

# Russian National Security Strategy: Regime Security and Elite's Struggle for 'Great Power' Status

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## INTRODUCTION

The most common premise concerning Russian foreign policy post-cold war is the assumption that its primary focus has been the restoration of the country's influence in international affairs (Kanet, 2007; Trenin, 2011; Tsygankov, 2005, Stent, 2014). Following a realist approach, it is possible to claim that the quest for a 'great power' with global interests and the ability to protect them has been the cornerstone of Russian Foreign policy for centuries (Tsygankov, 2012). Decisions made by the Russian leadership across last two years at the time of writing, including undeclared war in Ukraine and declared war in Syria, seem to fit perfectly into that narrative since the country was trying desperately in that period to defend its borders from threats of terrorism and hostile military alliances (i.e NATO). Moreover, a realist perspective encompasses the matters of prestige that are traditionally in the domain of a constructivist paradigm of international relations. If the Russian leadership considers status as a means of soft power to promote its agenda in the international arena, then it is natural that foreign policy decision-makers seek to gain this valuable resource at all costs. It is possible to argue about the continuity of choices and to claim that the current Russian leadership— being as restrained by a 'contradiction between overcoming economic backwardness and defending porous frontiers' (Rieber, 2007, 225) as Tsarist and Soviet rulers had been in their foreign policy— has chosen the hard line in their foreign policy. However, a realist approach can be considered as an oversimplification for the investigation of Russian foreign policy under the Putin regime.

The paper argues that a foreign policy driven exclusively by domestic needs has been conducted over a period of 16 years. In order to defend this hypothesis, this article suggests a close examination of the latest National Security strategy adopted on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2015 in the context of trends of internal development within the country.

This article is structured in the following way. The first section will present an analysis of the updated security strategy doctrine, including the differences from the

previous edition. The analysis points to a discrepancy between the doctrine’s mostly defensive nature oriented towards the regime’s domestic security, and claims of great power status against the background of decisive, if not aggressive, foreign policy and the country’s deteriorating economic development. The second section is divided into subsections, which will cover the relationship between status theory in international relations and the incentives of the Russian elite to pursue ‘great power’ status. The final section proposes a possible explanation of the paradox discussed during the discourse analysis of the strategy doctrine. This article concludes by providing a coherent argument on the incentives of modern Russian foreign policy, which cannot be assessed either by a purely realist or purely constructivist approach.

## **I. THE PARADOXES OF NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY DOCTRINE**

The National Security strategy doctrine is one of several documents that defines Russian foreign policy by putting it in the broader context of security, both external and internal. On 31<sup>st</sup> December 2015, the fourth redaction of this document was issued. Whereas the previous doctrine appeared in 2009 after the Russian – Georgian war and was designed to remain in force until 2020, the recent strategy was issued against the background of the war in Eastern Ukraine and a deepening crisis in the relationship between Russia and the West. The very fact that a strategy intended to last 11 years was nevertheless revised is what leads to the conclusion that some fundamental adjustments were introduced.

The new strategy doctrine only partially maintains the security narratives present in the previous version. By the doctrine’s definition, national security embraces the ‘protection of an individual, society and state from both foreign and domestic threats’ (art. 6)<sup>1</sup>. It is exactly the same definition from 2009. However, first major differences appear shortly thereafter. Following the previous document, the strategy proposes a broad understanding of security. In particular, it includes ‘primarily the state, social, informational, ecological, economic, transport, energy security, and security of the individual’ (art.6). In contrast to the short definition, such a framing of national security puts the well-being of the state as the top priority, with consideration for individual security falling last on the list. Unlike in the 2009 version, where there was no such contradiction since the promotion of the

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<sup>1</sup> All citations from the 2015 Strategy are taken from its official publication on “Rossiyskaya Gazeta” webpage and are accompanied with () brackets. Accessed (26.01.2016): <http://www.rg.ru/2015/12/31/nac-bezopasnost-site-dok.html>

constitutional rights of an individual was placed first upon the list of objectives {art. 6}.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, in both strategies there is a completely unquantifiable element of ‘spiritual security. In 2009, it was stated that ‘Russian traditional ideals, spirituality and proper attitude towards historical memory [are reviving]’ {art. 1}, and the 2015 document proclaims this thesis as well (art. 11).

In contrast to the previous strategy, the 2015 redaction is much more moderate in evaluating the successes of the country in all areas except foreign policy. In 2009, its authors claimed nothing less than that the country ‘has managed to overcome the consequences of the systemic political and socio-economic crisis of the late XXth century’ {art. 1}. In 2015, as the main accomplishment of the country’s development, it is suggested that the country has demonstrated its ability to ‘defend sovereignty, independence, state and territorial integrity and compatriots’ rights abroad’ (art. 8). What is more, in comparison to 2009, the current strategy is oriented towards the ideas of stability and regime protection rather than development. In its first articles, the 2009 strategy set the goal of transforming the nation into ‘one of the leading powers judging by the level of technological progress, the quality of life of the population, and influence on global processes’ {art. 1}, and to becoming ‘one of the leaders in world economy through effective participation in the global division of labour, [and] increasing the global competitiveness of the national economy’ {9}. In the 2015 strategy doctrine, there is no clear image of any future goals. Instead it is focused from the very beginning solely on the stability and protection of the country in a dangerous external environment.

The need to protect the country’s stability arises mainly from the threat posed by the global West, according to the new document. The new strategy doctrine appears much more explicit in this area when compared with the previous edition. Formerly, despite existing arguments such as debates about the US anti-missile program and NATO-enlargement, there was a goal to ‘build equal and strategic partnership with the USA on the basis of joint interests’ {18}. In the 2015 strategy doctrine, articles 12, 15, 16, 17 and 18 (disregarding any talk about economic, social or any other kind of internal development) provide an image of the hostile international environment the Russian state has to operate in. There is a long list of threats of conflict in modern international relations, according to which the main opponent to the Russian Federation is NATO and the USA. First and

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<sup>2</sup> All citations from the 2009 Strategy are taken from its official publication on “Rossiyskaya Gazeta” webpage and are accompanied with {} brackets  
Accessed (26.01.2016) <http://www.rg.ru/2009/05/19/strategia-dok.html>

foremost, Russia is threatened by ‘the support of the US and EU of the anti-constitutional coup d’etat in Ukraine, which led to a deep schism of Ukrainian society and the onset of an armed conflict...framed Russia as an enemy among the Ukrainian people [and]...transformed Ukraine into a long-term breeding ground of instability in Europe and directly on Russian borders’ (art.17). It is particularly emphasized that ‘the practice of toppling down legitimate political regimes, provoking instability within a state’ (art.18) is becoming more and more widespread. Accordingly, the question of information security becomes of the utmost importance in view of the fact that communication technologies are used ‘by some countries’ in order to ‘achieve the geopolitical goals resorting to manipulation with public opinion and history falsification’ (art.21).

In the context of being surrounded by various threats, the following long-term strategic interests are formulated in article 30: ‘strengthening of defense capabilities, promotion of the constitutional order, independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation; strengthening of political and social stability, development of democratic institutions, and improvement of communication between state and civil society; promotion of stable demographic development of the country; promotion of social stability, promotion of better living-standards and health-care; development of traditional spiritual-moral values; increasing the competitiveness of national economy’, and finally the ‘maintenance of the status of a great power’ (art.30).

The first peculiar feature of this list is the fact that, except for the last proposition, all other strategic interests directly related to foreign policy are presumed to be vectored towards internal development and regime stability. What is more, such focus on internal development is framed, not in the discourse of global competition or globalization as it was formulated in 2009, but in the context of a necessity to defend the regime against threats. These threats are defined as mostly external, although hints and links towards internal destabilizing forces are present in the text as well. In an analysis of the strategy, links towards foreign interference in Russian internal affairs can be found across the entire document. It is stated that there are efforts aimed at the ‘destabilization of the internal political and social situation in the country, including instigating “color revolutions” and the destruction of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values’ (art. 43). What is more ‘measures are taken for the prevention and suppression of intelligence and other destructive operations of special services and organizations of foreign states that are harmful to national interests; acts of terrorism, manifestations of religious radicalism, nationalism, separatism and ... to protect citizens and society from the destructive informational influence of extremist and

terrorist organizations, foreign intelligence services, and propaganda’ (art. 47). Here it should be noted that previously separated discourses of terrorism and foreign propaganda are merged and valued as an equal threat. Moreover, a threat is posed by ‘the erosion of traditional Russian spiritual-moral values and the weakening of the unity of the multinational people of the Russian Federation by external expansion of culture and information (including the distribution of low-quality pop-culture products)’ (art. 79) and consequently the state should ‘protect the cultural sovereignty ... and society from foreign ideological expansion’ (art. 82).

The rejection of any kind of revolution against an authoritarian government has been the cornerstone of Russian arguments with Western partners for a decade. In fact, ‘the consequences of Color Revolutions were regarded by the Russian elite as the result of the United States’ and the EU’s foreign policies’ (Gretskiy et al., 2014, 382). In February 2011, Russian president Dmitrii Medvedev explained the Arab revolutions as having been ‘instigated by outside forces’ and warned the Russian government: ‘Let’s face the truth. They have been preparing such a scenario for us, and now they will try even harder to implement it’ (Freedman, 2011). Finally, in 2014, in a meeting with his advisory Security Council, Vladimir Putin stated explicitly: ‘We see what tragic consequences the wave of so-called color revolutions led to... for us this is a lesson and a warning. We should do everything necessary so that nothing similar ever happens in Russia’ (Putin, 2014)<sup>3</sup>. What is more, the narrative of ‘national-traitors’ can be considered as the continuation of the discourse of ‘the agents of the foreign influence’, which was enforced in the country after the first wave of mass protest in Russia in the aftermath of fraudulent parliamentary elections in 2011. Against the background of a singular law regarding foreign agents, which was introduced on the 20<sup>th</sup> July 2012<sup>4</sup> and made it nearly impossible for any NGO connected with politics to work in the country, the narrative of ‘national-traitors’ was introduced in a presidential speech to the Federal Assembly two years after the Crimea Annexation. In the new national strategy, this discourse has become a dominant one.

The second characteristic issue of the new security priorities is the fact that, not only has the number of long-term goals formally stated in the strategy increased, but so has their ambiguity. The previous version of the security strategy doctrine described only three closely interrelated long-term goals: ‘the development of democracy and civil society and increasing the competitiveness of the national economy; promotion of the constitutional

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<sup>3</sup> Reuters. Darya Korsunskays «Putin says Russia must prevent 'color revolution'»  
<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-security-idUSKCN0J41J620141120>

<sup>4</sup> Federal Law of the Russian Federation from 20th July 2012. N 121-Φ3

order, independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation; [and] transformation of the country into a global power, whose actions are aimed towards the maintenance of strategic stability and partner relationships in the context of a multipolar world’ {art. 21}. All of these goals support each other and constitute a coherent argument.

In the 2015 strategy, however, there are six objectives which contain many contradictions with one another. For example, it remains unclear how the ‘promotion of political stability’, ‘strengthening of national agreement’, and ‘development of democratic institutions’ (which ultimately embeds an element of uncertainty and instability due to the intrinsic unpredictability of election results), correlate with each other. In view of the previous articles on economic issues – according to which economic development is conceptualized in terms of the ability of the country to resist external attempts to influence its domestic and foreign policies with the help of sanctions (art. 9, 24) – ‘why’ and ‘how’ the ‘improvement of competitiveness of the national economy’ should be achieved remains vague. Finally, the concept of the ‘development of traditional spiritual-moral values’ is vague as well. It is briefly defined in article 78 as ‘the priority of spiritual values over material ones, the protection of human life, rights and liberties, family, creational labor, responsibility before the country, moral and collective values, humanism, mercy, justice, mutual assistance, historical unity of the people of the Russian Federation and historical continuity.’ However, even that definition, located 48 articles after the formulation of the long-term goals, leaves dozens of possible contradictory interpretations, including, for example, anti-homosexual rhetoric and return to sharia law. Moreover, returning to the previous point, the range of actions from foreign powers that actually pose a threat for national security is never precisely defined. Consequently, one can put everything in the framework of ‘other destructive actions,’ including any alleged connections with a public protest, should one appear.

Following the long-term strategic resolutions, nine priorities of Russian security are subsequently listed. Considering their order as an indication of importance, as determined by the authors of the strategy, it is possible to support the main argument of the centrality of ‘regime security’ in the strategy. The first two priorities are ‘national defense, [and] state and public security’ (art. 31) with the promotion of high living standards, economic growth science, culture, ecology and strategic stability being of lesser importance. What is more, in the following sections that provide a more detailed explanation of these priorities, there are only 5 articles on ‘improving the living standards of the Russian population,’ compared with 17 concerning defense and the security of the government. This alone adequately signifies

the difference in importance attached to the different priorities. It is worth noting that no reference to democracy or civil society is found in this list, whereas there are references to them in the previous section on long-term national interests. Once again, there is a break of logic and an inconsistency between the various parts of the document, which makes it initially difficult to determine the true priorities intended by the authors of the document.

The only proposition which is depicted clearly and is present in all parts of the document, even those concerned with the development of human capital or economy, is that of regime security. For example, in the section on economic development, the following characteristics are used to describe the priorities of the government: ‘the strengthening of the currency system and ensuring its sovereignty,’ ‘the implementation of a rational import substitution and reduction of dependency on foreign technologies,’ and ‘the establishment of strategic reserves of raw mineral resources’ (art. 62). Whereas the section on ‘improving living standards’ contains an argument on improving ‘the development of information infrastructure and the availability of information on various aspects of socio-political, economic, and spiritual life’ (art. 53).

Consequently, that which helps to develop an understanding of the ambiguity and contradictive character of the strategy and its set of long-term goals is the narrative of regime security in the international environment of a ‘besieged fortress’, according to which the population should unite around the government in order to prevent foreign forces from ruining the country. Such a statement is not new for a discourse on Russian foreign policy. For example, Stalin’s conception of ‘building socialism in one country’ can be considered a predecessor of such a concept. Moreover, a general focus of an authoritarian regime on internal security is not a new phenomenon in international relations. Previously in 2010, Stephen Blank stated, ‘The Russian experience and overall security policy conforms to the pattern discernible in Asian and Third World countries where security is primarily internal security’ (Blank, 2010, 181). Furthermore, some researchers consider this phenomenon to even be beneficial for particular countries since, ‘without the security of the regime, the security of the state is likely to fall into utter despair if not disappear altogether’ (Ayoob, 2002, 46). However, all one could expect from a regime that is oriented towards internal security would be the establishment of peaceful foreign policy without any major attempts to challenge the existing structure of international relations. The annexation of Crimea, interference in the Syrian conflict, and an aggressive anti-West rhetoric, seem to contradict the idea of the supremacy of internal issues over external ones for a regime where ‘the proliferation of multiple military forces, intelligence and police forces ... often enjoying

more resources than do their regular armies, and their governments' recourse to rent-seeking, authoritarian and clientelistic policies' (Blank, 2010, 181).

At the same time, the doctrine itself contains a possible explanation for the discrepancy between the defensive nature of Russian security strategy and its aggressive foreign policy. Amidst all long-term proposals, there is one which describes the relationship between Russia and the rest of the world, although it has been formulated in a vague manner: the 'maintenance of the status of a great power'. In 2009, the objective was to become one of the leading world powers, whereas in 2015, only the 'status' of such is necessary. Consequently, Russian foreign policy is not aimed towards a purpose that can be assessed or measured, such as the position of the country as one of the leading world economies or the goal to overcome the GDP per capita level of Portugal. On the contrary, it is oriented towards what is essentially only a vague idea of 'status'. This orientation is what leads to a discussion about the role of a country's status and image in international relations in regards to regime security, as well as the peculiarities of foreign and domestic policy framing in the current Russian Federation.

## **II. STATUS THEORY AND MODERN RUSSIA**

Following the basic constructivist argument of Alexander Wendt (1999), the social world can be perceived as chiefly 'made of and driven by ideas.' Status has always been considered an important element of great power and there is a vast corpus of literature on this question (Onea 2014; Paul et al., 2014; Steele, 2008; Wolf, 2011; Wood, 2013). A good summary of the knowledge on status in international relations can be found in Volgy, Corbetta, Grant, and Baird's article 'Major Powers and the Quest for Status in International Politics.' According to Volgy et al., an acquisition of high status recognition among other countries matters in three different ways. Firstly, a country with such status can expect to be visible in major international conflicts and issues. Secondly, high status leads to a deeper involvement in international agendas. And finally, such status is an important resource for holding office (Volgy et al., 2011, p.10). In the same article, Volgy et al. proposed that Russia constitutes a unique category, being a country that believes itself to be a great power without all the capacities of one. What is special about Russia is that, in contrast to other over-achieving status-inconsistent countries that are afraid of losing this status and tend not to

take high-risk action (Volgy et al., 2011, p.11-12), Russia clearly conducts highly confrontational foreign policy.

It is universally acknowledged in academic literature that in order to become a great power, a state needs something to support such a claim: a combination of military and economic resources, as well as co-optive and coercive powers combined with attractiveness and recognition by other Great powers (Levy, 1981; Neumann, 2008; Nye, 1990). According to these criteria, modern Russia has limited reasons to call itself a great power.

Russia’s military capacities are limited with the exception of its nuclear arsenal. Otherwise, Russian armed forces are outdated for modern warfare and are able only to win in an open conflict against a weak opponent, such as Georgia in 2008. Furthermore, the Russian economic structure is as unbalanced and dependent on natural oil and gas prices as it used to be in the 1990s. Even in the mid-2000s when the country had opportunities to develop, ‘Russia remain[ed] overly dependent on the export of raw materials, primarily oil and gas. The change in Russia’s political system [had] aggravated the lag between research and development in the technology sector, while a brain drain [had] further reduced the pool of talent necessary for innovation’ (Rieber, 2007, 259). Despite decades of high-oil prices, the Russian population in 2015 is still extremely poor, with 79% having money only for basic food and clothes and 9% suffering a shortage of food.<sup>5</sup>

What is worse, the Russian economy is desperately underdeveloped even in the sphere of natural resource extraction. For example, Russian oil and gas companies have completely overlooked the strategic challenge of shale oil and gas industries for Russian economy (Ocelik et Osicka, 2014), demonstrating a principal unwillingness to modernize. Instead of any technological developments or a search for new markets or a better supply, the Russian elite, in particular Gazprom chief Alexei Miller (Gazprom, 2011)<sup>6</sup>, claimed that ‘As for shale gas—it is an international PR campaign, well planned by mass media. There are plenty of those campaigns —global warming, biofuel, I can give other examples.’

Finally, Russian soft power is limited mostly to the spoils of trade wars or the direct financing of certain politicians. This includes far-right parties in European Union countries or attempts to bribe those such as Victor Yanukovich with \$15 billion of credit in order to make him reject any economic association with the EU. In fact, there have been no major

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<sup>5</sup> VCIOM. Press – release № 3010 (December, 27, 2015)

Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2016 from <http://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=115531>

<sup>6</sup> Gazprom, 2011d. Press Conference Following the Topical European Energy Issues Roundtable

Discussion. Accessed 26 January 2016 from: <http://www.gazprom.com/f/posts/80/905737/krugly-stol-stenogramma-eng-2011-02-21.pdf>.

diplomatic achievements in recent Russian foreign policy – in 2014, at the UN, only 11 countries out of 193 supported Russia in its case against Ukraine over the annexation of Crimea. Generally, according to the study of the Pew Research Center after Crimea’s annexation, ‘across the 44 countries surveyed, a median percentage of 43% have unfavorable opinions of Russia, compared with 34% who are positive. Negative ratings of Russia have increased significantly since 2013 in 20 of the 36 countries surveyed in both years, decreased in six and stayed relatively similar in the remaining 10’ (Pew Research Center, 2015, 3)<sup>7</sup>.

Consequently, judging by the facts presented above, it is possible to agree with the idea that the ‘Russian Federation is an overachiever, enjoying a Great power status without having the capabilities of a Great power’ (Freire, 2011, p. 74). And according to the provisions of the national security strategy, such a status constitutes great value for the Russian leadership. The current regime seeks to maintain this status without making any real efforts in terms of the long-term development of the country, which leads to the question of what status as a ‘Great Power’ means for the current Russian leadership.

It is presumed in the literature surrounding this question, that ‘Russia seeks to be respected as a great power because of deep seated beliefs about its own identity and its place in the world’ (Ambrosio, 2005, p. viii). Some scholars appealingly propose that under the Putin regime, status concerns have become more important than questions regarding security or the economy on Russia’s foreign policy agenda (Heller, 2013). Prominent scholars have developed an argument that the lack of status and respect is the crucial problem in Russia-West relations, and it is due to the lack of such recognition that crises of trust constantly emerge (Monaghan, 2008; Sakwa, 2008; Stent, 2014; Tsygankov, 2012). For instance, Vincent Pouliot suggests that ‘if NATO wants Russia to play by the rules of the security-from-the-inside-out game, it should provide it with enough cultural-symbolic resources to have a minimally successful hand in the game’ (Pouliot, 2010, p. 239). Another example of such an approach is the position of Jeffrey Mankoff (Mankoff, 2007, p. 133), according to whom, ‘a Russia that is sure of itself and its standing in the world is likely to make a more stable, predictable partner for the West’. It is hard to disagree with such an approach, given that respect and recognition are purely in the realm of symbolic politics and do not require any material interests to be spent. However, such a position omits the very reasons as to why Vladimir Putin’s elite group places so much emphasis on the

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<sup>7</sup> Pew Research Centre. Russia’s Global Image Negative amid Crisis in Ukraine (July, 9, 2014) Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2016 from <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/09/russias-global-image-negative-amid-crisis-in-ukraine/>

question of status and what they really want from it. In order to answer this question, one cannot rely solely on the framework of foreign policy and has to look at the tracks of Russian internal political development.

The Russian Federation of today is by no means a democratic country. It is an electoral authoritarian regime. What is more, the position of the current ruling elite is the result of a long history of intra-elite struggle with all intra-elite conflicts being resolved as a zero-sum game during the first 12 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Gelman, 2015). As a result, by the mid-2000s, the governing group which had dealt with all its rivals had no incentives to limit the maximization of its powers since, ‘given the lack of constraints, [it was] able to achieve [its] goals in “pure” forms without major concessions’ (Gelman, 2015, 10). Consequently, since modern Russia is an authoritarian regime with elites having full control of it, it is crucial for foreign policy analysis to take into account the preferences of this group that rules Russia.

Answering the question of what the elite’s beliefs are is not an easy task since it is principally impossible to understand what another person thinks in the entire complexity of his mind. However, judging from the information available, one can assume certain points. Concerning the portrait of the elites that won in this uncompromised rivalry, one may refer to Giorgi Yavlinski’s (Yavlinski, 2015, 249) description: ‘despite the attempts to bring ideology, appealing to the most primitive instincts, into their politics, this group [the ruling elite] in fact denies any societal values that go beyond individual well-being.’ The latter is a crucial point: every single moment of staying in power leads to the personal enrichment of the small group of Russian elite beneficiaries. Corruption in general can be conceptualized as a cornerstone of the modern Russian political system (Shlapentokh, 2013). However, the elite group in such a regime can never feel totally secure. Taking that into account, the apparent paradox of contradiction between Russia’s foreign policy, the defensive nature of its National Security doctrine, and its ‘great power status’ concern can be answered.

### **III. REGIME SECURITY IN THREAT**

Returning to the content of the national security strategy, it must be noted that the doctrine’s main narrative is the protection of internal security, which is threatened by external dangers with the help of the so-called ‘fifth column’. The central pillars of this

narrative are the notion of ‘political stability’ (art.30), the conceptualization of information as the means of toppling down the government (art. 21), and the necessity to ‘strengthen the internal unity of Russian society’ (art. 26).

Such a narrative illustrates that the Russian ruling class is well aware of the role that popular movements, in the aftermath of unfair elections, played in the process of toppling down an authoritarian government in countries such as Serbia and Ukraine (Bunce and Wolchik, 2011; Beissinger, 2007) with at least moral support from the Western democracies. What is more, the fears of the Russian elite do have rational backing. As Adam Przeworski (Przeworski, 1991, 58) noted: ‘Authoritarian balance is underpinned by lies, fear and economic well-being.’ Sergey Guriev and Daniel Treisman have shown that in modern authoritarian regimes, the level of repression correlates with economic growth (Guriev, Treisman, 2015a; Guriev, Treisman, 2015b). However, one of the strategic disadvantages currently embedded in Russian authoritarianism is the inability to promote any kind of long-term economic development. After 2012, as Vladimir Gel’man (Gel’man, 2015, 118) points out ‘lies and fear, which had previously supported authoritarian equilibrium in Russia alongside economic growth, no longer served as efficient tools for maintaining the political status-quo.’ Both of these factors — the dependence on highly volatile natural resource exports and the decades-long deterioration of other sectors of industries and agriculture — were evident as early as 4 years ago. The point regarding predicted economic grievances should be stressed, as well as noting that the current crisis of the Russian economy is not a direct consequence of aggression against Ukraine and imposed western sanctions (Dreger, 2015), but rather of the structural problems of an extreme dependence on oil and gas prices and the fact that industrial diversification is not highly developed (Eller, et.al, 2016).

Such an economic model has made the Russian elite vulnerable in the face of public protests. The biggest one in modern Russian history erupted after the fraudulent parliamentary elections of 2011 and was finally suppressed with the help of brute force on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Despite that fact, the legitimacy of the ruling elite was not strong enough: even public polls, which are generally not the best method for measuring legitimacy, showed only moderate support for the government in 2012-2013. In August 2012, the approval ratings of Vladimir Putin were only 48% compared with 60% in May. His ratings were higher even during the time of ‘monetization of exemptions’ in 2005 – 55% respectively<sup>8</sup>. The position of the government could have been shaken in the case of deeper economic

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<sup>8</sup> Vedomosti. Putin’s rating is on its bottom (April, 17, 2012)  
Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2016 from  
[http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2012/08/17/rejting\\_putina\\_na\\_minimume](http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2012/08/17/rejting_putina_na_minimume)

crisis and a collision of political and socio-economic protest, which can be conceptualized as the primary threat to regime security. There was a sudden demand for a new source of legitimacy, and the maintenance of a ‘Great Power Image’ can be considered an answer that the elite have found for this question.

Traditionally, governments use the image of a superpower as a useful tool of promoting support in domestic policy (Merriman, 2004). Russia is certainly not an exception in that regard. In modern Russian history, an example of successful status acquisition was during the second Chechen war when, according to Hanna Smith (Smith, 2014, 361), ‘national unity had given a boost to Russian self-confidence and Russian great power identity had found its place in Russian domestic discourse.’ However, by the end of 2013, a decisive and aggressive foreign policy had turned into the only means available for the regime to defend the ‘great power image of the country’ against the background of economic decline and a collapse of state-structures, thereby providing citizens with the means of survival. Since the Russian elite seriously considers the possibility of external support for domestic protests, the genuine motives of the EU and the USA in their policies towards Russia are not that important. However, the incentive of the current Russian elite to remain in power at all costs is crucial for understanding modern Russian foreign policy in general, and the recent National Security strategy doctrine in particular.

#### **IV. GREAT POWER STATUS AND REGIME SECURITY**

The paradox of the Russian government conducting costly foreign policies of confrontation with the West and the operation in Syria, while simultaneously claiming ‘status concern’ as the long-term goal of the National Security Strategy Doctrine — against the background of the government’s primary concern of regime security — can be explained in the following way: the ‘status of a great power’ can be considered the core means of keeping the domestic audience under control, mobilizing support for the current Russian regime, and overcoming the internal threats to “political stability” (i.e. regime security).

A further argument is the fact that, after the drop in oil prices and structural inefficiency of the Russian economic model, the development of a ‘great power status’ remained the only recourse left to the Russian government to gain the symbolic value necessary to promote such a status in the eyes of the population at home. And in fact, the Russian leadership has managed to achieve a lot with such a policy. The rise of patriotism

in Russia following Crimea’s annexation provided the regime with the uncharacteristic support it needed in the context of forthcoming deepening economic grievances. Following the current argument, the emphasis of the ‘image’ in article 18 of the Strategy Doctrine becomes the most important position for the current Russian leadership, which also explains why the document never clearly defines how such a ‘status’ should look. It is possible, in line with the main argument of this article, to argue that the more undefined and unclear the notion of ‘status’ is, the more useful it is for the objective purposes of manipulation of domestic public opinion.

Moreover, it is possible to propose an answer to the question: ‘why does Russia use such strong language as presenting Western nations at one time as “brothers” and “friends,” while at other times castigating them for “betraying” the established principles and agreements?’ (Tsygankov, 2014, 347). Both aspects are purely instrumental and serve the sole purpose of achieving tactical goals. As a result, it does not make sense to try to understand modern Russian foreign policy just by looking into the words that Russian politicians put forth. Narratives can be reversed in a matter of weeks by propaganda means in order to justify the exact actions of the Russian leadership. The most recent story of turning Turkey from a strategic partner into the ‘traitorous enemy’ after the downing of a Russian fighter jet over Syria may serve as an illustration to this idea. Though this opens the way for another debate concerning the predictability of Russian foreign policy in particular, and of authoritarian regimes in general.

Finally, it is possible to answer why, regardless of having a national security strategy oriented mostly towards the problems of domestic security, the current Russian leadership has been in recent years conducting a foreign policy oriented towards constant involvement in international crises. The Russian government has to perform the role of a great power in international relations in order to keep such a status in the eyes of its domestic audience. According to polls conducted in March 2015, 47% of respondents preferred that the country be a great power ‘respected and afraid of,’ for the sake of the country’s economic well-being<sup>9</sup>. In January 2016, against the background of a deepening economic crisis, 36% of the population considered Russia to be a great power in the world, compared with 27% in 2015<sup>10</sup>. The fact is that, from the perspective of at least 30% of the Russian population,

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<sup>9</sup> Levada Center. Press-release “Positions of the Russian Federation on International Arena” (March, 23, 2015)

Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2016 from <http://www.levada.ru/old/23-03-2015/pozitsii-rossii-na-mezhdunarodnoi-arene>

<sup>10</sup> Levada Center. Publication “Nearly half of Russians think that the West sees Russia as a concurrent” (February, 4, 2016)

Russia being considered an enemy by most developed countries does not weaken their pride for the motherland but instead strengthens it. Even admitting that the country is economically weak compared with the West, people are proud that at least in terms of foreign policy capacities, Russia seems to be on equal footing. And this is the value that turns into a markedly high approval rating of the Russian government. Consequently, by means of aggressive foreign policy, the Russian elite are trying to preserve the image of Russia being great power in order to guarantee the safety of the regime.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of the 2015 national security strategy doctrine, in the context of the complex structure of Russian domestic policy, allows a number of conclusions to be drawn. To begin with, there is only one objective purpose that the Russian leadership is genuinely committed to — in particular the prevention of a regime change, which is being achieved by keeping control over all political processes within the country. But in order to meet this goal, decision-makers must resort to aggressive foreign policy and a demonstration of military might in local conflicts. This is the comprehensive argument regarding Putin’s foreign policy. Neither the thesis of Hannes Adomeit (Adomeit, 1995, p. 65) that, ‘[a] Russia that is obsessed with its lost great power identity possesses many irrational, unpredictable, contradictory traits in its foreign policy’, nor the suggestion of Richard Sakwa that the ‘Russian problem’ is not about a security dilemma, but rather a question of the status and respect from the West that it expects (Sakwa, 2008), covers the whole story. The Russian ruling elite does behave rationally, if the ultimate goal of this rationality is the preservation of the regime’s status and security. Since status, particularly international status, is the only means left to the authority against the background of economic failures and collapse of political institutions to keep control over power on the home front. At the same time, and due to the very nature of status as an issue created to a large extent by media and symbols, one can expect high flexibility of Russian foreign policy combined with low commitment to particular purposes. The crucial question for Russian authority becomes how to interpret its every action as a ‘status’ achievement.

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Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> March, 2016 from <http://www.levada.ru/2016/02/04/pochti-polovina-grazhdan-schitayut-chto-zapad-vidit-v-rossii-konkurenta/>

An analysis of the Russian national security doctrine leads to several important questions of the proper unit for analysis of modern Russian foreign policy. What is clear is that the traditional categories of “national interest” and “state security” are not applicable in the case of Russia. Usually (according to a realist approach), the discrepancy between national and ruling elite interests is impossible to separate, although in modern Russia the only interest that does matter is the maximization of power in the hands of a particular group. Consequently, the only aspect of analysis a researcher has to consider in regards to Russia is that concerning ‘regime security’.

Finally, the findings of this article illustrate, in the case of the Russian security doctrine, the role that status concerns can perform in an authoritarian regime in times of systemic crisis. It can be conceptualized both as a guarantee against ‘foreign support’ for domestic protests, and as an ultimate means of gaining popular support for the government. Status is the recourse necessary to consolidate citizens and prevent domestic unrest. Such a reading can explain the evident paradox, since the Russian ruling elite want to enjoy great power status without any investment into the country’s long-term development both politically and economically.

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