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Master's Thesis

Geopolitical Identity Transformation in Conditions of International Isolation: A Case Study of
Russia

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1. Introduction

1.1. Motivation

There is every reason to believe that the structural changes Russia has undergone over the past decades necessitate the justification of a new concept of identity, the formation of which is fraught with numerous challenges. The identity crisis has both internal and external dimensions, as the formation of a new, stable, and integral Russian identity is influenced not only by values and worldview aspects but also by geopolitical factors. The boundaries and contours of a nation's identity are shaped by its position, weight, and influence in the global community, as well as by the rest of the world's attitude toward it.

The flow of publications on the issue of identity continues to grow. Identity — whether political, national, regional, ethnic, religious, or sociocultural — is a topic that is widely and eagerly discussed. Can be said that the most complex construct in this context is the geopolitical component, where multiplicity serves as the systemic basis that defines the integrative interaction of various elements. Identity carries significant potential, the study and application of which require new ideas and research approaches, as well as the synthesis of different paradigms. The interest of political scientists in this area can be explained by two factors: firstly, the problem of identity occupies an important place and significance in the study of political processes; secondly, the search for self-identification remains a priority for many states in the context of new challenges.

1.2. Structure

The first section is dedicated to a literature review, which will cover key academic sources on constructivism in the area of identity formation and transformation, beginning with the foundational works of seminal constructivists and moving on to scholars who have expanded or critiqued the approach. It will also include relevant literature on geopolitical identity as a distinct category, as well as research on international sanctions as an instrument of exclusion, which is relevant for examining the topic in this context.

The theoretical framework will outline the approach this paper takes to studying state identity transformation, drawing on the constructivist perspective discussed. It will provide a detailed explanation of the theoretical lens through which the empirical data will be analyzed. Following this, the empirical analysis will build upon the methodological and theoretical sections that structure and inform it. The empirical analysis will apply a set of related concepts within a constructivist approach to examine the process of geopolitical identity change in response to sanctions pressure and isolationist actions, presented in chronological order for the entire period

under study. Based on this, an analysis of the dichotomies will be conducted with discussion, followed by a conclusion summarizing the entire work.

1.3. Subject of research and goals

The transformation of a state's geopolitical identity, particularly under conditions of international isolation, presents a complex and significant area of inquiry. A key question arises: how does international isolation influence a state's geopolitical identity? Sanctions and restrictive measures have tangible effects on both the discourse of political elites and the daily lives of citizens, impacting their economic well-being, lifestyle, and social dynamics, all of which shape political perceptions. These shifts, in turn, affect political behavior and electoral preferences, influencing voter decisions, political alignments, and support for government policies — sometimes producing paradoxical outcomes. Geopolitical identity is not only the identity of a nation and its people but also the collective ideas about the state's position and role in an increasingly globalized world. The nature of statehood and a nation's self-perception are closely tied to this identity, encompassing attitudes toward various aspects of the global order and perceptions of the geopolitical landscape.

This study will examine the case of Russia to explore the phenomenon of identity transformation under international isolation. Russia's experience provides a rich and nuanced context for understanding how a state's geopolitical identity evolves and adapts in the face of external pressures. The central research question is: How does international isolation shape the Russian public's understanding of Russia's geopolitical role and national identity? To explore this, we must consider several related sub-questions: How do Russian attitudes towards international sanctions influence their perceptions of Russia's place in global geopolitics? What impact does international isolation have on public opinion regarding Russia's foreign policy decisions and its relationships with other countries? Additionally, how do perceptions of geopolitical identity differ between Russia's youth and older generations in the context of international isolation? Furthermore, we investigate how the Russian government's policies and rhetoric are adapted to reinforce national identity in response to international sanctions and isolation. What strategies are employed by the government to maintain a sense of unity and purpose amidst these external pressures, and how effective are these strategies in shaping public sentiment?

Based on this, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- International isolation will lead to a noticeable shift in the political rhetoric of Russian government officials, emphasizing themes of sovereignty, resistance against Western influence, and the promotion of a multipolar world order;

- International isolation will lead to a redefinition of perceived threats and allies, with a decline in perceived threats from non-Western countries and an increase in perceived threats from Western countries;

- The discourse surrounding international isolation in Russia will contribute to the reinforcement of a distinct geopolitical narrative that emphasizes resilience against external pressures and the importance of sovereignty;

- Public opinion in Russia will reflect increased nationalistic sentiments and a stronger identification with a distinct identity that is separate from Western norms and values.

Also, must be noted that the expected contribution of this study is multifaceted. One of the main objectives is to fill a noticeable gap in the current understanding of how international isolation affects national identity and geopolitical perceptions, with a particular focus on Russia. By examining the ways in which international isolation affects Russia's self-perception and identity, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics. In this way, the work will contribute to a better understanding of the internal mechanisms underlying identity transformation in response to external pressure.

Moreover, the results of this study may have important policy implications. By analyzing how Russia's identity changes in response to international isolation, the study will shed light on the effectiveness of sanctions and isolation as diplomatic tools. This insight will be valuable in practical terms, offering a clearer understanding of the potential consequences and strategic considerations associated with implementing such measures against other countries. Finally, the study will examine the broader impact of changes in Russia's self-perception and identity on its international relations and role in the global system.

2. Literature review

The literature review begins by delving into the constructivist approach, highlighting the critical role of identities in shaping foreign policy strategies and emphasizing its analytical value in explaining the intersubjective nature of international relations. It underscores the importance of social interactions, norms, and values in shaping the international order and state behavior. The review then shifts focus to the concept of geopolitical identity, exploring various perspectives on how it has been conceptualized and interpreted by different scholars, particularly in the context of Russia's unique geopolitical position and its influence on identity and foreign policy. Since transformation must be triggered by something, the final section examines the impact of international isolation and sanctions on Russia's geopolitical identity. It examines the views on the effectiveness and consequences of sanctions as a tool in international relations, especially in the context of relevant experience.

2.1. Constructivism and Identity formation

Constructivism shows an inextricable connection between the foreign policy strategies of states and the processes of the formation of collective ideas and identities. By the mid-1990s, modern constructivism had taken shape in Western science as a theory of international relations. The theory of constructivism (in the American tradition — the theory of social constructivism) enjoys noticeable popularity in the study of international political processes. It's worth starting with the fact that one of the most famous constructivists, Alexander Wendt (1999), understands constructivism not as a substantive theory but as a philosophy of the social sciences and its main goal is to illuminate the ontological reality of intersubjective knowledge. Other authors, such as Emmanuel Adler (2005), view it as a «meta-theory», whose interest isn't so much in the contradiction between «science» and a literary interpretation of «stories» or a naturalistic concept of science, which is based on the theories and philosophy of science, as much as on the nature of the social sciences themselves and, accordingly, the theory of international relations. It's often noted that constructivism is only an analytical tool because it does not have a predictive function (Checkel 1998). Barkin (2003), for example, views constructivism as a cluster of research methods and analytical tools, «a set of assumptions about how to study politics» (p. 338).

In any case, no matter what to call it, constructivists were able to prove that it's not enough to proceed from pragmatic, strategic, and situational interests in order to fully reveal the relationships between players and the structures of the world order. Although constructivism accepts the foundations of both realist and liberal theory about the existence of states in a structure of anarchy with an unequal distribution of power, it argues that the structure of international order rests on the social interactions of states and that the international system is best described as an

intersubjective society of states (Wendt 1995). The ontological understanding of the social world required constructivists to combine sociological, linguistic, comparative political science, and comparative historical methods. We can refer to the main provisions of constructivism noted in the work of Finnemore and Sikkink (2001, p. 392), which include the following: «(a) human interaction isn't shaped by material factors but primarily by ideational ones; (b) the most significant ideational factors in this context are «intersubjective» beliefs as shared collective understanding; and (c) these beliefs construct the actors' identities and interests».

While structuralists try to explain why transformations of systems of international relations occur, constructivists strive to identify the internal mechanisms of these processes. By highlighting the phenomenon of «identities, » they essentially destroy the methodological distinction between politics as «external» and «internal. » It's worth noting that one can often see how the concepts of identity and culture are used almost interchangeably, but rather, identity is only an element of culture, in the form of beliefs shared by society. However, there are different views on whether state identity is part of domestic or international culture. So, if Berger's approach speaks of internal, then Wendt notes precisely the level of the interstate community as the main source of state identity (Berger 1998; Wendt 1999).

However, it is worth noting that Ted Hopf's work (1998), «The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory, » shows that conventional constructivists generally provide a cognitive account of identity or may not address its origins at all, while critical constructivists are more interested in how identity formation can stem from alienation or other underlying factors. Essentially, while conventional constructivism aims to focus on understanding how identities might drive actions, whereas critical constructivism investigates how these identities are constructed and explores how people come to accept a particular version of what is considered a naturalized truth. It is by understanding this fact that it becomes more. Identity is a multifaceted concept that plays a crucial role in many aspects of human life, manifesting in various forms. At its core, identity is tied to the capacity for self-awareness and reflection, allowing individuals to understand and express who they are. It is commonly viewed as a composite of qualities, beliefs, personal traits, and expressions that define both individuals and groups.

In the framework of Wendt's works, the identity of a state is formed from two components: the perception of oneself and the perception of other states. Constructivism determines that identity arises empirically, from the experience of interaction, and can be formulated only taking into account certain historical conditions (Wendt 1992; 1999). In other words, a state is always the bearer of one or more identities. He argues that «identities may be hard to change, but they are not carved in stone» (Ibid). This assertion highlights the inherent fluidity of identity, a core concept in constructivist analysis. It also suggests that state identities can

broaden to incorporate other states (Wendt 1999). In a Kantian culture, states develop a shared identity as «friends, » leading them to care about each other's well-being and security. This shift in identity boundaries can be seen in examples such as «liberal democracy» which illustrate how identities can evolve within a known context (Alexandrov 2003). Thus, can be assumed that they can also narrow.

Other scholars also give significant attention to the fact that identity consider the «self-other» relationship. Foreign policy strategies are derived from the internal needs of communities for consolidation. «Self» is realized only through the practices of comparison, rejection — cooperation — discrimination, and competition with «others» (Checkel 1998). For example, Peter Katzenstein (1996, p. 21) defines identity as «images of individuality and distinctiveness selfhood held and projected by an actor and formed and modified over time through relations with significant others». Adler and Barnett (1998) argue that national and state identities are formed in relation to other nations and states, with political actors' identities being tied to those outside their own community and territory.

A notable work about interaction in «self-other» relations is David Campbell's book (1992). It was in this work that the concept was put into practice and its viability and value were highlighted. Author analyzes the process of identity construction through a continuous web of media discourses, where the American «Self» is portrayed through its interactions with «Others. » He argues that a fundamental component of American identity is the concept of the «state par excellence» — an exemplary state created by the immigrant community. In other words, to reinforce its own exclusivity, the United States continuously seeks to identify and label other states or groups as «Others. » This demarcation of the U.S. from non-American «bad Others» is driven by the deep-seated needs of the diverse community to consolidate and affirm its global leadership. Accordingly, Campbell views the Cold War as a «struggle for the production and reproduction of identity» (Ibld, p. 195). He conceptualizes state identity as the result of exclusionary practices, where threats to a stable identity within the state are framed through a «discourse of danger» that associates these threats with external forces. This «discourse of danger» involves creating or exaggerating threats by the ruling elite to differentiate «us» from the perceived dangers of «them» (Alexandrov 2003).

Michael J. Shapiro also contributed to understanding the symbolic interaction of «self-other» by applying textual analysis to the construction of political identity. Using Clausewitz's «On War» as an example, Shapiro demonstrated that «self-other» relationships should be examined in historical retrospect to qualitatively analyze temporal and spatial parameters. He compared wartime heroic narratives with those from peacetime, finding that the former contains more markers distinguishing «Us» from «Them. » He argued that the identity of the warring «Self»

is forged through intense confrontations with images of the «Other. » He emphasized that collective consolidation of the «Self» is inherently tied to contrasting it with the «Other, » especially in the context of human fears and emotions (Shapiro 1992).

Anna Triandafyllidou in her work examines the connection between national identity and the presence of external or internal «Others» (1998). She explains that national identity has a «dual nature». It is formed both from within, based on shared traits among members of the group, and from without, through distinguishing the nation from other groups. This internal and external perspective is key, as national identity «becomes meaningful only through the contrast with others». «Significant others» are groups, either external or internal, that are seen as threats to the nation's identity, whether culturally or territorially. These perceived threats often lead to changes in how the nation views itself. National identity is not static; it evolves in response to these external pressures. As Triandafyllidou notes, «a «significant other» need not be a stronger or larger nation... but is perceived to pose a threat to the nation's independence or distinctiveness» (Ibid, p. 600). Moreover, such thing as nationalism often rises during times of crisis. Economic or political instability can push nations to reassert their identity by uniting against external threats. Author points out that national identity is often reshaped during such crises, as nations respond to challenges.

Other scholars, Morozov and Rumelili (2012) in their work emphasize that the relational nature of identity requires the presence of both a «generalized Other» and «various specific Others», which together shape the identity of the «Self». These «Others» act as reference points for the «Self» in defining, affirming, and expressing its identity. Identities are multifaceted and result from numerous, often contested, processes of differentiation from «Others». In principle, any distinction can be politicized and elevated to a marker of identity (Barth 1969; Neumann 1999). Therefore, identities are always formed in relation to multiple Others, including both internal and external ones, as well as the generalized Other.

Thus, each player's understanding of his interests and, accordingly, behavior patterns consist of a set of stable ideas about his own identity in comparison with the extensive historical experience of interaction with «others» (Wendt 1999). Constructivism emphasizes that government behavior is largely determined by norms, values, and ideas that are formed within discourse. According to Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink (1998), Identification with a norm is demonstrated when a nation «aligns with» and «supports» particular actions or principles in its relations with other entities. This process ranges from negative to positive identification, where others may be viewed as fundamentally different and opposed to the self or as closely aligned with and an extension of the self. The nature of this identification can shift depending on the issue at hand and over time (Wendt 1994). How a nation identifies itself in relation to others shapes its

boundaries of identity. As identification evolves, so do the norms and identity of the nation, influenced by changing levels of empathy and connection with others. Positive diplomatic strategies, such as confidence-building initiatives, signify positive identification, while antagonistic actions and threats indicate negative identification (Finnemore & Sikkink 1998). States may rely on certain concepts, interpretations of events, and public opinion when making decisions, which influences their foreign policy, relations with other countries, and international actions.

In this context, considering not only the formation but also the transformation of identity, it is also worth turning to Wendt, his early thoughts. His approach suggests that actors can engage in deliberate efforts to alter their identities through critical self-reflection. For instance, an actor (referred to as ego) may adopt new practices that influence the other party (alter) involved in the interaction. This interaction prompts alter to modify its behavior in response. This process extends beyond mere action changes; it fundamentally reshapes identity. Wendt describes this strategy as «altercasting» — a method of persuading «alter» to adopt a new identity by treating it as if it already possesses that identity (Wendt 1992; Wendt 1999). Altercasting is effective only if the other party reciprocates by accepting the new role, thus allowing the identity transformation to take root. Therefore, the concept of «othering» is critically important for addressing the research questions posed in this thesis.

Wendt argues that the identities and intentions of states, represented by «ego» and «alter, » are shaped through their interactions rather than being fixed or predetermined. These interactions involve each actor signaling and interpreting the other's actions, which socially constructs their understanding of each other's intentions and identities. This process shows how «ego's» identity is influenced by its interactions with «alter, » leading to varied outcomes in international relations based on different interpretations of gestures.

That is, it is necessary to understand that state identity is shaped by both internal and external factors, reflecting a state's perception of its role and status within the international system (Matsumura 2008). Over time, state identity evolves as political leaders craft it within the constraints of domestic conditions — such as economic development, technological capabilities, military power, and public opinion — and the shifting dynamics of international relations (Ibid).

In such frames, can be also noted that Wendt (1999) acknowledges the importance of «verbal communication». Similar idea of the dominance of a particular identity within society is shaped by discourse and debate involving state elites, intellectuals, and the public. In settings where the media is under government control, this influence can significantly shape which identity becomes dominant. From the theoretical perspective that views identity as social categories, identity is partly shaped by discourses that operate independently of individual actions (Fearon &

Laitin 2000). In environments marked by conflict, the discursive formation and symbolic systems that construct identity often involve differentiating oneself from others in an antagonistic way, leading to polarization and fragmentation of identities. This was noted when considering the concept of «Ego» and «Alter», as well as «Self» and «Other». That is, discourse shapes the framework within which people make sense of their identity and perceive others. Importantly, discourse can both support existing self-perceptions and contribute to their change. As scholars note, social realities do not exist independently of language; instead, they are inherently embedded within it (Davies & Harré 1990).

In national identity discourses, certain pivotal elements play a crucial role in shaping and defining how a nation's identity is understood and constructed. These central elements, known as «nodal points, » are strategically fixed clusters of statements within the discourse that significantly influence the formation and transformation of national self-identity (Laclau & Mouffe 2014). The nodal points in these discourses — encompassing cultural, ethnic, governmental, and civilizational aspects — vary based on the specific characteristics a nation-state chooses to highlight. Given that civilizational self-perceptions and allegiances are often central to the narratives and historical interpretations of nation-states, the civilizational nodal point can be particularly impactful in shaping national identity.

Nodal points are central concepts or ideas within a discourse that play a crucial role in shaping and defining identity. These key ideas help anchor and articulate the broader narrative of identity. However, while nodal points provide a stable framework for understanding identity, they are also subject to change and debate. These nodal points act as anchors, holding together different elements of identity, such as cultural traditions, historical events, ethnic origins, or political ideologies. By focusing on specific nodal points, a nation can shape and reinforce its collective self-image. This concept seems to be a good addition for structuring, when considering discourses in the selected example for my work.

Moreover, an insightful concept for analyzing identity in complex contexts is Shamsul's (1996) notion of «two social realities. » Shamsul distinguishes between two types of social realities: «authority-defined» and «everyday-defined. » The authority-defined reality is shaped by those in power, such as governments and institutions, and is often formalized through policies, educational systems, and media. This top-down narrative of identity, while dominant, may not fully reflect the lived experiences of individuals. In contrast, the everyday-defined reality arises from daily interactions and experiences, being more fluid and shaped by personal and communal practices. This version of identity is communicated through cultural practices, traditions, and popular media, offering a more organic understanding of identity.

According to Shamsul, these two realities are not isolated but interact in complex and dynamic ways (Ibid). The authority-defined reality sets a framework within which people negotiate their identities, influencing their everyday practices and perceptions. Conversely, the everyday-defined reality can challenge or reinterpret the official narratives, leading to a contested space where identities are continuously formed and redefined. This dual perspective emphasizes the necessity of analyzing both institutionalized viewpoints and everyday experiences to fully understand identity, highlighting its dynamic and contested nature as influenced by power dynamics.

Policy discourse does more than reflect collective identity; it actively shapes and redefines concepts of self and other. This involves defining degrees of difference and identifying perceived threats from various external groups, depending on how distinct they are considered (Hopf 2002). Political elites play a pivotal role in the formation of states and the creation of new identities. They are central in the processes of constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing collective identities (Lane 2011). Elites are essential in promoting ideas of unity, belonging, and a shared sense of purpose or destiny (Best 2011). They set rules, engage in negotiations, articulate ideologies, and define national boundaries. During periods of transition when ideological frameworks are rapidly evolving, elites are crucial in both shaping and reshaping collective identities (Lane 2011).

Given this, it is essential to consider both the authority-defined and everyday-defined levels to understand identity transformation comprehensively. Although the official level is often clearer and more straightforward to study, the everyday-defined reality poses some challenges. Discourse among citizens often appears inconsistent, fragmented, and highly individualized, frequently conveyed through spoken language. Since it primarily reflects personal experiences, it tends to be unstructured and is not usually directed toward achieving a specific, overarching goal. However, this fragmented nature does not diminish its importance; instead, it highlights the diversity and fluidity of lived experiences that challenge or complement institutional narratives.

2.2. Russia's Geopolitical Identity and scientific views

It is worth noting that most countries have a unique geopolitical identity or geopolitical code, as it is referred to by supporters of constructivism, such as Gertjan Dijkink (1998), who is known for his work in geography, geopolitics, cultural studies, and geographical identity. For instance, in one of his works at the end of the last century, Dijkink (1996) proposed the concept of a geopolitical vision of the world, which should be understood as a set of ideas about the relationship between various elements of political space, national security, and the threats to it, as well as its benefits and disadvantages. This geopolitical vision of the world includes ideas about

the territory of an ethnic group or political nation, its borders, forms of government, historical mission, and the external and internal forces that facilitate or hinder its realization.

The full-fledged concept of «geopolitical identity» is multifaceted and lacks a single, universally accepted definition. Different scholars interpret it based on regional and contextual factors. For instance, Ljubiša Despotović and Vanja Glišin (2021) define geopolitical identity as the «identification of geopolitical self-awareness and continuity in the time and space of a nation, as a relatively objectifying identity-geographical property of a national or religious group which is related to its specific spatial, cultural-civilizational, religious-confessional and political-state form of existence». Conversely, Vitaly Pusko (2018) emphasizes the awareness of a country's geographical and political space, incorporating components such as worldview, national identity, mentality, historical memory, political myths, and symbols. Many researchers, such as Il'in (1995), focus on the spiritual and mental foundations of geopolitical identity, which include geopolitical codes, images, and values. Another scholar, Lagerspetz, in one of his works about geopolitical identity construction, notes that the idea of geopolitical identity is not static but can be reshaped based on historical and cultural narratives, as well as strategic interests (2003). According to the text, geopolitical identity refers to a constructed sense of a country or region's place in the global or regional political landscape, shaped by historical, cultural, and strategic factors. This identity is often associated with desired affiliations rather than being confined strictly to geographical boundaries.

Turning to the case of Russia, it is worth starting with the point that the issue of Russia's place is given a place in the works by researcher Iver B. Neumann. It is noted that identity is often seen as something a person or group possesses. Humans have long been occupied with discussing what they have that others lack, defining what makes them unique. Thus, Neumann's work brought together a number of debates about central Europe, the place of Russia and other countries, which shows the complexity of the issue (1993). In his opinion, for Russia, such a «significant other» is the West, but for the West, Russia has always been a «significant other» (1999). Nations can interact with «others» in a variety of ways. For example, it could be confrontation or cooperation. The complexity of the situation is also noted in the work of Richard Sakwa (2018), that instead of creating a «common European home» or a Europe «whole and free, » the continent remained divided. The division stemmed from two contrasting visions: Gorbachev's pluralistic Europe with diverse systems coexisting peacefully and the «Europe whole and free» ideology that focused on the enlargement of the EU and NATO.

It may be noted that Viatcheslav Morozov's book, «Russia's Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World, » complements and examines Russia's identity using a postcolonial framework within the context of global international relations dominated by

Eurocentrism (2015). Morozov argues that Russia, with its historical experience of empire, including its Soviet past, is viewed through Eurocentric lenses that marginalize its role as a major global power. The book explores how Russia navigates its identity as a subaltern empire, balancing its desire for integration into Western-dominated global norms with the preservation of its sovereignty and distinct identity. Morozov's analysis sheds light on how Russia's self-perception influences its foreign policy and geopolitical strategies, offering a critical perspective on the complexities of Russia's position in the contemporary world order. Also, Hanna Smith (2014) argues that since 1991, Russia has struggled to attain the recognition of a great power on the global stage. Despite this, historical and geopolitical factors have led both the populace and the political elite to perceive Russia as possessing such a status. This discrepancy between the self-perceived status of a great power and its actual position in international relations can result in mutual misconceptions and misunderstandings, potentially escalating into significant tensions.

In one of Neumann's other works, namely in a publication entitled «Russia as Europe's other», the author discusses how human groups shape their identities by representing other groups as «others. » Russia is a key case in the study of European identity formation, consistently seen as an irregularity (Neumann 1998). Over 500 years of Western writings portray Russia as always just starting to be civilized and part of Europe. Since the Enlightenment, Russia has been viewed as a learner — sometimes successful, sometimes not. Recently, the metaphor of transition dominates European discussions about Russia. The text argues that Russia's ambiguous European status should be seen temporally, not spatially, and calls for reflection on how these debates influence the representation of Russia. This discussion impacts European security and policy decisions, such as EU and NATO expansion and economic transitions. Historical parallels between past and present Russian leaders show how past metaphors shape current perceptions. The author aims to spark debate on how European views of Russia over the past five centuries remain relevant today and influence identity formation. In addition, an article devoted to exploring the connection between identity and war may be interesting in this context (Neumann 1998b). It examines how wars help define friend and enemy relationships, drawing from literature on identity and war outbreaks.

Thus, the book «Russian Westernizers and Change in International Relations» by Tsygankov (2024) examines Russian thinkers who advocate aligning with the West, viewing it as superior. Covering from the early 19th century to today, the book identifies four schools of thought: Christian Westernizers, Economic Liberals, Political Liberals, and Social State Supporters. It compares these thinkers' evolving ideas and their responses to Western influences. The book also addresses new challenges for Russian Westernizers due to global changes and the war in Ukraine.

Among the noted researchers who consider the issues of the geopolitical position and identity of states such as Russia is Marlene Laruelle (2018). This researcher has made a significant focus on considering issues of nationalism and the ideological foundations of the Russian modern state, such as Eurasianism and the idea of «Russian World». However, in contrast to the previously discussed authors who note the various inclusion of Russia in Europe, Laruelle (2008) posits that Russia is neither fully European nor Asian but occupies a unique civilizational space. This ideology often challenges the notion of Russia being a part of Europe, emphasizing instead its distinctiveness and the blending of various cultural and historical influences. She also addresses these themes in various articles and edited volumes, where she discusses how Russian identity is constructed in opposition to Europe and how this impacts Russia's foreign policy and self-perception. Her works highlight the tension between those in Russia who seek closer alignment with Europe and those who advocate for a distinct Russian path that includes strong elements of Eurasian identity.

Moving on to the idea of Russian Eurasianism, everyone comes across the Soviet-Russian researcher of this trend, Dugin, whose views were noted by Marlene Laruelle (2006) herself. Aleksandr Dugin is a Russian political philosopher known for his far-right views. His ideology, often referred to as Neo-Eurasianism, argues that Russia occupies a unique civilizational space that transcends Europe and Asia (Dugin 2022). Dugin's works (2014) are influential in Russian nationalist and conservative circles, promoting the idea that Russia should embrace its Eurasian identity and resist Western influence. He is a strong critic of Western influence, advocating for a multipolar world where Russia and other non-Western powers can assert their sovereignty and cultural distinctiveness.

The concept of geopolitical identity is complex and multidimensional, and different scholars have proposed different interpretations based on regional and contextual factors. While geopolitical identity and national identity are interconnected, they are distinct concepts. National identity primarily refers to the sense of belonging and shared identity among the citizens of a nation, often based on common language, culture, history, and values. It is the collective identity of a nation's people and their connection to the nation-state. Geopolitical identity, however, extends beyond the internal characteristics of a nation to include its spatial and geopolitical positioning in the world. It involves a nation's self-awareness of its role and place in the global arena, considering geographical, political, cultural, and civilizational factors. Geopolitical identity is about how a nation perceives its place in the world and its relationships with other countries and regions, influenced by its historical experiences, geopolitical strategies, and international interactions.

2.3. The Definition of the main «Other» in Russian Political Discourse

With the theoretical underpinnings of geopolitical identity established, we now turn to how Russia navigates this complex landscape. Specifically, we'll explore how Russia defines the «Other» in its political discourse, focusing on the construction of the West as a significant counterpoint. As previously noted, within the process of «othering, » it is crucial to define what is considered «Other» for Russia, which will help to examine the transformation of its identity. Based on this, the initial focus is on the discursive mechanisms that construct the category of the West in the context of the relationship between the West and Russia. Specifically, it is necessary to identify the political actors encompassed by this construct and to determine the axiological load that the concept of the West acquires in discourse. References to the «West» appear in almost all significant statements made by state officials and political elites, and scholarly literature frequently employs this category, including in the context of its opposition to the Soviet Union and Russia as its successor.

The relationship between Russia and the West appears as part of the international relations of the Russian Federation at the level of foreign policy institutional practices. However, the peculiarity of these relations is that the category of the West lacks a clear and unambiguous reference. It is not a specific state or political actor but rather a collective construct, a discursive phenomenon whose meaning and axiological load are constructed through linguistic resources in political discourse.

Addressing the composition of political actors included in the discursive construct of the West, one can refer to Dubrovskaya's (2017) analysis. Her work notes that the West has an indeterminate and heterogeneous composition, i.e., the combination of actors belonging to the group varies. Nevertheless, three main uses of the category of the West with different semantic content can be distinguished. Firstly, the category of the West is used in discourse as self-evident, not requiring explanations about which actors it encompasses. The West is a collective and heterogeneous actor encompassing several countries that have different relations with Russia. The relationship between Russia and the West is presented as being based on opposing intentions of the parties.

Secondly, the West is represented as equivalent to Europe and the European Union, including EU member states, its various institutions and organizations, as well as individual actors officially authorized to represent the EU's interests. The plural form «partners» indicates the complex composition of the category of the West, which is associated with Europe both geographically and politically. The geographical boundaries of the West are discursively defined by its location on the continent, although Europe is only part of the Eurasian continent. The actors

forming the West as a political category are diverse and numerous. The representation of the West as exclusively European is also ambiguous. For example, in the context of Russian-European relations, NATO is repeatedly mentioned, even though this collective actor includes not only European countries but also several others, including the USA and Canada. References to NATO suggest that the West extends beyond the geographical and political boundaries of Europe to include non-European actors. NATO is presented as an element uniting Europe and the USA into a more general actor with which Russia builds relations.

The third type of representation of the West is based on the explicit indication of a close connection between Europe and the USA, which are discursively united into a group and attributed similar qualities (agenda, goals). The merging of Europe and the USA into a single category of the West occurs through the use of a syntactic structure with a shared part and two definitions for one noun (European and American colleagues).

Thus, it can be noted that the «West» as a phenomenon of political practice exists as a social construct that receives diverse and ambiguous representations depending on the changing political context, pragmatic factors, and strategic goals of the speaker. The West is constructed as a social actor composed of multiple and heterogeneous actors, including states, organizations, and individuals. The West does not have fixed geographical boundaries.

The «West» and the actors within it can be attributed both positive and negative properties, utilizing strategies of negative and positive representation, including evaluative, emotional, and predictive strategies. For instance, the strategy of negative evaluation encompasses condemnation and accusation, which often appear as a semantic and functional unity in speech. Accusation is more related to evaluation based on legal norms, while condemnation is realized through moral and ethical categories. Negative predictions are often presented in statements about possible adverse consequences of the actions of the considered «Other. » However, as noted, strategies of representation of the West can also include a positive axiological charge. This occurs when the collective actor «West» is discursively broken down into separate elements, and the object of representation becomes a specific actor within the overall category. In such representations, positive evaluation, positive emotional coloring, and positive prediction strategies are often used. Positive qualities and actions can be attributed to both specific organizations and international institutions that facilitate the successful functioning of international relations and to specific countries. Positive evaluations are typical in speeches during bilateral meetings between leaders of foreign policy departments.

Therefore, within the «self-other» concept, the strength of the difference between Russia and the West depends on the nature of the representation, whether positive or negative. In a broader context, from the perspective of social constructivism, the study shows that the concept of the

«West» is a flexible and unstable category. They are socially constructed and change over time, which prevents them from being viewed as constant and unchanging structures. This observation aligns with Wendt's assertion: «agents and structures are themselves processes — in other words, ongoing accomplishments of practice» (Wendt 1999, p. 313). The flexibility of foreign policy discourse lies not so much in the actors adhering to politeness but in the variability of the created discursive constructs. In other words, the discourses created and used by political actors are dynamic and can change depending on the context and goals.

2.4. International Isolation

In addition to political isolation and self-isolation, which is expressed in exclusion or withdrawal from international institutions and organizations, modern sanctions policy occupies an important place. Sanctions have emerged as a prominent tool in international relations, utilized by states and international organizations to address an array of issues. The increasing use of sanctions underscores the importance of understanding their impact and effectiveness, making research in this area highly relevant in today's globalized world. Robert A. Pape's article «Why Economic Sanctions Do Not Work» presents a critical perspective on the effectiveness of economic sanctions as a tool of international relations (1997). Pape challenges the conventional wisdom that economic sanctions can be an effective means of coercing states to change their behavior, arguing instead that sanctions often fail to achieve their intended political objectives.

Maarten Smeets' paper analytically reviews the functioning and challenges of implementing sanctions as a policy tool, focusing on cases against the Russian Federation and Iran (2018). Smeets argues that economic sanctions often impose costs on all involved parties, including those imposing the sanctions. The targeted country may develop new trade relations, and sanctions are usually used alongside diplomacy and other forms of pressure. The use of 'smart' sanctions, targeting specific areas, is growing, but attributing their success to the sanctions alone is challenging. In more detail, the negative aspects of sanctions were examined by a group of German researchers. It used a global sanctions dataset to identify factors contributing to the persistence of nondemocratic rule in targeted regimes (Grauvogel and Soest 2014). The results of a fuzzy set Qualitative Comparative Analysis show that sanctions can strengthen nondemocratic rule if the regime incorporates them into its legitimization strategy, particularly in cases with comprehensive sanctions, strong regime legitimacy, and limited links to the sender.

A separate work by the previously mentioned von Soest (2023) analyses the nature and effects of external pressure in the form of sanctions imposed on authoritarian regimes. It notes that the majority of countries under UN, US, and EU sanctions are authoritarian, and that «democracy sanctions» aiming to improve democratic and human rights in targeted countries are the largest

category of sanctions. The text highlights that authoritarian regimes are particularly challenging targets for sanctions as they have a tighter grip on public discourse and can more easily shield themselves from external pressure. The text presents trends in the application of sanctions against authoritarian regimes, reviews mechanisms of how economic and diplomatic restrictions work, and examines authoritarian targets' attempts to engage in «pressure proofing» to resist the effects of sanctions. The text also notes that authoritarian regimes often use sanctions to their own advantage, denouncing sanction senders as «imperialists» and blaming them for economic problems.

Work by other scholars examines the impact of economic sanctions on authoritarian rulers and argues that the effect of sanctions depends on the type of authoritarian regime (Escribà-Folch and Wright 2010). Personalist regimes and monarchies are more sensitive to the loss of external revenue and are more likely to be destabilized by sanctions. In contrast, dominant single-party and military regimes increase tax revenues and reallocate expenditures to maintain stability when subject to sanctions. The text uses data on sanction episodes and authoritarian regimes from 1960 to 1997 and finds that personalist dictators are more vulnerable to foreign pressure than other types of dictators. The text also finds that sanctions increase the likelihood of regular and irregular changes of rulers, such as a coup, in personalist regimes but have little effect on leadership stability in single-party and military regimes.

At the level of citizen-government relations, many questions arise as various studies show conflicting results. For example, Parks examines how sanctions impact incumbents' electoral performance (Park 2019). Its work argues that sanctions harm incumbents' vote shares due to citizens blaming them for resulting hardships. The effect is stronger in less democratic countries, where sanctions limit dictators' strategies and open opportunities for opposition. Analyzing 381 elections in 79 countries, the study finds sanctions negatively affect incumbents, especially autocrats. The findings have implications for accountability in autocracies, sanctions timing, opposition mobilization, and sanctions' role in democratization.

Alternatively, an article by Fathollah-Nejad (2014) critically evaluates the consequences of international sanctions on the example of Iran on two fronts: the Iran-West conflict and state-society relations. It challenges the prevailing narrative that sanctions would aid conflict resolution and weaken Iran's authoritarian regime. Instead, the article shows that sanctions have intensified the conflict and solidified Iran's domestic power structure while undermining its civil society.

Work by Guter-Sandua and Kuznetsova (2020) examines the Russian media's discursive responses to the economic sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea. It employs a critical perspective, analyzing the rhetoric of a prominent pro-Kremlin figure. The article argues that elite actors use persuasive tools to promote collective resilience as a value and as part of Russia's post-

Soviet identity, positioning «the West» as an «other. » The discourse of resilience aims to foster stability and maintain the incumbent government's dominance amidst an economic downturn.

Continuing the topic, in this context, one cannot miss works that consider related elements; for example, text by Verdier and Woo (2011) discusses the effectiveness of sanctions and positive incentives in influencing a target's behavior. The rally-round-the-flag effect is often cited as a reason for sanctions' failure, leading to the advocacy of positive incentives, which may encourage compliance. However, positive incentives can be vulnerable to extortion. The text suggests that using sanction threats and reward promises simultaneously is most efficient, and it tests this through a game-theoretic model. The results show that a sanctioner should never prefer sanction threats to reward promises, even with the risk of extortion, which is less of a drawback than the rally-round-the-flag effect. This multi-faceted issue is also touched upon by Timothy M. Frye (2017), who notes the complexity of the influence of sanctions pressure.

Baum and Groeling (2008), in their work, discuss the rally-round-the-flag phenomenon, which is commonly explained by the lack of elite criticism during foreign crises. The authors argue that media coverage of elite debates is more important than the debate itself and that the persuasiveness of elite messages depends on their credibility. They suggest that understanding the interactions between elites, the public, and the media is necessary to explain variations in public responses to foreign policy initiatives. Some scholars present a perspective on the «rally round the flag effect, » which argues for an anger-based conceptualization, drawing on earlier research on emotional appreciation (Lambert et al. 2011). They discuss the implications of their findings for theory and research in social psychology and political science.

Bussmann and Iost (2024) in their work note, that during severe international crises, the domestic public often becomes more loyal to its government, resulting in the «rally-'round-the-flag» effect, which boosts the popularity of political leaders. Most research on this phenomenon focuses on the US and other Western democracies. However, their work explores the case of non-democratic major powers. Its empirical analysis examines whether military conflicts are followed by an increase in presidential popularity. The results of monthly time-series estimation show that for less violent conflicts, any boost in popularity is typically small. However, there is a significant increase in presidential approval ratings after international crises where violence is a central element from the outset. Regimes also use sanctions as scapegoats for political and economic issues, undermining opposition mobilization (Grauvogel et al. 2017). These strategies counteract the signals sent by sanctions, making it unlikely that imposed economic sanctions trigger increased collective action against governments.

Overall, this literature review provides a reasonable understanding of the key ideas and concepts related to identity transformation. By examining diverse perspectives and exploring the

theoretical foundations laid by various scholars, it synthesizes the current body of knowledge and establishes a basis for formulating a theoretical framework for the study. The difficulty lies in the existence of numerous concepts within the constructivist framework, each with different, though similar, approaches to understanding identity. This diversity of perspectives highlights the absence of a single, unified approach to analyzing identity transformation. Consequently, there is a need for a clear and coherent methodology that can integrate these various perspectives into a comprehensive framework. Such a methodology would enable a more nuanced analysis of identity transformation by accommodating the complexity and multidimensionality of the concept. Addressing this need could significantly advance our understanding of how identities evolve in response to both internal and external factors, particularly in contexts marked by certain conditions.

Moreover, Despite the extensive body of literature on Russia's geopolitical identity, several criticisms and research gaps persist. One major criticism is much of the existing research tends to be static, failing to account for the dynamic nature of identity transformation in the context of international isolation and sanction pressure that modern Russia has faced quite recently. There's a clear need for longitudinal studies that track changes over time and under varying conditions of international engagement. In conclusion, despite the criticisms and limitations noted in the literature, the research arrays studied offer a valuable foundation for understanding the complex interplay between external pressures and identity formation. These studies reveal important insights into how factors such as international isolation, sanctions, and geopolitical shifts interact with internal elements like domestic politics, public opinion, and cultural factors to shape identity. All this explains both the possibility and the relevance of the study.

3. Theoretical Framework

This section presents the theoretical framework, which aims to comprehensively explain the process and mechanisms of identity transformation by drawing on existing concepts and ideas. By grounding the research in constructivism, this framework emphasizes the dynamic and intersubjective nature of identity in international relations, showing how identities are socially constructed and evolve through interactions, norms, and discourse. Drawing on the works of well-known scholars, the framework establishes the theoretical foundation for this study, while also shaping the methods and structure of the empirical analysis.

It is worth starting with the fact that «Constructivism is a way of studying social relations — any kind of social relations» (Onuf 1998, p. 262). As Onuf notes, while it draws from various methods of studying such a broad and complex subject, constructivism stands on its own as a distinct system of concepts and propositions. Since constructivism is not unified and there is no single structure of the approach, this work will reflect the elements common to most constructivists and their interrelationships, which will become the basis of the theoretical framework. I will draw primarily upon a number of researchers representing constructivism and their ideas, and not on some single unified one, since constructivism is a rather complex, but at the same time flexible tool that requires a comprehensive approach.

It's worth starting with the fact that reality is not an objective fact but is shaped through social interactions and shared understandings. Constructivism posits that there is no singular, objective reality in international relations. Unlike traditional theories, which focus on identifying common patterns and similarities among states, constructivism argues that differences in identities and interests arise from social construction. This approach emphasizes the role of social dimensions — norms, beliefs, ideas, rules, languages, and discourses — in shaping international relations. Social environments are formed through the interactions among individuals and the influence of collective social institutions. Scholars argue that what we consider «reality» is actually a «socially constructed reality» (Berger and Luckmann 1966). This perspective views reality as dynamic and dependent on context, meaning it can change over time and vary across different social and cultural environments. Consequently, what is considered «real» or «true» in one context may be understood differently in another.

In one of his works, Wendt's argument challenges the traditional view that anarchy in the international system automatically dictates how states behave. Instead, he suggests that anarchy is not a rigid or unchangeable condition; it is formed and continually reshaped by how states interact with each other and the shared understandings they develop. In other words, states' identities and interests are not determined by anarchy itself, but by the way they perceive themselves and others

within this system. This idea is important in constructivist theory because it emphasizes that the behavior of states and the nature of the international system are influenced by social interactions and shared beliefs, rather than being solely determined by the structure of the system (Wendt 1992). He described anarchy as «what states make of it, » meaning that the nature of anarchy is shaped by how states construct their identities and, consequently, their interests. Thus, by exploring how identities are formed and reshaped, we can gain deeper insights into the dynamics of international relations and the actions of states within the global arena.

Wendt (1994) notes that social identities consist of the meanings an actor assigns to itself when considering how it is perceived by others, essentially viewing itself as a social entity. These identities function as cognitive schemas, allowing actors to determine «who I am/we are» within a particular situation and occupy positions within a broader social role structure that is based on shared understandings and expectations. Identities are crucial because they provide the basis for interests, which are formed as actors interpret and define their circumstances (Wendt 1992; Wendt 1999).

The prominence and recognition of different identities can fluctuate, yet all identities are inherently social constructs that define the essence of an actor. These identities emerge from the collective beliefs and understandings that actors hold about themselves and others, and these shared perceptions collectively shape the structure of the social world (Wendt 1992). Furthermore, when established roles within the social structure are absent or break down, it becomes increasingly difficult for actors to define situations and interests. This lack of clear roles can lead to identity confusion, as the frameworks that typically guide an actor's understanding of their place within the social world are destabilized. This highlights the intricate relationship between identity and the social context.

Since the goal of this work is to track the change of identity in certain conditions, which seems possible since, as researchers note, identity is not static, it is necessary to initially understand what exactly influences this process. According to Iver B. Neumann, «Identity is a fluid, many-stranded, and perpetually negotiated phenomenon, and so all identities are ipso facto ambiguous» (1998, p. 45). This perspective underscores that identity is not static; it evolves continuously in response to both overt and subtle factors. Transformation in identity can be seen as a reaction to various incentives. Even a single change can initiate a domino effect, leading to a broader transformation of identity over time. Typically, any crisis amplifies the efforts of state bodies and individuals to develop new strategies to address the crisis, which in turn drives development and change.

As noted earlier, state identity is closely linked to how states define their relationships with others, categorizing them as friends, enemies, or rivals. This point of view is shared by a large

number of representatives of constructivism. Constructivists argue that in the process of identity construction, discourse plays an important role and is intrinsically linked to the «self-other» relationship. Thus, Triandafyllidou (1998) notes in his work that «self-other» has a dual nature: it looks inward to define the group's internal cohesion and outward to identify and differentiate from others. Also, based on that, the connection between «Self» and «Other» is not fixed and can evolve over time. So, identity is either threatened or reinforced through interactions with other states, significantly influencing international relationships. Therefore, in this work, identity and its transformation will be primarily considered through the «self-other» relationship (Checkel 1998). An actor's understanding of its interests and behavior is rooted in stable ideas about its identity, shaped by a history of interactions with «others» (Wendt 1999). A number of other researchers hold a similar position (Campbell 1992; Shapiro 1992; Katzenstein 1996; Adler & Barnett 1998; Finnemore & Sikkink 1998). In such frames, in addition to the process of «othering», the related concept of «altercasting» is also valuable when considering transformation (Wendt 1992; Wendt 1999). In this context, it is worth paying attention to the in-depth view proposed by Morozov and Rumelili that identities are always formed in relation to «generalized Other» and «various specific Others» (2012). They act as reference points for the «Self» in defining, affirming, and expressing its identity. «We are what we are because they are not what we are» (Tajfel & Forgas 1981, p. 124). In all this, discourse plays an important role (Fearon & Laitin 2000). It is discourse that forms the framework in which people make sense of their identity and perceive others (Davies & Harré 1990; Hopf 2002; Lane 2011). However, in order to study the discourse around an event or actor, it will be necessary to identify the central elements, known as «nodal points», proposed by Laclau & Mouffe (2014). They will allow us to understand the main elements that play a role in the process of «othering».

The concept of «two social realities» by Shamsul (1996) is valuable for analyzing identity in complex contexts. This perspective distinguishes between two types of social realities: «authority-defined» and «everyday-defined.» As Shamsul notes, the discourse at the «everyday-defined» level is often disjointed and fragmented. Moreover, in non-democratic regimes, the rhetoric and communication of power tend to play a more significant role compared to democratic ones. For this reason, taking into account such limitation, this paper proposes to focus on the self-perception of citizens and their attitude towards certain elements as part of the «everyday-defined» reality. In this context, how people perceive others reflects their self-perception, and vice versa, making these perceptions mutually constitutive. This dynamic process shows that self-perception not only evolves over time but also plays a key role in identity formation in relation to others (Stets & Burke, 2003). Thus, the self-perception of citizens and the discourse of political elites, which

are interconnected, influence the formation of identity and represent dynamics that can be monitored.

Given all of this, it appears necessary to focus on a certain type of identity — geopolitical identity — to answer the questions posed in this work. It is worth noting that this concept is less popular than others; it is complex and lacks a universally accepted definition, with interpretations varying among scholars (Il'in 1995; Lagerspetz 2003; Pusko 2018; Despotović & Glišin, 2021;). Nevertheless, several researchers offer different, yet closely related, interpretations, as demonstrated in the literature review. Also, it is fairly obvious that geopolitical identity is closely linked to national identity. The way a nation views its role on the world stage is often intertwined with its broader sense of self-worth and cultural identity. This connection is evident in national narratives that emphasize themes of exceptionalism, victimhood, or a sense of global responsibility, all of which contribute to how a state defines its place in the world.

In explaining the interest in so-called «geopolitical identity» in this work, it should be noted that constructivism argues that the significance of geographical spaces is created through discourse. This means that the way states and political actors talk about space and geography influences the way these spaces are understood and acted upon. It is worth noting here that constructivism and critical geopolitics, although related, serve different purposes and offer different perspectives. The chosen constructivist approach provides a broad theoretical framework that is applicable across disciplines. It focuses on how identities, interests, and realities are socially constructed through interaction and discourse, allowing it to consider a wide range of phenomena beyond geopolitics, which is relevant given the interconnectedness of geopolitical identity with other types. In addition, this approach offers flexibility in analyzing power relations, considering how power operates through language, norms, and social practices. This comprehensive approach provides a more nuanced view of power dynamics than the narrower and more limited one found in critical geopolitics. That is, using a constructivist lens can complement both related approaches.

Sanctions and international isolation, in this context, serve as a foreign policy trigger influencing identity. As revealed in the literature review, there is considerable debate and criticism regarding the effectiveness of this tool (Pape 1997). Sanctions can sometimes lead to opposite results in non-democratic regimes (Grauvogel and Soest 2014). Often, this contributes to the emergence of the Rally-'Round-the-Flag effect, ultimately bringing the government and the people closer together (Baum and Groeling 2008; Parks 2019; Bussmann and Iost 2024). Within this logic, Guter-Sandua and Kuznetsova (2020) note that such external pressure leads to the development of blame-shifting discourses and even antagonism between countries. This tactic is used to stabilize regimes and strengthen the legitimacy of the ruling authority. Therefore, it can be suggested that these frameworks allow for a clearer observation of identity shifts or changes, including

geopolitical identity, as sanctions often impact a significant portion of the population — something that non-democratic or semi-democratic regimes frequently exploit. In these conditions, based on all of the above; to consider the transformation of geopolitical identity, it is possible to rely on such elements as discourse of power or discourse in «authority-defined» context, as well as the geopolitical self-perception of citizens of a particular state. Under this type of self-perception, in this work, we mean how people in a certain country or region perceive and understand their role (of the state) and place in the world political system. How citizens evaluate the relations of their country with other states, including allies and opponents. How the population perceives external threats and internal security, including the impact of sanctions.

Generally, constructivism offers a robust framework for analyzing the transformation of identity in certain context, emphasizing that identities and interests are socially constructed through interactions and discourse. Unlike traditional theories, constructivism views reality as dynamic and context-dependent, shaped by social understandings rather than fixed patterns. By highlighting the fluidity of identity and the critical role of discourse, constructivism provides valuable insights into how states and their citizens perceive and redefine their roles within the global system. This approach can enrich our understanding of geopolitical identity and its evolution over time.

4. Methodology

Assumed that based on empirical data and a constructivist approach it will be possible to answer the questions posed earlier, while simultaneously testing a number of hypotheses. All this will allow us to extrapolate the results of the empirical analysis and apply it back to theoretical prescriptions in order to assess their correctness and completeness. Then, having generalized the findings, we will be able to understand what implications these findings may have for the further development of theoretical approaches in this area, as well as for the practical area. This will help to strengthen the connection between theory and practice, as well as improve the understanding of the problem under study.

Case study

Russia was chosen as the case study for this research on the transformation of geopolitical identity in conditions of international isolation for several compelling reasons, rooted in both empirical and theoretical considerations.

Experiences of International Isolation: Russia has faced international isolation in various forms and degrees. These experiences provide a rich and diverse empirical context to explore the research problem and answer the research question. Moreover, they offer a valuable opportunity to test and refine the theoretical frameworks and hypotheses on the relationship between international isolation and geopolitical identity transformation.

Data Availability and Accessibility: a wealth of data and literature available for analysis, both theoretical and empirical level. This facilitates the conduct of a comprehensive and rigorous case study and allows for the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings.

Relevance to Current Events: Russia's recent experiences of international isolation, particularly in the context of the Ukraine crisis and the Western sanctions, are highly relevant and timely. This case study can contribute to the ongoing debates and discussions on these issues, and provide insights for the policy makers and practitioners. So, the relevance and timeliness of the case of Russia can ensure the academic and practical significance of this research.

The analysis of the transformation of Russia's geopolitical identity under the conditions of sanctions and isolation requires a deep and comprehensive approach. In this study, the timeline has been divided into two parts: pre-sanctioned period (1991-2007, 2008-2013) and after (2014-2024). This choice of timeframes is justified not only by political events but also by the need to examine long-term trends that help to understand the evolution of the country's identity on the world stage.

The first period covers the phase when Russia was undergoing a process of restructuring its domestic and foreign policies. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the country was searching for new models of integration into the global system, striving for cooperation. This period is characterized by Russia's attempts to build more open international relations with various political forces, while simultaneously asking the question, «Who are we? » During this time, efforts were made to form the state's foreign policy identity, based on adapting to new global political realities, as well as a desire to secure a respected position on the political map. The analysis of this stage allows us to identify and record Russia's position in the pre-sanctions period.

The second period is marked by the introduction of sanctions against Russia by group of countries due to the situation surrounding Crimea and its annexation by the Russian Federation. During this phase, the state's identity is being redefined. This period is important for analysis because it demonstrates how external factors, such as sanctions and isolation in various sectors, can transform a nation's identity, and thus its approach to its role in the world.

Moreover, the longer timeframe of analysis helps to identify which elements of Russia's foreign policy identity remained stable throughout the entire period under study, and which underwent fundamental changes due to sanction pressure and international isolation. The comparison of these two-time segments allows for a better understanding and assessment of the role of sanctions as either a catalyst or possibly a consequence of deeper internal processes within the country. Thus, this approach provides the opportunity to see the full picture of the transformation of Russia's geopolitical identity in the context of its interaction with the outside world, contributing to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study.

Methods

This study is methodologically grounded in constructivism, and thus employs a qualitative research design. The qualitative approach focuses on analyzing discourse in an «authority-defined» context to understand the narratives employed by political elites. This is particularly important given the complexity of phenomena such as floating signifiers and implicit meanings. The primary criterion for selecting materials is their relevance to the study's focus, especially in relation to the «self-other» dynamic within Russia's European discourse. The selected texts must be pertinent to this dichotomy, which can emerge in various contexts and may be either explicitly stated or implicitly understood. Another key criterion is the significance of the materials,

particularly those related to the state's foreign policy¹, which serve as a foundation and are supported by official statements and speeches within the specified time period. Each document is thoroughly examined, with a focus on how key dichotomies — based on both constitutive differences and similarities — are constructed and articulated in Russia's narratives. The analyzed materials include both official English translations of original documents and translations provided by the author for texts without official translations. In parallel, the quantitative element of the study involves analyzing public opinion data to assess citizens' geopolitical self-perception, or the «everyday-defined» context. This analysis utilizes primary and secondary data from sociological surveys. Thus, a combination of methods is used to track key narratives significant to Russia's identity, followed by an analysis of the causes and the process of their transformation.

¹ The foundation of the Concepts is formed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation, federal laws, universally recognized principles and norms of international law, international treaties of the Russian Federation, regulatory legal acts of the Russian Federation governing the activities of federal government bodies in the field of foreign policy, as well as the National Security Concept of the Russian Federation, the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, and other similar documents.

5. Empirical Analysis

5.1. Pre-Sanction Period (1991-2007): From the Collapse of the Soviet Union to the Rise of Putin

5.1.1. Authority-Defined Perspective

Overall, the Soviet Union left a legacy for both Europe and the USA (the Western bloc) and Russia. On the one hand, the Soviet Union devoted many resources to ending World War II, establishing itself as a superpower, and even after its collapse, Russia inherited the fruits of its victory. On the other hand, the Soviet Union allowed Western countries to strengthen their common ideological, military, political, and economic alliances. In the emerging Russia, the growing external uncertainty made the question of developing a stable and independent self-identity urgent, which would become the foundation for development. Time was needed to understand what tasks the country could handle and what resources it had to achieve its foreign policy goals. In this context, it was necessary to reassess its identity in relations with «Russia — Europe» and «Russia — the West» as a whole. This was important because Russia faced a situation where European integration was advancing rapidly, and the EU was emerging on the geopolitical landscape as a new center of power, both economically, politically, and regionally. At the same time, in stark contrast to the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, NATO was trying to strengthen its voice, leadership, and sphere of influence by expanding its membership.

In the 1990s, developing within the post-Soviet society, Russia lost its image as a world leader and superpower, which was suddenly replaced by an uncertain image of a state with high potential but lacking the means to realize it. Avoiding the question of «Who are we? » was equivalent to refusing to choose its place in the system of major actors in the modern international system. It seems that the difficulties of such a choice for Russia were initially programmed by the peculiarities of its geographical and geopolitical position. During a period of radical transformation, Russian identity was profoundly affected by changing priorities and values. The transition to openness made it highly susceptible to external influences. Russian society became a new reality formed over the years of reforms. In these conditions, Russian identity began to evolve in terms of its content and forms of expression.

After the collapse of the USSR and the appointment of Boris Yeltsin as president, the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation was adopted on April 23, 1993 (Kremlin 1993). This diplomatic document was developed in the context of the end of the Cold War, the implementation of liberal democratic reforms, and the rejection of bipolar confrontation. The new doctrine emphasized the rejection of confrontation with Western countries and aimed to establish partnership relations with the United States and leading European powers. Relations with

European states were considered a priority for Russia's integration into the community of democratic states. In other words, in the first Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, as a state with a new political system and geopolitical strategy, Western countries were viewed as partners and potential allies within a community of democratic states. Russia has consistently sought to be part of Europe not only geographically but also in a civilizational sense.

In the post-Soviet version of Russia, there was one missing important component that was traditionally present in the arsenal of Russian identity. We are talking about a universalist idea, a vision of the development of the world, a project that Russia would offer to others. In the Soviet Union, such a project was based on socialist ideas. The degeneration of this ideology, its replacement by force, the loss of trust in it both among allies and among its own population became an important factor in the collapse of the USSR. That is why it was so difficult to define a «national idea» in the early 1990s. It was based on an attempt to present Russia as a new democratic state. There was a rejection of the perception of the «West» as a hostile «other». On the contrary, the West was perceived as an example and a basis for imitation, the final destination of political and economic transit. At the same time, its own Soviet past was being revised, and media narratives of condemnation of the Soviet period to some extent appeared. Interestingly, in a similar vein, identity politics in the early 1990s was built in almost all countries of the post-communist transit.

In practice, from 1991 to 2000, Russia joined several Western and European organizations. Thus, in 1994, it was the first to join NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program (NATO 2024). In 1996, it became a full member of the Council of Europe, and already in 1997 it signed the Founding Act with NATO, enshrining the principles of cooperation in the field of security. In 1998, it joined the Paris Club of Creditors (The Washington Post 1997), and in 1999, the Group of States against Corruption. All of this was aimed at and demonstrated Russia's desire to be part of the Western political and economic space. This desire for integration demonstrated its ambitions to become an important player in the international arena and improve its relations with Western countries by demonstrating commitment to Western norms. At the same time, it was difficult to talk about any entrenched values of Russians during this period, since the attention of the majority was focused on the economic problems that followed the collapse of the USSR.

The rise of Vladimir Putin to replace Yeltsin brought about a certain rethinking of the conceptual foundations of Russia's foreign policy, taking into account the increasing importance of the country's «national interest. » On June 28, 2000, a new Foreign Policy Concept was published (Kremlin 2000). With the country emerging from the most severe economic crisis, Moscow gained substantial political dividends. Thus, the adoption of this document corresponded to two key objectives. First, it was important to understand the overall configuration of the international relations system, considering the emergence of new challenges and threats. Second,

there was a need to reassess the general situation surrounding Russia and to define the priorities of its foreign policy activities. Unlike the previous concept, this one introduced a system of global and regional priorities. A cornerstone of the new concept was the firm defense of Russia's national interests. Another crucial element was the diversification of the Russian Federation's foreign policy connections, with a focus on partnerships with the West, as well as the development of relations with post-Soviet countries, the Asia-Pacific region, the Middle East, and Latin America. At that time, Russia did not have any «others» in a negative sense, particularly regarding European countries.

In the early 2000s, Putin emphasized that Russia's return to the European civilizational community could lead to a rise in cultural self-identification after a period in which this tendency had been weak (the Soviet era). This position was evident both in the domestic political discourse of the Russian leader and in his foreign policy rhetoric. The main characteristic of this period was the clear dominance of the idea of Russia's European essence and the virtual absence of statements about the country's special civilizational status. For example, in the early 2000s, Putin gave an interview on the program BBC Breakfast with Frost, where he stated: «In terms of its geography, history, culture, mentality, Russia is a European country. Of course, we are counting on and will seek to expand our cooperation with the EU. This aspiration is fully appreciated and supported by all the leading EU countries and the leadership of the European Commission» (BBC 2003). It was also noted that Russia is satisfied with the direction in which relations with NATO are developing.

The President's Address to the Federal Assembly, delivered on April 25, 2005, can be considered a kind of focus of the idea of rejecting a special (non-Western) path of development at that time (Kremlin 2005). President of Russia associated new vector of the state with the categories of freedom and democracy, and emphasized the special significance of the absence of any restrictions on movement and openness to the rest of the world. The following words from Putin seems to be important: «First and foremost, Russia has been, is, and will undoubtedly remain one of the largest European nations. The ideals of freedom, human rights, justice, and democracy, earned and championed by European culture, have long been a defining value for our society»². The President of the Russian Federation noted that for three centuries, Russia and other European nations have collaborated through Enlightenment reforms, the development of parliamentary and judicial systems, and the establishment of similar legal frameworks. Together, they advanced human rights, universal suffrage, support for the vulnerable, and social progress.

² «Прежде всего, Россия была, есть и, конечно, будет крупнейшей европейской нацией. Выстраданные и завоеванные европейской культурой идеалы свободы, прав человека, справедливости и демократии в течение многих веков являлись для нашего общества определяющим ценностным ориентиром»

Most of the examples of addressing the topic of civilization were interpreted by V. Putin in the context of a global and pan-European civilization. This approach was consistent with practice. Thus, Russia continued to actively integrate into Western structures. In 2002, the Russia-NATO Council was established to enhance security cooperation between Russia and NATO (NATO 2024). Putin's leadership aimed to deepen cooperation while considering Russia's strategic interests. However, the deterioration in relations between Moscow and Washington, coupled with foreign policy disagreements, contributed to a closer relationship between Russia and EU member states (EUR-Lex 2016). In general, Russia emerged from the political, economic, and, to a large extent, military crisis (the Chechen wars) that it had faced continuously throughout the 1990s. On this solid foundation, the Russian leadership has largely completed the formulation of a foreign policy strategy that aligns with the fundamental national interests of the country and the current stage of global development. Notably, several international events and factors, such as the bombing of Yugoslavia, terrorist threats, NATO's eastward expansion, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, influenced Putin's attempt to express Russia's views on international relations in his 2007 Munich speech.

Putin gave a speech devoted not so much to security policy itself as to geopolitical issues, and after analyzing it becomes possible to identify key points (Kremlin 2007). His speech reflects a complex interplay of rhetorical strategies designed to critique the unipolar world order, assert Russia's geopolitical stance, and address global security concerns. This is confirmed by the analysis carried out in the context of this work. He employs a direct, confrontational tone, often bypassing diplomatic pleasantries to convey his critiques of the existing world order. He positions himself as a speaker who will not adhere to standard diplomatic etiquette, instead opting for frankness. This approach not only establishes the sincerity of his views but also helps him present Russia as an honest, unfiltered voice in global politics. Russian president frequently draws on historical events to reinforce his points, grounding his argument in a broader historical context. By referencing the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, he legitimizes Russia's current stance against Western policies. He also invokes historical figures like Franklin D. Roosevelt to add weight to his argument about the interconnectedness of global security. For instance: «As Franklin D. Roosevelt said... «When peace has been broken anywhere, the peace of all countries everywhere is in danger. »» This use of history allows Putin to present his criticisms not as new or radical, but as grounded in well-established geopolitical principles. A recurring theme in the speech is the accusation that Western powers, mostly United States, engage in double standards. Putin repeatedly points out the hypocrisy of Western nations that promote democracy and international law while simultaneously violating those principles when it suits their interests. This is a classic example of defensive rhetoric, where he deflects potential criticism of Russia by

highlighting the faults of the West. «Russia — we — are constantly being taught about democracy. But for some reason, those who teach us do not want to learn themselves. » This tactic not only casts doubt on Western moral authority but also frames Russia as a victim of an uneven application of international rules.

A central argument in Putin's speech is his rejection of the unipolar world order led by the United States. He argues that this model is not only undemocratic but also unsustainable. His discourse constructs a vision of a multipolar world where multiple centers of power exist, and no single country dominates the global stage. He describes the unipolar world as: «One center of authority, one center of force, one center of decision-making. » Putin's rejection of unipolarity serves as a foundation for his advocacy of a multipolar world, where Russia has important role. Throughout the speech, Putin emphasizes Russia's sovereignty and portrays the country as a victim of Western encroachment. He defends Russia's right to protect its own security and criticizes NATO's expansion, which he perceives as a threat. His discourse positions Russia not as an aggressor but as a nation defending its legitimate interests. He asks: «Why is it necessary to put military infrastructure on our borders during this expansion? » This defensive rhetoric helps Putin frame Russia as a power that is unfairly targeted by the West, thereby justifying its actions in the international arena. It is evident that through a combination of critiques, historical references, and appeals to international law, he outlines a vision of global security that challenges Western hegemony and positions Russia as a defender of sovereign rights and legal principles. This rhetoric not only aims to bolster Russia's standing on the international stage but also seeks to garner domestic support by portraying the country as a victim of Western double standards.

However, at that time, the recognition of problems in international relations did not yet mean an automatic rejection of the idea of rapprochement with EU countries. For example, in the message, delivered 2.5 months after the Munich speech, Vladimir Putin ironically remarked on the country's search for a national idea (Kremlin 2007b). He emphasized that while this pursuit is not without meaning and interest, it can continue endlessly. He added that, nevertheless, cultural and spiritual uniqueness has not hindered anyone from building a country open to the world. Another important aspect of the speech was that Putin noted that plans to deploy missile defense in Europe are part of NATO's strategic pressure, in particular from the United States, which is a threat. At the same time, Russia sees a threat not only for itself, but also for Europe as a whole, demonstrating its desire to involve European countries in discussing security issues. «I would like to point out that elements of American strategic weaponry could appear in Europe for the first time. It is clear that such U.S. plans to deploy a missile defense system in Europe are not solely an issue of Russian-American relations. They, to varying degrees, affect the interests of all European states,

including those not in NATO»³ — noted the president of Russia. In other words, Russia viewed the United States and the process of NATO expansion as its primary antagonists, rather than the EU countries or Europe as a whole.

5.1.2. Everyday-Defined Perspective

The rapid collapse of what was believed to be a vast, centralized state — a state intended to endure for centuries — resulted in the fragmentation of a long-standing empire into numerous parts. This fragmentation occurred not only along state borders but also into ethnonational, regional, confessional, and other components. This sudden dissolution of the USSR spurred intense debates and discussions about Russia's future and prospects. The collapse of Soviet collective identity led to the emergence of multiple, diverse identities. The Russian people were confronted with the fundamental question of «Who are we? » both in cultural-civilizational terms and in a geopolitical sense. According to the theory of «two social realities, » where the dominant force is «authority-defined, » there is a direct correlation with how Russian citizens perceive their identity (Shamsul 1996). This theory supports the idea that authority discourse plays a crucial role in shaping identity characteristics during the initial phase up to 2007, before the imposition of sanctions. Consequently, questions regarding citizens' perceptions of the country's international standing and identity began to gain prominence as primary issues related to economic stabilization and security improvement were addressed.

This is supported by the findings of the statistics conducted by the researchers of the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Sociology (ISRAS 2007). An interesting question arose regarding Russians' perceptions of which countries, symbolizing the West and the East, Russia is closest to: a) in terms of culture; b) in terms of economy; c) in terms of national character. According to the data obtained, in the 1990s, the majority of Russians (50%) identified themselves with the West only in terms of culture. The economy of the «wild capitalism» that prevailed at that time seemed to them purely Asian or, at best, a mixed phenomenon. As for national character, Russians identified themselves as something between (with around 55% of responses centered in the middle of the scale, compared to approximately one-third in the «Western» part, and about 12% in the «Eastern» part). Despite fluctuations in the values of the corresponding indicators (which, for the most part, did not go beyond the margin of statistical error), this picture remained largely unchanged even in 2004.

³ «Обращаю внимание на то, что впервые в Европе могут появиться элементы американского стратегического оружия. Очевидно, что такие планы Соединенных Штатов по размещению системы противоракетной обороны в Европе не являются проблемой исключительно российско-американских отношений. Это в той или иной мере затрагивает интересы всех европейских государств, в том числе не входящих в НАТО»

By the end of the period under consideration, in 2007, the situation had changed somewhat. The percentage of people who believed that Russian culture was closer to the culture of the USA, England, or France, rather than to India or China, had increased by only 6% since 2004. However, in terms of the economy, there was a significant shift in views. The share of those who thought that the modern Russian economy had adopted Western characteristics more than doubled from 1998 (from 17% to 36.4%). At the same time, the percentage of those who still associated the Russian economy with the East dropped to one-fifth of the total number of respondents. The middle value remained practically unchanged. However, the data on national character were more unexpected. If previously opinions were concentrated in the center of the scale, and in 1998 and 2004, more than half of the respondents placed Russians equidistant from Western and Eastern countries, by 2007, the majority of answers (about 42%) shifted towards the left side of the scale, closer to the «West. »

It can be assumed that by the 1990s, after defining its goals and interests, society lost the psychological need for intense anti-Westernism that had previously been evident in the speeches of officials, public political writings, and mass consciousness. As a result, many evaluations became more objective, and the emotional burden of the struggle for self-assertion diminished. Nevertheless, the «West» was perceived differently within Russian consciousness. Society underwent a reevaluation of the «West» as a generalized term since the Cold War. Since the process of identity formation is inherently two-sided — relying not only on self-definition but also on the perception of the «Other» (Wendt 1999) — the «West» began to increasingly assume the role of the «Other» by the end of the examined period in the context of Russia.

According to the study, in 1995, over 77% of respondents viewed mentions of the USA quite favorably, while only 9% had unfavorable views. However, by the early 2000s, the percentage of those with favorable views had decreased to 37%, while the percentage of those with unfavorable views had increased to 39-40%. This negative balance of opinions later stabilized and has remained largely unchanged since. By 2007, surveys confirmed these figures: approximately 37% of respondents viewed the USA positively, while nearly 45% viewed it negatively. Similar figures are supported by data from the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion (VCIOM 2022). A resembling situation developed with NATO. In 1998, only 4.4% of respondents considered the North Atlantic Alliance to be a real threat. However, NATO's continuous eastward expansion—despite the concerns and protests of the Kremlin — the bombings in Serbia, the establishment of American military bases in Central Asian countries, and plans to deploy elements of the U.S. missile defense system in Eastern Europe, as well as persistent efforts to build global communication systems bypassing Russia, led to the fact that by 2007, the word «NATO» evoked positive feelings in less than one out of four respondents, while 76% had negative sentiments. It

should be noted that NATO itself is neither inherently good nor bad; it is anti-Russian by its original mission, structure, and ideology, something that the Russian population came to understand over this period.

The negative image of the United States, along with NATO, inevitably spread to European countries, which collectively form the West as a distinct geopolitical and cultural-historical entity. At the same time, a clear pattern emerged: the more independent and critical a Western country was in relation to America's strategy of global dominance, the warmer Russians' attitudes toward it became. During the period under consideration, the image of the West as a union of European countries, rather than the USA and European countries as a whole, was attractive and distinctly positive. For Russians, Europe is perceived as closer than America or, for example, Asia. Research revealed that the indicator for positive reactions to the word «Europe» was quite high, recorded at 72% in 2007. The only higher rating was for Russia itself (around 96%). In comparison, Asia and America lagged behind Europe by 20% and 30%, respectively. Additionally, five significant associations with Europe were most frequently noted by respondents during the period in question. For Russians, «Western Europe» is still primarily associated with prosperity, civilization, human rights, democracy, and discipline. These views are shared across all major socio-demographic groups. In 2007, the top five characteristics of Russia, as seen by its own citizens, were patriotism, spiritual world, crisis, culture, and mutual aid.

The results of the sociological surveys indicate that by 2007, Russian society had experienced a fragmentation of the generalized concept of the «West. » While the USA and NATO had become negative «Others, » the idea of rapprochement with Europe persisted. Although this was not an unconditional goal, it did not require Russians to change themselves due to their orientation toward European countries. Additionally, the process of forming Russia's geopolitical identity by 2007 remained incomplete, marked by confusion regarding values, objectives, and Russia's role both as part of the «European family» and as a representative of «Eurasianism. » This situation understandably left a vacuum for subsequent changes.

5.2. Pre-Sanction Period (2008-2013): Russia at the intersection of interests and opportunities

5.2.1. Authority-Defined Perspective

On July 12, 2008, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev approved a new Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, which largely complements and expands on the provisions of the previous Concept (Kremlin 2008). It reaffirms previously declared foreign policy principles such as openness, predictability, and pragmatism, driven by national interests. Foreign policy itself is declared to be a crucial resource and instrument of domestic policy. Specifically, it clarifies that

the goal is to create favorable external conditions for national modernization and for Russia's transition to an innovation-driven development model. The document emphasizes that the main foreign policy efforts should be focused on ensuring national security, preserving sovereignty, and strengthening Russia's position in the global community, which aligns with its interests as one of the world's leading centers of power. This sets the stage for Russia's role in contemporary global politics as a global power with broad foreign policy interests, rather than merely a regional player.

In addition to the traditional focus on Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, the European dimension of foreign policy is also reaffirmed and strengthened, being declared as a primary direction, despite the general principle of multi-vector foreign policy. It is noted that: «The main goal of Russia's foreign policy in the European direction is the creation of a truly open, democratic system of pan-regional collective security and cooperation, ensuring the unity of the Euro-Atlantic region — from Vancouver to Vladivostok — while preventing its new fragmentation and the revival of former bloc-based approaches, the inertia of which still persists in the current European architecture shaped during the Cold War era»⁴. It was explained that Russia is interested in establishing a strategic partnership agreement with the European Union, which would provide for equal and mutually beneficial cooperation, with the prospect of a visa-free regime. The concept also notes that: «Russia, as the largest European state with a multiethnic and multireligious society and a centuries-long history, is ready to play a constructive role in ensuring civilizational compatibility in Europe, promoting the harmonious integration of religious minorities, including in light of migration trends»⁵. The significance of Europe and the EU member states is highlighted by the fact that the development of bilateral relations with European countries is specifically noted as an important resource for advancing Russia's national interests in European and global affairs, contributing to the country's transition to an innovative development path. All of this affirmed the goal of fostering closer ties between Russia and other European countries, particularly EU members, as equal actors.

As for relations with the United States, the emphasis was placed on the need for mutually beneficial relations based on mutual respect. At the same time, the document notes that: «Russia maintains a negative stance toward NATO expansion, particularly regarding plans to admit

⁴ «Главной целью российской внешней политики на европейском направлении является создание по-настоящему открытой, демократической системы общерегиональной коллективной безопасности и сотрудничества, обеспечивающей единство Евро-Атлантического региона — от Ванкувера до Владивостока, не допуская его новой фрагментации и воспроизводства прежних блоковых подходов, инерция которых сохраняется в нынешней европейской архитектуре, сложившейся в эпоху «холодной войны»»

⁵ «Россия, как крупнейшее европейское государство с многонациональным и многоконфессиональным обществом и многовековой историей, готова сыграть конструктивную роль в обеспечении цивилизационной совместимости Европы, гармоничной интеграции религиозных меньшинств, в том числе с учетом тенденций в сфере миграции»

Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance, as well as the overall movement of NATO's military infrastructure closer to Russian borders. This undermines the principle of equal security, leads to the emergence of new dividing lines in Europe, and contradicts efforts to enhance cooperation in addressing the real challenges of the modern world»⁶. By and large, NATO and its plans are highlighted as the primary and explicit threat to both Russia's sovereignty and its national interests.

Even after the armed conflict between Russia and Georgia and the subsequent reactions, Russia's attitude towards Europe and the EU did not change. Thus, in the 2008 Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, the topic of the values of the Russian people was addressed, focusing on norms such as political equality, fairness in the courts, and the accountability of leaders (Kremlin 2008b). Further in the text, it stated: «This is freedom — personal, individual freedom. Freedom of enterprise, speech, religion, choice of residence, and profession. Family traditions. Love and loyalty. Care for the young and the elderly. Patriotism»⁷. This persuasive style suggests that in this message, the government is attempting to instill positive self-perceptions in ordinary citizens. Additionally, the text contains a substitution of concepts — what ought to be is presented as what is, and the norms of organizing the state's political life are described as characteristics of society itself.

As in any political speech or text, there must be an «Other» — a political entity that, at best, is fundamentally different from «us, » or at worst, opposes «us. » In this address, the United States is traditionally presented as the eternal «alter ego» — it is due to their irresponsible actions that the global economic crisis occurred, and they were the ones «behind the scenes» of the drama that unfolded in the Caucasus to justify the deployment of NATO ships to the Black Sea. However, Russia itself is positioned as a «team player» on the international stage, capable of effectively cooperating with other countries: «Russia is ready to stand together with other countries to confront <...> The lessons of the 2008 mistakes have shown all responsible nations that it is time to act. We must radically reform the political and economic systems»⁸. Thus, the external «Other» is the United States with NATO, while «we» are the civilized European powers, whose relations

⁶ «Россия сохраняет отрицательное отношение к расширению НАТО, в частности к планам приема в члены альянса Украины и Грузии, а также к приближению военной инфраструктуры НАТО к российским границам в целом, что нарушает принцип равной безопасности, ведет к появлению новых разъединительных линий в Европе и противоречит задачам повышения эффективности совместной работы по поиску ответов на реальные вызовы современности»

⁷ «Это свобода — личная, индивидуальная свобода. Свобода предпринимательства, слова, вероисповедания, выбора места жительства и рода занятий. Семейные традиции. Любовь и верность. Заботы о младших и старших. Патриотизм»

⁸ «Россия готова вместе с другими странами противостоять...», «Урок ошибок 2008 года доказал всем ответственным нациям, что пора действовать. И нужно радикально реформировать политическую и экономическую системы»

should be based on trust and cooperation. Overall, Medvedev as the new president of Russia did not change the foreign policy approach, and the «continuity» of views was clearly evident.

One year later, in annual speech addressed to the Federal Assembly, it was mostly noted that the priorities remain unchanged (Kremlin 2009). President Medvedev continues to support the strengthening of multipolarity, which, in his opinion, is becoming increasingly evident in the world. A focus in the area of security was placed on the Treaty on European Security, as a legal framework for the principle of the indivisibility of security in the Euro-Atlantic region. It was also noted that: «We are sometimes accused of having devised all of this against NATO. That is not the case. We do not build our foreign policy «against» anyone. However, we are not part of NATO, and neither are several other countries. Yet, serious decisions necessary for strengthening security in Europe must be made now. That is why we need a new and effective platform»⁹.

The following message did not differ significantly from the previous one, maintaining a neutral-to-positive tone toward Western actors. While relations with the U.S. were mainly described in terms of preserving a pragmatic approach and emphasizing economic benefits, the focus on the EU expanded (Kremlin 2010). The «Partnership for Modernization» was discussed in detail, including three key areas: first, mutual exchange of technologies, harmonization of technical standards and regulations, and practical EU assistance in Russia's accession to the WTO. Second, the simplification of visa regimes with the prospect of full abolition in the near future. Third, a substantial increase in professional and academic exchanges. At the same time, other regions were also given attention, albeit in less detail, reaffirming the country's multi-vector foreign policy. A special priority was placed on the CIS and its institutions, particularly the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). It was stated: «Ultimately, we must work towards the creation of a Single Economic Space — from the Arctic to the Pacific Ocean, across the entire territory of Eurasia»¹⁰. In practice, the actors moved closer in several important areas and in 2010, Russia and the European Union launched the «Partnership for Modernization» program (European Commission 2010). In addition, a visa dialogue was conducted with the EU, during which the possibility of simplifying the visa regime or even its complete abolition was discussed.

Vladimir Putin delivered his first address to the Federal Assembly following his election as president in May 2012. He began his speech by outlining the «fundamental questions» for

⁹ «Нас иногда упрекают, что мы все это придумали против НАТО. Это не так. Мы свою внешнюю политику «против кого-то» вообще не выстраиваем. Но и в НАТО мы не входим. Да и ряд других государств не являются членами этого блока. А серьезные решения, необходимые для укрепления безопасности в Европе, нужно принимать уже сейчас. И поэтому нам нужна новая, эффективная площадка»

¹⁰ «В конечном счёте мы должны действовать в направлении формирования Единого экономического пространства — от Арктики до Тихого океана, на всей территории Евразии»

moving forward in the long term, for the present and future of Russia (Kremlin 2012). One of the key national interests is the protection of sovereignty. In response to the question of what sovereignty means for Russia in the 21st century, it was stated that it is the possession of sufficient resources to ensure independence. «Russia must not only maintain its geopolitical relevance but also multiply it; it must be in demand by our neighbors and partners»¹¹ — noted Putin. This applies to the economy, culture, science, education, and diplomacy. At the same time, military power remains a key guarantor of Russia's security and independence. In addition, along with patriotism and civic responsibility as fundamental values, democracy was once again emphasized, as before. «For Russia, there is and can be no other political choice besides democracy. However, Russian democracy is the power of the Russian people specifically, with its own traditions of self-governance, and not the implementation of standards imposed on us from outside»¹². The necessity of strengthening spiritual bonds, such as mercy, mutual assistance, and support, which have historically made Russia strong, is also mentioned. Special attention in this regard is given to traditional values. In addition, as part of the understanding of the need for deeper work in the field of national policy and related issues, and in accordance with Vladimir Putin's decree, the Council for Interethnic Relations was established as an advisory and consultative body under the President of the Russian Federation (Kremlin 2012b).

Despite all this, little was said about foreign policy, and only in general terms, without mentioning specific actors or opinions about them. It was noted that Russia continues to advocate for a multipolar world, and its foreign policy is based on the principles of collective effort and cooperation in addressing global challenges. At the same time, in his inaugural speech of 2012, delivered prior to the address, Putin expressed ideas of Eurasianism: «...the historical perspective of the state and our nation depends today precisely on us, <...> on our perseverance in organizing the vast Russian expanses from the Baltic to the Pacific, and on our ability to become leaders and a center of attraction for all of Eurasia»¹³. It can be assumed that it was during these years that the idea of a Eurasian state was more or less formed in Putin's perception.

In the second year of his presidency after Medvedev, an updated Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation was released (Kremlin 2013). The formation of the Eurasian Economic

¹¹ «Россия должна не просто сохранить свою геополитическую востребованность, она должна её умножить, она должна быть востребована нашими соседями и партнёрами»

¹² «Для России нет и не может быть другого политического выбора кроме демократии. Однако российская демократия — это власть именно российского народа с его собственными традициями народного самоуправления, а вовсе не реализация стандартов, навязанных нам извне»

¹³ «...историческая перспектива государства и нашей нации зависят сегодня именно от нас, <...> от нашей настойчивости в обустройстве огромных российских пространств от Балтики до Тихого океана, от нашей способности стать лидерами и центром притяжения всей Евразии»

Union was highlighted as a priority task, aimed at maximizing mutually beneficial ties within the CIS space and becoming a model of integration that defines the future of the Commonwealth countries, while remaining open to other states: «The new union, built on universal integration principles, is intended to become an effective link between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region»¹⁴. As for the West, the U.S. and NATO were mentioned in the context of maintaining and developing constructive relations based both on international norms and mutual respect. Significantly more attention was given to relations with the EU, as it was stated that Russia is an integral, organic part of European civilization. In this regard, the necessity of creating a single economic and humanitarian space from the Atlantic to the Pacific was emphasized. A special focus was placed on the goal of mutual visa-free travel for short-term visits by citizens, and it was noted: «The visa regime remains one of the main barriers to the development of human and economic contacts between Russia and the European Union. Its removal would provide a strong impetus for the real integration of Russia and the European Union»¹⁵. In summary, it was stated that Russia proceeds from a strategic commonality of goals with all states of the Euro-Atlantic region, including NATO member countries.

The President of the country's annual address to the Federal Assembly began with the statement that global development is becoming increasingly contradictory and dynamic (Kremlin 2013b). In this context, Russia's historical responsibility is growing, not only as one of the key guarantors of global and regional stability but also as a state that consistently upholds value-based approaches, including in international relations. The President noted that the Russian Federation does not aspire to be labeled as a superpower in the sense of claiming global or regional hegemony. Russia's goal is leadership through the protection of international law, sovereignty, and the uniqueness of peoples. In addition, a significant part was devoted to values. The speech mentioned that in many countries today, moral norms are being reassessed, national traditions are being erased, and cultural differences are being diminished. Society is being urged to accept the equivalence of such opposing concepts as good and evil. «Such destruction of traditional values from above not only leads to negative consequences for societies but is also fundamentally undemocratic, as it is implemented based on abstract, detached ideas, contrary to the will of the majority of the people <...> And we know that there are more and more people in the world who support our position on the protection of traditional values, which have constituted the spiritual

¹⁴ «Строящийся на универсальных интеграционных принципах новый союз призван стать эффективным связующим звеном между Европой и Азиатско-Тихоокеанским регионом»

¹⁵ «Визовый режим остается одним из основных барьеров на пути развития человеческих и экономических контактов между Россией и Европейским союзом. Его отмена станет мощным импульсом для реальной интеграции России и Европейского союза»

and moral foundation of civilization and each nation for millennia: the values of the traditional family, authentic human life, including religious life, a life that is not only material but also spiritual, the values of humanism and the diversity of the world»¹⁶ — the head of state stated. In conclusion, it was noted that this conservative position is necessary to prevent a return to chaos and a primitive state. As an example of attempts to impose «progressive» development models on other countries and their results in the form of regression and violence, the events in the Middle East and North Africa were mentioned, including the dramatic situation in Syria.

At the 2013 meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club, Vladimir Putin reflected on and responded to various topics raised during the discussion (Kremlin 2013c). A significant portion was devoted to both the identities of different states and relations with international actors. The discussion began with values. It was noted that Russia's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity are non-negotiable. This also includes spiritual and ideological sovereignty. Attempts from outside to «civilize» Russia were described as «red lines» that no one should cross. In this context, the events unfolding in the world were identified as a serious challenge to Russian identity. The President of Russia stated: «We see how many Euro-Atlantic countries have effectively chosen to abandon their roots, including Christian values, which form the foundation of Western civilization. Moral principles and any traditional identity — national, cultural, religious, or even gender — are being rejected. Policies are being pursued that place a large family and same-sex partnerships on the same level, faith in God or faith in Satan. <...> People in many European countries are ashamed and afraid to speak about their religious affiliation. Holidays are either canceled or renamed, shamefully concealing their essence — the moral foundation of these celebrations. And this model is being aggressively imposed on everyone, the entire world. I am convinced that this is a direct path to degradation and primitivization, to a profound demographic and moral crisis»¹⁷. At the same time, Putin failed to clearly and explicitly outline which

¹⁶ «Подобное разрушение традиционных ценностей сверху не только ведёт за собой негативные последствия для обществ, но и в корне антидемократично, поскольку проводится в жизнь, исходя из абстрактных, отвлечённых идей, вопреки воле народного большинства <...> И мы знаем, что в мире всё больше людей, поддерживающих нашу позицию по защите традиционных ценностей, которые тысячелетиями составляли духовную, нравственную основу цивилизации и каждого народа: ценностей традиционной семьи, подлинной человеческой жизни, в том числе и жизни религиозной, жизни не только материальной, но и духовной, ценностей гуманизма и разнообразия мира»

¹⁷ «Мы видим, как многие евроатлантические страны фактически пошли по пути отказа от своих корней, в том числе и от христианских ценностей, составляющих основу западной цивилизации. Отрицаются нравственные начала и любая традиционная идентичность: национальная, культурная, религиозная или даже половая. Проводится политика, ставящая на один уровень многодетную семью и однополое партнёрство, веру в бога или веру в сатану <...> Люди во многих европейских странах стыдятся и боятся говорить о своей религиозной принадлежности. Праздники отменяют даже или называют их как-то по-другому, стыдливо пряча саму суть этого праздника — нравственную основу этих праздников. И эту модель пытаются агрессивно навязывать всем, всему миру. Убеждён, это прямой путь к деградации и примитивизации, глубокому демографическому и нравственному кризису»

institutions and values are being imposed on Russia, and which can be considered as stemming from the will and needs of Russian citizens. It was later added that without the moral and ethical norms that have formed over millennia, people will inevitably lose their human dignity. This is why the country's role is seen in defending these values. Also, it was noted that identification exclusively through ethnicity or religion is impossible in a large state with a multiethnic population. Common values, patriotic consciousness, civic responsibility, and solidarity were named as important elements. Thus, based on the above, it was concluded that Russia is a «flourishing complexity, » a state-civilization. In this context, attention was given to the Eurasian Economic Union as a project for preserving the identity of the peoples of the historical Eurasian space in a new era and a new world. According to Putin, Eurasian integration is a chance for the entire post-Soviet space to become an independent center of global development, rather than a periphery for Europe or Asia.

Overall, in the official discourse, especially during Putin's third presidential term and by the end of the pre-sanction period, several key «nodal points» began to emerge. It can be noted that elements such as sovereignty, expressed through independence in various spheres, and traditional values as a generalized term became increasingly important for Russia. Gradually, the idea of a «civilizational state» began to take shape, albeit with a still strong inclination toward Europe as a common «family» of nations and civilization. At the same time, efforts to create a kind of shared «Eurasian» economic space with certain countries on the continent were gradually gaining momentum, which became more evident by the end of the pre-sanction period in the discourse of the authorities, particularly in Putin's statements. In general, it cannot be said that by 2013 the official discourse opposed Russia to European countries, particularly the EU. However, by this time, a more or less clear understanding of Russia's identity, as seen through the eyes of the country's leadership, was emerging — defining the elements that constituted the state and its identity.

5.2.2. Everyday-Defined Perspective

Based on the annual May poll of Russian citizens and the responses received, it can be noted that the correlation between the official position of the authorities and the subsequent discourse and public opinion, although noticeable, does not fully coincide. If in the official discourse in recent years of the period under consideration, «reproaches» or even «accusations» regarding the «Euro-Atlantic countries» were visible, then for ordinary citizens, European countries were a positive actor (Levada Center 2013). In response to the question about attitudes toward the European Union during the latter half of the pre-sanctions period (2008-2013), the majority of respondents expressed a positive view. As of 2013, 61% of citizens responded «very

positive» or «mostly positive, » while 23% held «mostly negative» or «very negative» views, and 17% were undecided. It is worth noting that the percentage of those unsure slightly increased, which could indicate growing uncertainty or ambivalence toward the EU among parts of the Russian population. Looking at the 2008-2013 period as a whole, there was a slight decline in positive attitudes toward the EU among Russians, with no sharp changes. The same can be said for negative evaluations, which remained stable, while the number of undecided respondents saw a modest rise. Overall, due to the lack of either condemning or highly supportive discourse from the authorities, this period can be seen as somewhat stagnant in terms of public opinion. A similar situation is noticeable with regard to the United States, where a positive bias persisted from 2008 to 2013, except for 2009, which was affected by the situation involving Georgia and Abkhazia. In 2008, 52% of respondents had a «very positive» or «mostly positive» view, while 36% had a «mostly negative» or «very negative» view, with the remainder undecided. The 2013 survey showed similar results, with 51% of citizens viewing the U.S. positively, while 38% held negative views. The relatively small changes in percentages can be explained by the lack of compelling arguments from the authorities, which are often not supported by anything in practice.

Sociologists also asked whether Russia should strengthen its relationships with Western countries (as a generalized concept) or distance itself from them. In 2008, 57% of Russians supported strengthening ties with the West, and by May 2010, this figure had risen to 78%. From 2011 to 2013, the level of support remained relatively stable: 74% in 2011, 76% in 2012, and 71% in 2013. The idea of distancing from the West was supported by only 16% of respondents in 2013, while the percentage of those unsure remained stable at around 11-13% throughout the period. When asked which countries Russia should focus on in its foreign policy, 48% of respondents pointed to Western European countries, over 45% cited CIS countries such as Belarus and Kazakhstan, 30% indicated India and China, 22% mentioned Japan, and 18% referred to the United States. When it comes to cooperation with countries that often oppose the West and its values, accusing it of «imperialism» and «colonialism» (such as the authorities of Cuba, Venezuela, Syria, Iran, and North Korea), and which are largely isolated, only a small minority of citizens — ranging from 7% to 11% — recommended focusing on these nations in various years.

Between 2008 and 2013, Russian public opinion toward Western countries, particularly the European Union and the United States, remained generally positive despite the government's increasingly critical stance. Polls show that most Russians favored strengthening ties with the «West», while relatively few supported distancing from Western countries or aligning with nations that oppose «Western values». Overall, these results suggest that Russian citizens preferred engagement with the «West», with a steady but modest shift toward ambivalence, likely influenced by subtle changes in official discourse.

5.3. Sanction Period (2014-2024): Resistance and Reinvention

5.3.1. Authority-Defined Perspective

The 2014 conflict and its aftermath became a catalyst for profound changes in Russia. The «Us» versus «Them» rhetoric intensified, becoming a central element of Russia's foreign policy strategy toward the «collective West, » particularly Europe. In 2014, the United States and the European Union imposed a series of sanctions on Russia in response to the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine. EU officials confirmed the suspension of bilateral negotiations with Russia on visa issues and the New Agreement (Council of the European Union 2024). Key measures included personal sanctions against Russian politicians and businesspeople, the first sectoral sanctions, restrictions on Russian banks' and companies' access to Western financial markets, and the European Investment Bank's suspension of financing for projects in Russia (Настоящее Время 2021). This sanctions list was gradually expanded and extended over the following years. The widening distance between Russia and Europe reinforced the narrative of a «Western threat, » serving as a unifying element for Russian society around the idea of protecting its unique identity and independence from external influence.

Amid all the events, the President's 2014 message logically touched on various topics. In general, it was noted that Russia aims to expand the number of equal partners both in the West and the East, with a priority on cooperation with those countries where economic relations are not constrained by political considerations (Kremlin 2014). The President stated that despite foreign policy challenges, Russia plans to maintain relations with Europe and America while simultaneously increasing cooperation and developing new areas of interaction with countries on other continents. Mentions of the Eurasian Union and its importance gradually increased. At the same time, within the «Us vs. Them» dichotomy, the differences between Russia and several European states were more clearly highlighted: «If for some European countries, national pride is a long-forgotten concept and sovereignty is too much of a luxury, then for Russia, real state sovereignty is an absolutely essential condition for its existence! <...> Either we will be sovereign, or we will dissolve, disappear in the world»¹⁸. It can be said that the role of the «Other» is subconsciously diminished, with its influence and autonomy being called into question. Under the influence of counter-reactions and media propaganda, and in the absence of another influential viewpoint in the public space, united Europe appears in the collective consciousness not as an autonomous actor, but as an object of manipulation, a tool of influence from the United States,

¹⁸ «Если для ряда европейских стран национальная гордость — давно забытое понятие, а суверенитет — слишком большая роскошь, то для России реальный государственный суверенитет — абсолютно необходимое условие её существования! <...> или мы будем суверенными, или растворимся, потеряемся в мире»

their «puppet». The narrative of the «destruction of traditional spiritual and moral values» continued in various official meetings and speeches, reinforcing the overall discourse surrounding this nodal point (Kremlin 2014b).

The discussion also touched upon the imposed sanctions: The discussion also touched upon the imposed sanctions: «This is not just a nervous reaction from the United States or its allies to our stance on the events and coup in Ukraine, nor is it solely due to the so-called Crimean Spring. I'm certain that even if none of this had happened (and I want to emphasize this, dear colleagues, especially for you, for the politicians, for those present here today), if none of this had occurred, they would have found another pretext to restrain Russia's growing capabilities, influence it, or, better yet, use it for their own interests»¹⁹. In essence, the head of state sought to convey the viewpoint that the escalation and pressure from the «collective West» were inevitable, and Russia's foreign policy actions did not influence this fact. Moreover, the sanctions were described as illegitimate: «Sanctions are already undermining the foundations of global trade and the rules of the WTO, the principles of the inviolability of private property, and shaking the liberal model of globalization based on the market, freedom, and competition»²⁰ (Kremlin 2014c).

The 2015 address did not introduce anything new compared to the past; however, there were no direct references to the USA, Europe, or the entire «West» at all. The main focus shifted to emphasizing the idea of «import substitution» for various goods due to sanctions and strengthening economic as well as military sovereignty. Nevertheless, much of the speech was dedicated to security and the fight against terrorism, and in this context, Vladimir Putin took a dig at Western countries without directly accusing them in his statement: «We know why this happened. We know who wanted to overthrow inconvenient regimes and impose their rules. And what was the result? They stirred up chaos and destroyed statehood»²¹ (Kremlin 2015). The tone gradually intensified. In the 2016 address, the main focus was on the economy, both domestic and external (Kremlin 2016). Sanctions were described as an attempt to make Russia «dance to someone else's tune» and «neglect its fundamental national interests. »

¹⁹ «Это не просто нервная реакция США или их союзников на нашу позицию в связи с событиями и госпереворотом на Украине. И даже не в связи с так называемой Крымской весной. Уверен, что если бы всего этого не было (я хочу это подчеркнуть, уважаемые коллеги, особенно для вас, для политиков, для тех, кто в зале сидит сегодня), если бы всего этого не было, то придумали бы какой-нибудь другой повод для того, чтобы сдерживать растущие возможности России, повлиять на неё, а ещё лучше - использовать в своих интересах»

²⁰ «Санкции уже подрывают основы мировой торговли и правила ВТО, принципы незыблемости частной собственности, расшатывают либеральную модель глобализации, основанную на рынке, свободе и конкуренции»

²¹ «Мы же знаем, почему это произошло. Знаем, кому захотелось сместить неугодные режимы, грубо навязать свои правила. В результате — что? Заварили кашу, разрушили государственность»

Regarding the newly released foreign policy concept 2016, when compared to the document from 2013, it is notably more rigid (Kremlin 2016b). It pays more attention to threats, employs harsher rhetoric regarding Western partners, and has slightly altered priorities, although continuity with the previous document is evident. It was stated that systemic problems had accumulated in the Euro-Atlantic region over the past decades, manifesting in the geopolitical expansion of NATO and the European Union. The policies of the United States and their allies were described as restraining Russia through pressure in various areas, thereby causing harm to all. An interesting aspect of the 2016 Concept is the frequency of mentions of the Eurasian region, at the level of the Euro-Atlantic (often combined, rather than just Europe) and the Asia-Pacific. Such ideas and thoughts have increasingly appeared in Putin's rhetoric (Kremlin 2017). In his eyes, Russia was increasingly evolving into a distinct civilization, a leader in Eurasia (not only in the geographical sense, but also in the cultural-historical and politico-philosophical contexts).

In the subsequent addresses to the Federal Assembly, existing ideas and narratives were expanded and supplemented. A significant amount was said about sovereignty as a key factor and the threat to it. In this regard, the country's defense potential was discussed as being necessary due to the expansion of the United States in the region (Kremlin 2018). Countries that support the US both in expansion and in putting pressure on Russia were called satellites, as if marking and belittling them, while they themselves «grunt» to the States (Kremlin 2019). The idea was reiterated that Russia is a civilization based on its own identity, centuries-old traditions, the culture of its peoples, values, and customs. Putin also stated that: «Russia has been and will be a sovereign, independent state. This is simply an axiom. It will either be this way or it will not exist at all. <...> Russia cannot be a state if it is not sovereign. Some countries may, but Russia cannot»²². In doing so, he essentially noted that sovereignty = survival, meaning that anyone who encroaches upon it — not just militarily, but in any form of sovereignty — is considered a threat and an enemy. During the same period, in one congratulatory message to researchers, the president emphasized that «the study of the history, culture, and traditions of the East holds special significance for Russia as a great Eurasian power»²³ (Kremlin 2018b).

The 2020 presidential address did not include a foreign policy section and was focused solely on internal issues, such as social and economic matters (Kremlin 2020). However, the following message took a radically different approach. In the 2021 Presidential Address to the

²² «Россия была и будет суверенным, независимым государством. Вот это просто аксиома. Она будет либо такой, либо вообще её не будет <...> Россия не может быть государством, если она не будет суверенной. Некоторые страны могут, Россия — нет»

²³ «изучение истории, культуры, традиций Востока имеет особое значение для России как великой евразийской державы»

Federal Assembly, issues of international relations, sanctions, and interference in the internal affairs of other states were highlighted (Kremlin 2021). The President of Russia referred to the use of sanctions as a political tool, condemning them: «Unfortunately, it seems that the world has already become accustomed to the practice of politically motivated, unlawful sanctions in the economy, to crude attempts by some to impose their will on others by force»²⁴. The term «collective West» or «Western colleagues» also appears in the text. The President notes that Russia conducts itself with the utmost restraint, modesty, often not responding to unfriendly actions or even blatant disrespect. It is observed that in some countries, it has become common to criticize Russia for any reason, often without any grounds. Based on the analysis of this document, it can be said that by 2021, the once distinct term «collective West, » which referred to the U.S. and European countries (mainly the EU), had once again been unified, indicating not only a growing divide between the countries but also a sense of rejection. This was driven by both the continuation and escalation of the sanctions policy against Russia, as well as an increasingly confrontational rhetoric from Western states, as noted by Russian political elites and media.

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a large-scale military operation against Ukraine, marking a pivotal moment in modern geopolitics. This action significantly altered Russia's relations with Western countries, resulting in extensive economic, political, and humanitarian consequences. In a national address, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated the operation's objectives as the «demilitarization» and «denazification» of Ukraine and the protection of the Donbas population, which he claimed had faced persecution and genocide by Ukrainian authorities (Kremlin 2022). He also stated that the operation was a necessary response to «fundamental threats» to Russia's security posed by NATO, whose expansion Russia viewed as a threat to its existence. He cited examples of countries that had been subjected to NATO intervention: «It generally seems that almost everywhere in the world where the West attempts to impose its order, the result is bloody, unhealed wounds and the scourge of international terrorism and extremism»²⁵. The onset of military actions drew widespread condemnation, with international organizations, including the UN, NATO, and the EU, calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities.

Additionally, the sanctions policy, which has been ongoing since 2014, escalated to a qualitatively different level. The sanctions imposed on Russia became some of the strictest in history, significantly impacting ordinary citizens compared to previous sanctions packages. In

²⁴ «В мире, к сожалению, похоже, уже все привыкли к практике политически мотивированных, незаконных санкций в экономике, к грубым попыткам одних силой навязать свою волю другим»

²⁵ «Вообще складывается впечатление, что практически везде, во многих регионах мира, куда Запад приходит устанавливать свой порядок, по итогам остаются кровавые, незаживающие раны, язвы международного терроризма и экстремизма»

absolute numbers, prior to the outbreak of hostilities in February 2022, Russia faced 2,695 sanctions; by early August 2024, this number had surged to 19,535 (Castellum.AI 2024). Thus, Russia became the most sanctioned country in the world, the number of restrictive measures became 4 times more than in Iran and 10 times more than in North Korea. Russian banks were disconnected from the SWIFT interbank payment system, the activity of the MasterCard and Visa payment systems was stopped on the territory of the Russian Federation. The assets of the Central Bank of the Russian Federation located abroad were frozen, due to which Russia technically lost the ability to pay non-residents, the assets of Russian banks and companies. Many foreign companies left Russia, investments, supplies of products and equipment were stopped. The Russian authorities declared that the sanctions policy of the «West» is a conscious long-term strategy, the goal of which is, among other things, to strike a blow at every citizen of Russia. This view is supported by the observation that many sanctions and restrictions targeted only citizens holding Russian passports, effectively imposing a sense of «collective guilt» on all individuals regardless of their opinions or beliefs. Such measures included the cancellation of cultural and sports connections, such as the termination of contracts, cancellation of concerts, auctions, and the exclusion of Russian citizens from regional competitions (AA 2024; CBS News 2022; DW 2022). Additionally, the refusal to issue various types of visas and denial of residence permit extensions by several countries (Schengen News 2023), alongside the restriction and withdrawal of access to digital services, including the ability to purchase movies and video games (Naavik 2023), have impacted nearly all categories of citizens, including minors and politically neutral individuals. It can be said that this «collective punishment» has affected everyone indiscriminately. The authorities' discourse about the «collective West» and its actions has now become «tangible» for Russian citizens.

Moreover, during this period, Russia's international isolation and self-isolation began to intensify. On February 25, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe decided to suspend Russia's rights in the committee and in PACE. Subsequently, on April 7, the UN General Assembly suspended Russia's membership in the Human Rights Council (Council of the European Union 2022; United Nations 2022). In response, Russia announced its early termination of membership in these organizations. Furthermore, on April 27, the Russian Foreign Ministry declared the country's withdrawal from the UN World Tourism Organization due to the «politicization of its activities and support for discrimination against Russia. » This trend continued in subsequent years, with Russia being excluded from or withdrawing from over 40 organizations, forums, and conventions (TASS 2022). Additionally, the Russian government approved a list of countries that were considered unfriendly, known as the «Unfriendly Countries List. » This list, primarily established in March 2022, has been updated several times. As of October 2024, it includes 49

countries, featuring the United States, all EU member states, Australia, the UK and its territories, and others (Government of Russia 2024).

While there was no address to the Federal Assembly in 2022, within the framework of the previously mentioned Council for Interethnic Relations and all working meetings, it was clearly defined what traditional values are and what threatens them (Kremlin 2022b). According to the law, traditional values are defined as «moral guidelines» that shape the worldview of Russian citizens, passed down from generation to generation, forming the foundation of Russian national identity and a unified cultural space. These values strengthen civic unity and have a unique, distinctive expression in the spiritual, historical, and cultural development of the multiethnic people of Russia. The document lists elements such as life, dignity, human rights and freedoms, patriotism, citizenship, service to the Motherland, responsibility for its fate, high moral ideals, strong family ties, creative labor, the priority of the spiritual over the material, humanism, mercy, justice, collectivism, mutual assistance and respect, historical memory, and the continuity of generations, as well as the unity of the peoples of Russia. In light of the global civilizational and moral crisis leading to the loss of traditional spiritual and moral guidelines, threats to these values were identified. These threats include ideological and psychological influence on citizens to impose an «alien» system of ideas and values, such as immorality, the denial of patriotic ideals, service to the Motherland, natural continuation of life, the importance of a strong family, marriage, having many children, creative labor, and Russia's positive contribution to world history and culture. Additionally, the document names the destruction of the traditional family through the promotion of non-traditional sexual relationships. Besides extremist and terrorist organizations, the actions of the United States and other unfriendly foreign states, certain transnational corporations, and foreign non-governmental organizations were highlighted as carriers of this «destructive» ideological system.

The 2023 Address to the Federal Assembly summarized the official position on a number of issues and events that occurred over the past year (Kremlin 2023). There were many accusations directed at the «collective West, » primarily regarding the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The President noted that the promises of Western leaders, their assurances of a desire for peace in Donbas, turned out to be a cruel lie: «They were simply stalling for time, engaging in legal quibbling, turning a blind eye to political assassinations, to the repressions of the Kyiv regime against dissidents, to the persecution of believers, and increasingly encouraging Ukrainian neo-Nazis to commit terrorist acts in Donbas»²⁶. It was also noted that the West was negotiating with

²⁶ «Они просто тянули время, занимались крючкотворством, закрывали глаза на политические убийства, на репрессии киевского режима против неугодных, на издевательства над верующими, всё больше поощряли украинских неонацистов на террористические действия на Донбассе»

Kyiv even before the start of the military operation, while the U.S. and NATO were rapidly deploying their bases near Russia's borders, thus creating a high-level threat to the country. Putin stated: «This disgusting method of deception has been tried more than once before. They behaved just as shamelessly and hypocritically while destroying Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. They will never wash away this shame. The concepts of honor, trust, and decency mean nothing to them <...> Western elites have become a symbol of total, unprincipled lies»²⁷. On the other hand, it was stated that Russia was open and genuinely ready for constructive dialogue with the West, striving for an indivisible security system that is equal for all states, and had proposed such an option for many years. The situation was characterized as follows: «We are defending people's lives, our homeland. But the West's goal is boundless power <...> The West is using Ukraine both as a battering ram against Russia and as a testing ground»²⁸. In concluding his thought, Putin noted that the people of Ukraine have become hostages of the Kyiv regime and its Western masters, who have effectively occupied this country in every sense.

However, a different kind of threat was also raised — one of a values-based and ideological nature. The lies of Western countries were noted in this regard, especially concerning the distortion of historical facts and attacks on culture, the Russian Orthodox Church, and other traditional religious organizations in the country. «Look at what they are doing to their own people: the destruction of the family, cultural and national identity, perversions, abuse of children, even pedophilia is declared as normal, a norm of their life, and priests and clergymen are forced to bless same-sex marriages <...> What can be said here? Lord, forgive them, «they know not what they do»»²⁹ — Vladimir Putin said. In this context, it was noted that Western elites are simply going mad, and «this, it seems, is no longer curable, » while Russia must protect its children from «degradation and degeneration. »

The year 2023 also became the year of the release of a new version of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (Kremlin 2023b). It has become more ideologized and more aggressive compared to previous versions, and it has also absorbed various elements of a clearly propagandistic nature. Nevertheless, the national interests of Russia were initially highlighted,

²⁷ «Этот отвратительный метод обмана уже не раз был опробован и раньше. Так же бессовестно, двулично они вели себя, разрушая Югославию, Ирак, Ливию, Сирию. От этого позора никогда им не отмыться. Понятия чести, доверия, порядочности не для них <...> западные элиты превратились в символ тотальной беспринципной лжи»

²⁸ «Мы защищаем жизнь людей, свой родной дом. А цель Запада — безграничная власть <...> Запад использует Украину и как таран против России, и как полигон»

²⁹ «Посмотрите, что они делают со своими собственными народами: разрушение семьи, культурной и национальной идентичности, извращения, издевательства над детьми, вплоть до педофилии, объявляются нормой, нормой их жизни, а священнослужителей, священников принуждают благословлять однополые браки <...> Что тут скажешь? Прости господи, «не ведают, что творят»»

such as the protection of the constitutional order, sovereignty, independence, and the state and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation from destructive foreign influence, as well as the strengthening of traditional Russian spiritual and moral values and the preservation of the cultural and historical heritage of the multinational people. In addition, shifts in how Russia perceives its own identity and the global order are further reflected in a newly established hierarchical structure. The world is divided into nine regions, ranked in importance from most to least significant. The «Near Abroad» (first and foremost, the countries of the CIS) holds the highest position, followed by the Arctic. Next in the hierarchy are the Eurasian continent, specifically the People's Republic of China and the Republic of India. Following this are the Asia-Pacific Region, then the Islamic world, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the European region, and finally, the United States and other Anglo-Saxon states. This structure emphasizes Russia's prioritization of certain geopolitical areas and its strategic focus, highlighting a shift in global alliances and a growing emphasis on regions closer to home, as well as key partners like China and India.

While Russia's distrust and view of the West as a threat were already evident in the 2016 policy framework, the tone has become notably more assertive in the latest version. The document presents Western-led globalization as a form of imperialism and colonialism, directly opposing the spread of «harmful neoliberal ideologies. » Additionally, the 2023 concept accuses the West, and specifically the U.S., of actively working to weaken and ultimately destroy Russia through «undermining its internal political stability» and «eroding its traditional spiritual and moral values». Document notes that Russia's model for relations with Europe is based on geographic proximity and deep cultural and economic ties. However, the U.S. strategy of fostering divisions in Europe complicates normalization efforts, aiming to weaken both Russia and European economies. Regarding the U.S., Russia seeks strategic parity and peaceful coexistence, but this depends on the U.S. abandoning its dominance-focused policies. Relations with other western states will depend on their willingness to respect Russia's interests and move away from a hostile course. In other words, upon full analysis of the document, Russian government intends to focus on cooperation and engagement with the so-called Global South, emphasizing partnerships with nations that maintain neutral or supportive stances in the face of Western-imposed sanctions. Moreover, the 2023 Concept largely reflects the idea that Russia not only seeks to establish itself as a distinct civilization, separate from both Europe and Asia, but also aims to assert its role in the restructuring and redefinition of the world order through the lens of its unique civilizational perspective. It is evident that the President of Russia is working to position the «civilization-state» among the countries of the «Global South, » aiming to become one of its centers. The document also underscores Russia's intention to rethink the dynamics of international relations in a way that

aligns with its national identity and values, which are significantly different from the values and ideals of the modern «collective West. »

The 2024 Federal Assembly address logically continued the Russian president's anti-Western rhetoric (Kremlin 2024). It reiterated the lies of the U.S. and its satellites, as well as their unwillingness to engage in meaningful negotiations rather than demagoguery. The threat to Russia was also clearly defined: «The so-called West, with its colonial habits and tendency to ignite national conflicts around the world, is not just aiming to contain our development — what they want instead of Russia is a dependent, decaying, and dying space where they can do whatever they please»³⁰. Much was also said on the topic of security. According to Vladimir Putin, it is necessary to work on shaping a new framework of equal and indivisible security in Eurasia (not Europe, as in earlier addresses) in the foreseeable future. This necessity was expressed in the context of mentioning conflicts in various parts of the world, provoked by Western countries. Such actions were described as those leading to the «dismantling of the European security system. » «We also understand that the West is trying to drag us into an arms race, thereby exhausting us, attempting to repeat the trick they succeeded with in the 1980s against the Soviet Union»³¹ — noted Putin. At the same time, although it was stated that Russia is still ready for substantive discussions on various topics with all interested countries and organizations, the main focus was given to other associations — the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and BRICS. He emphasized that there are great prospects in building a large Eurasian partnership by aligning the integration processes within the Eurasian Economic Union with the People's Republic of China's «One Belt, One Road» initiative. As before, attention was also given to traditional values, which Russia embodies, while Western countries are losing them: «We see what is happening in some countries, where the norms of morality and family institutions are deliberately destroyed, pushing entire nations towards extinction and degeneration, but we choose life»³². The President of Russia noted that Russia has been and remains a «stronghold of traditional values, » on which «human civilization» is built.

In this context, it is noteworthy that «de-Europeanization» has even extended to place names (Новая Газета 2024). Europe Square, inaugurated in 2002 as a joint Russian-Belgian project symbolizing the «unity of European countries, » featured columns displaying European

³⁰ «Так называемый Запад с его колониальными повадками, привычкой разжигать по всему миру национальные конфликты стремится не просто сдержать наше развитие — вместо России им нужно зависимое, угасающее, вымирающее пространство, где можно творить всё что угодно»

³¹ «Мы также понимаем, что Запад пытается втянуть нас в гонку вооружений, тем самым измотать, повторить трюк, который им удался в 80-е годы с Советским Союзом»

³² «Мы видим, что происходит в некоторых странах, где сознательно разрушают нормы морали, институты семьи, толкают целые народы к вымиранию и вырождению, а мы выбираем жизнь»

flags and a sculpture titled *The Abduction of Europa* by Belgian artist Olivier Strebelle. However, in March 2023, Moscow authorities removed the European flags without explanation. Then, in 2024, Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin signed a decree officially renaming Europe Square to Eurasia Square.

As for the overall situation, two years after the start of hostilities, Russia, however, remains very far from being completely isolated. China maintains intense economic and political relations with Russia; countries in the Global South, like India, the United Arab Emirates and Brazil, as well as Russia's neighbors like Turkey, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, remain intermediaries, facilitating trade between Russia and the rest of the world. International organizations and clubs Russia is part of — like BRICS — continue to function and even attract new members. Although the EU and the US regularly impose new restrictive measures, Russian companies and the state find new ways of evading most of them (RussiaPost 2024).

5.3.2. Everyday-Defined Perspective

The Ukrainian crisis of 2014 marked the culmination of growing tensions between the West and Russia. The subsequent anti-Russian sanctions and anti-Western propaganda led to a sharp shift in public sentiment: while in 2013, about 20% of Russians had a negative view of the EU, by the end of 2014, only 20% viewed the EU positively, according to Levada Center polls. In 2017, however, there was a noticeable warming of attitudes toward the EU (Levada Center 2024). The share of Russians who held a positive view of the European Union increased to 38%. It can be said that the sanctions imposed in response to the situation with Crimea were relatively targeted and, for the most part, did not significantly affect the broader population. Over time, the intensity of anti-Western propaganda on federal television channels also waned. The negativity toward the West was somewhat artificial in nature, and it was impossible to sustain such a stance indefinitely. Since 2017, there has been a gradual, albeit inconsistent, positive trend.

However, the outbreak of hostilities in 2022, the «collective West's» support for Ukraine, and the imposition of the largest number of sanctions in history naturally influenced the general public. In March 2022, 21% of respondents expressed a positive attitude toward the EU, while 67% held a negative view, with the remainder undecided. This trend persisted as of September 2024, with 16% expressing a positive attitude, 71% negative, and 13% uncertain. A similar trend with nearly identical figures was observed concerning the United States, according to polls, indicating that in the minds of ordinary citizens, the EU and the U.S. had become united under the broader concept of the «collective West». The theme of traditional values as a distinguishing factor between Russia and the «West» has also left its mark. A survey conducted by NORC revealed that 68% of Russians expressed concerns over Western cultural influences, particularly regarding

LGBTQ+ issues (NORC 2023). This is further supported by another survey, which found that eight out of ten Russians believe it is important for Russia's future to preserve traditional moral, national, and religious values (81%) (VCIOM 2023). The older the respondents, the more they supported this view, 92% vs. 54% among 18-24-year-olds.

As for the period of active armed conflict and sanctions pressure, which affected all layers of society to varying degrees and acted as a form of «collective punishment, » this context gave rise to the Rally-'Round-the-Flag Effect. The accumulation of pressure from Western countries, combined with the government's discourse and multiplied by the nature of a not entirely democratic regime, led to a growth in anti-Western sentiment among Russian citizens. This simultaneously contributed to increased support for the government, particularly for President Putin. Politically, he continues to enjoy widespread popularity, especially for his foreign policy. The poll by NORC also reveals a strong sense of national pride, with 62% of Russians feeling that their country is treated unfairly on the international stage. This clearly highlights the impact of «collective punishment. » According to a sociological survey by the Levada Center, when asked about approval of Putin's activities (both domestic and foreign) as president and prime minister at the beginning of 2008, 86% responded positively, 13% negatively, and 1% were undecided (Levada Center 2024b). Between 2008 and 2014, approval fluctuated between 62% and 83%. From 2014 to 2024, there was a noticeable upward trend in approval, spiking after the annexation of Crimea, followed by a gradual decline by 2017-2019. However, support surged again after the onset of military actions on February 24, 2022. As of September 2024, Putin's approval rating stood at 84%, with 13% disapproving and 3% undecided. This dynamic demonstrates how external pressures, such as sanctions, combined with patriotic discourse and a focus on national unity during crises, contributed to maintaining and even boosting popular support for the leadership.

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that during the period in question, a significant number of Russian citizens left the country, especially after the onset of military actions in 2022. These individuals are, at the very least, politically disengaged, and the majority of them are likely to hold opposition views toward the current government, meaning they represent a portion of the population that could have voted against it. The challenge lies in the fact that estimating their numbers, even approximately, is quite difficult, with various experts providing different figures. According to The Economist, the number of Russians who left the country since the start of the military operation has reached a record high not seen since the 1920s. Estimates range between 500,000 and one million people as of 2023 (The Economist 2023). Another source reports that over 800,000 citizens have left Russia during this time (Mixed Migration Centre 2024). This exodus likely had a significant impact on the internal political landscape, as many of these individuals represent potential opposition to the regime.

In frames of this thesis, an anonymous survey was conducted by author to gauge public opinion on the theme of geopolitical self-perception. It included a set of closed-ended questions and one open-ended question. The target group comprised students, teachers, and pupils residing in the Northwestern Federal District of the Russian Federation, with participants up to the age of 60. A total of 52 respondents participated, with data collected through the online platform Google Forms. The survey first asked respondents to define Russia's identity, providing options such as «Europe, » «Asia, » and «Eurasia. » Most responses leaned toward «Eurasia» (73,6%), indicating a preference for viewing Russia as both a European and an Asian country. This was followed by an open-ended question asking respondents to name one or more countries they consider to be Russia's main allies. The top three countries mentioned were Belarus, China, and North Korea, followed by Serbia, Kazakhstan, and India. Additionally, several African and Latin American countries were mentioned.

Next, a series of questions focused on the economic sphere. In response to the question, «Do you consider sanctions a fair measure by the international community? » 64,2% answered «no, » 22,6% said «yes, » and 13,2% were unsure. Respondents were also asked to assess the level of damage they believe sanctions have caused to the country's economy to gauge general attitudes toward them. «Significant» and «moderately» together accounted for 79,2% of the responses, while the remaining respondents answered «slight. » Based on this, a question was asked about how attitudes toward Western countries have changed since the introduction of sanctions against Russia. A decline in attitudes was reported by 45,3% of respondents, while the other portion stated that their views had not changed.

To explore how external pressure affects society and its resilience, the survey included a question: «Do you agree that sanctions against Russia confirm the need to strengthen national security? » 56,6% of respondents answered «yes, » 26,4% said «no, » and the rest were unsure. Respondents were also asked whether they felt this pressure had an effect on society, specifically whether it contributed to uniting the Russian population. Half of the respondents agreed with this statement, a third disagreed, and the rest were undecided. The final question addressed Russia's geopolitical role and what respondents thought about it. Exactly 49,1% of respondents stated that Russia's geopolitical role has strengthened, 37,7% felt it had weakened, and 13,2% were uncertain. Overall, this survey therefore also confirms certain changes in society by the end of 2024. These changes primarily relate to shifts in public opinion and reactions to external pressures, particularly international sanctions. A strong identification with Eurasia, coupled with a noticeable preference for alliances with countries outside the Western sphere, highlights a shift in how respondents view Russia's geopolitical role and position. This reorientation is further reflected in views on the

fairness and impact of sanctions, with the majority perceiving them as unjust and damaging, but also as underscoring the need to strengthen national security.

6. Discussion

In this section, based on the examined data sets, the discourse of power and the climate in society in the period (1991-2024), it becomes possible to identify key dichotomies to illustrate the construction and representation of the «Self/Other» dynamics. These dichotomies act as tools for the formation and dissemination of central narratives that define the relationship between the Russian «Self» and the European «Other». The visualization is shown in the table below:

Self/Other Dichotomies in the Discourse of Russian Government Authorities on Europe

| «Self» Russia | «Other» EU / Europe |
|---|--|
| Protector of multi-polar world order | Promoter of unipolar, U.S.-dominated order |
| Sovereign and independent nation | Dependent on alliances (e.g., NATO, EU) |
| Pragmatic and rational | Politicizing common issues |
| Defender of «traditional values» | Morally and culturally declining |
| Unique civilizational space (Eurasianism) | Homogenized, overly Westernized culture |

Overviewing the time period from the emergence of Russia in 1991 to the present day in 2024, it becomes possible to note the presence of shifts in Russia's identity. Thus, when analyzing the official rhetoric, it becomes evident that the discourse of the Russian authorities largely relies on certain dichotomies that have emerged over time throughout the examined period. In the years following Russia's formation, there was a clear sense of misunderstanding of itself, its role, and a lack of overall identity. In the 1990s and 2000s, Russia was a country trying to establish contact with all actors, while Europe, in every sense, became a sort of benchmark. Russia viewed itself as a nation moving toward democracy, a market economy, and cooperation with the whole «West». At the time, European countries and the West were perceived as mentors and partners, exemplars Russia sought to emulate. During the Yeltsin and early Putin years, Russian foreign policy was largely shaped by aspirations for partnership with these actors. Such orientation was reflected both in practical initiatives and in the political elite's modeling on Western practices, especially in the earlier years. Accordingly, discourse was largely positive toward Western countries, with Russia

positioning itself as a European nation, part of the «European family» of shared values. Despite moments of tension, such as the Munich speech and the Georgia crisis, there was a clear distinction between the EU and the U.S.; the concept of a «collective West» had not yet emerged. Even in security discussions, there were proposals for a unified European system without NATO involvement. Simultaneously, cultural and humanitarian cooperation strengthened, and efforts were underway to lift visa requirements with the EU, aiming to make Russia the EU's closest external partner, if not a member. Russia also participated actively in Western organizations and forums, aligning with shared norms and values rather than opposing them.

However, during this period, Russia also aimed to assert its independence and reacted strongly to external interference, particularly in the latter half. A certain «ambivalence» grew in its foreign policy as it strengthened its economic and military capabilities, though no open antagonism was present. Tensions were noticeable mainly toward NATO actions led by the U.S., which did not significantly impact Russia's relations with Europe or its self-perception. The idea emerged that Russia could act as a protector of a multipolar world order, moving toward being a sovereign and independent nation. This approach reflects Russia's ongoing search for its «path, » role, and identity, considering its unique needs and characteristics while still looking to the familiar, in many ways proximate, Europe. It can be assumed that during the first two decades of modern Russia's existence, Europe became an important part of Russia's identity formation, and this may be why the subsequent process unfolded specifically in relation to this actor and its relationships with it.

Nevertheless, from an everyday-defined perspective, during the 1990s and early 2000s, Russian citizens' identities leaned culturally towards Europe but remained ambivalent about Russia's global role. The main focus for people was on personal and family life, with limited public interest in politics, especially foreign policy. Thus, in the first decade after the USSR's dissolution, questions of 'identity' were secondary. By 2007, however, there was a shift as people began recognizing Western influences in Russia's economy and culture, largely aligning with elite narratives. NATO and, to an extent, the U.S. were seen as relative «opponents, » but European countries held a favorable status. Many citizens supported deepening ties with Europe due to cultural, historical, and economic connections, as shown by the acceptance of policies like the Bologna education system and the push for a visa-free regime. During this time, a coherent geopolitical identity hadn't fully emerged for Russia, either officially or among the public. The young state was exploring its role on the global stage and balancing Western influences with a desire for sovereignty and cultural uniqueness — a common challenge for many developing national identities.

Over time, the Russian authorities began to distance themselves from the previous view in which Europe was perceived as a natural cultural and social context for Russia, moving towards a gradual estrangement from the EU. This shift occurred for a number of reasons, primarily due to the closer alignment between most European countries and the United States, which undermines the idea of multipolarity, where Europe collectively becomes one of the centers of power. Analyzing the dichotomies of «Self/Other» in the European discourse on Russia reveals that the differentiation between Russia and the EU is depicted as quite pronounced. The discourse includes a range of indicators of the radical «Other. » Additionally, this «Other» is portrayed as an antagonistic and threatening entity to the subjectivity of the «Self. » Finally, the relationships between «Self» and «Other» are not viewed as based on shared fundamental values, but rather as interactions driven by necessity. It should be emphasized that the discourse on Russia-EU relations is not exhausted by the dichotomies noted in the table, but they appear to be the main nodal points on which the opposition of «Self/Other» is constructed. Furthermore, new narratives in the Russian-European discourse primarily continue to rely on Western categories. This means that the discourse is built on a close semantic connection between Russia and Europe.

The Russian side viewed the annexation of Crimea as legitimate due to the referendum held and its results, and thus regarded the sanctions as illegitimate pressure and a violation of international law. Consequently, in official discourse, sanctions became seen as an act of Western aggression aimed at weakening Russia's sovereignty and controlling its domestic policy. The Kremlin's narrative heightened the focus on Russia's confrontation with the West, dividing the world into «us» and «them, » where «them» are Western countries using sanctions as a means of political pressure, and «us» are internal forces united around the patriotic idea of protecting national sovereignty. In this context, sanctions became not only an economic tool but a symbol of the struggle for independence and self-determination, contributing to the formation of a nationalist discourse within Russian society.

Western countries' actions further distanced them from Russia, which, for decades, had positioned itself as a defender of multipolarity and previously viewed European countries as a distinct «pole» rather than close satellites of the United States. Over time, the narrative shifted to portray Russia as a unique civilizational entity — a civilization-state — more aligned with the Eurasian path, an idea that had once existed only in theoretical discussions and was not raised by official authorities. In this regard, Russia's civilizational uniqueness, beyond preserving sovereignty, was highlighted by its adherence to «traditional values. » This rhetoric draws on historical and cultural narratives about Russia's distinctiveness, increasingly emphasizing the «alienation» of the West as antagonistic. These «traditional values» have become a crucial pillar in the discourse and in the identity being shaped during this period. Over time, the state discourse

increasingly emphasized a values-based ideological clash with Europe, particularly intensifying in response to sanctions and partial isolation from the West following the onset of military actions in February 2022. The Russian political leadership no longer viewed itself as part of the «European family, » instead adopting an image of a distinct, somewhat superior actor. This shift was increasingly evident both in rhetoric and in practice, as Russia began a partial self-isolation from the «collective West» by withdrawing from several international organizations, forums, and agreements, sending a clear signal to both the international community and Russian citizens. The primary focus in this context shifted to neighboring countries and representatives of the Global South, especially within the BRICS.

Speaking specifically about the sanctions, as discussed in theory, their effectiveness is low and quite contentious. When considering Russia's undemocratic regime, its abundant natural resources, and significant economic «buffer, » the sanctions have proven largely ineffective for the regime. Instead, they primarily served as a catalyst for mobilizing internal society around the ideas of patriotism and self-sufficiency, giving rise to the so-called Rally-'Round-the-Flag Effect. To a considerable extent, this effect has enhanced the effectiveness of the state's discourse, making the distinction of «Self/Other» a central theme in Putin's political rhetoric concerning Russia's place and role. The confrontation with the West has become a means of legitimizing internal reforms, economic difficulties, and political consolidation, and, most importantly, framing national identity.

Regarding the everyday-defined perspective, after 2014, the state discourse and the government-controlled media that highlighted it played a crucial role in reshaping the image of the West and in reevaluating Russia's own place and role in a changing world. The rhetoric accompanying events during this period led to a growing negative perception among the populace towards the «collective West. » This shift occurred due to both the actual pressure of sanctions and the portrayal of the West as a threat to sovereignty and society as a whole, particularly in terms of moral and value decay. While disagreements with European countries and the U.S. existed even before the annexation of Crimea, the population generally held a positive view of these actors, and the authorities' rhetoric lacked tangible backing. In this context, opposition to the EU, led by the U.S., became a sort of trigger.

It is evident that 2022 had a significant impact as well. Positive views of the West countries plummeted to record lows. Public approval of the authorities, bolstered by the Rally-'Round-the-Flag Effect and partial societal division due to emigration, reached a substantial level, as did national pride. One could argue that this effect enhanced the population's perception of the authorities' rhetoric, embracing the narrative of resilience against Western pressure and demonstrating how external isolation and economic pressure contributed to some degree of

societal consolidation. The denigration of Western countries in rhetoric over the past decade played a role, leading the Russian people to no longer want Russia to resemble Europe (primarily the EU), which they now viewed as a dependent actor of the U.S. in a state of moral and value decay and gradually losing its uniqueness.

7. Conclusion

This thesis applied a constructivist approach to better understand how external factors such as international sanctions and partial isolation shape the Russian public's understanding of the geopolitical role and national identity of contemporary Russia. Methodologically, based on constructivism, the concept of «two social realities» was employed, incorporating both political discourse analysis and examining societal reactions through survey results over a considerable time period (1991-2024). It is worth noting that due to the breadth and complexity of the topic, the «Self/Other» concept served as an appropriate framework for this analysis.

Analyzing the evolving identity of Russia in response to external factors, this work identifies mechanisms through which international isolation strengthens power discourses centered around specific nodal points. It demonstrates that Russia's self-perception increasingly forms in opposition to the West and European countries, reinforcing a distinct identity focused on a set of ideas and contrasts. The assumption is made that external pressure, such as sanctions, acts as a catalyst for transformation, particularly manifesting in the «Self/Other» dichotomy, altering identity discourse and impacting citizens' self-perception in both national and geopolitical contexts. It is important to note that the geopolitical identity of most states, including Russia, has historically been shaped both in opposition to and through interactions with «other» states and peoples, resulting in a dual and contradictory process. For instance, Russia has always existed at the crossroads of European and Asian influences, and European impact on Russian identity plays a crucial role in its history and development due to geography. However, this influence has manifested in various forms, ranging from a desire to adopt European elements to a strong resistance against Western ideas and values, as demonstrated in the work.

International political and economic isolation has profoundly influenced Russia's geopolitical identity and public perception, fostering narratives of uniqueness and distinction. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia faced a critical decision between integration with Europe and forging an independent path. Initially, there was a strong inclination toward Western alignment, reflected in public sentiment favoring European values. However, this process stalled as Russia asserted itself and the European Union aligned more closely with U.S. interests. The events of 2014 and 2022 catalyzed a significant shift in Russia's self-perception, prompting a redefinition of identity in opposition to the «collective West. » As a result, many Russians increasingly view their nation as an autonomous power, separate from Western norms. The concept of «Eurasianism» has gained traction, positioning Russia as a civilization-state that bridges Europe and Asia and serves as an alternative to Eurocentric models.

This work provides a number of insights in both theoretical and practical areas that can be derived from it. For example, it demonstrates the development of state identity within the framework of «Self/Other» and its transformation in response to both external factors and power discourse. It reveals the contemporary geopolitical self-perception of Russia along with all the resulting opportunities. Additionally, it addresses the questions posed at the beginning of the work and tests several hypotheses. It is important to note the potential for future research, as identity transformation is a dynamic process that continues to evolve, opening up new avenues for study. For instance, comparative studies focused on different countries could provide a more generalized understanding of how international pressure influences state identity across various political systems. Furthermore, employing diverse methodologies or even integrating knowledge from related fields could contribute to a deeper understanding of identity change, which could be explored in broader research.

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