outrage in the international community. The use of sarin gas against civilians was described by UN Secretary-General – Ban Ki-moon –as the most horrific chemical attack since 1988, when former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons to kill between 3,200 and 5,000 people in the Kurdish village of Halabja, in Iraq (United Nations Security Council, 2013). The incident crossed the "red line" articulated by Obama and triggered intense discussions to the dismantle Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles. The Russian Federation questioned the evidence provided by the United States about the use of chemical weapons by regular soldiers, suggesting that opposition forces might have done so to provoke a foreign intervention, and reiterated that Russia is "not protecting the Syrian government but international law" (Putin, 2013). Moscow opposed the following draft resolution submitted by France for its appeal to Chapter VII as the legal basis for military action.

During a press statement on 26 August 2013 Minister Lavrov referred about its recent meeting with US secretary of state John Kerry, criticizing the uncertainty of American plans on how to solve the Syrian civil war and their failed attempts at solving previous similar conflicts, "absolutely disregarding the consequences [its actions] cause in the Islamic world" (Lavrov, 2013). Finally, a Russia-US mediation agreement led to Syria's accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention to dismantle deposits and to prevent future acquisition of such weapons. On 27 September, the Security Council adopted Resolution 2118, mandating the elimination of Syrian chemical weapons stockpiles.

Assad formally accepted to ratify the Convention in a letter to the UN Secretary General, specifying that his adherence was possible only thanks to Russian mediation. Assad also stress that he accepted to ratify it as long as the United States stopped to

provide weapons to rebel forces and interrupt threats of a military intervention. At this stage, Russia's credibility became closely intertwined with Syria's compliance to Resolution 2118; otherwise, the Kremlin would have agreed to enforce punitive coercive measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

"Russia's forceful diplomatic action to support and promote this resolution came with some significant political risks, as Russia's reputation and credibility inevitably became hostage to the Syrian government's willingness and commitment to such a process. In this regard, although the resolution did not explicitly endorse an automatic punitive response to violations of the agreement, there was nevertheless reference to a chapter seven provision [which was] a significant compromise for Russia [...] There was clearly a sense in Moscow that the crisis in Syria had led to a dangerous deterioration in relations with the West" (Dannreuther, 2015).

The resolution text remained controversial due to the lack of any explicit reference to the responsibility of the Assad regime for the Ghouta attack. Unlike the Libyan case, the text did not call on Syrian authorities to cease violence against civilians, nor did it invoke the government's responsibility to protect its population. This outcome – largely consistent with Russian diplomatic objectives – made Syria a key test case for countering regime change attempts and to confirm Russia's role as a great power within a contested international order. The Russian foreign policy orientation to "regime security" showed its effects in the Central Asia and in the CIS area, where Moscow sustained illiberal and pro-Russian leaders.

IV.3.1 The annexation of Crimea

The Ukrainian protests of the Euromaidan movement in 2014 enjoyed broad support from Western governments and public opinion, in response to what was perceived as heavy Russian political interference. Following the victory of the

pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych in the 2010 presidential elections tensions escalated: one of the first major decisions taken by the Ukrainian president was, in fact, to suspend the ratification of the previously negotiated Association Agreement with the European Union. In the preceding years, Ukrainian domestic politics had been forced to navigate a delicate balance between a Western-oriented option and a pro-Russian one. During the negotiation process—promoted by Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande (and later extended to the foreign ministers of Russia and Poland, in an effort to reach an agreement with Kyiv following Yanukovych's resignation) – the violent events in Independence Square on 21 February 2014 resulted in the deaths of protesters and police officers. These events led to the collapse of the agreement, which had already been accepted by Yanukovych and representatives of Euromaidan, and plunged Ukraine into political chaos.

Putin responded to the Ukrainian street demonstrations by moving to annex Crimea on 23 February 2014, a former Soviet outpost transferred to Ukraine by Nikita Khrushchev in 1954. The majority of Crimea's population was Russian or, at the very least, Russian speaking. By invoking the same principle of self-determination that Western states had previously used to legitimize Kosovo's secession from Serbia, Putin reacted decisively to what he perceived a strategic challenge from the United States, which had extensively supported Ukraine's integration into the EU and NATO, further exacerbating the Ukrainian crisis. Unlike previous rounds of post-Soviet enlargement, in this case accession to the European Union was widely perceived in Moscow as a preliminary step toward NATO membership. The ultimate aim of this policy, from the Russian perspective, was the weakening of Russia and, potentially, the replacement of

Putin with a more compliant leader. Consequently, the Russian leadership interpreted NATO's eastward expansion not merely as a geopolitical manoeuvre, but as a direct obstacle to Russia's affirmation as a great power.

Putin therefore sought to secure a decisive point in asserting Russian primacy in the post-Soviet space: Russia would neither renounce its international status and compromise the security of its borders, nor would it allow the United States to decide the terms of its international position. The annexation of Crimea was formally ratified on 18 March 2014 and immediately followed by strong protests from the European Union and the United States, which adopted the first packages of sanctions against the Kremlin. At the same time, the Russian-speaking regions of Donetsk and Luhansk declared their independence from Ukraine.

The Obama administration condemned Russia's unilateral actions but – beyond the refusal to recognize the annexation – refrained from taking concrete steps to reverse them. It was evident that Ukraine represented a *sui generis* case in Russian foreign policy. The European Union, for its part, appeared internally divided between Baltic states advocating for harsher measures against Moscow and for a faster accession process for Ukraine, and older member states with historically closer ties to the Kremlin, which had traditionally favoured a more cautious approach. Ultimately, the Western response materialized in the provision of weapons and economic assistance to Kyiv, effectively accepting Russian *fait accompli* while attempting to contain Moscow's influence in Eastern Europe.

"With the Russian military intervention in Ukraine in 2014, the breakout from the post-Cold War, Western-dominated order was complete. The takeover of Crimea [...] clearly set Ukraine and other former Soviet republics off limits to any future NATO enlargement. The security buffer was back. If the use of force in Ukraine, from the Kremlin's standpoint, was essentially defensive, Russia's intervention in Syria in 2015 was a risky gambit to decide geopolitical outcomes in the Middle East [...]. Since then, the results of the military operation and diplomatic maneuvering have not only confounded early critics but also outdone even President Vladimir Putin's own expectations" (Trenin, 2019).

IV.4 The Russian military intervention in Syria

The Ukrainian crises led to a stalemate in diplomatic coordination between the West and Russia, deepening fragmentation over the future of the Syrian Arab Republic. In parallel, international discussions progressively shifted their focus on the growing presence of terrorist cells in the MENA region, a consequence of the proliferation of unsolved conflicts across the area. Among these theatres, Syria emerged as a particularly fertile ground for the settlement of transnational jihadist groups, and starting from 2012 volunteers – the so-called "foreign fighters – travelled there to join those groups". From a regional battleground, Syria became a major source of concern for the global repercussions it may produce. By 2014, Syria had become the main global hub for jihadist mobilization, surpassing Afghanistan and Iraq. According to UN estimates, between 25,000 and 30,000 foreign fighters had joined the conflict by 2014, including approximately 4,000 individuals from Russia or other former Soviet countries (President of Russia, 2015).
The two most prominent organizations were Jabhat al-Nusra, affiliated with al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Daesh), which proclaimed its califate in 2014 with Raqqa as its capital. The fight against terrorism came back at the core of Russian and American foreign policy in West Asia.

By mid-2015 the multiple battlefield setback suffered by the Syrian Arab Army, combined with the territorial gains of Daesh and the perceived marginalization of Moscow from Western-led initiatives, led to a redefinition of the Russian role in the conflict. Russia started framing the Syrian civil war under the lenses of counterterrorism, warning that the consolidation of terrorist groups – who could potentially return as radicalized fighters to the North Caucasus – posed a direct

security threat for Moscow. Attention to the diffusion radical extremism is frequently reiterated by President Putin and his entourage. The terrorist threat was addressed on the occasion of the "Moscow site" in April 2015, when the Syrian and Russian delegations "spoke in favour of invigorating the anti-terrorist struggle so as to enable Syria to fend off the threat of militant extremism" in line with the Geneva Communiqué (Lavrov, 2015), a concept re-expressed during Putin's meeting with Assad on 21 October 2015. The restricted and faithful interpretation of international legal norms adopted so far by Russia – especially with reference to expansive reading of the right to collective defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter – took a different course when Russia decided to directly intervene in Syria, on 15 September 2015.

Following talks with the Syrian Prime Minister, on 28 June, Lavrov – emphasizing the international community's commitment to the preservation of Syrian territorial integrity, sovereignty and respect for multiethnicity – stressed the urgent need to take joint efforts in fighting the Islamic State. He commented that "external players [...] should avoid any action that does not facilitate the formation of these conditions and political settlement" and "the common awareness of global danger should prevail over individual geopolitical schemes and unilateral goals" (Lavrov, 2015). He directly mentioned revived contacts with Washington, recalling how Obama-Putin discussion elevated the containment of ISIS expansion as a common objective, instructing their diplomats to pool efforts against jihadist groups. Two months later, on 31 August, at the meeting with the group following the implementation of the "Moscow site", Lavrov made reference to the initiative of Vladimir Putin "regarding the need to progress on parallel tracks: a surge in coordinated action in the struggle against terrorist threats", uniting the Syrian government and opposition in constructive dialogue platforms (Lavrov, 2015).

Washington acknowledged the transnational threat posed by ISIS, yet it remained suspicious about Moscow's intentions in Syria. From the American point of view, counterterrorism rhetoric appeared instrumentalized for consolidating the position of Assad, at a moment when he was losing both political legitimacy and territorial control. The fight against jihadism could not be separated from the political transition in Damascus: political transition was for Obama a prerequisite for long-term stability; conversely, Russia's interpreted regime-change as a primary driver for chaos and radicalization. Consequently, Moscow's intervention – officially framed as a mean to ensure defence of international law and counter-terrorism – was widely interpreted in the United States as a strategic move for preserving the Assad regime and maintaining Russian regional influence.

According to Russian and Syrian officials, in July 2015 Assad submitted a formal request to Moscow asking for its direct military assistance to support the counterterrorism operations. In August, Russia began deploying warplanes, tanks and artillery to Syria; meanwhile, Russian personnel were granted indefinite access to the Hmeimim airbase. According to media reports, when US officials learned of Russia's intention to open fire against the ISIS in Syria, they were in Baghdad and urged Russia – which had previously proposed joint efforts with the United States and the United Kingdom – to refrain from intervention. It was 30 September 2015, and one hour later Russian forces launched the military operation in Homs and Hama; the intervention enjoyed the public endorsement of the Russian Orthodox Patriarch, who depicted it as a "holy war against terrorism".
The bombing of a Russian passenger aircraft over the Sinai Peninsula on 31 October, later claimed by the Islamic State, reinforced the belief that terrorism was direct national security threat, allowing the Kremlin to intensify its operations and to frame

the intervention also like self-defensive. Beyond strategic and economic objectives, the Syrian campaign enabled Moscow to break out of the diplomatic isolation imposed by Western states following the annexation of Crimea.

"Just before launching the Russian air campaign, Putin sought the high ground in the UN General Assembly by calling for a 'broad international coalition against terrorism…on the basis of international law', which in practice meant one aligned with Damascus.31 The legal basis Russia offered for this unprecedented post-Cold War Russian use of force outside the CIS region was intervention by invitation of the Syrian government. There is no rule prohibiting an intervention by invitation in a civil war if the invitation comes from the government, a point emphasised in this case since Assad's regime also continued to retain control over the strategic core territory of the state (Visser 2016). Moscow has justified legally its support for the Assad regime, for 'constitutional order', on these grounds" (Allison, 2019).

Putin's address to 70th session of the GA Assembly, on 28 September 2015 echoed, albeit in a different strategic context, the narrative he had first articulated at the Munich Security Conference in 2007. While Munich primarily targeted NATO enlargement and American unilateralism in the post–Cold War space, the 2015 UN address extended this critique to the Western role in West Asia, portraying regime change operations as the source of state destruction and collapse into chaos. In this sense, Syria did not represent a rupture in Russian foreign policy rhetoric, but rather a contextual adaptation of a long-standing challenge to Western interventionism. On that occasion he denounced NATO enlargement and publicly blamed the West for the invasion of Iraq and Libya, whose victims and soldiers had at that point sided transnational terrorism. "In fact, the Islamic State itself did not come out of nowhere. It was initially developed as a weapon against undesirable secular regimes [..]. In these circumstances, it is hypocritical and irresponsible to make declarations about the

threat of terrorism and at the same time turn a blind eye to the channels used to finance and support terrorists, including revenues from drug trafficking, the illegal oil trade and the arms trade. (UN General Assembly, 2015).

NATO condemned both the objectives and the procedure of the Russian intervention, in support of a government that had lost its legitimacy. In a statement issued on 5 October 2015, the Alliance expressed its "deep concern with regard to the Russian military build-up in Syria," stressing that Russian airstrikes in Hama, Homs and Idlib "led to civilian casualties and did not target Da'esh." NATO explicitly called on Moscow to "immediately cease its attacks on the Syrian opposition and civilians" and to focus instead on fighting ISIS while advancing a political transition (Nato, 2015). This line was further reinforced three days later, when the Transatlantic Alliance denounced a "troubling escalation of Russian military activities" and linked Moscow's intervention to broader security risks, particularly in light of repeated violations of NATO airspace by Russian aircraft. Western officials urged Russia to adopt a "constructive and cooperative role in the fight against ISIS," warning that continued support for Assad "is not a constructive contribution to a peaceful and lasting political solution in Syria" (NATO, 2015). The Syrian theatre thus became the point where counterterrorism discourse, regime change disputes and post-Crimea geopolitical rivalry fully converged.

Putin dismissed those accuses and justified Western criticism as rooted in long-standing mistrust rather than reality (for instance, intelligence coordinates about the alleged "wrong targets" Russia had stroke were not provided). The G20 meeting in November allowed for discussing about terrorism and the Ukrainian crises. During the subsequent press release, Putin reiterated the need to gather forces, recalling how the

United States had declined his initial offer of cooperation while Moscow had "never closed the doors to this cooperation" (Putin, 2015). On November 27, following the meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister, the Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs – in line with Putin's discourse – suggested that electoral processes held in conflict regions were increasingly manipulated by foreign actors, with outcomes that unsurprisingly match Western preferences.

By late 2015, the Vienna talks and the unanimous adoption of Resolution 2254 on December 18 re-anchored the Syrian conflict within an UN-led political framework, marking a limited but significant re-engagement between Russia and the United States. As Ambassador Churkin emphasized, this was "the only format bringing together all influential players to find a sustainable and fair settlement through talks with the Government and the 'whole span' of the opposition". In this light, "only Syrian-led, inclusive dialogue can put an end to the untold suffering of the Syrian people," he said, calling upon all parties not to engage in rhetoric and, instead, to be guided by the need to combat terrorism and find a political settlement of the conflict (UN Security Council, 2015).

In is Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly, on 1 December, Putin reaffirmed that Russia "does not seek enemies" and called for "equal dialogue" grounded on international law and mutual respect. Putin underscored its readiness to join efforts with the United States in the fight against real threats (suggesting the presence of fictional threats), and recalling the Russian need to self-realization according to its own standards, traditions and culture (Putin, 2015).

On the 8 December 2024, after 13 years of civil war, opposition forces seized Damascus and brought the Assad regime to an end: his subsequent flight into Russia confirmed the depth of Moscow's commitment.

Overall, in Syria Russia consistently supported the incumbent regime while advancing a strict reading of principles of international law centred on sovereignty and non-intervention. At the same time, this legal posture coexisted with practices widely criticized for their humanitarian consequences, showcasing the systemic adoption of selective and instrumental interpretations of international legal principles. Yet Moscow continued to portray itself as the main defender of the UN Charter against "creative interpretations" aimed at legitimising interference in other states' domestic affairs. As Roy Allison observes, in arenas such as West Asia Russia "falls back on traditional UN Charter principles and deploys them to constrain Western power" (Allison, 2019).

As explained in the previous chapters, this approach has increasingly taken the form of normative instrumentalism through which Moscow broadens and reinterprets legal principles to align with its unilateral initiatives. In Syria, the combination of military intervention with a discourse centred on sovereignty and counterterrorism reshaped confrontation with the United States within a contested legal order. More broadly, these developments raise questions about the future trajectory of countries' future engagement with multilateral formats and international law. The growing reliance on sovereignty-centred approaches to governance, coupled with the tendency to prefer flexible diplomatic formats over institutional constraints, point toward a more fragmented and power-based international system. While the United Nations remained central in Russian policy and legal justifications – particularly as a means to avoid further isolation and sanctions following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 – broader patterns of interaction among superpowers increasingly reflect personalized, transactional and state-centred diplomacy.

International organizations continue to provide essential legal frameworks for coordination among States, yet their authority is increasingly constrained by intensified competition and selective engagement by their members. The growing reliance on *ad hoc* negotiation formats signals a recalibration of conventional multilateralism, as Sates seek to preserve room for autonomous action within an increasingly dense and powerful legal environment. From a broader perspective, the consolidation of sovereignty-centred approaches to international politics (reaffirming control over core security and foreign policy choices) does not entail withdrawal from international *fora*, but rather the State's ability to navigate and at times instrumentalize legal norms in pursuit of national interests. The preference for flexible diplomatic arrangements over rigid institutional constraints reflects an effort by major powers to regain political manoeuvrability within an interconnected international system, characterized by shifting power balances and the growing influence of those previously considered "minor" actors.

Within this evolving context, Russia's long-standing emphasis on sovereignty, non-interference and the primacy of state authority appears as an early articulation of a broader systemic trend. Across the crises under scrutiny in this thesis, Moscow consistently framed its opposition as the defence of sovereign independence and autonomous decision-making, and not to international law *per se*. What initially emerged as a counter-narrative to Western-shaped governance is converging with wider practices through which major powers seek to safeguard their margins of appreciation, while remaining formally committed to multilateral frameworks. Contemporary international politics is therefore characterised not by the erosion of multilateralism, but by its reconfiguration. International institutions continue to operate as key arenas of coordination and legitimacy, yet within an environment

shaped by power asymmetries, selective compliance and sovereignty-centred interpretations of international norms. In this light, Russia's evolving posture toward the West over the past two decades represents a broader transformation in how major States engage with the international order – one in which interdependence persists, but is increasingly subordinated to the imperatives of States' sovereign will.

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