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## **Role theory and Russia's attempts to integrate the post-Soviet space: from internal to international duties<sup>1</sup>**

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#### ***Abstract***

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Moscow's foreign policy towards the post-Soviet space has become an even greater area of concern. In order to better understand Russia's behaviour in the post-Soviet space, it is worth analysing what led to Moscow's renewed interest in this area. There are numerous accounts explaining Russia's policies towards its neighbourhood, but they often focus on material factors or Russian imperial complexes. To address the existing gap and examine changes in Moscow's attitude towards the region, this paper will use role theory and analyse shifts in Russia's national role conceptions. It argues that the combination of important external and internal factors led to changes in perception of Russia's international duties and responsibilities between Putin's rise to power and his return to the presidency in 2012. Consequently, these changes resulted in different understanding of Russia's role in the post-Soviet space, which had implications for Russia's increasingly aggressive actions in the region afterwards.

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**Keywords:** Russian foreign policy, post-Soviet space, regional integration, role theory, national role conception

## **Ролевая теория и попытки России интегрировать постсоветское пространство: от внутренних к международным обязанностям**

### **Аннотация**

После российского вторжения в Украину в феврале 2022 года внешняя политика Москвы в отношении постсоветского пространства стала еще более серьезной проблемой. Чтобы лучше понять поведение России на постсоветском пространстве, стоит проанализировать, что привело к возобновлению интереса Москвы к этой сфере. Существует множество версий, объясняющих политику России по отношению к своим соседям, но они часто сосредоточены на материальных факторах или российских имперских комплексах. Чтобы устранить существующий разрыв и изучить изменения в отношении Москвы к региону, в данной статье будет использована ролевая теория и проанализированы сдвиги в представлениях о национальной роли России. Утверждается, что сочетание важных внешних и внутренних факторов привело к изменению восприятия международных обязанностей и ответственности России в период между приходом Путина к власти и его возвращением на пост президента в 2012 г. Следовательно, эти изменения привели к различному пониманию роли России на посту президента. - Советское пространство, что впоследствии повлияло на все более агрессивные действия России в регионе.

**Ключевые слова:** Внешняя политика России, постсоветское пространство, региональная интеграция, ролевая теория, национальная ролевая концепция

### **Introduction**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 makes us reflect on changes in Russia's foreign policy (RFP) towards the post-Soviet space. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was mainly focused on cooperation with the West, which meant that its neighbourhood, although still important (and referred to as the "near abroad"), was not a top priority for Moscow. This attitude began to change relatively quickly with growing scepticism towards the West, and the new course took root when Yevgeniy

Primakov became Russia's foreign minister in 1996. Moscow began to pay more attention to the post-Soviet space, nevertheless, this new approach did not result in any significant steps towards the region, even after Vladimir Putin took power. However, in October 2011, that is just after declaring his intention to return to the presidency, an article appeared, in which Putin presented his plans for integration of the post-Soviet space, actually reinvigorating this idea. Putin wrote about „a crucial integration project” of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan and described it as “a historic milestone for all three countries and for the broader post-Soviet space”. He made it clear that the ultimate goal was a higher level of integration in the form of a Eurasian Union and described this initiative as “a powerful supranational association capable of becoming one of the poles in the modern world” (Putin, 2011), which marked a big shift from previous integration initiatives. Indeed, Russia's previous attempts in this area were neither effective nor efficient. For example, Moscow had been negotiating the creation of common governmental institution and a common currency with Belarus for more than a decade (Barakhova et al., 2011).

As such, it is worth asking why did Moscow decide to take this important step at that particular moment? A natural explanation for such a shift could be a change in the leadership, but apart from the symbolic exchange of presidential and prime ministerial seats between Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, the ruling team, and particularly Putin himself, had been in power since 2000. There are numerous valuable explanations for this turn in literature (see below section), but as this paper aims to show, they do not fully account for a shift in Russia's attitude towards integration in the post-Soviet space. To answer this puzzling question, the article applies role theory, which treats states as actors who behave in the international arena in line with roles with which they identify (Adigbuo, 2007, p. 88). The paper argues that the decision to engage more decisively in the regional integration resulted from a combination of several important internal and external factors that influenced Russian leaders' understanding of their state's international roles.

Consequently, although the article examines the past events and decisions of RFP, it has implications for the analysis of Russia's international behaviour today, which, with Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, is as urgent as ever. Indeed, a closer look at the mechanisms of RFP formation in the recent

past, particularly in the absence of changes in the key positions of the president and minister of foreign affairs, may be helpful in understanding the subsequent changes in Moscow's approach to the post-Soviet area and its increasingly aggressive attitude, exemplified by the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

The article progresses as follows. The first section presents the existing explanations of Russia's foreign policy in the region and intensified integration efforts. The second one briefly introduces the theoretical framework and methodology. The two following sections analyse dominant national role conceptions (NRCs) used by Russian leaders (the president and foreign ministers: Igor Ivanov and Sergei Lavrov) at the beginning of Putin's two presidencies, that is in 2000 and 2012. I then proceed to examine and compare different factors, which led to changes in the distribution of Russia's dominant roles. The last section presents broader conclusions and implications for RFP.

### Existing explanations

There are different interpretations of Russia's renewed efforts to integrate the post-Soviet space, which can be, by and large, divided into the approaches paying attention to material (geopolitical and economic) and ideational factors. The most common are geopolitical accounts. For example, Popescu argues that in 2011 Russia launched a Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) "fuelled by geopolitical aspirations" and adds that by launching the union, Russia "hoped to compensate for its relative economic weakness through a high-profile display of political assertiveness" (Popescu, 2014, p. 7). Bashkatova (2011) also sees this motivation as the dominant arguing that the biggest benefits for Moscow would be geopolitical ones, as Russia would increase its influence in the region. Likewise, Nikolayev (in Bashkatova and Sergeyev, 2011) perceives the idea as a political rather than economic one, and writes that it was intended to anger the West and take advantage of the EU's internal weaknesses (for other geopolitical explanations see e.g. Sakwa, 2015; Gvosdev and Marsh, 2016).

Krickovic (2014) in his analysis combines geopolitical and economic dimensions arguing that the changing nature of the global economy after the 2008-09 financial crisis was the main factor behind Russia's renewed

interest in the integration of the post-Soviet space. In this quickly changing international system, regional integration was seen by Russia as a strategy to respond to new challenges and prepare for an unpredictable future (Krickovic, 2014). Likewise, Diesen (2018, p. 1) writes about Russia's geo-economic strategy, arguing that it aims to take advantage of economic ties and remove Russia from the periphery of both Europe and Asia, thus placing it at the heart of an integrated Eurasia. Indeed, there are numerous analysts who point to a decisive significance of the economic dimension. Radzikhovsky (2011) claims that if successful, the EEU could be Russia's last resort for an extensive growth. Lukin (2011), writing about elimination of customs borders and maybe even borders as such in the future, points out that the EEU would not mean the restoration of a unified state in a political sense and as such, should be considered as an economic rather than political union. Interestingly, another Russian analyst, Inozemtsev (2011) is critical about the economic argument saying that the EEU's GDP would barely exceed that of Russia, while the average GDP per capita would be even lower than Russia's. Finally, Barakhova et al. (2011) write that the economic ties in the post-Soviet space still existed which means that "for all practical purposes" the EEU already was in place and Russia could not afford to give it up, which actually points to the importance of both political and economic elements behind the creation of the union.

Apart from geopolitical and economic accounts, there are also explanations that speak about the importance of ideational factors. These sources more or less explicitly refer to the longing for a powerful empire and often pay attention to Russia's great power status as well as the importance of regional hegemony. Indeed, Salin (in Balmforth, 2011) mentions nostalgia for the imperial past and writes about Putin trying to play this "imperialist sentiment". In one of the most prominent of such accounts, Trenin (2011) argues that Moscow's integration initiatives result from the need to reconcile with the lost empire and the lowering of Russia's status on the international arena, which was a consequence of this.

The above sources pay attention to many important factors but do not tell us the whole story. For example, the changing geopolitical context can be an important factor, but first it is worth examining how it was perceived by the Russian leadership, as in the end, "what matters is how the policy

maker imagines the milieu to be, not how it actually is" (Sprout & Sprout, 1957). As such, it is important to analyse whether Russian decision makers saw the changing international environment as a threat or as an opportunity (both explanations appear in the literature) and how it determined their understanding of Russia's international duties. Furthermore, the unique focus on geopolitical aspects neglects potentially important domestic factors both economic (internal development and stabilisation in the 2000s) and political (slow erosion of the regime's popularity and support). As for ideational approaches, they increase our understanding and highlight important factors behind Russia's international decisions. However, while, for example, Trenin (2011) pays attention to the continuing imperial complex, this article argues that it was a change in Russia's leaders' understanding of their state's international duties and responsibilities that led to the renewed integration which, nevertheless, was not necessarily related to the loss of empire. Indeed, this paper contends that the notion of identity may be too static to account for changes in RFP. As Gotz (2017, p. 238) points out in his analysis of Russia's near abroad assertion, "centrist" identity became dominant around the mid-1990s, but RFP towards its neighbourhood became more assertive only about ten years later. As such, the concept of role can be useful as a link between identity and foreign policy behaviour (see McCourt, 2011).

Overall, this article argues that ideational factors were no less important than material ones and it was the combination of both that led to a change in the leadership's attitude towards the post-Soviet space. Consequently, I examine how Russian leaders saw international system, their neighbourhood, and Russia's duties and responsibilities at one of the key moments for the post-Soviet area, as 2011/2012 marked not only the beginning of the Eurasian Economic Space, but also Putin's return to the presidency. The perception of Russia's role by its leaders from that period is compared to the beginning of Putin's first presidency to show changes in the understanding of Russia's international obligations, which have implications for Moscow's behaviour in the international arena also today.

### **Role theory in foreign policy analysis**

Role theory was introduced to foreign policy by Holsti who claimed that states' foreign policy behaviour is rooted in decision makers' "role conceptions, domestic needs and demands, and critical events or trends in the external environment" (Holsti, 1970, p. 243). In recent years, the theory has been very popular among foreign policy analysts who have been using it to explain the intricacies of international decisions of many countries (see e.g. Harnisch, 2011; Cantir and Kaarbo, 2016; Wehner, 2020). The theory is based on the concept of roles that are understood as patterns of behaviour which actors believe are expected from them in a particular context (Elgström & Smith, 2006, p. 5) and according to Holsti (1970), states can play multiple roles simultaneously. The below analysis focuses on the notion of national role conception (NRC), which Holsti (1970, p. 245) defined as "the policymakers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system".

Russia's dominant NRCs were identified through content analysis, which can be a transparent and reliable method for generating data on NRCs (Breuning, 2017). Content analysis and the coding process mainly focused on statements that refer to the leadership's views of Russia's international duties and responsibilities (see Le Prestre, 1997; Grossman, 2005). In both periods, the analysis covered the first six months of Putin's presidency. The examined statements were mainly accessed via the official websites of the President and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. By focusing on Russian leaders' statements as well as by including in the analysis several Russian sources, the paper aims to improve the understanding of Russia's perceptions of international affairs and consequently, of its changing foreign policy priorities.

### **Putin's first term and emphasis on internal development**

In the first analysed period, Russian leaders frequently spoke about three NRCs: internal developer, supporter of the existing balance of power and partner of the West.

### **Internal modernisation trumps international goals**

Definitely the most often they used a role that emphasised Russia's responsibilities related to internal development. The economic resurgence and **internal modernisation** was the key priority for Russia at the beginning of Putin's first term, which was clearly stated by the President many times (see e.g. Putin, 2000b, 2000a). Likewise, Igor Ivanov (in Pushkov, 2000), Russia's foreign minister, explained that the key phase of the state's development required foreign policy to contribute to the progress in internal affairs.

Crucially, the leadership spoke about the need for a better investment climate and noted that it was improving too slowly and remained unfavourable (e.g. Putin, 2000b). Furthermore, and related, Russian decision makers numerous times talked about the vital role of foreign investments in the state's development naming "the attraction of foreign investments as a key factor in integrating Russia into the world economy" (Putin, 2000c). The need for foreign investment and trade indicates the huge significance of relations with the West for Russia's internal development, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

### **Foreign policy based on the balanced international system and partnership**

The second most frequently used NRC was that of **supporter of the existing balance of power**, which, according to Russian leaders, ensured the security of the international system and both Russia and the USA should do everything not to destroy it (Putin, 2000b). It indicates that Russia saw the preservation of strategic stability as crucial for the world and that Moscow would not undermine the international agreements (such as the ABM treaty) which guaranteed it. Speaking about concerns related to international security and the preservation of the ABM treaty, Putin also mentioned Russia's initiative to establish "a European anti-missile defence system together with Europe and NATO" (Putin, 2000c). The popularity of this NRC and the willingness to cooperate with Washington show a relatively high level of trust in the West at that time.

Indeed, at the beginning of Putin's presidency, the leadership often presented Russia as **the partner of the West**. It was common for them to speak about Russia's determination to work together with the USA and to stress that Washington was among Moscow's "principal partners", that Russia would never make choice in favour of confrontation with the USA and that the mutual relationship should be future-oriented (Putin, 2000b). Interestingly, the leadership not only spoke favourably about the USA, but also about NATO. For example, Putin (2000d) stated that Russia intended to build relations with NATO based on partnership, wanted to see NATO as "a partner in the settlement of major problems and [...] in creating a safer world". Likewise, even later anti-Western hawks, such as the then secretary of the Security Council, Sergei Ivanov, did not rule out Russia joining NATO (RFE/RL, 2000c).

While Russia treated the USA as a partner mainly in the field of security, the European Union (EU) was primarily an economic one (see RFE/RL, 2000c). In addition, Putin (2000e) saw Russia as "an inalienable part of Europe" and stressed that Moscow not only wanted to but actually would have to develop not in confrontation with Europe, but together with it. The above points are very important for the considerations undertaken in this article as they suggest that the willingness to cooperate closely with the EU, and with the West in general, meant that the main vector of RFP pointed to that direction, not to the post-Soviet space. Moreover, the self-perception of Russia as part of Europe might have made greater integration efforts in Russia's neighbourhood redundant. Due to many factors described in the following sections, there were no similar statements twelve years later and the direction of RFP as well as its attitude towards the post-Soviet space changed too.

### **Foreign policy as a tool for internal development**

Overall, the examination of dominant NRCs and the above statements demonstrate the supremacy of domestic goals over international ones at the beginning of the 2000s. Such a hierarchy was also present in official documents. For example, the 2000 foreign policy concept spoke about the "creation of favourable external conditions for steady development of Russia,

for improving its economy, [and] enhancing the standards of living of the population” (Foreign Policy Concept, 2000). All of this suggests that in 2000 foreign policy was treated as a tool for internal development and therefore external goals, like the potential integration of the post-Soviet space were of secondary importance.

If the leadership talked about other roles, the most often they presented Russia as the supporter of the contemporary balance of power, which indicates that Moscow paid more attention to the stability of international situation that would not disturb internal modernization than to its neighbourhood. Likewise, the partnership with the West was supposed to serve internal modernization, mainly through foreign investments and increased volumes of trade. Indeed, responsibilities related to internal reforms dominated over international responsibilities to such an extent that Putin stated that Russia had “too many domestic problems to serve as a mediator in hot spots” and it was not its role “to take part in settling every conflict” (Putin, 2000g). These statements demonstrate a completely different attitude than in 2012, when Russia openly spoke about its role in certain conflicts (see the following paragraphs), in 2014–2015 when it intervened in Ukraine and Syria, or in 2022 when it invaded Ukraine.

Last but not least, the analysis demonstrates some interesting relations between the dominant NRCs. It indicates that internal developer role linked with the second most frequently used NRC: as Russia was primarily focused on domestic situation and internal modernisation, it wanted to preserve the existing status quo internationally, so that unfavourable changes in the international system would not hinder internal reforms. Consequently, as Russia was internally weak, it was striving for partner relations with the main world powers, particularly with the dominant one – the USA and its European allies. All of this indicates that in this interconnected structure of Moscow’s international duties and responsibilities, there was no place for integration efforts in the post-Soviet space. However, it was different in the second analysed period.

### **Putin's return to the presidency and more internationally oriented NRCs**

Distribution of dominant NRCs in 2012 was almost completely different to the one in 2000. The only role which remained among those used most often was internal developer, however, it was used much less frequently and in a slightly different context than twelve years earlier.

#### **Russia as the advocate for peaceful conflict resolution**

The most frequently the leadership spoke about Russia's role as the **advocate for peace and peaceful conflict resolution**. For example, Putin (2012a) said that Russia saw the solution to various conflicts through peaceful political and diplomatic means and encouragement of the conflicting parties to end armed violence. Although seemingly neutral, this role had, at least to some degree, anti-Western character, as describing their peaceful approach, Russian leaders often contrasted it with that adopted by the West. Speaking about Syria, the President emphasised that dialogue and negotiation was a more complex and subtle approach than "intervention using brute force from outside", clearly referring to earlier western interventions in the Middle East (Putin, 2012e). The domination of this role and its strong international and often anti-Western dimension indicate that Russia perceived its main international duties and responsibilities in a completely different way than twelve years earlier.

#### **Sovereignty and international law as barriers to actions of the West**

Almost equally often the decision makers presented Russia as the **advocate of states' sovereignty**. This position was perfectly illustrated by Lavrov who explained that general principles for any conflict resolution should be based on "the indestructible principle of international law on non-interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state" (Lavrov, 2012b). Referring to the situation in Syria, Lavrov (2012a) said that solutions to internal problems could not be imposed from outside, adding that such attempts had been

made recently (in Libya) and they did not end with anything positive. As the above statements demonstrate, this NRC (as the advocate for peaceful conflict resolution) was often used to stress Russia's opposition to Western actions, which once again indicates a different perception of Russia's roles and responsibilities in the international system.

**Supporter of international law** was the third most frequently used NRC. Russian leaders several times presented their state as a staunch supporter of international treaties and agreements. For example, Lavrov (2012a) said that supremacy of law in international relations was one of Russia's key priorities, while Putin (2012a) explained that reliance on international law was the only way to conduct international relations because unilateral actions threaten to destabilize the international system. As with the two above roles, this NRC was, at least in part, anti-Western in nature. Putin not only spoke about Moscow's support for international law, but also stated that Russia was worried when it saw some actors' efforts "to maintain their traditional influence, often by resorting to unilateral action that runs counter to the principles of international law". He also added that evidence of such actions can be seen in "so-called 'humanitarian operations', the export of bomb and missile diplomacy, and intervention in internal conflicts" (Putin, 2012e), thus clearly referring to activities of the West, particularly the USA.

### From internal to regional focus

At the very beginning of his new presidential term, Putin (2012c) clearly stated that **regional integration** in the post-Soviet area was one of Russia's top priorities and Lavrov (2012b) described it as "an unconditional foreign policy priority" and "a route with strategic perspective". Furthermore, the President expressed his views regarding the integration saying that Russia and other post-Soviet states could not "function and develop effectively in isolation from one another" as they faced similar challenges (e.g. in modernising their economies) and threats.

Crucially, Putin several times said that deepening of the integration in the post-Soviet space was the core of RFP and Moscow's strategic objective. He also declared that Russia would continue its efforts in establishing the EEU which would lead to deeper integration as well as "a common market

of 165–170 million consumers, common economic legislation, and free flow of capital, services, and labour” (Putin, 2012e). As such, the President actively promoted the integration stressing its economic benefits for members and stating that the next step would be the creation of the Eurasian Union. Lavrov (2012c) saw the EEU as one of the important supranational bodies that in the modern world were a necessary component of a stable global economy. He also described it as a way to secure economic growth on a global scale, which was particularly important due to the risks related to economic problems in the Eurozone, the USA and China (Lavrov, 2012d). Interestingly, at the Russia–EU summit working session, Putin explained that Moscow did not see contradictions between developing the EEU and building relations with the EU. Indeed, he emphasised that Russia’s goal was to make these two integration processes work together (Putin, 2012c) and spoke about building a common market from the Atlantic to the Pacific (Putin, 2012e).

The popularity of this concept as well as the statements that presented the EEU as RFP priority clearly demonstrate changes that took place in Moscow’s approach to the post-Soviet space. In addition to the integration itself, the leadership’s statements point to two broader but related goals. First, the above-mentioned common market combining the EU and the EEU would finally allow Russia to negotiate with the EU as an equal partner, not a junior one, as the EU had treated Russia. Second, the decision makers not only saw it as a chance for equal cooperation with Brussels, but also as the initiative that might be influential in terms of global development and could be a bridge between the EU and the Asian-Pacific region.

Finally, as at the beginning of the 2000s, the leadership spoke about Russia’s obligations related to **internal development**. For example, Putin acknowledged that Russia needed to change the structure of the economy and make it more innovative, explaining that such a modernisation would improve many aspects of life (Putin, 2012g). At the same time, however, the President quite confidently spoke about Russia’s economy, saying for example, that it looked “quite good” and appeared “preferable to the economies of many European nations”. He even added that Russia at that time was adhering to the Maastricht treaty more than many European states (Putin, 2012f).

The above statements show that also at the beginning of Putin’s third term, Russian leaders saw the need for reforms at home. Their references to internal

development may have also resulted from the growing concerns with the impending period of stagnation raised by Russian analysts (Trifonov, 2011) as well as from several statements in which Putin simply alluded to election promises. Nevertheless, despite a few speeches about the need for internal development, the much smaller number of them as well as statements in which the leadership praised the economy, show that they did not perceive the duties related to modernization as pressing as twelve years earlier. Instead, they spoke more often about Russia's international responsibilities, including those in the post-Soviet space.

Overall, the above analysis indicates that the majority of the most popular roles, despite their seemingly neutral character, had a clear anti-Western undertone. Indeed, whether talking about support for a peaceful resolution of conflicts, for the states' sovereignty or for international law, Russian decision makers more or less obviously juxtaposed Russia's approach with that of the West. Furthermore, the distribution of the dominant NRCs points to two other important trends. First, Russia no longer saw internal development as its main responsibility, and therefore, foreign policy was no longer subordinated to it. Second, and related, the departure from duties linked to internal modernization allowed Moscow to focus on new responsibilities in the international and, above all, regional arena. The next section focuses on the main factors that led to these shifts.

## Discussion

The distribution of dominant NRCs shows that at the beginning of the century Russia's emphasis was on domestic rather than international issues. Putin very often stressed the need for modernisation and priority of addressing domestic tasks, explaining that without it, Russia would not be able to pursue an active foreign policy. As the President repeatedly explained, a stable economy was the foundation of a strong state that was respected in the world (Putin, 2000e). This indicates that the list of the state's duties arising from dominant NRCs was relatively straightforward: first to strengthen Russia internally, and only then to foster international position which may explain the lack of serious engagement and integration initiatives in the post-Soviet space at the beginning of Putin's first term. Indeed, in 2000 Russia did not

seem to be interested in regional integration. On the contrary, Moscow took certain steps in the opposite direction and withdrew from the visa-free travel regime with the CIS in June 2000, a move described by Ivanov as a step to protect the country from terrorism, organized crime, and drug trafficking (RFE/RL, 2000d). Furthermore, some Russian analysts even wrote that Moscow no longer had any allies in the CIS and that the states in the region had been strangers to one another (Novoprudsky, 2000), while in the foreign policy concept adopted in June 2000, integration was not mentioned among the regional priorities (Foreign Policy Concept, 2000). However, twelve years later the leadership saw Russia's roles in a much different way. The below sections analyse changes at the international, domestic, and individual level to explain shifts in Russia's dominant NRCs and Moscow's attitude towards the post-Soviet space.

### **Changing international situation and deteriorating relations with the West**

Although one of Russia's main roles at the beginning of Putin's first presidency was the partner of the West, already at that time, the Kremlin had many reservations about the US actions in the security sphere. For example, Moscow was concerned that the Washington's plans to deploy the nuclear missile defence would undermine the global stability (Putin, 2000d). At the same time, the fact that relations remained friendly despite the US withdrawal from the ABM treaty soon after, shows that single actions, even so important were not enough to destroy the mutual trust. However, the ABM treaty was not the only bone of contention in mutual relations. Russia also negatively perceived NATO eastward enlargement, saying that it was not conducive to European stability (Putin, 2000d). In the President's words (Putin, 2000h), Moscow's main concern was that NATO was not able to ensure equal security for all in the Euro-Atlantic space, however, it is hard not to get the impression that after neglecting Russia's voice on various issues, including regarding the Balkans a few years earlier, this was another situation that made Moscow see itself on the periphery of global developments at that time. Consequently, although relations with the West remained relatively good for many years, inter alia, because Russia counted on Western investments necessary for

internal development, such events slowly undermined mutual trust. They not only influenced Moscow's attitude towards the West, but also the general perception of Russia's role in the international arena which was later reflected in shifts in foreign policy priorities and changing attitude to integration in the post-Soviet space.

Numerous statements from 2012 indicate that there was not much optimism in Russia about better relations with the West. For example, Putin (2012g) acknowledged that he had no hope for the resolution of the missile defence issue, regardless of the US elections results and that real change would be possible only if Russia, the USA, and Europe were all equal participants in building the security system together. He also complained about Russia's one-sided image abroad, which was distorted and did not reflect "the real situation" (Putin, 2012e). In addition, Putin said that the law connected to Magnitsky's tragedy did not require so much attention from the US Congress, that Russia would respond with similar sanctions and summed up his lack of hope for any positive solution to this problem with the simple "if they pass it they pass it" (Putin, 2012d). These statements clearly demonstrate Russia's disappointment with the actions of the West and a significantly lowered level of trust compared to the beginning of the 21st century.

Furthermore, the perception of changing world order and the weakening West was another important element that influenced Russian leaders' view of their state's international obligations and plans for the post-Soviet space. Lavrov (2012b) stated that it was clear that the 21<sup>st</sup> century world order moved towards a polycentric system, while Putin (2012b) spoke about the traditional Western economies being weakened by the crisis and their leadership being eroded, thus implying that the importance of countries such as Russia and China was growing. Such a perception of the international order was shared by Russian analysts, who believed that due to the serious consequences of the financial crisis in the USA and particularly in the Eurozone, Russia would be able to establish its position as a bridge between China and Western civilization (see e.g. Yurgens in Barakhova et al., 2011).

Overall, the above processes (disappointment in relations with the West, weakened focus on mutual partnership and the perception of the West being in crisis) combined with less need for focusing on internal development, were important factors that influenced changes in dominant NRCs as well

as Russia's perception of the post-Soviet space and its role in the region. In addition, other events in Russia's neighbourhood, such as the colour revolutions and the 2008 war in Georgia deteriorated relations with the West even more, while the developments of the Arab Spring further influenced Russia's views of the international as well as regional situation. Looking from this perspective, the EEU can be seen as a step towards strengthening Russia's position in the region to prevent further regime changes in its neighbourhood. Indeed, Russia's new dominant roles, such as advocate for the peaceful conflict resolution and supporter of states' sovereignty, were often used in opposition to Western "aggressive and interventionist" actions. Consequently, these processes affected Russia's policies in the post-Soviet space. Shifts in dominant NRCs indicate that when Moscow lost any illusions about building a world order characterised by a strategic balance, it focused on (re)building its own sphere of influence through the creation of the EEU, which was seen as a chance to become a new core. However, there were also significant domestic factors that influenced this redirection of RFP.

### **Russia stronger internally, but not without problems**

#### *Russia's new self-perception*

The view of the weakening West and the changing balance of power in the international system was also linked to the leaders' perception of Russia as an increasingly important international actor. Indeed, already Putin's inauguration speech demonstrated how the leadership's perception of Russia and its international roles changed. The President emphasised that Russia had strengthened, regained dignity as a great nation and that the world had seen it risen anew, adding that it had everything to continue development and progress (Putin, 2012a). He also explained that Russia's prospects as a country depended, among others, on the ability to become a leader and centre of gravity for the whole of Eurasia (Putin, 2012a). In a similar tone, Lavrov (2012d) described Russia as "one of the centers of the emerging polycentric international system", which was "fully aware of its level of responsibility in this new stage of history".

The above speeches show that twelve years later the perception of Russia and its role was much different than at the beginning of the century. It

was a view of an effective and quickly developing state rather than the one that absolutely needed to start modernisation. Furthermore, and more importantly for the considerations undertaken in this article, Putin presented Russia as a leader of Eurasia, which indicates changes in his attitude towards Russia's position in the world and integration initiatives. Aware of its weaknesses, in 2000 Russia sought partnership with the West. However, in 2012, one can notice much more self-confident perception of Moscow's place in the international system. Putin (2012i) explicitly said that contemporary Russia was gaining influence in the world and Moscow's offers of support for the European economies which suffered from the recession as well as many initiatives on Syria, such as convening an international conference to resolve the conflict, show that the leadership saw their state as an actor with specific duties and an important role to play on the international stage. This self-perception is strongly reflected in new dominant NRCs, which much more often referred to Russia's international obligations, such as promoting peaceful solutions to conflicts, defending states' sovereignty, and supporting international law.

### *Economic stagnation and elections*

However, despite the internal development and the new self-perception, not everything in Russia looked rosy. Although the state undoubtedly strengthened internally compared to 2000, it is worth taking a closer look at its economic situation in the second analysed period. Russia experienced a serious decline in GDP as a result of the financial crisis, and although it returned to the path of economic growth, the growth rates were far from those of the 2000s (Macrotrends, 2020). Concerns about the economic stagnation as well as increasingly long period in which Putin would be in power after winning the presidential contest, led to rising dissatisfaction of the public and frequent comparisons with the Brezhnev era (Malashenko, 2011; Trifonov, 2011), which is commonly remembered as the time of stagnation. Indeed, opinion polls showed increasing discontent with the same political figures, both Putin and Medvedev, particularly among the middle class frustrated not only with corruption and lawless behaviour of government officials but also with the lack of political competition in Russia. Similar trends were

beginning to be noticeable also among ordinary Russians (Bunin, 2011). Likewise, Russian analysts pointed to the common concern about the budget, and noted that Putin was not able to expand the social contract (see Pismennaya and Styorkin, 2011), around which his first two terms had been built. As such, the proposal to create the EEU can be understood as a distraction from the internal situation and inability to restore growth rates, to which the Russians had already got used to in the first decade of the 21st century. In return, Putin offered the society something bigger, something that would cross Russian borders, and thus would divert attention from the increasingly complex domestic situation.

In addition, some Russian commentators considered the creation of the EEU as the primary objective for Putin's next presidential term. However, it is interesting to note that as his spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, acknowledged, Putin had not discussed these plans with the Kazakhstani and Belarussian leadership. Indeed, just two months earlier, Kazakh Economy Minister, Kairat Kelimbetov, said that there was no need to rush Customs Union expansion (Barakhova et al., 2011). It suggests that Putin's decision to announce plans for the EEU might have been made relatively quickly and could have resulted from a number of internal factors. For example, political analyst Chernyakhovsky saw the idea of the EEU as "the highlight of Putin's campaign and presidency", while Pavlovsky, the ex-Kremlin insider, linking this announcement with the upcoming presidential elections, said that he did not remember any elections since 1996 in which "the president did not promise to restore the best of what the USSR had to offer" (Chernyakhovsky and Pavlovsky in Barakhova et al., 2011). In a similar tone, Petrov (in Balmforth, 2011) pointed out that the initiative was supposed to draw attention to Putin's foreign policy victories at the beginning of the electoral campaign. As such, the presidential campaign and Putin's expected return to the presidency seem to be another strong incentive which led to the promotion of the integration in Russia's neighbourhood.

### *The beginnings of the conservative turn*

The efforts to create the EEU can also be seen as first signs of the conservative turn. The reintegration of the former Soviet republics was a popular idea

in Russia (see Salin in Balmforth, 2011), particularly among conservative voters. As such, Putin turned to them not only with traditional values (see below), but also with the project of the EEU, which was supposed to show Russia's might and bring memory of Russia's greatness by reviving the idea of a supranational body under Moscow's dominance. The presentation of the EEU as a bridge between the EU and Asia or as an equal partner of the EU perfectly fits into this narrative.

Since his return to the presidency, Putin increasingly often emphasized the importance and exceptionality of Russian traditions and values, sometimes juxtaposing them with Western ones, which were supposed to have lower moral value. Already in his inaugural speech, the new-old President said that Russia would achieve its goals if it stood firmly upon "the solid foundation" of "multi-ethnic people's cultural and spiritual traditions, [...] centuries of history, the values that have always been the moral backbone" of Russians' life (Putin, 2012a). He also spoke about "the spirit of unity and creation" being woven "through the entire fabric of Russian history", helping to build might and unity of a great nation and making "enemies retreat", adding that ancestors' "traditions such as genuine deep-rooted patriotism and mutual respect between peoples" must be honoured and preserved (Putin, 2012j). Additionally, Putin emphasised the special role of Orthodoxy, presenting Russia as its defender. For example, he criticised the performance of the punk rock group Pussy Riots staged inside Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, referring to the "moral side of the story" and explaining that steps taken against the group were in the interests of the Russian people and children that needed this kind of protection (Putin, 2012h). The group's trial and sentence were broadly criticised in the West, which could only strengthen the narrative about the superiority of Russian values. The President even spoke about strengthening the economy by reinforcing what he considered "the most important: our [Russia's] moral and ethical principles, based on our multi-century history" (Putin, 2012g), which points to the central importance of Russian values in all areas of life. Consequently, as the narrative in Russia was becoming increasingly conservative and in conflict with liberal values, Russia's relations with the West (most importantly, with Europe) became more and more complicated, which led to a turn towards Eurasia, which was reflected in the popularity of the regional integrator role and increased

involvement in the region. However, the above-described processes might not have been possible without changes in the Russian power circles.

### **Putin and his advisers**

At the beginning of his first presidential term, Putin (2000h) revealed that in his opinion, the Russian economy should not differ significantly from those of developed countries, which indicates that in order to change and bring it closer to the economies of the West, the new President needed reformers, particularly liberal ones. Indeed, in his first years in power Putin was surrounded by many liberal advisers, such as Alexander Voloshin, Andrei Illarionov, and German Gref, who headed the newly formed powerful ministry for Economic Development and Trade. In addition, the position of liberal finance minister, Alexei Kudrin, was so strong that he was sometimes called the second prime minister. Russian analysts wrote about “the liberal-minded Petersburgers” who came to Moscow with Putin (Netreba, 2000) and termed the cabinet “a team of technocrats” who were supposed to implement Putin’s ambitious restructuring plans (RFE/RL, 2000a).

However, over time, the balance of power in the Kremlin began to shift towards the so-called *siloviki*, that is individuals often associated with power structures, characterized by more conservative and anti-Western views (see Bremmer and Charap, 2007). The last significant example of this tendency was the removal of Kudrin, regarded as the leader of the liberal faction, from his post in September 2011. Kudrin’s release was ordered by Putin after he opposed the increase in military spending (Butrin & Parfentyeva, 2011; Pismennaya & Styorkin, 2011). These shifts in the power circles are reflected in the distribution of dominant, often more assertive NRCs. Consequently, these changes also contributed to more anti-Western foreign policy focused on Russia’s sphere of influence, which combined with Putin’s return to the presidency and the idea to make the EEU the cornerstone of his next term, meant strengthened integration processes in the post-Soviet space. Indeed, as Russian analysts point out (Yurgens in Barakhova et al., 2011), the idea to build the EEU was in line with the views of this more conservative faction which was often anti-Western and saw the problems in the Eurozone and in the USA as an opportunity for Russia to restore its sphere of influence.

Furthermore, some Russian analysts (see e.g. Malashenko, 2011) wrote about Putin's lack of triumphant victories. As such, the big plan to create the EEU could be seen as a step towards something significant, to satisfy increasingly indifferent or even disappointed public opinion. As for the President himself, Glikin (2011) points out that the idea of the EEU was nothing more than Putin's personal ambition, who wanted to become a "ruler of Eurasia". Indeed, Putin himself called the integration a "historic milestone" for all post-Soviet states and described it as "one of the poles in the modern world" and "an efficient bridge between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region" that would "help ensure global sustainable development", which suggests the focus of the new-old President on goals broader than just Russia. Putin (2011) also wrote that the union would help its members to establish themselves within the global trade and economy as well as to become "leaders of global growth and drivers of progress". These high-flown plans are largely reflected in internationally ambitious NRCs that were dominant in the second analysed period. Consequently, the comparative analysis of NRCs used by Putin in 2000 and after his return to the presidency shows a significant change in the areas on which the President was focused. In 2000 he was definitely more concerned with the internal development and several times stated that the main goal of RFP was to create favourable conditions for domestic modernisation. But in 2012, Putin used NRCs which were much more focused on world affairs and spoke about stable domestic situation serving Russia's international goals, thus reversing the logic from his first term.

## Conclusions

The analysis demonstrates that the combination of different external and internal factors changed the understanding of Russia's international roles and its obligations towards the post-Soviet space over the years. The examined statements as well as the distribution of dominant NRCs clearly indicate that at the beginning of Putin's first term, Russia saw itself on the periphery of global affairs and domestic dimension was more important for the leadership than the international one, which basically precluded any major integration initiatives in Russia's neighbourhood. However, the changing international

context and the deterioration of relations with the West led to a shift in the understanding of Russia's position in the international arena, while internal strengthening changed Russia's self-perception. These processes resulted in significant shifts in dominant NRCs. At the same time, economic stagnation, presidential campaign, and the guiding idea for the new presidency as well as the beginnings of the conservative turn that put Russia more and more in opposition to the West, led to the performance of the regional integrator role and to the promotion of integration initiatives in the form of the EEU, which began to be seen as an opportunity to become the new core. That said, it is important to note, that these changes might not have taken place without shifts in the power circles and Putin's personal ambitions. As for the last points, a horizontal comparison of the NRCs used by the President and other Russian decision makers could show whether the plans for the EEU were in fact mainly driven by Putin's ambitions or there existed a larger agreement among the Russian elite.

Ten years after Putin's article calling for the creation of the EEU and more than six years after its establishment, the union's legacy is mixed. On the one hand, it has sought to develop further and aimed to create a common market for goods, services, capital, and labour. On the other hand, however, it is difficult to speak about direct economic benefits as Russia has been struggling to encourage deeper integration due to different views regarding economic interests (see Inozemtsev, 2016) and fears of other members about making the union too politicized and geopolitical in nature (see RFE/RL, 2021). Indeed, one can notice the reluctance of the post-Soviet states not only towards accession itself, but also towards deepening of the integration, which indicates that the integration project is perceived as a way to fulfil Russia's hegemonic ambitions, even by members of the EEU. Furthermore, and related, the unsuccessful attempt to include all post-Soviet states, and particularly Ukraine which was supposed to be a key member (see Cadier, 2015), into the project was a serious blow to Moscow's plans for the region. The EEU also did not prevent further regime changes to pro-Western ones in Russia's neighbourhood, which led to aggressive policies aimed at subjugating Kyiv and stopping Ukraine's rapprochement with the West. These subjugation attempts and increasingly aggressive actions towards not only Ukraine (annexation of Crimea, support for the separatists in Donbas, 2022 invasion), but also Georgia (2008 intervention), are one of

the main reasons why Russia's integration projects have not been effective. Through such steps, Russia, instead of being an advocate of states' sovereignty and supporter of international law, presents itself as an aggressor and revisionist of the international order. Consequently, Moscow strengthens its image as a hegemon that is once again trying to subjugate its neighbours, which not only discourages other post-Soviet states from integration, but also arouses anxiety among the EEU members, which is well demonstrated by Kazakhstan's refusal to recognize separatist-controlled territories in Ukraine as independent (RFE/RL, 2022).

More broadly, the analysis of dominant NRCs shows a bigger change in RFP, a move from treating foreign policy as a tool for internal development to the use of internal strength to project Russia's international position. Indeed, at the beginning of his presidency, Putin promised people big modernisation of the country and understood Russia's role as internal developer. However, in 2012 the leadership saw Russia's role as a counterweight to the actions of the West as well as an active player in its neighbourhood and therefore pursued another big project – this time international one – the integration of the post-Soviet space in the form of the EEU. Consequently, the attention paid to perceptions of the leadership and their understanding of Russia's place in the world as well as its duties and responsibilities, point to limitations of material explanations of Russia's regional policies. At the same time, taking material factors into account, in particular Russia's economic situation, and changes in the international system, the article demonstrates some shortcomings of the ideational explanations focusing on Moscow's quest for status and imperial complexes. As such, role theory demonstrates its usefulness in linking different factors and levels of analysis: international (changing geopolitical situation, deterioration of relations with the West), domestic (economic situation, political context, Russia's self-perception), and individual (changes in the power circles, Putin's personal ambitions). In addition, the analysis speaks to role theoretical literature on differences between roles and identities. It validates some research in this area (e.g. McCourt, 2012) demonstrating that in Russia's case changing identity (from being a part of Europe towards a member/leader of Eurasia) led to shifts in more dynamic concepts – roles. Thus, it indicates that roles can indeed be the link between identity and foreign policy behaviour.

Consequently, dominant NRCs can provide useful clues for states' future decisions on the international arena. As such, further role theoretical analyses could highlight some important dynamics that led to another change in Russia's approach to regionalism and a shift from the emphasis on building the EEU towards the creation of a Greater Eurasia (see Lewis, 2018). Likewise, the analysis of Russian leaders' statements in the period preceding the 2022 invasion of Ukraine can show how Putin and other decision makers perceived Russia's role at that time and how their understanding of its international duties could have influenced the decision to attack Ukraine. Indeed, many of the dynamics examined in the article, along with new international factors (fear of Ukraine's rapprochement with the West, the perception of Biden's weakness, the leadership change in Germany, the upcoming presidential elections in France), domestic pressures (economic hardships, erosion of regime's popularity, very difficult situation with the pandemic) and subsequent changes in foreign policy decision-making processes (a narrower circle of advisers, see e.g. Galeotti and Bowen, 2014, Putin's isolation during the pandemic) might have further influenced changes in the leadership's understanding of Russia's roles, which could have contributed to the decision regarding the invasion of Ukraine.

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