

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF POLITICAL STUDIES AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
DOCTORAL SCHOOL – POLITICAL SCIENCE

DOCTORAL THESIS

FOREIGN POLICY OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION
FROM 2007 TO PRESENT:
IMPLICATIONS FOR BLACK SEA SECURITY

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**Foreign Policy Of The Russian Federation From 2007 To Present:
Implications For Black Sea Security**

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SUMMARY

The doctoral thesis is a multi-dimensional, in-depth analysis of Russian Foreign Policy after the fall of the Soviet Union. The temporal delimitation in 2007 is due to the speech given by President Vladimir Putin at the Munich Security Conference, which was the public declaration of nonalignment with the US led rules based order, an official announcement that the Russian Federation is seeking and favoring multipolarity. The Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation was not built in a vacuum, but in very complex international, regional and domestic contexts. The entire monograph was conceived as a multi dimensional X-ray of what the elements of said policy are, of the variables, principles and theories which have contributed to said policy, of the socio-cultural domestic ecosystem in which said policy took shape and, finally, what role the structure of the international system played in how said policy developed. The geographic focus on the Black Sea is in part due to the pivotal role the area plays in Russian strategic thinking and in part due to astounding lack of strategic foresight “the collective west” has been unfortunately displaying towards the region since the end of the Cold War. We can say that my academic motivation in pursuing such research objectives is equally linked to the important role the Black Sea plays in the European security architecture and the paradoxical lack of strategic attention it receives from the Euro Atlantic community as a whole.

The central research objectives of the doctoral thesis were two fold: first, I tried to analyze the geopolitical situation in the Black Sea from a Russian perspective and second, I set out to outline possible strategic bottlenecks which could lead to at best a stale mate at worst, all out conventional great power war between the Russian Federation and the United States and

NATO. The novelty of the paper lies in the approach: not only did I look at the global and regional state of affairs from a Russian centric vantage point, but I also employed a cognitive psychology lens to the structural realist framework. By doing so, I am trying to understand the why behind Russian strategy and political decisions, but, most importantly, I am attempting this in order to highlight what the US and its allies are doing wrong in the way they choose to engage the Kremlin. Both novelty and multidisciplinary approach facilitated a better informed decision process for the conclusion reached.

On Methodology

In order to achieve my research aims I employed several research methods. All methods have addressed both epistemological and ontological positions of the problem presented. Epistemologically, the present study deconstructs and analyses the nature, origin, and scope of Russian foreign policy, its epistemic justification, the rationality of said strategic and policy choices from a Russian standpoint. I did not limit my research to document analysis and discourse analysis because this I found was not ensuring a clear delineation between what one would characterize as justified belief/correlation and subjective opinion. By exploring the origins of Russian political thought and by taking into consideration the nature of Russian society as opposed to “western” society I believe the analysis is indeed closer to objectivity. An example of said objectivity would be the debate whether Russia is a European power or a western power. The chapter dedicated to the framing of Russian foreign policy explains how although Russia is geographically European, it is also culturally “Russian” not western. The chapter dives deep into socio-cultural development of Russian strategic decision making, it analyses Russian sources instead of focusing on “western” ones.

These research methods also addressed ontological positions/questions: what is the correlation between Russian foreign policy and the current state of political science and international relations, how does Russia interpret not only the environment in which it decides/operates but the theories and rules/norms put forth by the domain of political science in itself. Through my work I was looking to find a relationship between two or more variables. I set out to

observe and identify the impact one variable has on the other and the changes that occur as a result. Each chapter does so for a particular dimension of Russian foreign policy and Russian strategic thought. The purpose of employing correlational research in the quantitative dimension of the study was to find trends and patterns between the variables. It is obvious that in my academic endeavor I could not control the variable, nevertheless, I did identify positive correlations for example between Russian aggressive posture in world politics and popular support at home as well as negative correlations such as the one between political discourse and historical facts(for example the heavy leveraging of the Great Patriotic War on foreign policy framing).

I collected data from various sources. Naturally, I started with the official sources: the Kremlin, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Russian Ministry of Defense. I analyzed both official/doctrinal/strategic documents as well as speeches, interviews(formal and informal) and essays or op ed's written by Russian decision makers. I considered this the first level of sources. The decision makers were people such as President Vladimir Putin, former President Dimitry Medvedev, Ministers Sergey Lavrov and Sergei Shoigu, former prime minister of Russia Yevgeny Primakov, former General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev, just to name a few. Notably, I did not limit myself to only the very "visible" decision makers.

A second level of sources were Russian academics and foreign policy analysts active in the main Russian platforms/think tanks, universities and research institutes. Furthermore, I read and analyzed numerous articles published by military theoreticians in established newspapers such as Russian Military Thought. In this group fall also all major Russian newspapers.

Finally, the third level of sources were journalists/media, both "regime friendly" as well as in the opposition. In this category I added influencers from social media.

In order to create a baseline, both document analysis and correlational research were not limited to the period 2007 to present, but went further back to the 1990s, which represent a key, formational period for the post-soviet Russian society.

Structure Of The Thesis

The doctoral thesis is structured in the article-based format, consequently, each chapter can be read as a standalone article or through the prism of the overarching monograph. There are five main articles and each proposes a research question(s) that adds another layer of clarity and argumentation to the meta hypothesis. The core of the thesis starts from the contention that Russian foreign policy is realist and geopolitical in nature, nevertheless, the framing is rather ambivalent. The main driver/motivator of Russian foreign policy is, undoubtedly, Russian national interest. The thesis was built upon the structural realist foundation, however, each article/chapter employs different concepts or theories which are explained and contextualized accordingly.

Chapter 1 : The central hypothesis of this segment is that Russian national interest as conceptualized by Russian political leadership, and inherently Russian foreign policy establishment are incompatible both in nature and substance with the current Euro Atlantic security and defense architecture. The resulting research questions therefore were: what are the elements/building-blocks of Russian foreign policy and what causal logic underpins Russian foreign policy/grand strategy choices? The importance of these questions is self-evident: without an objective analysis of Russian foreign policy, the Euro Atlantic community cannot build informed strategies nor can it engage in meaningful diplomacy.

The first chapter identifies three clear directions of Russian foreign policy and for each it presents the rationale, the “origin” and outlook. Russian Foreign Policy has been extensively “analyzed” in the West, nevertheless, my position is that an overwhelming amount of “Russian Foreign Policy Analysis” has been done from a Western point of view. I do not see the strategic/policy planning value in analyzing the grand strategy of any country, if it is done through a unilateral lens. Based on my research there are three vectors which channel Russian grand strategy: first, there is Russia’s great power identity in the “polycentric international system”; second there is Russian attitude towards “Spheres of Influence” and inherently “NATO-centrism” in Europe (or in Russian interpretation “Anglo-Saxon centrism” of NATO) and, finally,

opposition of economic globalization, free market system and “the turn to the East”. For each vector, the thesis presents in depth argumentation and discusses implications for the international system in general and for the Black Sea in particular.

The first chapter also serves as the theoretical contextualization of the thesis: offensive structural realism. Throughout the doctoral thesis, as I build my arguments, I underline how these tie into offensive realism and why they lead me to conclude that the current path of global politics is rather tense and dangerous. Another important theory which has substantial explanatory power when analyzing Russian foreign policy is hegemonic theory. The chapter spends a significant amount of time explaining how Russian view of the modern world draws many elements for the theory put forth by Antonio Gramsci in his “Prison Notebooks”. This aspect is further deconstructed in the second chapter, one which focuses on some of the origins of Russian strategic thinking, especially the Revolutionary/Bolshevik period.

The chapter concludes by connecting all identified foreign policy dimensions to the Black Sea and the impact they have on the region.

Chapter 2: The second chapter of the thesis illustrates how the Russian World concept has been used as a cognitive frame for “selling” said foreign policy both to domestic and international audiences. The discussion conceptualizes what Russkiy Mir/Russian World is, what the origins of post Soviet Russian identity discourse are and how they reflect in contemporary Russian ideological framing, what the Kremlin and the Russian political establishment and intelligentsia intend to achieve by promoting such a concept and how it is correlated to the Black Sea. Ultimately, the question is: is Russkiy Mir/Russian World an ideology or simply a very well orchestrated cognitive operation meant to frame pragmatic, sometimes ruthless, geopolitically and economically driven policies? The chapter employs cognitive psychology in order to explore the socio cultural roots of the term and it outlines how the concept has evolved in Russian cultural and eventually political discourse.

The conclusion is that Russkiy Mir/Russian World is nothing more than a cognitive “frame” for promoting national interest and geopolitically motivated policy choices both internally and abroad. The “Russian World” does not have the power or “buy-in” of an ideology.

Chapter 3: The third chapter analyses the hard power/military aspects of Russian foreign policy. NATO is a constant mention in Russia political discourse and therefore this chapter breaks down the evolution of NATO in the Black Sea. The chapter asks which were the key moments in NATO history as they directly relate to current Russian foreign policy, and how are they linked to the Black Sea. How is NATO perceived in the Kremlin, as well as by Russian security and defense elites? Thirdly, are there any prospects for mitigating present day security threats in the region?

Symbolism plays an important role in Russian political discourse, therefore, a significant portion of the chapter is dedicated to the symbolism of the Russian Naval Forces in general and the Black Sea Fleet in particular. There are both elements of continuity and change in Russian and Soviet maritime strategy. It is clear that there are major differences between the Red Army of the USSR and present day Russian Armed Forces.

Finally, the chapter takes a deep dive into Russian Naval diplomacy and it outlines how the Russian Navy has been employed as an instrument of power projection with regionally and globally. For the Black Sea in particular, the thesis makes the case for Romania being reinforced as a NATO/EU pillar in the region.

Chapter 4: The fourth chapter focuses on the economic aspects of how the Kremlin prepared the conflict with the West. Because the thesis is built within a structural realist framework, the first part of the chapter spends a lot of time discussing the American strategy for energy in the world. Another aspect which is extensively explored is the Russo-German energy relationship and the chapter breaks down how the largest economy in Europe has managed to become so dependent on Russian energy. Western and Russian conceptualization of energy in national security/energy security differ and the chapter shows exactly how this affects the Black Sea in particular. Finally, the chapter takes a closer look at the role the EU, and especially Germany play in the energy field in the Black Sea. In Russian strategic planning, German dependency on Russian energy has played a very important role. Diluting US power and influence in Europe is a major strategic

goal of the Kremlin and by establishing a very well crafted “German reaproachment” Moscow has managed to buy a lot of time, something that became very obvious in February 2022.

Chapter 5 The final chapter brings together all arguments and explores implications for the Black Sea in light of Russia’s new posture in global affairs. The major conclusion is that the continent is heading towards great power conflict if all other elements remain the same. Great power conflict in twenty-first century Europe will most likely look very differently than the previous great power wars, nevertheless, the dangers are the same: the loss of precious human lives and the destruction of the environment.

For the Black Sea specifically, the outlook is very complex. The epicenter of the great power conflict is shaping up to be this very region, but paradoxically, the region has always been a “wild card” in the European security architecture. Given the new, emerging structure of the international system, one where regional powers will play a more important role than during the ColdWar, this could very well be an opportunity for skilled diplomats to negotiate favorable outcomes for NATO and its partner nations. What is clear is that the European security architecture is changing and that February 2022 was the official end of the unequivocally unipolar world.

Post - Scriptum: The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation 2022

The Kremlin released the new foreign policy concept after the thesis was finalized, and, the tone and content of the new Russian strategic document essentially confirm every single direction identified in my work. The Russian Federation has entered a new phase in its existence and from a Russian perspective this is an opportunity for Russia to be one of the architects of the new security order. Given the complexities of the international systems and the isolation Russia is facing in “the collective West”, it will be very challenging for Russia to achieve this strategic goal. A lot will depend on the cohesiveness and resolve of the US and its allies and partners.