Nation-Building in Times of Conflict:
The Discursive Construction of Russian National
Identity through the Russo-Georgian War

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents ...................................................................................................................... 2
List of Figures and Tables ........................................................................................................ 5
Abstract .................................................................................................................................. 6
Declaration ................................................................................................................................. 7
Copyright Statement ................................................................................................................ 7
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................... 8
Note on the Transliteration and Translations of Russian .......................................................... 9
Map of Georgia ........................................................................................................................ 10

Introduction .............................................................................................................................. 11
The Differing Interpretations ................................................................................................. 14
Russia’s ‘Neutral’ Stance and the Recent Conflict in Ukraine ................................................. 17
Historical Background ................................................................................................ ............ 19
  The Soviet Period and the 1990s ....................................................................................... 19
  The Outbreak and Development of the 2008 War .......................................................... 22
Review of the Literature on the 2008 War ....................................................................... 25
  The Essentialist Perception of Russian Identity ............................................................. 25
  Discourse Analysis and the 2008 War .............................................................................. 27
Structure of the Thesis ................................................................................................ ............ 29

Chapter 1. War, Discourse, and National Identity .................................................................. 31
Introduction ............................................................................................................................. 31
  1.1. The Role of Language and Discourse in Society ......................................................... 31
  1.2. The Power of Words in War ......................................................................................... 36
  1.3. Discourse and Identity ............................................................................................... 38
    The Nation-Building Process ........................................................................................... 39
    The Construction of Russian National Identity ............................................................ 40
  1.4. The Discursive Battle in Russian Society .................................................................... 43
    Nation-Building and War ............................................................................................... 45
    The Importance of the Other/s in the Construction of National Identity ..................... 47
  1.5. The Categorisation of the Participants in the Conflict ............................................... 49
    The Themes in Focus and the Analysis of the Data ....................................................... 49
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................... 54
Chapter 2. The Discursive Construction of Russia as a ‘Non-Imperialist Great Power’

Introduction ........................................................................................................56
2.1. Russian Greatness in a Historical Perspective ........................................59
2.2. Constructing a Great Power through Other Means ..............................61
   Enacting an Interventionist Discourse .......................................................62
   A Legal Discourse as a Base .................................................................67
2.3. Strengthening Russia through a Successful Military Operation ...........70
2.4. Independence as a Result of the People’s Will ........................................74
2.5. A Moment of Truth and Russia’s 9/11 ..................................................77
2.6. The Formation of a Non-Imperialist Great Power ................................83
Conclusion ........................................................................................................89

Chapter 3. The Historic Legacy of the Soviet Union and the Cold War ........91

Introduction .......................................................................................................91
3.1. The Study of History Politics Related to Russia ......................................94
3.2. The Uses of the Soviet Past .................................................................96
3.3. The Role of History in the Context of the Russo-Georgian War ............99
   The New Russia and the Cold War Mentality of the United States ..........99
   A Militarily-prepared Peaceful State ....................................................101
3.4. The Role of History and the Independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia ..........................................................103
   The Cold War on August 26 2008 .........................................................104
   The Ambivalent Stance towards Soviet History .....................................108
   The Spectre of Imperial History in the Post-Independence Period ..........109
3.5. The Use of Elements from Russian Literary Culture ............................110
3.6. The Downplaying of the International Tension ....................................112
3.7. The Distance from the Soviet Union ....................................................114
3.8. The Repetition of the Discourse .........................................................118
Conclusion .......................................................................................................122
Chapter 4. Discourses on Citizenship and Compatriot Policy during the 2008 War …

Introduction .............................................................................................................................. 124
4.1. Russia’s ‘Passportisation Policy’ ............................................................... 126
4.2. The Ambiguous Compatriots Policy ......................................................... 128
4.3 Defining Nations and the Issue of Genocide ............................................. 129

Defining ‘Russians’, ‘Ossetians’, ‘Abkhazians’, and
‘Georgians’ ........................................................................................................................... 130

The Duty to Protect in Times of War ................................................................. 133

4.4. The End of War and the Protection Narrative ........................................ 135
4.5. The Uses of the Genocide Claim ............................................................... 137
4.6. The Georgian People and Territorial Integrity ....................................... 141
4.7. Imperial History and the Attack on Russia ............................................ 144

Uses of Imperial History ............................................................................................... 145

Russia as a Victim ............................................................................................................ 151

4.8. The Five Foreign Policy Principles and the Continuation of the USSR
................................................................................................................................................ 153

Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 157

All Roads Lead to Russia as a Great Power ................................................... 162

The Great Power Vision – a Legacy from the USSR ................................. 164

The Protection Narrative and the Great Power Vision ........................... 168

Some Final Remarks ........................................................................................................ 171

Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 157

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................... 174

Primary Sources ................................................................................................................ 174

Secondary Sources ............................................................................................................ 180

Final Word Count: 67 419 words.
List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1 Map of Georgia........................................................................................................10

Table 1 Tsygankov’s Constructivist Explanation of Foreign Policy: A Causal Process.....45
Abstract

This thesis examines the discursive construction of Russian national identity through the 2008 war in Georgia with a focus on how this process was influenced by the Russian leadership’s desire to gain the support of both the domestic and international audiences for its actions outside its borders. These actions involved forceful military intervention, the recognition of the independence of the two Georgian break-away republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the decision to place Russian military troops in the two republics during the aftermath of war. The study critically examines the official Russian discourse, with a focus on particular visions of national identity that this discourse utilized. The study demonstrates how the official discourse in the context of the 2008 war contributed to the construction of Russian national identity and thereby seeks to highlight the performative power of language.

By placing considerable focus on the internal dimension of the Russian leadership’s conduct in the international arena, i.e. the consolidation of the national community in the event of war, the thesis contributes to an oft overlooked element of Russian foreign policy initiatives. Consequently, it seeks to challenge the tendency to explain Russian actions with regard to the war as a natural result of an imperialistic identity – a tendency that fails to take into account how national identity can be constructed in its more immediate context. By making use of Rogers Brubaker's concept of nationalism as an event, the study discusses the increased force of nationalism during war and demonstrates how this was clearly the case during the 2008 war in Georgia.

The analysis concentrates on three main identity visions within the official Russian discourse. Firstly, it examines how contemporary Russia was constructed as a great power, partly as a response to the claims that it was an imperialist state. Secondly, it discusses the role of certain historical concepts, i.e. the Cold War and the Soviet Union, within the discourse and elaborates upon the act of politicising history. Thirdly, the study analyses the Russian leadership’s protection narrative that emphasised the responsibility to protect Russian citizens and compatriots in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It is demonstrated how these different identity visions were intertwined, resulting in a rather contradictory official discourse that speaks to many different audiences simultaneously, while foregrounding the first of the above-mentioned identity visions, namely of Russia as a great power.
Declaration

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Moreover, I would like to thank my family and friends who have spoilt me with their love and support these last few years. They let me be who I needed to be during this process, with all its highs and lows. Last but not least, to Gyöngyi, who has accompanied me during the main part of this journey, I am more grateful than I can express. This final product is as much yours as mine.
Note on the Transliteration and Translations of Russian

This thesis uses the Library of Congress system of transliteration without diacritic marks.

The translations in English are made by comparing the original Russian source with the official English translation provided by the Kremlin. If the official translation is deemed to be acceptable, it is left as it is, quoted verbatim; otherwise the translation is modified. In those cases where the official translation into English is not modified, the thesis includes a reference to the English version together with the Russian one.
Figure 1  Map of Georgia

Source: Fischer Weltalmanach, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2009, in the report by the International Fact-Finding Mission in Georgia.\(^1\)

Introduction

The brief war in Georgia in August 2008 constituted Russia’s first major military intervention into another sovereign state since the fall of the Soviet Union, as well as the largest outbreak of fighting in Europe since the war in Kosovo in 1999.\(^2\) The 2008 war resulted in the deaths of about 850 people, with many more wounded, and more than 100,000 civilians fleeing their homes.\(^3\) Yet the nature of the war and the role of its participants were subject to widely disparate interpretations. In particular, what ‘Russia’ is, i.e. Russian national identity, and its aim in waging war outside its borders was widely debated in the international arena.

Questions concerning the ‘just’ borders of the post-Communist Russian state as well as who belongs to the Russian nation came to the fore, a discussion that was intensified following the dissolution of the USSR. Put differently, the question of where Russia, as a national community and a state, actually begins and ends acquired renewed urgency during and in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 war.\(^4\) These differences in interpretation shaped the ‘media war’ or ‘information war’ that followed the initial fighting, with the main Russian and Georgian media outlets presenting widely differing pictures of the war and the developments on the ground.\(^5\)

The international debate following Russia’s military involvement became concentrated around three main themes. Firstly, there was controversy over whether the war demonstrated that contemporary Russia was to be considered a ‘Great’ or ‘Imperialist Power’. Secondly, the historic legacy of the Cold War and the Soviet Union was debated,\(^6\) In the 1990s, there had been a degree of Russian military involvement in the Georgian break-away republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as in Transdniestr in Moldova, and Tajikistan. See Hans Mouritzen and Andres Wivel, *Explaining Foreign Policy: International Diplomacy and the Russo-Georgian War* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012).

\(^2\) In the 1990s, there had been a degree of Russian military involvement in the Georgian break-away republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as in Transdniestr in Moldova, and Tajikistan. See Hans Mouritzen and Andres Wivel, *Explaining Foreign Policy: International Diplomacy and the Russo-Georgian War* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012).


\(^5\) In her analysis of the conflicting media reports about the war, Margarita Akhvlediani argues that the conflict can be perceived as a media as much as a military conflict. See Akhvlediani, “The fatal flaw: the media and the Russian invasion of Georgia”, in *Crisis in the Caucasus: Russia, Georgia and the West*, ed. Paul B. Rich (New York: Routledge, 2010). Furthermore, Paul A. Goble argues that the 2008 conflict was primarily an information war, and that the victories and defeats on the information plane were more important and fateful than those on the ground. “Defining Victory and Defeat: The Information War between Russia and Georgia”, in *The Guns of August 2008: Russia’s War in Georgia*, eds. Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2009).
due to a number of states claiming the resemblance of the heightened international tensions in connection to the conflict to the strained international relations during the Cold War and of contemporary Russia with the USSR. Thirdly, the Russian leadership’s narrative of protecting Russian ‘citizens’ and ‘compatriots’ in South Ossetia and Abkhazia was in focus due to such a narrative creating confusion about who could be claimed to belong to the Russian nation and thus be in need of protection if the Russian government deemed it necessary.

The articulation of the differing interpretations, and the subsequent understanding of the war and its participants’ roles, would not have been possible without language and discourse. The latter constructs reality in a particular fashion by producing specific accounts of events and the actors involved. Discourse thus assists the political leadership of a country in exercising power through the use of words by accepting the presence of certain narratives in society while withstanding others. The narratives presented by the Russian leadership in the context of the 2008 conflict resulted in varying interpretations of the war and its participants for the leadership’s audiences. The differing interpretations were thus formed through discourse. It is thus important to examine the logics inherent in the official Russian discourse around the three themes discussed above, since these themes all touch upon geopolitical issues that are highly relevant to Russia’s neighbouring countries and the international community at large.

Yet despite the relevance of language and discourse, these aspects have been largely neglected in the scholarship on the 2008 war. In order to fill this gap, the main aim of the thesis is to examine how the Russian political leadership aimed to legitimize its conduct through discourse in the context of war. The recent scholarship has noted how nationalism tends to be mobilised suddenly in the context of a military conflict, with the elite using particular discourses of nationhood to rally the citizens around the flag. In analysing how the official Russian discourse aimed to legitimise the Russian government’s actions in Georgia, the thesis will focus on particular visions of Russian national identity that the discourse utilized.

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The study investigates the discursive mobilisation of Russian national identity in the context of war by addressing two core questions and four sub-questions, all of which touch upon the three above-mentioned themes around which the Russian political leadership waged its ‘information war’ during its conflict with Georgia.

Core research questions:
- Which discursive constructions of Russian identity were particularly prominent in the official Russian discourse during the 2008 war in Georgia?
- How did these discursive constructions relate to the issues of the ‘just’ borders of the post-Communist Russian state and of its national membership and belonging?

Sub-questions:
- How did the Russian political leadership discursively construct Russia as a Great Power in relation to the international critique portraying contemporary Russia as an Imperialist Power?
- What role did the historic legacy of the Soviet Union and the Cold War play for the Russian political leadership in the face of the international critique in connection with the 2008 war?
- What role did the narrative of protecting Russian citizens and ‘compatriots’ play in discursively legitimising the Russian government’s actions?
- What particular meanings did the concepts of the Great/Imperial Power, Soviet Union, Cold War, Russian Citizens and Compatriots, acquire in the war context?

By examining these questions, the thesis aims to contribute to a better understanding of how the official Russian discourse in the context of war contributed to the many interpretations of the conflict and its participants. The highly disparate perceptions of the war and Russia’s role in it, especially in connection with the three themes discussed above, had a negative effect on both the Russo-Georgian relationship as well as the relations between Russia and the ‘West’ (i.e. the European Union and North America). Therefore, it is vital to examine the logics behind these disparate interpretations.
The Differing Interpretations

In all instances of war, it is difficult for outside observers to access an impartial, balanced account of developments on the ground and the role of the belligerent parties, which naturally applies also to the 2008 war in Georgia. The reactions from a number of states, based on certain interpretations, ranged from accusations of Russian imperialism to a more pragmatic stance showing concerns for the developments on the ground, and a limited number of states demonstrated their open support for Russia’s actions.7

The harshest critique derived from the USA and most EU states, and especially from a number of post-Communist states bordering Russia. These members of the international community generally disregarded the Russian version of events and a large number of the post-Communist states, the majority of which are now members of the European Union, delivered a relatively alarmist message about what the Russian actions really meant and the role that Russia was playing within international relations.8 They depicted Russia’s military intervention in Georgia, the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as the decision to station military troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia after the war, as showing the country’s true face as an authoritarian state with imperialistic goals.9 Furthermore, the Russian leadership’s argument that the military intervention arose

7 Among the European states, examples of Russia-supporters were Italy, with Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi a staunch supporter of Russia’s actions during the war, as well as Belorussian President Aleksander Lukashenko who showed open support for Russian military actions, even though the latter was mostly silent during the initial war phase and failed to recognise the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the aftermath of the war. It may be argued that Germany adopted a more pragmatic stance by avoiding delivering any especially harsh critique of either Russia or Georgia, as did France which held the European Council Presidency that year and thus spoke for the European Union as a whole. For a good overview of the reactions of the international community, including a discussion of the more neutral stance of a number of the Central Asian States and China, see Mouritzen and Wivel, International Diplomacy and the Russo-Georgian War. For a study limited to the reactions of the European states, see Henrik Boesen Lindbo Larsen, “Russo-Georgian War and Beyond: Towards a European Great Power Concert”, Working Paper 32, (Danish Institute for International Studies, DIIS 2009), https://www.ciaonet.org/attachments/15360/uploads.

8 As stated by Oksana Antonenko, however, it took several days for the West to issue clear statements in support of Georgia which surprised most Georgians, who expected the West to intervene on their side in face of a Russian attack. Only after Russia crossed into Georgia proper and began to bomb Georgian towns did the West issue strongly-worded statements requesting Russia to withdraw its troops. Antonenko, “A War with no Winners,” Survival: Global Politics and Strategy, 50, no. 5 (2008), 23-36, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00396330802456445.

9 In a joint statement by the presidents of Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania issued on August 9, 2008, the EU and NATO were called to ‘stand up against the spread of the imperialist and revisionist policy in the East of Europe’, in Philippa Runner “EU preparing snap summit on Russia-Georgia War,” EU Observer, August 10, 2008, http://euobserver.com/foreign/26596 (accessed May 7, 2014). Furthermore, a separate statement issued by the Estonian Parliament, the Riigikogu, suggested that Russian arguments about the need to protect Russian citizens were identical to those used by Nazi Germany when attacking Czechoslovakia and Poland in 1939, http://www.riigikogu.ee/index.php?id=50828, accessed May 7, 2014. The then Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt presented a similar argument, suggesting that the doctrine of intervention as based on the protection of individuals with Russian passports in the territory of South Ossetia could be compared to
from the need to protect Russian ‘citizens’ and ‘compatriots’, mainly in South Ossetia but also in Abkhazia, was harshly criticised. The highest levels of concern about the arguments inherent in the protection narrative were demonstrated by those post-Communist countries, with large numbers of ethnic Russians, Russian speakers or people with a looser affinity to Russia who could be included under the term ‘compatriots’.

In contrast, the Russian political leadership presented a starkly different picture to that of its critics in the West, whereby it sought to downplay the most serious accusations, but simultaneously framed the war as demonstrating Russia’s heightened importance in the world political arena. Much of Russia’s official discourse took the form of a response to the critique deriving from large segments of the international community, and was thus dedicated to explaining Russia’s choices in the war context and thereby seeking to justify the military intervention and the post-war developments. It was even more important for the Russian leadership to promote Russian actions to the domestic audiences, in order to garner the necessary support for the war, the independence recognition and the permanence of the Russian military troops. The message presented to the Russian public was generally well perceived and the approval rates for both President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, lay at 83% and 88%, respectively, in September 2008, according to a survey by Russia’s main independent and most trustworthy polling agency, the Levada-Center.10

In order to gain support for its military actions by downplaying any aggressive intentions on the part of Russia, Moscow went as far as claiming that Russia was, in practice, not a party to the conflict but rather a mediator and protector of peace and human rights. However, the scholarly literature most commonly uses the term ‘the Russo-Georgian War’, a title clearly indicating that Russia was one of the belligerent parties in the conflict, waging war against Georgia. On occasion, the conflict is called ‘the Five-Day War’, thus emphasising its brief nature, and such a term is possibly used in order to differentiate the 2008 hostilities from the lengthier wars of the early 1990s and mid-2000


in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia was involved in both of these earlier conflicts, however, even though the extent and purpose of its involvement remains debated.

Moreover, in a 2009 report from the European Union’s International Fact-Finding Mission on the conflict in Georgia, in which all sides of the war were allowed to present their respective view of the hostilities, the titles of the texts submitted to the mission developing the report clearly indicated the different portrayals of the conflict deriving from the belligerent parties. Georgia entitled its original English text ‘The Aggression by the Russian Federation against Georgia. Summary’. Russia’s version bore the title ‘For the overall assessment of the War in August 2008. Georgia’s aggression against South Ossetia in August 2008’, [К общей оценке августовского конфликта 2008 г. Об агрессии Грузии против Южной Осетии в августе 2008 года]. Moreover, the Russian account in the report stated that the use of the term ‘the Russian-Georgian War’ was inappropriate. Russia was allegedly only exercising its ‘inalienable right to self-defence’ as outlined in Article 51 in the United Nations Charter. Russian military actions were thus concentrated on defending its people in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, i.e. Russian citizens/compatriots residing in the republics as well as Russian peacekeepers on the ground, from the Georgian aggressor. Such reasons do not, however, disqualify Russia from being one of the warring parties.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia also provided texts for the report explaining their views of the conflict, even if these were more limited in scope than the Georgian and Russian versions. The title of the Abkhazian version was relatively neutral and read ‘Summary of the events in August 2008’ [Резюме событий августа 2008 года] and the South Ossetian account had no title but it referred to the war as ‘the Georgian-Ossetian conflict’ [Грузино-осетинского конфликта].

12 For a relatively neutral account of the wars in the Caucasus, and Russia’s role in them, see Vicken Cheterian, “The Origins and Trajectory of the Caucasian Conflicts,” Europe-Asia Studies 64, no.9 (2012): 1625-1649. For another, albeit brief, discussion on the naming of the conflict, see Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr, The Guns of August 2008: Russia’s War in Georgia (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 5.
14 The title was provided in the English language. IFFMCG report, Vol III.
The differences in interpretations of the conflict are also demonstrated by the discussions of whether the 2008 conflict can be perceived as a ‘war’ at all. The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the main deliverer of data sets on conflicts, codes the 2008 crisis in Georgia as conflict over territory (a separatist conflict). Moreover, similar to the Kosovo conflict, it is placed within the category of ‘intra-state conflicts with foreign military involvement’. Concerning the intensity of the conflict, the UCDP describes the clashes in 2008 as a ‘minor conflict’.

There is thus no single term that encapsulates all views of the conflict and its participants. Despite the existence of these different definitions of the conflict this thesis largely alternates between the terms ‘the Russo-Georgian War’ and more neutral terms like ‘the 2008 war in Georgia’, or, when the context allows it, ‘the 2008 war’. The first term is furthermore problematic, as it omits the agency of South Ossetia and Abkhazia during the conflict and its aftermath.

The decision to employ the above terms is in no way political and does not indicate any specific understanding of the conflict and its participants, but is instead a pragmatic choice based on the fact that most scholarly accounts of the 2008 war use the term ‘the Russo-Georgian War’ and this study thus seek to contribute to a level of terminological coherence within the literature.

Russia’s ‘Neutral’ Stance and the Recent Conflict in Ukraine

The Russian leadership’s refusal to be perceived as a party to the 2008 war in fact resembles the current Russian administration’s initial denial that it sent military troops to Crimea during the latest Ukraine crisis. The issue about the differing interpretations of Russia’s role in a war context is naturally not necessarily limited to the 2008 war. In fact, this thesis’ research questions, albeit slightly re-formulated, could be applied to the current conflict in Ukraine. Many commentators have drawn parallels between the 2008 war in Georgia and the invasion of Ukraine, often in order to demonstrate the dangers inherent in an increasingly assertive Russian foreign policy. Jeffrey Mankoff argues that ‘Russia’s invasion of this Ukrainian region is at once a replay and an escalation of tactics that the Kremlin has used for the past two decades to maintain its influence across the domains of

the former Soviet Union’. \(^{19}\) He argues that Moscow has since the early 1990s directly supported or contributed to the emergence of the break-away republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, Transnistria in Moldova, and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan.

Angela Stent extends the parallel as far as Russia’s intervention in the current Syrian conflict and argues that Russia is determined to revise the global order that it perceives as being imposed on the country since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. \(^{20}\) Such revision involves, amongst other things, preventing more post-Soviet states from joining NATO. In fact, a Membership Action Plan for Ukraine and Georgia in the organisation was discussed during the Bucharest Summit in April 2008. These plans failed to materialise, however. Indeed, the majority of analyses of the 2008 war state Georgia’s desire to join NATO as one of the main reasons for Russian military actions in the conflict.

Even though it is possible to draw certain parallels between the 2008 Georgian war and the more recent Ukrainian conflict, and possibly also the war in Syria when it comes to contemporary Russia’s increasingly assertive foreign policy, it is also important to point to the differences between the different conflicts. As Russia’s involvement in the Syrian conflict is unconnected with the ‘just’ borders of the Russian state or the concept of belonging and to membership of the Russian nation, only the conflict in Ukraine will be covered below.

Russia did not annex South Ossetia and Abkhazia as it did the Crimean Peninsula. Additionally, Ukraine, and especially Crimea play a different role in the Russian national consciousness than Georgia, including South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Indeed, the declaration of Ukraine’s independence in 1991 was more traumatic for many representatives of the Russian elites and ordinary citizens than other independence declarations during that period. \(^{21}\) Ukrainian independence determined the end of the Soviet Union as this was the most populous and economically powerful Soviet Republic after the Russian Republic. \(^{22}\)

Moreover, Russians perceive Ukrainians as particularly close ‘brethren’ ethnically, historically and culturally, with Vladimir Putin going as far as reiterating the pre-

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\(^{22}\) Moscow did not officially oppose Ukrainian independence in the early 1990s. Following the referendum on Ukrainian independence, Gorbachev accepted the outcome and announced the dissolution of the USSR. The claim that Russians and Ukrainians were one nation was advanced only by extreme Russian nationalists who operated at the margins of politics until in 2013 Putin suddenly issued this claim himself.
revolutionary perceptions that Russians and Ukrainians constitute a single pan-Russian nation to justify his policies in 2014. The Crimean Peninsula is further perceived as the cradle of ‘Russian Christianity’. In a speech in 2014, Putin argued that the ‘historical reunification’ of Crimea with Russia was of ‘special significance’ because Crimea is ‘where our people live, and the peninsula is of strategic importance to Russia as the spiritual source of the development of a multifaceted but solid Russian nation and a centralized Russian state’. South Ossetia and Abkhazia, or Georgia at large, occupy a less prominent place in Russian national consciousness than Ukraine, even though Georgia’s aspirations to join the Western institutions were, and remain, viewed unfavourably by Moscow. Nevertheless, as the thesis aims to demonstrate, the official Russian discourse legitimising the military conflict was closely intertwined with specific visions of Russian nationhood wherein the people of South Ossetia and Abkhazia were discursively constructed as part of the Russian ‘us’.

In order to prepare the ground for the forthcoming analysis of these visions appearing in the official Russian discourse in connection to the war a brief overview of the developments in Georgia, with a focus on South Ossetia, during the Soviet period and especially since the end of the 1980s is required. As argued by Gerard Toal, the 2008 war in South Ossetia was the result of numerous legacies at the local, state, regional and international levels, the most important legacy being the breakup of the Soviet Union.

**Historical Background**

*The Soviet Period and the 1990s*

During Soviet times South Ossetia was an ethno-territorial region within Georgia. It was granted the status of an autonomous region (*oblast*) in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1923, a status with the lowest level of autonomy within the Soviet system. It had a lower status than Abkhazia and Adjaria, the two other autonomous regions within Georgia, which received the higher status of autonomous socialist Soviet republics (ASSR). However, despite the fact that the Soviet authorities followed the formal territorial borders, the Ossetians and Georgians were highly intermixed, with a Soviet population

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23 Tolz, *Russia*, x.
census in 1989 indicating that 60% of Ossetians in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic lived outside the South-Ossetian Autonomous Oblast.\textsuperscript{26} The total population of South Ossetia was around 98,500 at that time and this number included around 28,500 ethnic Georgians. The war that broke out in the early 1990s wrecked this coexistence and brought the South Ossetians closer to their ethnic kindred in North Ossetia.\textsuperscript{27}

In 1990, South Ossetia declared its independence from Georgia, in the form of full sovereignty within the Soviet Union. The Georgian government forcefully rejected such a move. Tensions were continuously high between the Georgians and South Ossetians, which eventually resulted in the South Ossetia War of 1991-1992, also known as the First South Ossetian War.\textsuperscript{28} In spring 1991, the fighting escalated due to the Russian forces’ sporadic involvement.\textsuperscript{29} Eventually, in June 1992, then Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, and his Georgian counterpart, Eduard Shevardnadze, met in Sochi to sign a ceasefire agreement.

The Sochi Agreement, or Dagomys Agreement, with its following protocols defined the zone of conflict, a security corridor and set up the Joint Control Commission (JCC).\textsuperscript{30} It consisted of representatives from Georgia, Russia, North and South Ossetia and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).\textsuperscript{31} The JCC was supposed to, amongst other tasks, oversee the observance of the agreement, promote dialogue, facilitate the return of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and coordinate the activities of the trilateral Joint Peacekeeping Forces, JPKF.\textsuperscript{32} This peacekeeping body was constituted by forces from Georgia, Russia and South Ossetia (the latter with a commander from the Russian republic of North Ossetia). The peacekeeping forces ultimately served under Russian command according to a JCC agreement signed in Moscow in 1994.

Russia thus had the main leverage over the peacekeeping troops, as well as the ceasefire agreements in general. As argued by Vicken Cheterian, Moscow perceived the various ceasefire agreements in the South Caucasus as a way to preserve its influence over

\textsuperscript{26} IFFMCG report, Vol. II, 65.
\textsuperscript{28} The second war is the conflict in 2004.
\textsuperscript{29} IFFMCG report, Vol. II.
\textsuperscript{30} In Cheterian, “The Origins and Trajectory of the Caucasian Conflicts.”
\textsuperscript{31} At that time the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe.
\textsuperscript{32} In 1992, the JPKF was called the Joint Peacekeeping and Law Enforcement Forces (JPKLEF), but was changed in 1997 to exclude the law enforcement component, in Cheterian, “The Origins and Trajectory of the Caucasian Conflicts.”
this region and as a tool for introducing mostly Russian peacekeepers into the territory.\textsuperscript{33} Such attempted influence included being part of the development of the ceasefire in connection with the war in Abkhazia in 1992-1993.

In the early 1990s Georgia was a war-torn state and the government, in addition to the war with South Ossetia, was also combating the break-away republic of Abkhazia which struggled for expanded autonomy and ultimately independence. As in South Ossetia, the population of Abkhazia was highly intermixed, with a significantly higher number of ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia than ethnic Abkhaz, according to the aforementioned 1989 Soviet census. Georgians made up almost 46\% of the population of Abkhazia, while ethnic Abkhaz and Russians made up the largest population groups after that, at around 14\% each, respectively. The war began in August 1992 and lasted for 16 months. The main warring parties consisted of Georgian government forces and ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia, on one side, and Abkhazians, Armenians and ethnic Russians in Abkhazia, on the other. In 1994, the belligerent parties signed the Moscow Agreement, under the mediation of Russia and the United Nations.

The ceasefire agreements resulted in relative calm in Georgia for more than a decade, but the conflict persisted. In January 2004 Mikhail Saakashvili, as a result of the Rose Revolution, became President of Georgia after Shevardnadze. He claimed that Georgian territorial integrity was at the top of his political agenda. Following his inauguration process at the grave of King David IV, considered the first unifier of Georgia, he argued that ‘Georgia’s territorial integrity is the goal of my life’.\textsuperscript{34} Saakashvili argued that South Ossetia and Abkhazia would again be restored to Georgia before the forthcoming 2009 presidential elections.

Between May and July 2004, the tension in South Ossetia increased, largely due to an anti-smuggling campaign that involved the closure of the Ergneti market which was a major trading place for contraband goods. In August, the violence escalated and dozens of people were killed, including a number of civilians. The political polarisation hardened, and a new peace plan proposed by the Saakashvili government in July 2005 was rejected by the South Ossetian government led by Eduard Kokoity, who instead presented another plan incorporating South Ossetia’s independence. In a popular referendum in November 2006, 95\% of about 55,000 registered voters in South Ossetia confirmed that they would

\textsuperscript{33} Cheterian, “The Origins and Trajectory of the Caucasian Conflicts.”
\textsuperscript{34} In International Crisis Group, “Georgia: Avoiding War in South Ossetia.” King David IV was born in 1073 and ruled Georgia from 1089 to 1125.
welcome independence from Georgia. The polarisation within Georgia continued during the coming years, and the conflict remained frozen until the tension mounted and with Russian involvement developed into a war in 2008.

The Outbreak and Development of the 2008 War

The large-scale fighting that broke out in August 2008 was the result of the escalating tensions in Georgia during the preceding months. However, as with the interpretation of the war itself, the origins of these tensions are disputed. The relationship between Georgia and Russia had been deteriorating since 2006, and the number of skirmishes rose during spring and summer 2008. For instance, in April 2008, Tbilisi claimed that a Russian fighter jet had shot down an unmanned reconnaissance aircraft over Abkhazia. In late May/early June, Russia deployed railroad construction troops to Abkhazia to repair the local railway stretching from the south of the Abkhaz capital of Sukhumi to the town of Ochamchira. These acts were perceived extremely negatively by the Georgian authorities and the deployment of the railway troops as an act of aggression and preparation for war.

In July 2008, four Russian warplanes flew over South Ossetia while the then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was visiting the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. That same month two large-scale military exercises were conducted in the area. Georgia, together with the United States, Ukraine, Armenia and Azerbaijan, implemented the ‘Immediate Response 2008’ exercise. Russia, on its part, implemented ‘Kavkaz 2008’, intended to be a ‘counterterrorist’ exercise, that involved simulations of an invasion of Russia through the Roki Tunnel, connecting South and North Ossetia, and across the adjacent Mamison Mountain pass.

From August 1 onwards, the violence escalated, involving amongst other incidents the blowing up of a Georgian police vehicle and killing of a group of off-duty South Ossetian police officers. The increased violence led to the Georgian government evacuating a number of civilians from Tskhinvali in South Ossetia to Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia on August 2-3. The fighting continued, growing in intensity on August 6. On August 7, South

35 Toal, “Russia’s Kosovo,” 10.
36 Cf. IFFMCG report, Vol. II.
38 Toal, “Russia’s Kosovo.”
Ossetian forces shelled a Georgian peacekeeper post, killing two Georgian peacekeepers and wounding five more. That evening the Georgian forces advanced on Tskhinvali, which resulted in a number of Georgian and Russian peacekeepers leaving their posts, and General Mamuka Kurashvili, head of the Georgian peacekeeping troops, stated that Georgia would ‘restore constitutional order’ in South Ossetia in response to an alleged bombardment of Georgian villages by South Ossetian troops. Later, however, the Georgian government opposed Kurashvili’s statement and instead sought to justify the Georgian attack by claiming that its purpose was to counter the Russian incursion. Georgian forces started shelling Tskhinvali that same night in an operation named ‘Clear Field’.

Russia responded to the Georgian attack within hours. Furthermore, the leadership of Abkhazia and North Ossetia demonstrated their support for South Ossetia. The North Ossetian President Taymuraz Mamsurov, for example, travelled to South Ossetia to evacuate civilians on buses and also to meet with President Kokoity. On August 10 Russian forces crossed the borders of the internal security corridor in order to march on Georgian villages within South Ossetia. Furthermore, Russian planes continued their bombardment of Georgian military facilities, the port of Poti and airports, as well as patrolling Georgia’s Black Sea waters and sinking Georgian missile boats that confronted them. Moreover, on August 10 around 1,000 Abkhaz troops, assisted by Russian fighter planes, entered the part of the Kodori Gorge occupied by Georgian troops.

On August 12, the then French President Nicholas Sarkozy met with Medvedev to negotiate a ceasefire agreement. The six-point agreement was a legally binding text intended to end the fighting and make way for a political solution. The six principles involved the cessation of hostilities, the granting of access to humanitarian aid, the return of Georgian forces to ‘their permanent positions’ and the Russian forces to the line where they had been stationed prior to the outbreak of hostilities. Moscow managed to include in the agreement the fact that Russian peacekeepers were allowed to implement additional security measures until an international monitoring mechanism was in place, thereby enabling the Russian military to establish extended buffer zones, the borders of which were

39 Toal, “Russia’s Kosovo.”
40 IIFFMCG report, Vol. II.
41 Toal, “Russia’s Kosovo.”
42 The Kodori Gorge, or Kodori Valley, is located in Abkhazia. Before the war, its upper part was controlled by Georgian forces, while Abkhaz forces controlled its lower part.
43 For a copy of the ceasefire agreement, see IIFFMCG report, Vol III.
never clearly delineated, and assign itself the role as ‘peacekeeper’ outside South Ossetia and Abkhazia and inside Georgia proper.\footnote{Toal, “Russia’s Kosovo,” 19.}

However, South Ossetian and Russian forces continued to advance into Georgia proper after August 12, and occupied additional territory.\footnote{IIFFMCG report, Vol II.} After August 22 Russia withdrew the majority of its troops to inside the administrative borders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, leaving a few troops in the buffer zones. Additional Russian forces were removed following an implementation agreement reached on September 8. A month later, on October 8, all Russian forces had been withdrawn from Georgian territory outside the two break-away republics, and on October 9, the Russian Foreign Ministry declared that all Russian ‘peacekeeping forces’ had departed from the territory ‘adjacent to South Ossetia and Abkhazia’.\footnote{Russian Foreign Ministry, “СООБЩЕНИЕ ДЛЯ СМИ, О завершении вывода российских миротворческих сил из зон, прилегающих к Южной Осетии и Абхазии,” October 9, 2008, last accessed January 12, 2016, http://archive.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/04ABEF7ADD27CBFBC32574DD005AA32B.} However, Russian forces and their local allies remained in Akhalgori in South Ossetia and the Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia.

Arguably, the Russian military forces could remain in the area largely due to the decision to recognise the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia by Moscow on August 26. The Russian leadership, amongst other arguments, cited the ‘Kosovo precedent’ in response to the massive international critique of the decision to grant these break-away republics the status of independent states.\footnote{Kosovo was recognised as an independent state in February 2008, six months before the war broke out in Georgia. Moscow strongly opposed Kosovan independence.} Despite Moscow’s aspirations that other states as well as Russia might recognise the independence of the two republics, especially the members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), in the end only Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru joined Russia in declaring the republics’ independence.\footnote{The small Pacific Islands of Tuvalu and Vanuatu recognised the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2011, but both states eventually withdrew their recognition and established diplomatic and consular relations with Georgia.}

Unfortunately, however, the end of war did not mean that the tensions between the belligerent parties vanished. The recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia’s independence could be perceived as having cemented these frozen conflicts. The presence of Russian military troops and embassies in the two break-away republics, as well as Moscow signing much-criticised agreements with Abkhazia in November 2014 and South Ossetia in March 2015 concerning mainly military and economic cooperation did nothing
to relieve the tension.\textsuperscript{49} In contrast, Moscow claims that it was cooperating with independent states which have the right to make their own sovereign decisions.

The remaining tension was thus partly a result of the different interpretations of Russia’s role in the region during the 2008 war and in its aftermath. In the scholarly literature, however, Russia’s role and national identity is portrayed in overly essentialist terms, as not having been affected by the developments on the ground, as if these were constructed irrespective of the context. The following literature review will provide examples of the essentialist nature of most interpretations.

Review of the Literature on the 2008 War

\textit{The Essentialist Perception of Russian Identity}

The majority of the scholarly accounts of the 2008 war explain the outbreak of war as based on an inherently assertive Russian foreign policy that is a natural result of Russia’s aggressive and even expansionist tendencies. Russia’s identity is thus commonly not analysed as developed within its context, within a situation of international conflict. The forthcoming literature review focuses solely on the 2008 war. Relevant methodological and theoretical literature is analysed in the following chapter.

In the period immediately after the war the analyses of the conflict, naturally, tended to be based on media coverage as well as on reports and speeches deriving from each of the conflicting parties.\textsuperscript{50} The main purpose of these scholarly accounts was to examine the underlying reasons for the outbreak of hostilities, explain the main events, as well as discuss to which party to the conflict one should attribute the blame, in the majority of cases pointing the finger at Russia for triggering the war.

Analysts argue that the war took place at a time when Russia’s foreign policy had become increasingly assertive and was influenced by a ‘sphere of influence-thinking’.\textsuperscript{51} In other words, the war was intended to restore Russia’s influence in the former Soviet


\textsuperscript{50} For a useful, albeit non-scholarly, examination of Russian media sources, see East View Press, \textit{Countdown to War in Georgia: Russia’s Foreign Policy and Media Coverage of the Conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia}, (Minneapolis, United States: East View Information Services, 2008).

Furthermore, commentators argued that Russian troops did not merely intervene in order to defend South Ossetia, but ‘they were coming to change Georgia’, and that the crisis had ‘lowered the threshold for Russian military intervention in Russia’s ‘near abroad’’. Russia’s goals were allegedly clear. They involved, among other things, the annexing of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, destroying Georgia’s economy and civilian infrastructure, and deposing President Saakashvili. ‘Russia’s war’, as one scholar named it, revoked one of the key founding concepts in Eurasian and European security in the post-Cold War era; namely the perception of Russia as a ‘peaceful status quo oriented power’.

Moreover, history was supposedly back, a sentiment building on the argument about the ‘end of history’ depicting the final triumph of liberal democracy after the end of the Cold War. The return of history was partly caused by a ‘resurgent’ Russia competing with the European Union and the United States for influence over the states along Russia’s borders. Russia had demonstrated its policies’ ‘ugly neo-imperialist side’ and ‘no one should look at Vladimir Putin’s Russia in the same way after this conflict as [they] did before’.

After a more extended period of time, the analyses of the conflict naturally included a greater variety of sources to draw upon, such as the report published in September 2009 by the International Fact-finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, mentioned above, as well as other reports and analytical pieces deriving from both within and outside the academic community. Over time, more theoretically grounded analyses appeared that more extensively discussed the wider significance of the war, i.e. what it meant for the future relations between the West and Russia and for the broader study and conduct of international relations, as the conflict was often perceived as constituting a paradigm-shift in international relations due to Russia having used military force and heavily encroached on Georgian sovereignty. With the publication of the Fact-Finding Mission report in 2009, with its thorough examination of the war, there were few accounts to be found describing the events of the war or analyses of who was to blame for the outburst of hostilities.

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52 Fedorov, “The Sleep of Reason.”
53 Antonenko, ”A War with no Winners,” 24.
58 Ronald D. Asmus, A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
Instead, the 2008 war was used as a case study for further theoretical academic investigation, such as the edited volume by Alexander Astrov (2011) and the aforementioned work by Mouritzen and Wivel (2012).\(^{59}\)

The enlargement of the scholarly field to include more theoretically oriented studies based on the 2008 war is a welcome development. However, there is a gap in the scholarly literature concerning Russian national identity construction in the context of the 2008 war. In order to fill this gap, this thesis adopts a constructivist approach to understanding war and perceives national identity, interests and grievances as socially constructed, in part through language. It could thus loosely be situated within the constructivist literature on Russian identity and the country’s role in the international arena, more recent contributions being the work by Ted Hopf (2002), Andrei Tsygankov (2013, 2016), Anne Clunan (2009), Michael Urban (2010), the edited volume by Ray Taras (2013), and Magda Leichtova (2014).\(^{60}\)

**Discourse Analysis and the 2008 War**

In line with Hopf, this thesis focuses extensively on discourse and its bearings on the construction of national identity. It is based on the assumption that instances of language use, such as statements by political leaders, generated certain meanings of the war and the belligerent parties, thereby demonstrating the performative, or constitutive, power of language and discourse, yet the linguistic aspect of the 2008 war has only been investigated by a limited number of scholars.\(^{61}\) This thesis seeks to add to this relatively marginal literature.

The studies by Pertti Joenniemi (2010) and Andrey Makarychev (2011) are among the few that introduce the role of language and discourse into the analysis of the 2008 military


\(^{61}\) For an illuminating study of the construction of particular meanings of events, see Gerard Toal, “Russia’s Kosovo.”
conflict. Through a discourse analysis approach Joenniemi examines if the war was of
groundbreaking importance for the direction of international relations, i.e. if it symbolised
a turning-point, placing power politics back on the agenda, or if it were merely a minor,
soon to be forgotten, incident. He focuses on the ‘discursive battlefield’, which consists of
conflicting arguments and views. ‘The battlefield’ in focus is one where the statements
and policies of Russia, the European Union and the United States converge, and the study
highlights how the different framings of the war led to separate views concerning its over-
all significance, which in turn resulted in difficulties regarding rapprochement and
reaching the shared understanding that would be needed to solve the persistent tension.

In a similar fashion, Makarychev examines Russia’s ‘international identity’, i.e. the
country’s identity in the international arena, but with a focus on Russia’s relations with
NATO. He highlights how inconsistencies within the ‘discursive formations’ make these
formations fluid and controversial, as well as dependant on external discourses, such as
those deriving from NATO, yet Makarychev’s study does not focus exclusively on
discourse, nor does it engage in a full examination of the discursive developments in
relation to the war.

Both Joenniemi and Makarychev’s studies make welcome contributions to the
literature on the war however, as they discuss how discourses develop in relation to other
discourses, as well as to different policies implemented and the developments on the
ground. In other words, the importance of the discursive context is highlighted. This study,
similar to Joenniemi and Makarychev, focuses on how the official Russian discourse is
affected by the country’s relations with, and the discourses of, its international
counterparts. The current thesis can be perceived as an extension of both studies, since it
includes an examination of how the heterogeneity of the political establishment in Russia
and the resultant differences in opinion and interests between the individuals and groups
within it affect the development of the discourse. Furthermore, in contrast to Joenniemi

ussian-conflict-a-turning-point; Andrey Makarychev, “Russia and NATO After the Georgia War: Re-
64 Cf Cory Welt, “After the EU War Report: Can There Be a “Reset” in Russian-Georgian Relations?,”
65 ‘Discursive formations’ is a term used to denote a group of statements with any order, position, correlation
or function as determined by a disunity between them, in Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge &
and Makarychev this thesis investigates certain prominent concepts in the official Russian discourse which are directly related to the construction of national identity.

Moreover, the intensification of nation-building is an important dimension of the Russo-Georgian war, as the vigorous political mobilisation of national sentiments tends to occur in the context of a military conflict. The scholarly literature, which tends to foreground contemporary Russia’s ‘imperialism’, usually downplays this crucially important internal dimension of the conflict on foreign soil in which Putin’s government has been involved. This is another gap in the scholarly literature which this thesis aims to fill in.

Structure of the Thesis

The dissertation consists of four chapters.

Chapter 1 constitutes the theoretical and methodological base of the thesis. It studies the relationship between language, discourse and national identity within the context of war. A discourse analysis approach for scrutinizing the social construction of national identity is presented and the chapter thus creates an analytical framework for the following three chapters that discuss the three core themes relating to Russian identity. National identity is discussed as a product of a ‘discursive battle’ that is influenced by the ‘Significant Other’, i.e. the West. In the last section of the chapter the selection of the data is described.

Chapter 2 studies the discursive construction of Russia as a Great Power in face of the international critique of Russia as a resurgent state with imperialistic goals. It discusses how the Russian political leadership utilised the great power vision in order to gain legitimacy for its conduct during the Russo-Georgian war. The chapter demonstrates how the key political leadership utilised an identity marker that has been part of the Russian identity debate for centuries, but how the great power concept acquired a new meaning in the war context and thus managed to speak to many audiences simultaneously.

Chapter 3 analyses the Russian leadership’s ambivalent stance to the role and interpretation of history, and how the use of history is connected to the vision of Russia as a great power. The chapter focuses on the concepts of the Cold War and the Soviet Union, due to their prevalence in the official Russian discourse during the 2008 war and its aftermath. It demonstrates how the Russian leadership denied that the international tension
resulting from the 2008 war equaled a new Cold War. The resemblance of contemporary Russia to the USSR is also denied, while not portraying the Soviet Union in a completely negative light.

Chapter 4 studies the protection narrative that focused on safeguarding the lives and dignity of Russian citizens and compatriots in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and what role this narrative played in discursively legitimising the Russian government’s actions. The situational meaning of these concepts is examined as is how an understanding of them contributed to the vision of Russian nationhood as presented by the Russian leadership in connection to the 2008 conflict. As in the other chapters, it is demonstrated how the different parts of the official Russian discourse were directed towards both the international community as well as the heterogeneous Russian domestic society in order to legitimise Russian conduct both during and in the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian war.
Chapter 1. War, Discourse, and National Identity

Introduction

The relationship between war, discourse and national identity is symbiotic. This chapter, which constitutes the theoretical and methodological base for the thesis, demonstrates the linkage between these elements in order to discuss what role language and discourse play in the construction of national identity within the context of war. It highlights the rewards of using a discourse analysis approach to examine the social construction of national identity and war, and establishes a framework for the subsequent analysis of the core themes related to Russian national identity, namely: Russia as a Great/Imperial Power, the Historical (primarily Soviet) Legacy and Russian Citizens/Compatriots. The chapter begins with a discussion of the role of language and discourse within society, and continues with an examination of their role in the conduct of war. Thereafter, it elaborates on the connection between discourse and identity, before moving on to discuss Russian national identity as a product of a discursive battle between different groups and coalitions within Russian society and the impact of the ‘Significant Other’, i.e. the ‘West’, in such a process. Finally, the selection of the data is discussed, along with how they will be analysed to demonstrate the importance of studying the role of discourse and language in the Russian nation-building process in a situation of international conflict.

1.1. The Role of Language and Discourse in Society

This thesis is based on the assumption that language is an important component of the social world, and never neutral. The study adopts a linguistic approach, drawing on elements from structuralist linguistics, as it perceives language not merely as a neutral conveyor of meaning but also as an important analytical level of its own with its separate dynamics.66 Ferdinand de Saussure, founder of structural linguistics, argues that the relationship between words, or sound images, (signifiers) and meaning (the signified) is

arbitrary.\textsuperscript{67} According to the author, the individual word has no value, or meaning, in itself but is negatively defined since it gains its value from what it is not. Thus sound images are not simply a reflection of what they are supposed to represent. Instead, as demonstrated by Henrik Larsen, meaning is perceived as mediated by language, so no investigation can be performed on the level of ideas and meaning.\textsuperscript{68} Accordingly, we have no access to meaning but only to language, which is the closest we can get to meaning. In structuralist and post-structuralist language philosophy language is perceived as our only access to reality.\textsuperscript{69} Therefore, one must conduct an independent study of the level of the signifiers; in other words, language should be the principal object of study.

However, as noted by Larsen, analysts of discourse generally reject the idea of an abstract and general structure of language, nor assume there to be any general system of meaning. Instead there are ‘special systems whereby [the] meanings of words differ from system to system, from discourse to discourse’.\textsuperscript{70} Larsen, leaning on Michel Foucault (1989) and Christopher Norris (1982), states that the impact of words depends on the social values we allot them rather than merely on the differences between them and on the rules that decide the manner in which they can be connected.\textsuperscript{71} Such rules are unconnected with grammar or syntax, but are what gives meaning in the social world. Thus there can be no general system of meaning since the rules and the value of words differ.

There are many different definitions of discourse depending on the scholarly approach employed. This thesis adopts Norman Fairclough’s definition of discourse as being language use seen as a type of social practice.\textsuperscript{72} The study especially focuses on the social practice of national identity construction within the context of war, and thereby examines the performative power of discourse. As stated by Richard Jackson, in his analysis of the discourse around the war on terrorism, examples of the many different kinds of discourse

\textsuperscript{68} Larsen, \textit{Foreign Policy and Discourse Analysis: France, Britain and Europe}. See Larsen for a brief discussion of the different perceptions of the structuralist and post-structuralist schools concerning the existence of meaning. The former argue that meaning is relatively stable, even though it can be changed, while the latter argue that it is impossible to fix meaning within language. This thesis leans towards the structuralist position, since it assumes that meaning can be temporarily fixed even if it takes various forms depending on the audience. A specific meaning exists for a certain audience at a set time, yet language in itself is not assumed to have any meaning, merely acquiring meaning in context.
\textsuperscript{70} Larsen, \textit{Foreign Policy and Discourse Analysis}, 14.
\textsuperscript{71} Michel Foucault, \textit{The Archeology of Knowledge} (London: Routledge, 1989); Christopher Norris, \textit{Deconstruction: Theory and Practice} (London: Methuen, 1982).
in society include medical, scientific, media, educational, academic, and political. Jackson goes on to say that all forms of discourse have their own specific jargon, terminology, logic, and way of reasoning. This study will focus on political discourse, but in a narrow and restricted form; namely, ‘the body of text and talk of politicians’.

Discourses consist of a limited range of possible statements, which advocates a limited range of meaning, leading them to shape what it is possible to say and not to say in a given situation. This thesis recognizes, however, the socially constitutive effect of discourse. Discourse constitutes the social world, while being constituted by the same. Fairclough terms this the ‘dialectical’ relationship between discourse and the social. Consequently, discourse has an effect on the social by constituting and changing knowledge, social relations and social identity. Due to this thesis’ research focus, our discussion will focus on the third aspect; namely, the discursive construction of social identities.

Discourses thus produce certain versions of events. The relationship between texts and social processes is based on a perception of discourse as not being simply a reflection of events, but as interpreting these events, creating understanding of them, and constituting their socio-political reality. Since social reality is constructed through language, you can reach ‘reality’ through studying discourse, yet the aim is not to discover the reality behind the discourse; the object of analysis is the discourse itself.

As discussed by Adam Hodges, language does not simply represent a pre-existing social world. Instead, as the author states, it significantly contributes to the constitution of that social world, often through narrative. The latter is perceived as ‘stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing’, and helps us to organise our experience and memory of events. Hodges argues that, in modern democracies, political leaders speak to the public to inform, debate and persuade, but more significantly to organise the experience of the nation through the use of narratives, yet the content and form of

76 Fairclough, introduction to *Critical Language Awareness*, 8.
79 In Jørgensen and Philips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*.
80 Adam Hodges, “The narrative construction of identity: The adequation of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Ladern in the “war on terror”,” in *Discourse, War and Terrorism*.
narratives are limited by the range of existing discourses in a given society. This thesis perceives the relationship between discourse and narrative as narratives being influenced by discourses, and discourse usually consisting of a number of narratives. These have a linear quality and refer to a linked series of events or happenings, while discourses are non-linear, have a structuring function, which in this context refers to a particular way of organising an area of knowledge or social practice and therefore deals with the connection between a text and its socio-political purpose. A narrative belongs to, and is subordinate to, the discourse which generated it.

Discourses’ constitutive effects include the maintenance and furtherance of power relations, since individuals and groups within society aim to promote certain discourses while silencing others. As demonstrated by Jackson, discourses shape the social reality by being an exercise of power, since they seek to become hegemonic by pushing alternative or rival discourses to the margins and presenting themselves as the complete and final truth.\(^\text{82}\) Moreover, as the author continues, political discourses are constructed and employed for certain purposes, predominantly for the creation, maintenance and extension of power.\(^\text{83}\)

As argued by Ruth Wodak, however, language should not be considered powerful in its own right, but instead ‘it gains power by the use powerful people make of it’.\(^\text{84}\) If discourse conventions have a role in constituting the social in a certain way, then the control over these processes would be a powerful, but camouflaged, instrument of domination.\(^\text{85}\) Yet, discourses are never monolithic or truly hegemonic due to competing voices and ideas. Therefore, the government should constantly reformulate and reaffirm them.\(^\text{86}\)

Scholars have differed regarding what to include in the concept of discourse in order for it to be a valuable object of research. Larsen states, for instance, that in traditional linguistics and social psychology, discourse has often been treated as a micro concept and such analysis can involve an examination of the patterns of everyday conversation among individuals.\(^\text{87}\) The approach has been criticised, by critical linguists amongst others, for failing to include in the discussion the societal macro structures in a systematic manner. On the other hand, as the author notes, in social theory, discourse is used as a macro concept in

\(^\text{82}\) Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*.
\(^\text{83}\) Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*.
\(^\text{85}\) Fairclough, introduction to *Critical Language Awareness*.
\(^\text{86}\) Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*.
\(^\text{87}\) The elaboration of the research field, found below, is mainly taken from Larsen, *Foreign Policy and Discourse Analysis*. 
order to demonstrate how language constitutes social processes, especially in the work of Foucault and Louis Althusser. The latter argues for a close link between discourse and power relations, and focuses especially on class struggle, while Foucault (1989) discusses the linkage between language and power, and the central role of discourse in constituting identities and social beliefs. These latter theories and analyses fail to incorporate micro processes and concrete texts, understood in a broad sense as writings and speeches. In contrast, this thesis is in line with Fairclough who suggests a combination of macro- and micro approaches to language and deploys a form of discourse analysis that focuses extensively on the linguistic features of the texts that constitute a discourse.\textsuperscript{88} The present study is not one of pure linguistics per se, however; it seeks to approach the research topic in a transdisciplinary manner in order to examine the relationship between texts and social processes and thereby highlight the performative power of language.

A combination of micro- and macro approaches serves this thesis’ purpose well. An analysis on the micro level allows for a close textual analysis of the official Russian discourse about the 2008 war, while the macro analysis focuses on the discursive construction of Russian national identity with regard to the broader themes (e.g. Russia as a Great or Imperial Power). In highlighting the importance of studying discourse, however, the study does not claim that all is discourse, or that discourse is the only object of research that warrants scholarly attention but simply that it is one, albeit crucial, aspect of social life.

While this study follows Fairclough’s focus on the linguistic components of discourse, however, it acknowledges the usefulness of other theories, such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s discourse theory, that argues that non-linguistic elements could also be important in understanding a particular discourse.\textsuperscript{89} This thesis’ research focus, however, demands a text-based approach in order to reveal the workings of the different identity visions furthered by the Russian leadership within the context of the Russo-Georgian war.

\textsuperscript{88} Larsen, \textit{Foreign Policy and Discourse Analysis}.

\textsuperscript{89} In Phillips and Jørgensen, \textit{Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method}, Fairclough accepts that visual images, such as television broadcasts, are part of discourse, but chooses in his own study to focus on linguistic components alone.
1.2. The Power of Words in War

In times of war, the performative, or constitutive, power of language and discourse becomes particularly prominent. No war can take place without the articulation of the differing interests, grievances and guilt. Without words, or communication, it would be difficult to convince one’s military forces that it is worth being injured or even dying for the homeland, or to persuade the population to send their children, spouses and fellow citizens to the conflict zone while also being affected by the state’s financial burden of waging war. Further, in cases of an actual or anticipated re-drawing of the state borders as a result of war, it can be difficult to convince the international community of the righteousness of changing the international status quo and infringing on the sovereignty of states.

As Daniel Nelson states, ‘human conflict begins and ends with talk and text’. He demonstrates how we use words to present our position, to mobilize our troops and gain the support of the domestic population and international audience. The state authorities must induce consent in order to normalize the conduct of war and, in order to do so, they need more than propaganda or public diplomacy, but a form of language or public narrative that creates approval and suppresses individual doubts and large-scale political protest. The authorities should construct a new, accepted reality wherein state violence appears normal and justifiable.

This language or public narrative consists of a number of categories that are constructed by the participants and observers of conflict, to make sense of the chaotic situation that is war. According to social psychologist Henri Tajfel, human beings are predominantly driven by an urge to understand the world and they use categories to provide themselves with meaning. Categorisation brings with it distinction and exaggeration, and as a result categories are often perceived as more different or similar than they actually are. For instance, we create an ‘us’ and a ‘them’ in order to make sense of the world and the identities of these categories are often set wide apart. Without social categories, there can be no sense of social identity, and the categories involving our own identity are only possible because of the existence of those denoting ‘others’. As will be

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91 Jackson, Writing the War on Terrorism.
92 Michael Billig, “Preface: Language as forms of death,” in At War with Words, eds. Mirjana Dedajic et al.
demonstrated in this thesis, before, during and after a war there is an increased emphasis on the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

This study is thus based on the assumption that war and conflict are not necessarily based on any innate aggressive human instincts or predetermined national interests or grievances. Instead, these interests and grievances are socially constructed, partly through language. As stated by Ray Taras, a constructivist approach to research assumes the social construction of reality which manifests itself when ideas, norms and thought processes are the main explanatory variables rather than material phenomena. Images, self-images, perceptions and misperceptions are perceived as integral parts of the construction of reality.

The construction process is rooted in language. Instances of language use can produce a certain meaning of an object, for example a war and its participants, thereby legitimising a certain action and response. In other words, a particular discourse is enabled and constructs reality in one way or another. Elaborating on Tajfel’s ideas about the lack of explanatory power in biological theories which maintain that aggressive human instincts are the main catalyst for war, Michael Billig contends that ‘a discourse of indignation, threat and suffering, shared and communicated within a group, can become the basis for mobilization against an identified enemy’. He states that feelings of anger and frustration alone, shared collectively among the population of the United States after the 2001 terrorist attacks, could not have resulted in the ensuing military response. The anger had to be formed through a range of understandings spoken out loud. A discourse legitimising war was needed.

Discourse provides a forum for the necessary act of categorisation in times of conflict and thus has an effect on the political process surrounding war. However, as argued by Jackson, the role of language and discourse in constructing the political process is a relatively understudied subject. This thesis seeks to contribute towards filling this gap, and applies a variant of discourse analysis that is related to the construction of the notion of nationhood within the context of war. As mentioned above, discourse both constitutes and changes identities so it is important to examine what form this construction process takes in a situation of international conflict.

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95 Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism.*
1.3. Discourse and Identity

This thesis perceives identity as being constructed through discourse. Identity is ‘a condition of being or becoming that is constantly renewed, confirmed or transformed, at the individual or collective level, regardless of whether it is more or less stable, more or less institutionalized’.

The non-essentialist perception of a collective identity owes much to Benedict Anderson and his seminal study about the construction of nations and nationalism. Anderson argues that nations and other communities that are larger than face-to-face groups are ‘imagined communities’ and should be differentiated by the way they are imagined rather than by any degree of authenticity. The imagined character of nations is based on the fact that ‘members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them; yet, in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’.

As argued by Wodak, this imaginary community reaches the mind of the population by being constructed and conveyed in discourse, essentially in narratives of national culture. National identities are thus products of discourse. National identities, seen as specific forms of social identity, are discursively produced, reproduced, transformed and destructed, through language and other semiotic systems. De Cillia et al. state that ‘The idea of a specific national community becomes reality in the realm of convictions and beliefs through reifying, figurative discourses continually launched by politicians, intellectuals and media people and disseminated through the systems of education, schooling, mass communication, militarization as well as through sports meetings’. Consequently, there is no single, final national identity, but instead different identities that are discursively constructed depending on the context, i.e. the social field, the situation wherein the discursive act appears, and the topic currently under discussion.

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96 Wodak. The Discourse of Politics in Action: Politics as Usual (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 76.
98 Anderson, Imagined Communities, 15.
The Nation-Building Process

The discursive construction of identity thus forms part of a country’s nation-building process. Nation-building as a concept has been the subject of many interpretations, but this study is in line with Pål Kolstø who defines it as a deliberate process of instilling sameness:

‘nation-building is an active process pursued by state leaders, intellectuals, educators, and others who try to give a state the qualities of being a nation-state. Nation-building is intended to instil[I] in the state’s population a sense of being one common nation, to cultivate a sense of belonging to the particular state in which they live and no other’. 102

It concerns the construction of national identity and a sense of unity. This thesis is in line with Kolstø when he rejects equating nation-building with identity construction in ethnocultural groups, which he calls ethnic consolidation, but instead as identity construction in a group that is coterminous with the total population of a state.

One must analytically separate civic/political and ethnic nation-building. As stated by Oxana Shevel, civic and ethnic nationalism are ideal categories, although most states’ policies combine the two. 103 Even though these categories are ideal types, they can still provide us with some theoretical leverage. According to Kolstø the civic nation-building process involves the authorities of a country seeking to gain the support of all of the inhabitants to get the national project underway, yet the population groups’ cultural distinctiveness is not infringed. 104 In this process, the emphasis lies on the political traditions and symbols shared by all ethnic groups, but the inherent risk with this strategy is that the emotive power of supra-ethnic symbols is generally weaker and thus less able to unite the people effectively.

As further argued by the author, in ethnic nation-building, the authorities equate the symbols and traditions of the titular nation, i.e. the dominant ethnic group after which the state is usually named, with those of the state, thus making them the norm for the country’s entire population. State officials here seek to make the ethnic and political nations correspond, to as large a degree as possible.

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The Construction of Russian National Identity

In Eastern Europe, the ethnic understanding of the nation, i.e. as based on ‘common blood’, language, religion and history, has been more prevalent throughout history than the civic notion based on certain binding elements such as citizenship, law and unity by consent. Furthermore, the ethnic perception was reinforced when the Bolsheviks came to power, yet the different ethnic groups in the USSR were not allowed full cultural sovereignty (and had no political sovereignty) and the Russians had the greatest cultural and, to an extent, political influence of all population groups in society. Moreover, the Soviet Union was a ‘hybrid of ethnic and civic state: On the one hand, it was a multi-national state based on a nonethnic ideology (Soviet Marxism); on the other, an ethnic empire based on the power dominance of the largest nation, the Russians’.

As argued by Vera Tolz, in Russia, both the civic and ethnic elements of nationhood were weakened by the form of Russian state-building. The development of a Russian ethnic identity was hindered by the Russian Empire being a multi-ethnic empire, and the development of a unifying civic identity within the state borders was stunted by the authoritarian nature of the governments of Russia and the Soviet Union. As a result, during the territorial dismemberment of the USSR, the majority of citizens in the Russian Federation did not perceive this [former] Union republic as their legitimate national homeland.

Shevel states that the civic and ethnic nation-building agendas in post-Soviet Russia have continued to be defined by contradictions and ambiguities. She argues that all potential nation-building agendas in post-Soviet Russia, both ethnic and civic, have been difficult both to articulate and implement. Thus the difficulties apply both to their discursive constructs as well as when they take the form of state policies. Such difficulties were experienced during the Yeltsin period, and have also been present during the presidential mandates of Putin and Medvedev.

Since the 2000s, however, there has been a somewhat greater emphasis on the building of a civic rossiiskaya nation within the borders of contemporary Russia. Such a civic

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notion of nationhood is, however, problematic due to Russia’s imperial history. As demonstrated by Shevel, as a former imperial power, Russia may pursue two different types of civic policy: it could define the nation by the territory of the present state or by that of the former empire or parts of those lands. Both notions are ‘formally civic’ since they are based on territory rather than blood, but they demonstrate very different images of the nation.108 One of these images is non-irredentist and the other potentially irredentist.

Both definitions are inherently problematic. Defining the Russian nation based on the territory of the present state has no historical precedence in Russia.109 The country has for centuries been an empire reaching further than the borders of the present Russian state, and the Russian identity has never developed as an ethnic or territorial identity confined to the borders of the Russian Republic within the Soviet Union. Thus, creating a civic territorial nation in post-Soviet Russia proved to be a difficult task. Viatcheslav Morozov aptly states that ‘to be its own successor, to create a new identity based on the denial of the Soviet past...to fall into emptiness [and] start its history from a blank slate’.110

Furthermore, the presence of millions of Russians in the former Soviet republics makes defining the Russian nation according to the borders of the present state problematic. No Russian leader has been able to disregard the claims to a right to protect ethnic Russians outside the Russian state borders.111 However, in the case of the Russo-Georgian war, the protection narrative did not focus on ethnic Russians, but rather Russian ‘citizens’ and ‘compatriots’, thus adding a level of complexity to the Russian nation-building process due to the fact that these individuals were not of Russian ethnicity while being perceived by Georgia and the majority of the international community as belonging to Georgia.

The definition of the Russian nation as the former USSR and all Soviet citizens as its members is inherently contradictory, however. Since it extends the Russian nation beyond the borders of the current state, it naturally affects its relations with Russia’s neighbours. Thus, as argued by Shevel, due to the potential irredentism of such a definition of the nation it is difficult to adopt as official state policy. However, officially recognising that such a national construct and the political unit inherent in the state are incompatible would

108 Shevel, "Russian Nation-Building from Yelt’sin to Medvedev,” 180.
109 Shevel. "Russian Nation-Building from Yelt’sin to Medvedev.”
mean admitting that contemporary Russia is merely a diminished form of the ‘real’ Russia, that was far larger.

Thus, as argued by Tolz, in the modern Russian national imagination, Russia as an empire and Russia as a national state of the Russian people have been poorly differentiated. This explains the lack of clarity within society concerning the ‘just borders’ of the post-Communist Russian state and who belongs to the Russian nation. This confusion is evident at all levels of society, and more prominent in the Russian Federation than in the other newly independent post-Communist states that started their state and nation building processes after the breakup of the Soviet Union. As argued by Kolstø, the challenges faced by Russian nation-builders are different from those facing other Soviet successor states. In Russia, the question is how to win the domestic population’s support for the radical truncation of the territory of the state, not for the establishment of a new or newly independent state and the gaining of acceptance for such. Additionally, as stated by the author, the Russian nation-building project is often challenged by the equivalent projects in the country’s different regions, which are often ethnically based.

The Russian Federation was thus born into uncertainty concerning its national identity. Olga Malinova argues that the ‘crisis of identity’ that emerged as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent economic and political transformation, should be perceived not only as a consequence of the new circumstances that made it necessary to ask ‘who are we?’, but also as a result of a bitter conflict between differing conceptualisations of a new collective identity. Russia was forced to redefine its status in world politics as well as determine its allies and opponents, and this new situation resulted in a fierce domestic discursive struggle concerning which national strategies to pursue. In fact, as argued by Lara Ryazanova-Clarke, ‘The last twenty years of Russian society narrating itself, has been a time when the creative potential of language to construct new meanings has been tested to the full’. Malinova further argues that the common Russian practice of constructing its identity vis-à-vis ‘the West’ to a certain extent provided a pretext for perceiving the Russian community that ‘stands behind’ the Russian state as

113 Kolstø, “Nation-Building in Russia.”
already having emerged as a ‘normal nation’, and for overlooking the inner cultural, social, ethnic, and religious heterogeneity of Russia.116

1.4. The Discursive Battle in Russian Society

The heterogeneity of Russian society and the relation to the Other is also discussed by Andrei Tsygankov, who categorises the different schools of foreign policy thinking that have developed over time in Russia, namely the Westernist, Statist and Civilisationalist schools.117 He applies a social constructivist approach to foreign policy analysis demonstrating how these schools develop in response to the different international and local conditions.118 These domestic identity coalitions aim to present their views of national identity and Russia’s international choices in ways that are in line with their respective images of both Russia and the world beyond its borders.

Broadly speaking, the Westernisers focus on Russia’s similarities with the West and perceive Western civilization as the most viable and progressive. The Statist school, the most influential in Russia, emphasises the importance of a strong, independent state with an ability to respond to external threats to its security. Civilisationists conceptualize the relation between Russia and the West ‘in terms of cultural oppositions’.119 They perceive Russia to be its own civilisation and often emphasise its mission in the world and the importance of spreading Russian values beyond the country’s borders.

Tsygankov denies that the traditional approaches to Russian foreign policy, i.e. realism and liberalism, possess sufficient explanatory power as they fail to present a comprehensive explanation for Russia’s highly divergent foreign policy choices in the post-Soviet era. He makes a valid point that both liberal and realist theorising around foreign policy deploy exclusionary principles when they attempt to explain states’ international engagement. This is because each of the theories focuses on one aspect of the international system while largely neglecting the importance of others. As the author

116 Malinova, “Russia and the West in the 2000s,” 74.
118 There is a growing field of constructivist studies on Russian foreign policy. In general, the theory of constructivism is no longer perceived as being part of the more peripheral academic debate but instead as an aspect of mainstream research.
argues, instead of choosing either power or modernisation, or alternatively democratisation, as the only factors which influence foreign policy formation, the relative importance of multiple factors should be acknowledged in order to explain Russia’s liberal changes as well as return to great power thinking during certain periods. Tsygankov also perceives both realism and liberalism as being ethnocentric, since they address Russian foreign policy from a Western cultural standpoint, thus minimising or overlooking Russian indigenous history and systems of perception.

Social constructivism, on the other hand, is argued to answer the question of what ‘national’ means in different social conditions, with the application of various meanings and interpretations to the conceptions of the ‘nation’. Constructivists argue that there is no essence, no pre–given qualities, within a thing, person, state or nation that makes these entities into something particular, constant and static. Moreover, by bringing ideas and beliefs that guide actors’ behaviour on the international scene to the forefront of analysis, social constructivism thus brings human consciousness into the picture. Scholars within this field perceive existing categories, such as, ‘Russian national identity’, not as something natural or ‘real’, but as constructed, always part of a process and thus subject to change depending on the context. Here, we ought to remember the constitutive power of discourse in the identity construction process.

While Tsygankov does not place any extensive emphasis on the textual aspects of the articulation of national identity, he argues that a ‘discursive competition’ commonly takes place between groups and coalitions that, by drawing on the actions of the Other and interpreting various international and local influences, strive to establish the dominant view of the national identity vision which will guide policy making. There is thus competition between discourses in society. This struggle derives from the fact that a society is never homogenous, and that different groups wish to claim the central societal space to present their message. In the end, one of the visions gains the upper-hand and the state subsequently uses this vision of national identity as a basis for its foreign policy. Tsygankov produced the following descriptive tool to explain the above process:

120 Tsygankov, Russia’s Foreign Policy.
121 Burr, An Introduction to Social Constructionism.
122 Tsygankov, Russia’s Foreign Policy, 2nd ed., 16. The term ‘discursive competition’ is used quite widely within the scholarly literature, and is often used in a Foucauldian context.
He thus shows that foreign policy is a profoundly political phenomenon, shaped by the rise and fall of different identity visions that are defended by social and political groups. As discussed in the forthcoming section, in times of war, the proponents of the different foreign policy groups may become especially articulate and often seek to present a certain image of the national homeland to demonstrate certain qualities of the state/nation in order to justify a certain response to, or development of, the hostile situation. Thus, at least since the early nineteenth century, nation-building processes tend to heighten during times of military conflict.

Nation-Building and War

In order to examine the nation-building process during times of international conflict, this thesis employs Rogers Brubaker’s discussion about nationhood or ‘nationness’ as an event, i.e. as something that happens, not merely as something that develops.\(^\text{124}\) Nationness can thus happen, suddenly and with force. In order to be able to support such a supposition, however, this thesis relies on Brubaker’s understanding of the relation between nation, nationhood and nationness. He perceives ‘nation as a category of practice, nationhood as an institutionalized cultural and political form, and nationness as a contingent event or happening’.\(^\text{125}\) The world is therefore not ‘a world of nations’, as suggested by Anthony Smith, but instead one in which nations exist as categories of social organisation.\(^\text{126}\)

Consequently, as stated by Brubaker, if we are to understand nationalism, we must

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\(^{123}\) Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy*, 2nd ed., 17.


\(^{125}\) Brubaker, *Nationalism reframed*, 21.

understand how the category of nation is used in practice, how it structures perception, develops thought and experience and formulates discourse and political action.

He argues that there exists extensive literature that examines nationhood and nationalism from a developmentalist perspective by looking at the long-term political, cultural and economic shifts that, over the centuries, have resulted in the gradual emergence of nations, or nationness, thus leaving out the discussion about it as an event. As argued by Eric Lohr, studies that focus on long-term developments which create the social, intellectual and conceptual provisions for the development of modern nations do not emphasise ‘the conditions under which nationalism actually emerges and wins’. Naturally, there exist studies, by sociologist and political scientists, that have examined different nationalisms, but these do not generally focus on particular events, since these scholars wish to find structural and cultural explanations that are generalisable in nature. Historians, in their turn, while focusing on events, have not theorised them to any great extent.

According to Brubaker we must think theoretically about the relatively rapid changes in the nationness of a group as well as the relational settings. In certain situations, such as after the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the population experienced a sudden and forceful ‘nationalization’ of their public and, at times, private life. This involved the nationalisation of narratives, interpretative frames, perceptions, thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, such a process is described as silencing or marginalising alternative political languages that were not nationalist in nature and making identities uniform by removing their complexities. By examining this process as an event, we can arguably understand some of its dynamics.

War is naturally a significant event for any country and thus affects the nation-building process. As argued by Lohr, it is somewhat surprising that war is not more centre stage in the theoretical literature on nationalism and he argues that the term war nationalism would be useful when thinking about nationalisms in the Russian Empire during World War I, in order to bring the focus to war as a moment that mobilised

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128 Eric Lohr, “War Nationalism,” in The Empire and Nationalism at War, eds. Eric Lohr et al. (Bloomington, USA, Slavica press, 2014), 92.

129 Brubaker, Nationalism reframed.
nationalism. Lohr thus supports describing nationalism as an ‘event’, arguing that theories that perceive nationality as an ‘external characteristic or ordering principle ascribed to people without consideration of their will explain nationalism better than theories that view nationalism as the result of long-term developments and nationality as a category that builds up gradually in people’s psyches and identities’. According to Brubaker, an event such as a state collapse or war, ‘suddenly crystallizes rather than gradually develops, as a contingent, conjecturally fluctuating and precarious frame of vision and basis for individual and collective action’.

War can, in other words, bring to light the different visions of the nation - visions that are essential for uniting the nation behind the leadership during times of hostility. Moreover, wars tend to develop conditions in which popular mobilisation in support of particular vision(s) of the nation can occur rapidly, yet, as argued in this thesis, in addition to the support of the domestic community, the political leadership needs to legitimise its actions in front of the international community due to the economic and political interconnectedness of states in today’s globalised world. Military actions during war, which are perceived by the international community to be territorially interventionist, naturally lower the international standing of the state that is engaging in military activities. In the case of Russia, such international reputation is, to a large degree, decided by the West.

The Importance of the Other/s in the Construction of National Identity

Tsygankov argues that the western recognition of Russia’s standing in the international arena is able either to bolster or undermine the influence of the different schools of foreign policy thinking within the Russian political landscape. A higher degree of recognition of Russia as an equal and legitimate player in the international arena strengthens the individuals and groups who focus on Russia as belonging to the West at large, and the lack of such recognition gives force to those individuals and groups who demand greater independence from the West and more confrontational policies towards it.

The importance of western recognition is due to the fact that the West plays the role of Russia’s Significant Other. Additionally, as Tolz argues, the comparison with the West is

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131 Lohr, “War Nationalism,” 92.
132 Brubaker, Nationalism reframed, 19-20, in Lohr.
the most important factor in the development of the modern Russian identity.\textsuperscript{133} She states that the relationship with the West, notably the question of whether or not Russia can be considered part of Europe, has been of utmost importance for Russia’s own self-reflection, how it perceives the world outside its own borders, its view of Russian history, as well as its different roads forward over the last 300 years. However, in Eastern European/Russian thought, Europe and the West are not at all times portrayed as one and the same. For example, the current official position of the Kremlin is that Russia is part of Europe, yet it is opposed to the West. The main component of the West would, in the latter instance, be the United States and the United Kingdom, as opposed to ‘Europe’ as comprising continental Europe.\textsuperscript{134}

It is, however, common for a state or nation to have a number of Others that have an effect on the construction of its national identity. As noted earlier, during times of war, the categories of the Self and the Other become more articulate, yet the Other is often depicted in excessively negative terms during such times, which is not necessarily the case during peace times.

During the 2008 war in Georgia, the Georgian government, led by Saakashvili, was portrayed in the official Russian discourse as an Other, an entity that Russia was not. The same applied to the United States’ government, which was repeatedly accused of supporting the Georgian government. Europe as a whole, often taken as a synonym for the countries comprising the European Union, did not play a very prominent role in the official Russian discourse during the war. Individual European states, such as France, due to its role as holder of the presidency of the European Council and broker of the six-point ceasefire agreement together with Russia and Georgia, received a certain degree of attention in the official Russian discourse. The Netherlands also stood out in this discourse due to the Russian leadership’s use of the Srebrenica massacre of 1995, and the failure of the Dutch peacekeepers to protect the Bosnian Muslim population at the time, as a justification for keeping Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia and Abkhazia after the end of the 2008 war. As mentioned above, the Russian decision to keep military troops in the two republics met with harsh criticism from Georgia as well as many other members of the international community.

\textsuperscript{133} Tolz, Russia.  
\textsuperscript{134} On the history of the differentiation between Europe and the West, see the chapter “The West” by Tolz in A History of Russian Thought, eds. Derek Offord et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
1.5. The Categorisation of the Participants in the Conflict

Georgia, the United States and a limited number of European countries were thus categorised in a certain manner in the official Russian discourse related to the war, yet the focus lay on the categorisation of the Self, of ‘Russia’, as well as of the ‘people’ of the two break-away republics and of the ‘war’. The Russian leadership responded to the international critique, arguing that Russia was not imperialistic but yet a Great Power; it was not the Soviet Union in new clothes; the international tensions did not signify the emergence of a new version of the Cold War; and Russia had not infringed Georgian sovereignty but simply protected the life and dignity of Russian citizens and/or compatriots in the region. Different realities were thus constructed and these were articulated through language.

The different denominations built on various contingent discourses that provided one possible construction of reality and of the subjects involved; one that was possible, but not necessary. In other words, reality could have been constructed otherwise and the 2008 war and Russia’s role in it could have been portrayed in a different light, but both the Russian political leadership and the international community chose one interpretation of the situation over others. The different actors chose one set of words over others, thereby constructing a certain version of events and of the subjects involved. These versions were, at times, highly incompatible, yet, as argued by Michael Urban, individuals outside the discursive sphere may not regard these representations as correct, and may even perceive them as being insane, but by the participants within the sphere such practices are deemed to be real and possibly not remarkable at all.135

**The Themes in Focus and the Analysis of the Data**

The contingent discourses that were in circulation in Russian during the 2008 war and its aftermath affected the Russian nation-building process, and the discursive struggle in connection with the 2008 war can thus be perceived as a cross-section of the longer-term nation-building project, yet this snap shot of the Russian leadership’s attempts to unite the nation behind a common cause is, to a certain extent, an anomaly in such a project due to the nation building process’ heightened intensity during the event of war and the special dynamics inherent in a war context. In any case, within this cross-section, the study will

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partly emphasise the influence of the Significant Other on the discursive construction of national identity. The focus of this study is thus the Russian political leadership’s construction of Russian national identity through discourse in the context of war, including how this process was influenced by the critique delivered by certain members of the international community.

This thesis seeks to pinpoint the different discourses articulated by the Russian political leadership in a situation of international conflict - discourses that compete to define the Russian nation, within the specific genres of political speech and interviews, yet the discursive field consists of many different levels of discourse, and this study treats the official Russian discourse as an overarching discourse with other discourses subjugated to it, such as the legal and interventionist discourses that will be discussed in the forthcoming chapter. The official Russian discourse is understood to be the general framework of meaning that constitutes the Russian political leadership’s way of speaking about and understanding the world. The legal and interventionist discourses are more specific frameworks of meaning that emphasise certain more limited issues and roles for Russia in the context of war. Legal discourse in this context is a set of statements which explain Russia’s position and actions with reference to the various legal aspects. Interventionist discourse relates to the statements referring to Russia’s self-acclaimed obligation to intervene in the conflict, much due to the country’s role as ‘the guarantor of peace and security of the people of the Caucasus’ [гарант мира и безопасности народов Кавказа].

Through such an undertaking, the following analytical chapters reconstruct the identities that were important in the Russian nation-building process in the context of the 2008 war, and are in line with Hopf’s argument that the process of reconstructing identities demands the contextualization of their meaning within texts, within their source, and the texts’ subsequent relation to other texts that rearticulate the meaning of these identities.136

As a frame of analysis, this study has taken the three chosen themes, namely Russia as a Great/Imperial Power, the Historical (primarily Soviet) Legacy, and Russian Citizens/Compatriots, all crucial elements in the Russian nation-building process, as starting points. The study consequently focuses on the statements that touch upon these themes. As mentioned, these themes were chosen because they are the most important components of the contentious issues of the ‘just’ borders of the contemporary Russian state and of who belongs to the Russian nation – questions that took centre stage in Russia

136 Hopf, Social Construction of International Politics.
after the fall of the Soviet Union and still have a bearing on the Russian nation-building process today.

Furthermore, the logics inherent in the discussions around these themes are presumably of great interest to many members of the international community due to their general interest in, and concern about, the possible revisionist tendencies of contemporary Russia. In the event of international conflict, the political leadership of a country is dependent on a degree of predictability concerning the actions of other states, and grasping the identity of other states offers, at least to a certain extent, a chance to predict their actions, yet if the actions of a state, for example the conduct of war, do not converge with the state leadership’s utterances concerning its own identity, the sought-after predictability is lost. Furthermore, a country’s political leadership might think that they have understood the identity of another state/nation, but their understanding can be faulty and thus misleading for the development of state policies. Therefore, the international community would benefit from a better understanding of the discursive aspect of the Russian leadership’s construction of national identity.

While focusing on the three chosen themes, this study examines how the conceptual apparatus used by members of the Russian political leadership treats Russian nationhood. This thesis will, to this end, discuss the development of certain concepts, i.e. the possible transformation of their meaning, that relate to the three main themes. The focus will predominantly be on the concepts of the Great Power, Imperialism, the Soviet Union, the Cold War, the Russian Citizens/Compatriots. These concepts acquire certain meanings depending on their context and the discourses that surround them.

By framing both the actions on the ground and the parties involved in a certain way, the discourses arguably produced a specific understanding of the themes and the meaning of the different concepts. The role of the analyst of discourse is to ‘map out the processes in which we struggle about the way in which the meaning of signs is to be fixed, and the processes by which some fixations of meaning become so conventionalized that we think of them as natural’. In doing so, this study will examine how the Russian political leadership, during and in the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian war, sought temporarily to fix certain meanings of signs, i.e. words and concepts, and how such fixation fed into the interpretation of Russian national identity and thus created a certain version of reality.

This study will, to this end, focus on the meaning found in a number of ‘nodal points’, privileged signs around which other signs are ordered and from which these other signs obtain their meaning. Nodal points are initially empty, and filled with meaning by their context. The main nodal point for this study is ‘Russia’, but also the ‘people’ of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, or ‘Ossetians’ and ‘Abkhazians’, and the ‘war’. ‘Georgia’, ‘the West’, as well as ‘the United States’ and, to a more limited extent, ‘Europe’ are also perceived as nodal points, even though their role in Russia’s official discourse surrounding the war is predominantly to explain what Russia is not. Other signs of importance to this study are, for example, ‘victim’ and ‘aggressor’.

This study thus examines actual instances of language use. It reviews explicit articulations of various representations of identity within the texts that touch upon the three chosen themes. The reason for focusing on the discourses enacted by the political leadership is due to its agency concerning the furtherance of a specific discourse. As argued by van Dijk, ‘elites are the ones who initiate, monitor, and control the majority and most influential forms of institutional and public text and talk’. As further argued by the author, however, this does not mean that the public simply consists of inactive onlookers who passively adopt the elites’ opinions and ideologies, but that the elites are better able to influence interpretations and social beliefs. The ‘elite’ as a concept could involve the most influential figures within the intellectual, economic and military spheres as well, but this thesis is limited to an analysis of the discourses deriving from the key political leadership.

The discourses are analysed by examining a chosen set of statements and the study concentrates on the statements by the then President Dmitry Medvedev, the then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, due to them being the main speakers representing Russia in the international arena at the time of the 2008 war. Such focus does not infer that they were the only politicians who were involved in the construction of the image of the Russian nation but these were the ones who were predominantly allowed to speak in the forum of international relations and thus the ones whose voices were heard and answered to. If one were to analyse the performative power of language and discourse, taking both the international and domestic influences into account, the statements should derive from individuals who are listened to both at home

140 Van Dijk, “The Elite Reproduction of Racism.”
and abroad. The study thus includes both texts directed at the international community and those addressing the domestic audiences, thus providing an opportunity to compare if and how the discourse changed depending on the audiences. Such a comparison will provide a more multi-faceted understanding of the political discourse at hand.

The analysis of the three themes within the political discourse could have been expanded to include material from the editorials of the quality newspapers, as these are often to be found within the framework of meaning provided by the main political discourses, as well as academic writings and reports from think-tanks related to the political parties, since such material forms part of the debate in the political sphere and therefore part of the predominant or rival political discourses. The reason for limiting the primary sources to statements by the Russian political leadership is that their pronouncements are directed more or less directly at Russia’s foreign policy partners and adversaries; it is through these official political forums that the Russian political elite expect its international counterparts to listen to the Russian message, something which is not necessarily the case for texts found in media outlets or in the domestic political sphere, such as parliamentary debates and information deriving from certain political parties.

Work on this thesis has also involved a close examination of a number of the main constituting texts of the Russian state, such as the Foreign Policy Concepts of Russia from 2000, 2008 and 2013, the National Security Concepts from 2000 and 2009, the Russian Constitution from 1993, as well as the Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly from 2000 to 2014. These are not directly included in the textual analysis but exist as background texts that, to a certain extent, affect my understanding of the main primary sources. As mentioned, it is necessary to put the primary texts in relation to other texts that rearticulate the meaning of identities. The Presidential Addresses to the Federal Assembly have also been useful for conducting a brief analysis of the discursive sphere preceding and following the 2008 war, since it is necessary to compare the discourses before, during and after the war in order to obtain a clearer picture of their relevant aspects.

In order to detect any shifts over time in this discursive process, the study analyses the statements in a largely chronological order, thereby taking into account the context wherein the discourse developed. Moreover, I divide the texts into three time periods: firstly, the actual period of the war, 7/8 - 12 August 2008; secondly, the weeks between the signing of the six-point peace plan and the recognition of the independence of South

141 Cf. Larsen, *Foreign Policy and Discourse Analysis.*
Ossetia and Abkhazia, 12-26 August, 2008; and lastly, a two-month-period following the recognition of independence. The length of the last period of analysis was decided by the interest shown by the Russian leadership as well as the international community with regard to the chosen themes, as demonstrated through the frequency by which these matters were referred to in the statements.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to outline the theoretical and methodological frameworks of the study, which are informed by the perception that language plays a central role in conflict and war. The chapter discussed the usefulness of applying a discourse analysis approach that treats language as an important component of the social world, with language attaining an especially prominent role during the conduct of war. Furthermore, war and conflict have been portrayed as socially constructed, rather than based on any innate aggressive human instincts or pre-determined national interests or grievances. Instead, war and conflict are perceived as dependent on language due to the need to articulate grievances and guilt, mobilise troops and obtain support from both the domestic and international audiences.

Instances of language use produce certain meanings for the identity of the participants in war by enabling discourses that construct the social reality and its participants in a certain way. As a result of the 2008 war in Georgia different realities were presented by Russia on the one hand, and certain members of the international community on the other. These realities built on different contingent discourses that defined Russia and its actions during the war and in its aftermath. Since the Russian identity construction process is, to a large degree, determined by the recognition of the Significant Other, i.e. the West, it is important to examine how Russian identity was constructed in discourse, with this critique as an important influential factor.

To this end, this chapter discussed the usefulness of applying a variant of discourse analysis that focuses on explicit statements made by certain members of the Russian political leadership, in order to examine the construction of the notion of nationhood within the context of war, with a special focus on the influence of the West in such a process. The forthcoming analysis of the main primary sources concentrates on the three chosen themes; namely, Russia as a Great/Imperial Power, the Historical (primarily Soviet) Legacy, and
Russian Citizens/Compatriots, due to their being important components of the problematic issues of the ‘just borders’ of the Russian nation/state and the belongingness to the Russian nation.

The following analytical chapters are thus based on the theoretical and methodological frameworks discussed and will, in their totality, demonstrate the importance of studying the role of language and discourse in connection with the Russian nation-building process. The analysis starts with an elaboration of the vision of Russia as a Great Power, and how it relates to the international critique about Russian being a state with imperialist goals.
Chapter 2. The Discursive Construction of Russia as a ‘Non-Imperialist Great Power’

Introduction

Russia’s self-perception as a great power is one of the cornerstones in the search for the Russian state and national identity. Due to the historical great power status of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, as well as the super power status of the latter from the end of WWII until its collapse, a prominent role for Russia in the international arena is of great importance for both the Russian political leadership as well as the population at large. During the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, the official Russian discourse utilised the great power vision of Russia in order to legitimise the country’s actions to both national and international audiences.

While utilising visions of Russia as a great power, the official discourse simultaneously displayed a firm resistance to the claims about Russia being an imperialist state due to the Russian military actions during the war and the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This chapter demonstrates how the Russian leadership, by mixing old and new discursive traits, sought to counter the critique of Russian imperialist tendencies while still building on the great power narrative, thus giving the great power concept a new meaning in the war context and thereby enabling the Russian political leadership to address a wide range of audiences simultaneously.

143 There is no one single definition of ‘great power’ in the scholarly literature. Iver B. Neumann discusses the traditional ways of defining great powers as the Weberian and Durkhiemian, in Neumann, “Russia as a great power, 1815-2007,” Journal of International Relations and Development 11, no. 2 (2008): 128-151. The former offers a realist account of great powerhood and discusses the issue in terms of power prestige, i.e. a relational quality that translates into having power over other communities and one that is connected to military and economic factors. The latter focuses more on moral aspects, and defines great powerhood in terms of a state being just, organized and having a superior moral constitution. Neumann himself suggests the addition of a third way, namely the question of governance and bases his discussion on Foucault’s work on the emergence of governmentality. Even though Neumann’s article is a welcome contribution to the scholarly discussion around great powerhood, this thesis is not concerned with determining if contemporary Russia is in fact a great power or not, but seeks to illuminate how the Russian political leadership constructs Russia as a great power through discourse. The content and form of the great power notion are thus fluid and are determined in their context, which in this case is the discursive construction of Russian national identity through the Russo-Georgian war.

144 The concept of ‘imperialism’ is in this thesis used as relating to territorially expansionist politics since that is what the term usually meant when used to criticize Russian actions during the Russo-Georgian war. Consequently, the study does not engage in any lengthier discussion around the term’s conceptual meaning as found in the academic literature.
The portrayal of Russia as a great power was neither surprising nor novel in the official discourse since the great power concept has, for centuries, been a constant in the Russian identity debate. It is a notion that seems to fit all circumstances and stages of development of Russian and Soviet identity. Moscow has made use of it in times when the country has been considered relatively strong economically, militarily and politically, as well as when its strength has been considerably weakened. In other words, the concept seems to be malleable and acquires different meanings depending on the context. Due to the concept’s relevance for the Russian, as well as Soviet, identity debates, it is important to study what such a concept means in different contexts, for which purposes it could possibly change, and how such dynamics affect these debates. Moreover, a better understanding of what Moscow itself reads into the great power concept at certain points in time, whether this reading is dominated by increasingly territorial revisionist tendencies on the one hand or more internationally cooperative ones on the other, can guide policy makers abroad when forming their policies towards Russia.

Due to the salience of the perception of Russia as a great power at most levels of Russian society, portraying the country as such during the war and its aftermath was a natural choice on the part of the Russian political elite, and also a way to establish its role as an influential power within the international system. This specific discursive mobilisation assisted the Russian leadership in uniting the Russian community behind the decision to go to war, to recognise the independence of the two break-away republics, as well as to maintain Russian troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia long after the end of war. The notion spoke to the Russian general public, as well as to the majority of the members of the different schools of foreign policy thinking, yet the schools’ proponents supported and disregarded different aspects of the great power claim, and some even partly denied Russia’s ability to become a great power. As Tsygankov states, members of the Westernist school, such as Boris Nemtsov, Vladimir Milov, Yevgeni Gonthmakher and Igor Yurgens, questioned Russia’s ability to become a great power due to the economic and political development model chosen by Putin. They argued that this model prevented the modernization of Russia and the country’s integration into Western institutions. Furthermore, according to the author, they criticized Russia’s involvement in the war.

While the great power narrative was used to gain legitimacy by demonstrating Russia’s strength, downplaying any expansionist tendencies was intended to acquire approval by other means. On the one hand, it sought to show the international community that Russia was a trustworthy, cooperative player and, on the other, it spoke to those
sections of the domestic community that did not welcome the idea of a new Russian imperialist state. The latter would arguably include Westernisers who wish to foster positive relations with Western countries and who commonly focus on Russia’s similarities with the West. It also entailed the majority of the general Russian population that wishes to see Russia as a great power but that has realized that imperialism is an expensive political project.

The Statists emphasise the importance of a strong, sovereign state and portraying Russia as a great power is thus imperative. They seek the West’s recognition by emphasising Russia’s economic and military strength and this striving for recognition was clearly demonstrated in the official Russian discourse in connection to the 2008 conflict, especially in the war’s aftermath. Moreover, since the notion of an external threat to Russian security is high on the agenda for Statists, the official discourse to a significant degree mirrored the Statist school’s perception of foreign policy. As argued by Tsygankov, the Statists think that Russia ‘must remain a great power capable of responding to those threats anywhere in the world’.145 However, this school does not generally explicitly demonstrate any desire for expansionism, and the resistance against the accusations of imperialism would thus speak to the members of this school.

There were naturally individuals within Russian society who did not support the official discourse’s relatively pragmatic stance when resisting the accusation of imperialism. These people instead sought to further the perception of contemporary Russia as a country that had finally, if not regained, then at least increased its influence over parts of the territory lost due to the dissolution of the USSR. Such ideas can be found among the members of the Civilisationist school and its more hard-line political and intellectual movements; for example, the more extreme neo-Eurasianists welcomed the war and the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but would have liked to see an even more assertive and confrontational policy that would have resulted in the restoration of Russian hegemony in the CIS area. The recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was, however, celebrated as a step in the right direction. Alexander Dugin, the most outspoken proponent of Russian neo-Eurasianism, travelled to South Ossetia on August 26 in order to proclaim his support for Russia’s decision to grant

145 Tsygankov, Russia’s Foreign Policy, 2nd ed., 7.
the break-away republic independence and he praised the ‘long-awaited renaissance of the Russian empire’.146

Russia was thus alternatively perceived as an ‘imperial’ and a ‘great’ power, and so it is important to examine this discursive struggle. Moreover, the ‘great power versus imperial power’ is the main framework through which the nature of Russian foreign policy is usually interpreted both inside Russia and in the international arena. An analysis of the official discourse deriving from the Russian leadership concerning these themes must consider this duality in order to understand the different emphases in the discourse during the war and its aftermath. The chapter analyses the statements by the Russian key political leaders in a largely chronological order, in order to examine if certain developments on the ground or within the communication with Russia’s international partners would result in the different visions of Russian national identity taking different forms and thus acquiring alternative meanings. There will be some deviation from this chronology when the discussion requires it. The chapter starts with a brief discussion of the historical importance of the self-image of Russia as a great power up to the 2008 war. It then proceeds with an examination of the statements from the war period and its aftermath.

2.1. Russian Greatness in a Historical Perspective

The pursuit of great power status has been prevalent in the official Russian discourse since the time of Peter the Great.147 During the Cold War, the USSR considered itself to be the equal of the United States when, following World War II, the Soviet Union emerged as one of the world’s two superpowers. The fall of the Soviet Union naturally caused a change in official Russian discourse due to the loss of this superpower status but even during the tumultuous decade of the 1990s, when the new Russian state was encountering serious economic difficulties, had lost large parts of its land mass and had little significant influence in its more immediate geographical surroundings, there was still an evident

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146 Interestingly, Eduard Kokoity, South Ossetia’s President at the time, was part of the international version of the neo-Eurasianists, i.e. the International Eurasianist Movement, in Marlène Laurelle, “Neo-Eurasianist Alexander Dugin on the Russia-Georgia Conflict,” CACI Analyst, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, May 3, 2008, http://old.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4928.

147 Neumann, “Russia as a great power, 1815-2007.”
desire among both the leadership and the general population to perceive Russia as nothing but a great power.\textsuperscript{148}

Such ideological continuity supports Iver Neumann’s argument of a ‘tacit assumption’ among Russians of the impossibility of Russia being a small and insignificant state - it must be a great power or nothing at all.\textsuperscript{149} Seemingly, great power status is, to use Neumann’s terminology, a ‘self-referential axiom’ in Russia’s identity politics.\textsuperscript{150} Ronald Suny, who perceives Russia’s self-image as a great power as imagined rather than corresponding to its actual power, argues that Russia will probably continue to identify itself as a great power despite its weaknesses.\textsuperscript{151}

Additionally, with the assumption of Vladimir Putin as President in 2000, the portrayal of Russian greatness as a natural state of affairs became increasingly prominent within the official discourse. During Putin’s first term in office, Moscow sought to construct Russia as a great power that was a reliable, yet powerful, state that had embarked on an appropriate path of development after the chaotic 1990s. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001, the Kremlin sought discursively to construct Russia as a natural partner of Washington in the fight against terrorism. Putin’s first term has been widely seen as the ‘liberal’ era in Russian post-Communist politics, and the second term, with the 2004 Beslan massacre as a significant discursive turning point, as sharpening the rhetoric of the president.\textsuperscript{152}

In accordance with the perception of the increasingly assertive nature of Russian foreign policy one could, however prematurely, interpret Putin’s speech to the Federal Assembly in 2005, in which he argued that the fall of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the last millennium, as expressing a desire to build a new version of an imperialist state that would incorporate the former Soviet states, while describing his speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy in 2007 as proof of a revival of Cold

\textsuperscript{149} Neumann, \textit{Russia as a great power}, 128.
\textsuperscript{150} Neumann, \textit{Russia as a great power}, 129.
War thinking. A closer examination of the speeches by the Russian leadership during Putin’s first two presidential terms, including these two speeches mentioned above, indeed demonstrates that the official discourse changed from portraying Russia as a cooperative state that was relatively admissive in front of international, and predominantly Western, rules of engagement, to being increasingly confrontational while emphasising Russia’s prominent role in the international community. The discourse does not demonstrate any explicitly imperialistic desires deriving from the key political leadership, however.

The official discourse from the Russo-Georgian war and its aftermath followed the latter pattern to a certain degree by seeking to naturalise Russian greatness and demonstrating a resistance to the ‘Western’ rules of engagement, while not displaying any imperialist desires. Bobo Lo argues that Russia’s military activities during the 2008 war revealed to the world that, after years of yearning for recognition as a great power, Russia was to be reckoned with and one could no longer ignore its interests. Even though the Russian leadership firmly denied any imperialistic tendencies, however, it simultaneously left the question about any future Russian military engagement outside its borders open to interpretation. The concerns demonstrated by a number of Russia’s neighbouring states were argued to be out of touch with reality, at the same time as Russia’s inherent right to take its own decisions in the region was emphasised. The resistance to the imperialist claims was thus not always clear and consistent within the discourse, an issue that will be discussed in the forthcoming examination of the official Russian discourse from the war.

2.2. Constructing a Great Power through Other Means

The following analysis of the selected empirical material examines how the Russian leadership discursively sought to construct Russia as a great power midst the international critique of what was perceived as its government’s imperialist tendencies. Interestingly enough, the vision of Russia as a great power was generally not explicitly articulated by

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the Russian leadership but was instead constructed through other identity markers that all worked towards building the image of Russia as a great power.

During the war and its aftermath, there were two main discourses that worked to legitimise Russian conduct and construct Russia as a great power. Firstly, what this thesis chooses to label an interventionist discourse built on Russia’s role as ‘the guarantor of peace and security of the people of the Caucasus’. As a result of such self-ascribed responsibility in the region, Russia was allegedly obliged to intervene in the conflict. Secondly, a legal discourse was enacted that emphasised the righteousness of Russian conduct in connection with the war as based on bilateral and multilateral agreements, the Russian Constitution and international law. The legal discourse was continuously built on, extended long beyond the most intense war period, and seems to act as the discourse that embraced all other discourses found.

In the period following the war, statements that more clearly spelt out Russia’s role as a great power started to recur more frequently, but did not generally articulate this role explicitly. Such a portrayal included a description of the war as a ‘Moment of Truth’, i.e. a decisive event that demonstrated the country’s strengthened role within international relations and the need for a new international security architecture that offered more space to Russia in the decision making process. Moreover, and highly significant for the discussion of this chapter, the statements from the aftermath of the war demonstrated how the Russian leadership strongly resisted the imperialist label being applied to post-Communist Russia, while simultaneously constructing itself as a militarily strong and influential international power.

**Enacting an Interventionist Discourse**

During all stages of the 2008 war, as well as in the conflict’s immediate aftermath, the interventionist discourse emphasised the role of Russia as the ‘guarantor of peace and security of the people of the Caucasus’. Such a role was partly sought by repeatedly referring to Russia’s peacekeeping duties in the region. This role was largely self-assigned, even though a Russian military presence was viewed favourably by certain groups outside Russia’s borders, such as the majority of the population of South Ossetia. Portraying Russia as an active promoter of peace in the area is, however, not a new element in the official Russian discourse. Russia has had peacekeeping forces in the region since the beginning of the 1990s, and as early as 1993, former Russian President Boris Yeltsin noted
Russia’s ‘special responsibility’ in the area, demanding that the international community should ‘grant Russia special powers as guarantor for peace and stability in this region’.  

Russia has conducted four different peacekeeping operations in the region, namely in Moldova/Transdnestr, Tajikistan, and in Georgia/South Ossetia and Georgia/Abkhazia. The conditions of these operations differ due to their mandates, and the historical and cultural differences between the countries as well as to the political and military particulars of the conflicts. It could be argued that these are peacekeeping operations in name only, since one of their main objectives seems to be to maintain Russian influence in the countries along its borders. As argued by Dov Lynch, however, despite the controversy over these operations they have received little attention in the scholarly literature. Russian peacekeeping in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) began in 1992 and was initially intended to protect Russian interests in the region as well as to prevent Russia’s domestic reform from being affected by ‘conflict spillover’ from this volatile region. However, according to Lynch, the Russian leadership changed its strategy from the late 1990s onwards due to an understanding of the dangers and costs of intervention, and because of the perception that the primary threats to Russian security are internal. As a result, Russian peacekeeping increasingly took the form of more traditional international peacekeeping and the emphasis began to fall more on conflict resolution. However, the neutrality of these forces continues to be questioned.

In the case of Georgia, the presence of Russian peacekeeping forces in South Ossetia and Abkhazia was harshly criticised by the Saakashvili government even before the war broke out in 2008, and the critique continued during the war and its aftermath. Assigning Russia the role of the protector of the Caucasus was thus highly controversial, and the significant space it occupied in the official Russian discourse is thus very interesting.

Medvedev’s first official statement after the outbreak of war in August 2008 consequently spelt out that ‘Russia has historically been, and will remain, a guarantor of

158 Lynch, Russian Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS, 2.
the security of the peoples of the Caucasus’. A declaration of this role in the very first official statement from the president demonstrates its centrality in the official Russian discourse. An identical pronouncement was made on August 11, the day before the presentation of the six-point peace plan by Medvedev and his French counterpart, Nicolas Sarkozy. On this day, at a meeting with various party leaders of the Russian Parliament, Medvedev reiterated the same message: ‘I repeat now what I said several days ago; namely, that Russia has historically been the guarantor of the security of the peoples of the Caucasus. This is our mission and our duty. We have never been passive observers in this region and never will be’.

Russia hereby ascribed a special and active role to itself in the region and stated that it would maintain this position in the future, yet such responsibility was allegedly not a choice, but a duty. Lavrov made a similar statement during a BBC interview on August 9, for which I cannot find a Russian original or translation. The interviewer enquired about Russia’s aims in South Ossetia, and Lavrov replied that ‘Russia’s aim is to maintain peace. This is not just Russia’s aim; this is Russia’s obligation.’ Russia thus purportedly both desired and was forced to keep the peace in Georgia.

Putin separated the legal aspect of the peacekeeping duties from the historical role of being a ‘stabiliser’ in the region, however, connecting the latter to the ‘political’ side of the situation. On August 9, when chairing a meeting in the Russian republic of North Ossetia, he stated:

As for Russia, from a legal point of view, our actions are completely justifiable and legitimate. Moreover, they are necessary. In accordance with international agreements, including the agreement of 1999, Russia not only fulfils its peacekeeping duties [функции миротворческого характера] but also its obligation to take one side under its protection if the cease fire is violated by the other side. And we have done so in full accordance with these agreements, in this case in relation to South Ossetia.

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As I have said, this concerns the legal aspect of the situation, but there is also a political side. The case is that Russia has, for centuries, played a remarkably positive, stabilizing role in this region of the world (in the Caucasus as a whole). It has been a guarantor of the security, cooperation and progress in this region. This was true in the past and it will remain so in the future. There is no doubt about it. We will not impose anything on anyone.\textsuperscript{162}

In the statements above, the interventionist discourse exists in parallel with a legal discourse and they reinforce each other in order to construct the great power narrative, but the Russian word for ‘peacekeeping’ [миротворческий] literally means ‘peacemaking’ and these two terms differ in legal terms in that ‘peacemaking’ focuses on solving a conflict through diplomatic means and does not involve the presence of military forces.\textsuperscript{163} As the Russian ‘peacekeeping’ forces are military forces, however, this thesis will hereafter use the term peacekeeping in the main discussion even though it will note when the Russian leadership used a different term.\textsuperscript{164}

When Putin added to the great power narrative by stating that Russia has played a stabilising role for centuries, he enforced the claim of the historical continuity of Russian greatness, yet failed to provide a clear definition of what a ‘positive stabilising role’ would entail. Arguably, by portraying this role as ‘political’, Putin made Russia’s interference in the region sound like a matter of choice rather than a necessity, based on the protection of the peoples of the Caucasus in the event of conflict. The lack of clarity concerning the rationale for this word choice creates confusion regarding the boundaries of Russia’s role in the region.

Moreover, the claim that Russia was the guarantor of peace and security in the Caucasus was reinforced by the argument that the Russian military intrusion was based on a need for ‘coercing Georgia to peace’ and conducting a ‘peace enforcement’ operation as an unavoidable consequence of the Georgian government’s attack on South Ossetia.\textsuperscript{165} ‘Peace enforcement’ generally involves a higher degree of force than both ‘peacemaking’


\textsuperscript{163} See, for example, the United Nations’ definitions of the different terms on http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/operations/peace.shtml, accessed May 12, 2016.

\textsuperscript{164} In cases where the term peacemaking [миротворческий] is employed within the Russian leadership’s pronouncements, this term is indicated as ‘peacekeeping/making’ or ‘peacekeepers/makers’ in order to demonstrate the ambivalence in such terminology. However, as stated above, the main discussion about these terms will in the majority of cases only use the term ‘peacekeeping’ or ‘peacekeepers’, due to the nature of these forces and to allow the text to flow smoothly.

\textsuperscript{165} See, for instance, Lavrov’s August 9 BBC interview referred to above.
and ‘peacekeeping’ and its application to the 2008 war can be seen as part of a more resolute Russian foreign policy.

Russian officials nurtured such a resolute stance by repeatedly stating that the peace enforcement operation would continue until the stated goals had been achieved, yet the international mandate of the Russian peacekeepers stated that their role was to monitor the ceasefire in South Ossetia rather than to engage in peace enforcement. In the aftermath of the war, Russian officials continued this line of argument, claiming that the peace enforcement operation would continue until all of the goals had been reached, thereby preparing the ground for the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as the decision to place military forces in the two newly ‘independent’ states after the war.

As demonstrated above, the legal discourse, which will be discussed in more detail below, was repeatedly enacted in order to portray Russia as a law-abiding state that had no choice other but to continue its peace enforcement operation until a ‘status quo ante’ was established. In the same BBC interview mentioned above, Lavrov decisively voiced this stand:

We cannot allow peace agreements just to be violated this way, and whatever it takes to bring the situation to status quo ante will be done.

Russia was thereby constructed as a ‘determined’ and ‘consequent’ actor with set goals that it was prepared to do anything to attain. Additionally, by stating that Russia would do ‘whatever it takes’ in order to restore the status quo, Lavrov left the field open for many different interpretations concerning what that could possibly entail, including fear of further large-scale military intervention into other neighbouring countries.

In order to reach its goal of coercing Georgia into accepting peace, the Russian leadership claimed that the deployment of military troops during the war was justified since they were merely an enforcement of the Russian peacekeeping troops in the area. At the time of the cessation of hostilities, Lavrov, during a joint press conference with Chair-in-Office of the OSCE and Finland’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Stubb, emphasised such a stance by claiming that Russian troops sent into Georgia simply assisted

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166 Roy Allison, “Russia Resurgent?”
the already present peacekeeping troops and should, in other words, not be perceived as part of an aggressive and expansionist Russian foreign policy:

The measures which the Russian side is taking through the efforts of our peacekeepers/makers [наших миротворцев] and the additional units sent there to assist them are aimed, first and foremost, at protecting and ensuring the rights of our citizens and at fulfilling our peacekeeping/making obligations [наших миротворческих обязательств].168

In other words, it was alleged that Russia did not engage in warfare but was simply adhering to its peacekeeping duties in the region. The concerns expressed by the Russian leadership regarding the terminology applied to describe the war and the general perception that Russia was one of the warring parties, as discussed in the introduction, can thus be perceived as a logical consequence of portraying Russian actions as a question of peacekeeping and the additional troops sent in as an enforcement of the existing peacekeeping brigade.

A Legal Discourse as a Base

The peacekeeping duties and claim to be a guarantor for peace and security in the Caucasus were firmly grounded in a legal discourse that sought to justify Russian presence in Georgian territory before, during and after the conflict on the basis of various international agreements that had been reached during the previous two decades between Russia, Georgia, the international community and the Georgian break-away republics, on the Russian Constitution as well as the fundamental principles of international law. In relation to the latter, the Russian leadership repeatedly claimed that Georgia’s aggressive actions resulted in Russia acting out of self-defence, a right stipulated in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.169

A legal discourse is not a new phenomenon in Russian politicians’ pronouncements and has been a regular feature in both Putin and Medvedev’s statements, even during peace time. Furthermore, the Foreign Policy Concept of 2008, presented by Medvedev in July of that year, even included a new sub-section dedicated to International Law within section

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III, ‘Priorities for the Russian Federation in Addressing Global Problems’. The additional sub-section is entitled ‘The primacy of law in international relations’ and was not included in the Foreign Policy Concept adopted in 2000 at the beginning of Putin’s first presidential mandate. The same sub-section is found, however, in the Foreign Policy Concept of 2013, adopted when Putin returned to the presidential post, signaling a more permanent position of the legal theme within the official Russian discourse.

Even though the legal case for the Russian intervention in the 2008 war could be questioned, Medvedev enacted a legal discourse from the first day of the conflict. In his initial statement on the war, referred to above, he claimed that Russia’s presence in Georgia enjoyed an ‘absolutely lawful basis’ and that it had been and would continue to be guided by the fulfilment of Russia’s peacekeeping mission, which in turn was guided by former agreements. Medvedev argued that ‘What took place is a gross violation of international law and of the mandates that the international community gave Russia as a partner in the peace process’. The legal references within this initial statement signal the large emphasis on domestic and international law as seen throughout the period that is the subject of this study.

The legal discourse was further enacted when the Russian leadership delivered a critique of the international community for its alleged failure to press Saakashvili’s regime to sign an agreement regarding the non-use of force prior to the 2008 war, as well as for selling weapons to the Georgian government. Both during the conflict and in its aftermath, the Russian leadership emphasized that certain members of the international community should take responsibility for the events that occurred in August 2008. In the above-mentioned interview for the BBC on August 9, Lavrov voiced such critique:

Frankly speaking we can’t avoid noticing that those who ignored our warnings and sold offensive arms to Georgia, those who ignored all warnings and did not impress the need to sign this non-use of force agreement on the Georgian government, I think they
should bear at least part of the responsibility for what is going on.\textsuperscript{175}

On August 11, Putin voiced the same critique, adding that ‘Nobody listened to us. Now you can see the result’.\textsuperscript{176} The claim that Russia was not listened to prior to the outbreak of the war appeared numerous times in the official discourse and worked to portray Russia partly as a ‘victim’ of the surrounding world’s ignorance, but also as the only international player which tried to do the ‘right thing’, in accordance with international and domestic law, in order to avoid the conflict breaking out in the first place.

Thus, one way in which Russia sought to counter the negative critique and build up the great power narrative was by swapping some of the predicates attached to Russia and Georgia. Instead of accepting the role of the ‘aggressor’, the Russian leadership portrayed Russia as a ‘victim’ and, conversely, the Georgian government, with Saakashvili at its helm, as the ‘aggressor’. Such victimization of Russia does not immediately seem to support the great power claims but by portraying themselves as the ‘victim’ Russia could justify the military actions taken during the war as ‘defensive’ and ‘retaliatory’ operations that merely served to protect the civilians in South Ossetia, the majority of whom had acquired Russian citizenship, as well as the Russian peacekeepers on the ground who had been attacked, wounded and sometimes killed by the Georgian peacekeepers. Under both international and domestic law, Russia had a responsibility to intervene and protect these people.

If Russia were legally obliged to intervene in the conflict, the United States was not. Putin, in the same speech noted above, blamed the United States for intervening in the conflict due to the transfer of Georgian troops from Iraq to Georgia using US military transport planes. In line with presenting Russia as an independent state that made its own decisions, always in adherence with international law, but regardless of the nature of international reactions, he stated that ‘this will not change anything, but this is a step in the opposite direction from resolving the situation’. In order to stress his disapproval of these actions, he explained that the US actions were based on a high level of cynicism:

\begin{quote}
What is surprising is not even the cynicism of such actions, because politics, as they say, is relatively cynical in general. What is surprising is the scale of this cynicism! What is surprising is the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{175} Lavrov, “Interview by Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov to BBC,” August 9, 2008.
ability to swap white for black, black for white, the fine skill of
being able to portray an aggressor as a victim of aggression, and to
make the victims responsible for the consequences.  

It is difficult to follow the logic of such a statement, since ‘cynicism’ generally points
to a lack of trust and belief. What kind of trust the United States lacked, as demonstrated
by the transfer of Georgian troops from Iraq, thus taking the side of the ‘aggressor’, i.e.
Georgia, instead of the ‘victim’, which in this case meant the population of South Ossetia
and the Russian peacekeepers, was never defined. In any case, despite Russia being a
‘victim’ of Georgian aggression, the Russian leadership claimed that Russia ‘won’ the war
due to the swiftness and decisiveness of both the leadership and the military, arguing that
the latter had performed ‘heroic’ deeds in order to defend the Motherland.

2.3. Strengthening Russia through a Successful Military Operation

In the aftermath of the war, Russian officials continued to enact the legal discourse,
but at this point in time, it was not merely applied in order to justify Russian actions but
also to support the claim that Russia was the undisputed ‘winner’ of the 2008 war. As
discussed, on August 12, Medvedev negotiated a six-point peace plan together with
Sarkozy that underwent separate discussion on both sides of the conflict but was
ultimately sent to Saakashvili for approval on August 14. He signed it on August 15, as
did Medvedev the following day.

The Russian leadership repeatedly claimed that the original peace plan of August
12 was a diplomatic success, even though it was widely criticized by European security
officials due to its vague wording. It was argued that this lack of clarity might result
in Russia being able to claim that it was fulfilling the stated objectives in the plan even
though it would not withdraw its troops to where they had been stationed before the
war. It further gave Russia the opportunity to keep peacekeepers within Georgia proper
without defining their responsibilities or what the stipulated security measures in the

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177 Putin, “В.В.Путин провел заседание Президиума Правительства Российской Федерации,” August 11.
178 See, for example, EurActiv, “Sarkozy under fire over ‘foggy’ Georgia peace plan,” August 29, 2008,
peace plan would mean in practice. Moreover, European officials criticized the fact that there was no mention of Georgia’s territorial integrity in the peace plan.

Russian officials, on the other hand, resisted such accusations while arguing that Russia’s objectives had been reached, goals that had been set at the outbreak of the 2008 war. Moreover, Medvedev, at a press conference with Sarkozy on August 12, stated that a ‘new status quo’ had been achieved, a term that is quite ambiguous, however, since a status quo normally refers to preserving the current situation. To describe it as ‘new’ thus becomes quite paradoxical but later in the same speech, when spelling out the Russian objectives, Medvedev instead argued that Russia had ‘restored the status quo’:

Most important of all is that we achieved our set objectives. What were these objectives? First, we protected the citizens of the Russian Federation living in South Ossetia. Second, we restored the status quo and defended law and order in accordance with the international agreements signed in 1992 and subsequent years, upon which the conflict resolution efforts in this region have been based. In other words, we have acted in full accordance with our peacekeepers/makers’ mandate, expanding it only as far as these regrettable circumstances required.

Medvedev thus repeated the argument that Russia was ‘expanding’ the peacekeeping/peacemaking mandate according to the developments on the ground, yet the decision to increase the number of Russian forces due to these developments was naturally problematic when the different actors provided differing readings of them and subsequently held different perceptions of what was required in order to solve the conflict. At the same press conference, Medvedev articulated a similar sentiment about the successful operation conducted by the Russian forces, but added an element of vengeance by stating that ‘the aggressor has been punished and its armed forces are disorganized’.

A member of the audience asked Medvedev if it had been possible for Russia to react differently in the face of Georgia’s military operation in South Ossetia. In response, he criticized the international community’s lack of decisive actions by claiming that ‘When international law is violated, the state and the entire international community must take appropriate action and not make the kind of half-hearted response that is regrettable


common in the world today’. He portrayed Russian actions as ‘effective’ and ‘consistent’, arguing that the number of deaths would have been far higher had Russia’s military response been of a different nature.

The Russian leadership thus continuously framed Russian actions as part of a successful military campaign, but simultaneously demonstrated frustration over the limitations that some of Russia’s international counterparts sought to place on Russia’s ability to frame the conflict and its outcomes in its own terms. Both the Russian and Georgian sides, for instance, accused the other of acts amounting to ‘genocide’ and ‘ethnic cleansing’ during the conflict, and Medvedev insisted on Russia’s inalienable right to frame the conflict in its own terms.

Lavrov displayed signs of annoyance at the press conference with Stubb that same day. He singled out the then US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, for denying Russia the right to designate the conflict in its own terms, arguing that Saakashvili had accused Russia of ethnic cleansing and genocide a few days after the meeting with Rice but that she had then failed to issue reprimand to the Georgian leadership. In using the term ‘genocide’ the Russian leadership is evoking a particular set of historically emotive values and memories; in doing so they are reminding Western audiences of previous genocides, such as that in the former Yugoslavia, and the holocaust, and of the extreme, taboo qualities we attach to the term. This is an implicit rebuttal of Western criticism of Russia’s actions in Georgia, and a counter-accusation of hypocrisy. The Russian leadership thus demonstrated its inalienable right to frame the conflict as it saw fit and blamed the international community for a degree of double standards in their dealings with Russia and Georgia.

Lavrov also expressed his frustration over Rice’s alleged statement that Russia was seeking to overthrow Saakashvili and that it would only thereafter cease military operations. He argued that such a ‘dethroning-enthroning exercise’ was neither in Russia’s political culture nor part of its foreign policy, adding that ‘That is what others do, whom we know’. The different readings of the conflict, especially the mis-readings by the international community, were a constant in the official Russian discourse in the aftermath.

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of the conflict. Lavrov stated that he hoped that the international community would evaluate the conflict and ‘view the situation with different eyes’.  

In the period following the cessation of the main hostilities, the Russian leadership, along similar lines, expressed frustration over how Russia’s peacekeeping forces were portrayed by some of the media, especially in the West. In an interview with the Russian radio station Ekho Moskvy on August 14, Lavrov voiced his concerns over the lack of explanation regarding the reason for Russian presence on Georgian territory:

You understand quite a simple picture is thrown on to the screen that is not accompanied by any deep analysis and is accompanied with the phrase “Russians have invaded Georgia”. Who cares that the Russians were there as peacekeepers/makers on the basis of the agreements signed in Tbilisi? And who cares that these agreements were torn up by Georgia’s leadership, which began to bomb the city which it considers to be within its territory? Now the Russians appear to be in Georgia. Yes. But what they’re doing there, one doesn’t have to explain.

Lavrov failed to draw a distinction between Russian military troops and the peacekeeping forces, and Russian troops without a peacekeeping mandate were consequently equated with peacekeeping forces.

A few days after the peace plan was agreed, Medvedev met with the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, in Sochi. One of the main issues discussed was the deployment of international peacekeepers in the area. Medvedev once again articulated Russia’s role as the protector of peoples in the Caucasus, but argued that such a role was decided by the Caucasian peoples themselves, due to the high degree of trust placed in the Russian peacekeepers:

As far as the peacekeepers/makers are concerned, of course, we are not opposed to having international peacekeepers/makers there. It is not our position on the matter that is the issue. We are bearing our share of responsibility for ensuring security in this very complex region, but the issue is that the Ossetians and Abkhazians themselves trust only the Russian peacekeepers/makers because the events of the last 15 years have shown them that the Russian peacekeepers/makers are the only force able to protect their


interests and often their very lives. This is why they see the Russian troops as the only guarantee of their security, and this is something that also has to be taken into account.\textsuperscript{184}

The deployment of international observers, as well as the continued presence of Russian peacekeepers, was thus dependent on the will of the people of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This line of reasoning was in line with the logic followed by the Russian leadership throughout the conflict; namely that Russia was merely responding to developments on the ground and, in this case, answering to the will of the people in South Ossetia rather than entertaining any desire for domination or geographical expansion, although Russia allowed international observers into the area after a period.

The Russian leadership argued that the presence of Georgian peacekeepers within South Ossetia and Abkhazia would be completely unthinkable due to the actions of the Georgian side. In the same interview for Ekho Moskvy, Lavrov stated that ‘You understand that this is not even the position of Russia. It is an objective reality. How can you imagine that Georgian peacekeepers/makers will come there?’\textsuperscript{185} The decision was once again removed from Russia and instead described as originating from an ‘objective reality’ on the ground.

2.4. Independence as a Result of the People’s Will

The reality on the ground in South Ossetia and Abkhazia allegedly forced Russia to recognize the independence of the two break-away republics. Russia’s decision to recognize their independence on August 26 added to the international community’s unease regarding what some saw as Russia’s imperialistic ambitions, yet the Russian leadership backed up the decision with a claim to be securing the right to life for the people of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia thus resisted the imperialistic accusations, portraying itself instead as a responsible international player with an important role to play for the citizens of the two enclaves, thus building on the great power narrative.

Yet before the recognition of independence, however, the official Russian discourse prepared the ground for this unilateral decision. At the meeting with Merkel on August 15,


referred to above, Medvedev again connected the role of guarantor of security in the Caucasus (but adding that this role could be exercised in the region as a whole) with the will of the people of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, thereby and paving the way for the recognition of the enclaves’ independence less than two weeks later:

Unfortunately, after what has happened, the Ossetians and Abkhazians are unlikely to be able to live in one state with the Georgians, or some kind of titanic efforts would have to be made to resolve the conflict. But as I said at my meeting with Mr Sarkozy and also during my meeting yesterday with the leaders of the unrecognised territorial entities - South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and again during my meeting with Ms Merkel, as the guarantor of security in the Caucasus and in the region, Russia will accept the decision that reflects the clear will of these two Caucasian peoples and will use it as guideline in its foreign policy and guarantee its enforcement in South Ossetia and Abkhazia in accordance with the peacekeeping/making mandate that we have. This is my view with regard to this situation.186

Russia thus placed the will of these people before the territorial integrity of Georgia. The forceful international critique that ensued after August 26 concerned the encroachment on Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity. In response to such critique, the Russian leadership repeatedly claimed that Russia had, since the beginning of the 1990s, sought to uphold Georgia’s territorial integrity through its peacekeeping forces but that the Georgian government itself, especially under the leadership of the former president Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the then President Saakashvili, had undermined such a principle due to discriminatory acts directed towards the populations of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The 2008 attack on South Ossetia was the last straw, and Russia was subsequently obliged to intervene. In an interview with French television channel TF1 on August 26, Medvedev stated that the decision to recognize the independence of the two republics was a necessity due to the developments within Georgia:

It is a matter of choosing the lesser evil. We still hold that territorial integrity is one of the fundamental principles of law. We have tried repeatedly over these last 17 years to preserve Georgia’s territorial integrity with the help of our peacekeeping/making contingent, with the help of international efforts, and by simply trying to prevent bloodshed and killing in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This failed to achieve results.187

In the numerous interviews conducted by various media outlets that same day, Medvedev reiterated the message about Russia having acted as a peacekeeper in Georgia for the last two decades while simultaneously seeking to preserve Georgian unity. In a BBC interview on August 26, Medvedev responded to the interviewer’s statement about the recognition of independence and additional Russian troop movements within Georgia proper having created an impression that Russia was pursuing its national interests rather than keeping the peace in Georgia:

Of course Russia pursues its own interests, but in this case these interests coincide with the need to protect the security of the people in these two territories we have recognised. As for this being an independent decision, any country that decides to recognise a new state does so independently.\(^{188}\)

Russian national interests were, in other words, equated with the protection of the populations in the two disputed enclaves. As with the initial Russian military intervention during the war, Russia’s decision to recognize the enclaves’ independence was described as unavoidable due to the duty to protect these people and Russia was once again positioned as a neutral actor who was solely acting out of goodwill and the need to protect the population. The historical developments in Georgia as well as the developments on the ground during the war decided for Russia; it was not Russia’s decision. As Lavrov argued in a response to media questions on August 26:

The situation I think is utterly clear. Russia simply couldn’t have taken – and had no right to take – a different decision, considering the history of the South Ossetia and Abkhazia questions, including the recent years of the settlement process, in both cases begun after the attempt to create, as President Zviad Gamsakhurdia said in 1989, a “Georgia for Georgians”, which was halted thanks to efforts by Russian peacekeepers/makers who did not allow genocide to occur then.\(^{189}\)

Russia thus strongly resisted the international critique concerning the Russian decision to recognize the independence of the two republics. Medvedev, in an interview with the Russian television channels Rossiya, Channel One and NTV, stated that ‘We have made


our decision and it is irreversible. Our duty is to ensure peace and calm in the region, and this is the basis of our position’.190

2.5. A Moment of Truth and Russia’s 9/11

In the period following the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the Kremlin advanced its efforts to make sense of the war for both domestic and international audiences. The conflict was claimed to have taught the world a number of ‘lessons’, being described as a ‘Moment of Truth’ and ‘Russia’s 9/11’, that had resulted in a ‘new situation in the world’ and a ‘new geopolitical situation’. The argument about a ‘new status quo’ was again utilized. On occasion the official statements about a new international situation were not consistently followed by an explanation about exactly what had changed, and it was moreover not always clear if such a ‘new situation’ followed upon the war or was already brewing before the war, thus creating a level of confusion with regard to the intended meaning.

In an attempt to break down the argument, however, it is possible to regard the ‘new international situation’ as being made up of three separate but interrelated parts. Firstly, the conflict demonstrated Russia’s ability to be a strong and influential player in world politics, one that stood up for its citizens wherever they were located. Secondly, the war demonstrated the need for a new international security architecture. Thirdly, the hostilities were a clear sign of the urgent requirement to develop a world order built on multilateralism as opposed to the unilateralism of the United States. Russia, at times, claimed that the unilateral world order had contributed to the outbreak of hostilities.

Lavrov, in a speech at the Moscow State Institute for International Relations (MGIMO) on September 1, focused on the new world situation in which Russia allegedly took on the role of one of the influential powers within the international community. Russia’s actions in 2008 provided evidence of its inherent strength:

Russia has returned to the world arena as a responsible state which can stand up for its citizens. If somebody were mistaken on that score, then our resolute actions to force Georgia to accept peace and our recognition, due to the circumstances, of the independence

of South Ossetia and Abkhazia should have dispelled any such doubts.¹⁹¹

This statement demonstrates that, prior to the conflict, some actors did not perceive Russia as a ‘responsible state which can stand up for its citizens’, but that now the country’s standing should be clear to all. Interestingly enough, in the same speech, he added elements that would fit into a religious and moral discourse, directly following a statement that enacted the legal discourse:

With its reaction to the Georgian aggression, Russia has set a certain standard of responding that fully complies with international law, including the right to self-defence under Article 51 of the UN Charter and our specific commitments in terms of the settlement of this conflict. Moreover, Russia and its peacekeepers/makers have followed our deeply Christian tradition of dying for our friends.¹⁹²

Lavrov portrayed Russia as a Christian state that was ‘sacrificing’ itself for the cause of the greater good, similar to the notion of self-sacrifice inherent in the statements about the country’s intervention on the basis of protecting the population in the enclaves.

A few days later, at a meeting with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Medvedev reiterated the message about Russia being a strong state, while adding that it would prioritize its national interests over diplomacy if the situation required this, yet it is worth remembering that Russian national interests were equated with the protection of the citizens of South Ossetia as well as the Russian peacekeepers, and the base for all decisions was once again claimed to be international law:

Russia has always supported diplomatic solutions to disputes but, if necessary, we will take firm action to defend our interests – this is the main lesson we have learnt from these events – in compliance with international law, of course.¹⁹³

Later during the same speech, he made a similar statement, emphasizing that Russia would take firm action if any party failed to abide by these agreements:

A few conclusions. First, we need to conduct ourselves decently, to abide by international law, respect the agreements that have been reached, including those concerning peacekeeping/making. If someone does not do so, they will face harsh consequences. This is probably one of the most significant conclusions that should be drawn from the crisis in the Caucasus. No one is allowed to kill people, destroy peacekeepers/makers - who are there under international mandate - with impunity. The implications will be very serious.194

The interventionist discourse was thereby drawn upon once more in order to defend Russia’s actions by claiming that an attack on peacekeepers would naturally have grave consequences in the form of a military response.

The Russian leadership continuously referred to the changed world situation in the weeks and months after the war, but also demonstrated frustration over the lack of understanding of some of its international counterparts regarding Russian actions as a response to this new international situation. The main critique of such a lack of understanding was usually directed at the United States, while again emphasizing the US’ double standards in a number of fields. At a meeting with the Russian State Council on September 6, Medvedev highlighted the support received from ‘hundreds of millions of people’, while criticizing the US for a failure to provide such support, albeit indirectly:

In this period, as they say, we have lived through a moment of truth. After 8 August 2008, the world changed. I have already said that we were supported by hundreds of millions of people. However, we haven't heard words of support and understanding from those who, in the same circumstances, pontificate about freedom of choice and national dignity and the need to use force to punish an aggressor.195

Russia was again portrayed as a victim here, due to not being understood by parts of the international community. The Kremlin repeatedly claimed that it simply wanted ‘respect’ from its international counterparts for its own worth and an understanding about its intervention in the 2008 war.

The victimization of Russia was also seen in the projection of the war as Russia’s 9/11, as in Medvedev’s speech to the Valdai Club on September 12.\textsuperscript{196} Using the 9/11 attacks in order to justify Russia’s response is not new in the official Russian discourse, and could also be seen in connection to the Beslan tragedy in 2004. Medvedev, in his Valdai speech, stated that the world had learnt many lessons from the terrorist attacks of September 2001, and that he hoped it would also learn from the events of August 8 2008. By drawing a 9/11 analogy, the Russian leadership signaled that Russia and the Russians had come under attack by an evil enemy and the war was thus portrayed as a crucial event that naturally gave rise to a forceful answer on the part of Russia.

The 9/11 attacks in the United States resulted in a changed international situation due to the increased focus on anti-terrorism actions and the legitimization of the use of force by the state in situations that did not provide grounds for the use of force prior to the attacks. The Russian leadership sought to create a similar justification for its actions in connection to the 2008 war. Furthermore, the 9/11 analogy and the arguments about a new international situation were combined with a critique of US unilateralism. In a speech to the Russian Federation Council on September 18, Lavrov stated:

\begin{quote}
We have no doubt that the crisis provoked in the Caucasus signifies a new quality in the international situation and in Russia’s international standing. The still-flickering illusions that somebody may have held are now conclusively dispelled, as is the myth of a unipolar world. The realization of this probably feeds the hysterical and absolutely immoral reaction in a number of capitals.\textsuperscript{197}
\end{quote}

It was, in other words, not Russian actions that resulted in the harsh international critique, but instead a ‘realization’ on the part of these actors of the strength of Russia and the problematic nature of unilateralism. Russia was thus speaking for the international community, i.e. portraying itself as an important player in a newly multipolar world. This was an interesting reversal in the discourse since the Russian leadership generally criticized the international community for speaking for Russia and not giving it an independent voice.


In addition to the lessons learnt about Russia’s strength, the readiness of the country to react with decisiveness to any attacks on its citizens or peacekeepers and the faulty character of the unilateral world order, the Russian leadership argued for the impossibility of maintaining a Euro-Atlantic security architecture with NATO at its forefront. This architecture was allegedly driven by hegemonic decisions as formulated by the United States. A new security architecture was initially proposed by Medvedev in Berlin on June 5, 2008.\(^{198}\) At this point in time, it was referred to as a new ‘European’ security architecture, but was changed to ‘Euro-Atlantic’ at some point after the war, thereby including the United States in the new security format. In his Berlin speech, Medvedev likened the new security agenda to an extension of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, arguing that it would be a legally binding treaty on European security in which all Euro-Atlantic organizations could participate.

Lo argues that the security architecture proposed by Medvedev was the ‘most active initiative undertaken by Russian diplomacy in recent years’ and that it demonstrated a desire to be a responsible player in the international community.\(^{199}\) Lo adds that it was a sign of a new-born self-belief on the part of Russia, and that the general rationale behind the proposal was to redefine Europe in order to create a more important role for Russia and its interests due to the negligence it had sensed since the end of the Cold War. Moreover, it was meant to consolidate Russia’s influence in the post-Soviet states while bringing the country into the ‘European strategic mainstream’, and thereby allow the country to be recognized as a great power.

In Russia’s own words, the supposedly urgent need for a new security architecture was based on the altered world situation. As mentioned, it is not always clear what such a transformed situation entailed, and since the architecture was proposed before the war, it should logically build on a situation that at least partly existed before the 2008 conflict. Lavrov claimed that the ‘turning point in world development’ demanded a ‘profound, philosophical approach’ and that history should be taken into account when pursuing such an approach. It was allegedly important due to the lack of an equal collective security system in Europe:

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This is important, since Europe, unfortunately, still does not have a collective security system which would be open to all and provide all with equal security. But something needs to be done – otherwise everything in Euro-Atlantic affairs will drop back into its rut. The present crisis points to this as well. Europe needs collective work on European security issues – naturally on an equal rather than a bloc basis. Our relevant initiatives remain valid.

Lavrov further drew a connection to the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, the CFE Treaty, which Russia abandoned in 2007, as well as to the antiballistic missile shield, a US initiative that was intended to result in ground-based interceptors in Poland and a radar station in the Czech Republic. The missile defence system was initially suggested by former US President George W. Bush and has under the presidency of Barack Obama significantly diminished in size. Russia continuously criticized the project, which it perceived as directed towards itself, while the United States claimed that it was designed to protect against long-range missiles from Iran. Lavrov stated that Russia would respond unilaterally unless a multilateral dialogue were set up:

At issue is the establishment of a truly universal system of collective security in the Euro-Atlantic area with the full integration of Russia. In this context, honest consideration must also be paid to the problems that have arisen over the CFE Treaty and the deployment of elements of a US global missile defense system in Eastern Europe. In the absence of a reasonable multilateral dialogue, we will respond ourselves – in line with the principle of reasonable sufficiency. National security can’t rest on a word of honour – President Medvedev also spoke of this.

Following the statements about the Russian military invention in the Russo-Georgian war and the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia being a response to a logic that was outside Russia’s control, Lavrov declared that it was not Russia that should have restrained itself but that it was Georgian actions as well as the ‘systemic defects’ in the current security architecture that failed to prevent the war.

By repeatedly arguing for the need for a new security architecture, the Russian leadership demonstrated its frustration over its non-inclusion in parts of contemporary international relations. Conversely, Western reactions to Russian actions during the war and its aftermath consistently demonstrated a preoccupation with a resurgent Russia that

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had tarnished its reputation for a long time ahead and thereby spoilt its chance of being included in such an international structure to any larger extent.

The Russian leadership refused publicly to acknowledge, however, that the conflict would have any negative long-term consequences for Russia’s international standing; rather the opposite. Putin, in an interview for the German television channel ARD TV on August 29, claimed that the act of defending Russian citizens as well as the ability to conduct an ‘independent foreign policy’ would only work against Russia’s isolation in world politics:

I believe that a country, Russia in this case, which can defend the honour and dignity of its citizens, protect their lives, and fulfill its international legal commitments under the peacekeeping/peacemaking mandate, will not find itself in isolation, no matter what our partners in Europe or the United States may think, expressing their bloc mentality. Europe and the United States are not the whole world, for that matter.

On the contrary, the reputation of those countries which cater to the foreign policy interests of other states at the expense of their own national interests will be damaged, regardless of how they explain their actions.  

Putin thereby sought to undermine the central role of the West within international relations, while portraying Russia as relatively immune to international pressures since it was merely following its own national interests rather than those of any other state. In the same speech, the ‘European countries’, a group in which Russia at times choose to include itself and at other times did not, are reproached for catering for US foreign policy interests instead of their own.

2.6. The Formation of a Non-Imperialist Great Power

The Russian political leadership further emphasized the country’s foreign policy assertiveness in the following weeks; for instance illustrated in the speech before the Russian State Council on September 6, when Medvedev stated that ‘the events in South Ossetia also demonstrated something else: Russia will not allow anyone to compromise the lives and dignity of its citizens, Russia is a nation, which will continue to be reckoned

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with’. While Russian officials were using the 2008 war further to build on the great power narrative, however, they also chose to respond to the imperialistic charges by denying any such motivation and thereby giving the great power concept a new meaning.

The Russian leadership argued that, contrary to any imperialistic desires, Russia wish to build constructive relationships with every state that expressed a wish to build relations with Russia. It thus continuously emphasized the importance of continuing good relations with the international community, yet the current state of these was described in complex terms. At times, Russia claimed that the 2008 war had not resulted in a worsening of its relations with its international counterparts, and in other instances the deterioration of these relations, especially with the United States, was claimed to be a reality, yet whichever quality the relationship between Russia and its partners was claimed to possess, the Russian leadership insisted that these relations in any case must be based on reciprocity and respect, a balanced interchange between equal partners.

The Russian leadership argued that the concerns of contemporary Russian imperialism, demonstrated by a number of European states, were based on a faulty picture, with a historical base. Medvedev, in an interview with the French news channel TF1 on August 26, the day when South Ossetia and Abkhazia’s independence was recognised, expressed such sentiments:

As for our friends who are nervous, some of them have been nervous for a long time now and I think they are reacting not to this conflict but simply to historical phantoms.
Regarding the situation overall, I think things will calm down, our European partners will know how to tell the wheat from the chaff, and we will build normal and productive relations for the future.

Russia’s relations with its European partners would in other words not be affected by the crisis, since Europe would, over time, come to understand the truth about the war and Russia’s role in it. On the same day, in a CNN interview, Medvedev answered similar concerns that Russia would send forces into Georgia if necessary or into any other post-Soviet state based on similar objectives as during the Russo-Georgian war, namely ‘humanitarian reasons’. Medvedev again stated that the situation had changed, this time due to the recognition of the republics’ independence, but confirmed that Russia would help to ensure the security of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and intervene in case of an attack against them. Regarding concerns about a possible Russian intervention into other

states that were formerly part of the Soviet Union, he stated that: ‘Of course we do not plan any such interference, and we will not do so’, but then added, rather ambiguously: ‘But Russia is an independent sovereign state and it has the right to decide what it must do to promote its interests particularly in the areas along its borders. That is obvious’.  

Two days later, Putin was asked a rather provoking question during a CNN interview. First, the interviewer, Matthew Chance, stated that other post-Soviet countries were deeply concerned that they would be the next victim of an attack and so become part of a ‘resurgent Russian empire’, especially Ukraine but also Moldova, the Central Asian states and some of the Baltic countries. Thereafter, the interviewer asked if Putin could guarantee that Russia would never again use military force against its neighbours. Putin was clearly dismayed by this question:

I am categorically opposed to the way this question is formulated. It is not we who should guarantee that we will not attack anybody. We have not attacked anyone. It is we who are demanding guarantees from others that they will not attack us again and will not kill our citizens, and yet there are attempts to portray us as the aggressor.  

Putin thus sought to turn the question around and once again portrayed Russia as the victim. The critique of Russia being an imperialist, resurgent state was therefore turned around 180 degrees, making the only options available for the actors involved in the conflict to be either the ‘aggressor’ or the ‘victim’.

During the following days, Russia was continuously pressed to answer the concerns of neighboring states that they might be next in line to be on the receiving end of Russia’s ‘imperialistic’ endeavours. In an interview with the Italian television channel RAI, Medvedev answered a question about how Russia would respond to these concerns. The interviewer also mentioned the deployment of the US missile defence system in the area as a cause for Russian actions in connection to the 2008 war. Medvedev again denied that Russia needed to answer to such accusations and that the neighbouring states’ concerns were unfounded:

We are not going to respond to anyone’s concerns. We would like answers to our own concerns about NATO expansion and the emergence of a new encirclement of arms around Russia. As for our partners, as far as the Baltic states go, I think they are suffering

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‘phantom pains’. No one is threatening them. This is just their way of keeping the political elites in somewhat of an excited state.\textsuperscript{207}

Furthermore, Medvedev treated Ukraine and Moldova as separate issues during the interview. He claimed that Ukraine at that point in time had a great opportunity to choose its future security strategy by letting the Ukrainians themselves decide whether they wanted to join NATO, a democratic right which he argued was not currently available to the population. Concerning Moldova, he stated that Russia had recently discussed the prospects of a settlement in Trans-Dniester with Moldova’s then President Vladimir Voronin, thus downplaying the sense of insecurity in Moldova.

The Russian leadership appeared to feel obliged to answer the imperialism accusations in a different manner and explain why Russia could not be the resurgent imperialist power as some partners of the international community portrayed the country. At the Valdai Club on September 11, Putin focused on the internal development of contemporary Russia as one of the reasons for the impossibility of any imperialistic tendencies:

No matter how much scare-mongering may surround the Caucasus, everybody understands that this cannot spread to Europe. This is impossible. Russia is different. We have none of the imperial ambitions of which some accuse us, and we will never have them. Our society internally is different, imperialism will not go down well with it.\textsuperscript{208}

As a continuation of the above statement, Putin expressed a desire to build constructive relationships with Russia’s partners in Europe, the US and Asia. He stated that such international cooperation is of interest to Russia despite the ‘diplomatic complexities’, thereby downplaying the imperialistic accusations as simply being caused by diplomatic differences.\textsuperscript{209}

In an interview with the Polish newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza published that same day, Lavrov again refuted the imperial attributes, but this time on the base of Russia being a ‘morally righteous’ state that always sided with the weaker party:

We regard the statements by certain states’ leaders concerning Russia’s “imperial” and “revisionist” policies as completely untenable. Historically, we have always sided with the weaker


party, even at the risk of angering some hegemonic power or other. The moral rightness of our position is undisputed.\textsuperscript{210}

Thus, even though it was claimed that Russia was a different society than before, the Russian past is not claimed to have been imperialistic in nature but quite the opposite. The contemporary Russian leadership did thus not argue that the Soviet Union was an imperialist state. The Soviet leadership itself denied any accusations of imperialism, instead emphasizing the dangers of American imperialism, but yet not claiming the Soviet Union to be a nation-state. Adding to the Soviet paradox is the decision to emphasise the different republics’ national traits while subjugating these republics to the central power of the Soviet Union. As argued by Ronald Suny, ‘The great paradox of Russia’s twentieth-century evolution was that a self-proclaimed empire fell in 1917 to be replaced by what became a neo-imperial state that not only refused to see itself as an empire, not only considered itself to be the major anti-imperialist power on the globe, but became the unwitting incubator of nations within it’.\textsuperscript{211} Anti-imperialism was, all throughout the Soviet period, a reoccurring trope in Soviet rhetoric.

Due to the denial of the imperialistic nature of the Soviet Union, the epithet ‘non-imperial’ is more fitting than ‘post-imperial’ since the latter implies that the Soviet Union was an imperialist state, yet the Russian leadership still argued that contemporary Russia was a ‘new’ state that was not to be compared with the Soviet Union, even though the Soviet past does not have the same negative imperialist connotations for Russia as it has for many Western observers - an issue that will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Although Russian officials vehemently resisted the imperialist label, they continuously developed the great power narrative long after the war. The importance of international cooperation was constantly emphasised, but they simultaneously constructed Russia as a ‘strong’ state and a ‘global player’ by claiming the impossibility of Russia being anything else than such a state. It is a ‘big’ and ‘important’ state or nothing at all, as expressed by Medvedev at a meeting with Russian public organisations:

\begin{quote}
I will not be telling you anything new when I say something that today is absolutely obvious to all, just as it was obvious to our ancestors and predecessors. Russia may exist either as a strong
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{211} Suny, “Living in the Hood,” 48.
state, as a global player, or it won’t exist at all. Another Russian state is unthinkable. 212

Medvedev hereby claimed a historic continuity for Russia’s greatness, but it is worth noting that the recognition is claimed to have derived from the domestic community; from ‘our ancestors and predecessors’, rather than from the international community.

As discussed, the Russian leadership repeatedly negated the possibility of any outside forces being able to influence Russian decisions, whether it concerned military intervention, the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, or Russia’s domestic development. For example, at the same meeting with Russian public organizations, Medvedev stated that the country would pursue independent politics, not dictated by laws from outside:

We will tolerate no delay in pursuing our goals of developing the economy, encouraging business activity and increasing creative and personal freedom on the pretext that the country is in danger and ‘surrounded by enemies’. There will be no such thing. This choice of ours, a choice long since made, it was not decided in order to please this or that country but is the hard-won choice of our people. 213

Medvedev repeated this sentiment later in the same speech, and thus continuously built on the great power narrative that worked to construct Russia as an ‘independent’ state that decided its own political direction, yet the argument about the importance of continuing the domestic development despite the rhetoric about Russia being surrounded by enemies would be simultaneously directed to those forces in Russian society that exaggerated the security threats towards Russia at the expense of positive societal development.

The message about Russian sovereignty was also delivered, albeit in a more forceful manner, at a speech on September 30 during a promotion ceremony for Russian military officers, when Medvedev argued:

I think that it is perfectly clear to you that after the events that occurred in August of this year, our lives have not become any easier. In fact, the determination with which Russia was forced to stand up for ordinary people, for those who held Russian passports,

carrying out its obligations under international mandate, was never going to satisfy the large number of forces who believe they only they have the power to influence the climate of our planet, that only they are capable of taking meaningful action. I would go even further: they will not forgive us for this.

The critique by the international community was thus a recurring theme in the official Russian discourse, but an element that the Kremlin repeatedly claimed did not have any significant effect either on the Russian actions during the war or Russia’s subsequent domestic or foreign policy to any great extent.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how the Russian political leadership sought to legitimise Russia’s conduct in connection with the Russo-Georgian war through discourse in the context of war by using a vision of national identity that portrayed Russia as a non-imperial great power. This vision of national identity was mainly utilised in order to unite the Russian people behind the war efforts but also for the sake of justifying its actions before the international community, despite the Russian leadership’s claims about the irrelevance of international opinion. The largely negative international response to Russian attempts to justify its foreign policy actions, however, demonstrates that the discourse was largely unsuccessful in gaining the international community’s approval for Russian choices in connection to the war.

The two main contingent discourses during the war and its aftermath were an interventionist discourse and a legal discourse. The former was based on the claim that Russia was ‘the guarantor for peace and stability of the people of the Caucasus’ and the legal discourse drew on international agreements and laws as well as domestic legal elements such as the Russian Constitution. Both discourses overlap and complement each other in order to construct Russia as a non-imperial great power and thereby seek to justify Russia’s intervention during the war as well as the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the war’s aftermath.

Due to the salience of the great power notion at most levels of Russian society as well as within most of the political factions, portraying Russia as a great power was a natural choice on the part of the Russian political elite, yet the non-imperial epithet was added in order to downplay any expansionist tendencies, without publicly stating that the Soviet
Union was an imperialistic state. While resisting the imperialistic accusations, however, the official discourse demonstrated that Russia, due to its great power identity, would also in the future take any action it deemed necessary if its citizens, compatriots or military personnel were in danger, in South Ossetia, Abkhazia or anywhere else along Russia’s borders. Such statements created an ambiguity concerning Russia’s intentions in its neighbouring countries, and worked against the non-imperial designation, instead fuelling the interpretation of Russia as an imperial power. This ambiguity is central to official discursive constructions of Russia and has both strengths and weaknesses. It can help the official discourse to appeal to broader sections of society (inside Russia), but it can also make the official pronouncements of the Russian political leadership sound unconvincing, particularly to international audiences. It is not certain, however, that the Russian political leadership had a clear aim to sound convincing to these audiences, but the apparent contradictions within the discourse could also serve the purpose of creating an atmosphere of uncertainty wherein ‘truth’ and sound judgement could be relativised.

The ambiguity concerning Russia as a great or imperialist power in turn relates to the question of the ‘just’ borders of contemporary Russia since the official discourse demonstrates that Russia considers that it has an important role to play in the area that belonged to the former Soviet Union. The ambiguous nature of these discursive constructions also concerns national membership and belonging to post-Communist Russia, since it demonstrates that it is not always clear when Russia would consider it justified to intervene in the post-Communist countries, a right that is allegedly granted to contemporary Russia through its status as a great power. The ambiguity inherent in the official discourse does not, however, automatically translate into Russia being an imperialist power, but demonstrates that the construction of Russia’s post-Communist national identity is still strongly influenced by the break-up of the Soviet Union and the significant territorial losses that that entailed. The lack of clarity concerning the borders of the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia in the minds of the Russian political leadership is crucial for understanding the development of Russian national identity, and will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, that deals with the use of history in the official Russian discourse regarding the 2008 war.
Chapter 3. The Historical Legacy of the Soviet Union and the Cold War

Introduction

The concepts of the Cold War and the Soviet Union occupy a prominent position in the official Russian discourse regarding the Russo-Georgian war. The Russian leadership’s usage of these concepts often appeared as a response to accusations from parts of the international community that Russia was provoking a return to the Cold War, and that modern Russia was synonymous with the USSR. Key Russian political leaders thus strongly resisted such associations but did not portray the Soviet past as a completely negative historical period, thereby demonstrating the ambivalence concerning the role and interpretation of history among Russia’s political elite. This ambivalence was partly due to a desire among the Russian leadership to distance Russia from the darker, more oppressive elements of the Cold War and the Soviet past while simultaneously presenting modern Russia as an inheritor of the greatness of the Soviet Union. The latter portrayal of the past can be seen as a desire to emphasise the natural state of Russia’s great power identity.

This chapter discusses the importance of the memories of the Cold War and the Soviet Union through the theoretical lens of history politics, in order to create a deeper understanding of the ambivalence concerning the use of history in the official Russian discourse during and in the aftermath of the Russo-Georgian war. It will examine the influence of the interpretation and re-interpretation of history on Russia’s understanding of the Self, and discuss whether the uses of history take any particular form when applied in a situation of tense conflict or war.

The discourses in play can be perceived as part of the politicisation of history, a political conduct that has gained increasing prominence both in Russia and abroad in the new millennium.\(^\text{214}\) As argued by Alexei Miller, however, the politics of the past is a difficult phenomenon to understand and describe concisely since those who practise it consciously seek to disguise both its tasks and its inherent mechanisms.\(^\text{215}\) These

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practitioners seem to share some common objectives, however. According to Igor Torbakov, the political utilisation of history generally has two main, interlinked goals.\textsuperscript{216} Firstly, such conduct aims to construct a cohesive national identity and the gathering of society around the current power centre. Secondly, its practitioners seek to distance the nation from any guilt that may be connected with the past. As argued by Malinova, the reconsideration of the master narrative(s) of a collective past is an important aspect of the nation-building process, one that involves choosing between different interpretations and assessments.\textsuperscript{217}

By choosing to assess the international tension that resulted from the war as not constituting a new Cold War, while simultaneously providing a relatively ambiguous interpretation of contemporary Russia’s perception of the Soviet past, the Russian leadership, as with the non-imperial great power vision, spoke to many different audiences at once. The denial of a new Cold War was, amongst other audiences, directed at the international actors who were critical of Russia’s actions during the war. Russia wished, partly for economic reasons, to be perceived as a cooperative player rather than an instigator of conflict and sponsor of international tension. Moreover, by distancing Russia from the Soviet Union the Russian leadership also sought to downplay any imperialistic notions that were often attributed to Russia as a result of the Russo-Georgian war. The ambiguity inherent in both distancing contemporary Russia from the USSR while stating that the Soviet Union was a great state contributed, as we shall see, to the blurring of the division between the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia.

Furthermore, the official discourse spoke to the general Russian population, which did not desire a new Cold War due to the international isolation and military tension that such a situation would entail. The unclear stance towards the Soviet past would also be favourably perceived among the general population since, by maintaining a connection to the Soviet past, the Russian leadership confirms a linear development path for Russia’s great power identity while the resistance to equating the USSR with contemporary Russia downplays any imperialistic connotations.

Furthermore, the interpretations and assessments of the role of the past in the present spoke to the different schools of foreign policy thinking, even though some aspects of the

\textsuperscript{216} Igor Torbakov, “Divisive Historical Memories.”
\textsuperscript{217} Olga Malinova, “In Search of a “Usable Past”: Discourses about National Identity in Post-Soviet Russia,” Paper for the 22nd IPSA World Congress of Political Science, Madrid, July 8-12, 2012, accessed October 28, 2014, http://paperroom.ipsa.org/papers/paper_12707.pdf. A master narrative can be described as a comprehensive explanation of certain historical experiences or knowledge. If a narrative is a story, a master narrative (or grand/meta narrative) is an all-encompassing story that explains several smaller-scale narratives.
historical references were less favourably perceived than others among the schools’ proponents. Firstly, the Westernisers would arguably be staunch opponents of any Cold War-like tension with the West. As argued by Tsygankov, by joining the ‘Western civilised nations’, Russia would be able to respond adequately to threats and banish its economic and political backwardness.\footnote{Tsygankov, Russia’s Foreign Policy, 2nd ed., 5.} As this thesis argues, the Russian leadership’s resistance to a general perception of a new Cold War would thus be perceived positively by this school. The ambiguous treatment of the USSR is slightly more problematic. Due to this school’s focus on the relationship with the West, any resemblance between contemporary Russia and the Soviet Union would thus arguably be problematic because of the generally negative perception of the USSR in the West.

Secondly, the Statists’ prerogative is a strong and sovereign state that would be able to fend off any external threats. The denial of a new Cold War was thus arguably perceived both in positive and negative terms, as were the references to the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, the sovereignty of the USSR was not under question, but due to the military tension, there was a more imminent external threat to the state. Furthermore, the ambiguous stance towards the Soviet Union would arguably speak to most proponents of this school since the great power notion is highly relevant for them. The linear development of Russia’s great power identity, mentioned above, is emphasised but, by avoiding directly stating that contemporary Russia is to be equated with the USSR, one can more easily resist any imperialist claims.

Thirdly, as argued by Tsygankov, the Civilisationists respond more aggressively to the notion of an external threat and perceive Russia as a distinct civilisation. Consequently, this thesis argues that the denial of any Cold War tension would be less favourably viewed by this school’s proponents, especially the more hard-line neo-Eurasianists. There seems to be a willingness to sacrifice peace and stability for the spread of Russian values and power, so it would be less important to downplay any international tension. Moreover, the amorphous treatment of the Soviet past was arguably regarded both positively and negatively. The linear development of Russia’s identity as a great power is naturally important, but the Civilisationists would not favour too much of a distance from the Soviet past due to the imperial tendencies within this group.

Thus, as demonstrated, the references to history were perceived differently by the various audiences, and the use of the concepts of the Cold War and the Soviet Union seems
to vary depending on the context. The images drawn from the recent past are framed differently and such a discrepancy makes it difficult to create a common understanding of their meaning in the context of war as well as their relevance to the development of Russian national identity. A separate study of the history-political discursive aspect of the conflict is required, in order to analyse how these concepts are used and why they appear with such high frequency.

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the scholarly literature on the uses of the past and then elaborates upon this phenomenon in Russia in the 1990s and the 2000s, leading up to the 2008 war. It thereafter analyses the main primary sources on the war and its aftermath, with a focus on the Russian leadership’s utilisation of the concepts of the Cold War and the Soviet Union.

3.1. The Study of History Politics Related to Russia

There has been no shortage of studies focusing on the use of the past in the Russian context. As demonstrated by Malinova, however, there are different approaches to the study of the political utilisation of the past but still no consistent theory that involves common methodological assumptions. The interdisciplinary research field is brought together by a common object of study rather than a consistent research program.

Thus, as a first step towards reaching a higher degree of theoretical and methodological clarity, one should provide more precise definitions of some of the main terms involved. As argued by Tolz, it would be analytically useful to separate the concepts of the ‘politics of memory’ and the ‘politics of history’, which are often used interchangeably in the scholarly literature that focuses on the instrumental and selective

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220 Malinova, “In Search of a "Usable Past".”
use of the past in addressing societal or political issues. She argues that the former term is somewhat broader and includes actions undertaken by a number of actors with different interests in the utilisation of the past, not necessarily politically based. The latter term generally indicates a narrower range of activities that seeks to promote a particular reading of the past and is mainly exercised, or supported by, the political leadership of a country. Since this chapter is devoted to an analysis of the Russian political leadership’s utilisation of the historical past in a political setting, the term ‘politics of history’, or alternatively ‘history politics’, will hereafter be used.

The current literature on the 2008 war in Georgia does not generally problematise the Russian political leadership’s historical references, predominantly figuring in the conflict’s aftermath, and thus neglects a possible explanatory factor for the different interpretations and portrayals of the 2008 war and the importance of a usable history for Russia’s identity construction. Furthermore, in the literature on the role of memory and history within Russian politics, the discursive aspect is not usually analysed separated from other elements of memory or history politics, such as the attempts to regulate historical interpretations through law, the development of institutional structures that aim to control historical research as well as archives and publishers, or the advancement of a single history textbook in schools that would teach students the ‘true’ history of Russia. Such a gap in the literature highlights the need for an examination of the discursive aspect of the war.

In accordance with Malinova, I examine the official Russian discourse as expressed by key Russian political leaders - actors who present a certain interpretation of a collective past representing particular political interests, but who simultaneously lean on an ‘available repertoire’ of a past that can be exploited for political purposes. Such purposes involve the legitimisation of power, striving for electoral support and justifying political decisions, amongst other issues, yet the ultimate success of these policies depends on how well their activities fit with the existing repertoire of concepts, images, narratives and symbols, as well as with the ideas presented by other actors.

This chapter proceeds with providing background information on the use of history within Russia, in order to prepare for the subsequent analysis of the main empirical findings from the period of the 2008 war. It starts by briefly discussing the relationship

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221 Tolz, “Modern Russian Memory of the Great War, 1914-20.”
222 For a discussion of the different forms of using the past in Russia, see Miller, “Historical Politics.”
223 Malinova, “In Search of a “Usable Past”.”
between politics and history in the last few years of the Soviet Union as well as during the 1990s, but the main focus is on the first decade of the new century, when Vladimir Putin took over the presidential post from Boris Yeltsin, since the new millennium signified an increase in the Russian political leadership’s construction of a usable past.

3.2. The Uses of the Soviet Past

The relationship between politics and history in the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia has taken many forms since the Perestroika period, which began in the mid-1980s, and marked an upsurge in the Russian public’s interest in the country’s history. The crimes committed by the communist regime, especially under Stalinism, entered the public discussion. There were far-reaching uses of terms that had previously been banned, such as ‘empire’ and ‘totalitarianism’ when discussing the Soviet Union. This change in the public discourse did not imply that all of the population was critical of Stalin and Stalinism, however, but rather that the critics engaged the main public communicative sphere.

In turn, the 1990s heralded a general lack of public interest in the history in Russia. Instead of dwelling on the past and its significance for the present, the focus lay on the economic difficulties affecting the majority of the population. Moreover, when people did pay attention to the past, there were clear divisions in society concerning its relative importance and the meaning of different historical events. The memory of the Soviet victory in World War II was the sole event that was considered important across different societal groups, as is arguably also the case in the new century. In the 1990s the politicians understood the overall lack of historical sentiment among the population, however, and so omitted historical references from their main speeches. In the final years of Yeltsin’s presidency Russia witnessed an increased interest in identity politics within the political establishment as well as the use of history for political goals in the form of the ‘Russian

224 Miller, “The turns of Russian historical politics, from Perestroika to 2011,” in The Convolutions of Historical Politics.
226 Miller, “The turns of Russian historical politics.”
idea’.

According to Tolz and Miller, the late 1990s saw the development of a narrative about the Soviet past that would consequently be used by the Kremlin under Putin.

During President Putin’s first two presidential periods (2000-2008), historical references became more frequent in official Russian discourse than had been the case in the 1990s. Moreover, the utilisation of history was evident in the development of state symbols. Putin, in coalition with different groups and parties within the top echelons of power, established the tricolor Russian flag, he introduced a revised version of the Soviet national anthem and transformed the National Unity Day on November 4 to a new national holiday. The latter commemorated the expulsion of the Polish forces from Moscow in 1612, the end of the Time of Troubles and the Polish-Russian War (1605-1618).

Putin had more leeway for mobilising consent for Russian collective identity, by utilising values and symbols from the Soviet period, than did Yeltsin due to the latter being more prone to take sides, thus alternating his support between the different political camps during the domestic political conflicts of the 1990s. It seemed that the main idea behind Putin’s utilisation of symbols was to promote an acceptance of all aspects of history as ‘a common heritage’, but the attempt to use past symbols as a strategy for reunification proved difficult and the result was instead full of controversy while ignoring problems and avoiding taking responsibility for the past.

Miller argues that the increase in history politics in Russia in the new millennium was a reaction to the more prominent role of history in a number of post-Communist countries in Eastern Europe. The references to history in these states, especially Poland, involved a regular portrayal of the Soviet Union and the Communist period as utterly negative. They cleansed their national histories of Communist traits, which were argued to be contrary to national tradition. The responsibility for past crimes was thus transferred to Russia and any possible achievements that took place during the Soviet period were rejected.

This battle over the interpretation of history has commonly been labeled ‘history wars’ or ‘memory wars’, yet, as argued by Alexander Astrov, a closer examination of the substance of the history politics in various European states suggests that Russia was not

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228 Tolz, “Modern Russian Memory of the Great War, 1914-20.”
230 Malinova, “In Search of a “Usable past”.”
231 Miller, “The turns of historical politics,” 256.
232 Miller, “The turns of historical politics.”
always the object for this politics and not even the most important one. Instead, the main object was a process of internal socialisation of these post-Communist states in the context of integration into the European and transatlantic structures.

In any case, the intensification of Russia’s history politics is also described as a reaction to the growth of tensions in Russia’s relations with the West, especially the US and the ‘new Europe’. The increase in history politics in Russia, and the subsequent development of the ‘history wars’ between Russia and several Eastern European countries from the early/mid-2000s onwards was probably also due to the Russian government accommodating a domestic public urge to come to terms with history and consolidating the population under a common cause that was not necessarily connected with developments outside Russia’s own borders.

The reactive nature of history politics in the Russian case should not be exaggerated since the picture tends to be far more complex, but it is still important to recognise this factor when analyzing the role and interpretation of historical concepts in connection with the 2008 war. As mentioned above, history politics is, above all directed at domestic audiences. The prevalence of historical concepts in the official Russian discourse directed at the international community does not prove otherwise. It does not necessarily signify that the international community adopted the role as the main addressee of such rhetoric, but during times of international conflict, it gains an increasingly important role as one of the audiences. A situation of crisis, such as war, tends to foreground foreign policy concerns. In this case, a country whose leadership is criticised in the international arena is increasingly likely to frame its discourses and narratives in response to such criticism.

The following discussion of the empirical material will examine if the official Russian discourse changed according to the different audiences, with a focus on the usage of the concepts of the Cold War and the Soviet Union. It is important to analyse the concepts of the Cold War and the Soviet Union separately, while simultaneously demonstrating their interconnectedness. In the discourse deriving from the West, the ‘Cold War and the ‘Soviet Union’ do not always seem to be fully separate, thus creating a reading of the concepts as two sides of the same coin that symbolised historical conceptions with overly negative connotations. The two concepts were depicted as infinitely connected and analytically dependent on each other. Allegedly, according to this discourse, if we were in fact

234 Miller, “The turns of historical politics.”
experiencing the emergence of a new Cold War, Russia was naturally a continuation of the Soviet Union, or alternatively, if Russia were a continuation of the Soviet Union we definitely saw the emergence of a new Cold War.235

As we shall see, the Russian leadership, on the other hand, appears to have separated the two concepts to a greater extent than their critics in the West, predominantly portraying the Cold War as a negative contribution to world development while the Soviet Union was treated more ambiguously, demonstrating a certain nostalgia for the Soviet past while not directly spelling out its significance for the current Russian state.

Despite the need for such an analytical separation, the discussion around the Cold War and the Soviet Union will be elaborated upon in parallel in order to demonstrate the changing and context-dependent character of the official Russian discourse and how it developed over the course of the 2008 war. The empirical material is thus analysed in a largely chronological order.

3.3. The Role of History in the Context of the Russo-Georgian War

During the most intense period of confrontation during the 2008 war, up until the presentation of the six-point peace plan on August 12, Putin made references to the end of the Cold War, and these associations, as well as references to Soviet history, become even more frequent in the aftermath of the war. As mentioned, however, the references to the Cold War and the Soviet Union need to be analysed separately. As the following analysis will demonstrate, the former is predominantly a reaction to the ‘history wars’ and the latter a clearer example of ‘history politics’. Both discussions do, however, highlight the power of language and perceptions within international relations.

The New Russia and the Cold War Mentality of the United States

The Cold War was portrayed negatively by both Russia and its critics, and the concept in itself was not reinterpreted by the Russian leadership in order to reach any specific political goals. During the war, the Russian political leadership repeatedly accused the

235 Iver Neumann mentions further blurring of the boundaries on the part of the West, arguing that the dominant memory of Russia found in the Western discourse was influenced by memories depicting the country as backward and a potential military threat. Since these memories originated from periods that came before communism, the fall of communism was not in itself able to erase these memories. Neumann, “Europe’s post-Cold War memory of Russia: cui bono?”, in Memory & Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past,” ed. Jan-Werner Müller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
United States’ administration of harbouring a Cold War mentality. On August 11, at a Government Presidium meeting, Putin accused the United States of such a mentality, and made references to both the ousting of Saddam Hussein and the presidential period of Ronald Reagan:

But, of course, Saddam Hussein had to be hung for destroying several Shiite villages, and the present Georgian leadership, who have simply wiped out ten Ossetian villages from the face of this planet, whose tanks were running over children and old people, who have burnt civilians alive in sheds - these people, certainly, had to be protected. If I am not mistaken, Ronald Reagan once said about a Latin American dictator: "Somoza is a bastard, but he is our bastard. And we will help him, we will protect him."

Many things have changed since then; the world has changed dramatically. The Cold War ended a long time ago, but this "Cold War" mentality is still in the minds of some American diplomats. Too bad. Nevertheless, we will continue to build relationships with all partners, including our American partners. We will do everything, as I said at the beginning, to bring our peacekeeping/making mission to its logical conclusion.236

References to a Cold War mentality were naturally used as an accusation by Putin, as demonstrating a desire on the part of the United States to erect the once torn down walls which hinder international cooperation and re-create a bipolar world, with Russia on one side and the United States, or the West in general, on the other. It pointed to a resistance on the part of Putin to separate contemporary Russia from the globalised international community since Russia wishes to be perceived as a cooperative state, while still being a sovereign, independent country that makes choices that suit its own development path. By claiming that the United States’ administration was harbouring a certain kind of mindset, the official Russian discourse highlighted the relevance of perceptions. Different mindsets can give cause to differing readings of a specific event, and ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ can thus be relativised.

The references to the protection of Somoza refer to the US support of the Nicaraguan dictator, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, a member of the Somoza family that ruled Nicaragua between 1936 and 1979. Putin was in the above statement indirectly referring to the US support for Georgia and Saakashvili before, during and in the aftermath of the 2008 war. By claiming that the Cold War ended a long time ago, Putin thus signals that the US

administration’s worldview is based on the old patterns of a divided world and is consequently erroneous.

The Russian leadership referred to the United States’ Cold War mentality numerous times in the period following the 2008 war but did not apply it in equal measure to the European states, even though it at times claimed that a number of European states did not understand the real reasons for Russian actions. The official Russian discourse from the immediate war period did not, however, include any direct references to the Soviet Union, as the Soviet past was instead referred to in the days and weeks following the war, as was equally the case with the self-designated ‘non-imperialist great power’ identity constructed by Moscow in the war’s aftermath.

**A Militarily-prepared Peaceful State**

In the official Russian discourse related to the period directly following the war, before Russian recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia on August 26, the political leadership did not directly refer to the Cold War while the Soviet Union was mentioned on one occasion, during a meeting between Medvedev and Russian World War II veterans from the battle of Kursk in 1943, which will be discussed below. The concept of the Soviet Union was used in order to demonstrate a linear societal development that portrayed both it and contemporary Russia as ‘peace-loving’ states, much reinforced by the role of the guarantor of peace and security in the Caucasus, as discussed in the previous chapter.

The official discourse simultaneously demonstrated the military readiness of both Russia and its Soviet predecessor. Medvedev thus presented a mixed message from a country which naturally leant towards peace and cooperation while at the same time demonstrating a readiness to use force if needed. The argument that Russia was a peaceful but militarily-prepared state dates back to Tsarist times and it was moreover a standard Soviet propaganda tool, demonstrated in the phrase ‘We are a peaceful people, but our armoured train stands ready on the side’ [Мы мирные люди, но наш бронепоезд стоит на запасном пути]. This phrase is found in the refrain of the popular song ‘Kakhovka’, with lyrics by the Soviet poet Mikhail Svetlov and music by Isaak Dunayevski, produced in 1935 for the film entitled ‘Three Friends’ [Три товарища]. The song remained part of the canon of popular Soviet culture through the entire period of the USSR’s existence.

Peace was a common propaganda theme in the Soviet period and the USSR was regularly presented as a peace-loving state that opposed the war-mongering capitalist and
imperialist United States and its allies. The self-definition of the Soviet Union as a peace-loving state dates back to 1917, when the newly inaugurated Bolshevik government issued Lenin’s ‘Decree on Peace’ that called for an end to the First World War. During the interwar years, the ‘struggle for peace’ was one of the USSR’s main propaganda themes in the articulation of Soviet foreign policy. This ‘struggle’ gained renewed prominence in the early years of the Cold War. It served to blame the West for the emergence of the Cold War and the risk of a hot war, and in parallel strengthened Soviet supporters in capitalist countries who were fighting western Cold War policies.

The ambivalence inherent in the coexistence of peace and war in the period following World War II could be explained, in part, by the Soviet people’s experiences during the war. The Soviet Union and Germany were the two countries that had suffered the most during the war, and the Soviet people thus naturally feared military conflict but felt it necessary to remain prepared in case of a fresh attack. As a solution, the Marxist-Leninist thesis maintained that socialism was the only way to achieve peace, and this was thus utilised as a rationale for connecting political objectives with the public’s desire for peace.

Thus the argument that contemporary Russia and the Soviet Union are peaceful states, while simultaneously militarily prepared, seems to be a theme that runs throughout history. It was present in post-Communist Russia, including in connection to the 2008 war. In line with the statement about the Soviet Union being a peaceful state with ‘an armoured train standing ready on the side’, Russian foreign policy in connection to the 2008 war was not presented as aggressive but mostly reactive in nature, as discussed in the previous chapter. It had allegedly not been a Soviet choice to go to war when this occurred, nor was it a choice for the post-Soviet Russian state, as any war-like policies were simply a reaction to external aggression. Both the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia, however, stood militarily ready in case of an attack. In the 2008 setting, such an attack was allegedly directed against Russian citizens, mainly in South Ossetia, and against Russian peacekeepers. One should note, however, that the word ‘practically’ gives the statement about Soviet peaceful history a tinge of relativity, of hesitation:

> You know that we have always been a peace-loving country. Practically at no time in its history did Russia, the Soviet Union, or contemporary Russia ever start hostilities. But even the most peace-

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238 Roberts, *The Soviet Union in World Politics*.
loving country has to have combat-ready armed forces. You know the well-known saying that he who does not want to feed his own army will end up feeding someone else’s. We cannot allow this to happen.

The above statement clearly demonstrates one of the main goals within history politics, namely distancing the nation from guilt, yet the statement is of course highly questionable. Indeed, warfare as conducted by the USSR usually took the form of proxy wars, such as in the Korean War (1950-1953) and the Vietnam War (1954-1975), to name but a few instances of Soviet involvement, making statements about the Soviet Union’s peaceful nature somewhat easier for the government to justify. At the same time, however, the WWII period involved a number of direct Soviet interventions in foreign territory, acts which did not have the nature of proxy wars, namely the invasion resulting in the Winter War in Finland (1939-1940), the Soviet invasion of Poland (1939) and the Baltic States (1940, 1944), and the invasion of Iran together with other Allies such as the British and other Commonwealth forces (1941).

Soviet troops’ involvement in various conflicts between the end of World War II and the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 does not support the claim of the Soviet Union to be a peace-loving state, either. As an example, Soviet troops fought in the Afghan War (1979-1989), and the Warsaw Pact’s crack down on the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and the Prague Spring of 1968 cannot be argued to have been of an overly peaceful nature.

3.4. The Role of History and the Independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia

The ever-prevalent peace theme occupied considerable space in the official Russian discourse during and in the aftermath of war, including after the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Following Russia’s unilateral decision to recognise the independence of these two break-away republics, however, the discussion

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about the resumption of a new Cold War gained new strength. At this point, it is possible to distinguish more clearly what the concept of the ‘Cold War’ meant for the Russian leadership when put into the context of the 2008 war. The internationally accepted understanding of the Cold War is that it was an ideological and geopolitical battle between ‘the West’, consisting mainly of the United States and its NATO allies, and ‘the East’, including the Soviet Union and the other former Warsaw Pact members. The Cold War naturally involved a high degree of political and military tension between the two.

Nevertheless, the Cold War that the Russian political leadership referred to in relation to the 2008 war omitted the ideological contest, although Russia repeatedly accused the United States of conducting an ideologically driven foreign policy while their own Russian policy did not include any ideological traits. The new Cold War, the emergence of which the Russian leadership denied, instead revolved around the diplomatic and political relationship between Russia and the West, especially in the case of the United States. The military aspect is largely neglected also, since the rhetoric did not involve any comments about a military contest between Russia and any Western states.

*The Cold War on August 26 2008*

On the day when the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was recognized, Medvedev was forced to respond to a number of questions from different foreign and domestic news outlets about the resumption of a new Cold War. It is worth noting that the number of these accusations increased directly after the independence recognition, thus signaling that Russia’s political involvement in its close neighbourhood was one of the main causes of these recriminations. Medvedev repeatedly stated that Russia did not desire a resumption of the Cold War. In an interview with the French news channel TF1, he clearly spelt out his view of the Cold War period:

I do not want a Cold War. It brought humanity nothing but problems. Therefore we will do anything we can to avoid this, but the ball is in Europe’s court now, and if they want to worsen relations, they will of course achieve this. If they want to preserve our strategic relations – and I think this is absolutely in the interests of both Russia and Europe – then everything will be normal.242

Medvedev thus argued that it was not Russia’s responsibility to prevent a new Cold War, but instead the duty of its international counterparts; in this statement, Europe is

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singled out. Russia merely wanted to ‘calm the aggressor’ [успокоить агрессора], i.e. the
Georgian government with Saakashvili at its helm, and develop a good future for the
inhabitants of South Ossetia and Abkhazia:

Of course, we do not like this talk of a Cold War. We do not want
any escalation. On the contrary, we want to calm the situation. Our
actions aimed against Saakashvili’s aggression were undertaken
precisely in order to calm the aggressor, on the one hand, and give
life and a good and reasonable future to the peoples of these two
unrecognised entities on the other.\textsuperscript{243}

Such a statement relates to the aforementioned role of Russia as a guarantor of peace
and security in the region. Moscow thus once again turned everything around 180 degrees
by denying any accusations that it was an aggressor that desired an escalation of the
tension, instead portraying itself as a peace-loving, responsible state. There seems to be no
middle ground in the official Russian discourse surrounding the war; you are either an
aggressor or a victim, either an instigator of conflict or a responsible peace enforcer.

Moreover, the above statement was directly followed by a remark about the West’s
responsibility to be clear sighted and pragmatic about the ‘real state of affairs’ in order to
reduce the tension in international affairs:

As for tension, it is within the power of the West, within the power
of the countries who think that the tension is growing, to reduce it.
All they need to do is to recognise the real state of affairs instead of
creating hysteria out of virtual situations. They need to take
pragmatic action and think about the future. I think it is in the
West’s interests to build full and friendly relations with the Russian
Federation.\textsuperscript{244}

Such statements are important since they demonstrate the weight that the Russian
political leadership itself places on the role of perceptions and rhetoric in conflict
situations, thus highlighting the importance of studying the inherent logics of these notions
in relation to the 2008 war. It was allegedly the West that had to make an effort to read the
situation differently and part of the reason for such a misreading was their ideologically
coloured policies, especially of the United States.

Similar to the above mentioned references to the Cold War mentality, especially in the
case of the United States, in a CNN interview on August 26, Medvedev again blamed the
US leadership for conducting an ideologically tinted foreign policy. The US presidential

\textsuperscript{243} Medvedev, “Интервью телекомпании «Аль-Джазирана»,” August 26, 2008, last accessed March 18,
\textsuperscript{244} Medvedev, “Интервью телекомпании «Аль-Джазирана»,” August 26, 2008.
elections were set for November 5, 2008, and Medvedev was asked which steps he would like to see the new US President taking on attaining office. Medvedev replied that cooperation between Russia and the US was dependent on the removal of such ideological tendencies in Washington:

We will be ready to work with any American administration that the American people choose. We believe that the most important thing is that the new leaders of the US be guided by the real interests of the American people rather [than] some farfetched ideological scheme. And if this does indeed happen, then I am sure that we will be in a position to reach an agreement on the widest range of issues. We want to avoid any controversies and we would like to avoid a new edition of the Cold War. We would like to have full-value constructive relationships with our western partners including with the US. But to do so we need a dose of pragmatism and mutual respect.245

Medvedev was then asked about the risk of a severe worsening of relations between Russia and the US in light of the disagreements over issues such as Georgia, the missile defence system and Iran. He replied that ‘We do have disagreements, but they are not fatal and if we don’t blow this problem up into something it’s not, if we don’t try to start a new Cold War, then it won’t happen’. Thus the Russian political leadership once again highlighted how the perception of the current state of affairs was the factor that would determine the quality of international relations. The international tension would not need to increase if the parties would choose to see the situation with different eyes.

Furthermore, when Medvedev was asked in the earlier mentioned BBC interview if he was concerned about the possible renewal of a Cold War, he answered in the affirmative, but in an interview with the pro-Kremlin channel Russia Today (RT), he stated that ‘We aren’t afraid of anything, including the prospect of a Cold War’.246 In the latter interview, he added that a ‘confrontational scenario’ between Russia and its partners in the West would not be fatal for Russia due to the country having lived through ‘different conditions’ and therefore able to ‘manage it’. It is interesting that Medvedev gave different answers to the two media outlets. On the one hand, in front of an international audience it was naturally more favourable to portray international relations as being more relaxed than during the Cold War. On the other hand, portraying Russia as a strong state that did not

fear a new Cold War was a pragmatic choice that fed into the great power narrative. Additionally, Medvedev blurred the borders between the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia by stating that Russia, rather than the Soviet Union, had lived through different conditions and would therefore be able to endure another Cold War.

However, in the above mentioned BBC interview, Medvedev also spoke about priorities, about placing the protection of human lives above the risk of international tension, thus portraying Russia as a selfless state that would think first and foremost about the people living in South Ossetia and Abkhazia as well as Russian peacekeepers and thereafter about what effect Russian actions would have on world politics and any resulting tension. As mentioned, the interviewer asked if Medvedev feared a renewal of the Cold War, but he also posed a question concerning the possible split between Russia and the West:

Yes, it worries me, but if we are talking about priorities, our priority is to protect people’s lives, and this is why I have decided to recognise these two new states. We do not want a Cold War. No one has ever gained from it. No matter what some politicians might say, there are no victors in a Cold War. We do not seek confrontation and tension. What we want are normal productive and most importantly respectful relations with our Western partners.247

Medvedev thus also took the opportunity to demonstrate his resistance to the perception of the West as the ‘winner’ of the Cold War, arguing instead that ‘there are no victors in a Cold War’.

Moscow’s insistence on handing over the responsibility to the Western powers for the aggravation of tension on the international arena and the resumption of a new Cold War was mirrored in the rhetoric of some of certain Western political leaders. For example, the then British Foreign Minister, David Miliband, gave a speech in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev on August 27, in which he stated that Medvedev had a responsibility to avoid starting a new Cold War and a new arms race.248 In an interview with the German media outlet ARD, Putin answered these accusations by stating ‘There's this joke: Whoever’s the first to cry "Stop thief!" is the guilty party’, thus indicating that London would be responsible for

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any resumption of the Cold War.²⁴⁹ Again, he stated that Russia did not wish to aggravate the tension and simply desired a sound, friendly partnership with all actors.

*The Ambivalent Stance towards Soviet History*

In the above mentioned BBC interview, Medvedev moreover made references to the USSR and also issued a relatively negative assessment of the Soviet past:

There used to be the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. There used to be Soviet troops in the GDR, and we must admit that they were occupation troops, which remained in Germany after WWII under the guise of allied troops. Now these occupation troops are gone, the Soviet Union has collapsed, and the Warsaw Pact is no more. There is no Soviet threat, but NATO and US troops remain in Europe. What for?

A foreign threat is useful for putting things in order in one’s own camp, to make one’s allies follow the bloc discipline. Iran does not play this role very well, and it is very tempting to revive Russia’s image as the enemy, but nobody in Europe is afraid anymore.²⁵⁰

Portraying the USSR as an occupying force and speaking of the ‘Soviet threat’ rarely featured in the official Russian discourse of the last decade, and contradicts the earlier discussed notion of the Soviet Union as a ‘peaceful’ state. Such a contradiction demonstrates the Kremlin’s ambivalent stance towards the Soviet past. Descriptions of this period of history involve everything from an emphasis on the Soviet Union’s good deeds, often focusing on the victory over Nazi Germany in World War II, i.e. Victory Day, to negative descriptions such as the one above, adopting silence about the past as a sort of middle way.

The above statement was in reaction to Miliband’s speech, mentioned above, and Medvedev accused Miliband and the British government in general of a certain degree of hypocrisy. Moscow suggested that Russia was constructed as an enemy in order to facilitate ‘putting things in order in one’s own camp’ and thus again transferred the responsibility for the aggravation of international tension as well as the usage of Cold War rhetoric from Moscow to London. The statement also highlighted a recurrent theme in the official Russian discourse from the 2008 war, of the Western powers conducting ‘bloc politics’. Moscow repeatedly claimed that such a structuring of world politics was counter-

productive and that Russia itself was not part of any bloc. The United States was regularly portrayed as the self-assigned leader of the Western bloc, and at times Great Britain shared this leading role.

The Spectre of Imperial History in the Post-Independence Period

While denying any desire on Russia’s part for a resurgence of the Cold War, Lavrov made comparisons with the Great Game, i.e. the geopolitical great power competition between the Russian and British Empires in the 19th century, stretching in to the 20th century. The main goal of the Great Game was to gain control of a strategic land mass in Central Asia. The British involvement was based on the urge to build a buffer zone around British India, while Russia wished to expand its territory and sphere of influence.

In a speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) on September 1, a few weeks after the end of the 2008 war, Lavrov referred to this period of history:

The spectre [призрак] of the Great Game wanders again in the Caucasus. If the United States and its allies’ final choice is not their national interests or those of the Georgian people, but Saakashvili’s regime, which “has never learned anything,” this will be a mistake of truly historic proportions.251

Lavrov here refers to Marx, and the prologue of the Communist Manifesto: ‘A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism’ [призрак бродит по Европе - призрак Коммунизма]. The Foreign Minister was not, of course, making any direct connection to Communism, but rather indicating that a major conflict between great powers was haunting the Caucasus, thus indirectly defining contemporary Russia as great power. This statement also pointed to the involvement of the West in the 2008 war, however, thereby portraying the conflict in terms of the West opposing Russia. Furthermore, such a statement could be read as both contemporary Russia and the West seeking to widen their sphere of influence in the region. Lavrov used the Great Game analogue in an article from September 15 2008, where he repeated, using almost exactly the same words, the statement above.252

3.5. The Use of Elements from Russian Literary Culture

The use of history in the official Russian discourse was not limited to past wars and conflicts or to the Soviet Union as a state, but the Russian leadership made use of selected cultural figures that could work to portray both the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia in a certain light. In the same speech by Lavrov at the MGIMO, the legacy of the writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was used to explain Russian conduct in the international arena during the post-Cold War era. Solzhenitsyn died just before the Russo-Georgian War, on August 3, and his legacy was consequently used by Moscow to justify Russia’s actions. In the above-mentioned speech at MGIMO, Lavrov claimed that the end of the Cold War had resulted in ‘genuine freedoms’ being prioritised in the international community.\(^{253}\) Bloc politics had allegedly disappeared, and multipolarity had become more prominent, thereby assisting the creation of a new, self-regulatory international system.

Immediately after this declaration, Lavrov stated that Russia had ‘suffered a grievous loss’ due to the death of Solzhenitsyn. The Foreign Minister claimed that the writer had been ‘rightly considered the chief dissident of the Soviet Union’ and that such dissidence was displayed in the new Russia’s behaviour on the international scene. He claimed that ‘we are, in practice, upholding in international relations the right to dissidence; in other words – the right to freedom of speech and thought for any state – regardless of its size and civilisational identity’.\(^{254}\)

The references to Solzhenitsyn are important since they partly support a negative perception of the Soviet Union due to the writer’s critique of the Soviet communist system and the Gulag. Although no supporter of socialism, however, he also harshly criticised western cultures with their emphasis on secularism, legality and alleged permissiveness, and denounced the West for historical Russophobia. Such criticism was developed particularly during his years of exile in the United States.

On his return to his homeland in the early 1990s, Solzhenitsyn disapproved of the then President Boris Yeltsin’s policies. In the later years of his life, he adopted a hardening, nationalistic posture that involved calls for the creation of a new Slavic State that would unite Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Northern Kazakhstan. Solzhenitsyn did not wish to see


the building of a new empire, however. Albeit critical of Yeltsin, he viewed Putin’s policies generally positively and credited the president for giving hope to a demoralised Russian society. The writer was a harsh critic of the alleged decadence and materialism of post-Soviet Russia. In an interview with the German publication Der Spiegel in 2007, he claimed that ‘Putin inherited a ransacked and bewildered country, with a poor and demoralized people. And he started to do what was possible -- a slow and gradual restoration’. Moreover, at the end of his life, the writer’s criticism of the West further hardened.

Medvedev and other top officials attended the writer’s funeral in 2008, and the then president issued a decree a few days afterwards, renaming a street in Moscow after Solzhenitsyn in memory of his contribution to Russian culture. Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzkhov thereafter announced that Big Communist Street [Большая Коммунистическая улица], was to be renamed Alexandr Solzhenitsyn Street [улица Александра Солженицына]. Such a move was not appreciated by all, especially not the Communist flank in Russia or locals and businesses who had to alter their documents. There are also numerous libraries and schools named after the writer in Russia, as well as a number of monuments. However, the act of upholding a positive memory of Solzhenitsyn continues to be contested.

The references to Solzhenitsyn can be seen as another sign of the ambiguity inherent in contemporary Russia’s relations with the past. The political leadership emphasised positive moments as well as important cultural and political personalities of the Soviet past. It used parts of the writer’s legacy that suited the government’s aims, by for example highlighting Solzhenitsyn’s resistance in order to legitimise contemporary Russia’s

255 Northern Kazakhstan’s population is predominantly Russian. In the pre-revolutionary period, Ukrainians, Belarusians and the northern Kazakhs were officially considered to be part of the Russian nation [общерусская нация]. Solzhenitsyn believed that a state including the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Belarus and Northern Kazakhstan would be the true Russian nation-state.
independent political and military conduct in the international arena, thus legitimising Russian actions despite the fact that they resulted in increasing international tension.

3.6. The Downplaying of the International Tension

As mentioned above, the tension between Russia and the West, especially the United States, were repeatedly downplayed by Moscow. The Kremlin acknowledged that relations were not optimal but objected to comparisons to the frosty relations that had existed during the Cold War. As discussed above, the responsibility for the tension was shifted away from Russia:

I would not call this a full-scale crisis of the kind that existed during the Soviet period, but there is tension today. We certainly did not want this tension. It is the result of the not entirely reasonable policy the United States has pursued in Georgia. At some point they gave the Georgian leader the impression that he could do as he pleased with impunity.\(^{259}\)

The logic inherent in the deteriorating relations due to the United States’ actions in connection to the 2008 war is not always easy to follow. The United States openly supported the Georgian government, but if Russia was disinterested in bloc politics, that fact would not need to affect the relations between Russia and the United States to any greater extent. As discussed in the previous chapter, Moscow claimed that it was not a party to the conflict but merely a mediator, an argument which makes the picture even more complex. Medvedev followed the above statement with a claim that the quality of Russia-US relations was partly dependent on the US taking care of the situation on the ground in Georgia by stating that ‘The sooner our American partners sort out this issue the better it will be for Russian-American relations.’ It was thus the responsibility of the US to deal with the Georgian government, and this would in turn improve the relations with Russia.

The Russian leadership repeatedly criticised the United States’ role in the 2008 war and the subsequent creation of tension that could possibly lead to a Cold War, both when addressing the Russian domestic community as well as at gatherings with international political leaders. At a joint press conference with the then French president, Sarkozy,

Medvedev, in response to a question about Russian plans to change the borders of Europe, rejected any imperialistic plans, adding that certain countries desired to bring the past into current international relations:

I have already characterised it as the phantom pains [фантомными болями] felt by those who are determined to see the Russian Federation as a new version of the Soviet Union. Russia is not that, but it is a country to be reckoned with.\textsuperscript{260}

The Soviet Union was here used to point to the development of the current Russian state, and thus left a negative impression of the Soviet past. The statement that Russia was a state ‘to be reckoned with’ in the international arena was relatively random in this context, if one considers the question posed, which focused on whether Russia could be trusted rather than the inherent strength or influence of the country. The Kremlin seemed to take every opportunity to bring up the question of Russia’s power in the international arena, whether it fitted the discursive logic or not.

The past was brought up in different ways, but its role was also downplayed at times. In the preamble to the transcript of his speech at the Valdai Club on September 11, Putin stated:

We must analyse the past - he who does not know the past has no future, as is known - but we must proceed from realities. Today we have no ideological contradictions, like in the Cold War; there is no basis for a cold war.\textsuperscript{261}

Here Putin is downplaying the role of history somewhat. The statement should be read in the context where the Eastern European actors had been trying to escalate the ‘history wars’, and demonstrated the Russian leadership’s discomfort regarding these ‘wars’. It recalled that history is indeed important, but that one should consider present-day politics instead of creating historical phantoms that would result in making direct connections between contemporary Russia and the negative aspects of the Soviet past.

Before the above discussion, the British scholar, Richard Sakwa, asked why Russia had been unable to build good relations with the West for the last 200 years. In response,


Putin indicated that there had indeed been many clashes of interest in the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, but that the world today had now changed. From there on, it is quite difficult to follow the logic since he seemed to explain the allegedly changed world situation as consisting of a more assertive foreign policy on the part of the United States, that did not allow any other power to encroach on its sovereignty while at the same time sending warships close to Russia’s borders. In other words, different themes are interwoven in this discourse – the past as consisting of clashes between powers, a changed world in which the United States decides the rules of the game, and a reality that does not involve any ideological contradictions and thus no cold war.

Furthermore, in line with Putin’s resistance to pitting Russia against the West, he argued that the West is not one and the same, but consists of many separate parts:

The West is very heterogeneous and Europe is very heterogeneous. The monolith was created during the Cold War. It was in a way “frozen” because it faced a common and presumably very dangerous enemy, the Soviet Union. That enemy is no more. It does not exist and the Europeans are not afraid.\textsuperscript{262}

Putin thus wished to avoid describing the situation in terms of a West that stood unified against Russia. Some commentators believed that Russia sought to drive a wedge between the NATO allies or the United States and European countries in general during the 2008 war.\textsuperscript{263}

3.7. The Distance from the Soviet Union

The historical connections tend to be interwoven with an urge to uphold good relations with western countries. At a later date, at the meeting with international leaders at the Valdai Discussion Club, both Medvedev and Putin had an opportunity to answer questions about the resurgence of a new version of the Soviet Union. As already mentioned, the Russian leadership demonstrated both a desire to distance Russia from the Soviet past, while at the same time creating a continuity with this period of history.

\textsuperscript{262} Putin, “В.В.Путин встретился с членами международного дискуссионного клуба «Валдай»,” September 11, 2008.
In Medvedev’s Valdai speech on September 12, such ambiguity once again emerged. In response to a question from the audience on whether Russia would follow the same policy in the Middle East as did the Soviet Union, the then President aired his frustration over the general perception of Russia as the ideological heir of the USSR:

> No, of course not. We do not wish to pursue the policy of the Soviet Union in the Middle East, the Far East or anywhere else. We don’t need it. Russia is not the Soviet Union. And maybe this is just a basic misconception that we cannot overcome. Unfortunately -- and this has been said many times in many different places -- unfortunately, so far Russia continues to be perceived not only as the legal successor of the Soviet Union, but as its ideological heir as well. And this is not the case. Russia has completely different values.264

Immediately afterwards, however, Medvedev clearly demonstrated his continuing desire to paint a positive picture of the Soviet Union and thus articulated the ambiguity towards the past that is often found within the contemporary official Russian discourse:

> Yes, the Soviet Union was a great and strong state. Many of our people were born in the Soviet Union, including myself. But when it comes to ideological values, ours are completely different. Maybe we don’t even fully realise how different today’s Russia is from the Soviet Union.

The difference between contemporary Russia and the Soviet Union, therefore, supposedly lay in the ideological values. Medvedev hereby distanced Russia from the communist ideology. The leadership did not claim that contemporary Russia was led by another kind of ideology but argued that it had abandoned ideology altogether. The then President stated that Soviet foreign policy was completely guided by ideology and that he wished that, in the new world order, foreign policy would have abandoned such ‘unpleasant traits’. Medvedev once again mentioned the question of ideology when arguing that the situation did not fit into a cold war framework due to the absence of an ideological confrontation.

The alleged ideological foreign policy of certain Western states, especially the US, had already been touched upon in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 war, but in his Valdai speech, Medvedev explained in greater detail what he meant in making such claims. He referred to US intervention in the Middle East, arguing that these interventions were not in the interests of US citizens:

All of these concepts, which are taken up by the State Department and elsewhere - they are pure ideology, and with perfectly obvious properties. This does not help the citizens of that state at all. Let us ask ourselves frankly: because the United States is active in Iraq, in Afghanistan, and looking at Iran, has the life of the people of the United States of America become better or more secure? Does the population gain anything positive from these activities? Hardly.

It seems to me that we should all try to remove ideology from our foreign policy. The fewer schemes there are, the better. 265

He then stated that: ‘we certainly need to get rid of Sovietology stereotypes. It seems to me that the problem with the current administration of the United States of America is that it contains too many Sovietologists’. In Medvedev’s speech, Sovietology was at times equated with Kremlinology, even though the former denotes a study of Soviet society as a whole while the latter predominantly emphasises Soviet politics and focuses mostly on the Kremlin.

In the same speech Medvedev clearly touched upon the ‘history wars’ between Russia and certain Central and East European countries. In response to a question from the audience concerning his perception of the relations between Russia and central European countries, such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, he stated that he did not see any insurmountable problems, arguing that the action of some Eastern European politicians of utilising history, allegedly in order to achieve certain political goals, was detrimental to the positive development of these relations:

> Yes, the Soviet period created fertile ground for exploiting this issue to achieve certain political goals. By the way, I understand why Eastern European politicians resort to this at times. This is an obvious political technique that, to some extent, is a way of consolidating the national elite. It involves adopting the same attitude towards Russia as to the Soviet Union.

Medvedev stated that he had already sought to discuss the issue of the utilisation of history for political purposes, but in relation to the United States. Once again, the US interventionist policy was placed centre stage and Russia was inserted into the equation on relatively loose grounds:

> What Iraq represents is obvious, and the majority of the problems there have been resolved. The same is true for Afghanistan. Iran is not very clear to the American consumer, despite the number of wild theories on this topic, but it is absolutely clear what Russia is.

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If Russia is the former Soviet Union, then there is a threat to international peace. This is easy to "spin". This is a platitude but it is true, and in general the popularity rates of this round of candidates prove this.

The latter remark about the popularity rates pointed to the 2008 US election campaign. Medvedev and Putin raised the issue of the US presidential candidates utilising the 2008 war in Georgia for the sake of gathering electoral support on several occasions, thus, in a relatively far-fetched manner, clearly demonstrating the Kremlin’s dismay over the alleged utilisation of history on the part of the US.

Immediately following the accusations of the use of the past in the US, Medvedev repeated that such acts of history politics could be seen in Eastern Europe too. He argued that, in order to improve relations one should not exclusively focus on the ‘events of the recent past’, presumably referring to the 2008 war, and seek to overcome the image of Russia as the Soviet Union. He stated that ‘if Russia is portrayed as “dangerous”, if Russia is seen to be a way of consolidating the population during domestic or other events, then of course this will be difficult’. Moreover, he claimed that Russia and Eastern Europe could enjoy very close relations since, even during the Soviet period, there were elements that united the two sides, namely ‘joint development and a joint cultural and educational space’. Such cooperation was not lost, according to Medvedev.

The Russian leadership thus consistently argued that it sought cooperation with all states and that the overly dark picture that some international actors painted of it and the international playing field was misleading. Medvedev repeatedly claimed that the misunderstanding of the conflict and Russia’s role in it was largely caused by faulty perceptions of contemporary Russia and that such perceptions were consequently caused by a belligerent rhetoric on the part of those actors who desired to paint a faulty picture of reality. At one point in the Valdai speech, an audience member asked Medvedev whether Russia’s image would be that of a state that positioned itself against the status quo. Purportedly, states that had historically opposed the status quo, such as Germany before 1914 and France in the 18th century, had provoked conflict on a global scale. The question focused on whether the current Russian leadership realised that such rhetoric and geostrategic goals could result in a global conflict situation. Medvedev answered that Russia’s rhetoric in connection to the 2008 war was largely coloured by the fact that it was part of a response to a military conflict that Russia’s partners should take that into account.
instead of furthering any alarmist messages about Russian policy. Allegedly, the partners who chose this scenario did so partly in order to serve certain domestic political goals:

Of course, the easiest way is to fall back on a time-honoured practice and claim that Russia has finally dropped its democratic mask, shown that it wants neither democracy nor a market economy, but intends rather to militarise and strengthen its authoritarian regime. It’s finally happened, and now talking to Russia is the same as talking to the Soviet Union. This response is accompanied by a counter-rhetoric that serves to achieve one’s own domestic political purposes.

Medvedev argued that the United States resorted to ‘belligerent’ rhetoric after the September 11 attacks, but one needed to take into account that the US at that point had suffered greatly and was under threat, ‘Naturally, this affects what the leaders say and what the president said’. Even though the image of Russia was claimed to be important for the Russian leadership, Medvedev argued, later in the speech that, ‘there are situations where image is nothing and real action counts for everything’, thus emphasising that the reality on the ground was more important than the international actors’ perception of Russia.

3.8. The Repetition of the Discourse

The weeks following the Valdai Club meeting witnessed a similar focus on the role and interpretation of history, and the official Russian discourse involved more or less the same themes. One of the main efforts during this period lay in distancing contemporary Russia from the ideological competition of the Cold War. During a meeting with public Russian organisations, about a week after the Valdai speech, Medvedev again articulated his thoughts about a possible resumption of the Cold War:

Of course, we do not want a cold war. We have no interest in it and we know what consequences it would have. I mentioned at some point that we do not want it but we do not fear it. I am convinced that no one is interested in it now. If you have been following events, you would have noticed that the moment came when our partners’ hard-line rhetoric began to change, because they have practically no levers of influence and it is clear at the same time that taking this road would only make life more complicated.\textsuperscript{266}

\textsuperscript{266} Medvedev, “Стенографический отчёт о встрече с представителями общественных организаций,” September 19, 2008.
The development of Cold War tension thus lies in the words, but such unfolding of events is prevented by the softening of the rhetoric of certain partners. Such softening is allegedly due to the fact that these actors cannot possibly influence either the developments on the ground or Russia’s undertakings.

Furthermore, an audience member described the ‘classic version’ of the Cold War as a struggle between two hostile regimes and two completely different social and ideological systems, in response to which the then president explained why such an ideological struggle would be impossible today:

I can only agree with you when you say that what the cold war people are talking about now is impossible for ideological reasons. Our people want to live in a modern country, a country that has resolved its main economic problems, an open country that can assure its people of a decent level of consumption, the chance to travel abroad, save, buy property and meet their most important, day-to-day needs. We’ve undergone great transformation since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Russia was a transformed, peaceful country, and did not allegedly seek to oppose the status quo. Contemporary Russia was not, as demonstrated, always perceived as such by large sectors of the international community. The then US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, delivered a speech at the German Marshall Fund on September 19, in which she criticised Russia's actions in the 2008 war and the more authoritative turn in the country’s domestic development. Moreover, she mentioned ‘the paranoid, aggressive impulse, which has manifested itself before in Russian history’ regarding the development of free, independent democratic states at its borders, as most prominently demonstrated during the colour revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, which Russia perceived as a threat to its interests rather than a source of security. She insisted that the Russian leadership would be unable to benefit from the international norms, institutions and markets, while simultaneously challenging their very basis. There is no ‘third way’ and ‘a 19th century Russia and a 21st century Russia cannot operate in the world side by side’.

Rice thus compared contemporary Russia with the Russian Empire, but also firmly stated that the current situation did not signal the emergence of a new cold war and that contemporary Russia was not the Soviet Union in terms of the size, power, aims or nature.

of the regime. According to Rice, the Russian leadership had no desire to spread a single ideology across the world, had not come up with an alternative to democratic capitalism and was unable to develop a system of client states and rival institutions; ‘The bases of Soviet power are gone’. Moreover, Rice argued that US foreign policy during much of the last century had resulted from the relationship with the Soviet Union. The US was, at that time, limited to a ‘zero-sum, ideological conflict’ wherein every state had to choose a side. Nowadays, the US was supposedly free to pursue a multidimensional foreign policy.

The Russian leadership delivered a harsh response to Ms Rice’s speech, and a commentary from the Russian Foreign Ministry stated that Russia had no geostrategic aims in the 2008 war, which was a ‘one-off act’ caused by ‘emergency circumstances’ and that there was no ‘domino theory’ of which to speak.\(^\text{268}\) Washington’s choice to frame Russian actions in terms of geopolitics was allegedly caused by ‘stereotypes of the past, those very same “zero sum games”’. If there were any wider regional or global effects of the 2008 war and its resolution, those were merely a ‘byproduct’ of events imposed upon Russia.

The Russian Foreign Ministry claimed that Rice’s argument that Russia was not being the Soviet Union was positive, since ‘All the rest derives from this fact’. Moreover, the Foreign Ministry was pleased that the US had allegedly borrowed Russian ideas, such as the perception that the end of the Cold War was an ‘emancipating’ event for the whole world. Moreover, the commentary expressed hope that the US would remove the ‘prejudices and inertias of the past, particularly the stress on military power’.

In another commentary by the Russian Foreign Ministry at the General Assembly of the United Nations’ 63\(^\text{rd}\) session, published on September 27, it was argued that the Cold War ‘distorted the nature of international relations’ thereby making the international arena a forum for ideological confrontation.\(^\text{269}\) Later in the same text, the Cold War was once again discussed, together with the dangers inherent in a ‘distortion of reality’:

The events of August provide us with yet another occasion to rethink the responsibility for what actually happened. Distortion of reality hampers international efforts to settle conflicts and crises, and revives the worst practices of the era of the Cold War.


The Cold War thus involved an alteration of reality, a practice that was allegedly also present during the Russo-Georgian War. It is unclear whether the Foreign Ministry directed the critique of this distortion of reality in the past towards the United States, Europe, the West in general or even whether the Soviet Union was included within it.

Furthermore, the Foreign Ministry claimed that the opportunity in recent history to banish the element of ideology within international relations had been missed. In a similar vein, Medvedev, in the first World Policy Conference held in Evian on October 8 2008, argued that the highly unipolar policies of the United States following the terrorist attacks on September 11 2001 neglected the participation of Russia and other willing states. He stated that the world had missed a historic opportunity to ‘de-ideologise’ international relations and develop a genuinely democratic world order. Russia and the other states that showed solidarity with the United States after the 9/11 attacks stepped up in order to combat terrorism, but also ‘for the sake of overcoming the divisions that the Cold War had created in the world’. Moreover, the issues of sovietology and historical phantoms were once again brought to the fore:

This is all has-beens. Sovietology is a has-been, but sovietology, like paranoia, is a dangerous disease, and it’s a pity that part of the U.S. Administration still suffers from it. People should be studying the new Russia rather than reviving Soviet phantoms, but I’m sure that a "new Fulton" and a new edition of the Cold War are not on the agenda, no matter how deeply these notions remain in the minds of some politicians.

A “new Fulton” refers to Winston Churchill’s 1946 ‘The Sinews of Peace’ speech, commonly referred to as the ‘Iron Curtain’ speech. It is widely considered that this speech transformed the West’s perception of the USSR due to Churchill’s emphasis on the power of Moscow over Eastern Europe and the authoritarian nature of the Communist Parties in these countries. At that time, the Western countries had been grateful for the Soviet Union’s role in ending WWII, but Churchill’s speech has been perceived as contributing to the division of Europe into a Western and Eastern part. Medvedev’s statement about Fulton was thus intended to demonstrate the Russian leadership’s resistance to any kind of division between Russia and the West.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the Russian leadership’s use of historical concepts, with a focus on the Cold War and the Soviet Union, in the official discourse in connection with the Russo-Georgian war. The cold war concept acquired a new meaning after the end of the Cold War, both within and outside Russia. Its contemporary meaning is a general state of serious tension in the international arena, with Russia on one side and the majority of the Western states on the other. Such tension does not necessarily involve military force but the widespread usage of this concept is commonly triggered by military conflicts in which Russia is involved. Similar comments about a new Cold War were seen in connection to the latest conflict in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. As demonstrated, however, the cold war concept did not acquire a new meaning in the context of the Russo-Georgian war.

The concept of the Soviet Union, on the other hand, received a far more ambiguous treatment. This chapter has discussed how the Russian leadership denied the resurgence of a new Cold War while simultaneously seeking to construct Russia as a ‘new’, ‘non-ideological’ state that did not equate with the USSR. The Russian leadership instead claimed that the United States’ foreign policy was determined by ideology, but it is unclear what kind of ideology is meant. The sought-after balance between constructing Russia as a new, post-Soviet state while at the same time upholding the Soviet Union as a great, strong state contributed towards blurring the boundaries between contemporary Russia and the USSR. This naturally affected the understanding of who should belong to the Russian nation, since a lack of strong resistance to the Soviet past at times fed into interpretations of contemporary Russia as an imperialist state, and thus making it increasingly unclear whether the population of South Ossetia and Abkhazia should be included within the Russian nation. This situation of irresolvable contradictions was colored by the need to interact with other actors in the international arena, thus demonstrating the relational quality of identity construction.


122
The Kremlin’s denial that a new Cold War was on the horizon as a result of the 2008 war can be seen predominantly as a reaction to the ‘history wars’ that occurred in Russia and Eastern Europe since the beginning of the new millennium, while the unwillingness to portray the Soviet Union in a negative light was connected to an urge to demonstrate Russia’s traditional role as a great power and important international actor, thus constituting a clearer case of history politics. As will be demonstrated in the forthcoming chapter, such a traditional role was indirectly articulated through the protection narrative that focused on Russia’s responsibility to protect the residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.
Chapter 4. Discourses on Citizenship and Compatriot Policy during the 2008 War

Introduction

One of the main arguments in the official Russian discourse, designed to justify Russia’s actions during and in the aftermath of the 2008 war in Georgia, was the protection of Russian ‘citizens’ [граждане] and ‘compatriots’ [соотечественники] mainly in South Ossetia but also in Abkhazia. The Russian authorities were able to raise such a claim due to the fact that many of the residents of the two break-away republics had been given Russian passports in the years leading up to the conflict. This chapter examines the situational meaning of the concepts of Russian citizens and compatriots and how the understanding of them contributed to the vision of Russian nationhood as presented by the Russian leadership in connection to the 2008 conflict. It thus examines how the protection narrative used in a situation of international conflict, based on safeguarding the lives and dignity of Russian citizens and compatriots, assisted in discursively legitimising the Russian government’s actions.

The Russian leadership built on the protection narrative by using a language of legal concerns and human rights, predominantly by invoking Article 51 of the United Nations Charter that stipulates the right to ‘individual’ and ‘collective self-defence’ as well as the UN’s ‘responsibility to protect’ principle (R2P) agreed upon by the international community in 2005. As demonstrated in earlier chapters, the official Russian discourse in connection to the war was able to speak to many audiences simultaneously, while parts of it were naturally viewed unfavourably by certain groups or individuals. Arguments concerning the legal aspects of Russia’s actions and the protection of human rights were

273 The Russian official discourse naturally focused on protecting the inhabitants of South Ossetia due to the Georgian attack being concentrated in this area, while Russian officials claimed that the next target for the Georgian leadership was the inhabitants of Abkhazia.


used to gain legitimacy before a large part of the international audiences due to the primacy of international law within the international community, and it would also speak to the majority of the general Russian population who perceived the protection of Russian citizens living abroad as legitimate and necessary.

Furthermore, as this thesis argues, such arguments would also be favourably viewed by the Westernizers due to the acclaimed shared values with the West, although this does not mean that the Westernizers generally supported the waging of war or granting independence to South Ossetia and Abkhazia in order to protect the human rights of the population of these republics. There were exceptions, however; the Director of the Moscow Carnegie Centre, Dmitry Trenin, who can be considered a member of the Westernist school, supported Russia’s military intervention in the 2008 war, although he did not back the decision to grant the break-away republics’ independence, because of the risk of this leading to Russia’s isolation from the West.276

The members of the Statist school would arguably regard the protection of Russian citizens as strengthening the power of the state due to this demonstrating the responsibility that the state is prepared to adopt in order to secure the human rights of its citizens in need. Moreover, the security of contemporary Russia, so central to the foreign policy thinking of this school, was strengthened due to Russia showing the world that it is a militarily strong great power that is able to protect its citizens and compatriots despite the external pressure to do otherwise. Furthermore, the Civilisationists argued that Russia had a cultural obligation to protect those people who had ‘historically gravitated towards Russia’.277 Arguably, the utilisation of the compatriots concept would thus be favourably perceived by this group due to its ability to include in the protection narrative a large array of people, including former Soviet citizens.

The current literature on the 2008 war discusses Russia’s claim to the right to protect its own citizens in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the lack of a firm legal base supporting such an assertion, even though the utilisation of the compatriots concept in the official Russian discourse is not covered to any large extent.278 What is lacking in the literature,

276 Dmitry Trenin, “Непрактичный прагматизм,” Pro et Contra 12, no. 5-6 (2008), 20-27, in Tsygankov, Russia’s Foreign Policy.
277 Tsygankov, Russia’s Foreign Policy, 2nd ed., 207.
however, is a thorough examination of the impact of the Russian leadership’s particular conceptualisation of citizenship in the context of war on the discursive construction of Russian national identity. It is important to examine the consequences of the usage of the concepts of ‘citizens’ and ‘compatriots’ within the narrative of self-defence and protection, and the subsequent overlapping of these two concepts, have for the official discourse of the nation.

In order to discuss these issues based on the empirical data, this chapter begins by providing a general overview of the development of Russia’s ‘passportisation policy’, which was implemented in South Ossetia and Abkhazia during the 1990s and 2000s. Thereafter, it examines the Russian compatriot policy as well as the Russian and Georgian citizenship laws. The focus in the following section will be on the official categorisation of Russian ‘citizens’ and ‘compatriots’. The main purpose of this discussion is to create a background for the subsequent discussion about the empirical material from the period of the 2008 war and its aftermath.

4.1. Russia’s ‘Passportisation Policy’

The Russian government has issued Russian passports to foreign citizens in post-Communist states since the breakup of the Soviet Union. As stated by Igor Zevelev, Yeltsin’s government claimed to be ready to distribute passports to all ‘ethnic Russians’ who had ended up outside Russia’s borders after the dissolution of the USSR, as well as to non-ethnic Russians who had ‘historical connections’ with Russia. These dual citizenship plans did not materialise to any large extent, however, and the Russian government merely concluded agreements with Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, countries with the smallest Russian diasporas in the CIS region. Furthermore, Turkmenistan withdrew from the agreement in 2003. According to Zevelev, as a consequence of being unable to offer *de jure* Russian citizenship to the majority of the residents in the regions, the Yeltsin government began to encourage *de facto* dual citizenship in 1997, a move based on Russian legislation from 1993-1995. Such an act granted these new citizens many of the same fundamental rights as Russians residing in Russia, but was seen by the

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governments of the former Soviet states as infringing on the sovereignty of their country of residence.

The inhabitants of the two Georgian break-away republics (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) welcomed the decision to grant them Russian passports, while the Georgian government perceived this as both illegal and as limiting the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Georgia rejected dual citizenship, and continues to do so. After the dissolution of the USSR, the populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia rejected Georgian citizenship. As argued by Scott Littlefield, this decision, together with the Georgian authorities’ lack of control over the republics, resulted in an unclear legal status for these peoples.\(^{280}\) In a sense, they became stateless with limited possibilities to, for example, traveling abroad, since locally produced passports were not valid for travel. As emphasised by Littlefield, however, the residents of the republics were not denied Georgian citizenship; they merely chose not to acquire it.

The process for Abkhazians and South Ossetians to gain Russian citizenship was fairly straightforward in the 1990s, but the new Russian citizenship law proposed in 2002 made the process more complicated for former USSR citizens.\(^{281}\) Up to that point, a Soviet passport made it easier to acquire a Russian equivalent, but the new law proposal led the populations of South Ossetia and Abkhazia to arrive en masse in 2002 and 2003 at the consular departments set up by Moscow in order to acquire Russian documents. On the other hand, the removal of the former five-year residency requirement and Russian language test eased up the process of obtaining Russian documents.\(^{282}\)

The current number of residents with Russian citizenship in South Ossetia and Abkhazia is hard to ascertain but it relates to the majority of the population in these republics, with some estimates putting the figure as high as 90%.\(^{283}\) The Russian passportisation policy, however, was in stark contradiction to Saakashvili’s goals. As previously discussed, one of his primary political goals was to regain control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, an objective that was complicated by Russia handing out passports to the residents within the republics, yet the Georgian government’s strong objections to

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\(^{280}\) Scott Littlefield, “Citizenship, Identity and Foreign Policy.”


Russia’s severe infringement of the country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity was countered in the official Russian discourse by references to the protection of these peoples’ human rights. The protection narrative also included different elements depending on the context, however, and in the 2008 war, the rossiiskii citizens in Georgia were the main object of protection, although the insertion of the ‘compatriots’ concept into the narrative made the picture somewhat more complicated and broadened the object group of protection mainly during the war period.

4.2. The Ambiguous Compatriots Policy

In May 1999, the law ‘On State Policy of the Russian Federation towards Compatriots Abroad’ was adopted after the Russian government failed to introduce dual citizenship legally with a number of the former Soviet republics. It was supposedly designed in addition to the dual citizenship strategy. The 1999 law defined compatriots as, among other things, those ‘who were born in one state’ and who ‘share common language, religion, cultural heritage, customs and traditions’ and their direct descendants, except for ‘descendants of persons who belong to titular nations of foreign states’. In July 2010, almost two years after the 2008 war in Georgia, the law was amended and the definition became increasingly unclear. The new law came to include, in addition to the above category of individuals as well as Russian citizens permanently residing abroad, ‘people living outside the border of the Russian Federation who made a free choice in favour of a spiritual and cultural connection with Russia and who usually [kak pravilo] belong to peoples [narody] which have historically lived in the territory of the Russian Federation’.

As argued by Shevel, the designation of ‘compatriots’ as the ‘us’ group of the Russian state has provided the government with a legal solution to the question of the boundaries of the Russian nation. She convincingly demonstrates how the Russian government’s designation of ‘compatriots’ legalises the ambiguity inherent in the question of the boundaries of the Russian nation, while failing to solve any of the contradictions in the country’s various nation-building agendas. Both versions of the compatriot law as well as

284 Zevelev, “Russia’s Policy toward Compatriots in the Former Soviet Union.”
285 In Shevel, “Russian Nation-building from Yeltsin to Medvedev,” 192.
the statements by Russian officials concerning the identity of the compatriots demonstrate how these people can be defined as anything from ethnic Russians to all former Soviet citizens.

As an example of the latter, Alexander Zhuravsky and Olga Vykhovanets, when discussing the development of Russia’s compatriot policy although with a focus on refugees and forced migrant, conclude that ‘In Russia’s case, a compatriot is any citizen of the former Soviet Union, even if he or she, or their forebears never lived in the RSFSR (now the Russian Federation)’ and that ‘there was once a united homeland that they all shared’.\textsuperscript{287} They further argue that ethnicity should not be taken into consideration since the USSR was an ‘exceptionally multiethnic country’.

The definition and usage of the compatriot concept is thus a complex issue that, in combination with citizenship for foreign nationals, adds to the already contentious issue of determining the civic and ethnic borders of the Russian nation. This chapter touches upon both the civic and ethnic dimensions of nation-building since the protection of Russian citizens belongs to the former while the support of compatriots is somewhat more complicated and fits both categories. The lack of definitional clarity concerning these concepts in the official Russian discourse about the war feeds into the ‘legalisation of vagueness’ as discussed by Shevel and the problematic nature of the ethnic/civic dichotomy in general, yet this thesis goes further than Shevel by examining how the compatriot concept feeds into the Russian leadership’s particular conceptualisation of citizenship in times of war, together with other peoples who are portrayed as part of the Russian ‘us’, and this conceptualisation’s effects on the discursive construction of national identity.

4.3. Defining Nations and the Issue of Genocide

The designation of the population of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, alternating between ‘Russian/our citizens’ and ‘our compatriots’, the ‘residents’ or ‘people’ of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, or ‘Ossetians’ and ‘Abkhazians’, contributed to a vagueness concerning membership of the Russian nation. The forthcoming section will focus on analysing the main primary sources and will discuss how these concepts were used by the Russian

leadership during the war and its aftermath. As in the previous chapters, I have analysed the primary sources in a largely chronological order in order to be able to define the main contours of the official Russian discourse and detect any shifts within it over time, thus emphasising the importance of taking into account the context wherein the discourse developed. I will start by identifying the definitions created by the Russian leadership of the different population groups within Georgia, and will thereafter discuss how the notion of genocide was used in order to justify Russian actions and how such notions were inserted into the protection narrative.

Defining ‘Russians’, ‘Ossetians’, ‘Abkhazians’ and ‘Georgians’

The argument about the necessity of protecting Russian citizens in South Ossetia was included in the first statement of Medvedev at the beginning of the 2008 war, foreshadowing its central role in the foreign policy discourse of the Russian leadership during the war and its aftermath. The then president introduced a legal discourse, which has been discussed in earlier chapters, in order to strengthen the validity of his arguments. He claimed that the Russian Constitution and federal laws spelt out his duty to protect ‘Russian citizens’ [российскіе граждане]:

Civilians, women, children and the elderly are dying today in South Ossetia, and the majority of them are citizens of the Russian Federation.
In accordance with the Constitution and the federal laws, as President of the Russian Federation, it is my duty to protect the lives and dignity of Russian citizens, wherever they may be.\(^{288}\)

One should note that Medvedev, at the time of the 2008 war, had been president for only a few months, and thus probably felt a need to demonstrate his strength and ‘responsibility to protect’ his own population, whether they were living within the Russian Federation’s borders or not. Medvedev’s agency has been a widely debated topic, however, from the start of his presidency due the fact that Putin, in his role as Prime Minister, was perceived as remaining the main decision maker in Russian politics, in times of war as well as peace.

In any case, Medvedev’s references to the citizens helped to counter the de-legitimising discourse of imperialism, although the notion of protecting these citizens

‘wherever they may be’ [где бы они ни находились], a notion repeated numerous times in the aftermath of the conflict, would naturally lead to concerns about Russian imperialism in some of the countries bordering Russia due to them hosting a significant number of ethnic Russians or Russian speakers, even though these people may not have held Russian citizenship. This applied especially to those states whose relationship with the Russian Federation was not at all times amicable. The largest number of Russian citizens living abroad was located in countries such as the United States, Israel and Germany, but these fears did not apply to those countries to any large extent.289 They would, however, apply to the Baltic States where large numbers of ethnic Russians live, especially Estonia and Latvia, as well as Ukraine.

The legal right for a state to protect its citizens outside its borders is limited, however, and the references to the R2P principle and Article 51 in the UN Charter about the ‘inherent right of individual’ and ‘collective self-defence’ were thus broadly questioned.290 There is no customary law that spells out the right to protect or rescue a country’s nationals outside the state borders and diplomatic protection can only be exercised without the use of military force.291 Furthermore, the fact that the process of granting Russian citizenship to the inhabitants of the two break-away republics was, in itself, legally dubious, thereby making the Russian leadership’s choice to apply a legal discourse even more questionable.

Allison states that both the process of granting passports to the residents of the two break-away republics as well as Russia’s self-defence argument demonstrates Russian political expediency. He further notes that, in terms of political intentionality, it is important to differentiate between a state that is seeking to protect the ‘lives and dignity’ of its citizens who are merely residing abroad, and a government that is defending citizens who are seeking to create their own independent state in the territory of another country, which was the case for both South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Medvedev complicated the issue further, however, since he added the notion of protecting ‘our compatriots’ [наши соотечественники] by stating that ‘We will not let the deaths of our compatriots go unpunished. The perpetrators will receive the punishment they deserve’ [Виновные понесут заслуженное наказание]. The comment about protecting Russian citizens ‘wherever they may be’, combined with the vague notion of

290 IFFMCG 2009; Allison, “The Russian case for military intervention in Georgia”; Littlefield, “Citizenship, Identity and Foreign Policy.”
291 Allison, “The Russian case for military intervention in Georgia.”
'compatriots' and the statement about ‘punishment’ for the guilty would naturally create a sense of unease among certain international actors, largely due to the poorly defined boundaries of the concepts and the threat of the use of force. ‘Punishment’ does not necessarily signify military involvement, but, in the context of war it would not be remarkable if that is the general interpretation of this term.

The fact that the two different designations of the population that Russia had a responsibility to protect appear in the same statement could, in itself, be seen as evidence of the lack of a clear separation lines between the different concepts. Compatriots were, in this context, portrayed as part of the Russian people and so a natural part of the protection narrative.

At times, a more neutral description of the residents of the break-away republics was used, such as in an official statement issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry on August 8 wherein Russia articulated that it hoped that its foreign partners and the international community at large would not remain indifferent when deciding the fate of ‘thousands of people living in this region’. Arguably, when seeking to gather the support of the international community, it was more favourable to speak of these residents in more general terms, as people with no specific nationality, especially due to the widely questioned process of granting these residents Russian passports.

In the same vein, when chairing a meeting in the Russian republic of North Ossetia on August 9, Putin stated that Georgia’s military actions constituted a crime against the ‘Ossetian people’ [осетинский народ], a designation that, considering the audience of his speech, could include the population of the Russian republic of North Ossetia-Alania as well. Even if Putin, by such a word choice, did not necessarily seek to demonstrate that he regarded the Georgian actions as an attack on Russian territory, he emphasised the proximity of the people of North and South Ossetia. Such a move was favourable for mobilising the large number of volunteers who entered South Ossetia from the North Caucasus region during the war in order to defend their ‘Ossetian brothers’.

Furthermore, Putin argued that Georgia should ‘respect the rights and interests of other people’ [другие народы], thus clearly signalling that he did not perceive the population of South Ossetia as belonging to the Georgian nation. It is important to note, however, that he did not state in this speech that the South Ossetians were part of the Russian people, nor

use the citizenship argument, thereby avoiding entering into discussions about a possible reunification of South and North Ossetia, about which there are many different opinions on both sides of the mountains.

The Duty to Protect in Times of War

On the same day as Putin delivered his speech in North Ossetia, in a BBC interview, Lavrov reiterated president’s constitutional duty to protect Russian citizens, especially when they found themselves amidst an armed conflict.294 He mentioned that the term ‘responsibility to protect’ was widely used within the United Nations with regards to conflicts in Africa or other ‘remote regions’. Lavrov then stated that the conflict was not taking place on the African continent but was ‘next door’, in an area where Russian citizens live. Therefore, according to Lavrov, Russia must exercise its responsibility to protect, as stated in the Russian Constitution and federal laws. Similarly to the above discussion about the lack of legality in Russia’s references to self-defence and the responsibility to protect, the acclaimed heightened importance to protect these citizens when residing in areas close to Russia’s own borders did not have any basis in international law, which does not state that a country acquires broadened legal rights due to the geographical proximity of its citizens to the country’s own territory.

The interviewer thereafter enquired whether Russia’s offer of citizenship to the ‘citizens of another country’ was part of the antagonistic stance that had developed between Russia and Georgia over the last year. This question may have been incorrectly formulated, however, since it is possible to offer citizenship to the citizens of another country in cases where dual citizenship is possible, yet, as stated above, Georgia does not allow double citizenship. Lavrov argued that, due to the former Georgian President, Zviad Ghamsakhurdia’s, campaign ‘Georgia for Georgians’, directed against Ossetians, Adjarians and Abkhazians, these people ‘ran to Russia for passports, for citizenship’, yet the view shared by most Georgians was that Moscow was coordinating the ethnic conflicts in Georgia and thus contributing to these people’s desire for Russian citizenship. It is undeniable, however, that Ghamsakhurdia’s nationalist policies did indeed feed into the desire for independence on the part of the Georgian republics.

Ghamsakhurdia was the first democratically elected president of the Republic of Georgia after the country gained its independence from the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. He had a mixed record of both democratically oriented policies as well as more oppressive ones that aimed at limiting the freedom of his population. ‘Georgia for Georgians’ was a political slogan as well as a doctrine attributed to Gamsakhurdia and his supporters, even though, while president, he denied that he had proclaimed this slogan. ‘Georgia for Georgians’ had ethno-political undertones and different meanings for the population groups within the country, and discriminated against non-Georgian ethnic minorities, including Ossetians and Abkhazians. The slogan first appeared during the Georgian protests against Soviet rule, at that time utilized for claiming the right to Georgian independence, while it during Gamsakhurdia’s presidential period focused on minority issues within the country.

In the above mentioned BBC interview, Lavrov argued that, when the conflict in Georgia in the 1990s eased, these minority groups were still denied basic social services while, as Russian citizens, they received, amongst other things, pensions and salaries. He believed, therefore, that the reasons for providing citizenship would be understood. Furthermore, Lavrov stated that, when people were seeking to ‘blow this particular aspect – the Russian passports in South Ossetia and Abkhazia – out of proportion’, he reminded them about the case of Moldova, where a large proportion of the population had acquired Romanian citizenship and the European Union had made no comment thereupon. By referring to Gamsakhurdia’s nationalist policies Lavrov partly shifted the decision to grant Russian citizenship from the Russian government onto the ethnic minority groups themselves, as affected by the supposed reality on the ground.

Two days later, on August 11, at a meeting with the leaders of the parties represented in the Russian parliament, Medvedev reiterated his presidential duty to protect. The people he was supposed to protect were the ‘people of South Ossetia’ as well as the Russian peacekeeping brigade. During his speech ‘our compatriots’ [наши соотечественники] and ‘our citizens’ [наши граждане] were used interchangeably. Having mentioned the attack on the ‘people of South Ossetia’, Medvedev stated that ‘several thousand people

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have become victims of the ensuing humanitarian disaster, and a large number of them are yours and our citizens’. Later in the speech, he began to speak about the protection of ‘compatriots’ while thereafter directly reverting to ‘our citizens’:

I already spoke about this; from the outset, my duty as president was to protect our compatriots, not to leave the crimes unpunished that were committed against the civilian population and the peacekeepers. Russia strives to end the barbarity as soon as possible against the Ossetian people, against our citizens.  

‘Our citizens’ are in the above statement insufficiently distinguished from the ‘Ossetian people’ as a whole. At the end of this same speech Medvedev once again used ‘compatriots’ when stating that ‘we are doing everything within our power. Russia will not leave its compatriots in misfortune and will, of course, seek to normalise the situation’. While failing to fully differentiate between Russian citizens and Ossetians, Medvedev offered a different definition of the latter at a joint meeting with Sarkozy on the day when the six-point peace plan was presented.

4.4. The End of War and the Protection Narrative

On August 12, Medvedev, together with Sarkozy, made public the main contents of the peace negotiations, emphasising the important task of protecting Russian nationals. At a joint public appearance with his French counterpart, Medvedev stated that the main goal of the Russian ‘reinforced peacekeeping force’ had been achieved; namely that ‘the aggressor has been punished and its armed forces disorganised. Above all, we have protected the interests of Russian peacekeepers and Russian citizens living in South Ossetia’.  

However, from August 12 onwards, the issue of independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia started to be discussed more intensely, and the peace plan stated that the future status of the republics should become subject to international discussion. Before the 2008 war, public support for the separatist regimes was not part of Russian official state policy, though such support was occasionally heard from the Russian Duma as well as individual members of the government who backed the republics’ separatists in the years after the

break-up of the Soviet Union. After the Georgian attack on South Ossetia in August 2008, both the Duma and the Russian government made joint efforts and backed both regions’ independence bids.

From August 12 onwards, the population of South Ossetia and Abkhazia were increasingly described as merely Ossetians and Abkhazians, even though the notions of Russian citizens and compatriots were still a regular feature in the official discourse. Giving these people a label as non-Russians fitted the narrative well, since it assisted Russia in officially distancing itself from the discussions about these republics’ future independence, even though it did not necessarily mean that the Russian leadership did not unofficially have either a strategy or at least a desire concerning the outcome of the future discussions concerning their status. If the Russian officials had merely described the population in the enclaves as ‘Russian citizens’ when discussing independence, this might have fuelled even further the interpretation of the situation as Russia having a lot invested in the question of independence and could thus work unfavourably for Russia’s official stance of being primarily a mediator and not a party to the conflict.

The argument that the Ossetians and Abkhazians themselves should be consulted regarding their possible independence was repeated numerous times by the Russian leadership between August 12 and the day when their independence was recognised (August 26):

You were right in asking if the Ossetians and Abkhazians can and want to live within Georgia. This is a question for them to ask themselves and it is they who will give their own clear answer. It is not for Russia or any other country to answer this question for them. This is something that must take place in strict accordance with international law, although over these last few years international law has provided numerous very complicated cases of peoples exercising their right to self-determination and the emergence of new states on the map. Just look at the example of Kosovo.

This is therefore a question that the Ossetians and Abkhazians must answer themselves, based on their own history and taking into account everything that has happened over these last few days.

As discussed in the introductory chapter, the struggle for independence on the part of South Ossetia and Abkhazia originated long before Russia started to hand out passports to

299 Littlefield, “Citizenship, Identity and Foreign Policy.”
their citizens. The Russian leadership brought up the problematic history of the breakaway-republics at numerous instances in the aftermath of the war. The Kosovo parallel was frequently made, as mentioned in previous chapters, and the above statement justified the independence recognition in the two break-away republics in Georgia, without immediately demonstrating support for the recognition of Kosovo due to it being a result of different interpretations of international law.

4.5. The Uses of the Genocide Claim

In addition to the Kosovo parallel, the alleged genocide committed by Georgia against the population of South Ossetia started to gain prominence in the official Russian discourse immediately after the presentation of the six-point peace plan, yet accusations of genocide were made by the Georgian side as well, pointed at Russia. Claims of genocide during conflict situations was not a new phenomenon in the region in the post-Cold War period and the 2008 war was not the last occasion when such grave accusations were heard.

In connection with the current conflict in Ukraine, Russia launched a criminal case in 2014 in the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation [Следственный комитет российской федерации] concerning genocide committed by members of the Ukrainian establishment towards the Russian population in south-eastern Ukraine. The Investigative Committee is a Russian law enforcement body that replaced the Russian Prosecutor General’s Investigative Committee, and has since 2011 been the main federal investigative authority in Russia. It answers to President Putin.

Matthew Kupfer and Thomas de Waal argue that the claim of genocide has become one of the ‘hallmarks’ of the conflict in Ukraine, that the term has been used as an instrument of political rhetoric for over sixty years, and that it has been exercised in the former Soviet Union more than anywhere else in the world.301 Its importance lies in how genocide works as a ‘signifier for the “ultimate evil” ’.

In 1946, after the end of WWII and the horrendous acts of the Nazis towards the European Jews, the UN General Assembly declared genocide a crime under international law. During the Cold War, both the Soviet Union and the United States politicised

genocide, even though the former took it a step further than the latter. Kupfer and de Waal argue that the legal concept of genocide, which is supposed to describe crimes against humanity, has in the last 70 years been turned into a ‘political accusation with a general application’, especially in the post-Soviet political discourse. They state that both the general population and the governments in the fifteen new post-Soviet states started to use the claim of genocide in the process of rediscovering and reinventing their national histories, languages and cultures.

Evgeny Finkel has aptly called this process the ‘Search for Lost Genocide’, arguing that the political elites in the new states have been making use of the genocide claim in order to strengthen their legitimacy. Furthermore, genocide can play both a normative and a practical role in contemporary politics. Firstly, status as a genocide victim can conveniently be used to avoid having to confront injustices and crimes for which the members of one’s own nation are responsible. Secondly, a human tragedy such as genocide is a very strong justification for independence.

Accusations of genocide have been prevalent in Georgia since the end of the 1980s, with both Ossetians and Abkhazians accusing Georgians of genocide among their respective populations, and Georgia accusing Abkhazia of the same crime. The connection between independence and the use of genocide claims is important in the case of the 2008 war. By claiming that the Georgian government had committed genocide against the Ossetians and Abkhazians, the Russian leadership was, intentionally or not, preparing the ground for the independence recognition on August 26, 2008. As Brian Grodsky suggests, ‘if the campaign for victimhood is the weapon of the weak, genocide claims are the silver bullet’. Furthermore, genocide claims could work to justify Russian intervention in the war and remove some of the blame for the atrocities committed by the Russian troops during the war. Russia could also more easily argue that it was siding with the victim, i.e. the population of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, against the aggressor, i.e. the Georgian government.

At the above mentioned conference with Sarkozy on August 12, Medvedev discussed the issue of genocide as committed against the population of South Ossetia during the 2008 war. When an audience member asked both presidents whether they had raised the issue of

ethnic cleansing at all during their talks, Medvedev took the opportunity to highlight the
issue of genocide:

As far as ethnic cleansing is concerned, this is a problem, of course, and we were very firm in raising this issue and will pursue it with those responsible for these acts. Some of our partners, for some reason, ask us not to raise this issue, including during confidential conversations. Perhaps they are embarrassed. Under international law these acts are deemed a crime, just as the murder of thousands of citizens is called ‘genocide’. There can be no other name for these acts.

Numerous claims of genocide were made from August 12 onwards by Medvedev, Lavrov and Putin. Concepts are naturally subject to interpretation, and certain members of the international community were uncomfortable about the Russian leadership describing Georgian actions during the war as an act of genocide. As mentioned further above, in using the term ‘genocide’ the Russian leadership is evoking a particular set of historically emotive values and memories. In contrast, Russia argued that the international community could not allow the use ‘double standards’ within international law.

Immediately after making the above statement Medvedev aired his frustration over such contrasting principles:

Moreover, as we already said, we are faced with a very strange situation when one person who murders thousands of people is called a terrorist and a scoundrel, while another is the lawfully elected president of a sovereign state. International law should not permit the use of double standards, and this is a principle to be upheld in political practice.

It is unclear to whom Medvedev is referring to in the first instance, i.e. the person who is ‘called a terrorist and a scoundrel’, but he may have meant Saddam Hussein, who had been referred to earlier. The person who is referred to as ‘another’ is Saakashvili.

That same day Lavrov made references to genocide committed by the Georgian government. At a press conference following a meeting with the then Chair of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and Finnish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Stubb, Lavrov stated that more than two thousand people had been killed, a number that was in line with the official Russian discourse at the time, but that was later corrected to a few hundred people.305 In his speech, Lavrov stated that ‘we

305 Lavrov, “Стенограмма выступления и ответов на вопросы СМИ Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова на совместной пресс-конференции по итогам встречи с действующим Председателем ОБСЕ, Министром иностранных дел Финляндии А.Стуббом,” August 12, 2008, accessed December 4,
are talking about ethnic cleansing, genocide and war crimes’, and that South Ossetian settlements had been ‘wiped off the face of the earth’. The latter trope was used numerous times in the Russian foreign policy discourse surrounding the war, strengthening the genocide claims and the need for the Russian government to assist these people in need.

Another reference to genocide was made by the Russian Foreign Minister when making comparisons with the failure of the Dutch peacekeepers (Dutchbat), part of the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) to protect the civilian population in Srebrenica in 1995. Up to 8000 Bosnian Muslim boys and men were massacred, though the exact numbers are disputed. Both the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) recognised this massacre as genocide. Yet current Serbian president Tomislav Nikolić, apologised for the massacre officially but did not call it genocide, although his predecessor, Boris Tadić, did. Srebrenica was declared by the UN to be a ‘safe area’ for civilians during the Bosnian war. The Dutch peacekeepers handed over Bosnian civilians to the Bosnian Serb army, arguing that they would be safe and were consequently blamed for failing to take the risk of genocide seriously enough.306

In the context of the 2008 war in Georgia, references to the failure of the Dutch peacekeepers were made in order to justify the continued presence of Russian peacekeepers on Georgian soil, while the Georgian peacekeepers should allegedly have left the area, as the local population did not want them there. Lavrov mentioned the problematic relations between South Ossetia and Georgia since the beginning of the 1990s in order to prove his point:

But the Russian peacekeepers will, of course, stay there. We will completely fulfill our duty to protect the South Ossetian population, who more than once came under attack by Tbilisi both at the beginning of the 90s and, by the way, three years ago in summer 2005, when Mr. Saakashvili also tried to make war and seize South Ossetia by force. Our peacekeepers will not allow a repetition in South Ossetia of what happened in Srebrenica, when the peacekeepers from the Netherlands failed to prevent genocide, and to this day we know how upset the Dutch leadership is over this. We will not find ourselves in such a position, and our peacekeepers will never be in such a situation.

2014,
http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/bdp_4.nsf/2fee282eb6df40e643256999005e6e8c/d1b2af1b82040b7cc32574a30058505f?OpenDocument.
306 In July 2014 a Dutch court ruled that the Netherlands would be liable for the murder of 300 Bosniaks in Srebrenica, placing a certain amount of blame on the Dutch peacekeeping force while acquitting the state of responsibility for the thousands of other Bosnian Muslims killed.
Putin also referred to the Dutch peacekeepers’ role in the Srebrenica massacre a few weeks later, incorporated into a similar message about Russia’s undeniable duty to protect civilians in South Ossetia. He stated that the Dutch leadership was still ‘apologising’, but that Russia did not need to ‘apologise’ for its actions during the 2008 war, as ‘we’re confident we’re right’.  

Furthermore, at the press conference with Stubb on August 12, Lavrov stated that US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, had urged the Russian leadership not to define Saakashvili’s actions in South Ossetia as ‘genocide, ethnic cleansing and war crimes’. Saakashvili on the other hand, had allegedly not been approached with the same request and the Georgian President stated that Russia ‘wanted to annex the whole of Georgia and, in general, he was not shy about using the term ethnic cleansing’, according to Lavrov. Thereafter Lavrov stated, with a sense of irony; ‘I assume that Rice, having spoken to me, didn’t have time to make the same request to Mr. Saakashvili’, thus Lavrov was highlighting the international community’s ‘double standards’. Furthermore, as demonstrated throughout the official Russian discourse, the Georgian government is often equated with Saakashvili and the Russian leadership repeatedly demonstrated that it perceived the then president as the main cause of the war.

4.6. The Georgian People and Territorial Integrity

It is important to note that the Russian leadership differentiated between the Georgian government as directed by Saakashvili and the general population of Georgia, however. The former was depicted in an utterly negative light while the latter, including both Georgians living in Georgia proper and those living within the Russian Federation, were portrayed as people with whom Russia shared close bonds of friendship and ‘brotherliness’. At the press conference with Stubb, Lavrov highlighted this dividing line, arguing that the Russian government not only had no desire to negotiate with Saakashvili, but that it did not even wish to speak with him. In contrast, he stated; ‘As to Georgia, we have always treated and continue to treat the Georgian people with deep respect. We want to live with them in friendship and harmony and are convinced that the Georgian people

will yet display their wisdom.’ The latter concerned the choice of political leadership by the Georgian people, and the Russian leadership stated numerous times that the Georgian population would one day get the leadership they ‘deserved’.

Throughout the official Russian discourse, the people were placed at centre stage and it was their choice that allegedly formed the base for all Russian governmental actions, be it ‘Russian citizens’ or ‘compatriots’, the ‘Georgian people’, or the ‘peoples of South Ossetia and Abkhazia’. Just as the process of handing out Russian passports was depicted as based on the needs of the people in the two break-away republics, the decision about the future of Georgia’s territorial integrity was portrayed as dependant on the choice of the residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, yet simultaneously the Russian leadership argued that the choice lay in the hands of the Georgian leadership. The fact that Georgia’s territorial integrity was not mentioned in the six-point-peace plan of August 12 provoked numerous questions, especially from the media.308

Georgian territorial integrity was also affected by the permanence of Russian troops in the area. In the Russian discourse, the message about the permanence of these troops took various shapes, and the Russian officials first declared that Russian troops would not remain in the republics but shortly thereafter stated that they would remain for the ‘foreseeable future’. In 2011, the Russian State Duma passed a resolution, ratified by the then President Medvedev, stating that Russia would maintain military bases in the two republics for 49 years, with automatic 15-year extension. This agreement concerns the 7th military base in Abkhazia and the 4th in South Ossetia, which were a development of the peacekeeping posts. The military bases were welcomed by South Ossetia and Abkhazia but as Georgia considered the republics to be Georgian territory, these bases were naturally perceived as a serious breach of Georgian territorial integrity. Russian military bases in the region added to the concerns among large sectors of the international community about Russia’s undue involvement outside its borders.

308 Sarkozy initially took a rather neutral position as the President of the European Council. On a question from the media about the reason for leaving out the issue of Georgia’s territorial integrity from the peace plan he stated that Georgia was a sovereign state, but that the peace plan could not provide an answer to all questions in the heat of the moment. He argued that the problematic situation in Georgia had existed for a long time, and that the most important issue at that moment was to cease the hostilities. “Заявления для прессы и ответы на вопросы журналистов по итогам переговоров с Президентом Франции Николя Саркози”, August 12, 2008, last accessed September 15, 2015, http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/1072. After August 26, however, Sarkozy condemned Russia’s unilateral decision to grant South Ossetia and Abkhazia independence.
At the press conference with Stubb, an audience member asked Lavrov about the demand by the Russian leadership that Georgian troops leave the areas in Georgia from where they were firing at South Ossetia. Russia was, according to a large part of the international community including Georgia itself, casting doubt on the territorial integrity of Georgia through its military presence, and Lavrov was asked whether he considered South Ossetia and Abkhazia Georgian territory. Lavrov gave an answer that was in line with many of the other statements in the official Russian discourse; that Russia was upholding the principles of international law but the reality on the ground dictated the steps that had to be taken. He argued that the territorial integrity of Georgia depended on the actions of the Georgian government:

So the question of what will be of the territorial integrity of Georgia is, first of all, in the hands of the Georgian leadership itself. And we, particularly at the level of the top Russian leadership, told Mikhail Nikolayevich Saakashvili so more than once. Then it still seemed to us that he understood what it was all about. Everything indicates that he never did. But the fact that, by his barbarous actions in South Ossetia, he has undermined the reliability of the Georgian state has once again proved to the Ossetian and the Abkhaz people as well, that they will not be secure together with Georgia. This is an absolute fact. And the wounds he has inflicted on the Ossetians, and they have just healed the wounds of the previous attempt to seize them by force – those wounds will take a very, very long time to heal. In any conflict it is necessary to be guided by some common elementary principles, and one of them is the key principle – respect the people who live on this or that territory and restore trust, and we have no trust in Mikhail Nikolayevich Saakashvili, we feel no trust in him and I do not think any Ossetian does.

Allegedly, the participants in a conflict ought to be guided by the principle of respect for the people living in the territory and restore trust, first and foremost, among the civilian population, yet Lavrov’s ‘we’ incorporated the Russian government, or possibly Russia as a whole, and thus made how Russia interpreted the conflict and the actions of the Georgian leadership important.

In line with the argument about Saakashvili’s actions being the cause of Georgia’s limited territorial integrity, the Russian leadership stated that the then Georgian President sent his troops against the residents of South Ossetia. The Kremlin, however, consistently framed these people in terms of inhabitants that the Georgian government ‘considered’ to be its citizens. The Russian leadership was thus able to accuse Georgia of sending troops against its own population, while simultaneously casting doubt on the nationality of these
people. Here, the instrumental and situational usage of the different definitions of the people is very clear.

In an interview with the Russian radio station Ekho Moskvy, Lavrov was once again asked about Georgian territorial integrity and the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In his answer, Lavrov first discussed the aforementioned campaign ‘Georgia for Georgians’, then the ‘deep human insult’ towards the residents of the two break-away republics by the inclusion of Georgian territorial integrity in the peace plan. He then mentioned the issue of treating these residents with respect:

As we kept saying all these years, Mr. Saakashvili has to learn how to speak respectfully and patiently with the people whom he considers his citizens, whom he considers residents of his country. That is what he is patently unable to do. You know what he has done in lieu of this? Mr. Saakashvili has inflicted colossal harm not only upon the South Ossetians, not only upon the Abkhaz, if you take the ethnic characteristic, but also upon the Georgians – his own people. What has he done for the Georgian state as a result of this operation? Before, despite all problems, with all complexities, there really were Georgian enclaves in South Ossetia, Georgians lived there.309

As mentioned, when speaking to an international audience it may have been more favourable to speak of the different population groups within Georgia in more general terms, as having no specific nationality, but the statement above demonstrates how the message may be altered when speaking to domestic audiences. Lavrov separated the people according to ethnic characteristics, but only the ‘Georgians’, not the ‘South Ossetians’ and the ‘Abkhazians’, were included in the notion of Saakashvili’s ‘own people’. Furthermore, even though the ‘Georgian enclaves in South Ossetia’ in this context signified ethnic Georgians, the statement is relatively ambiguous and adds to the rather vague definition of these peoples. In any case, a statement like the one above could naturally have been perceived as very provoking if in front of an international audience including Georgia itself.

4.7. Imperial History and the Attack on Russia

In the period following the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the protection narrative included the same themes as during the war and its

immediate aftermath, yet several new themes emerged that were partly intertwined with the already existing ones. Two of the more significant new themes were Russian imperial history as well as Georgian actions as an attack on Russia. The latter was predominantly furthered by Putin, and is not to be read as a claim on his part that South Ossetia and Abkhazia were Russian territory but rather that Georgia was mounting an attack on Russian ‘citizens’ and peacekeepers in the two break-away republics, people who were perceived to be part of the Russian ‘us’. Additionally, the issue of genocide and the right to self-determination of the peoples of these territories were further elaborated.

*Uses of Imperial History*

On the day of the independence recognition, on August 26, the Russian leadership naturally had to answer several questions about the basis of the unilateral political decision to grant these regions independence. On August 26, in an interview with the television channel Al Jazeera, Medvedev explained the underlying reason for the Russian government’s decision:

We decided on this step for the reasons I spoke of earlier: to prevent killing and genocide, to give the peoples of Abkhazia and South Ossetia the chance to realise their right to self-determination after 17 difficult years, after failed attempts to calm the situation and restore Georgia’s territorial integrity. Prior to this decision we didn’t take any steps towards recognising these two entities as independent states. On the contrary, we tried to help to glue Georgia back together, but this latest aggression and the genocide unleashed by the Saakashvili regime put an end to these plans. We had no choice but to take this decision.310

It was thus the realities on the ground, including the purported genocide committed by the Georgian government, that forced Russia to take the unilateral decision to recognise the republics’ independence. Russia had allegedly no other choice. When asked by the interviewer whether at least part of the reason for the decision was based on a desire for a regime change in Georgia, due to the Russian government’s negative portrayal of Saakashvili, Medvedev, in the same vein as previously, replied: ‘Our actions are based solely on sober calculations: we want to help people who today are misfortunate, and there is no other motive behind our actions’. He added that the Russian government did not ‘like’ Saakashvili, but that it was before the Georgian people and the international

community that he must answer to his crimes. Medvedev thus removed the Russian
government’s role in having a say in Georgia’s political future, thereby contributing to the
portrayal of Russia as merely an unbiased mediator and guarantor of the peace and security
in the area.

The argument that the only objective of Russia’s actions was to give life and a decent
future to the inhabitants of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was repeated, whatever the
Kremlin was asked. On the same day (August 26), in an interview with Medvedev with the
French television channel TF1, the interviewer stated that what Europeans saw in South
Ossetia was that Russian was spoken, one paid with Russian rubles and many people had
Russian passports; ‘This is not recognition of South Ossetia as an independent state but is
secession from and conflict with Georgia, and a possible future merger with Russia. Does
this signal a return of Russia’s imperialistic ambitions, a restoration of the empire?’
Even though, in response, Medvedev denied any imperialistic ambitions on the part of
Russia, as discussed previously, he included Russia’s imperial history in his answer:

Empires, as a rule, do not revive and to long for the imperial past is
a serious error. At the same time, we must think about those who
have Russian passports and live in neighbouring regions. The
decisions we have taken all have one sole objective, and that is to
give these people a decent life and the chance to realise the rights
accorded to them by the UN Charter. Living together with Georgia
has not worked. They all at one time separately became part of the
Russian state – the Ossetians, the Abkhazians, as well as the
Georgians. The attempt to live together has not worked and the
blame for this lies fully with Georgia.

The comment about the Ossetians, Abkhazians and Georgians having once been part
of the Russian state appears quite haphazardly to have been put into this context. It seems
to work against its own purpose to insert a comment about Russia’s imperial past having
just denied any imperialistic ambitions on the part of Russia. Additionally, the above
statement blurs the division between the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, since it
fails to differentiate between the imperialism of the former and the ‘anti-imperialism’ of
the USSR. Furthermore, framing the policies of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union
as an ‘attempt to live together’ and then arguing that Georgia was at fault for the failure of
such an attempt signals that the Russian leadership would still like to see Georgia, South
Ossetia and Abkhazia as part of the same state. Additionally, by framing the imperialistic

policies of contemporary Russia’s predecessors as an attempt to live together, the discourse seeks to downplay any imperialistic tendencies among these states.

Georgia was part of the Russian Empire for 117 years, from 1801 to the collapse of the empire. In the early 1920s, Georgia became part of the Soviet Union. However, Georgia became part of the Russian Empire partly due to being challenged by the Muslim Ottoman and Persian Empires and, being an Orthodox Christian country, it sought protection from a state with the same religion. Georgia, or the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti, became a Russian protectorate as early as 1783, however, through the Treaty of Georgievsk, but was annexed by Russia in 1801. Georgia repeatedly blamed Russia for failing to honour its obligations as laid out in the treaty, and Russia’s failure to fulfill its commitments at the time is still mentioned, even at a governmental level, in contemporary Georgia.

South Ossetia became part of the Russian Empire simply due to being part of the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti. The area of what is present day North Ossetia became part of Tsarist Russia as early as 1774. The Ossetians were generally regarded as obedient citizens by the Russians and did not put up as much resistance as did many other peoples in the Caucasus when the Russian Empire expanded. When the Russian Empire collapsed, South Ossetia fought to become independent from Georgia and sided with Moscow when Georgia was occupied by Bolshevik forces in the early 1920s. The republic was incorporated into Georgia as the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast, and North Ossetia became part of Russia. The perception of the Ossetians as loyal citizens continued during the Soviet era.

Abkhazia, on the other hand, was incorporated into the Russian Empire as an autonomous principality in 1810, and came under complete Russian control in 1864. Many Muslim Abkhazians were driven from the area, mainly into the Ottoman Empire, following the Caucasian War (1817-1864), an emigration wave commonly known as muhajirism. The Abkhaz diaspora is today far larger than the number of Abkhazians who live in Abkhazia. As with South Ossetia, Abkhazia was part of the Democratic Republic of Georgia after the Russian Revolution in 1917. It became a Soviet Socialist Republic in the beginning of the 1920s, but in 1931 its status was transformed to an Autonomous SSR within the Georgian SSR.

The fact that Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia were formerly part of the Russian Empire was brought up numerous times by the Russian leadership in the aftermath of the 2008 war, but tended to be relatively unconnected to the rest of the speeches or statements. Additionally, an issue that came up many times after the independence recognition of
South Ossetia and Abkhazia was how Georgia had allegedly forced South Ossetia and Abkhazia to remain part of Georgia after the breakup of the Soviet Union. As argued by Lavrov in response to a media question on August 26, Georgia had denied the two republics the right to define their own legal status – a right granted to autonomous republics within a union republic.\(^3\) Lavrov chose to include Russian imperial and Soviet history in the initial discussion when he stated that; ‘historically both the Ossetians and Abkhaz had lived in the same entity with the Georgians practically always exclusively within the framework of another, larger state: either the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union’, yet the claim that Georgia had denied these autonomous regions a status as independent states rings rather hollow when considering that the Russian Federation itself denied autonomous Russian regions like Chechnya and Tatarstan such status in the beginning of the 1990s.

Russian imperial history and the break-away republics’ status after the fall of the Soviet Union were often brought up during discussions of Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity, adding to the ambiguity inherent within the official Russian discourse. In the above mentioned interview with the French television channel TF1, Medvedev, when asked whether Georgia would be entitled to limited sovereignty only, replied that he thought that Georgia should be a ‘normal and full-fledged state’, but thereafter complicated the issue by arguing that Georgian sovereignty depended on Georgia’s relations with its neighbours:

MEDVEDEV: As for its sovereignty, this is a complicated question of course. It will ultimately be determined by its relations with its neighbours, but what has happened has changed the situation and Georgia has entered a new era. I think that Georgia will have to draw conclusions from the events that have taken place. This is a serious lesson about how to build relations with neighbours and with the peoples who at one time were part of Georgia.
INTERVIEWER: What exactly do you mean by this?
MEDVEDEV: Exactly what I just said.

Georgia had supposedly entered a new era [новые времена]. The meaning of Georgia’s ‘neighbours’ is unclear, but would in this context at least include South Ossetia and Abkhazia, thus signaling that they were no longer part of Georgia. Furthermore,

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Medvedev clearly stated his view by choosing to frame South Ossetians and Abkhazians as ‘peoples who at one time were part of Georgia’.

The issue of Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity, Russian imperial history and the self-determination of the two break-away republics were constantly mentioned in the official Russian discourse in the aftermath of the war, clearly demonstrating that the Russian leadership considered the meaning of all of these concepts as being a question of interpretation. On the day of the independence recognition, in the BBC interview, mentioned above, Medvedev again got to answer to a question about any possible imperialistic plans on the part of Russia. The interviewer emphasized the fact that Medvedev had argued that Russian actions in the war were dictated by the need to ‘protect Russian citizens wherever they may be’, and asked if this meant that Russia was ready to take similar steps in other regions, such as Ukraine, the Baltic States or Moldova. Medvedev gave a relatively open-ended answer to the question:

This means only one thing: in accordance with the Constitution, Russia has the right to self-defence, and I, as Commander in Chief and a guarantor of the Constitution, have a duty to protect the lives and dignity of our citizens. In certain cases, I have no choice but to take this kind of action.

The then President was thus not denying any future intervention on the part of Russia if there were a need to protect Russian citizens. Again, the ambiguity of Russia’s stance left the question open for interpretation and allowed for a broad array of future actions on the part of Russia, in which case the Russian leadership would not have been required to negate earlier promises or statements. On earlier occasions in the aftermath of the war, the Russian leadership had stated that Russia definitely did not have any plans to intervene militarily in its neighbouring region, but the inconclusiveness inherent in stating that Russia had no plans of that sort and simultaneously arguing that the country would be prepared to intervene whenever necessary in order to protect its nationals naturally left audiences in a state of incertitude. Furthermore, such argumentation was also in line with the notion of Russia as a peaceful state but with an ‘armoured train’ ready on the side, as discussed previously in this study. Moreover, the statement above enacted the legal discourse that acted as a base for the narrative about protecting Russian citizens.

A similar open-ended statement was made by Medvedev in an interview with CNN the same day. The interviewer asked if Russia would send forces into the region again, if

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necessary. Medvedev stated, rather ambiguously, that the ‘situation has changed’ and that Russia would help to ensure the security of South Ossetia and Abkhazia after the independence recognition and would ‘provide them with all necessary assistance’ in case of an attack. Thereafter, he gave a comparable answer to the one above, but here stated that concerning ‘intervention’ [вмешательства], Russia would not have any urge to intervene in other areas or conflicts:

As to intervening in other areas, in other conflicts, of course we have no plans for such intervention, and we will not do so. But Russia is a state that is obliged to protect [обеспечивать] its interests in the areas along its borders [по всему периметру]. That is obvious.

Thus, Medvedev argued that further intervention into the region was not on the agenda but that, if Russia’s national interests were threatened, the leadership could decide to act. The independence and sovereignty of Russia came up numerous times both during and after the war, and is a regular theme in the official Russian discourse.

In a CNN interview on August 28, Putin made several statements that could relatively easily have been misinterpreted since he called the Georgian aggression an attack on Russia, as will be discussed later, and thus fed into the themes of Russian sovereignty and independence. He also mentioned Russian imperial history, however, when Ossetia, Georgia and Abkhazia became part of the Russian Empire, and furthermore made an interesting reference to Stalin and his policies by stating:

When the Russian Empire collapsed after the First World War, Georgia declared its own state, while Ossetia expressed its desire to remain part of Russia. This was immediately after the events of 1917.
In response, Georgia conducted a punitive operation there, a very cruel one, and repeated it again in 1921.
When the Soviet Union was formed, these territories were given to Georgia on Stalin's orders. As you know, Stalin was of Georgian origin.
Therefore, those who insist on that those territories should continue to belong to Georgia are Stalinists. They defend a decision made by Joseph Stalin.315

Such an utterance is interesting as it portrays Stalin and his policies in a negative light. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Soviet history, and especially the role of Stalin, has been a contentious issue in contemporary Russian politics.

Shortly thereafter, in the same interview, Putin mentioned the unity of Russia and Georgia, but in the sense of Georgian culture and people. He made a reference to ‘civil war’, however, that could be interpreted as provoking the Georgian government and those parts of the Georgian population who would not appreciate hearing about the ‘spiritual link’ between the Georgians and Russians:

For us it is a special tragedy, because over many years of joint existence, Georgian culture - and the Georgian people have an ancient culture - has undoubtedly become part of Russia's multinational culture.

You know, for us, there is even a tinge of civil war, although Georgia is of course an independent state; there is no doubt about it. We have never infringed on Georgia’s sovereignty, and we have no intention of doing so in the future, and yet, we have special spiritual links with that country and its people considering that almost a million, or even more than a million, Georgians live in this country. For us, this is a special tragedy.

Putin thus made the conflict into one of Russia as a whole, that stood together with the Georgian people against the Georgian government, as led by Saakashvili. The fact that he mentioned Georgia’s sovereignty in this statement could be provoking in itself since, from the Georgian point of view, it would naturally not even be an issue worthy of mention.

**Russia as a Victim**

Putin continued along the same lines later in the interview by arguing in terms of an attack on ‘us’ when discussing Georgian actions during the war. Such statements could, at first glance, be read as Putin stating that it was an attack on Russia as a country, signaling that South Ossetia was somehow part of Russia, yet what he probably aimed at was to emphasise the ‘Russianness’ of the residents in the region who had Russian passports as well as highlight the attack on Russian peacekeepers. When asked whether Russia could guarantee that it would not use military force against its neighbouring states again, Putin stated: ‘We have not attacked anyone. It is we who are demanding guarantees from others that they will not attack us any longer and will not kill our citizens. And yet there are attempts to portray us as the aggressor’. Putin thus increasingly portrayed Russia as a victim of aggression, but Russian victimhood was regularly complemented by references to the country’s readiness and ability to stand up to the ‘aggressor’.
The idea of Russia being attacked was mentioned by Putin the next day also, during an interview with the German television channel ARD.\textsuperscript{316} When asked whether Russia had the right to remain in the conflict zone, bomb the area and ‘de-facto occupy a sovereign country’, Putin stated that the attack on the Russian peacekeeping post and the killing of peacekeepers and Russian citizens was perceived as an attack on Russia. Later in the interview, he stated that ‘we are a victim of aggression, and we count on the support of our European partners’.

In the same vein of downplaying any aggressive intentions on the part of Russia, the Russian leadership denied any future military involvement in Ukraine. In the ARD interview the interviewer stated that the then French Minister for Foreign and European Affairs, Bernard Kouchner, had expressed concerns that the next conflict could be Ukraine, namely Crimea, with Sevastopol as a base for the Russian Navy. The interviewer asked if that was the next goal for Russia. Putin answered that Crimea was not disputed territory and there had been no ethnic conflict as between South Ossetia and Georgia. Furthermore, he argued that Russia had long recognised the borders of contemporary Ukraine and that asking this sort of question about Russia’s targets reeked of provocation. The ‘complicated processes’ in Ukrainian society, such as with ‘the Crimean Tatars, the Ukrainian population, the Russian population, the Slavic population in general’ was supposedly Ukraine’s domestic problem. Russia and Ukraine had an agreement concerning the permanence of the Russian fleet until 2017, and Russia would allegedly abide by this although, as a result of the most recent conflict in Ukraine, it had naturally been nullified due to the Russian government’s claim that Crimea is now Russian territory, and Sevastopol a federal city in the Southern Federal District.

The Russian leadership was thus arguing that it would not interfere in the affairs of another state, but yet it would respond to any aggressive attack against the Russian ‘us’. This issue was again raised during Putin’s speech at the Valdai Discussion Club on September 11 2008 where he discussed the danger of failing to respond to Georgia’s actions, since a lack of initiative on Russia’s part could threaten the stability of the whole area, in this case meaning the unstable North Caucasus:

Of course we had to respond. How else should we have behaved? Did you expect us to wipe our bleeding nose and bow our head? Do

you want us to act in a way that would throw the situation in the North Caucasus in Russia off balance?  

The statements about an attack on ‘us’ and ‘Russia’ were thus combined with the problems in the North Caucasus. Russia allegedly had to respond in order to avoid creating further instability in the volatile Northern Caucasus. The protection narrative thereby received a dimension concerning the security of the state, the protection of Russia as a country, not only of Russian citizens living in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.  

4.8. The Five Foreign Policy Principles and the Continuation of the USSR  

Russia’s foreign policy objectives were thus widely questioned by the international community in the aftermath of the war, and the central role of the protection narrative in the official Russian discourse was highlighted by Medvedev’s declaration on August 31 of five principles behind the country’s foreign policy, that were brought up in later speeches and interviews by both Medvedev and Lavrov.  

The fourth principle is as follows:  

protecting the lives and dignity of our citizens, wherever they may be, is an unquestionable priority for our country. Our foreign policy will be based on this need. We will also protect the interests of our business community abroad. It should be clear that we will respond to any aggressive acts committed against us.  

In combination with the fifth principle, which states that there are ‘regions in which Russia has privileged interests’, the fourth, with its declared intention of responding to any ‘aggressive act’ against Russia, could easily be interpreted as meaning that Russia would act forcefully in accordance with a ‘sphere of influence’ thinking in the region. One should note, however, that the fifth principle simply mentions ‘interests’ rather than ‘influence’. The mentioned regions are, according to Medvedev, ‘home to countries with which we share special historical relations and are bound together as friends and good neighbours’. The CIS states were repeatedly identified as the primary countries in such regions.

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The primacy of the CIS countries was mentioned by Lavrov in a speech to the MGIMO a few days later, on September 1, in which he declared: ‘the CIS space is not a “chessboard” for playing geopolitical games. This is a common civilisational area for all people living here, one that keeps our historic and spiritual legacy alive’. Lavrov brought up the civilisational theme several times in the aftermath of the war, and it is mentioned in the Foreign Policy Concept of 2008. In the chosen primary sources, however, neither Putin nor Medvedev portrayed the CIS countries as part of a common civilisation.

In the same speech at MGIMO, Lavrov continued to place the wishes of the people, not the state, centre stage, but argued that the security of the individual in no way ran counter to the traditional concept of state security. Furthermore, Lavrov brought up the issue of the lack of citizenship of certain peoples in countries that once formed the Soviet Union:

> People living the conflict regions in the post-Soviet space have found themselves in the “gray zone” through no fault of their own, often never becoming citizens of states which emerged as a result of the breakup of the USSR. It is incomprehensible why those speaking in virtually every corner about the ‘responsibility to protect’ forgot about this when it concerned a part of the former Soviet Union where the authorities began to kill innocent people by appealing to sovereignty and territorial integrity. For us, the question in South Ossetia was one of repelling aggression and protecting our citizens directly on the borders of Russia and not in the Falkland Islands.

As discussed above, the people of South Ossetia and Abkhazia chose not to acquire Georgian citizenship; they were not denied such. Additionally, the location of Russian citizens was allegedly of great importance, once again feeding the concern of countries in the neighbouring region.

Furthermore, the comment about Russia acting in a neighbouring country and ‘not in the Falkland Islands’ can be interpreted as an indirect critique of the British policies concerning these islands. The Falkland Islands are British overseas territory, with its own internal governance, but the Argentinian government does not recognise the islands’

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320 Georgia announced on August 12 2008 its intended withdrawal from the CIS, a process that was finalised in August 2009.
sovereignty and the British hold over the territory. The official Russian discourse on the 2008 war, mirrors the British one, since the latter involves claims about the ‘Falkland Islanders’ right to determine their own future’, thus removing the responsibility of the islands’ sovereignty from the British government and giving it to the people of the Falkland Islands.321

Another word choice that may have been contentious among the Georgian leadership was the Russian leadership’s usage of the concept of ‘fraternal’ peoples, a phrase that was also applied to the Ukrainian people in the most recent conflict in Ukraine and met with resistance among parts of the Ukrainian leadership. In a statement to the Russian State Council on September 6 2008, Medvedev argued that all Russian regions would be able to provide Abkhazia and South Ossetia with ‘fraternal support [братскую поддержку] as well as practical assistance, especially concerning the infrastructure.’322 The concept of the ‘fraternity of peoples’ [Дружба народов] in its current meaning goes back to the Stalin period, especially the 1930s, when it was meant to be a metaphor for the multi-ethnic Soviet Union. In Gorbachev’s period, the expression became discredited and was rarely used, if at all, in the official discourse and the media of the 1990s and in the earlier part of Putin’s first presidential period.

The theme of the ‘brotherliness’ and interconnectedness of Russia and its neighbouring countries was mentioned by Medvedev in his Valdai speech on September 12.323 The issue about the Russian spheres of interests naturally triggered questions from observers of Russian affairs, and in response to a question from an audience member about the scope of Russia’s ‘zones of influence’ and ‘special interests’, Medvedev first focused on stable relations with the neighbouring states as a priority, then emphasised that these states themselves would prosper from such stability, before finally focusing on the closeness between Russia and these states:

We are so close to each other that it is impossible to come between us. It is impossible to say that Russia would like things a certain way and our neighbours another. It is not even a matter of belonging to this or that organisation, this or that bloc, but rather

the common history or genetic connectedness of our economies and
the very close kinship of our souls.

Such a statement resembles utterances made by the ultra-nationalist writer and
politician Alexandr Prokhanov and other nationalists who declared that the people of the
USSR had developed a common genetic code. Thus, the above statement is another
reference to the Soviet legacy, and is portrayed as a binding force for contemporary Russia.

Thereafter, Medvedev pointed out that such interconnectedness did not mean that
Russia should isolate itself by solely working with the CIS countries or former Soviet
states. In any case, even if the question were framed as zones of ‘influence’ rather than
‘interest’ Medvedev did not react to such a word choice, even though he himself did not
choose to use it. Shortly after the above statement, he argued: ‘Of course we are not
interested in drawing boundaries on a map to designate our own areas of influence and so
forth. That would be pointless. In a multipolar world, everyone influences everyone else’.
This is a reference to the fact that during WWII, the Soviet leader, Josef Stalin, US
President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill drew such
lines on a map during the Yalta Conference in 1945 in order to divide up war-torn Europe,
and so demonstrated a degree of distancing from Stalin’s legacy.

This theme of the closeness of the peoples in the neighbouring region was brought up
a few days after the Valdai Club meeting, on September 19, when Medvedev met
representatives of Russian public organisations to discuss Russia’s handing out of
passports to the people of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.324 His comments added to the
undifferentiated usage of the concepts of ‘citizens’ and ‘compatriots’. Following a
statement about the differing attitudes towards Russian citizens living in South Ossetia,
Medvedev demonstrated his view on Russia’s ‘passportisation policy’:

Some ask why we handed out passports to these people. But what does
this mean, ‘handed out passports’ [раздали паспорта]? These people
did not receive any protection from the Georgian state. They wanted to
become Russian citizens, not to mention the fact that, essentially, they
were already Russian citizens in that they were citizens of one big
country and never considered themselves as separate from it. Therefore,
this whole issue of giving them passports is, of course, not some
geopolitical game. This is not handing out passports, but is simply our
reaction to these people’s request. If others elsewhere requested the
same, we would behave in exactly the same way, in situations that

324 Medvedev, “Стенографический отчёт о встрече с представителями общественных организаций,”
concern our former compatriots [бывшие соотечественники] above all, of course.

Firstly, by stating that these people were already Russian citizens due to them being ‘citizens of one big country and never saw themselves as separate from it’, Medvedev contributed to blurring the boundary between the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia. Secondly, by speaking about ‘former compatriots’, he softened these same boundaries, since this term means the citizens of the Soviet Union. The then President thus demonstrated an ambiguity in relation to the citizens of the former Soviet Union who, according to the above statement, would all have been Russia’s ‘former compatriots’.

As discussed in earlier chapters, Russia wants to be perceived as a ‘new’ state that is not a new version of the Soviet Union yet, as demonstrated above, this division between Russia’s legal predecessor and contemporary Russia is not always clear in the official Russian discourse.

Conclusion

The protection narrative about the 2008 war contributed to the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in the civic and ethnic nation building agendas by blurring the division between contemporary Russia and, on the one hand, the USSR and, on the other, the Russian Empire. Furthermore, it contributed to the ambiguity inherent in the question of national membership and belonging.

This chapter has demonstrated how, in the official Russian discourse about the war, the concepts of Russian ‘citizens’ and ‘compatriots’ were combined with the notions of the ‘residents’ and ‘people’ of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, or ‘Ossetians’ and ‘Abkhazians’, in a way that created ambiguity concerning these peoples’ identity and Russia’s own responsibility in the conflict. The meaning of these concepts were thus shifting and such insufficiently differentiated usage of these concepts provided the Russian government with an opportunity to justify both its military intervention as well as the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia’s independence in the aftermath of the war. It contributed towards making parts of the official Russian discourse contradictory and relatively opaque and thus fed into the unpredictability concerning Russia’s foreign policy.

Furthermore, the notion of protecting Russian ‘citizens’ was predominantly backed up by a legal argument, and these citizens were generally not attributed any special
characteristics apart than being part of the Russian civic nation. The definitional space of the notion of citizens is narrower than that for compatriots, which definitional borders are more elastic, but the protection of Russian citizens was a more useful argument for the Russian leadership due to the concept’s stronger legal weight within international law and its more neutral essence. Thus the Russian leadership’s focus on the protection of Russian citizens could be perceived as partly directed towards the international community due to the importance of international law within international relations, but it also worked to create a relatively neutral, non-ethnic stance in front of certain segments of the domestic Russian audience that would not like to see ethnic characteristics as determining the belonging to the Russian ‘us’. Moreover, by placing the primary focus on the protection of Russian ‘citizens’ rather than ‘compatriots’, the Russian leadership could narrow down the number of people for whom Russia would have legal responsibility. 325

Furthermore, the definitional space of the concept of ‘compatriots’ is broader and not always neutral in essence, so less useful than the ‘citizens’ concept when seeking to justify Russia’s actions in front of an international audience. Compatriots can, for instance, at times, include all former Soviet citizens, and this would work particularly favourably in front of domestic audiences. The Russian leadership needed to unite the nation in order to gain public support for conducting a war outside Russia’s borders, and the notion of protecting Russian ‘compatriots’ was probably effective in rallying the country around a common cause. By making use of the ‘compatriots’ concept, however, the Russian leadership chose to include a notion that might cause even greater concern among the states bordering Russia due to the concept being vague and thereby allowing the possibility of including within the protection narrative a number of people living in the post-Soviet states with some kind of affinity to Russia, such as ethnic Russians, Russian speakers, Russian citizens, former Soviet citizens and others who simply felt some kind of cultural or spiritual connection to Russia.

By blurring the definitional space of the Russian ‘us’, the responsibility for deciding who to include within this identity space can more easily be claimed not to fall on the Russian leadership but instead on the people of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The Russian leadership repeatedly emphasised that the population of the two break-away republics chose to acquire Russian citizenship, so the decision to give these people Russian passports was not primarily made by Moscow and thus not part of some grand imperialistic scheme.

325 Cf. Shevel, “Russian Nation-building from Yel’tsin to Medvedev”.

158
Distance from such liability supported the Russian leadership’s argument that Russia was simply reacting to the developments on the ground rather than being an instigator of the conflict and an imperialistic power with revisionist tendencies, such as regularly argued by a number of international actors. According to the Kremlin’s line of argument, Russia did not incorporate these populations within its orbit, but instead it was the will of these peoples and the problematic situation in Georgia during the preceding two decades that led to these peoples becoming Russian citizens. The Russian leadership was able, as a result, to distance itself both from the critique surrounding Russia’s ‘passportisation policy’ in the years preceding the conflict, as well as being the ‘aggressor’ during the 2008 war. Russia’s role as the ‘guarantor of peace and security in the Caucasus’ was thus strengthened, as well as its status as a great power.
Conclusion

Large sectors of the international community were bewildered by Russia’s massive military response to the Georgian government’s bombardment of the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali in August 2008. The various interpretations of the war and its participants naturally had a destabilising effect on Russia’s relations with both Georgia and its other international counterparts due to the need to be able to predict other states’ behaviour within international relations. This thesis has sought to illuminate one part of the puzzle that constitutes the highly divergent perspectives of the war and of Russia’s role within it, namely the construction of Russian national identity, especially the discursive aspect of this process. The study has thus highlighted the performative power of language and discourse.

In the international media and Western political discourse, Russia was repeatedly portrayed as an imperialistic power that, through its military actions during the war, had finally shown its true nature as an authoritarian state with expansionist goals. Such an interpretation of Russia’s international actions was also prevalent during the contemporary conflict in Ukraine, and the Russo-Georgian war has, at times, been depicted as the first concrete result of contemporary Russia’s imperial policies, with Putin’s speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 as a sign of Russia’s increasingly assertive foreign policy. It is indeed correct that Russian foreign policy has grown more assertive over time, and we saw the first indication of this when Putin first ascended to the presidential post in 2000. The trend intensified from 2004 onwards, but it would be premature to depict it as being imperialistic without taking a closer look at its inherent dynamics. Russian foreign policy and identity have often been described in relatively essentialist terms, without taking note of how they are constructed within their context.

This study set out to explore how the Russian leadership sought to legitimise its conduct through discourse in the context of the 2008 war in Georgia, focusing on particular visions of Russian national identity that the official discourse utilised in order to rally the citizens around the flag. Thus the study has made an original contribution to research by examining how the official discourse in the context of the 2008 war has contributed to the construction of Russian identity. Furthermore, due to the thesis placing much emphasis on the internal dimensions of the Russian leadership’s actions in the international arena, i.e. the consolidation of the national community inside Russia, it has contributed to a largely
neglected dimension of the Russian leadership’s actions outside its borders. As discussed, the tendency of scholars and other observers of Russian politics to interpret Russia’s foreign policy actions through the ‘Russian imperialism’ lens results in them often overlooking this central internal dimension of Russian international conduct.

The thesis’ main research questions sought to examine which discursive constructions were the most prominent in the official Russian discourse on the 2008 war, and how these relate to the ‘just’ borders of the contemporary Russian state and to its national membership and belonging. The official Russian discourse on the 2008 war in Georgia contained several visions of Russian national identity, the analysis of which represents a snapshot of the longer-term nation building process, but with its own special characteristics due to the event of war. Utilising Brubaker (1996) and Lohr (2014)’s concept of nationalism as an event, the thesis has discussed how the mobilisation of nationalism can acquire increased force under specific circumstances, such as war. Such mobilisation was clearly demonstrated in the official Russian discourse in connection with the Russo-Georgian war, enacted in order to unite the Russian people around the leadership’s decision to send military forces into the Georgian territory, recognise the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and maintain military forces in the two break-away republics after the end of hostilities, despite these actions being the object of wide-spread criticism from, mainly, Russia’s international counterparts.

Furthermore, the thesis’ sub-questions touched upon the main discursive constructions of Russian identity. Firstly, it discussed the identity vision of Russia as a non-imperial great power, which was partly formed as a response to the international critique portraying the country as an imperialistic state. Secondly, the portrayal of Russia as a new state that was to be equated with neither the Soviet Union nor an instigator of a new Cold War was analysed. Thirdly, the study scrutinised the protection narrative that focused on the responsibility to protect Russian citizens and compatriots in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and subsequently constructed Russia as a responsible state that cared for its people wherever they were located. Furthermore, as part of the discussion about the main discursive constructions of Russian identity, the thesis examined the particular meanings that the concepts of a ‘Great/Imperial Power’, ‘Soviet Union’, ‘Cold War’, ‘Russian Citizens’ and ‘Compatriots’ acquired in the war context. By examining the discursive aspect of these themes, the study added a crucial analytical level to the literature on the Russo-Georgian war, as well as to the scholarly work on Russian nation building in general.
By examining the statements from the key political leadership, in this thesis defined as Putin, Medvedev and Lavrov, the study revealed that quite a uniform message was delivered by the three actors, even though the way of expression may at times have differed among them. Such uniformity does not, however, translate into the discourse being coherent. The logic of the different arguments often halted, yet this incoherence paradoxically enhanced the leadership’s opportunity to address multiple audiences simultaneously.

The examination of the empirical material covering the main discursive constructions in the official Russian discourse in connection to the war showed that the identity vision of Russia as a great power takes centre stage at all times. In other words, all of the different themes are interwoven in a manner that furthers this specific identity vision. This conclusion begins by synthesising the different arguments constructed by the Russian leadership in order to demonstrate how they all supported the great power vision of identity, before discussing the study’s limitations and possible directions for further research.

*All Roads lead to Russia as a Great Power*

As demonstrated in this thesis, the great power concept has been a constant in the Russian identity debate for centuries, at least since the reign of Peter the Great. Both Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union were considered to be great powers and the latter even acquired the identity of a superpower after the end of the Second World War, which was maintained until the dissolution of the USSR. The tumultuous 1990s, however, with its economic and political instability, naturally resulted in the loss of a superpower status, yet the great power vision did not disappear from the Russian collective consciousness, remaining instead one of the most important elements in the construction of Russian national identity in the post-Communist era, if not the most significant one.

Russia’s ‘natural’ state of being was thus perceived to be a great power, regardless of the actual state of affairs. With Putin’s ascendancy to the presidential post in 2000, the great power notion became increasingly prominent within the official Russian discourse, implying that Russia was a reliable partner and a ‘normal’, if powerful, state. The concept never acquired any imperialist connotations during Putin’s first two presidential mandates, however.

Medvedev, shortly after taking over as president, experienced his most serious foreign policy challenge during the Russo-Georgian war. The great power concept occupied a
prominent role in the official Russian discourse surrounding the war. All of the various arguments presented by the Russian leadership in connection with the war seem to have been connected to this particular identity vision; namely, a great power that has an important role to play within the international arena and is able to care for its citizens and compatriots both within Russia and outside the state borders, yet the concept acquired a fresh meaning in the war context due to the imperialism critique deriving from large sectors of the international community, but mainly from many of the post-Communist states along Russia’s borders. The particular great power vision presented in connection with the war depicts Russia as a trustworthy, cooperative and responsible player, thus downplaying the accusations of imperialism, but is simultaneously depicted as a strong, independent power that takes its own decisions, as it sees fit.

The Russian leadership did not wish for Russia to be portrayed as a territorial revisionist power, but still as a strong and influential state that made its own independent choices despite the resistance on the part of certain of its international partners. The Russian key political leadership is dependent on support from the domestic community, especially in times of war. Thus, such a discursive identity construction was natural due to the fact that the majority of the domestic community perceived the great power status as an important element in the construction of Russian identity while the majority of the population and the different schools of foreign policy thinking would not like to see Russia as an imperialist state even though there were groups, such as the neo-Eurasianists, who might have welcomed such a development in Russian foreign policy. The majority of Russians, however, tended to regard imperialism as an expensive and destabilising political project that would affect the country’s relations with the international community negatively. Russia is dependent on good relations with the international community, politically and especially economically.

The non-imperial epithet was also used for the critics within the international community who needed a degree of predictability concerning Russian foreign policy with regard to its political and diplomatic conduct. The construction of contemporary Russia as a non-imperial great power was thus directed at different audiences both within the domestic as well as the international community.

The great power narrative was continuously built on by enacting an interventionist discourse that consolidated Russia’s role as the protector of peace and security for the people in the Caucasus, as well as a legal discourse that sought to justify Russia’s actions as being based on international and national agreements and laws. The non-imperial epithet
was largely added in the aftermath of war, mainly after the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, since this event resulted in a widely-held perception that Russia was annexing parts of Georgia, even if Russia did not integrate the two republics into its own state, as it did with the Crimea. The independence recognition increased fears among some of Russia’s neighbouring countries that they would be next in line for Russian territorial revisionism, and the Russian leadership felt obliged to answer such accusations.

Other arguments delivered by the Russian leadership, however, undermined their denial that Russia was a non-imperial state with no territorially revisionist tendencies. Russia demonstrated that, due to its great power identity, it would come to the rescue of its people in the area close to its borders if this were deemed necessary. As has been argued throughout the thesis, however, the identity of the Russian people whom the Russian state saw itself as obliged to protect was unclear. The non-imperial great power identity construct thus further complicated the question of the ‘just’ borders of the contemporary Russian state and the membership and belongingness to the Russian nation.

The Great Power Vision – a Legacy from the USSR

The historical legacy of the Cold War and the Soviet Union, as represented in the official Russian discourse, further strengthened the message about contemporary Russia being a great power. This thesis has demonstrated how these concepts occupied a prominent place in the official Russian discourse in connection to the Russo-Georgian war. The discursive construction of Russia as a great power is thus closely connected to the uses of history and especially the role of the USSR in the consciousness of the contemporary Russian leadership. This study has argued that the discourses in play in connection with the war contributed to the politicisation of history, and thereby played an important role in uniting domestic society behind the leadership in the context of the 2008 war. As with the non-imperial epithet added to the great power concept, the Russian leadership partly used these historical concepts as a response to certain accusations by sectors of the international community.

Russia was blamed for causing the emergence of a new Cold War, as demonstrated by the international tensions at the time, and contemporary Russia was equated with the USSR. The tension between Russia and some of its international counterparts eased quite soon after the war ended, however, especially that between Russia and the United States. In early 2009, the Obama administration sought to decrease tension with Russia, leading to
a ‘reset’ between Russia and the United States.\textsuperscript{326} One should, however, keep in mind that this willingness to improve ties with Russia occurred amidst the financial crisis that began in the autumn 2008, thus demonstrating that the willingness to improve these relations was most probably partly subject to various pragmatic considerations, such as a need for international cooperation in times of serious economic difficulty.\textsuperscript{327}

The Russian leadership’s denial that the international tension heralded a resumption of the Cold War was a result of Russia wanting to distance itself from certain more problematic periods of the Soviet past, and instead portray itself as a trustworthy cooperative player. The Russian leadership argued, however, that the relations between Russia and its international counterparts were better than certain commentators wished to portray them, but Moscow still recognised that there was room for improvement in these relations. The Russian leadership repeatedly claimed that it was Russia’s critics who were responsible for the worsening of relations, and thus it was them who had the leverage to improve these.

According to Moscow, the deterioration in relations was caused by a faulty understanding on the part of the West about the war and its participants. Such misunderstanding was, allegedly, to a large degree caused by certain international actors’ mental inertia, that led to an inability to change their perceptions of Russia. In particular, the United States was accused of harbouring a Cold War mentality that translated into a desire to create division within international relations. Moreover, a number of post-Soviet states were blamed for basing their policies on ‘historical phantoms’ that contributed to equaling contemporary Russian foreign policy with some of the imperialistic policies of the USSR.

The Russian leadership’s denial of the emergence of a new Cold War was thus, as demonstrated, mainly directed at the international audiences who were critical of Russia’s conduct in connection with the 2008 war, and was especially aimed at denouncing the ‘history wars’ with a number of East European countries in the last decade which often

\textsuperscript{326} US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton brought a symbolic gift for Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov to demonstrate US intentions to turn over new leaf in the relationship. She brought a button to the meeting, on which the word ‘reset’ was supposed to have been inscribed. Unfortunately, the button stated ‘peregruzka’, which means ‘overcharge’. See, for example, “Misspelled ‘Reset’ Button Embarrasses Clinton,” \textit{The Moscow Times}, March 10, 2009, accessed March 30, 2016, http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/misspelled-reset-button-embarrasses-clinton/375144.html.

\textsuperscript{327} In the chosen empirical sources, a shift in the topic of discussion is detectable, at least from October 2008 onwards, moving away from the 2008 war to discussing the international economic crisis. Such a discursive shift was probably favourable for the Russian leadership since the 2008 war and Russia’s actions in connection to it were somewhat overshadowed by the financial crisis that was arguably considered to be of higher importance for many international partners than the problematic situation in Georgia.
involved displaying the negative effects of Soviet policies in Eastern Europe. The United States was also accused, however, of using history to further its own domestic political goals, such as when the candidates for the US presidential election of autumn 2008 were argued to have been making use of the Russo-Georgian war in order to gain support from the US electorate. The references to a new Cold War were also partly directed at the domestic community, that did not want to experience the isolation and military tension that such an international situation would entail.

It is noteworthy, however, that the Russian leadership, before the international audience, at times argued that it was indeed worried about the prospects of a new Cold War, while in other instances, it stated that, while not welcoming such a tense international situation, it did not fear it, as Russia had lived through difficult periods before and would survive. This is a clear example of the transformation of the discourse depending on the situation and how the meaning of the great power concept can take different forms. Before the international community, it was important to demonstrate that Russia did not wish to increase the tension, thus portraying it as a cooperative great power, while simultaneously portraying the country as a strong great power that was capable of handling any situation that it might encounter.

Lavrov's historical references to the Great Game served to downplay somewhat the cooperative attributes apparently intended to demonstrate that the conflict was between great powers. Moscow does not perceive Georgia to be a great power, however, so the references to the Great Game indirectly placed part of the blame for the conflict on the West in general terms, and particularly the United States. The international tension that Moscow wished to downplay was naturally ratcheted up by such claims, however, and would indirectly support the argument that the Russo-Georgian war would spark a new phase of the Cold War.

The Russian leadership thus forcefully rejected the idea of a resumption of the Cold War, while the historic legacy of the Soviet Union was treated somewhat more ambiguously. The Russian leadership sought to distance itself from the USSR and portrayed contemporary Russia as a new state that had embarked on a very different development path than its legal predecessor, although at the same time the Soviet past was not consistently argued to have been a completely negative period in history. By failing to paint the Soviet past in a completely negative light and stating that the USSR was a great, strong state, as for instance argued by Medvedev when highlighting that he himself was born in the Soviet Union, the Russian leadership emphasised that contemporary Russia’s
legal predecessor was a great power, indirectly signaling that there was an unbroken identity chain between the two, resulting in the Russian Federation inheriting the greatness of the USSR.\textsuperscript{328} By utilising these historical references in such an ambiguous manner, the leadership was able to address many audiences and demonstrated a degree of sensitivity to the sense of loss of the country’s greatness due to the dissolution of the USSR, experienced by many people in Russia.

Another way in which the historic legacy of the USSR worked to further the great power vision of contemporary Russia was through the notion of both the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation being peaceful states. By presenting Russia as a peaceful state, it acquired some of the qualities needed to be a contemporary great power yet, simultaneously, the official discourse demonstrated the military readiness of contemporary Russia. The message that the country was a militarily prepared peaceful state was, as discussed, a common propaganda tool in the Soviet discourse as well. Thus, the message was mixed and Russia was constructed as a peaceful state that was militarily prepared, if necessary. As is the case with Soviet foreign policy, however, presenting Russia as a peaceful state while engaged in war is a rather problematic undertaking.

It was thus uncommon for the official discourse to present the Soviet Union in a negative light, even if at times a less favourable portrayal was offered. Medvedev, for example, at one point argued that the Soviet troops in the GDR were occupation troops who remained in Germany after the end of the Second World War by portraying themselves as allied troops. He added that these occupying forces no longer existed, and nor did the Warsaw Pact, yet then he mentioned that the NATO and US troops were still in Europe, which was allegedly a mystery. The above portrayal of Soviet troops as occupation forces naturally contradicts the argument that the Soviet Union was a peaceful state.

The main differences between contemporary Russia and the Soviet Union were thus usually not portrayed by the Russian leadership as linked to foreign policy, but instead presented as being based on ideology and values. Moscow distanced Russia from the ideology of communism, but did not offer any alternative ideology that would be present in Russia today, instead arguing that Russia had discarded ideology altogether. Instead, US foreign policy was claimed to be ideologically driven. The direct meaning of such a

\textsuperscript{328} Medvedev, “Стенографический отчет о встрече с участниками международного клуба «Валдай»,” September 12, 2008.
foreign policy is unclear, but it seems to be based on US interventions abroad that, it was argued, do not have any positive consequences for the US domestic population.

The ambiguous treatment of the Soviet Union, in particular, assisted in blurring the boundaries between the USSR and contemporary Russia and thus affected the perception of the current borders of the Russian state. This, in turn, created hesitancy concerning who belonged to the Russian nation due to Georgia being part of the Soviet Union, and thus consequently South Ossetia and Abkhazia as well.

*The Protection Narrative and the Great Power Vision*

Through the third theme discussed, namely the protection narrative that focused on the safeguarding of the life and dignity of Russian citizens and compatriots, the great power vision was furthered once more. The protection of these people, residing mainly in South Ossetia but also Abkhazia, was one of the main arguments delivered by the Russian leadership in order to legitimise Russian conduct in connection to the war yet, throughout the discourse, the decision to go to war and grant these republics’ independence was taken from Russia and given to the people of the two republics. Russia had allegedly no interest in the outcome of these actions, but was simply granting these people their inherent right to life and dignity.

Furthermore, since the protection narrative was backed up by various legal arguments, contemporary Russia was portrayed as a law-abiding state that adhered to international norms concerning the primacy of international law within international relations – qualities of a contemporary great power yet, by arguing for the need to protect Russian citizens and compatriots wherever they might be located, Russia portrayed itself before the domestic audiences as a responsible great power that would protect its people in all instances.

The protection narrative thus drew on a language of legal concern and human rights, repeatedly mentioning Article 51 of the UN Charter in order to claim Russia’s responsibility to further people’s right to individual and collective self-defence, and the UN’s ‘responsibility to protect’ principle (R2P). As has been argued throughout the last chapter, references to international law were mainly aimed at international audiences due to the primary role of international law within international relations as well as to the general Russian population who would support the protection of its own citizens and compatriots wherever they might be located.

As demonstrated, the reason for the Russian political leadership even being able to articulate such an argument was that the population of South Ossetia and Abkhazia had
been given Russian passports in the years prior to the conflict. The absolute majority of the inhabitants of these two break-away republics held Russian citizenship at the start of the 2008 war. Moscow repeatedly claimed that the population of the two break-away republics chose to acquire Russian citizenship and that this was not Russia’s decision. The problematic situation in Georgia since the dissolution of the USSR encouraged these people to separate themselves from Georgia and in the end seek Russian citizenship. It is indeed correct that the population of South Ossetia and Abkhazia did not want to be part of the Georgian state and preferred Russian citizenship instead of Georgian.

What is important for the discussion of how the Russian leadership portrayed Russia’s role in the war, however, is how they framed Russia’s actions as simply a reaction to the developments on the ground and to these people’s will, rather than being based on any desire of Russia to further Russian political interests and power. As the Russian leadership consistently distanced itself from the responsibility for its conduct in connection with the war and instead portrayed the conflict as one between Georgia and South Ossetia/Abkhazia, however, it thereby removed itself from the responsibility of having to take a conscious decision concerning the contentious issue of the national membership of these people. Furthermore, it could discursively separate Russia from the much criticised passportisation policy.

The Georgian government naturally perceived Russia’s passportisation policy extremely negatively since it was seen as encroaching on Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Russian leadership’s arguments concerning Georgian territorial integrity, however, are significant, as they further the great power vision of post-Soviet Russia. Moscow claimed that Russia had, since the break-up of the Soviet Union, sought to protect the territorial integrity of Georgia through its role as peacekeeper and peace broker in the various conflicts in the country in the 1990s and 2000s. Russia thus ascribed itself an important role in the Caucasus - a role not at all times appreciated by certain post-Communist states, such as Georgia. In any case, the Georgian government, as led by Saakashvili, was argued to have trampled on its own territorial integrity by sending troops into South Ossetia in August 2008. It was thus allegedly the Saakashvili government itself that had worked against the country’s territorial integrity while seeking to unite the lands that it perceived to be Georgian territory.

In contrast, by arguing for Russia’s inherent right and responsibility to protect its citizens, the Russian leadership was seeking to counter the imperialism claims by presenting Russian conduct not as interference in the affairs of another state but instead as
protection of its own people who happened to be living outside its borders. Interestingly, the Russian leadership even legitimised its conduct in connection to the war by arguing that the Georgian actions constituted an attack on Russia. Such statements should not be read as Moscow officially stating that Georgian territory was part of the Russian state, however, as they were simply designed to emphasise the ‘Russianness’ of the people who had been given Russian passports and also highlight the fact that a number of Russian peacekeepers were killed as a result of the Georgian military intervention. Thus Russia was, at times, portrayed as a victim and Georgia as the aggressor, even though such victimhood was repeatedly complemented by statements about Russia’s readiness to respond to any future threats if necessary and the great power vision of Russian identity was thus upheld.

Claiming that Russia would be prepared to protect these people wherever they might be located, however, adds to the sense of insecurity in the countries along Russia’s borders that host a large number of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers. The usage of the compatriot concept arguably increased the sense of insecurity due to its vague definitional borders that allows for the protection of people in the neighbouring countries who have some looser affinity to Russia. As demonstrated, this concept can, at times, include all peoples who were once part of the former Soviet Union.

Furthermore, the lack of clear separation lines between the concepts of Russian citizens and compatriots in the official discourse assists in blurring the line between the USSR and contemporary Russia. If the compatriot concept is able to include all former Soviet citizens and the concept is interchangeably used together with that of Russian citizens, it could be read as the Russian leadership considering all former Soviet citizens to be citizens of contemporary Russia. That naturally feeds into the concerns of Russian imperialism.

Yet throughout the Russian official discourse a more neutral description of the inhabitants of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was used, such as the ‘inhabitants’ or the ‘people’ of the two republics, or ‘Ossetians’ and ‘Abkhazians’, and such usage was arguably more favourable in front of the international audiences since it depoliticised the situation somewhat by removing any possible Russian incentives for either the war or the independence recognition of the two break-away republics. Furthermore, by describing the population of South Ossetia as ‘Ossetians’ the Russian leadership could gather the support from North Ossetia, which during the war sent a large amount of volunteers to Georgia who came to protect their ‘Ossetian brothers’.
The people of South Ossetia and Abkhazia were thus never portrayed as ‘Georgians’ in Russian official discourse. Yet the historical belongingness of these peoples was mentioned several times, even though such historical period signified them having been part of Georgia. After the independence recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia on August 26 the imperial history of Russia was brought up several times in Russian official discourse. Yet the insertion of this theme into the official discourse was rather random and thus indicated that it was a theme the Russian leadership found important and wished to highlight, no matter the question asked or the issue discussed. The official discourse repeatedly discussed how South Ossetia and Abkhazia first was part of the Russian Empire and then the USSR but in the latter instance through being part of Georgia. Furthermore, the Russian leadership accused Georgia for not granting South Ossetia’s and Abkhazia’s independence after the dissolution of the USSR, something that was granted Georgia and should have been given the two break-away republics as well.

In the same vein, Putin argued that Georgian actions were a crime against the rights of ‘other people’ thus demonstrating that the Russian leadership did not consider the inhabitants of South Ossetia and Abkhazia to be part of Georgia anymore. However, he did not argue that these people were part of Russia either. It is interesting that the above argument about ‘other people’ whose rights Georgia did not recognise was delivered already during the 2008 war and not only after the independence recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia thereby indirectly demonstrated that it already at the outbreak of war saw these people as not belonging to Georgia. The argument about Russia seeking to protect Georgian territorial integrity all through thus rings rather hollow.

Thus the chapter contributed to highlighting some of the contentious issues concerning the borders of contemporary Russia and the belongingness to the Russian nation. Especially the compatriots concept made the division lines between the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia relatively unclear due to the all-inclusive nature of the compatriots concept. The Russian leadership blurred the definition of the Russian ‘us’ and hereby made it easier for them to remove itself from the decision of who will be included in the definition of the Russian nation.

*Some Final Remarks*

This thesis has demonstrated that the identity visions within the Russian official discourse were often relatively ambiguous in nature and such a lack of clarity created
problems for the conduct of international relations due to the need for clear communication and a need to understand one’s international counterparts. This ambiguity could feed into the sense of obscurity and lack of transparency scholars and commentators on Russian politics can experience. At times, Western scholars studying Russian foreign policy can experience a lack of coherent and transparent information channels on which to base their analysis. Such a situation is caused both by a rather complex pattern of formal and informal relations that shape the Russian political landscape and by a rhetorical insistence by Western scholars on such complexity. While accepting that the relative intricacy of the Russian political arena can certainly complicate the task of Western scholars, part of this academic work on Russian foreign policy is nonetheless coloured by a largely deterministic form of analysis based on unsubstantiated claims portraying Russian politics as impenetrably obscure and irrational.

The idea of such deterministic portrayal is powerfully formulated by James D. J. Brown (2010) when drawing on Edward Said’s seminal study *Orientalism* in his discussion of Western scholarship on Russian foreign policy. Brown presents a convincing picture of the ‘Orientalisation’ of Russian foreign policy, while simultaneously arguing for the need to leave the stereotyping and fast-reached conclusions behind in order to create a more balanced analysis. He argues that conventional academic discourse on Russian foreign policy that originates in Western scholarship is generally based on three features: the exaggeration of differences between Russian foreign policy and that of its Western counterparts; the assumption of Western superiority concerning forms of engagement in international affairs; and the - at times - repetitive and unimaginative analysis of Russian foreign policy which has resulted in a widely accepted narrative.

Brown does not argue that scholars should overlook any genuine dissimilarities between the foreign policies originating from Russia and the Western countries, only that the specificities should be explored in a balanced and sensitized manner, which, he argues, is exemplified by the work of, for example, Hopf (2002) and Tsygankov (2006). Brown does not dismiss the Western literature on Russian foreign policy on the grounds of being unimportant or totally faulty, but merely emphasises the large array of ready-made assumptions that can be found in some of this scholarship.

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331 The 2010, 2013 and 2016 revised editions of Tsygankov’s study have been discussed earlier in this thesis.
Through its discursive approach this thesis has sought to contribute to conducting research on Russia’s actions outside its border in a more balanced and sensitized manner. Yet a limitation of the thesis has been the inability to go even more in depth into each of the three themes discussed in the study. One could have chosen to limit the discussion to only one of the themes in order to be able to go deeper into the subject matter, but that would instead have left out other issues that were important for acquiring a broader understanding of this cross section of the Russian nation building process.

As a continuation of this thesis, and in order to gain an even greater understanding of the interaction between discourses at the international arena, a study involving a detailed examination of the texts deriving from the international community could be conducted. Furthermore, the research framework applied in this thesis could be used for a better understanding of the discursive construction of Russian state and national identity in connection to the more recent Ukraine crisis. During and in the aftermath of conflict and war, clear communication is of utmost importance in order to put an end to hostilities and assist in both the short- and long-term reconciliation processes of the post-conflict period. Thus, Western scholars should avoid basing any analysis of Russian foreign policy on a priori assumptions of difference or unpredictability inherent in Russian rhetoric and actions on the international arena.
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