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## RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY SINCE THE 90s

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### Abstract

This is an exploratory study which reviews Russia's foreign policy from the 90s to the present day. Three theoretical perspectives studying Russia's foreign policy are reviewed in detail. The review shows that the existing theories cannot adequately explain Russia's foreign policy towards Georgia well. The study suggests that Ontological Security Theory (OST) can be a better tool to study Russia's foreign policy towards Georgia and the rest of the paper is used to explain different versions of the theory and provide empirical validation for the use of OST.

**Keywords:** Ontological Security Theory (OST), Georgia, international relations, security, Russia

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## INTRODUCTION

The development of Russian foreign policy has long been under intense scrutiny in the field of international relations (IR) – especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union (henceforth: USSR) in 1991. This is of great importance not only for studying the cataclysmic effect of the end of the Cold War on Europe and the world, but also for explaining the further aggressive policy of the Russian state towards the post-Soviet space. The result of this aggressive policy is the Russia-Georgia war in 2008 and the conflict in the eastern part of Ukraine, as well as in Crimea since 2014, which led to a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.<sup>0</sup>

## MAIN PART

Many different and sometimes conflicting theoretical perspectives have been used to explain Russia's foreign policy strategy and actions. Broadly speaking, the literature on Russian foreign policy can be divided into three camps: power-based explanations, ideological explanations, and domestic political explanations.<sup>2</sup>

First, those who rely on power-based explanations argue that the balance of power in the global system of states is paramount and prioritize the material threats that arise from it.<sup>3</sup> Others argue that the situation is exactly the opposite, namely that long-term decline in power forces Russia to act as a great power and to be assertive and create favorable international structures.<sup>4</sup> Finally, some point out that Russia's behavior is a common case of balancing against the West and the so-called creation of buffer zones between the EU and NATO on the one hand and Russia on the other.<sup>5</sup>

Second, an idea-based explanation emphasizes intangible security issues such as identity, values, or norms to understand Russian foreign policy motivations. Much of this literature deals with Russia's self-image as a great power and its recognition by the international community.<sup>6</sup> Related to this is the opinion that Russia, as a great power, has the right to interfere in its sphere of influence.<sup>7</sup> Importantly, many scholars have used ontological security theory (OST) to explain his foreign policy. Others point to a different formation of identity in

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<sup>2</sup> Elias Götz, “Putin, the State, and War: The Causes of Russia’s near Abroad Assertion Revisited\*+,” *International Studies Review* 19, no. 2 (May 10, 2016): 228–53, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viw009>.

<sup>3</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Projecting Confidence, Not Fear: Russia’s Post-Imperial Assertiveness,” *Orbis* 50, no. 4 (September 2006): 677–90, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2006.07.008>.

<sup>4</sup> Andrej Krickovic, “The Symbiotic China-Russia Partnership: Cautious Riser and Desperate Challenger,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 10, no. 3 (2017): 299–329, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pox011>.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Korolev, “Theories of Non-Balancing and Russia’s Foreign Policy,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 6 (February 3, 2017): 887–912, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2017.1283614>.

<sup>6</sup> Iver B. Neumann, “Russia as a Great Power, 1815–2007,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 11, no. 2 (May 20, 2008): 128–51, <https://doi.org/10.1057/jird.2008.7>.

<sup>7</sup> Johan Matz, *Constructing a Post-Soviet International Political Reality: Russian Foreign Policy towards the Newly Independent States 1990–95* (Uppsala: éditeur non identifié, 2001).

the Russian state and politics. The idea here is that there is competition between different narratives both within the population and among political elites about what characterizes Russia. March, Engstrom, Tsygankov, and Hopf argue that the shift from "statist nationalism" to a "conservative," "ethno-nationalist," or "civilizational" form of national identity explains Russia's shift from pro-Western to expansionist foreign policy.

Third, and lastly, scholars also argue that the internal political structures and form of government in Russia and/or the characteristics of the political elite—primarily Vladimir Putin—determine Russia's foreign policy strategy. Within this camp of explanations, some scholars argue that Russia's foreign policy rapprochement with like-minded authoritarian states and interference in the democratization of its neighboring countries (eg, Ukraine and Georgia) is done to ensure regime survival.<sup>8</sup> The argument is that the proliferation of democracies and states that uphold the liberal international order near Russia could potentially destabilize its authoritarian system. This is, among others, according to Marten, expressed in the patron-client networks that Russia maintains with Iran and Syria. Scholars also point to the professional background and personal characteristics of President Vladimir Putin, as well as the importance of the worldview of the political elites around him.<sup>9</sup>

Some researchers specifically refer to the 2008 Russia-Georgia war. Several scholars have focused on Russia's foreign policy towards Georgia before and after the 2008 war. For example, Wilhelmsen argues that Russia's foreign policy strategy is based on the securitization of Georgia as a "Western proxy" and, therefore, a threat to Russia's neighborhood and sphere of influence.<sup>10</sup> Strichartz emphasizes the importance of changing role concepts in Russia. In the wake of the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, Russia supported cooperative policies because of its belief in good relations with the West, internal development in Russia, and the presence of liberal advisers.<sup>11</sup>

However, this conception of the national role changed before and after the 2008 war, where self-image as an increasingly important great power, along with changes in the global balance of power, made Russia more aggressive in its foreign policy. The latter perspective is somewhat reflected in Rezvan's argument that part of Russia's strategy towards the post-Soviet space, which is also Georgia, can be explained by the neorealist paradigm of securing

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<sup>8</sup> ROY ALLISON, "Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis," *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (July 2013): 795–823, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12046>.

<sup>9</sup> Ian Bremmer and Samuel Charap, "The *Siloviki* Putin's Russia: Who They Are and What They Want," *The Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (January 2007): 83–92, <https://doi.org/10.1162/wash.2006-07.30.1.83>.

<sup>10</sup> Julie Wilhelmsen, "Identification and Physical Disconnect in Russian Foreign Policy: Georgia as a Western Proxy Once Again?," *European Journal of International Security* 8, no. 1 (May 27, 2022): 89–108, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2022.18>.

<sup>11</sup> Damian Strycharz, "Shifts in Dominant National Role Conceptions and Changes in Russia's Foreign Policy," *Role Theory and Russian Foreign Policy*, March 9, 2022, 181–204, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003219200-9>.

geopolitical security interests.<sup>12</sup> However, to understand the full picture, it is necessary to take into account Russia's imperial historical experience, which led to the role concept of the existence of a legitimate great power in its sphere of influence.

## CONCLUSION

What can be seen from the above is that no scholar has used OST's views to investigate Russian foreign policy in the case of Georgia. Nevertheless, OST was used in a broader context to understand Russia's general foreign policy strategy. Most of these papers examine the consequences of the relationship between the West and Russia on their respective feelings of ontological security and, therefore, on behavior. Some argue that Russia's assertive foreign policy can be attributed to the West's partial or total ignorance of Russia's self-esteem as a great power.<sup>13</sup> Others argue that Russia's hostility to the West has led to a sense of "Russianness" and Russian "civilization" that emphasizes traditional values and norms and aims to build unity in the post-Soviet space over ideological, spatial, and social factors.<sup>14</sup> The collapse of the USSR is a collective trauma for Russia, and the liberal international order represented by the West stands against it and sows ontological security fears for Russia.<sup>15</sup> It is possible that the rise of geopolitical rhetoric in Russia's foreign policy discourse is an attempt to reduce ontological insecurity resulting from the end of the Cold War, and Russia is trying to reestablish itself as a great power. Finally, Akchurina and Della Sala suggest that Russia and the EU have created an endemic situation of conflict in regions of mutual interest because their narratives about these regions and the behavior that this entails pose an ontological threat to the other.<sup>16</sup>

There are two important gaps in the study of Russia's international relations policy, which can be summarized as the need for a long-term study of Russia's foreign policy towards Georgia and doing it on the basis of the OST. Filling these gaps will allow us to better understand Russia's foreign policy and specifically Russia's foreign policy towards Georgia.

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<sup>12</sup> Babak Rezvani, "Russian Foreign Policy and Geopolitics in the Post-Soviet Space and the Middle East: Tajikistan, Georgia, Ukraine and Syria," *Middle Eastern Studies* 56, no. 6 (July 23, 2020): 878–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2020.1775590>.

<sup>13</sup> Tanya Narozhna, "Revisiting the Causes of Russian Foreign Policy Changes: Incoherent Biographical Narrative, Recognition and Russia's Ontological Security-Seeking," *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 15, no. 2 (June 30, 2021): 56–81, <https://doi.org/10.51870/cejiss.a150203>.

<sup>14</sup> Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, "Russia's Relations with the West: Ontological Security through Conflict," *Contemporary Politics* 22, no. 3 (June 28, 2016): 359–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2016.1201314>.

<sup>15</sup> Christian Kaunert, "EU Eastern Partnership, Hybrid Warfare and Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Eucrim - The European Criminal Law Associations' Forum*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.30709/eucrim-2022-011>.

<sup>16</sup> Viktoria Akchurina and Vincent Della Sala, "Russia, Europe and the Ontological Security Dilemma: Narrating the Emerging Eurasian Space," *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 10 (November 26, 2018): 1638–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1546829>.

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