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THESIS ABSTRACT

Mechanisms of Legitimizing the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation toward the Post-Soviet Space (2007–2024): Ukraine, Georgia, and the Republic of Moldova

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The Political and Academic Context of the Chosen Topic

In recent decades, the foreign policy of the Russian Federation has grown increasingly complex, undergoing continuous transformations with profound implications for the territorial, political, and even identity security of other states. The 2007 Munich Security Conference, where Russia's leader, Vladimir Putin, criticized the international order by claiming that the West was pursuing a unipolar dominance, marked the beginning of Russia's withdrawal—both symbolic and practical—from the Western normative consensus. Following this withdrawal, a series of geopolitical tensions emerged, along with military and ideological actions, such as the war in Georgia (2008), the annexation of Crimea (2014), the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine (2022), and the increasingly overt interference in the domestic politics of the Republic of Moldova (particularly between 2020 and 2024). These developments have heightened debates concerning both the evolution and the impact of Russia's foreign policy on international dynamics. At the same time, the manner in which Russia has continued to pursue its aggressive foreign policy (and still does—for example, by carrying out attacks against Ukraine while simultaneously engaging in peace negotiations), attempting to shape the perceptions and views of social and political groups regarding its legality, underscores the need to debate the issue of legitimacy in international relations.

In international relations, legitimization can be understood as the process through which an institution or regime consolidates its right to govern by obtaining recognition and acceptance from other actors. This process is shaped by numerous factors, such as states' status, their interests, actions, and interactions, as well as compliance with international and social norms (Bodansky, 2012, p. 5). Nonetheless, within a global system where war and the use of force have historically constituted central instruments of international interaction, where actors' interests increasingly overlap, and where "the deepening of the system vs. anti-system divide is becoming more pronounced" (Naumescu, 2017, p. 384), the legitimization of force and foreign policy by a state may assume both a legal character and an illegal one, while still appearing legal. The development of international law has introduced regulations aimed at restricting the resort to violence and at providing a legal framework for the use of force. However, the evolution of international relations has amplified the challenge of distinguishing between the legality and the legitimacy of a state's actions. The two World Wars compelled the contemporary international order to be founded upon

peremptory norms prohibiting the use of force (UN Charter, Art. 2, paras. 3 and 4) and on imperative legal provisions designed to uphold a "universal order" (Roșca, 2010, p. 97). Nevertheless, with the transformations in international dynamics after the Cold War, the concept of legitimization gradually became detached from strict legal interpretation, shifting instead toward the moral and discursive acceptability of actions. According to Troncotă (Rotaru & Troncotă, 2017, pp. 245–246), the early 1990s witnessed a growing tendency among international actors—particularly great powers (e.g., NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999)—to exploit normative concepts of the UN Charter, such as humanitarian interventions, as justification for foreign policy actions. Within this context, legitimacy becomes equivalent to what the author terms the "power of intervention," namely "the capacity of a state or a group of influential states to impose its own version of events, a version subsequently 'institutionalized' as an international norm" (Rotaru & Troncotă, 2017, p. 247), even if it has not been previously endorsed by the UN Security Council.

Thus, key events such as the Cold War have eroded the clear meaning of UN principles, producing repercussions on the interpretation of its laws and norms—particularly Article 51 concerning the right to self-defense (Roșca, 2010, p. 97). These effects remain visible today, especially in relation to the legal limits of threats or of the use of force under the pretext of peacekeeping. Both legal and illegal legitimization share a common denominator: the necessity of explaining to national and international audiences a state's use of "force," regardless of the form it takes. In the present thesis, the term is understood and employed in line with Roșca's definition—as encompassing all forms of coercion, from physical, economic, and political to psychological, the latter of which should not be excluded or underestimated in importance (Roșca, 2010, p. 98).

Within the academic field (Bjola, 2005; Roșca, 2010; Bodansky, 2012; Mînăscurtă, 2014; Simuziya, 2023), there has been a growing demand to provide a clear distinction between legitimization as a justification of state actions and legitimization as a legal construct. Consequently, the legitimization of a state's foreign policy, even when aggressive, depends on meeting criteria such as compliance with international norms and treaties, democratic values and morality, as well as the principle of imminent threat (Simuziya, 2023, pp. 12–16). Therefore, illegitimacy arises when force is exercised voluntarily and not within a necessary or well-argued context (Bodansky, 2012, p. 6). This distinction between legal and illegal legitimization of foreign

policy is crucial for understanding how power is exercised at the global level. The specialized literature on the subject reveals that, in international relations—the central focus of this research—the process of legitimization begins when actors attempt to explain and present their actions in such a way that they are broadly accepted as falling within the generally recognized international normative framework. This endeavor is supported by multiple legitimizing mechanisms, particularly at the discursive level, such as shaping perceptions, constructing roles, or interpreting the normative framework in favorable terms. Because a competitive or even aggressive discourse can effectively guide perceptions regarding a potential conflict or political event (Tsygankov, 2016, pp. 16–18).

Research gaps and the relevance of the topic

Over the past three decades, research in the field of international relations has devoted considerable attention to the role of identity and perceptions in shaping and legitimizing the foreign policy of states, particularly that of the Russian Federation (e.g. Katzenstein, 1996; Wendt, 1999; Sarcinschi, 2005; Flockhart, 2006; Tocci et al., 2008; Laruelle, 2009; Clunan, 2009; Epstein, 2011; Urban, 2010; Osipian, 2013; Leichtova, 2014; Grigas, 2016; Henrikson, 2016; Hopf, 2002, 2016; Neumann, 1996, 2015, 2017; Romanova, 2018; Tsygankov, 2014, 2016, 2018; Mankoff, 2022; Niño et al., 2023; Kulyk, 2023). Within the Romanian scholarly context, although the topic of Russia has been predominantly approached from a military and economic perspectives—thus, strategic rather than identity-centered—through the works of authors such as Naumescu and Dungaciu (2015), Blidaru (2018a, 2018b), Dungaciu (2020), Lazăr (2021), Goșu (2014, 2022a, 2022b), Secu (2023), Chifu (2023), and Naumescu (2019, 2023), there are nevertheless contributions that analyze Russian foreign policy from a constructivist perspective. A selection of recent Romanian academic contributions[1] that informed the present analysis includes Ciolan

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[1] Since Russian foreign policy has been extensively analyzed by numerous scholars, the present research is grounded in a carefully selected body of literature which, although not exhaustive, has been guided by several central criteria: direct relevance to the research objectives, the analytical value of the studies consulted, the diversity of theoretical perspectives, and the academic recognition of the included authors. It is important to emphasize that, despite the effort to provide a balanced and well-documented overview, certain valuable works and important names in the field have not been incorporated into the thesis, either due to space limitations or because they did not directly address the hypotheses and research questions formulated. Nevertheless, these works remain valuable for shaping and guiding further investigations on the subject.

(2016), who emphasizes Russia's construction of great power status through narratives invoking its history; Popescu (2013) and Secrieru (2022), who problematize the ways in which this self-ascribed identity shapes Russian foreign policy; and Cristea and Dumitrescu (2012), who stress the relevance of analyzing Russian perspectives on the roles and dynamics of states in international relations as a means to better understand its foreign policy. Complementary insights are also offered by Rotaru and Troncotă (2017) and Rotaru (2019), who highlight how Russian leaders reinterpret the international normative framework or invoke the protection of compatriots to justify foreign policy actions within the post-Soviet space, as well as by Toderas and Pascal (2024) and Popescu and Dobre (2020), who examine the important role played by Russian media and other non-state actors in disseminating and reinforcing the notion that Moscow's domestic and foreign policies are legitimate. Moreover, even though she does not specifically analyze the case of Russia, I consider the body of work by Ioana Leucea (2012, 2020, 2022, 2023) extremely valuable, as it contributes to understanding the complexity of the international system and the importance of approaching it through a constructivist lens—an approach that prevents overly reductionist interpretations of a state's foreign policy (for example, the assumption that an aggressive state necessarily pursues only strategic gains). From the specialized literature on the legitimization of Russian foreign policy, particularly within the post-Soviet space, it emerges that Russia often justifies its actions through rhetoric grounded in protectionism, stability, and the defense of Russian culture, compatriots, and history. The key events analyzed reflect actions rooted in this systematic justificatory framework, simultaneously supported by the construction of a strategic discourse designed to portray Russia as a guarantor of global equilibrium. Scholars such as Rotaru (2019), Hopf (2016), and Grigas (2016) demonstrate that Russian narratives have been progressively developed, gaining resonance especially since 2007.

However, existing research does not adequately cover the post-2020 period, which includes both the war in Ukraine launched in 2022 and Russian interference in the Moldovan presidential elections and the pro-EU referendum of 2020 and 2024. Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to fill this gap and to update the existing scholarship by analyzing the most recent data (discourses and documents). It thus provides an interpretative framework for examining the legitimization strategies employed by Russia in the post-Soviet space, spanning from the war in Georgia (2008) to the most recent geopolitical tensions mentioned above.

<center>**Research plan**</center>

Building on the considerations outlined above, the purpose of this work is not only to update and complement existing research on the legitimization of the Russian Federation's foreign policy with the most recent and tense geopolitical contexts (**covering also the first two years of the war in Ukraine**), but also to analyze the most recent Russian discourses and documents. The ultimate aim is to provide a specific analytical framework for understanding how legitimacy can be constructed, imposed, and sustained through language and normativity in international relations. The study seeks to outline an analytical model that helps identify a pattern of legitimizing Russia's foreign policy, based on clear and specific indicators derived from public discourse. I argue that such a model may serve as a reference point for the analysis of other similar practices initiated by Russia, offering an interpretative lens applicable to other contexts of conflict or geopolitical tension in different regions. Moreover, this model should subsequently be applied to the study of other international actors in diverse geopolitical situations, so that the identified legitimization pattern may be extended and refined.

To achieve this goal, I established several clear objectives that I pursued throughout the entire research, namely:

➢ Identifying the main discursive mechanisms used by Russia to construct the legitimacy of its subversive foreign policy actions in the post-Soviet space.
➢ Analyzing how international norms and legal frameworks are reinterpreted in Russian official discourse to justify illegal actions.
➢ Examining how the concept of the "Russian World" has been gradually consolidated as an instrument of legitimization.

These objectives were developed around the central research question: "*How have Russia's discursive-normative strategies shaped the process of legitimizing its foreign policy in relation to the post-Soviet space (specifically with Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine) during 2007–2024?*". This question stems primarily from a personal interest in understanding the process of legitimizing state foreign policy beyond purely geopolitical or military-strategic explanations. It also reflects an interest in legitimacy as a process, not simply as an outcome. Thus, the concern is not only

whether an action is legal or illegal, but rather how states attempt to embed their actions into an international normative framework so that they become perceived as legitimate. Furthermore, given that Russia's recent foreign policy actions have directly targeted a regional space in close proximity to Romania, I have asked whether this region functions as a testing ground for Russia's legitimization pattern, which in turn influenced the choice of the three post-Soviet states mentioned as case studies.

The research question rests on two working hypotheses:

➢ Since 2007, the Russian Federation has been undergoing a process of "re-imperialization" and re-legitimization on the international stage, where national identity and the concept of the "Russian World" serve as central instruments of foreign policy for justifying and supporting its hostile actions in the post-Soviet space.
➢ In legitimizing its subversive foreign policy in the post-Soviet space, Russian leaders have activated and sustained, both before and after key events, narratives grounded in protectionism, stability, and the defense of Russian culture, compatriots, and history, with the aim of preparing, familiarizing, and conditioning the collective mindset for future Russian actions.

To pursue these objectives, and ultimately the broader aim, the research further proposes the following secondary questions:

➢ What role do identity, perceptions, and norms play in constructing the legitimacy of Russia's foreign policy?
➢ How are international norms reinterpreted and instrumentalized in support of Russia's actions, and what are the main normative justifications used in legitimizing its hostile foreign policy actions?
➢ What are the specificities and discursive narratives employed by Russia toward Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine between 2007 and 2024?
➢ How does Russia's official rhetoric evolve over time, depending on the international context and the reactions of other actors to its subversive actions?

Although the topic is complex, widely debated, and well established in academic discourse—potentially raising questions about this study's originality—I argue that precisely the breadth and scope of the subject offer a positive analytical challenge. Russian foreign policy is not solely about military actions or diplomatic strategies; it extends across multiple conceptual dimensions (e.g., identity, economy) and geographic arenas (e.g., the post-Soviet space, Africa, Asia, relations with the United States or Europe). Temporally, too, it has adapted to key moments and undergone continuous transformations, thereby generating new and original analyses. In this context, the contribution of the present study lies in applying an analytical framework focused on a specific dimension of Russian foreign policy—discursive-normative mechanisms of legitimization—while also addressing a recent period (2007–2024), with relevant and timely case studies such as the war in Ukraine (2022–present) and the electoral context in Moldova (2020–2024).

The analysis of the primary data selected for this research indicates that, in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, Russian legitimization has relied on three main mechanisms identified here, all grounded in a constructivist perspective: a) influencing and shaping perceptions; b) reconstructing national identity, as well as that of other international actors; c) normatively justifying foreign policy. In this context, Russian official discourse has been structured around three central themes, activated both before and after key events so that their legitimization could be more readily assimilated by the public:

1. **Russia's identity is superior to that of the West**. Russia has self-defined as a bastion of traditional values, an empire grounded in history, reinforced by the consolidation (and expansion) of the "Russian World," in opposition to a decadent and hegemonic West.

2. **A shared history with Russia reveals the true identity of post-Soviet states**. Russian narratives have been built on historical determinism, claiming that history binds former Soviet states to Russia, and therefore they must remain under its influence.

3. **Russia has a moral and legal duty to defend its compatriots**. Justifications have been grounded in arguments that historical obligations and Russia's status as a great power compel Moscow to act by any means necessary to protect ethnic russians and those identifying with the "Russian World," regardless of location.

Additionally, Russian officials have employed a fourth discursive theme: **Russia's role as guarantor of international equilibrium in a multipolar world**. Unlike the first three themes, which are analyzed separately for each state, this one is examined independently, as it underscores the distinctive features of Russia's model of legitimizing foreign policy. This theme legitimizes Russia's policy of "re-imperialization" (Grigas, 2016, p. 37) by invoking the question of world order. In this framing, Russia presents itself as an essential actor in maintaining global balance, arguing that instability in the post-Soviet region is the result of Western interference. Accordingly, the Kremlin asserts not only its right but also its obligation to protect this region from external influence, even through expansionist, military, or political measures. Moreover, the theme has evolved over time: in 2007, Putin criticized U.S. dominance and proposed multipolarity as an alternative international order; by 2014 and 2022, multipolarity was no longer framed as a debatable alternative but as a fact to be ensured by Russia; and by 2024, Russia's role as a central power in a multipolar world had become not only assumed but imposed. Its great-power status was no longer to be negotiated or contested, but recognized de facto, with any attempt to limit Russian influence framed as a threat to international stability.

Applying the principles of the constructivist perspective as formulated by scholars such as Wendt (1999), Hopf (1998, 2002, 2007, 2010, 2016), Mitzen (2006), Checkel and Katzenstein (2009), and, in the Romanian context, Leucea (2012, 2020, 2022, 2023), Ghica (2010), and Arădău (2010), reveals several particularities of Russia's legitimization process in relation to the post-Soviet space between 2007 and 2024. The concept of legitimacy acquires a new—illegal—dimension when states reinterpret the international normative framework to justify, de facto, their hostile actions toward other actors. In Russia's case, its aggressive actions contradict the international law, yet they are discursively and normatively supported by invoking seemingly "legitimate" concepts—such as protecting history, culture, and Russian compatriots. Although not recognized as legal grounds for intervention under the international law, these arguments are contextualized within a semantic field associated with established UN Charter concepts such as the responsibility to protect, self-defense, or humanitarian intervention, with the aim of generating international acceptance or, at minimum, creating ambiguity regarding the legality of its actions.

In light of the above, understanding legitimacy requires moving beyond the legal framework. Its updated meaning is contextualized through discursive, strategic, and normative processes by

which states pursue their interests through reinterpretation of norms. Russia's repeated, selective, and adaptive use of legitimization mechanisms across time and space in Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova ultimately constitutes a potential pattern of legitimization that may be replicated elsewhere. Consequently, this pattern poses a potentially dangerous precedent. Against this background, the present research contributes to understanding legitimization not merely as a process of justifying actions but also as a process of testing the effectiveness of strategies in preparing larger foreign policy objectives in similar or different regions. The chosen timeframe and selected events thus provide a framework for observing the instrumentalization—and especially the evolution—of legitimization processes. In today's international context, marked by ideological fragmentation, legitimacy must be increasingly understood as a form of power in its own right. For it not only precedes, supports, or follows action, but also becomes a political instrument itself, capable of negotiating the boundaries between legality and illegality, between aggression and protection, and between what is considered moral and immoral.

General Overview of the Research Project	
Research components	**Description**
Research questions	**Primary research question:** How have Russia's discursive-normative strategies shaped the process of legitimizing its foreign policy in relation to the post-Soviet space (specifically with Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine) during 2007–2024? **Secondary research questions:** ➤ What role do identity, perceptions, and norms play in constructing the legitimacy of Russia's foreign policy? ➤ How are international norms reinterpreted and instrumentalized in support of Russia's actions, and what are the main normative justifications used in legitimizing its hostile foreign policy actions? ➤ What are the specificities and discursive narratives employed by Russia toward Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine between 2007 and 2024?

	➢ How does Russia's official rhetoric evolve over time, depending on the international context and the reactions of other actors to its subversive actions?
Hypotheses	➢ Since 2007, the Russian Federation has been undergoing a process of "re-imperialization" and re-legitimization on the international stage, where national identity and the concept of the "Russian World" serve as central instruments of foreign policy for justifying and supporting its hostile actions in the post-Soviet space. ➢ In legitimizing its subversive foreign policy in the post-Soviet space, Russian leaders have activated and sustained, both before and after key events, narratives grounded in protectionism, stability, and the defense of Russian culture, compatriots, and history, with the aim of preparing, familiarizing, and conditioning the collective mindset for future Russian actions.
Research objectives	➢ Identifying the main discursive mechanisms used by Russia to construct the legitimacy of its subversive foreign policy actions in the post-Soviet space. ➢ Analyzing how international norms and legal frameworks are reinterpreted in Russian official discourse to justify illegal actions. ➢ Examining how the concept of the "Russian World" has been gradually consolidated as an instrument of legitimization.
Theoretical and methodological framework	Constructivist paradigm
Case studies	Comparative analysis of Russia's foreign policy legitimization strategies regarding Georgia, Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova (2007–2024)
Primary data for analysis	➢ Speeches of Russian officials and their representatives in the ex-Soviet space (2000–2024) ➢ Official/strategic documents of the Russian Federation
Research methods	➢ Qualitative discourse analysis and qualitative document analysis ➢ Comparative analysis of three case studies ➢ MAXQDA

Table 1. *General Overview of the Research Project*

Thesis roadmap

The present research unfolds across six chapters. **The first chapter**, *Theoretical Dimensions of Legitimation in International Relations: Concept, Typologies, and Mechanisms*, plays an essential role in laying the theoretical foundations of the entire study. It is designed both to clarify conceptual aspects and to underline the importance of the constructivist perspective as a theoretical framework for the analysis.

This chapter highlights the need to understand legitimacy not merely as a formal or normative concept, but rather as a social and political process through which influence in international relations is constructed and maintained. This nuance becomes particularly relevant given that states often resort to legitimation tools to justify their foreign policies, even when these are inconsistent with the principles of international law. The chapter thus provides a necessary distinction between legality and legitimacy—an issue recurrent in the scholarly literature—illustrated not only theoretically but also through relevant international examples, which demonstrate the instrumentalization of legitimation as a strategic means of justifying foreign policy. Particular attention is also devoted to the mechanisms through which legitimation is enacted in international relations. Synthesizing multidisciplinary analyses (e.g., political science, law, and international relations) and drawing on the most recent scholarship, the chapter details how identity, social perceptions, and international norms function as pillars of the legitimation process.

The second chapter, *The Legitimation of the Russian Federation's Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Space – Theoretical Perspectives*, focuses on the analytical application of the concept of legitimation to concrete actions. It proposes a nuanced investigation of how this process is instrumentalized by an authoritarian state (the Russian Federation, consistently classified by democracy indices as authoritarian, with its authoritarian tendencies increasing in recent years—see EIU 2023, 2024) in order to consolidate its power and influence at both regional and global levels. To achieve a comprehensive perspective, the analysis adopts a comparative method, highlighting the analytical contributions of multiple schools of thought in international relations (constructivism, realism and neorealism, Marxism, and liberalism).

By exploring the different ways in which these schools of thought conceptualize and problematize the legitimation of Russian foreign policy, the chapter argues that the constructivist

perspective—chosen as the theoretical foundation of this thesis - offers a more nuanced interpretive framework, centered on the role of ideas, norms, and identity in shaping foreign policy. Constructivism does not deny material realities and their evident manifestations (in Russia's case, its strategic objective of redrawing borders in order to re-legitimate itself as a great power on the international stage). However, it stresses how such realities acquire meaning and are justified discursively and normatively. In contrast to realism, for instance, which interprets Russia's actions as reactive to Western policies, constructivism interrogates how this narrative is itself a method through which Russian leaders justify foreign policy decisions. By invoking selective historical interpretations, they appeal to a wide spectrum of emotions—fear, pride, frustration—thus seeking to legitimate the severe international implications of their actions.

Of course, despite the rationale for adopting constructivism as the theoretical framework, its limitations could not be disregarded. To mitigate these, the chapter devotes substantial attention to explaining the role of constructivism in understanding Russia's legitimation of foreign policy, not as an exclusive model but as a complementary framework that highlights the symbolic and normative complexities of these processes.

The third chapter, *Methodological Foundations of the Research*, elaborates the methods employed - case study, narrative discourse analysis, and document analysis—for investigating Russia's foreign policy legitimation in the post-Soviet space between 2007 and 2024. The chapter does not merely describe the methods but explains the rationale for employing a constructivist methodology, their epistemological compatibility, and their relevance to the research objectives. A critical reflection on the limits of these methods is also included, recognizing the challenges posed by the subjective nature of discourse selection, language barriers, the vast quantity of data, and methodological obstacles arising during the research, particularly after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Strategies for addressing these limitations are presented, such as the use of MAXQDA software to complement qualitative analysis and provide technical support in organizing and managing large volumes of primary data.

Another essential aspect of this chapter concerns the presentation of the data analyzed and the explanation of how these were collected. Briefly, the research is based on both primary data (speeches, public statements of russian officials and representatives, official russian documents, as well as international declarations and documents) and secondary data (analyses, books, articles,

etc.) from both Western (including Romanian and post-Soviet) and russian sources. Although this chapter carries a more technical character, it plays a central role in the thesis, providing not only a justification of the methods employed but also the epistemological foundation for the entire analytical endeavor. It acts as a bridge between the conceptual framework and its concrete application in the case studies that follow, where methodology becomes the primary tool for reconstructing, interpreting, and understanding the legitimation process in all its complexity.

The fourth chapter, *Russia's Foreign Policy Toward Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova (2007–2024): An Analysis of Legitimation Strategies*, addresses the main objective of the study: to examine how Russian officials and their representatives in the post-Soviet space employ multiple legitimation mechanisms to justify Russian foreign policy. This analysis generates an analytical model outlining Russia's legitimation pattern. Case selection was guided by the need to account for both military and non-military contexts: the cases of Georgia and Ukraine focus on events involving the use of force (the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine), while the Moldovan case (2020–2024) emphasizes Russian interference in domestic politics and threats of military escalation.

Each case study follows a common structure, focusing on discursive and normative strategies of legitimation. Applying an analytical grid inspired by constructivist theory and specialized literature, three central themes were identified in Russia's rhetoric: 1. Russia's identity is superior to that of the West—reaffirming its global actor status; 2. Shared history with Russia reveals the true identity of post-Soviet states—justifying Moscow's influence; 3. Russia bears a moral and legal duty to protect its "compatriots"—legitimizing interventions and regional control. A fourth, transversal theme was also identified: Russia as guarantor of balance in a multipolar world. This reflects Moscow's self-perception as a salvific force in an international system dominated by the West—represented variably as the United States, NATO, or the European Union, individually or collectively.

To understand these justifications, the chapter also analyzes the ideological framework underpinning Russian narratives. Particular attention is devoted to the evolution of the concept of "Russkiy Mir" ("Russian World") from a cultural idea to a geopolitical instrument that legitimates Russian foreign policy.

The fifth chapter, *Comparative Analysis of Case Studies on Russia's Legitimation Process*, synthesizes the main findings from each case. It argues that Russian leaders progressively construct the legitimation of foreign policy by instrumentalizing historical, identity-based, and protective themes. These are adapted across time and space in order to: a) influence perceptions among Russian citizens, post-Soviet societies, and international audiences; b) reconstruct both Russia's identity and that of other actors; c) adapt the normative framework according to situational interests. All these serve the overarching goal of legitimizing Russia's "re-imperialization" and its re-legitimation as a great power internationally.

The legitimation pattern outlined by this research may prove replicable by Russia in other geopolitical contexts or by other states seeking to justify their actions on the international stage. This issue is addressed in the **sixth chapter**, *Conclusions and Future Research Directions*, which formulates broader insights regarding the instrumentalization of legitimation in international relations. A key pillar of this pattern is the construction of an imminent threat, followed by the shaping of public opinion to accept measures portrayed as necessary to neutralize it—even when illegal under the international law. Within this framework, the idea of "protection"—of identity, citizens, historical heritage, or values—becomes a central rhetorical device used to legitimate actions that, objectively, breach international norms. The chapter also presents avenues for future research, such as developing a theoretical framework to examine how states (e.g., the Baltic States or Ukraine) deconstruct great-power legitimation narratives. Such responses could, in contrast, generate models of defensive legitimation —discursive strategies designed to protect sovereignty and counter hostile narratives. This approach also raises the question: What do revisionist states omit to say? (in this case, what Russia leaves unsaid at the discursive level). Thus, a particularly useful constructivist research direction would be the study of strategically omitted elements in Russia's foreign policy discourse. Ultimately, the final chapter extends the scope of the thesis beyond Russia, pointing toward future research into the legitimation processes of other international actors across diverse geopolitical contexts.

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