National University of Political Studies and Public Administration

Phd Thesis

The Role of the Shared Neighbourhood and the Perception of Elites in the Dynamics of Relations between the European Union and the Russian Federation

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<center>Introduction</center>

The paper "The Role of the Common Neighbourhood and Elite Perceptions in the Dynamics of Relations between the European Union and the Russian Federation" offers a comprehensive analysis of the complex relations between the European Union and the Russian Federation, highlighting the multiple dimensions of this interaction – institutional, ideological, geopolitical, and related to the strategic perceptions of decision-making elites. The paper examines the dynamics of EU–Russia interactions in the common neighbourhood, paying particular attention to the role of elites and to how their perceptions, interests, and strategies impact bilateral relations, influencing both cooperation and the escalation of conflicts. Through this approach, the research seeks to contribute to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of power mechanisms and their implications for regional security and order, while also considering the perceptions and influence exercised by elites in this context. The contribution of this research is highly relevant to understanding current dynamics, given the sensitive nature of the topic in the context of recurring crises in the common neighbourhood (Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus), the Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine, as well as the security and identity challenges faced by the European Union.

The research relies on the articulation of several theoretical frameworks – institutionalism, elite theory, neoclassical realism, conservatism, and liberalism – reinforced by the use of case studies and comparative analyses that combine qualitative and quantitative methodologies. By adopting an eclectic theoretical and methodological framework, the paper transcends the inherent limitations of single-theory approaches, offering a more comprehensive interpretation of EU–Russia relations.

The subject is addressed in a chronological manner, highlighting major historical events while also bringing forward new and relevant aspects from the present. It reflects the complexity and volatility of EU–Russia relations, which have from the outset been marked by structural imbalances and divergent visions of bilateral cooperation, deeply influenced by major historical moments such as the two World Wars and the Cold War. An important role in this dynamic was played by both the special relationship between Germany and Russia and the verbal promises made to Gorbachev regarding NATO's non-expansion eastward, later invoked by Russia to justify its aggressive actions. After the collapse of the USSR, EU–Russia relations

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began with hopes for close cooperation, reflected in the 1997 Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. In the 2000s, cooperation intensified, with Russia becoming an important economic partner for the EU, particularly due to its energy resources, while the four "common spaces" of cooperation – economy, external security, justice and freedoms, research and education – were established in 2003. However, as Russia under Vladimir Putin consolidated its domestic power and the EU strengthened its international role, divergences in vision began to surface. The failure of the 2007 Strategic Partnership marked the onset of a rupture.

Since 2008, relations have deteriorated, a process accelerated by the Russo-Georgian conflict and, especially, by the 2014 Ukraine crisis, when Russia illegally annexed Crimea and supported separatists in Donbas. In response, the EU imposed economic sanctions and suspended most cooperation, while maintaining limited channels of dialogue, amid divergent positions within the EU on how to approach Moscow. Initiatives such as France's calls for a renewed strategic relationship generated controversy. The 2021 visit of High Representative Josep Borrell, which ended with a harsh exchange of accusations, highlighted the deep tensions.

The most severe rupture was Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which fundamentally shook EU–Russia relations, ushering in an era of open antagonism and consolidating Russia's isolation from the West.

At present, the relationship is dominated by heightened antagonism, with the EU adopting firm measures to support Ukraine and consolidating its geopolitical stance, while Russia seeks new global partners to counterbalance the increasingly pronounced isolation imposed by the West.

The novelty of the research lies in capturing and analyzing, in real time, the ongoing transformations at the European level, as well as unprecedented developments in the sphere of foreign and defence policy, both in the European Union and the Russian Federation. In this regard, the paper highlights a series of major geopolitical shifts, such as the re-emergence of high-intensity military conflict on the European continent, which has profoundly reconfigured the EU's strategic priorities. In response, significant initiatives have been launched, such as the European Defence Industrial Programme (EDIP) and SAFE (Strategy to Boost the European Defence Industry), marking a new stage in the development of the EU's defence dimension, supported by substantial institutional changes, including the creation of a new portfolio for Defence and Space within the European Commission, the transformation of the SEDE Subcommittee in the European Parliament into a standalone parliamentary committee dedicated to defence, as well as budgetary reallocations. At the same time, the rise of far-right

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parties in the European Parliament reflects a profound ideological shift, with direct implications for internal political cohesion. In parallel, the EU's enlargement policy has been revitalized by granting candidate status to several Eastern neighbourhood states, while Georgia has experienced surprising setbacks, some member states have abandoned neutrality, and trade relations and routes have been reconfigured. All these developments outline a systemic transformation of the European security architecture. By integrating these phenomena into an extended research framework, the paper offers an original and valuable perspective on the complex processes of redefining regional order and security architecture in Europe, thereby contributing to the strengthening of both academic and practical understanding of contemporary EU–Russia dynamics.

The research hypotheses formulated in this paper focus on the influence of political elites and perceptions, the importance of the common neighbourhood, as well as the role of foreign policy and hybrid tactics in the dynamics of bilateral relations. More specifically, among the premises put forward is the idea that political elites, both in Russia and in the European Union, prioritize their survival and the consolidation of power, which influences both domestic and foreign policy. An important effect of elite behaviour within the EU is the member states' desire to retain exclusive control in certain policy areas in order to avoid replacing the national elite with a supranational one, thereby protecting their internal autonomy and influence. In the case of Russia, this interest in survival translates into the rejection of the democratic models promoted by the EU, perceived as a threat to the authoritarian regime and political stability, and considered an infringement on national sovereignty and an attempt to undermine internal power. This behaviour leads to a deep contrast in how the two sides approach the common neighbourhood: Russia displays an aggressive attitude, driven by the perception of threats to its security and influence, while the EU promotes integration and development. Ideological divergences and identity-based narratives amplify mutual tensions, and Russia's centralized political structure allows it to project influence more effectively compared to the EU's fragmented decision-making. At the same time, Russia frequently resorts to hybrid tactics, combining military, informational, and cyber means, while its transition to conventional conflicts reflects both deliberate strategies and misperceptions of the international environment. Ultimately, the dynamics of bilateral relations are profoundly influenced by the fundamental differences in the worldviews of the two actors.

The paper is structured into four chapters, each with its own theoretical and methodological framework adapted to the specifics of the subject under investigation. The construction of the chapters follows, as far as possible, a comparative "mirror" approach: on

the one hand, analysing the European Union's decision-making system in the field of foreign policy and assessing, through specific research methods, the impact exerted by different categories of elites on it; on the other hand, examining the Russian Federation's decision-making system and the role of elites in shaping its foreign policy. This symmetrical approach is complemented by two case studies on recent and particularly relevant events. The first concerns the European Union and analyses the 2025 decision to establish the *Reform and Growth Facility* for the Republic of Moldova, illustrating how European elites influenced the decision-making process. The second focuses on the Russian Federation and examines the decision to launch the military invasion of Ukraine in 2022, emphasizing the role and influence of Russian elites in adopting this major foreign policy decision.

Chapter I: Institutional Structures, Political Elites, and National Positions in the Foreign Policy of the European Union

This chapter examines the foreign policy of the European Union, focusing on the institutional mechanisms and actors that influence its directions. The European Union has developed through the consolidation of fundamental institutions such as the European Commission, the European Council, the European Parliament, and the Court of Justice, which ensure both efficient functioning and the development of the legal and political framework necessary for European integration. These structures facilitate cooperation among member states and the implementation of common policies.

The institutionalist perspective, supported by researcher Natalia Zaslavskaya[1], provides a useful framework for analysing the EU's foreign policy and its relations with Russia, highlighting the role of institutions in shaping political and social behaviours. Different forms of institutionalism—rational, historical, and sociological—offer complementary perspectives on how European institutions influence decision-making, manage conflicts, and contribute to integration, by reducing cooperation costs, maintaining historical norms, and socializing the actors involved.

The chapter presents an analysis of the evolution of the EU's decision-making system, from the Treaty of Paris signed in 1951 to the present day, and of the impact this system has

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[1] Natalia Zaslavskaya, „(Neo) Instituţionalism", in Tatiana Romanova, Maxine David (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of EU-Russia Relations,* Routledge, 2021, p. 93, accesat pe 28 august 2024 disponibil la https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781351006262-11/neo-institutionalism-nataliazaslavskaya

on foreign policy and the EU's stance towards the Russian Federation, including various perspectives on the concept of dynamism. Proponents of intergovernmentalism see changes in the EU's institutional structure as the result of negotiations among member states, gradually carried out at the highest level. In contrast, neo-functionalists, inspired by Jean Monnet's concept of *spillover*[2], view this evolution as a continuous process that generated new supranational and transnational actors capable of influencing and shaping the institutional design of the European Union.

Today, the EU has a complex institutional framework, composed of seven main institutions, multiple bodies, and decentralized agencies, each with executive, legislative, judicial, or financial roles. The functioning and competences of these institutions are regulated by EU treaties, but in practice some seek to expand their powers beyond the formal framework, which has led to recent calls for treaty revision. By employing discursive, institutional, and budgetary bricolage, the European Commission has extended its influence into intergovernmental areas such as foreign and security policy, without treaty change, by linking them to existing competences such as the internal market. Through Article 114 of the TFEU, it justified initiatives such as the European Defence Industrial Programme, thereby strengthening the defines industrial base of the EU and its member states. Similarly, the European Parliament, despite its limited competences in foreign and security policy, has sought to influence this field through indirect tools such as plenary debates, own-initiative resolutions, and public pressure on European institutions. Although it can legislate directly in this field only rarely, the Parliament has managed to put issues on the public agenda, particularly through resolutions on human rights and situations in third countries. According to EP archives on European Parliament Resolutions on human rights worldwide, some of the first EP resolutions concerning the Soviet Union date back to 1973[3], followed by a series in 1977–1978[4]. In relation to the Russian Federation, the Parliament adopted more than 20 resolutions during the 2019–

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[2] Kevin Featherstone, "Jean Monnet and the democratic deficit in the European Union", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 32, 1994, p.167, accesat pe 5 decembrie 2023, disponibil la https://www.researchgate.net/publication/23522727_Jean_Monnet_and_the_%27Democratic_Deficit%27_in_th e_European_Union.

[3] European Parliament, "Debate with resolution after the oral question 1/73 on EC relations with USSR and Comecon", 1973, accesat pe 1 noiembrie 2024, disponibil la https://aei.pitt.edu/56418/1/BUL098.pdf.

[4] European Parliament, "Resolution on the abuse of psychiatric medicine in the USSR", 1977, p. 274, accesat pe 1 noiembrie 2024, disponibil la https://aei.pitt.edu/36053/1/A2375.pdf; European Parliament „Report drawn up on behalf of the Political Committee on the situation of the Jewish community in the Soviet Union, Rapporteur: Mr. Cornelis Berkhouwer", PE0 AP RP/POLI.1961 A0-0430/78, 14 November, 1978, accesat pe 1 noiembrie 2024, disponibil la http://www.eprs.sso.ep.parl.union.eu/eprs/auth/en/product_2.html?id=100125&ref_id=2385&src=2&q=id%3A1 00125%2BAND%2Bsrc%3A2.

2024 legislature, showing a consistent and active interest in shaping the Union's foreign policy. After the Russian invasion of 2022, the Parliament, under the leadership of President Roberta Metsola, became a strong voice in support of Ukraine, being the first European institution to call for granting candidate status to Ukraine and the first European body to address the Verkhovna Rada[5]. Paradoxically, although it has limited competences, the AFET Committee is the largest and most influential in the European Parliament, adopting annual reports and resolutions on foreign and security policy and hearing relevant EU officials. Thus, despite its legal limitations, the European Parliament has become an influential actor in the Union's foreign policy.

The EU's foreign policy represents the set of actions and policies through which the Union manages its relations with international actors, promoting its values and interests. It is broadly defined, including both the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and other policies with an external dimension, such as trade or energy. Officially established by the Maastricht Treaty (1993) and strengthened by the Treaty of Lisbon, the CFSP remains an area with a strong intergovernmental dimension, where decisions are taken unanimously, and European institutions have a limited role. A telling example of the EU's difficulties in adopting a common position is its relationship with Russia, where divergent interests and perceptions among member states have hindered a coherent foreign policy. Although European institutions have been strengthened over time, decisions regarding Russia remain frequently marked by internal disagreements. To understand these dynamics, a mixed theoretical approach is necessary, combining institutionalist perspectives with neoclassical realism, while considering factors such as elite perceptions, historical traumas, political culture, and the capacity to mobilize internal resources. This approach explains why, despite an elaborate institutional architecture, the EU faces difficulties in formulating and implementing an effective and unified foreign policy, particularly in relation to major actors such as Russia.

Through the positional and decisional research method, elites at the European level with an impact on the EU's foreign policy were identified. To ensure the most consistent results, the decisional method was applied in examining different dimensions of the European Union's foreign policy: from decisions on the application of sanctions and the enlargement process with new member states, to the negotiation of trade agreements, as well as within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the Common Foreign and Security

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[5] Steven Van Hecke, Emek M. Uçarer, "The EU's Foreign Policy Toolbox: Conflicting Approaches and New Challenges", Policy Brief 3, *College of Europe,* 2022, accesat pe 7 septembrie 2024, disponibil la https://www.coleurope.eu/sites/default/files/research-paper/CEPOB%203-22.pdf.

Policy (CFSP). Applying the decisional method to identify elites with an impact on the CFSP highlighted the extremely important, yet often overlooked, role of Coreper II. Within the Council of the European Union, the negotiation process involves several levels, starting with specialized working groups (including geographical ones), continuing with the informal Antici Group, which sets the weekly agenda of Coreper II, and culminating in Coreper II, where ambassadors—the permanent representatives of member states—reach agreements in principle that prepare the final decisions of ministers. Although often ignored in the literature due to its low visibility, Coreper II plays an essential role in setting the agendas of the European Council and the Foreign Affairs Council, while the permanent representatives play a key role in coordinating national positions, especially in complex domestic political contexts, such as coalition governments. Through regular in-person meetings and informal networks, they decisively influence the decision-making process, and their agreement on a file allows its inclusion on the "A list," leading to its adoption without debate, even in Council formations unrelated to the subject matter. In other words, a foreign policy decision, if it passes Coreper II, will be approved at the next Council meeting, even if it is in the Agriculture and Fisheries, Environment, Home Affairs, or any other formation unrelated to foreign policy. The Council functions as a single legal entity, and any of its ten configurations can decide on an act belonging to another configuration. Approximately two-thirds of Council decisions are taken in this way. Permanent representatives also exert influence beyond the Council, collaborating with Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and providing guidance for important votes in the European Parliament that affect member states.

Next, a case study is presented that analyses the influence of political and diplomatic elites on the EU's decision to adopt the Reform and Growth Facility for the Republic of Moldova in 2025—a major financial support package of €1.9 billion designed to support the country's European path and counter Russian influence in the region. The choice of this case study is based on its strategic relevance for the Eastern neighbourhood and on the fact that this regulation was adopted under the ordinary legislative procedure, allowing the examination of elites both at the European Parliament level and at the Council level.

At the European Parliament level, two committees were responsible: BUDG and AFET. The rapporteurs and shadow rapporteurs, most of whom came from states with strategic interests in the region (Romania, Poland, the Baltic states), supported a common position favourable to the Republic of Moldova, managing to improve the European Commission's initial proposal by increasing funding and accelerating pre-financing. In the Council, negotiations took place under the presidency of Hungary (at Coreper II level) and Poland (at

trilogue level). The Council's position was established in Coreper II on December 11, 2024 (without reaching the level of Foreign Ministers) and was adopted without discussion, on the A list of the Council agenda of December 17, 2024 (in the General Affairs format).

The final result was a robust financial package, with increased grants and greater pre-financing, designed not only for Moldova's internal reforms but also as a strategic tool to reduce Russia's influence. The study highlights how European elites decisively influenced the complex legislative process, demonstrating the importance of coordination between institutional and political actors in shaping the EU's foreign policy. This case study revealed the complex interaction between institutional and political actors and emphasized that the decision-making process in EU foreign policy was nuanced, with direct and indirect influences exercised at multiple levels. For this reason, this chapter does not omit actors with indirect influence, and the analysis also focuses on political parties and European political groups as well as on the national positions of member states.

The number of MEPs for each member state is established under the Treaty on European Union, reflecting the principle of degressive proportionality and the population of each country. MEPs play an essential role in shaping Parliament's positions and in the legislative process, influencing EU policies, including foreign policy, by voting on resolutions and appointments to key posts such as the President of the European Commission or the High Representative for Foreign Affairs. European political groups, which regroup MEPs according to ideological orientations, have a major influence in shaping the plenary agenda and the political positions adopted. In the 2019–2024 term, the main pro-European actors (EPP, S&D, Renew, and the Greens) held the majority, but they lost significant influence in the new 2024–2029 legislature compared to the previous one, which facilitated the rise of far-right and far-left groups such as Patriots for Europe and ESN. Although these groups increased numerically, they were blocked from obtaining leadership positions through an informal "cordon sanitaire" instituted by the other political groups.

The analysis of votes on resolutions and positions adopted in plenary debates, especially in the context of EU–Russia relations after the 2022 invasion, highlights a surprising convergence between far-left and far-right groups in opposing sanctions on Russia and rejecting military support for Ukraine, even though their arguments and ideological motives differ. In contrast, groups such as the ECR, influenced by pro-Ukraine national parties, maintained a firm anti-Russian stance. Furthermore, plenary interventions show that although political affiliation provides a general indication of position, members may adopt distinct stances influenced by national interests. Moreover, MEPs from the Baltic and Nordic countries

display clear anti-Russian unity regardless of the political group, driven by historical experiences and security concerns. These dynamics and voting patterns reflect the complexity of political parties' influence on European foreign policy and the essential role of elites in shaping the EU's agenda towards Russia.

The positions of the member states have also diverged over time: Austria, Hungary, and Italy favour dialogue; Germany oscillates between economic interests and firmness; Romania, Poland, and the Baltic states promote a hard line; France maintains an ambiguous position; others (Spain, Ireland, Malta) remain peripheral. However, the war in Ukraine has brought about shifts in positions, the most spectacular being that of France—the only EU member state holding both nuclear power status and a permanent seat on the UN Security Council—which began to actively support Ukraine's accession to NATO (as highlighted at the NATO Summit in Vilnius), as well as its accession to the European Union, marking a change in stance toward EU enlargement policy.

The chapter provides a comparative analysis of the foreign policies of the European Union and the Russian Federation in the near neighbourhood, focusing on states such as Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, and Belarus. It also includes a comparative examination of the approaches of the two actors in the separatist regions of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, highlighting strategic differences in areas such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Donetsk, and Luhansk.

Russia's influence in these regions is complex and sometimes contested by local elites, who seek to diversify their external relations, even in areas supported by Moscow. In general, the post-Soviet states in Russia's neighbourhood aspire to strengthen their sovereignty— sometimes even Belarus, considered Russia's closest political and economic ally, thereby displaying a certain degree of autonomy.

The war in Ukraine has been a major disruptive factor, accelerating political and security changes in the region. For some states, such as Armenia and Moldova, it represents an opportunity to detach themselves from Russian influence, while others, such as Georgia, aim more at balancing foreign relations and consolidating national security, including by maintaining economic ties with Russia.

Regions with significant Russian-speaking populations, such as South Ossetia, Luhansk, or Transnistria, hold major strategic importance for Moscow, which in some cases has internationally recognized the independence of separatist entities. Russia's position in these conflicts is determined not only by ethnic or historical factors but also by the regional balance of power, relations with other states, and the internal dynamics of the Russian political elite.

In Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia preferred to maintain good relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey, adopting a pragmatic policy. In Georgia, Russia recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia after Tbilisi expressed its desire to join NATO. In Moldova, the status of neutrality prevents external military alliances, and Russia maintains influence without officially recognizing Transnistria, even after local referendums.

<u>Chapter II: The Geopolitics of Values: Russian Conservatism versus European Liberalism</u>

Chapter II, serving as a complement and mirror to Chapter I—which examined the European Union's foreign policy and the role of its elites—centers on analysing the foreign policy of the Russian Federation and the influence of political elites in its formation. This analysis is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of neoclassical realism, elite theory and Russian conservatism, contrasted with European liberalism, and it applies methods similar to those used in Chapter I to identify and evaluate elites in the Russian context. The study examines the vertical structure of power at the Kremlin and includes an in-depth case study on the influence of elites on Russia's decision to invade Ukraine.

This chapter emphasizes the ideological component, using Neoclassical Realism (NCR) as an analytical benchmark in studying EU–Russia relations. Neoclassical Realism views global politics as conflictual but, unlike realism and neorealism, integrates both the constraints of the international system and domestic variables to explain foreign policy. NCR rejects the idea that states pursue only security, emphasizing instead their goal of shaping the international environment through diplomatic, military, economic, and normative instruments. NCR analyses states based on their internal characteristics (state–society relations, institutional structures, strategic culture, leaders' perceptions), with foreign policy determined primarily by material power but mediated by internal factors that may alter the direct link between systemic changes and state strategies.

Both realism and neorealism overlook cultural or regime differences among states, a view illustrated by J. Mearsheimer's claim: "Regardless of whether a state is democratic or autocratic, this matters relatively little... Nor does it matter much who is in charge of a state's foreign policy.[6]" In contrast, NCR aims to examine the circumstances under which foreign

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[6] J. Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism", în Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, Steve Smith (Eds.), *International Relations Theories Discipline and Diversity,* Oxford University Press 2013, p.78, accesat pe 10 februarie 2025, disponibil la
https://www.academia.edu/10064301/_HIN_100504_International_Relations_Theories_Tim_Dunne_Milja_Kurki_Steve_Smith

policy is designed and implemented. Neoclassical Realism is particularly useful when combined with foreign policy analysis because it explains variations in state responses to structural changes by integrating both external and internal factors. Relevant examples include the EU's differing approaches to Russia, the shifts in Russian foreign policy before and after Vladimir Putin's rise to power and during his presidencies, the diversity of EU member states' positions, and the varying levels of coherence in reactions to the 2024 invasion of Ukraine. In this view, foreign policy is shaped by leaders and decision-making elites, whose perceptions of systemic threats and ability to mobilize internal resources act as an intermediate filter between the international environment and the final decision. For analysing Russian foreign policy, NCR is the appropriate choice because it provides an intermediary framework between power-distribution–centred realism and identity- and perception-focused constructivism. NCR enables an understanding of Russia's behaviour by integrating both objective systemic constraints and their subjective interpretations by political elites. Thus, competition with the West cannot be explained solely by the rebuilding of economic and military power but also by Russian leaders' strategic decisions and perceptions—especially those of Vladimir Putin, as Michael McFaul emphasized: "Leaders matter. Another Russian leader could have chosen another path.[7]"

Actions such as the 2008 invasion of Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, or support for Donbas separatists reflect both the continuity of Russia's strategic culture and imperial tendencies and the decisive role of the Kremlin's inner circle and Putin's personal traits, including his ability to manipulate international norms and mobilize internal resources. Still, another Russian leader—though likely to have followed similar foreign policy lines dictated by historical patterns—might have employed different means and strategies to implement them.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's foreign policy oscillated between continuity and abrupt changes, structured by Christian Thorun into four stages between 1992 and 2007[8]. These included an initial alignment with the West, a more assertive and ambiguous stance, temporary collaboration in the war on terror, and ultimately a hostile attitude toward European security. After 2008, with the conflicts in Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, and the

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[7] Michael McFaul, "Putin, Putinism, and the Domestic Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy", in I*nternational Security*, Vol.45, No.2/2020, p.98, accesat 5 aprilie 2023, disponibil https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article/45/2/95/95260/Putin-Putinism-and-the-Domestic-Determinants-of.

[8] Christian Thorun, *Explaining Change in Russian Foreign Policy: The Role of Ideas in Post-Soviet Russia's Conduct towards the West,* Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008, pp. 1-2.

war in Ukraine, Russian foreign policy became overtly confrontational toward the West. Thorun explains these developments through the influence of Russian elites' ideas and perceptions, making the internal dynamics of elites essential to understanding the trajectory of Russia's foreign policy.

For this analysis, elite theory provides a useful framework, highlighting the concentration of power in the hands of a narrow group, especially in the context of Russia's authoritarian regime. Pareto's typology— "foxes" (manipulative and flexible elites) and "lions" (authoritarian and coercive elites)—fits Vladimir Putin, who combines both strategies to consolidate control[9].

Under Putin's regime, foreign policy unfolds on two levels: a public and visible one, consisting of official documents and political discourse, and an invisible one, dominated by a narrow circle of power that controls essential decisions. This vertical structure of power explains how Russia pursues assertive foreign policy, combining skilled diplomacy with the use of force. The starting point of this new mode of governance, known as the "power vertical," is the year 2000, when Vladimir Putin won the presidential elections. It is considered that this system of governance is a direct consequence of Putin's election. Had someone else, such as Yevgeny Primakov, Grigory Yavlinsky, or Gennady Zyuganov, won, the way the "power vertical" developed would have been different.

Primakov, for example, had significant influence as foreign minister, promoting a realist foreign policy, criticizing rapprochement with the West, and advocating for Russia as an independent power. However, while many directions would have been similar, the domestic context, resources, and political imperatives would have been different, leading to alternative outcomes. Primakov would probably not have consolidated the power vertical as Putin did, since he had strong regional alliances and did not restrict regional autonomy as Putin did. Moreover, Putin built a circle of power based on personal and economic ties from his past in the KGB and St. Petersburg, enabling him to consolidate control. Primakov also could not have mobilized the Putin–Medvedev tandem, which ensured the continuity of the "power vertical." Externally, Primakov was known for revisionist positions, and the West would have reacted more firmly, whereas Putin gained time through an apparent diplomatic rapprochement.

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[9] Alasdair Marshall, Patrick Brown, Udechukwu Ojiako, "The lion and fox animal spirits of Machiavelli and Pareto", *European Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol.58, No.1, 2020, p.14, accesat pe 4 martie 2025, disponibil la https://journals.openedition.org/ress/6226?lang=en.

The psychological and divergences in leadership style and tools between the two leaders were crucial—Primakov was considered cautious, while Putin proved more skilled at consolidating power. Putin's reforms, which weakened legislative and regional power, strengthened economic control, and amended the constitution to expand presidential powers, were tailored to his context and profile.

Academic sources converge on the fact that after 2000, Vladimir Putin successfully reshaped and tightly controlled the power structure of the Russian political system. Divergences appear, however, in interpretations of this leadership style—termed Putinism: some scholars define it as a coherent ideology, while others see it as a meta-ideology. Russian conservatism under Vladimir Putin becomes a meta-ideology, grounded in Orthodoxy, nationalism, and the rejection of Western liberalism. The EU's liberalism is based on democracy, the free market, and multilateralism. The clash of values is central: Russia presents itself as the defender of a "multipolar world" against a "decadent" Europe. Russian power is concentrated around the presidential vertical, with the Constitution amended to extend Putin's mandate, while civil society is restricted. Conservative intellectual Leonid Poliakov argues that although Vladimir Putin is not ideologically bound to conservatism, he is nonetheless perfectly attuned to the conservative instincts of the Russian population and their respect for history and traditions[10].

The influence of elites in Russian foreign policy is disputed in the literature, but common points exist: Vladimir Putin is the central and stable factor of power, while the elite influencing foreign policy is a heterogeneous group composed of siloviki, military officers, businessmen, and government members. Although internally fragmented, this elite is narrow and stable over the long term, ensuring the stability of the autocratic regime. Applying specific research methods to identify elites with an impact on foreign policy reveals that, while members of different elites share a common professional environment, their motivations are more tied to personal interests and survival than loyalty to their group. Influence in foreign policy is circumstantial and often depends on geographic or thematic context (for example, Igor Sechin has been relevant in managing energy relations with China or Venezuela, Nikolai Patrushev is active in Asia, and Minister Lavrov in relations with Syria), while decisions concerning Ukraine are largely controlled directly by Putin, with limited elite influence.

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[10] Leonid Poliakov, "The Conservatism of Konstantin Leontev in Present-Day Russia." *Russian Studies in Philosophy* Vol.35, No.2, 1996, accesat pe 5 aprilie 2023, disponibil la https://research.ebsco.com/c/a2wb3v/viewer/pdf/ipz7qzx5mv?route=details.

The case study on Russia's decision to invade Ukraine is significant because it represents the most important military manifestation of recent Russian foreign policy, profoundly altering European security. The decision marked a shift from hybrid war tactics to open conflict, and the analysis of this case provides insights into the internal dynamics of Russian elites and how they influence foreign policy.

In the case of the invasion of Ukraine, the decision was made within an extremely narrow circle, without consulting major institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Federation Council. This reflects a semi-personalist and opaque mode of governance, where Putin and a small core of elites control strategic decision-making, excluding other official bodies.

Formally, the decision to use armed forces outside Russia must be approved by the Federation Council, but in the case of the invasion, this approval was only a formality after the decision had already been made and military preparations completed. Legislative changes in 2009–2010 increased the president's powers regarding the use of troops abroad, reducing democratic oversight of such decisions.

The invasion of Ukraine was influenced both by ideological visions and historical narratives promoted by elites, and by flawed security assessments of Ukraine's military preparedness and the West's reaction. This combination led to a risky yet calculated decision, made by a narrow core of elites around Putin, who dominate the decision-making process in Russia.

Chapter III: The Instrumentalization of Hybrid Warfare as a Foreign Policy Tool in the Logic of Russian Elites: Between Legacy and Vladimir Putin's Vision

This chapter analyses the evolution of the concept of "hybrid warfare" and proposes an operational definition: a complex combination of conventional and unconventional means—military, cyber, informational, and economic—used in an integrated way to achieve strategic objectives. Under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, the Russian Federation has refined and perfected this toolkit, employing it both in its near neighbourhood and against the European Union and NATO.

The chapter highlights the main dimensions of hybrid warfare as practiced by Russia, including economic penetration through strategic investments designed to create dependencies, as well as the use of energy deliveries as a coercive instrument; cyber operations and attacks on critical infrastructures and European institutions; and informational operations, materialized

through propaganda and disinformation campaigns. These tools are also analysed through the case study of Ukraine, where the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the conflict in Donbas, and the 2022 invasion stand as paradigmatic examples of how Russia has combined traditional military tactics with hybrid actions. Episodes such as the Odessa crisis or the conflict in the Sea of Azov illustrate the degree of integration and coordination of these means.

The effects of Russia's hybrid warfare have had profound consequences on the security doctrines of EU and NATO member states, generating doctrinal changes, the creation of new institutions, and debates regarding the application of Articles 4 and 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Furthermore, the systematic use of propaganda, support for Eurosceptic parties, and exploitation of sensitive topics for European public opinion confirm the multidimensional character of this type of warfare.

A particularly subtle aspect of the hybrid warfare techniques applied by the Russian Federation, analysed in this chapter, is the use of "reflexive control" in its relations with the European Union and the West in general. This concept involves covertly influencing the adversary—without them realizing they are being influenced—so that they adopt decisions which, ultimately, weaken their own strategic position. In this logic, it is argued that some radical components of the European Green Deal—one of the most extensive legislative packages adopted by the EU, with cross-cutting impact on the economy, agriculture, industry, trade, and social policies—may have been indirectly stimulated by Russia through the application of reflexive control. The objective would have been to diminish European economic competitiveness and create campaign themes favourable to populist and far-right parties, with anti-EU and anti-Western orientations, that could benefit electorally from the tensions generated.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that hybrid warfare is not merely a complementary military strategy but a coherent foreign policy doctrine of the Russian Federation, preferred and perfected by Vladimir Putin, in full accordance with his psychological characteristics and leadership style. This doctrine has a major impact on European security, the internal cohesion of the European Union, and the contemporary international order. The personality of leader Vladimir Putin, shaped in the KGB environment—characterized by suspicion, informational control, and loyalty to the state—deeply influenced his way of thinking and acting. His psychological profile, defined as that of a "hostile coercive agent with expansionist tendencies" and an "introvert with high dominance,[11]" is distinguished by a strong desire for control,

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[11] Millon Personality Group, "Millon® Inventories," accesat 8 aprilie 2025, disponibil la

strategic calculation, lack of empathy, assertiveness, and a Manichean worldview ("us versus them").

This psychological structure gives him the ability to analyse in detail the context and the behaviour of adversaries, anticipating and manipulating hidden motivations and ambiguities, which enables the application of hybrid strategies with a high degree of sophistication and efficiency. Moreover, a leader with a profile of "deliberative introversion and high dominance" tends to favor the use of hybrid warfare as a preferred method of foreign policy, as it ensures a balance between caution and influence through indirect actions, with controlled risks and reduced operational costs.

Chapter IV: EU–Russia Dynamics – A Causal Layered Analysis and Alternative futures

The research methods used in the previous chapters, drawn mainly from International Relations and Elite Theory, were essential for analysing the EU–Russia relationship and the influence of political elites. However, due to the unpredictable nature of political decisions, it became necessary to integrate methods from Futures Studies. According to Prof. Dr. Adrian Pop, the interaction between IR and FS reflects a current reconvergence between two fields that were initially convergent, then divergent, against the backdrop of growing global complexity[12]. Although compared to IR, the field of FS is less institutionalized, it possesses a higher degree of methodological innovation and applicability, and it brings benefits to the policy-making process in the field of IR.

Combining IR with FS in this thesis allows the exploration of possible alternative futures shaped by shifts in Worldview – The EU's Perspective for EU–Russia relations, which, beyond contributing theoretically to this work, could also have practical utility. By anticipating possible developments and presenting futures alternatives, this approach could influence the formulation or adjustment of foreign policies, providing an analytical framework for adapting

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https://millonpersonality.com/millon-inventories/s; Aubrey Immelman și Abby Goff, "The Post-Expansionist Personality Profile of Russian President Vladimir Putin," Ps*ychology Faculty Publications*, Vol 6. No3. 2017, accesat 8 aprilie 2025, disponibil la https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/psychology_pubs/20.

[12] Adrian Pop, "The interplay between international relations and futures studies in the complexity context", in Roberto Poli (Ed.), Handbook of Futures Studies, Edward, Elgar Publishing 2024, p. 387, accesat pe 2 martie 2025, disponibil la https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollchap/book/9781035301607/book-part-9781035301607-34.xml.

more effectively to changes in the global geopolitical landscape and for shaping a desirable future.

To address this methodological challenge, the research employs Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), developed by Sohail Inayatullah, which explores reality beyond events and discourses, down to structures, paradigms, and deep myths. Combined with progressive change scenarios, this approach offers an integrated vision of the present and possible future directions of EU–Russia relations. Over time, this method has become increasingly used in various fields, including in government projects and prestigious international organizations such as the UN[13].

CLA represents a valuable tool in our analysis, as it enables exploration of the past and present through the lens of possible alternative future scenarios, rather than being limited to predicting a single future based solely on empirical data[14]. For CLA, the future is an active aspect of the present[15]. The benefits of this method include questioning conventional futures, expanding the diversity and complexity of scenarios, and moving the analysis from a superficial framework to a deeper one[16].

CLA analysis is carried out across four levels: *Litany* – the surface level of a situation, what is visible on the surface, including quantitative data and the broadly accepted version of reality. *System* – the underlying causes generating the situation, including social, political, and economic structures. *Worldview* – the deeper perspectives shaping the situation, including entrenched social, linguistic, and cultural frameworks that justify behaviours, independent of the identity of the actors involved. *Myth/Metaphor* – the analysis of collective archetypes, imaginaries, narratives, and underlying stories that sustain a given situation and feed into

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[13] UN Global Pulse, "Causal Layered Analysis", Foresight, accesat pe 3 martie, 2025, disponibil la https://foresight.unglobalpulse.net/blog/tools/causal-layered-analysis/.

[14] Jeanne Hoffman, "Unpacking Images of China Using Causal Layered Analysis", *Journal of Futures Studies*, Vol.16, No.3, Martie 2012, p. 2, accesat 20 februarie 2025, disponibil la https://jfsdigital.org/articles-and-essays/2012-2/vol-16-no-3-march/article/unpacking-images-of-china-using-causal-layered-analysis/.

[15] Sohail Inayatullah, Causal Layered Analysis: Sohail Inayatullah at TEDxNoosa, 12 mai 2013, accesat pe 1 martie 2025, disponibil la https://www.google.com/search?q=a+casual+layered+analysis&sca_esv=b04edf4c6777ddf8&source=hp&ei=4J DIZ9DhHomK9u8P8DI&iflsig=ACkRmUkAAAAAZ8ie8NJpIdZ4K0exhAdpW47izheXDEkx&ved=0ahUKE wjQ0ZalwvOLAxUJhf0HHXAZAAAQ4dUDCA4&uact=5&oq=a+casual+layered+analysis&gs_lp=Egdnd3Mt d2l6IhlhIGNhc3VhbCBsYXllcmVkIGFuYWx5c2lzMgcQIRigARgKSKEmUABYiSRwAXgAkAEAmAGCAq ABwBKqAQYxOS40LjK4AQPIAQD4AQGYAhmgAuMSwgIFEC4YgATCAgUQABiABMICChAAGIAEG EMYigXCAgoQLhiABBhDGIoFwgIIEC4YgAQY1ALCAgYQABgWGB7CAggQABgWGAoYHsICCRAAGI AEGBMYDcICCBAAGBMYDRgewgIFEAAY7wXCAggQABiiBBiJBcICCBAAGIAEGKIEwgIFECEYoAH CAgYQABgNGB7CAgQQIRgVwgIFECEYnwWYAwCSBwYxOC41LjKgB9GdAQ&sclient=gws-wiz&safe=active&ssui=on#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:058eb286,vid:ImWDmFPfifI,st:0.

[16] Sohail Inayatullah, "Casual Layered Analysis- Deepening the future", în Sohail Inayatullah ed., Questioning the Future: methods and tools for organizational and societal transformation, Tamkang University Press, 2005, p. 2, accesat pe 19 februarie 2025, disponibil la http://www.metafuture.org/library1/FuturesStudies/The-Study-of-the-Future-questioning_the_future_ch_1-2007.pdf.

collective consciousness. The first two levels are more easily perceived consciously. The systemic and social causes level is usually where political debate takes place, where the role of the state and of other actors and interests is analysed[17]. The present situation and visible activities are influenced by the deeper and subtler levels of metaphor/myth and worldview. If the analysis were limited only to the first two levels, foreign policy would be determined exclusively by the internal and external conditions of a state or entity. However, foreign policy is not determined solely by objective evaluations of a specific context but is also the result of subjectivity; security and foreign policy are intrinsically linked to it, forming the identity in whose name they are expressed[18]. These subtle aspects of subjectivity and identity are particularly present in the last two levels of analysis, namely worldviews and metaphor/myth.

The chapter reflects the opinion of Park and Seo, according to which the foreign policy of state/entity A derives from the meanings attributed by its identity framework at the metaphorical level, while the policy of state/entity B is interpreted through the identity framework of state/entity A. In this regard, we present below, for easier understanding, the schema provided by Park and Seo[19]. If the identities of the entities are in opposition, their foreign policies will be antagonistic and lead to conflict. Even if the foreign policies of entity A and entity B do not seem explicitly opposed, conflict resolution becomes difficult when their implicit concepts clash.
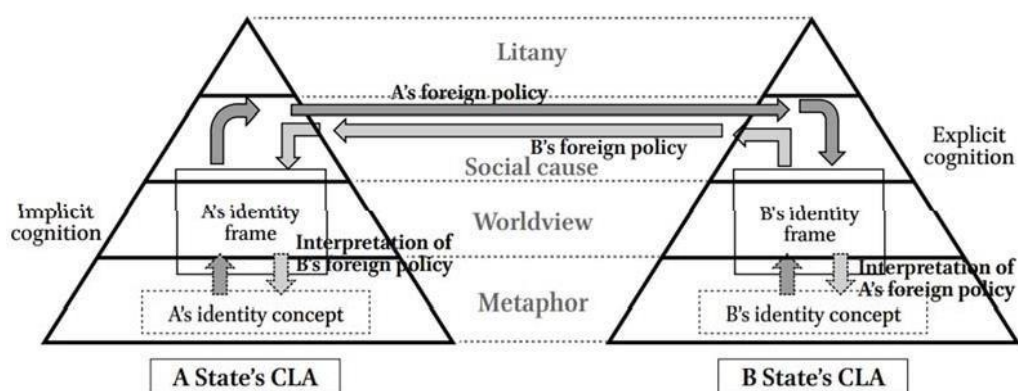
[17] Brian Bishop, Peta Dzidic, Lauren Breen, "Multiple-level analysis as a tool for policy: An example of the use of contextualism and causal layered analysis", Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice 4, p.4 2013, accesat 2 martie 2025, disponibil la https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285343795_Multiple-level_analysis_as_a_tool_for_policy_An_example_of_the_use_of_contextualism_and_causal_layered_analysis

[18] David Cambell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, University of Minnesota Press, 1992, p. 253.

[19] Doyoun Park, Yongseok Seo, "Identity Frame as the Anchor of Interstate Conflicts: The Case of the United States–North Korea Denuclearization Negotiation", International Negotiation Vol. 27, No. 2 2022, p. 224, accesat pe 3 martie 2025, disponibil la https://brill.com/view/journals/iner/27/2/article-p215_2.pdf.

<center>Application of the Method</center>

Litany

At the Litany level, EU–Russia relations are defined by the visible dynamic of events, including periods of cooperation as well as significant tensions, culminating in Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This evolution indicates a constant deterioration of multilateral cooperation mechanisms in Europe.

System

Going beyond the surface-level analysis of the Litany, the System level examines the fundamental systemic causes that contribute to and sustain the dynamics of relations between the European Union and the Russian Federation. These causes include the system of governance of each entity, the existing legal and institutional framework, foreign policy initiatives of both entities combined with security interests, as well as economic and demographic factors. The differences between the governance systems of the European Union and Russia have a major impact on their foreign policies, profoundly influencing the strategies they adopt on the international stage. These contrasts are reflected in divergent views on sovereignty, human rights, the international order, and bilateral relations. They also determine the use of distinct foreign policy tools and different approaches in relations with other global powers, often generating a tense dynamic in which the EU's democratic values conflict with Russia's geopolitical interests.

At this level, profound fractures are identified in the economic models of the two entities, as well as the vulnerability of the European Union resulting from its adoption of the neoliberal paradigm in relation to Russia—based on the belief that increasing trade and economic interdependence diminishes the risk of conflict—an assumption proven inadequate in the context of relations with the Russian Federation.

The analysis also highlights significant systemic differences in how the European Union and the Russian Federation understand and approach the concept of security. These divergences reflect distinct perspectives on threats, strategic priorities, and protection mechanisms, profoundly influencing policies and bilateral relations, as well as each entity's positioning on the international stage.

Another important systemic cause, often overlooked in the literature, is Russia's demographic decline. This affects the country's long-term economic, military, and social capacity, thereby influencing its internal stability and its geopolitical position internationally.

Worldview

Analysis at this level delves deeper, supporting the widely accepted perspective in the literature that a country's worldview is a product of its strategic culture. In this context, we follow Dr. Foxall's position, who values the definition offered by Professor Alastair Iain Johnston of Harvard University, which integrates factors such as history, political culture, and geography, considering it a valuable theoretical framework for our analysis[20]. It has been observed that the two entities start from different bases regarding strategic culture: the European Union is in the process of consolidating its own strategic culture, while Russia relies on a long-standing strategic tradition, shaped over centuries. Russia and the European Union present fundamentally different geostrategic approaches, reflected in their dimensions and perceptions of territory. Russia, the largest country in the world, covering 11% of the planet's landmass, has a strategic culture deeply rooted in the idea of territorial expansion as an essential mean of security, historically marked by the need to create "natural barriers" for protection against invasions. In contrast, the EU, with a much smaller territory, defines itself through a geopolitical identity based less on physical territory and more on shared values and institutional principles. This difference leads the EU to adopt a security policy oriented toward regional stability, development, and cooperation, while Russia prioritizes territorial control and the expansion of influence to ensure its security. Thus, differing views of geographic space profoundly shape the strategies and external relations of both entities.

Russia and the European Union also differ deeply in their historical and political cultures, which influence their worldviews and external strategies. Russia, with an "eternal" tradition and an identity built on historical continuity, claims a messianic role and a legacy encompassing territorial expansion and a sphere of influence over former Soviet states, supported by an authoritarian regime and a perception of the West as an irreconcilable adversary. In contrast, the EU emerged as a project of peace and reconciliation after World War II, grounding its identity on shared values such as democracy, human rights, and international cooperation, promoting consensus and dialogue within a pluralistic political

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[20] Alastair Iain Johnston, "Thinking About Strategic Culture", *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 1995, p. 38, accesat pe 2 martie 2025, disponibil la: https://doi.org/10.2307/2539119.

structure. This fundamental difference creates a tense dynamic in their relationship, reflecting profound divergences in their approaches to international order, sovereignty, and security.

The war in Ukraine represented a defining moment for the European Union, marking a clear break between its previous "innocent" vision and a new, more pragmatic and assertive approach to security and defence. The Russian invasion exposed Europe's vulnerabilities, prompting the EU to accelerate the consolidation of a common strategic culture, adopt economic sanctions, and provide military and humanitarian support to Ukraine. The conflict has driven the development of autonomous defence policies, including through the creation of a dedicated portfolio and initiatives to finance the defence industry. At the same time, tensions in the transatlantic relationship, accentuated by the rhetoric of the Trump administration, encouraged the EU to reaffirm its independence in foreign policy. Thus, the war in Ukraine is transforming the EU's worldview, emphasizing the need for collective security, strategic autonomy, and solidarity among member states.

Myth/Metaphor

This deepest level of CLA analysis represents the foundation that influences all other layers, relying on metaphors as essential instruments in the construction of theory and thought. Metaphor serves as a cognitive framework through which individuals or groups interpret information, thereby shaping decision-makers' perceptions of international relations. It reflects the ways in which national identities, historical narratives, and cultural assumptions are embedded in the understanding of phenomena, justified through concepts linked to myth and symbolism, in order to conceptualize reality by analogy with familiar elements.

From the outset of the analysis, the unequal position of the actors studied became evident: Russia's imaginary is deeply rooted in history, tying myths, national identity, and international status—especially in relation to Ukraine—thus profoundly influencing its foreign strategy. In contrast, the European Union's imaginary is more recent, fluid, and marked by diversity, but it suffers from an emotional deficit due to the elitist nature of the European project, with limited citizen involvement. This affects public perception and fuels calls for a European imaginary better able to connect people to the process of integration and democratization.

The myths of Russia and the European Union are built on opposing, antithetical bases, generating a profound identity conflict between the two entities. The EU promotes the idea of a safe space and a peace project, including for Ukraine, while Russia claims that Crimea is "always" part of Russia and views Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia as one people, thereby

accentuating the opposition between their identities. This divergence confirms the hypothesis that antagonistic foreign policies result from conflicting identity frameworks.

The invasion of Ukraine diminished the intensity of certain Russian myths, especially within the EU and neighbouring countries, and analysis of EU–Russia relations must consider multiple interconnected myths that influence collective mentality and foreign policy decisions.

The myths about the EU considered in this analysis include: The Myth of the Bull – the Birth of Europe; The Third Force; A Symbol of Peace; The EU as a Home Away from Home for Ukrainians; The EU as the Tower of Babel.

The myths about Russia considered include: The Greatness of Russia; The Provincialization of the EU and Recognition of Russia as a Great Power; The Bear; Moscow – the Third Rome; The Great Patriotic War; The Peoples of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine are One Nation and Crimea Has Always Belonged to Russia; The Besieged Fortress.

The myths about the international system include: The Rules-Based International Order vs. the Law of the Jungle; The Thucydides Trap.

Inayatullah argues that for each level of analysis within CLA, possible future scenarios can be constructed, illustrating this by integrating it with progressive change scenarios. Starting from Level 3, the worldview level, the chapter presents possible future scenarios generated by changes in these worldviews, from both the European Union's and Russia's perspectives. These scenarios will fall into four main categories: absence of change, marginal change, adaptive change, and radical change[21].

Alternative futures shaped by shifts in Worldview –The Perspective of the Russian Federation

Part of the academic literature and the Western political elite consider that Vladimir Putin's departure from power could lead to improved international relations and a less aggressive foreign policy. This paper explains why such an assumption is misguided and dangerous, as it rests on unfounded hope and fosters Western passivity.

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[21] S. Inayatullah, "Scenarios for teaching and training: From being Kodaked to future literacy and futuresproofing,*CSPS Strategy and Policy Journal*, Vol.8, iulie 2020, p.37, accesat pe 22 martie 2025, disponibil la
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359501728_Scenarios_for_Teaching_and_Training_From_Being_Ko daked_to_Futures_Literacy_and_Futures-Proofing.

Putin exerts major influence over Russia's domestic and foreign direction, but many of his ideas and values are deeply rooted in Russia's strategic culture and are shared by elites and the population alike. Therefore, any successor would likely pursue similar policies, even if differing in style or intensity. Moreover, the current regime is profoundly deinstitutionalized, and succession will likely take place outside of a democratic or transparent framework.

The CLA analysis showed that a radical shift in Russia's worldview would have to begin with a transformation of the geographical level of its strategic culture, not necessarily with a political change. Russia's strategic identity has been shaped by the vastness of its territory, and any detachment from this territorial perception could generate a profound modification of its global outlook. Thus, it is not the direct replacement of Vladimir Putin that would be decisive, but rather the diminishing of his influence over Russia's political and territorial structure.

Support for Putin remains very high (88% in 2025), even amid a prolonged economic and military war, which reflects not only propaganda but also a collective mentality favourable to authoritarianism and expansionism. Although other polls show low levels of economic and social confidence, they do not contradict support for the regime but rather suggest a resigned and anxious population, not a rebellious one. However, a major military defeat in Ukraine could represent a turning point. Against the backdrop of ethnic diversity, social discontent, and the fragmentation of central authority, there is a risk of separatist movements. Regions such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, the North Caucasus, or Yakutia are identified as areas with separatist potential, whether for historical, economic, or cultural reasons. These tensions could be amplified by the disproportionate mobilization of minorities in the war in Ukraine.

The Russian Constitution does not officially allow secession, and promoting separatism is illegal. Yet the realities on the ground and the current dynamics suggest that a significant weakening of the regime, fuelled by a military defeat, could lead to the fragmentation of the Federation or to destabilizing internal conflicts. Although it may seem difficult to imagine the disappearance of the Russian Federation in its current form, history shows that empires can collapse or be radically transformed following military defeats or national humiliations that trigger popular revolts. Relevant examples include Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, which led to the 1905 Revolution and important concessions such as the October Manifesto, as well as the collapse of the Tsarist Empire after participation in World War I and the 1917 Revolution. Similarly, the USSR's failure in Afghanistan exposed military vulnerabilities and

contributed to the decline of the Soviet regime. These precedents suggest that present-day Russia could also be affected by similar events.

Examples such as Tatarstan highlight the separatist potential of certain republics, supported by a distinct historical identity, economic development, and previous political claims. The disproportionate human losses in the war, especially in minority-populated regions, deepen resentment toward Moscow and fuel ethnic and social tensions. Recent analyses indicate multiple regions vulnerable to secessionist movements, from the Caucasus to the Republic of Sakha, where either non-Russian population dominate or historical precedents of independence exist. A military humiliation in Ukraine could trigger internal conflicts, and a weakened Russian Federation would struggle to maintain control over its entire territory. Separatist movements could give rise to new states with uncertain international recognition, some evolving into forms of small-scale authoritarian governance, with less global impact than the current centralized power structure.

This possible disintegration would directly affect the global balance of power, and the European Union would have to manage the risks generated by instability at its borders. The collapse of central control could trigger conflicts in territories occupied by Russia, such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Kaliningrad exclave. At the same time, Russian elites, in a desperate situation, could resort to radical and dangerous decisions, including the use of the nuclear arsenal, in a last attempt to preserve internal authority and influence.

Nevertheless, a controlled transition to a new form of organization—either a genuine federation or several independent states—could create opportunities for international cooperation and a more balanced relationship with the European Union. All these intermediate situations can be considered essential components of the Litany and System levels for a future characterized by adaptive changes. In this context, the Kremlin's vertical power structure would be replaced by a vortex of chaos, in which flows of power become fragmented and unstable. Such a transition would have significant implications for the international system, with multiple geopolitical and economic consequences. This future scenario is considered the riskiest for the European Union and its member states, due to the multiple possibilities that could generate conflicts at the EU's external borders and territorial reconfigurations.

Alternative futures shaped by shifts in Worldview – The EU's Perspective

The European Union is currently defined by a worldview based on soft power, promoting peace through democratic values, human rights, and economic cooperation. However, recent geopolitical shifts, especially the war in Ukraine, are forcing the EU to rethink its global role.

A radical change scenario would involve a complete transformation of the Union into a federation with its own army, capable of militarily defending European values and becoming an autonomous actor on the international stage. This would mean abandoning its traditional peaceful vision in favour of one based on military power. Implementing such a change would require profound reforms: amendments to EU treaties and to the constitutions of member states. For instance, in Germany, transferring defence powers to the European level is prohibited without a constitutional reform, while in Romania or Austria the army is directly subordinated to the people and the nation. Moreover, there are states with neutrality policies (Ireland, Austria) that could refuse integration into an active European army. Therefore, such a transformation would require broad political and societal consensus.

In an adaptive scenario, the EU would create a European army parallel to national ones, composed of volunteer soldiers (including from third countries), without major constitutional changes. This would preserve state sovereignty, while the European Commission could coordinate strictly defensive joint operations. Such an army would operate within the current principles of the EU and collaborate with NATO, ensuring greater strategic autonomy without undermining Union unity.

A marginal-change scenario assumes that only some states would deepen military cooperation, while others would remain reserved. Thus, the EU would support Ukraine, but without a strong and coherent collective effort. The conflict would drag on, and relations with Russia would deteriorate, leaving Ukraine in a gray zone, at risk of becoming a frozen conflict. Although Europe's defence industry would grow, the lack of a common vision and fragmented decision-making would prevent the EU from becoming a major actor in global security policy.

In the absence of any change, the EU would remain stuck in a worldview that leaves it incapable of responding to the new geopolitical reality. Its global influence would decline, and dependence on the United States would increase. Internally, the Union would face tensions, fragmentation, and inefficiency, while its founding myths and soft power ideology would become increasingly irrelevant. In this scenario, the EU risks marginalization and the inability to sustain a real solution for Ukraine or for continental security.

This thesis has analysed in depth the dynamics of relations between the European Union and the Russian Federation in the shared neighbourhood, emphasizing the central role of political elites and collective perceptions in shaping these geopolitical interactions. While Russia, through centralized and authoritarian leadership, perceives the neighbourhood as a strategic buffer zone and historical sphere of influence, the European Union, institutionally fragmented and led by diverse elites, promotes an agenda of democratic and economic enlargement. This dissonance of worldviews has fuelled a tense, often zero-sum climate, in which states such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have become arenas of competition and indirect confrontation.

The research highlights that, in the Russian Federation, foreign policy decision-making is deeply personalized, centralized around President Vladimir Putin and supported by a narrow network of loyal elites, within an opaque and vertical system. These elites use foreign policy not only as a strategic tool but also as a means of domestic legitimation and regime consolidation. In contrast, the EU operates within a democratic but fragmented framework, where coherence and efficiency are often limited by divergences between national and supranational elites. Foreign policy thus becomes an expression of collective identities, national fears and aspirations, shaped by historical perceptions, regime survival strategies, and systemic constraints, in an increasingly volatile international context.

In the context of EU and NATO enlargement, Russia formulates its external strategy as a response to perceived insecurity, defending its traditional sphere of influence. Hybrid warfare becomes Moscow's main tool of power projection, avoiding direct military confrontation. This involves tactics such as information manipulation, support for separatist movements, and infiltration of target-state structures. Under Vladimir Putin's leadership—shaped by KGB methods and a conservative ideology—this type of conflict reflects a preference for ambiguity, plausible deniability, and strategic subversion.

The application of hybrid warfare is adapted to the context of each state in Russia's neighbourhood. Moscow has used various tactics to influence separatist conflicts in Georgia, Moldova, or Nagorno-Karabakh, at times recognizing separatist entities and at other times maintaining ambiguity. The war in Ukraine marked a major shift—from indirect strategies to

open military confrontation—generating regional repositioning and giving states in the former Soviet space the opportunity to reaffirm sovereignty. At the same time, the Russian elite seeks to maintain internal control through the promotion of a conservative meta-ideology, but it is challenged by demographic changes and the potential loss of legitimacy.

At the European level, Russia's hybrid warfare as well as the war in Ukraine have led to a profound reassessment of the EU's foreign and security policy. The EU has faced limitations imposed by its intergovernmental character and by differing member state perceptions of Russia. Nonetheless, the conflict has reactivated the enlargement process, particularly eastward, and stimulated cooperation in defense. Foreign policy decisions are influenced not only by institutional architecture but also by elite perceptions, party dynamics, and external geopolitical pressures, especially in relation to the US, China, and energy security.

This work analyses the complex relationship between the European Union and the Russian Federation through the lens of multiple political theories, particularly Neoclassical Realism, which explains how Russia's foreign policy is influenced not only by international constraints but also by the ideologies and internal dynamics of the Kremlin regime. The conservatism promoted by Putin and the Russian elites functions as a strategic meta-ideology justifying an antagonistic stance toward the West, seen as a decadent and dangerous model. Decisions such as the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, although seemingly irrational from a classical rational perspective, are understood as instruments of political survival and internal consolidation.

The conflict between the EU and Russia is deeply affected by a "Manichean trap," in which both sides see each other as representatives of absolute and opposing values, thereby reducing the possibility of dialogue and pushing relations toward confrontation that allows only total victory. Russia's foreign policy reflects more an internal struggle for power than a classic strategic calculus, while current tensions are intensified by the perceptions and identities constructed by political elites on both sides. This dynamic makes it difficult to find pragmatic solutions and sustains a climate of continuous confrontation.

The future of EU–Russia relations depends on the capacity of both sides to radically change their worldviews. For the EU, this may mean adopting a stronger and more military stance, while Russia would need to reassess its identity and global role, especially in the wake of a possible military defeat. The deep changes required involve a redefinition of political and identity paradigms, and the success of this transformation will determine whether the two entities can move beyond rivalry and build a stable European security architecture in the 21st century.