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The role of Russia's 'near-abroad' in its foreign policy towards the West: The case of Belarus

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Abstract

Currently, due to Russia's aggressive policies, most recently the decision to wage an illegitimate war against Ukraine, a sovereign state, the relationship between Russia and the West is at best confrontational if not purely antagonistic. Western nations have long characterized Russia's activities in its neighborhood as attempts by Russia to establish and maintain a sphere of influence, while Russia denies such statements and justifies its policies in the 'near abroad' by pointing to the increased presence of NATO surrounding its borders. The 'near abroad' appears to play a special role in Russian security, especially in the light of the perceived threat from NATO. Russia has strived greatly to secure cooperation with the neighboring countries in the military sphere, for example within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) or Collective Security Organization (CSTO), and on a bilateral basis. However, out of all the partners, the highest level of military integration has been achieved with Belarus. The Russian Federation benefits greatly from military cooperation with Belarus for geopolitical reasons. For Russia, it's a 600-kilometer advance westward, an opportunity to place troops closer to NATO's boundaries, closer to the Ukrainian border, and closer to Kaliningrad. Considering the above, this thesis aims to explore the importance of external factors, specifically the Russian perception of the threat posed by NATO and its members, in the military relationship between Russia and Belarus, and the role(s) of Belarus in Russia's security.

It concludes that the military integration between the countries has increased over the last two decades, in part, as a response to Russia's growing threat perception regarding the West. Belarus serves for Russia as a tool in balancing against NATO and its members, a sphere of influence, a defensive strategic buffer, and a platform for a potential offensive against the West. While the first three roles were present in the military relationship between Russia and Belarus during the whole period of review (2000- 2022) and even before, their importance has grown due to the increase in Russia's threat perception of the West. The final role has gained prominence in the last couple of years, most notably in 2022 since the territory of Belarus was used by Russia to launch an attack on Ukraine, an aspiring member of NATO.

The thesis is a single case study, using a primarily deductive approach where neorealism and its concepts serve as a tool for interpreting Russia's actions. There is an assumption of an asymmetrical relationship between Russia and Belarus, thus, Russia is thought of as a larger power using its smaller neighbor Belarus to counter the power and threats it perceives as coming from the West, i.e., Russia is seen as maximizing its military power in Belarus to balance that of NATO and its members. However, since the 'near abroad'

can be viewed as one whole, the findings of this case study can be applied to a broader context and used in a discussion of the importance of Russia's 'near abroad' in its foreign policy towards the West.

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1. Introduction

Currently, due to Russia's aggressive policies, most recently the decision to wage an illegitimate war against Ukraine, a sovereign state, the relationship between Russia and the West is at best confrontational if not purely antagonistic. Russia's policies in its neighborhood have long been criticized by the Western powers as attempts by Russia to create and maintain a sphere of influence (Cooper & Kulish, 2009). However, Russia justifies its actions by claiming that they are necessary, among other things, to counter the threats posed by NATO, the political and military alliance of the Western States established in 1945 with the aim to ensure the freedom and security of its members via the use of political and military methods. Such claims pose a question as to the importance of Russia's 'near abroad' in its foreign policy, especially military policy, towards the West.

Russia's 'near abroad' includes the former members of the Soviet Union that are vital to Russia's national interests. Here we find states of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, countries of Eastern Europe, such as Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova, but also states of South Caucasus, like Georgia, and to a lesser extent the Baltics. According to Huasheng (2021), while it is well acknowledged that Russia has a substantial influence over nations in the 'near abroad', the importance of this region in Russian foreign policy is rarely discussed. In truth, the 'near abroad' has had a tremendous impact on Russian diplomacy. This region establishes the organization of Russian diplomacy, dictates its aims, affects diplomatic thought, and serves as a point of conflict between Russia and the West. This influence of Russia is especially evident in the case of Belarus which has been Russia's number one partner (some say a difficult, awkward, and unreliable one, but nevertheless important) ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In addition to political and economic cooperation, the military alliance between Russia and Belarus, which now encompasses both multilateral and bilateral dimensions, has developed over the years, particularly within the framework of the Union State of Russia and Belarus. Considering the apparently increasing integration of both states and the current involvement of Belarus in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it is important to examine the impact of external factors - the perceived threat posed by the West – on the development of the relationship between Russia and Belarus and the importance of this relationship for Russia's security in country's wider confrontation with the West.

This thesis aims to analyze the policies of Russia that seek to maximize the military power of the country via Belarus from the perspective of neorealism, i.e., how the cooperation with Belarus in the military sphere is used to benefit Russia and safeguard its national interests

vis-à-vis the West. The assumptions and theories put forward by neorealism will be used as a “lens” through which to interpret Russia’s military cooperation with Belarus in the light of the perceived dangers from the West. The thesis will explore the importance of external factors, specifically the Russian perception of the threat posed by NATO and its members, in the military cooperation between Russia and Belarus, and the role of Belarus in Russia’s security.

The research question the thesis attempts to answer is:

How does Russia’s external threat perception of the West (NATO and its members) influence the development of the military relationship between Russia and Belarus over time in the context of a wider confrontation between Russia and the West?

To conduct the above-mentioned analysis and respond to the research question, the thesis will first examine and summarize the current state of research in the following areas: Russia's foreign policy and goals in relation to the West, Russia's relationship with its ‘near abroad’, and Russia's relationship with Belarus. Following that, the theoretical framework based on the paradigm of neorealism and realist foreign policy will be discussed, as well as the methodology applied in the thesis will be described. The analysis will seek to examine the importance of external factors in the military alliance between Russia and Belarus, specifically Russian perceptions of the threats posed by the West, and their influence on the military alliance of the states, and clarify Belarus' role(s) in Russia's military policy toward the West. Finally, the thesis will conclude and provide answers to the research question.

2. Literature review

To illustrate the state of the art in international relations studies regarding Russia, especially, on Russia's complex and often confrontational relations with the Western powers and the role country's 'near abroad', notably Belarus, plays in them, identify areas that require further investigation, and avoid duplication, a literature review has been conducted. Three broad areas have been investigated: (1) Russia's foreign policy and its goals concerning the West, (2) Russia's relationship with its "near-abroad", and (3) Russia's relationship with Belarus. The literature review starts from the broader context of Russian foreign policy and its goals concerning the West to show the areas that have been studied extensively and the main themes of scholarship. Furthermore, the focus is on the literature regarding the importance of 'near abroad' in Russia's foreign policy as well as the specific case of the relationship between Russia and Belarus and its role in Russian overall orientation to the West.

2.1. Russia's foreign policy and its goals concerning the West

The topic of Russia's foreign policy and its goals concerning the West have been studied extensively, both in the context of the Soviet Union and from the perspective of independent Russia. Several scholars focus on Russia's foreign policy from a historical perspective, aiming to demonstrate change and continuity over time (see, for example, Tsygankov 2012, Kumar 2016). Using historical analysis, Tsygankov (2012) argues that Russia's relationship with the West has followed three distinct patterns over the previous two centuries – (1) cooperation with Western nations, (2) defensive reaction to the Western world (i.e., Russia retreating into periods of solitude to re-establish domestic strength), and (3) policies of assertiveness vis-a-vis the West (p.2-4). While most scholars focus on the aspect of conflict in the relations between Russia and the West (see, for example, Makarychev 2014, Boulegue 2017, Kanet 2017), some underline both the themes of conflict and cooperation. See, for example, Kropatcheva (2012) who studies Russian foreign policy in the realm of European security through the lens of neoclassical realism and argues that while Russia is frequently blamed for being anti-Western and uncooperative, in fact, Russian foreign policy is selective and incorporates both cooperative and non-cooperative strategies. Similarly, Sakwa (2020) claims that the popular belief that Russia is attempting to resurrect a Soviet-style challenge to the West is nothing more than imaginary. He states that "Russia has returned as an international conservative power, but it is not a revisionist one, and even less is it out to subvert the West" (p.356).

What is perhaps not surprising, but noteworthy is that a considerable amount of scholarship focuses on President Putin as an important factor in Russian policies and international aspirations (see, for example, Nitoiu 2017, Pedersen 2018, Bukkvoll 2003, Casier 2006, Roberts 2017). Nitoiu (2017) writing about Russia's path to assertiveness in the international arena under Putin examines six books that in his view are representative of the main debates around Russian foreign policy, including toward the West (see Allison 2013, De Haas 2011, Gvosdev 2013, Leichtova 2014, Sherr 2013, Tsygankov 2012). He claims that much of the discussion in the six books revolves around the internal and external conditions that enabled Putin to take on a path of assertiveness, as well as the power sources he employed (Nitoiu 2017, p.40). While Nalbandov (2016) asserts that:

Without a doubt, no major decision in Russian foreign policy is taken without Putin's personal touch, be that the war against Georgia in August 2008 (while he accompanied his national team to the Beijing Olympic Games) or the "hybrid war" in Crimea in March 2014 where the "polite green men" (the term given to unidentified soldiers in Russian military uniform who occupied the peninsula) in 2014 "facilitated" the referendum on the Russian annexation of the peninsula (p.5).

Most of the authors seem to agree that Putin is an important actor in the creation of Russian foreign policy and that his approach is an assertive one, aiming to earn Russia the status of great power once again, whose national interests must be taken into consideration by other countries, especially those in the West. Moreover, several scholars explore Russia as an actor that is testing the limits of the West and a revisionist power aiming to change the international system currently in place (see, for example, Baek 2009, Kaczmarek 2009, Piontkovsky 2015). For example, Kaczmarek (2009) argues that Russia's foreign policy entered a revisionist phase in late 2006 and early 2007. This has primarily been characterized by Moscow's desire to fundamentally rebuild the current model of relationship with the Western powers shaped by the outcome of the Cold War. According to the scholar, Russia's goal is to persuade Western countries to acknowledge the Russian Federation's unique position and recognize that its 'near abroad', including CIS countries, is a "de facto zone of Russia's privileged interests" (Kaczmarek 2009, p.47).

Signifying the importance of hard power in the formulation of Russian foreign policy, many authors touch on the issues of military/security factors, specifically the relationship with NATO (see, for example, Boulegue 2017), and Russia's role in the European security

environment (see, for example, Kanet 2017, De Haas 2011, Kanet 2020). The idea that much of Russia's security policies in relation to the West are determined by the perception of NATO and its Eastwards expansion is mostly agreed upon by the scholars whether they defend or criticize such an approach. Kanet (2020) argues that:

On the Russian domestic side, gradual, but ultimately significant, changes in Russian strategic culture in a much more assertive and aggressive direction have responded to what the Russians view as illegitimate challenges to their security resulting from [that] very Western expansion (p.237 – 238).

Furthermore, a theme focusing on the military/security elements in international relations, widely covered after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, is one of hybrid warfare or new generation warfare (and even "political war") supposedly employed by Russia to undermine the stability in the West (see, for example, Renz 2016, Galeotti 2019, Suchkov 2021). According to Giles, the idea of hybridity got deeply established in NATO's conceptual framework for describing Russian activities in Ukraine, and as a result, pervades NATO member states' policy and thinking (As cited in Suchkov 2021, p.417). However, despite the wide usage of the concept of hybrid warfare, Suchkov (2021) claims that today's most authoritative academics believe that the term's relevance and applicability are at best limited, but the hybrid name itself is deceptive because it conveys an utterly erroneous sense of originality (p.417).

It must be mentioned that while many of the works are realist in nature, some of the literature also looks at the role ideas and ideology play in the foreign policy discourse (see, for example, Kassianova 2001, Laruelle & Umland 2012, Roberts 2017, Omelicheva 2016). For example, Roberts (2017) argues that the dominant structural explanations for Russian foreign policy do not appropriately account for the role of identity in Putin's emerging foreign policy narrative. Putin's narrative is molded by and fosters discourse on cultural and historical linkages with Russian 'near abroad', as well as the cultural and security vulnerabilities created by the West's treatment of Russia, as proven by NATO expansion (p.1). Moreover, Kassianova (2001) explores the idea of "the conflict potential in relations with the West as a resource for fostering national unity and a basis for the construction of the state identity" (p.822).

2.2. Russia's relationship with its "near-abroad"

There is an abundance of literature examining Russia's relationship with its 'near abroad'. The term 'near abroad' was coined by Moscow and refers to the countries of the former USSR (perhaps excluding the Baltics) since Russia intended to retain control over the majority of these countries (Britannica n.d.). Thus, a lot of scholarship regarding Russia and the 'near abroad' revolves around the idea of "spheres of influence" (see, for example, Bogdanov 2021, Nalbandov 2016, Canikoglu 2021). For example, Nalbandov (2016) states that:

In a quarter of a century after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Near Abroad does not stop evoking emotions in Russian political culture, which by inertia continues to view them as an extension of its political and territorial self (p.291).

In addition, many authors explore the national interests of Russia in the 'near abroad'. For example, Abushov (2009) attempts to identify Russia's strategic interests in the South Caucasus region as well as the critical elements that affect Russian policy, concluding that ever since the fall of the USSR Russia has struggled to recognize the sovereignty of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan (p.209). Furthermore, Gotz (2017) claims that while Russia's occupation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine have made headlines, Moscow's activities in Ukraine are merely one part of a much larger picture. Russia has grown more forceful and, at times, hostile in its interactions with other former Soviet countries in recent years (p.228). Control and influence are also the themes of Cameron's and Orenstein's (2012) analysis of Russian involvement in the failed or partial democracy and formation of hybrid, competing authoritarian regimes in the majority of non-Baltic post-Soviet nations (p.2).

Indeed, the idea of Russia's as an actor facilitating authoritarianism and weakening the potential for democratization is also a topic widely researched (see, for example, Tolstrup 2009, Babayan 2015, Way 2015). However, here it must be noted that both Babayan (2015) and Way (2015) argue that Russia's actions have been largely ineffective. Babayan (2015) claims that while Russia has contributed to the paralysis of democratization in its neighborhood, its activities cannot be equated with autocracy promotion and are mainly devoid of ideological grounds. In fact, Russia's opposition to democracy promotion originates from its desire to reclaim its great power status, and retain regional influence, and the fact that it recognizes Western policies as a danger to its national interests (p.438), rather than its wish to promote authoritarianism. Moreover, Way (2015) argues that Russian interventions have periodically exacerbated instability and separatist conflict, but there is no evidence that

such interference has rendered post-Soviet countries less democratic than they would have been otherwise (p.691).

Another widely discussed question is the role of ethnic Russians in the Post-Soviet Zone and Russian identity in the policies of the Russian Federation as well as the concept of *Russkii Mir*¹ (see, for example, Selhorst 2015, Nalbandov 2016, Terente 2014, Wittke 2018). For example, Nalbandov (2016) reflects that:

In the attempt to build relations with [the near abroad], the very crux of Russian identity is revealed. Russia is guided by the purest type of primordialism, which keeps that "the nations are an ancient, necessary, and perhaps natural part of the social organization, an organic presence whose origins go back to the mists (or myths?) of time" (p.186).

The role of identity is also featured by Just (2016) in his article *Promoting Russia abroad: Russia's post-Cold war national identity and public diplomacy*, where the author claims that the Russian approach to public diplomacy and branding has been characterized by a preference for locating and mobilizing supportive Russian diaspora communities while avoiding creating networks among people who do not share Russia's foreign policy aims. In the view of the author, it has significantly hampered Russia's capacity to influence international audiences and form new alliances (p.82). Similarly, Rotaru (2018) argues that Russia's struggle to control and utilize soft power in the 'near abroad' has been detrimental to the country. Scholar's analysis with respect to six former Soviet republics shows that by exploiting the soft power resources, Russia has decreased its ability to attract (p.37).

Furthermore, a part of the literature on Russia's relationship with the 'near abroad' looks into Russia's revanchism abroad and wars the country has waged in the post-Soviet zone, such as the 2008 Georgian war (see, for example, Rasizade 2009, Rezvani 2018, Rak 2017, Driscoll & Maliniak 2016) and the 2014 annexation of Crimea and conflict in the Donbas

¹ According to Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group (2021) *Russkii Mir* essentially is Russian quasi-ideology with a goal of expanding Russian influence in the 'near abroad' and unifying the states viewed as the Kremlin's backyard on the basis of Russian language shared history and the Russian Orthodox Church. As a political idea, it gained traction in the 2000s, notably after Vladimir Putin began using it in public addresses to appeal to "compatriots" overseas.

region (see, for example, Götz 2017, Rezvani 2018, Simão 2016). For example, Simão (2016) claims that:

Russia's role in the insurgent wars ongoing in the post-Soviet space remains a central element in understanding their development, maintenance, and central features. Simultaneously, these conflicts also play a role in Russia's domestic and international politics (p.491).

Lastly, apart from political and military themes, the issue of economic ties between the Russian Federation and the neighboring countries is also examined, for example, Jeffries (1996) focuses on such topics as the payments mechanism, the ruble zone, prices, trade, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and other developments.

While some articles touch on the role of the 'near abroad' in the relations between Russia and the West (see, for example, Rak 2017, Canikoglu 2021, Kerrane 2020, Wittke 2018, Feinstein & Pirro 2021) - for example, Kerrane (2020) analyses Russian vulnerabilities and fear of Western dominance in the 'near abroad' as the key motivation of state action using a defensive realism paradigm (p.23), -they do not address the ways in which Russia maximizes its power via the 'near abroad', specifically Belarus, in its foreign policy towards the West, and the significance of the external factors in this process, which is the topic of this thesis.

2.3. Russia's relationship with Belarus

One of the main themes in the literature on Russia's relationship with Belarus is the theme of integration and cooperation (see, for example, Levesque 2007, Trenin 2005, Garbe et al 2011, Yarashevich 2014, Ambrosio 2006). Specifically, much has been written on the role of the Union State in the relations between the countries (see, for example, Deyermond 2004, Žulys 2005). Most scholars agree that any real integration efforts have not been successful (except for military integration) but the concept has benefited both regimes politically and the future of the Union State is largely dependent on the "personal dealings of the two presidents, their preferences and interest" (Žulys 2005, p.169).

Furthermore, Belarus has often been painted as a country that must choose between closer ties with East or West (or Russia and the members of EU and NATO), or rather one that is forced to pursue the so-called 'multi-vector policy', balancing on the spectrum between the two powers (see, for example, Janeliūnas 2007, Dastanka 2021, Schmidtke & Yekelchik 2008, Suzdaltsev 2019, Kuleszewicz 2017). For example, Janeliūnas (2007) argues that due to the

2006 energy conflict in relations between Belarus and Russia, there are two potential scenarios for Belarus's future: the country may become "a shadow of Russia" and de-facto transfer its sovereignty to Moscow or the country may become a "typical Eastern European state" attempting to pursue both pro-Russian and pro-Western policies (p.131). As of 2020 and the breakdown in the relationship with the West (due to increased human rights violations of the incumbent regime), the first scenario appears to be likely. While other states in the Post-Soviet zone such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova have slowly opened to 'Europeanization' and democratization via civil unrest against authoritarian regimes, Ambrosio (2006) claims that Russia has been successful in preventing 'color revolution' in Belarus. The relations between the states are complex, however, any democratization in Belarus would endanger Putin's regime, so Russia openly provides support to Lukashenka despite the difficult domestic situation in Belarus. Writing on the same topic just in 2021, Guetta (2021) argues that:

The Russian president has so little faith in his Belarusian counterpart Alexander Lukashenko's future that he is casting around for a successor and is not really even bothering to hide the fact. At the same time, he refuses to let him go because the removal of Lukashenko, a man loathed by his people, would provide a fillip for democracy that might put dangerous dreams into the heads of the Russian people (p.40).

Another widely covered topic is security, European (see, for example, Kuleszewicz 2017) and Russian (see, for example, Kazharski & Kubová 2021), and military cooperation between Russia and Belarus in light of NATO expansion (see, for example, Vysotskaya 2014, Szyszlo 2003, Jasutis 2022, Baggiani 2020, Main 2002, Pugačiauskas 2019, Deyermond 2004, Blidaru 2018), which will also be examined in this thesis. In fact, Jasutis (2022) states that the military integration of Russia and Belarus is not a done deal, but substantial advancements are expected in the near future. Such measures are connected to the coordination of joint command and military leadership, talks on the Union State's military philosophy, and the development of common military facilities in Belarus (p.26).

Apart from military cooperation, which will be analyzed in this thesis, economic cooperation between Russia and Belarus has also been researched (see, for example, Yarashevich 2014, Žulys 2005) as well as the role of energy in the relationship between the countries, especially the importance of the 2006 energy conflict (see, for example, Garbe et al

2011, Konończuk 2008). Other topics such as the role of identity (see, for example, Kazharski & Kubová 2021, White & Feklyunina 2014) and mass media in the relationship between Russia and Belarus (see, for example, Szostek 2018) are also discussed among scholars.

While it is well acknowledged that Russia has a substantial influence over nations in the 'near abroad', specifically Belarus, the importance of this region in Russian foreign policy toward the West is rarely discussed in detail. Therefore, this thesis aims to fill the gap by exploring the role of Belarus in Russia's foreign policy toward the West as well as the importance of external factors, i.e., the increasing Western influence in Russia's neighborhood, on the military relations between Russia and Belarus.

3. Theoretical Framework

This section will introduce the theoretical framework selected for the thesis, namely realism. Realism has been chosen due to its explanatory power in the given context where the focus is on the aspects of polarity, military power, spheres of influence, and the importance of structural factors in international relations. As revealed by the literature review, much of scholarship has used the concepts of realism to study Russia and its relationship with the West, thus, it is clear that the paradigm of realism fits with the current behavior of Russia, especially, in relation to its immediate neighborhood.

In this section, first, the historical origins and fundamental assumptions of realism will be outlined, after which the main concepts, such as the balance of power, used by realists to understand international relations will be explained. In addition, the assumptions of realist foreign policy will be presented since the focus of the thesis is to investigate the foreign military policies adopted by Russia to maximize its power via Belarus in its confrontation with the West. Here, the importance of structural factors for foreign policymaking will be stressed, however, the section will also delineate the limitations of the theory since it leaves out many factors that affect foreign policymaking, such as the domestic, human, and institutional factors. Lastly, there will be an explanation as to how the chosen theory will be operationalized to answer the proposed research question.

3.1. Realism – History & Fundamental assumptions

It is not an exaggeration to say that realism was once equated with the theory of international relations and other theories that exist today have been created as a criticism of realism and its shortcomings (Wohlforth 2008). The beginnings of realism can be traced as far back as 431 BC when the famous Greek historian and military strategist Thucydides wrote his book *The Peloponnesian War*, where he focused on the importance of power in foreign policymaking. Another book recognized as one of the starting points of realist thought is *The Prince* written by Niccolò Machiavelli, it “has been widely marketed as the bible of realpolitik, and over the past centuries “Machiavellian” has become synonymous with cunning but amoral statecraft” (Wivel 2017, p.4). In Machiavelli’s view, [state] self-perseverance is a worthwhile aim in and of itself since it serves as the required basis for achieving all other objectives. However, in order to do so, the decision-maker must be anti-idealist and rule with a reason, able to safeguard the community using any means necessary (ibid.). Similar views were adopted by Otto von Bismarck, who recognized the significance of power in politics. This is especially noteworthy because in 19th century Germany the elite was focused on ideals and his point of

view was not common (Pflanze 1958, p.493). In fact, one of his most (in)famous quotes is "[t]he great questions of the day will not be settled by means of speeches and majority decisions but by iron and blood" (Otto Von Bismarck) indicating the importance of military power in international relations.

However, the ideas of modern realism in the 20th century could be attributed to post-war thinkers such as E. H. Carr, who argued that in order to comprehend the world and the problems that we all confront, utopia and realism should be combined, and Hans Morgenthau, who claimed that that in international politics, realists must regard assessing the implications of different political acts to be the greatest virtue (Wivel 2017, p.5). Furthermore, prominent realist scholars include Kenneth Waltz, the founder of neorealism (or structural realism), John Mearsheimer, most known for developing the theory of offensive realism, and Stephen Walt, who has made significant contributions to defensive neorealism and is the inventor of the balance of threat theory.

While realism is not a single theory, but rather an overarching framework covering numerous theories, there are fundamental principles and ideas common to all realist thinkers. First is the tendency to consider nation-states as a unit of analysis instead of focusing on specific institutions, organizations, officials, and other actors. That is, in the view of realists, a nation-state interacts with the rest of the world as a single unit, the political divisions inside the state will eventually be addressed, and the government will speak with one voice for the whole state. Furthermore, it must be noted that the state-centric view is based on the concept of sovereignty and the idea that states possess a monopoly on the legitimate use of force (Cag.edu.tr n/d). Second is the thesis of rationality or the assumption that states are rational actors. There is a disagreement/discussion as to what constitutes rationality, for example, Mearsheimer claims that rational actors are smart and strategic while irrational ones are foolish and reckless, but it is difficult to understand what this means in practice (Shadunts 2016, p.2-3). However, the bottom line is that according to realists' states prefer to take actions that are beneficial to them rather than actions that are neutral or harmful to them. Third, realists emphasize the anarchical nature of international relations, meaning, that no global authority (similar to the national authorities that ensure order within nation-states) exists that could ensure order, justice, and peace in the interactions between states, thus, leading to a system of self-help. The lack of a global government has a significant impact on international politics. Self-help anarchic political systems place significant limits on international players' capacity to attain their goals while also exacerbating collective egoism (Wohlforth 2008, p.134). Furthermore, realists often accentuate the aspect of polarity in

international relations or the idea that the international system is dominated by one or more influential nations (or group of nations) or “poles”. The use of words “unipolar”, meaning that single great power (the hegemon) dominates the international system, “bipolar”, meaning that two great powers dominate the system, such as the situation was during the Cold War, and “multipolar”, meaning that more than two great powers exist in the world, is used to describe the polarity in the international system. Due to the context of anarchy and polarity, realist scholars believe that national security is at the top of the foreign relations priority list, especially, self-preservation (preservation of territorial and political integrity, sovereignty) (Cag.edu.tr n/d). Fourthly, international politics is essentially power politics for realists. Great disparities of power in both senses of the term – control (certain organizations of people always have an outsized impact on politics) and resources (certain organizations of people always have more material means to obtain what they desire) are always present in state affairs (Wohlforth 2008, p.134). The goal is to maximize the hard power/security to be able to coerce others to do what you want and deter them from harming you. Also, the importance of geopolitics, the study of the impact of certain geographic features (such as the positions and locations of regions, states, and resources, as well as topography, climate, distance, immigration, state sizes and shapes, demography, and the like), on states' foreign policies and actions as a tool for statecraft, must be mentioned (Kelly 2016). While this is not a concept that is solely related to realism, Wu (2018) claims that in light of its core theoretical assumptions concerning international anarchy, the unit of analysis, and power politics, classical geopolitics, although having a different genealogy, may potentially be regarded an important member of the family of realist theories.

3.2. Realism – Main concepts

Realism has several theoretical schools, such as classical realism, neorealism, offensive, and defensive realism, detailed exploration of which is not within the scope of this thesis. However, the thesis will not draw upon the tenets of classical realism, which is more concerned with human and domestic factors, but instead on the neoclassical/structural realism that focuses on the effect of the structure of the international system on the behavior of states. Besides the different schools of thought concerned with realism, on a lower level, there are also a number of specific theories or concepts, such as the balance of power theory, the balance of threat theory, the concept of spheres of influence, various types of security dilemmas (incl. the offense-defense debate and the concept of arms race), hegemonic stability theory, and others, used by theorists to understand the world around us. The thesis

will further focus on three of the sub-theories/concepts - the balance of power/threat theory, the concept of spheres of influence, and the concept of "strategic buffer" both from the perspective of offensive and defensive realism, which will be used to analyze the role of Belarus in Russia's military policy towards the West. The concepts have been selected following the literature review due to their explanatory power in the specific case study.

3.2.1. Balance of power/threat

According to Kenneth Waltz (1979) balance of power theory is the most distinctive political theory of international relations. It can be understood as either an international setting or a policy approach. In the first case, what is referred to is the international situation where the balance of power is either in equilibrium - situations in which one state's or a group of states' strength is "balanced" by the corresponding power of another state or group of states - or disequilibrium - power balance between the nations is out of balance, it benefits the hegemon and can lead to abuse of power by the stronger state. One could say that there was power equilibrium during the Cold War since both the US and USSR balanced each other out, and power disequilibrium after the end of the Cold War, since after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the US emerged as a leading hegemon (Toledo 2012, p.59) and arguably has remained as the leading power ever since. As a policy, the balance of power theory proposes that states will ensure their survival by preventing any one state from attaining sufficient might to rule the others. In many instances, this will lead to the formation of alliances (other policies are also named by Morgenthau such as splitting or keeping a hostile state divided to make it weak, territorial compensation, and arms race or disarmament). Essentially, alliances are used by countries to improve their position of power:

Nations A and B, competing with each other ... to maintain and improve their relative power positions ... can add to their own power the power of other nations, or they can withhold the power of other nations from the adversary (Morgenthau 1985, 201).

Disagreements exist as to whether states will form alliances with the strongest state or weaker ones, i.e., whether they will *balance* – partner in the fight against the main cause of threat - or *bandwagon* - join forces with the country that poses the greatest danger (Walt 1985, p.4). However, Walt (1985) in his work *Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power* concludes that rather than bandwagoning, governments build partnerships to counterbalance the dangerous states. The main reason for balancing and alliance formation is the hard power position, while common ideology is a weaker source of alliance formation. The formation of

alliances is best when it is based on common interests or indeed a common perceived aggressor (p.33).

Somewhat similar to the balance of power theory is the balance of threat theory, however, here the main difference is the hypothesis that states form alliances to counter threats, not just power alone, so not the absolute or relative power of the state is the determining factor but the perceived threats the state poses (Watson 2002, p.9-10). Perceived threat is defined by four aspects, according to Stephan Walt. Aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and hostile intents all influence one's degree of threat (Muscato n/d).

Assuming that everything else is the same, it can be concluded that the larger the country's total resources, such as population, industrial and technological capabilities, and military power, the greater the potential threat it poses to others. Thus, aggregate power is an important part of the threat it can potentially pose to others. Aggregate power in itself can be a motive for both balancing and bandwagoning strategies. As the ability to project power decreases with distance, neighboring countries pose a greater threat than distant ones. Assuming everything else is the same, countries are more likely to choose alliances in response to threats from countries close to them than from those far away. As with aggregate power, imminent threats due to geographic proximity can lead to either balancing or bandwagoning. Assuming everything else is constant, a country with significant offensive capabilities will make it more necessary for other nations to form an alliance to counterbalance it over another country that is unable to attack for geographic, military, or other reasons. Although there is a clear link between offensive capabilities and geographical proximity (countries that are close to each other are much more likely to threaten each other) these factors are not identical. The offensive factor is also closely related to, but not identical to, the aggregate power factor. In particular, offensive capabilities are the ability to threaten the sovereignty or territorial integrity of another country at an affordable price. The ease with which aggregate power can be turned into offensive capabilities, such as the development of large, mobile military capabilities, is influenced by a variety of factors. The immediate threat posed by the offensive capabilities of one country can provide a strong incentive for other countries to counterbalance it. However, if one country's offensive capabilities allow it to quickly conquer another, vulnerable countries may see little point in resisting and choose a bandwagoning strategy instead. Finally, a country that is considered aggressive is likely to create a situation in which other countries will want to form an alliance to counteract it. Nazi Germany, for example, faced a convincing balancing alliance because it combined

considerable power with extremely dangerous ambitions. Walt emphasizes that perceived intentions, not strength, play a particularly decisive role in the choice of alliances. In a situation where a country is and will remain aggressive, it is unlikely that other countries will want to join. After all, if even the allies cannot change the aggressor's intentions, it is expected that a vulnerable state, even if it is an aggressor's ally, may fall victim. Forming a balancing alliance with others may be the only way to avoid such a fate (Walt 1985). Therefore, according to the balance of threat theory, all these aspects not just power alone are evaluated by states when entering into alliances to counter the threats posed by other states or groups of states.

3.2.2. Spheres of influence

The concept of spheres of influence has been widespread in policy discussions and rhetoric, however, it has rarely been explored by the academy. Generally, spheres of influence are thought of as hierarchical structures whose formation and maintenance are the consequence of two distinct practices: a foreign/outside player has some influence over a certain region or polity, especially in terms of third-party interactions, and other external actors are barred from exerting the same type of control over the same place (Jackson 2020, p.255). There are various bodies of established theory that have shed some light on this phenomenon, one of which is geopolitical realism. According to geopolitical realism, spheres of influence are defined as the geographic area of a large power's military superiority for the purposes of control and exclusion. Fear and coercion are used to gain and retain spheres of influence, and they are restricted to the distance over which the hegemon can credibly project power to protect or control territories and peoples inside these territories (ibid., p.257).

While historically there have been many instances of spheres of influence, starting with the structure of Athenian and Spartan empires during the Peloponnesian War to the situation during the Cold War with opposing spheres of influence, the US and Soviet systems, the concept isn't only a remnant of the past:

At the beginning of President Barack Obama's term of office in 2009, Vice President Joseph Biden stated "We will not recognize a [Russian] sphere of influence. It will remain our view that sovereign states have the right to make their own decisions and choose their own alliances" (ibid., p.256).

Thus, spheres of influence still prevail in the "modern" world and Russia is one of the countries that is thought of as attempting to secure one in its 'near abroad'.

3.2.3. *Strategic buffer*

The establishment of a 'strategic buffer' surrounding the central power, which generates greater physical isolation from potentially harmful exterior players, is the prevalent cause for why a great power would attempt to develop a sphere of influence. The strategic buffer argument has been used by governments claiming spheres of influence in the past (Jackson 2020, p.258). However, rather than boosting a strong defense, great powers may pursue spheres of influence for the reverse reason, i.e., specific foreign areas may increase a state's capacity to conduct a powerful attack. Although not mutually incompatible, an offensive vs defensive realist assumption may determine whether a held foreign territory serves as a strategic buffer or a platform for increased power projection (ibid., p.259). Essentially, for realists, the claim to a sphere of influence is based on the capacity to legitimately exercise military force in specific areas. Thus, it is clear why throughout history, spheres of influence have frequently taken the shape of strategic geographic buffers for great powers — a great power's close perimeter is the most militarily defensible and controlled. Credible military dominance over a smaller region – and with respect to other contenders – is the only means to assert claims of control and exclusion or to fight them in a world where force is the final judge of differences and safeguard of security (ibid., p.260).

3.3. Realist Foreign policy

The purpose of the thesis is to examine the foreign (military) policy of Russia, thus, it must be noted that neorealism is not a theory that attempts to predict foreign policy actions by states, it rather outlines the structural factors of international relations through which the world can be explained. According to Waltz (1979), “[a] theory at one level of generality [neorealism essentially is at a global level] cannot answer questions about matters at a different level of generality” (p.121). However, it is possible to examine certain foreign policy actions that are rooted in the structural factors of world politics from the viewpoint of neorealism. Thus, this section looks at the main aspects of (neo)realist foreign policy analysis.

Realism is a “top-down approach” to foreign policy analysis. To understand foreign policy, we must first comprehend the worldwide context in which it is made. Thus, realist foreign policy analysis differs from what we often think of as foreign policy analysis, which has traditionally focused on “state-level and human decision-making”. The realism approach to foreign policy appears to have an inherent conflict - on the one hand, for realists' foreign policy is crucial since it is inextricably related to the state's security and survival, however, in the realist world, the potential for foreign policy activity is constrained since global politics are

marked by "recurrence" and "repetition". Realists justify this conflict by stating that it is the nature of international interactions that have led to this (Wivel 2017, p.2-3). According to Wivel (2017) "the foreign policy decision-maker is left to decipher the signals from international politics to defend the interests of the state rather than pursue the greater good" (p.3) External limits on an individual state's foreign policy action area, however, do not reduce foreign policymaking to a "technical" matter of correctly understanding the international power structure (ibid., p.3).

Naturally overlapping with the themes identified in the first section of this chapter, Wivel (2017) singles out five recurring issues in realism's involvement with foreign policy: (1) Realists agree that focus is on self-interest, but this assumption leads to a variety of forecasts and prescriptions for foreign policy action, (2) Realists stress the relevance of international circumstances in determining national foreign policy, (3) Realists make a strong universalist assertion about the nature of foreign policy and our ability to comprehend it using realism as a tool, i.e., to analyze, advise, conduct, and critique foreign policy across time and geography, a realist starting point might be used, (4) Because realists prioritize (collective) self-interest in a volatile international environment, ideas and values are sometimes dismissed as "noise" that disrupts and distorts the wise pursuit of foreign policy, and (5) Realist foreign policy is not constrained by ideology since it takes an ideologically pluralist approach to understanding international affairs. It offers a technique rather than a path to a concrete result (p.6-8). The next section will describe how the theoretical framework will be applied in the specific case under review.

3.4. Operationalization of the theory

In this thesis, neorealism will be used as a "lens" through which to interpret Russia's actions with respect to Belarus in its confrontation with the West. The main assumptions of neorealism theories and concepts outlined above will be employed to analyze the significance of external factors in the military alliance between Russia and Belarus and the role of Belarus in Russia's military policies towards the West. The focus will be on the structural incentives behind specific foreign strategies. As already stated, there are limitations to realism, for example, it leaves out many factors that affect foreign policy, like the domestic, human, and institutional factors, thus it is not a theoretical framework that can be applied to any study concerned with foreign policy making. When domestic factors are important, realist foreign policy analysis is often combined with ideas concerning states' underlying structures (Wivel 2017, p.9). However, if the focus, like in this thesis, is on the external factors and how they

affect the policies of states, neorealism can be a useful point of departure. Thus, while neorealism offers only crude tools for assessing individual nations' foreign policies and is solely concerned with the structural motivations for such policies, this does not rule out the theory as a viable option for understanding foreign policy (ibid., p.11). According to Wivel (2017):

[P]ointing to the importance of structural incentives as drivers of foreign policy contrasts with most studies on national foreign policy around the world, which tend to focus on the specificities of national foreign policymaking and the “uniqueness” of the state studied. [...] a focus on the effects of international structure on the national foreign policy provides an important corrective to—or at least problematization of—national narratives about the specificities and uniqueness of national foreign policy. Used in this way, realism may be viewed as a critical foreign policy theory, raising important questions about almost any country’s self-perception of foreign policy (p.11).

Since the thesis is theory-driven, the assumptions and concepts described above will guide the analysis. The balance of threat approach will be used to examine the importance of the perceived dangers posed by the West on the development of the military alliance of Russia and Belarus, looking especially at the four aspects put forward by Walt - aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and hostile intents, and how they have changed over time. The analysis will employ concepts such as the balance of power/threat, spheres of influence, and “strategic buffer zone” both from the standpoint of defensive and offensive realism to analyze the role of Belarus in Russia’s security vis-à-vis the West. The thesis will not examine the domestic factors of Russia in its military policy making but will look at the external context in which they are made, i.e., the perceived threat from NATO and its members and the need to counter such threat by maximizing military power via the relationship with Belarus. A deeper analysis that would also consider Russia’s domestic factors that come into play in military policy making could be the next step to better comprehend the choices made and their rationale.

4. Methodological Framework

This section covers the research design used in the study, ontological and epistemological considerations, the considerations related to the chosen data, the applied method of analysis, and the research limitations.

4.1. Research Design

The objective of this thesis is to examine the importance of external factors in the relationship between Russia and Belarus and the role(s) of Belarus for Russia's security from a perspective of the country's turbulent relationship with the West, in particular, NATO and its member states. Therefore, the thesis will, firstly, analyze Russia's (and Union State's of Belarus and Russia) external threat perception concerning NATO and its members to show how it has transformed over the years. Secondly, it will examine the impact of the threat perception on the development of the military alliance between Russia and Belarus, and, thirdly, it will look at the role(s) of Belarus for Russia's security in its wider confrontation with the West. The designation 'West' in this thesis denotes the members of NATO, as well as aspiring members and partners, such as Finland, Sweden, and Ukraine. Thus, the designation "West" will be used interchangeably with "NATO and its members".

For the purpose of analyzing the external threat perception and the role(s) of Belarus in mitigating the perceived threats, the concepts of neorealism explained above, and qualitative analysis have been applied to study the Military Doctrines of Russia and the Union State of Russia and Belarus, news articles and speeches of country officials as well as peer-reviewed works of scholars. In addition, quantitative analysis is used to examine the change in aggregate power and geographic proximity of NATO for the purpose of looking at the perceived threat posed by NATO and its member states to Russia over time. The analysis mainly covers the period from 2000 to 2022 or the duration of Putin's presidency (note: from 2008–2012 Putin served as a Prime Minister, not President, however, he is still believed to have held the power during that period) since it is markedly different from the previous presidency of Boris Yeltsin and in many ways can be described as a struggle to reclaim Russia's rightful position in the world. However, some aspects from earlier times (starting from 1991) have also been included for context and comprehensiveness.

4.2. Ontological & Epistemological Considerations

In a nutshell, **ontology**, a branch of philosophy, is a science of what is, or to put it simply - it is the study of the classification and explanation of entities (University of Warwick 2017). It deals

with statements concerning the nature of being and existence. As a notion, ontology appears to be a fairly abstract term, yet it is important to the questions posed in social research, the ideas we employ, and the actions we take (ibid.). This thesis employs ontological realism as the basis for understanding the world around us. According to ontological realism, at least a portion of reality is ontologically separate from human brains (Niiniluoto 2003). In this thesis, things and processes are viewed as mind-independent. Furthermore, structural realism (or neorealism) applied in this thesis views social phenomena as wholes that cannot be broken down into their constituent components, due to its systemic approach (Fischer 2019, p.145). Thus, because both the structure and the state are social wholes, and because neorealism assumes the state to be an empirical entity, the theory can be said to embrace methodological holism—a philosophy of social sciences approach that prioritizes higher-level social entities and their properties in terms of explanatory and ontological priority (ibid.).

The theory of knowing is known as **epistemology**. It is concerned with the mind's relationship to reality, essentially questioning if we know things and, if so, how, and when we know them (The University of Sheffield n/d). The epistemology used in this thesis is empirical realism which underpins realist and neorealist theories of international relations (Joseph 2007, p.345). This position only acknowledges the existence of a reality that can be witnessed firsthand. (ibid.). Theoretical terms (widely used in this thesis), according to empirical realists, are crucial to scientific activity, since they signify the actual, but unobservable, hypothetical things that are supposed to underpin the observable events that the scientist strives to explain (Slaney 2001, p.132). It acknowledges that there are no universal laws yet believes that we must look at causal processes and how they function as tendencies to shape the reality we perceive, at least in part. While critical realism recognizes that both structure and agency must be considered, this thesis focuses primarily on structure as an explanation of processes (Fryer 2020). It is the structures that place limits on the decisions of agents.

4.3. Case study

The thesis is a single case study, analyzing the role(s) of one country – Belarus – for Russia from a security perspective in a wider context of the relationship between Russia and the West. It is an in-depth analysis of a specific country, that serves as an illustration of something larger, i.e., it's a case of something (Ylikoski & Zahle 2019, p.1-2). This something larger is the importance of the 'near abroad' for Russia in its relationship with the West of which Belarus serves as an example.

The purpose of choosing a case study in this thesis is to provide a full, in-depth description and analysis of the situation. Meaning that the case narrative is rich, intense, and holistic, and gives a comprehensive grasp of the situation (ibid., p.2). Furthermore, the essential concept of extensive research is significant for case studies, i.e., the researcher uses several procedures that allow them to collect information relevant to the problems being investigated. In this way, the research topics under inquiry drive the method selection rather than the goal of adopting certain methodologies (ibid.). It is also true for the case study in this thesis.

It must be mentioned that the case study technique has long been a source of dispute among academics due to misunderstandings that surround it. Flyvbjerg (2006) is one of these experts, arguing that there are five frequent misconceptions about the case study approach that are commonly made:

Misunderstanding 1: General, theoretical (context-independent) knowledge is more valuable than concrete, practical (context-dependent) knowledge.

Misunderstanding 2: One cannot generalize on the basis of an individual case; therefore, the case study cannot contribute to scientific development.

Misunderstanding 3: The case study is most useful for generating hypotheses; that is, in the first stage of a total research process, whereas other methods are more suitable for hypotheses testing and theory building.

Misunderstanding 4: The case study contains a bias toward verification, that is, a tendency to confirm the researcher's preconceived notions.

Misunderstanding 5: It is often difficult to summarize and develop general propositions and theories on the basis of specific case studies (p.221).

However, the scholar rebuts all these claims by arguing that 1) since, in human science, general and predictive theories do not exist, context-specific information is more significant, 2) the possibility for generalization is dependent on the specific situation, and formal generalization is overestimated for scientific growth and "the power of example" at the same time, 3) case study research may be used to generate and test hypotheses, and the two are not mutually exclusive in terms of approach, 4) the case study research has the same level of

bias due to the researcher's prior views as other research designs, and 5) the problems with summarizing have more to do with reality than with the methodological framework of case study research (ibid, p.302-313). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that case study research is not only valid but also helpful to answer such questions as posed in this thesis.

The case study in this thesis can be described as a theory-driven case study since it is guided by the chosen theoretical framework and seeks to put a pre-existing theory (neorealism and its sub-theories) to the test. The goal is to explore the case through a lens of neorealism and see if the theory's expected processes are in place (Ylikoski & Zahle 2019, p.2) and what they reveal about the case. Furthermore, it is an explanatory case, it aims to study the progression of a causal process. The findings are based on more than just observations about the specific instance as it assumes a large body of existing causal knowledge, i.e., the observations of the causal process in this specific case are paired with adequate prior information to generate a very persuasive causal narrative about the situation (ibid.). In addition, the chosen case is a "typical case" or "most likely case" since it is assumed that the theory is likely to give a solid explanation in relation to the case (Willis 2014).

While one of the key advantages of doing a case study is that it allows exploring the particularities of the specific case, the findings can sometimes be applied to other cases in the same or similar context. The thesis aims to some extent to generalize the findings to be applicable not just in the case of Belarus but also to other countries in Russia's 'near abroad', such as Georgia, Ukraine, or Moldova. Like Belarus, these countries due to their geographic and social factors, form a part of the "shared neighborhood" of Russia and the West, thus, potentially might play a similar role(s) for Russian security as Belarus. However, based on the literature review, Belarus appears to be the most striking example of military integration, therefore, caution is advised when extrapolating the finding to other countries in the 'near abroad' since there are a lot of specifics that could influence the conclusions. However, it is believed that the findings in this particular case can provide useful information to researchers studying the importance of Russia's 'near abroad' in the context of the larger Russia – West confrontation.

4.4. Data analysis method

The data analysis method chosen for the thesis is predominantly qualitative in nature. Non-numerical data were collected and examined in order to explore and interpret its meaning. Although realism is frequently connected with quantification, it is compatible with a wide range of qualitative approaches (Given 2008). Mental processes and experiences are genuine

phenomena that can influence behavior and qualitative approaches can be used to identify and verify causal processes (ibid.).

The specific method of analysis employed in the thesis is document analysis. Document analysis is a type of qualitative research that uses a methodical approach to analyzing documentary data and answering particular research questions (Frey 2018). The researcher interprets documents to provide voice and meaning to the issue under review. In order to get meaning and empirical knowledge of the subject being investigated, document analysis necessitates periodic inspection, study, and interpretation of the data (ibid.). The main objective of the document analysis in this thesis is to assess the content in light of the theoretical concepts of balance of power and treat (including offensive capabilities and hostile intent), spheres of influence, and strategic buffer zones (see the section on the operationalization of the theory). The documents were analyzed with an aim to show how the intensity of perceived threats and the importance assigned to them have transformed over time, and the impact this threat perception has on the development of the relationship between Russia and Belarus, rather than to interpret the narrative or discourse. The documents were selected due to their explanatory power in the given situation. For example, to analyze the threat perception, Military Doctrines of Russia and the Union State of Russia and Belarus were used, to examine the development of the Russo-Belarus military alliance and the importance of external factors in this development – various news articles (mainly of Russian and Belarusian origin) were selected as well as scholarly articles on this topic, and to analyze the various roles(s) of Belarus for Russia's security the above were combined with additional secondary literature to further strengthen the findings (see more in the section on the choice of data).

In addition, quantitative analysis was used to analyze the change in aggregate power and geographic proximity of NATO over time. Statistical data related to population, economic power, etc. from 2000 was compared to the same data from 2020 or 2021 (depending on the availability) to show the developments during this period.

4.5. Choice of Data

This paper relies on two types of data: primary and secondary data. The primary data used is the Military Doctrines of Russia (2000, 2010, 2014) and the Union State of Russia and Belarus (2001 and 2021), news articles, including speeches by Russian and Belarussian officials, as well as a small amount of statistical data. The secondary data used are peer-reviewed articles of scholars writing on issues pertaining to the subject matter.

4.5.1. Primary data

The data was collected with the purpose to analyze the importance of external threats, especially those coming from NATO and its members, on the development of the military alliance between Russia and Belarus. In order to do so, it was necessary to collect documents outlining Russia's military threat perception over time as well as documents signifying the developments in the Russo-Belarus military alliance. For the former, the Military Doctrines of Russia and the Union State of Russia and Belarus were chosen, and all those Doctrines that have been adopted during the time period specified (which were all of the existing Doctrines besides Russia's Military Doctrine adopted in 1993) were selected for analysis. While many official documents deal with the topic of security, Military Doctrines were chosen since they include a system of views officially adopted in Russia on the preparation for armed defense of the state and its allies. Furthermore, they are explicitly based on and, thus, include an analysis of external and internal military dangers and main military threats to the Russian Federation and its allies, which is the focus of the thesis. In addition, some statistical data (such as the population, GDP, area, military power, etc.) was used to look at the change in the aggregate power and geographic proximity of NATO over time.

For the latter, news articles published during the period of review on the developments in military cooperation between Russia and Belarus were chosen. These articles included information on the exact developments, i.e., signing of a new agreement, purchasing of common military equipment, organizing of joint military exercises, agreeing on the presence of military objects in the territory of Belarus, etc., as well as statements of Russian or Belarussian officials.

The original language of the Doctrines was Russian, however, in order to analyze them, they were translated to English by using an automatic translation system made available by Google. The quality of the translation was then reviewed against the original document, since the author has basic knowledge of the Russian language, to make sure that it is accurate and no relevant information is lost in translation. The origin of news articles was also partly Russian or Belarussian, however, they were available in English, thus, no translation was necessary.

Of course, when studying documents qualitatively, it must be kept in mind that they may include bias and should not be viewed as an objective, genuine representation of reality (Bryman 2016, p.503). Documents, including the Military Doctrines or news articles and official statements, analyzed in this thesis, by their very nature, do not disclose the truth; they create a reality in and of themselves, relying on the context in which they were created as well

as the context in which they are read. Moreover, documents are rarely created in isolation, but rather in the context of other documents, since they almost always refer to and/or respond to other documents (ibid., p.560-561), which is also the case with the Doctrines as they refer to other official policies such as the National Security Strategy and Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. These were excluded from the data set since they are too broad and include not only military aspects but also issues related to the economy, environment, technology, climate, values, etc. outside the scope of the thesis.

4.5.2. Secondary data

Secondary data was chosen with the purpose to analyze the role(s) of Belarus for Russia's security in the larger Russia and West confrontation and to support the primary data chosen for the thesis. This resulted in sort of a meta-level analysis or systematic review of existing literature with an aim to show how the role(s) of Belarus can be seen through the different theories and concepts applied². Books, academic articles, papers, and journals written predominantly in the social or political sciences were selected for analysis. The scholarly works were chosen based on their relevance and quality; an attempt was made to also consider the articles written from the Russian perspective (not just the Western one) albeit only those available in English. Furthermore, publications published recently were prioritized in order to better reflect the present situation (albeit older articles were also analyzed for those parts of the thesis that aim to look at the historical development of the situation). The data collection was confined to platforms with free access and platforms with access offered through Aalborg University's library. Regardless of the criteria for data collection, enough data was collected for the study, allowing all required information to be accounted for and showing that the topic of investigation is indeed a relevant one.

4.6. Research Limitations

Research limitations can be divided into two groups – those related to the research design and chosen methodology or theory and those related to the researcher him or herself (University of Southern California 2022). When it comes to the first group, theoretical limitations and those limitations related to the meta-analysis of existing literature must be mentioned. As already mentioned in the chapter dedicated to the theoretical framework, using neorealism and its sub-theories and concepts for analyzing foreign policy leaves out many of the other aspects that influence the choices made, such as domestic, institutional,

² The comments refer to the analysis and not the literature review

and even human factors. It is clear that these factors that are outside the scope of the chosen theory have an impact on the case under review. However, since the focus of the thesis is to examine the external factors (or structural incentives) and their influence, the choice of theory is justified. A more detailed study that takes into account Russia's internal dynamics that influence military strategy towards the West and the role of Belarus in this strategy might be the next step in better understanding the decisions taken and their reasoning. When it comes to limitations related to meta-analysis (systematic review) of existing literature, the following potential issues should be mentioned: a systematic review and meta-analysis of the literature provide a summary that is only as trustworthy as the methodology employed in each of the main research (Garg et al. 2008, p.255); lack of comprehensiveness, as well as publication and selection bias, when included studies are not typical of the evidence base; and inadequate critical assessment of included research validity, with all evidence treated as equally valid (Haddaway 2020). Furthermore, there are also disagreements over how to interpret summary results (Garg et al. 2008, p.255). However, the researcher believes that all these issues have been solved to an appropriate degree by ensuring that only high-quality peer-reviewed research is included, a wide spectrum of available relevant secondary literature is reviewed and analyzed, and the interpretation is based on a deep and comprehensive understanding of the context.

When it comes to limitations related to the researcher herself, the limitations related to time must be mentioned as well as the language limitations and potential bias. When creating a research paper, a deadline will almost always be a limiting element of the paper's diligence and depth. The time constraint limits the scope of the literature search and study, as well as the case inquiry. With more time, a broader scope of primary and secondary documents could be reviewed, however, the researcher trusts that balance has been achieved in this regard and that the limitations imposed by time have not impaired the quality of the thesis. Furthermore, the impact of language must be acknowledged. While, as mentioned, the researcher has basic knowledge of Russian, thus, the thesis includes an analysis of documents originally in the Russian language, all the other data used are in English. This naturally imposes constraints on the representativeness of data used, as well as has the potential to result in biases since the data is predominantly of Western origin. The researcher is aware of these issues thus an attempt has been made to use sources from, if not Russian researchers, then from those coming from regions neighboring Russia, such as the Baltics, Poland, and Eastern Europe in general since they possess the contextual and historical knowledge of the topic under review. Lastly, the researcher is aware of her own bias, which could influence the

conclusions reached, thus, an attempt to present the topic and findings in a value-neutral way (which is essentially one of the core premises of the chosen theory, i.e., neorealism) has been made.

5. Analysis

5.1. Introduction and Context

As already established in the literature review, Russia is perceived by many as a realist state aiming to reach the status of global power in the international arena. In fact, its ambition, especially under President Putin, is to stand on an equal ground with the US, which it believes to be dangerously dominant in the world today (Feinstein & Pirro 2021, p.817-818). While Cold War, characterized by a stand-off between the US and USSR, is long over, the sentiments remain. According to Walt (2018) “[i]n an anarchic world, [Russia and the United States] have little choice but to compete with the other, lest one fall behind and become vulnerable to the other’s predations” (As cited in Feinstein & Pirro 2021, p.818). The relationship between the US and Russia, but also the West and Russia (since the West is often used to denote the US and its allies in the Western hemisphere, specifically the members of NATO and the EU) is perceived by Russia as a zero-sum game, this is especially evident in their shared neighborhood, which Russia is striving to keep free of Western influence. According to Kazharski & Kubová (2021), those in charge of Russia's post-Soviet transition failed to chart a course for the country's post-imperial future - the focus on the near-abroad has always been inextricably tied to Russia's concerns about its position in relation to the West, as well as a rising obsession with Western influence in what was formerly thought to be Russia’s sole legitimate area of interest. Essentially, the ties with the 'near-abroad' are framed as a zero-sum competition with the West (p.266).

Since Russia emphasizes the threat that the Western-led international order presents to the rest of the world, the goal of the country is to maximize its own influence to effectively counter that of the West. And the logical place where such maximization of power is to take place is the near-abroad. The sphere where the maximization of power vis-à-vis the West is the most vital from the perspective of national interests and the necessity of self-preservation is, of course, that of security. To establish its unilateral interests in the area, in 1993 in the first national security doctrine, Russian leadership labeled the former Soviet republics as the ‘near abroad’. In following doctrines, this phrase has been intimately tied with national security considerations (Canikoglu 2021, p.3561). As stated by Canikoglu (2021):

Russia defined post-Soviet space as “the near abroad” and declared the region as its privileged sphere of interest. Russia confirmed that it was committed to its interests in the region by incorporating them in the official doctrines. The “near abroad” did not

simply mean geographical proximity for a region viewed by Russians as their geopolitical extension. It was a word specially picked to warn against future infiltration of non-regional actors into the region (p.3563-3564).

In fact, the story of Russia's worldwide grandeur is built on the assumption that its 'near abroad' is made up of semi-autonomous republics that will never be entirely independent (Kazharski & Kubová, 2021, p.253). Russia's capability to 'hegemonize' the 'near-abroad' provides validation of 'self-image' as a global power in relation to the West (ibid. p.257).

While the entire near-abroad, and especially Ukraine, is important to Russian security, it is argued that Belarus, because of its marginal or liminal status, occupies a unique position with respect to Russia's securitized identity (ibid., p.249). Compared to other countries that once formed a part of the Soviet Union, Belarus has very close ties to Russia, especially when it comes to the military sphere. Ever since the 1990s, but even more so since the election of President Lukashenka in 1994, the countries have been moving towards integration (Deyermond 2004, p.1191). Military cooperation between Russia and Belarus includes multilateral aspects, such as under the CSTO's institutional framework, as well as bilateral aspects, especially inside the Union State of Russia and Belarus (Rácz 2022). The Union State of Russia and Belarus is a supranational organization made up of Russia and Belarus established in 1999 with the declared goal of increasing their partnership through economic and defense policy cooperation (Deyermond 2004, p.1191-1192). While the goal of the Union State is to integrate the social, scientific-technical, judicial, military, foreign, and economic policies of Russia and Belarus, including the adoption of a unified currency, the economic and political aspects of the integration have largely been considered a failure, while in the area of defense – a remarkable level of integration has been achieved (ibid., p.1191-1192).

While, as discussed above, the element of competition has always been present in the relationship between Russia and the West, the perceived level of threats posed by the West from the perspective of Russia appears to have been increasing since the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. Considering the development of Russia's relationship with the West and the role of Belarus in this relationship from the perspective of neorealism, the next section will explore Russia's external threat perception of NATO and its members from 2000 to 2022 by looking at the four factors indicated by Walt – aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intent – and the impact this threat perception has on the developments of the Russian – Belarus military alliance.

5.2. Russia's external threat perception and the development of the Russo-Belarus military alliance

For the purposes of examining the impact of Russia's threat perception of NATO and its members on the developments of the military alliance between Russia and Belarus, the analysis will first briefly look at the change in *aggregate power* and *geographic proximity* of NATO over time, followed by a study of change in the perceived *offensive capabilities* and *offensive intent* of the Western powers and impact thereof on the Russo-Belarus military alliance. The chapter is divided into several sections according to the time periods under review, respectively 2000 (and before) to 2007, 2008 to 2012, 2013 – 2020, and 2020 to 2022. These time periods have been chosen since each of them marks a different level of threat perception. The chapter starts with an overall examination of the change in *aggregate power* and *geographic proximity* of NATO over time to show the potential impact of these two factors.

5.2.1. *Aggregate power and geographic proximity*

As already stated in the theoretical framework, the larger the country's (group of countries) total resources, such as population, industrial and technological capabilities, and military power, the greater the potential threat it poses to others (Walt 1985). Thus, the aggregate power of a state or group of states is an important part of the threat it can potentially pose to others. Moreover (assuming all other factors are equal), countries are more likely to form coalitions in reaction to threats from a close distance than those from far away, indicating the significance of geographic proximity in the equation (ibid.). Thus, this section will look at two factors that contribute to threat perception – aggregate power and geographic proximity – to analyze Russia's perceived level of threat coming from NATO and its members from 2000 to 2021.

NATO's aggregate power has increased since 2000 with the accession of 11 new member states (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia in 2004, Albania, and Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, and North Macedonia in 2020). If we look at the population growth of NATO, it has grown from approximately 800 million in 2000 (OECD 2016) to almost a billion in 2021 (Statisticstimes 2021) which is about 12,20% of the world's total population (WorldData n/d). If in 2020 the territorial (land) reach of NATO was 24,5 billion km² after the accession of the last NATO member state - North Macedonia in 2020 - it now is slightly larger at 25,2 billion km² or about 17% of the world's habitable area (ibid.). When it comes to economic might, the combined GDP of the NATO members has grown over

2 times in the period from 2000 to 2020 (19,5 trillion USD to 40 trillion USD) (World Bank n/d). Of course, there is also an increase in technological capabilities of NATO member states in the reviewed period, notably when it comes to media consumption, green technologies, biotechnologies, and novities in healthcare, which while not directly linked to the military sphere does denote the overall influence of the alliance. Furthermore, robotics, artificial intelligence, additive manufacturing, and data analytics are all enabling industrial, including military, businesses to expedite innovation and boost the value-added content of their output (United Nations Industrial Development Organization 2019, p.xi).

When comes to military capabilities, although NATO does not have its own armed forces, it does have a permanent, integrated military command structure that includes military and civilian officials from all member states. NATO has significantly enhanced its combined military capabilities since 1949. It now has the potential to rely on roughly 3.5 million persons, including military and civilians (SHAPE n/d). According to a recent figure, nearly 20,000 NATO military personnel are participating in operations and missions all over the world, handling frequently complicated land, air, and naval operations in a variety of circumstances (ibid.).

The geographic distance from the borders of NATO member states to Russia (and Belarus) has decreased in the period between 2000 and 2020 due accession of new members, notably states of Eastern Europe and former members of the Soviet Union. The expansion and, thus, the geographic aspect of the threat, is often the focal point in the confrontation between the West and Russia since Russia perceives the growth of the alliance very negatively. However, despite the eastward expansion of the Treaty Alliance, merely 6% of Russia's geographical borders are adjacent to NATO nations, while out of 14 nations that share geographical borders with Russia, only five are members of NATO (NATO 2022). It must be mentioned that with the advances in the military, especially the potential of nuclear and non-nuclear strategic weapons, as well as globalization and information wars, the importance of geographic proximity decreases. Nevertheless, it is still important since conventional warfare has not lost its significance in today's world and information only has power in a given context, which often has to do with a shared history and other ties usually the strongest between neighboring countries.

Therefore, both the aggregate power of NATO has grown as well as, due to the accession of new states, the geographic distance from NATO member's borders to Russia has decreased in the period from 2000 to 2022. Furthermore, the potential accession of Georgia and Ukraine, states that form a part of Russia's 'near abroad' and thus (as argued above) are

vital to Russia from a security perspective, is viewed very negatively by Moscow as it argues that especially Ukraine's membership is a threat to Russia's "historic future as a nation" (Oster 2022). Both of these factors – aggregate power and geographic proximity - potentially increase the threat perception of Russia concerning NATO and its member states.

Furthermore, the imminent danger provided by one nation's (or alliance's) offensive capabilities might give a significant motivation for other countries to counterweight, especially if that country (alliance) is seen as aggressive. As stated in the theoretical framework, perceived intentions, rather than strength, play a critical role in alliance formation (Walt 1985). Thus, the next sections will look at the two remaining factors that contribute to threat perception – offensive capabilities and offensive intent – to analyze Russia's threat perception of NATO and its members from 2000 to 2022, and the impact thereof on the developments of the military alliance between Russia and Belarus. The basis for analysis will be the Military Doctrines of Russia (2000, 2010, and 2014) and the Union State of Russia and Belarus (2001 and 2021), as well as articles signifying the developments in the alliance between Russia and Belarus.

5.2.2. 2000 (and before) to 2007

Threat perception: Offensive capabilities and offensive intent

Military Doctrine of Russia 2000

The 2000 Military Doctrine of Russia recognizes that the military-political environment is shaped by various factors, including the following developments: national, racial, and religious fanaticism becoming more powerful, separatism being reactivated, local wars, and armed conflicts becoming more common and the regional arms races becoming more intense. However, Russia acknowledges that the threat of direct military aggression against the Russian Federation and its allies has decreased in modern times, thus, the level of perceived threat is low (Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2000). Among the most significant external threats indirectly linked with the perception of the West (i.e., names of countries or alliances are not mentioned in the document, but can be derived from the context), Russia highlights:

- Interference in the internal affairs of the state;
- Attempts to disregard Russia's interests in solving international security challenges, in order to offset its strengthening as one of the world's most prominent centers;
- The formation of forces along Russia's and its allies' borders, resulting in a breach of the current balance of power;

- Growth of military blocs and alliances at the expense of Russian Federation military security;
- The deployment of foreign soldiers on the territory of friendly states close to the Russian Federation in violation of the UN Charter;
- Discrimination, repression of Russian citizens' rights, freedoms, and legitimate interests in foreign countries (ibid.).

There is no direct mention of the Treaty Alliance, however, the reference to the growth of military alliances endangering the military security of the country is most likely directed towards the expansion of NATO. Also, the other threats mentioned above, especially the neglect of Russia's interests, meddling in internal affairs, the deployment of foreign forces in friendly neighboring states, and discrimination of Russian speakers, appear to be primarily directed toward the West. Nevertheless, the 2000 Doctrine refrains from explicitly indicating NATO as a threat, and overall, the level of perceived threats coming from the West is not high (ibid.). There is an indication of offensive capabilities - the formation of forces along Russia's and its allies' borders, growth of military blocs and alliances at the expense of Russia, the deployment of foreign soldiers on the territory of friendly states – however, the element of offensive intent is missing or very indirect.

Military Doctrine of the Union State 2001

Similarly, to the 2000 Doctrine of Russia analyzed above, the 2001 Doctrine of the Union State of Russia and Belarus does not name the Western powers or NATO as a potential threat, in fact, it states that the level of any threats that would amount to large-scale aggression is very low (Military Doctrine of the Union State 2001). It notes that it is under the effect of continuous changes in the international relations system that the world's military-political situation is taking form. Some of the changes highlighted are the intensification of rivalry between the world and regional centers of power as well as the deepening of international and regional integration, and the formation of a global financial, economic, and information space (ibid.). The challenges posed by globalization are noted in the light of the struggle between the preservation of a unipolar world and the creation of a multipolar one (ibid.). Here the implied focus could be on the US and its status as a hegemon at the time, which Russia saw as a threat and thus responded with the formation of the military alliance with Belarus as a step toward a multipolar world order. The Doctrine also states that the main target of those that oppose the Union State is to exploit the “historical contradictions” that exist in some areas within the participating states, provide support to extremist nationalist and separatist groups and provoke internal conflicts (ibid.). Here the Western powers could be the implied

opponents due to the confrontation over the wars in Chechnya in 1994 and 1999 and the following violent conflict that lasted until 2009, which the West condoned as Russian aggression in the post-Soviet space (see more in Kipp 2001). However, there is no direct mention of threats that could be posed by the West in the 2001 Doctrine.

The developments in the military alliance

Russia and Belarus have had a long-standing relationship during previous centuries - Belarus was part of the Russian Empire until 1917 and then following a brief period of partial independence, in 1922 it became part of the USSR. In 1991, due to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Belarus regained its independence. However, owing to the domestic instability in Russia during that time (economic and social unrest, as well as a constitutional crisis), Russia saw the integration of the two Slavic republics as a stabilizing force that would bolster Russia's standing in the CIS and the "near abroad." (Žulyš 2005, p.148). The first cooperation treaty was signed in February 1995, while in October 1995 a resolution was passed that framed the creation of a Union State as a goal of both countries. The Treaty Establishing the Commonwealth of Russia and Belarus was signed in April 1996 and the Commonwealth was changed into the Union of Belarus and Russia a year later (ibid., p.149-150). At the start, the integration of both states was largely motivated by domestic factors, i.e., the instability that followed the fall of the Soviet Union. Essentially, it was a political decision for both leaderships at the time to earn the support of the people. To overcome the crisis' consequences and deepen political and economic ties, the presidents of Belarus and Russia signed the Declaration Regarding the Further Unification of Russia and Belarus in 1998, while in 1999 a treaty on the establishment of a Union State between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus was signed. The terms of this treaty to a large extent define the present relations between Belarus and Russia (ibid, p.150).

Despite not being advertised as such, the union between Russia and Belarus has taken on an increasingly militaristic character (Deyermond 2004, p.1192). According to Deyermond (2004), Belarus and Russia's military cooperation precedes their intention to become a union state; in fact, it has been an almost continuous element of bilateral ties since independence (p.1193). The military integration of the two states (or rather the integration of Belarus into Russia) was rapid already during 1995 to 2007 when relations between Russia and the West were mostly stable and the threat perception by Russia was low. For example, in 1992 an agreement was established to coordinate defense actions as well as station Russian strategic forces on Belarusian soil, while in 1994 Russia and Belarus reached an agreement allowing a Russian air force unit to stay in Belarus until 2000 and giving Russia access to the Baltic Fleet's

Vileika communications center and the radar station at Baranovichi (ibid, p.1993). Furthermore, Belarus agreed to a long-term lease of their military facilities to Russia (for 25 years as of 1995), as well as common trainings were established and Belarusians were allowed to operate Russian test range facilities (ibid., p.1993). In 1997, a joint board of the defense ministries of both countries was created. Joint defense strategies, military legislation unification, and the formation of a joint regional group of troops, as well as procedures for their leadership during military operations, were agreed upon (ibid., p.1994). In reaction to NATO's eastward expansion, Russian officials declared in late 1998 that Russia and Belarus were establishing a combined defense system with 10 divisions on permanent alert, while in 2001 a Military Doctrine of the Union State (analyzed above) was adopted (ibid., p.1994). A joint exercise, Clear Sky-2003, was held in October 2003, as well as an arrangement for Belarus to lease Russian S-300 air defense missile systems was reached. With frequent meetings of the Joint Collegium of the Belarusian and Russian ministries of defense, the institutionalization of military integration was also established (ibid., p.1994). Rather than being just a result of external factors, according to Deyermond (2004), the increasing military cooperation can be explained by the direction of the Belarusian defense establishment, which is primarily a result of its beginnings. Unlike a number of other post-Soviet governments that built new defense systems following independence, Belarus' armed forces were built on the foundation of the republic's prior Soviet military establishment (p.1995). However, in addition to this aspect, external factors also played a role, specifically the expansion of NATO. While, as confirmed by the 2000 and 2001 Doctrines analyzed above, the end of the Cold War marked a decrease in the likelihood of confrontation between the two blocks, the Russian military was still interested in Belarus as a tool in balancing the power of NATO, or as Russia's natural shield, a zone of increased Russian pressure and influence (ibid., p.1196). Military integration with (or of) Belarus can be seen as a part of larger efforts to mitigate such threats as the neglect of Russia's interests, especially in the 'near abroad', or the growth of military blocs and alliances at the expense of the Russian Federation military security.

5.2.3. 2008 to 2012

Threat perception: Offensive capabilities and offensive intent

Military Doctrine of Russia 2010

In contrast to the 2000 and 2001 Doctrines, the 2010 Doctrine recognizes the growing external threats, including the threats by NATO, posed to Russia stating that despite the diminished likelihood of a large-scale war against Russia (using conventional and nuclear weapons), the

military threats are increasing in a number of sectors (Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2010). Among the main external dangers, the following are mentioned:

- The desire to equip NATO's military potential with global capabilities, to push NATO member nations' military infrastructure closer to the Russian Federation's boundaries, notably by expanding the alliance;
- Attempts to disrupt strategic stability through destabilizing the situation in specific nations and areas;
- Building up of military contingents of states (groups of states) in territory bordering the Russian Federation and its allies;
- The militarization of outer space, the deployment of strategic non-nuclear systems of high-precision weapons, and the construction and deployment of strategic anti-missile defense systems that jeopardize global security and disturb the present balance of forces in the nuclear-missile arena;
- The rise (intensification) of armed conflicts in regions bordering the Russian Federation and its allies (ibid.).

While the main military threats in 2010 potentially coming from the West (again no names of countries or alliances is mentioned in the document, but can be derived from the context) are the following:

- A significant deterioration of the military-political situation (interstate relations) and the establishment of conditions conducive to the deployment of armed force;
- The establishment and training of illegal armed organizations, as well as their activity on Russian Federation territory or those of its allies;
- Provocative use of military force during drills in regions neighboring the Russian Federation or its allies (ibid.).

It can be deduced that the level of perceived threats, including those from the West, is significantly higher in 2010 than in 2000 due to the growing distrust between the two poles. NATO, its expansion, posting of forces in the 'near abroad' (notably Baltics and Poland), deployment of strategic anti-missile defense systems as well as the exercises conducted by the Treaty Alliance, is mentioned explicitly, denoting that such actions are indeed perceived as threatening by Russia. Similarly, to the 2000 Doctrine, there is an indication of offensive capabilities - building up of military contingents of states (groups of states) in territory bordering Russia, the deployment of strategic non-nuclear systems of high-precision weapons, the establishment and training of illegal armed organizations – but unlike in 2000, one can also observe an element of offensive intent (ibid.). Particularly with respect to the

following threats - the desire to equip NATO's military potential with global capabilities, attempts to disrupt strategic stability, the establishment of conditions conducive to the deployment of armed force, and provocative use of military force during drills in regions neighboring Russia (ibid). However, the 2010 Doctrine does not explicitly refer to intent to violate the sovereignty or territorial integrity of Russia or its allies, but rather to undermine the importance of Russia and upset the balance of power, especially in the 'near abroad' (hence, repeated reference to territory bordering the Russian Federation) (ibid.).

The developments in the military alliance

While, as discussed above, the military integration has been ongoing since 1992, the intensity thereof was increasing during 2008 – 2012 due to Russia's conflictual relationship with the Western powers, here the war in Georgia in 2008 is of key importance. According to Klein (2019), the prominence of military measures in Russia's foreign policy arsenal has grown since the Russo-Georgian war and the commencement of military reform in 2008. This is particularly true in the post-Soviet space, where Moscow's crucial security concerns and regional aspirations collide. Russia has three objectives here: to deter threats, maintain regional dominance, and limit the leeway for the influence of foreign entities such as the US and NATO (p.7). While the 2008 war in Georgia was not openly supported by Belarus (Reuters 2008b) and Belarus did not recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Reuters 2008a), the military cooperation between the countries remained high with President Lukashenka stating that:

We created a joint unit. Certainly, it involves many problems. However, the very fact of creating this army unit by the Union State [of Belarus and Russia] at the western border means a lot [...] Most importantly, I can repeat today that you have no other reliable and decent partner in the west and there can be none (Belarusian television 2008).

Furthermore, in 2009, Belarus entered a new stage of military cooperation with Russia with the formation of a regional group of troops to increase the ability to safeguard the Union State. The Zapad 2009 strategic exercise, organized by the Belarusian-Russian regional group of troops, drew over 13,000 participants³. The exercise included members from the Russian Army, Air Force, and Air Defense Force, and simulated interaction inside the combined

³ This is according to Russia's and Belarus's official sources; the actual number of troops could have been higher (<https://icds.ee/en/words-and-steel/>)

Belarusian-Russian air defense system (Interfax Information Services 2009). In 2010, an agreement was ratified which facilitated the further development of Russian-Belarusian military-technical cooperation, allowing Russia and Belarus to equip their armed forces, other troops, army formations, law enforcement agencies, and security services, as well as regional groupings of troops, with highly efficient and advanced weaponry systems (Interfax Information Services 2010). A year later – in 2011, Putin, Prime Minister at the time, stated that Belarusian enterprises will assist in the fulfillment of the Russian government's defense procurement (BelGazeta 2011) signaling readiness to support Belarus's military industry economically. 2011 was also the year when Zapad 2011 took place since following the Zapad 2009 military exercise in Belarus, the presidents of Belarus and Russia decided to hold similar military drills every two years (Belapan news agency 2011). According to President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in 2011, military cooperation between Belarus and Russia is critical in sustaining regional peace and stability as well as safeguarding the two nations' national interests (ibid.). On the same note, in a joint meeting of the board of Russia's and Belarus's defense ministries, Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov said that Russia is speeding up military-technical collaboration with Belarus as a result of the present global situation, which is driving nations to extend cooperation (Zvezda TV 2012). According to Serdyukov:

NATO's eastward expansion has led to a shift in the balance of forces in the post-Soviet space in favour of that bloc. The development of the alliance's military infrastructure on the territory of new members has significantly enhanced capabilities to use modern arms. We are profoundly convinced that security can only be indivisible and equal. Attempts to strengthen one's security at others' expense are destroying the idea of building a community of countries and undermining the foundations of cooperation. We consider it unacceptable that sovereign countries should have solutions to their problems imposed on them. Among our national priorities is assisting allies and partners (ibid.).

It can be seen that the increased level of threat perception is contributing to further integration of the alliance with Russia pushing for increased presence in Belarus, for example, by organizing military drills such as the Zapad exercise. The increasing significance of external factors can also be observed in the rhetoric of the officials who state that it is the global situation that has led to an increase in military-technical cooperation with Belarus.

5.2.4. 2013 to 2020

Threat perception: Offensive capabilities and offensive intent

Military Doctrine of Russia 2014

Military Doctrine of 2014 highlights similar trends as the 2010 Doctrine. Like the 2010 Doctrine, it also indicates that while large-scale aggression toward Russia is unlikely, threats are growing in several areas (Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2014). While most of the external military dangers mentioned overlap with the 2010 Doctrine, when it comes to NATO, there is an emphasis on building up the power potential of the Treaty Organization, which Russia sees as threatening. Furthermore, although the 2010 Doctrine already acknowledges the deployment of foreign military contingents in territory bordering the Russian Federation and its allies as a threat, the 2014 Doctrine adds that such foreign military contingents have been deployed with an aim to put political and military pressure on the Russian Federation. Concerning the balance of power in the nuclear-missile area, the 2014 Doctrine recognizes a new threat, i.e., the implementation of the "global strike" concept⁴, that was not included in the 2010 Doctrine (ibid.). In addition, several new external threats potentially coming from NATO and its members, but also from Ukraine (again no names of countries or alliances are mentioned in the document, but can be derived from the context) are indicated:

- The use of information technology for military-political goals in violation of international law, directed at states' sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity, and constituting a danger to international peace, security, and stability;
- The establishment of regimes in countries bordering on the Russian Federation, including as a result of the overthrow of legitimate state authorities whose policies endanger the Russian Federation's interests;
- Foreign special services and organizations, as well as their coalitions, are engaged in subversive efforts against the Russian Federation (ibid).

The most significant military threats in the 2014 Doctrine are the same as in the 2010 Doctrine. Like the 2000 and 2010 Doctrine, there is an indication to offensive capabilities and intent to undermine the importance of Russia and upset the balance of power, however, the 2014 Doctrine goes further and also includes the perception of intent to violate the sovereignty or

⁴ Prompt Global Strike (PGS) is a US military endeavor to build a system that, like a nuclear ICBM, can deliver a precision-guided conventional weapon attack anywhere in the world in one hour (Wikipedia 2022)

territorial integrity of Russia or its allies. Particularly by referring to foreign military contingents deployed with an aim to put political and military pressure on Russia; the use of information technology directed at states' sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity; the establishment of regimes in countries bordering Russia, whose policies endanger Russia's interests; foreign coalitions, engaging in subversive efforts against Russia (ibid.). Here, of course, the situation in Ukraine must be mentioned since Russia was openly negative towards the new government (that came as a result of the overthrow of pro-Russian President Yanukovich) that wanted closer ties with the West and potential NATO (and EU) membership hence the reference to overthrow of legitimate state authorities whose policies endanger the Russian Federation's interests.

The developments in the military alliance

The military cooperation between Russia and Belarus reached a new high in 2013 when Sergey Shoigu, Russia's Defense Minister at that time, confirmed plans for a Russian air force installation in Belarus. Russian tactical aircraft now is able to attack targets in Poland and the Baltic nations from the facility. Shoigu also confirmed intentions to provide Belarus with four battalions of S-300 air defense systems in 2014. The minister's remarks not only reaffirmed military cooperation routes between the two nations at that time but also added a new dimension to Russia's military presence in Belarus, which has had long-term ramifications throughout the region (Oxford Analytica 2013). According to Oxford Analytica in 2013, when asked about plans for a Russian airbase in Belarus, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated that the two nations had become one military space. Essentially, Russia may utilize Belarusian territory for military objectives, thereby depriving Belarus of any claim to an autonomous military strategy (ibid.).

Similarly, to the war in Georgia, even though Belarus did not officially recognize the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (RFE/RL 2014), the military cooperation of the states did not suffer. According to Lukashenka, Belarus has fulfilled all of its obligations under bilateral economic and military cooperation agreements with Russia, and the two countries responded jointly to the increasing activity of their adversaries at their borders (Belapan news agency 2014). Moreover, the Russian defense minister underlined the importance of joint military drills in 2014 stating that these exercises have grown more frequent and comprehensive and that there are plans to perform a number of exercises in 2015 with the joint operating practice Union Shield serving as the highlight of the Russian and Belarusian Armed Forces' combined training program (Interfax Information Services 2014). In 2015, on the margins of the Army 2015 international military-technical symposium, Russian Helicopters Holding and the

Belarusian Defense Ministry inked a deal for the supply of twelve Mil Mi-8MTV-5 military transport helicopters in 2016-2017 (Interfax Information Services 2015). As already stated, 2015 saw the Union Shield-2015 exercise concerning which Defense Minister Shoygu stated:

In September, our armed forces held a joint operational exercise Shchit Soyuzo-2015 [Union Shield-2015]. In the conditions of NATO becoming more active near the Russian borders, we faced a task to increase the combat readiness and effectiveness of the military command bodies and the Russian and Belarusian troops in joint actions while repelling aggression against the Union State (Interfax news agency 2015).

Furthermore, according to Shoygu, Russia and Belarus must take coordinated positions on important concerns of global and regional security. The official believes that this approach is especially important in light of the world's tough military and political circumstances when sources of instability have crept dangerously near Russia's and Belarus's borders (ibid.). In 2016 alone, Russia and Belarus signed over 20 contracts for military supplies and upgrades, with several dozen more in the works (Interfax Information Services 2016a). Moreover, during 2016 roughly 100 joint events were organized as per the plan of inter-agency cooperation in the military sphere (Interfax Information Services 2016b). 2017 saw the biennial Zapad exercise which reportedly involved 12,700 troops⁵ (7,200 Belarussian and 5,500 Russian), as well as about 70 planes and helicopters, 680 pieces of military hardware, including about 250 tanks, 200 artillery pieces, multiple rocket launchers, and mortars, as well as ten warships (Thai News Service Group 2017). According to RFE/RL (2017), the joint Russian-Belarus activities were aimed against a hypothetical opponent aiming to destabilize the Minsk administration and establish a separatist foothold in western Belarus during the drills. This scenario mirrors Russian anxieties about "Western-orchestrated" political upheavals in its backyard, most notably in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in early 2014, when President Viktor Yanukovich, a Kremlin ally, was deposed. As stated by Kuleszewicz (2017), Russia has a strong interest in keeping military installations on Belarusian soil since it provides it with additional options for maneuvering in the event of an armed confrontation or simply to apply pressure on the world stage to defend Russian goals (p.98). Essentially, by 2018 Belarus may be seen as part of the Russian Federation's larger regional image, which aims, among other things, to

⁵ NATO has estimated that the drills have involved as many as 60,000-70,000 troops (Johnson 2017)

exploit its neighbors as a source of regional and worldwide influence (Blidaru 2018, p.53). In 2019, Mikhail Babich, Russia's ambassador to Belarus, affirmed plans to enhance military-technical cooperation with Belarus even further (Interfax America 2019). Russia began putting the 1999 agreement on the Union State into practice, with the goal of gaining more control over Belarus' internal and international affairs (Pugačiauskas 2019, p.233). According to Pugačiauskas (2019):

[It] may be firmly assessed as a new stage of strengthening of the military cooperation between Russia and Belarus with Russia being the initiator in the context of the ongoing conflict with the West. Thus Russia aims at enhancing its military power availing of and controlling the military potential of Belarus (p.247).

By establishing and developing the military alliance with Belarus, Russia has significantly increased its ability to employ its army with the backing of the Belarusian army and utilize Belarusian territory for prospective military activities (ibid., p.247-248), including with respect to the West.

It can be observed that the significance of the alliance for Russia is increasing since more resources are spent on ensuring the high military capabilities of the alliance and there is an even larger push for the militarization of Belarus. This in part can be explained by the growing threat perception from the West which during this period also includes the perception of hostile intent as signified by the 2014 Doctrine.

5.2.5. 2020 to 2022

Threat perception: Offensive capabilities and offensive intent

Military Doctrine of the Union State 2021

According to the 2021 Military Doctrine of the Union State of Belarus and Russia 2021, the military-political scenario surrounding the Union State is defined by developing negative processes in global and regional security, produced by both geopolitical rivalries among the world's main powers and the collision of interests of individual nations (a coalition of nations) (Military Doctrine of the Union State 2021). Some of the major negative elements impacting the evolution of the military-political situation potentially coming from the West and Ukraine (again no names of countries are mentioned in the document, but can be derived from the context) mentioned in the 2021 Doctrine are:

- Attempts to change value orientations and development models, discredit cultures, religions, and civilizations, falsify history, and contribute to the violation of related peoples' spiritual and moral ties;

- Resistance to the evolution of the Union State, the CSTO, and other international integration structures with the involvement of the Republic of Belarus and the Russian Federation by certain international organizations and foreign governments;
- Enhancement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's force capability on the Union State's exterior frontier (ibid.).

While the main external dangers to the Union State that appears to have a link to the NATO and its members (and also Ukraine) indicated in the 2021 Doctrine are:

- Enhancement of the military potential of individual states (coalitions of states), expansion of military-political alliances to the participating states' borders;
- Deployment of high-readiness military formations in states bordering the Union State, allowing strike groups of troops to be formed in a short period for actions against the Union State, active construction of military infrastructure facilities, and improvement of operational equipment on state territory for use by these groups;
- Efforts by particular nations (coalitions of states) to disrupt the situation in states bordering the Union State, as well as CSTO member states;
- Individual states establishing means for initiating internal armed conflicts in other states to alter the state authority in place or breach their territorial integrity;
- Enshrining provisions on the non-settlement of territorial disputes and other interstate conflicts with states parties in military doctrines, plans, conceptions, and other political and legal acts of states, as well as naming states parties as a threatening force in these documents;
- The spread of weapons of mass destruction, as well as the plans of leaders of other countries to deploy weapons of mass destruction and their components on the territory of states bordering the Union State;
- The execution of the idea of a "global strike," the aim to deploy weapons in outer space, as well as the deployment of strategic non-nuclear high-precision weapons systems, endangering global stability and breaching the present balance of forces in the nuclear missile sector (ibid.).

The following military threats are recognized by the Union State:

- The concentration of another state's armed troops along the borders of member states in the Eastern European zone of collective security, signaling an intention to use military action against the Union State;
- The rise of armed conflicts intended against the Union State's essential interests in the territory of states bordering on it;

- Mobilization in another state(s) to carry out an act of armed aggression against the Union State;
- The use of information and communication technology to carry out hostile acts that endanger international security, such as those intended at discrediting participating States, breaching their territorial integrity and state sovereignty, and intervening in their internal affairs;
- Other acts of state(s) based on the territory of another state(s), including statements and force demonstrations and signaling preparations for an attack on the Union State (ibid.).

As visible, the threat perception of Russia (and the Union State) has increased significantly in comparison to earlier Doctrines, and both factors that define the level of threat perception can be found in the 2021 Doctrine. While similarly to the previous Doctrines examined above, the 2021 Doctrine refers to the offensive capabilities of NATO and its members numerous times, e.g., by acknowledging the enhancement of the military potential of NATO, deployment of high-readiness military formations in states bordering the Union State, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, etc., there is a previously unseen perception of hostile intent (ibid.). The 2021 Doctrine indicates that there is a concentration of another state's armed troops along the borders of member states, *signaling an intention* to use military action against the Union State. Furthermore, there is a rise of armed conflicts *intended against* the Union State's essential interests as well as mobilization in another state(s) *to carry out an act of armed aggression* against the Union State and other acts based on the territory of another state(s), *signaling preparations for an attack* on the Union State (ibid.). Such phrasing signals a high perception of immediate threats potentially coming from the West and Ukraine.

The developments in the military alliance

2020 was a turning point in the cooperation between Russia and Belarus not only due to external factors but also domestic ones. The widescale protests against the presidential elections in Belarus cut the remaining possibilities for Western-Belarus cooperation and left Belarus no leverage in negotiations with Russia. Essentially, as Rácz (2022) puts it, Belarus became a military district for Russia. Belarus ended its official policy of neutrality with the amendments to the constitution in February 2022, both nuclear-free status and neutrality are no longer required under the new constitution. Furthermore, Lukashenka consented to the presence of a combined Belarusian-Russian military unit, which included combat-capable Russian soldiers, in March 2021 after a long period of pushing back on such a move (ibid., p.3-4). Furthermore, military exercises between Russia and Belarus have escalated dramatically

since 2020. In September 2021, Lukashenka announced openly that Russia and Belarus had practically a single army, and that if a conflict breaks out, they will fight together. A month later, he went even further, saying that in the event of a foreign invasion, Belarus may become a combined military base with Russia (ibid., p.4). During the 2021 migrant crisis on Europe's eastern borders, which Lukashenka triggered in an effort to destabilize Poland, Lithuania, and, to a lesser extent, Latvia, Russia sent armed soldiers to Belarus. Instead of deploying border guards or humanitarian aid, Russia conducted a series of nuclear-capable strategic bomber demonstration flights in Belarusian airspace as a response (ibid., p.5). Furthermore, the Union Resolve 2022 exercise included Russia's largest-ever troop and armaments deployment to Belarus. This enormous deployment served as a warm-up for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a conflict in which Belarus is presently involved (ibid., p.1). Belarus has been a key player in Russia's aggression in Ukraine from the start. By operating soldiers sent as part of the 'Union Resolve' exercise, Russia has utilized Belarus' land and infrastructure for its war against Ukraine. For example, from southeast Belarus, Russia started a significant onslaught against Kyiv, Russian bombers take off from the Belarusian airfields of Baranovichi and Lida, and Russia also uses the airfields to coordinate its air operations in Ukraine with an airborne early warning and control aircraft (ibid., p.5).

The high threat perception in the 2021 Doctrine can be read in the context of the increasing tensions between Russia and the West (incl. Ukraine), but also Belarus and the West, which predated the war in Ukraine in 2022. While the war was not waged against NATO members per se, it still fits in a larger frame of NATO – Russia relations due to Ukrainian aspirations to be closer to the West and become a member of NATO which has been met by a widespread resistance from the side of Russia (Sommerland 2022). There appears to be a link between the serious escalation in threat perception as showcased by the 2021 Doctrine and increasingly aggressive policies of Russia in the 'near abroad', including the use of the territory of Belarus for launching an attack on Ukraine.

The below sections explore the various roles of Belarus for Russia's security in the face of the perceived threat from the West by utilizing the concepts employed by realists described in the theoretical framework. Specifically, the following will be looked at - the role of Belarus in balancing against NATO, dependent Belarus as a sphere of influence, and the role of Belarus as a buffer zone both from the perspective of defensive realism and offensive realism.

5.3. Various roles of Belarus for Russia in its confrontation with the West

5.3.1. *Role of Belarus in balancing against NATO*

As already elaborated in the theoretical framework, the balance of power theory posits that nations preserve their survival by preventing any one state (group of states) from gaining sufficient power to rule over the others, especially when this state or group of states is perceived as a threat (e.g., due to the geographic proximity, military might or intent of aggression). One of the strategies to this end is the formation of alliances with the aim to improve the position of power. Examining the behavior of Russia, it is possible to conclude that the military alliance with Belarus is an attempt to balance out the US and its allies, the members of NATO, which Russia perceives as increasingly threatening. This role of Belarus can be observed during the whole period of review, i.e., from 2000 to 2022, and even before that since the early attempts at military cooperation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

According to the RAND Corporation's report "Russian Views of the International Order," published in 2017, Russian leaders and analysts believe that the US-led order is expanding to encompass the entire world, thereby endangering Russia's security and undermining Russian influence in its 'near abroad' (Radin & Reach, 2017, p.32 in Blidaru 2018, p.56). Thus, in the current environment, where the global power balance is shifted more towards the West and where the Russian elite agrees on the nature and severity of external threats, Russia is growing its international but especially regional influence to counterbalance the position of the Western powers (Blidaru 2018, p.57). As stated by Canikoglu (2021) Russian foreign policy in the region is pursued throughout Putin's administration to counterbalance Western aspirations. As a result of external factors and perceived threats, the Union State of Russia and Belarus has been turned into a powerful military alliance. Apart from the evidence in this thesis, such a statement can be further backed by works of other scholars proving the causality between the development of NATO and that of the military alliance between Russia and Belarus (Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira 2014, p.564-565).

The role of Belarus as a tool for Russia in balancing the power and perceived threats from the West (NATO and its members) is becoming more significant as the perceived threats are becoming more serious over time (see the analysis above). For example, the training effort to improve the interoperability of Russian and Belarusian airborne forces was stepped up during Zapad 2021, and for Russia, the visible acceleration in obtaining complete interoperability of both nations' armed forces is crucial as a show of strength against the US and NATO, as well as a deterrence on NATO's eastern flank (Żochowski 2021). Thus, the analysis in this thesis and the existing literature on the topic confirms the importance of the

external driver – the perceived threat posed by NATO and the need to balance against it - in the Russian-Belarusian military cooperation.

5.3.2. Dependent Belarus as a sphere of influence

In addition to using Belarus in its attempts to balance out the power/threats of NATO, Russia also maximizes its power in Belarus by ensuring the country's military dependency. The concept of spheres of influence can be applied here since control is exercised over Belarus showcasing Russia's military supremacy for the purposes of control and exclusion of the West. Essentially the goal is to exercise control over Belarus and ensure that others are incapable of exercising the same level of influence over the country. The whole of 'near abroad', but especially Belarus, presents an area that Russia sees as its exclusive sphere of influence crucial for the status of great power for Russia. Similarly, to the above, this role of Belarus can be observed during the whole period of review, i.e., from 2000 to 2022, and even before that.

As demonstrated above and further supported by works of other scholars, Russia strives to ensure that Belarus is dependent on Russian security guarantees and avoids real cooperation with other countries, especially Western powers because such a scenario would endanger Russia. In the military and technical fields, Russia is Belarus's most important partner and supplier. Russia continues to be the primary provider of raw materials, new and renewed (modernized) armament, and the primary consumer of Belorussian military industry complex goods. Furthermore, Russia occasionally provides Belarus special favorable treatment and credits, thereby subsidizing the procurement of military hardware (Pugačiauskas 2019, p.243). There is a significant disparity between Russian and Belarusian military-industrial complexes, with Belarus essentially being fully reliant on Russia and focusing on the production of integrated components (ibid, p.244). According to Pugačiauskas (2019):

Russia puts every effort to avail of relatively small potentials of the Belorussian military-industrial complex. The best way to do that is to purchase the main companies, such as Integral, the heavyweight tow-vehicle factory in Minsk, MAZ vehicle plant, Peleng and other [...]. Russia periodically shows its tactical aim to take a stronger stance in the military industry of Belarus (p. 246).

Here, however, it must be mentioned that while the dependency is asymmetrical with Belarus having significantly less power, due to the high level of integration, Russia finds itself dependent on Belarus too when it comes to military equipment (Rącz 2022, p.3).

While, as confirmed above, Belarus has always to some extent served as a sphere of influence for Russia, the relevance of this role is growing, especially considering the events of 2020 and the complete breakdown in relations between Belarus and the West. Due to the violent suppression of the protests that followed the 2020 Presidential elections in Belarus, there is no support for the current regime from the West. For the current regime to stay in power, they need support from Russia while having no alternative, thus, further concessions (including in the military sphere) are expected in favor of Russia. Thus, while motivated by external factors - the perceived threat posed by NATO and the desire to enhance its status as a great power equal to the US and its allies - domestic factors in Belarus have enabled Russia to further exploit Belarus as its sphere of influence in the larger framework of conflict with the West.

5.3.3. Role of Belarus as a strategic buffer

As has been argued above, Russia sees Belarus as its sphere of influence, and the rationale for the creation of such a structure stems from the necessity to ensure Belarus's position as a 'strategic buffer', resulting in increased physical separation from potentially dangerous external actors, in this case – NATO. Thus, another important role of Belarus in Russia's policy towards the West, especially, is that of a so-called buffer zone. Similarly to the above, this role of Belarus can be observed during the whole period of review, i.e., from 2000 to 2022, and even before that.

Russia's behavior with respect to Belarus can be interpreted via the beliefs of defensive realists, who hold that the international system pushes nations to adopt moderate and restrained behavior in order to secure their existence and safety. From this perspective, Russia's primary aim is to retain its status in the system which creates an incentive for maximizing power (security) in Belarus, rather than power being the end goal (Lobell 2017). Essentially, Russia sees Belarus as a buffer that separates Russia from the Western powers and can be used strategically to respond to various potential threats from the West. Apart from the evidence in this thesis, such a conclusion is supported by other scholars, for example, Baggiani (2020) who states that Belarus, from Russia's geopolitical perspective, serves as a buffer zone or "advanced defense bastion of Russian territory" (p.4). Essentially, Belarus' geopolitical relevance and military strategic importance have developed as a result of Russia's attempts to deepen the military integration with Belarus in the face of increasing threat perception coming from the West.

5.3.4. Role of Belarus in potential offense

However, as previously stated in the theoretical framework, rather than bolstering a strong defense, great powers may desire spheres of influence for the opposite reason, namely, that certain foreign territories may strengthen a state's potential to launch an attack. Thus, Belarus for Russia can be seen as a territory to be used for a potential offense. Unlike the above, this role of Belarus can be observed after 2020 and the increasing militarization of Belarus, especially in 2022 when Belarusian territory was in fact used by Russia to launch an attack on Ukraine.

Russia's recent behavior with respect to Belarus can be interpreted via the assumptions of offensive realists, who believe that the international system incentivizes governments to seek out chances to increase power and influence at the expense of competitors (Lobell 2017). Expansion, according to offensive realists, comprises aggressive international economic, political, and military activities to shift the power balance, seize opportunities to obtain more power; gain power at the expense of other states; and undermine future competitors through preventative wars to impede their rise (ibid.). While, of course, the official rhetoric of Russia focuses on the extension of military capabilities for defensive reasons, the territory of Belarus has the potential to be used by Russia for launching an offense against the NATO members. While this has not yet happened, Belarusian soil was used by the Russian forces in their invasion of Ukraine, a country aspiring to NATO membership, in February 2021 (Guzman 2022). According to Pugačiauskas (2019), Russia reveals its fundamental desire to increase the use of military capabilities by relying on Belorussian military capabilities, military infrastructure, and territory as a launching pad for possible military activities (p.231). Belarus would be a crucial location for pooling military and a point of departure for heading towards the West in the event that Russia launches a war against NATO. Furthermore, Belarus is regarded as a key area for Russia because of its closeness to the Kaliningrad Oblast if Russia decides to unlock this enclave encircled by the West and provide land connectivity with it (ibid., p.232-233). Here the importance of the Suwalki Corridor must be mentioned, which runs between Belarus and Kaliningrad, and is critical for the Baltics' security (Tektas 2022). The Suwalki Corridor connects Europe with the Baltic States - Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia - and is the only way to access the Baltic nations by road and rail from Poland and Central Europe, thus, it makes the Baltic Region vulnerable in the event of an assault by blocking the three nations from accessing NATO's primary territories (ibid.). While the likelihood of Russia actually seizing the territory and launching an offense on the Baltics appears small, it must not be ignored, especially in the light of Russia's

actions in Ukraine. The potential of the military of Russia and Belarus is not only defensive but also offensive in nature:

Evidently, the potentials of these armed forces [of Russia and Belarus] are sufficient to perform not only defensive functions but to also coordinate actions from Kaliningrad and Belarus and destroy targets in Poland, Lithuania and Latvia and thus aggravate the operation of NATO air forces in the Baltics (Pugačiauskas 2019, p.242).

Moreover, as already mentioned, both nations also organize a series of large-scale joint military drills known as Zapad. These maneuvers are propaganda-driven, as seen in 2009 when aggressive 'nuclear assault on Poland' and 'suppression of the Polish minority insurrection' were performed during drills in Belarus. NATO was also mentioned as a potential adversary in the scenario of Zapad-2013, and Russia was pushing for an increase in its military presence on Belarusian soil at the time (this was right before the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014) (Kuleszewicz 2017, p.94). A similar turn of events also occurred in relation Union Resolve 2022 exercise when Russian forces stayed in Belarus predating the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

In addition to the above, Moscow uses its close military cooperation with Belarus for propaganda purposes vis-a-vis the West. An illustration of this point is Moscow's habit of making threats to deploy Russian nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory, which is also the case in 2022 since on the 27th of February there was a successful (yet unrecognized by the West) referendum on amending the constitution to allow Russia to place Russian nuclear weapons on Belarusian territory (Reuters 2022). Since the referendum took place a few days after the start of the war in Ukraine, such action can be placed in a wider offensive narrative against Ukraine but also Western powers who have pledged their support to the invaded country.

6. Conclusions

The goal of the thesis was to examine how Russia's external threat perception concerning the West (NATO and its members) influences the development of the military relationship between Russia and Belarus from 2000 to 2022 in the context of a wider confrontation between Russia and the West. Therefore, the thesis, firstly, analyzed Russia's (including the Union State's of Belarus and Russia) external threat perception concerning the West to show how it has transformed over the years. Secondly, it examined the impact of this threat perception on the development of the military alliance between Russia and Belarus, and, thirdly, it looked at the role(s) of Belarus for Russia's security vis-à-vis the West.

To evaluate the development of threat perception, the balance of threat theory was applied, which highlights four factors that are important to consider – aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and hostile intent. If a state (or alliance) has considerable aggregate power and offensive capabilities, is geographically close and is perceived as aggressive, it is likely that other states will balance against it by forming alliances to increase their relative power.

In the case of NATO, its aggregate power has grown as well as, due to the accession of new states, the geographic distance from NATO member's borders to Russia has decreased in the period from 2000 to 2022. Furthermore, the potential accession of Georgia and Ukraine, states that form a part of Russia's 'near abroad' and thus, as argued above, are vital to Russia from a security perspective, is viewed very negatively by Moscow. Both of these factors – aggregate power and geographic proximity - potentially increase the threat perception of Russia concerning NATO and its member states making Russia seek allies, notably Belarus, to increase its own power to counter that of NATO.

Furthermore, concerning offensive capabilities and hostile intent, after examination of the Military Doctrines of Russia (2000, 2010, and 2014) and the Union State of Russia and Belarus (2001 and 2021), it can be concluded that the external threat perception of the West, notably NATO and its members, but also potential members such as Ukraine, has grown in the period from 2000 to 2022. While the 2000 Doctrine of Russia and 2001 Doctrine of the Union State indicate an overall low perception of the threat posed by the West - the factor of offensive capabilities does figure in the Doctrines, but the factor of hostile intent is very low or non-existent-, in 2010 and 2014 Doctrines of Russia the threat perception is higher. 2010 Doctrine of Russia does not explicitly refer to intent to violate the sovereignty or territorial integrity of Russia or its allies, but rather to undermine the importance of Russia and upset the balance of power, especially in the 'near abroad', while the 2014 Doctrine of Russia goes

further and also includes a perception of intent to violate the sovereignty or territorial integrity of Russia or its allies, for example, by referring to foreign military contingents deployed with an aim to put political and military pressure on Russia. The threat perception of the West is the highest in the 2021 Doctrine of the Union State since, in addition to the aspect of offensive capabilities, there is a previously unseen and explicit indication of perceived hostile intent with the Doctrine stating that the Western powers and Ukraine (names of countries are not mentioned in the document but can be derived from the context) are signaling the intention to use force and even mobilizing for an attack.

In line with the above, according to De Haas' (2011) research of official Russian foreign policy papers, the West has been regarded as a threat over the previous 15 years (As cited in Nitoiu 2017, p.43). While Russia's relations with the West were marked by a hesitant openness to cooperation during Putin's first term, Putin felt increasingly threatened by the West's penetration of Russia's sphere of influence during 2004 - 2008, against the backdrop of the colored revolutions in the post-Soviet space (De Haas 2011 in Nitoiu 2017, p.43). Moscow saw the uprisings as a struggle in its geopolitical rivalry with the West, criticizing the latter's interventionism; this was part of Russia's Monroe Doctrine, which defined a zone of responsibility in the post-Soviet region. These pro-West uprisings inspired widespread belief in the Kremlin that unless Russia took a more proactive stance, the West would continue its post-Soviet expansionist policy. As a result, preserving Russia's grip on post-Soviet republics became a critical source of strength in reclaiming Moscow's great power status (Nitoiu 2017, p.43). In fact, the 2008 Georgian-Russian war was a watershed point in Moscow's ties with the West as it marked Russia's return to the world scene as a major power without opposition from the US, the EU, or the international community at large (ibid.). This was followed by the 2014 annexation of Crimea and conflict in the Donbas region of Ukraine. While the current (2022) Russian wide-scale war on Ukraine follows the same pattern of aggression in the post-Soviet space.

Furthermore, it can be concluded that while the development of a military alliance between Russia and Belarus has been ongoing since after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, it has intensified in the last two decades. The cooperation reached a high following the war in Georgia and the commencement of 2008 military reform in Russia and has not slowed down since. 2009 was the year when Zapad exercises were first introduced in the framework of the Russia-Belarus alliance (it must be mentioned that Zapad exercises were also held in 1981, 1984, and 1999 within the framework of the Soviet Union and Russia itself). These large-scale exercises have been centered around scenarios of repelling potential aggression from the

West (both directly from the territories of NATO members and indirectly on the territory of Belarus) and ensuring Russia's security in this context. Moreover, around 2010 – 2012 it became increasingly clear that it is the external situation that is driving nations to extend cooperation, especially the increasingly conflictual nature of the relationship between Russia and the West. The military cooperation between Russia and Belarus reached a new high in 2013 with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stating that the two nations had essentially become one military space. 2015 saw the Union Shield exercise with a goal to improve the combat preparedness and efficiency of military leadership bodies as well as Russian and Belarusian troops in joint operations in the face of the perceived threat from NATO and its members. In the following years, Russia, with the support of the Belarusian army, considerably improved its capacity to deploy its troops and use Belarusian territory for potential military operations. However, 2020 was a turning point for the alliance with Belarus essentially becoming a military district for Russia (Rácz 2022). A number of steps were taken to increase the Russian military presence in Belarus which were previously resisted by the leadership of the country. Furthermore, the Union Resolve 2022 exercise included Russia's largest-ever troop and armaments deployment to Belarus, which served as a warm-up for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. From the very beginning of the war, Russia utilized Belarus' land and infrastructure for its attacks on the neighbor (Rácz 2022).

Overall, as the threat perception increases, there is a greater focus on the military alliance, i.e., more resources are devoted, more trainings are undertaken, and a larger Russian presence on the territory of Belarus is ensured. Eventually, as of 2020, the threat perception is very high, and Belarus has become essentially a military district for Russia playing an important role in the war with Ukraine. Putting an emphasis on increasing military cooperation with Belarus can be interpreted as Russia's response to the structural factors in international relations, such as the context of anarchy and polarity, which leads to considerations with respect to the balance of power. Belarus in this scenario is a "tool" via which Russia can maximize its power to respond to the West which is seen as a threatening power.

When it comes to the role(s) of Belarus for Russia's security, several (although overlapping) can be distinguished. These roles which are based on concepts of neorealism can be described as (1) a tool in balancing against the West (NATO and its members), (2) sphere of influence, (3) defensive strategic buffer, and (4) platform for an offensive against the West. While the first three roles were present in the military relationship between Russia and Belarus during the whole period of review (2000- 2022) and even before, their importance

has grown due to the increase in threat perception by Russia concerning the West. The final role has gained prominence in the last couple of years. Russia's apparent intensification of military cooperation with Belarus coincides with the increase in threat perception since the 2021 Military Doctrine of the Union State of Russia and Belarus includes considerably more serious threats to the Union State than previous Doctrines since it states that the West and Ukraine are declaring their desire to use force and even organizing for an assault, which is a previously unseen indicator of anticipated hostile intent.

The findings concerning Belarus showcase the importance of Russia's 'near abroad' for the country, especially, when it comes to attempts to balance against the power of the West (NATO and its members). In fact, the whole post-Soviet zone could be described as a buffer between Russia and the West, where Russia is striving to keep dominance despite the growing western influence. However, while Russia has strived greatly to secure cooperation with the neighboring countries in the military sphere, for example within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) or Collective Security Organization (CSTO), but also on a bilateral basis, out of all the partners, the highest level of military integration has been achieved with Belarus. Thus, while the whole 'near abroad' is important for Russia in its struggle for great power status, Belarus has an exceptional role in Russia's security.

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