AALBORG UNIVERSITY

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THE LOGIC BEHIND MODERN AUTOCRACY: REALISM VS. DOMESTIC POLITICAL SURVIVAL

The Case Study of Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine

A Master's Thesis

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the extent to which Russia's aggression against Ukraine can be explained by domestic political survival rather than external security concerns or power maximizing strategy. It compares two analytical frameworks: Realist theories (Offensive and Defensive Realism) and the frameworks of Informational Autocracy and Spin Dictatorship provided by Guriev and Treisman. While Realist approaches emphasize NATO expansion and regional power dynamics, they fall short of fully explaining the timing and intensity of Russia's actions, especially in 2014 and 2022. In contrast, the domestic survival logic of the Russian regime, characterized by manipulation of narratives and information and the importance of legitimacy, provides a deeper explanation. The study argues that the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 were closely linked to the regime's internal needs to boost public support and legitimacy. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 significantly boosted domestic support for the Russian regime by reinforcing nationalist sentiment, while the full-scale invasion in 2022 appears to have been driven by the regime's need to regain legitimacy.

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INTRODUCTION

Ukrainian crisis, starting from annexation of Crimea in 2014 and leading to full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, is a chain of geopolitical events and decisions influencing modern trends in international politics and will probably be considered by historians in the future as a turning chain of events of the early 21st century. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine marks a drastic change in the existing liberal international order, exposing deep contradictions in its normative foundations and revealing the fragility of a system (Mulligan, 2022; Risse, 2022; Sloss & Dickinson, 2022). The consequences of this series of events are visible: food crisis, deepening geopolitical instability, fractured international relations and significant economic disruptions (Mearsheimer, 2022). Taking into account such an influential effect of the Ukrainian crisis on both modern European and global trends and in the long-term noticeable changes in the liberal world order in the future, an important question arises: what caused this crisis? Was the conflict caused because of Russia's external security concerns, namely the threat posed by NATO's expansion and the loss of influence in its near abroad? This explanation was proposed by such influential scholars as John Mearsheimer (2014, 2022), Stephen Walt (2022) and Richard Sakwa (2015). Or, perhaps, the reasons driving Russia's aggression, which has been given much less attention, are domestic factors tied to the nature and specifics of governing model in the country?

The main goal of this thesis is to take a closer look at what's really behind Russia's aggression against Ukraine, focusing on both external security concerns and internal evolution of the Russian regime and its need for political survival. This thesis challenges the perception that Russia's foreign policy is driven primarily by Realist motives like security concerns or power maximization. Instead, it calls for the need to look more closely at how internal changes inside Russia's autocratic system can influence its behaviour in the international arena.

Through the lens of the events that took place in the context of the Ukrainian crisis and through the chosen theoretical approaches, this work attempts to study the more global and broader phenomenon of the evolution of autocracies. Modern autocracies, if compared with the dictatorships of the 20th century, in the 21st century have become more advanced, dynamic, unpredictable and yet no less destructive and threatening to the democratic free world (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). Misunderstanding the motives and nature of autocracies leads to wrong conclusions. Wrong conclusions, in turn, lead to wrong actions and reactions to world events.

There are many academic works suggesting that the catastrophe of the Second World War could have been avoided if the democratic free world had correctly understood the dictatorships of that time and responded effectively (Steiner, 2005; McDonough, 1998; Aster, 2008). The objective of this thesis in a broader sense is to bring to the understanding of the essence of modern autocracies and their evolution in the context of International Relations using the example of Russian political model.

To find the answer for the stated problem, this thesis approaches the Ukrainian crisis through two theoretical paradigms: theories of Offensive and Defensive Realism and the frameworks of Informational Autocracy and Spin Dictatorship proposed by Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman (2019, 2020, 2023). Realism focuses on external security concerns, power dynamics and the strategic behaviour of states in an anarchic international system. In contrast, frameworks of Informational Autocracy and Spin Dictatorship explores the internal logic of autocratic regimes, such as legitimacy and political survival concerns that might shape autocracy international behaviour. By comparing these two perspectives, this thesis aims to determine whether Russian aggression against Ukraine was driven more by external factors or by the internal survival strategy.

This thesis consists of six main chapters. The first chapter provides the theoretical framework, introducing Realism, Informational Autocracy and Spin dictatorship frameworks. The second chapter is a methodology. The third chapter provides historical and political background on the Ukrainian crisis from 1991 to 2022, focusing on key events. The fourth chapter examines Russia's domestic political landscape evolution. The fifth chapter conducts a comparative analysis of the explanatory power of external security concerns versus domestic political survival, applying the selected theories. Finally, the sixth chapter presents conclusions of the results.

Research Questions

Considering that the aim of this thesis is to examine factors driving Russia's aggression against Ukraine, focusing on the role of domestic political survival compared to external security concerns, the main question was formulated as follows:

"To what extent can Russia's aggression against Ukraine be explained by domestic political survival rather than external security or power-maximising strategic concerns?"

To answer this question, the following subquestions were developed to guide the analysis:

1. *"How does Offensive and Defensive Realism explain Russia's aggression against Ukraine?"*

2. *"How does the evolution of the Russian regime and its domestic political survival concerns help explain Russia's aggression against Ukraine?"*

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This chapter presents the theoretical foundation for the thesis by outlining key concepts of Defensive and Offensive Realism and frameworks of Informational Autocracy and Spin Dictatorship. The chapter also reviews existing literature that applies these frameworks to Russian foreign policy and make assumptions about Russian behaviour using frameworks of Informational Autocracy and Spin Dictatorship.

1.1. Realism

Realism is one of the main theoretical approaches in the study of International Relations, along with such theories as Liberalism and Constructivism. Even though Realism is a relatively old theory, it is still widely used by scholars, researchers and political experts and is also widely used to explain contemporary geopolitical events such as the Ukrainian crisis. Among the most famous representatives of Realism school are Hans Morgenthau, Robert Gilpin, Kenneth Waltz, John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt and others.

According to Morgenthau (1948) Realism has intellectual roots in classical political philosophy, particularly from the works of Thucydides, Machiavelli and Hobbes. It was these classics who started talking about the inherent nature of power struggles and self-interest of states. Yet, in general, the early 20th century became a crucial moment for the development of Realism. Overt Dictatorships like Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Nazi Germany clearly showed how power politics and survival really function in international relations (Carr, 1939). Power politics of the first half of the 21th century strengthen the Realist view among scholars.

From the point of view of the essence of Realism, it has several main principles on which the entire theoretical approach is formed: statism, survival, self-help and power politics. Statism means that the central actors in international relations are countries and that their interests and security are paramount in the international system (Sørensen, Møller & Jackson, 2022). Another important principle is survival, that stands for that the main aim of every country is to ensure its own existence by either balancing power or maximizing its own security (Sørensen, Møller & Jackson, 2022). Self-help means that countries because of the anarchic nature of the international system cannot trust and rely on other states (Sørensen, Møller & Jackson, 2022). Finally, power politics

means the distribution of power in the international system influences how states behave and interact with each other (Sørensen, Møller & Jackson, 2022).

Besides classical Realism, there are many other interpretations and approaches. For example, Neorealism that was introduced by Kenneth Waltz. Neorealism, or structural realism, emerged as a response to perceived limitations in Classical Realism. Neorealism takes classical Realism's international anarchy conception, but unlike classical realism which focuses primarily on human nature and the ethics of statecraft, Neorealism focuses instead on the overarching architecture of the international system (Sørensen, Møller & Jackson, 2022). Kenneth Waltz's neorealism redirects attention away from human nature. He argues that the international system has an anarchic nature and that there is no central authority, that determines state behaviour (Waltz, 1979). States are compelled to act in certain ways (seeking security and balancing power) because of systemic constraints, not because of individual leaders' motivations.

Neorealism arose during the Cold War, a period of history defined by world bipolarity and the fierce rivalry between global powers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Classical Realism's focus on state leaders' decisions and moral considerations seemed insufficient to explain the new systemic patterns of conflict and power distribution seen during this era (Waltz, 1979). Waltz's (1979) Neorealism redirects attention to the structure of the international system, claiming that the lack of a global authority pushes states to behave in set patterns, regardless of their internal characteristics.

As it was already mentioned before Realism is a theoretical framework that suggests that actors in the international system either power maximizing or seeking security. In the study of Neorealism there are two approaches focusing on each paradigm: Offensive Realism and Defensive Realism.

Offensive Realism, as outlined by John Mearsheimer (2001), argues that the main driving force in international politics is the drive for influence and that states are constantly looking to maximize their influence to ensure their survival. Great powers are motivated to seek regional hegemony in order to ensure their survival in the always changing anarchic international system (Mearsheimer, 2001). This approach claims that states are constantly aiming to increase their power, not only for self-protection, but also to dominate their region and secure their interests in a stronger way. Offensive Realists believe that, in a world without a higher authority to keep order, states are naturally inclined to act aggressively whenever they see a chance to get ahead (Mearsheimer,

2001). So, this motivation to maximize power creates an endless cycle of rivalry and conflict between major powers, especially when they start to see each other as threats. This approach does not include the attention of smaller actors, implying that their fate is decided by greater powers

In contrast to Offensive Realism, Defensive Realism approach claims that the primary objective of states is not power, but security concerns. As described by Kenneth Waltz (1979), states also act in an anarchic international system, which forces them to concentrate on their own survival and security. However, the main difference is that Defensive Realists think states are trying to maximise their security, not power. If a state gathers too much power, it can cause other states to react with balancing actions, which in the end may put its own security at risk. Waltz (1979) argues that the anarchic nature and structure of the international system shapes states behaviour and makes them act in a defensive way. This approach puts attention on the security dilemma – the idea that when one state tries to increase its own safety, it can accidentally make other states feel threatened, which may lead to growing tensions. Overall, for Defensive Realists state's main driving force is the desire to survive.

1.2. Defensive and Offensive Realist perception of Russia's Geopolitical behavior

Academic literature base on Russia's geopolitical behaviour is massive, including researches on annexation of Crimea and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Academics and researches provide various points of view, reasons and explanations using Realism approach. Overall, Realist scholars' perception of Russian aggression against Ukraine could be divided into two paradigms: Offensive Realism and Defensive Realist perception.

Offensive Realists explain Ukrainian crisis as predictable result of great power competition, where NATO's eastward expansion threatened Russia's strategic interests and its sphere of influence. John J. Mearsheimer, an American political scientist and international relations scholar, looks at the Ukrainian Crisis exactly from the perspective of Offensive Realism. He challenges the common Western narrative, which entirely blames Russia for the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Instead, Mearsheimer (2014) argues that the United States and its European allies are responsible for this crisis. The key issue, according to this perspective, is NATO expansion, that was considered by Russia as an effort to pull Ukraine away from its sphere of interest and integrate it into the West (Mearsheimer, 2014). Mearsheimer (2014) explains that NATO expansion was a long term process of provoking Russia: first (after the collapse of the USSR) expansion in 1999

brought in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic; second wave in 2004 that brough in Baltic Countries, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia; then NATO consideration of admitting Ukraine and Georgia in 2008 - coming up with EU's Eastern Partnership program and West's support of pro-democracy efforts in Ukraine, funding opposition groups and civil society initiatives. The Ukrainian crisis in 2014, with the fleeing of pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych and pro-Western politicians taking power, only fuelled Russian suspicions of a Western-backed coup. This event caused Putin to invade Crimea, where the majority of the population was ethnic Russian, many of whom favoured breaking away from Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2014). Also, Mearsheimer (2014) claims that the Ukraine crisis stems from a fundamental clash between two worldviews: Realism and Liberalism. From Russia's Realist perspective, Ukraine is a vital buffer state and NATO's enlargement to the East, especially into Ukraine, is seen as an existential threat. On the other hand, from the West's liberal point of view, liberal values like democracy and economic ties would be enough to reshape Europe.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Mearsheimer (2022) continued his thoughts. According to John Mearsheimer (2022), the root cause of the Ukraine crisis lies in the West's persistent efforts to draw Ukraine into its sphere of influence, particularly through integration into the European Union and again NATO expansion. From Russia's perspective, Ukraine was effectively becoming a NATO outpost, prompting a strong reaction that culminated in the 2022 invasion when diplomatic efforts to halt NATO's advance failed (Mearsheimer, 2022). To sum up, Mearsheimer argues that the Western world, including USA, EU and NATO provoked Russia because of the invading its sphere of interests and its goal to achieve the regional hegemony.

Another prominent Realist scholar is Stephen Walt, who criticizes liberal internationalism and claims that the war in Ukraine has exposed the limitations of this theoretical approach. Despite strong economic ties between Russia and the West, these connections failed to deter Moscow's aggression (Walt, 2022). Institutions like the United Nations, central to liberal theory, were also powerless to prevent or even meaningfully respond to the invasion. Walt (2022) also continues the same idea, as Mearsheimer, claiming that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not an unexpected anomaly, but a predictable response from a great power seeking to defend its interests. Given the ongoing conflict, Walt (2022) exclaims that Realism is becoming more relevant in international relations, which contends that in an anarchic world without a central authority, states must rely on

their own power for security, inevitably leading to competition. The main idea of scholar is that ignoring core strategic interests of mayor power in the region can lead to disaster, just like it happened in Ukraine (Walt, 2022).

Defensive Realistic perception of the Ukrainian crisis is that the West has failed to articulate a common vision of continental security order that would have been inclusive towards Russia. Defensive Realists explain the Ukrainian crisis as a consequence of the West's failure to recognize Russia's legitimate security concerns, arguing that Russia's actions were a defensive response to perceived encirclement and threats to its strategic buffer zone rather than a desire for expansion.

Richard Sakwa (2015), at the background of the annexation of Crimea, criticizes the assumption that Russia's president Vladimir Putin sought to resurrect a Soviet-style empire. Instead, he portrays Russia as a defensive actor reacting to what it views as Western overreach and violations of international law. According Richard Sakwa (2015) Putin positioned the Crimea intervention as a protective move: both strategically, focusing on keeping access to the black sea; and ideologically, focusing on protecting Russian-speaking population. For Russia, Ukraine was a vital buffer state and it was perceived as a direct security threat if it were to shift towards NATO membership (Sakwa, 2015). The fear was that this would lead to the establishment of an anti-Russian state on its borders, similar to other former Soviet states that had joined NATO (Sakwa, 2015).

Overall, both Offensive and Defensive Realist perspectives mostly blame Western world, including the US, EU and NATO, for Ukrainian Crisis. Offensive Realists focuses on great power rivalry and strategic competition, arguing that NATO's expansion and Western efforts to reshape Ukraine triggered a predictable response from Russia. In contrast, Defensive Realists focus on Russia's sense of encirclement and its efforts to protect what it views as legitimate security interests.

1.3. Modern Informational Autocracy

Autocratic regimes vary and evolve throughout the history. Autocracies and dictatorships are defined in contrast to democracies and can take many forms. There are significant variations: from feudal-style monarchies like Saudi Arabia to modern, bureaucratically efficient regimes like

Singapore (Svolik, 2012). Overall, autocracy is defined as a political system in which authority is centralized in the hands of a single individual, known as an autocrat (Frantz, 2016).

The rise of modern types and specifics of autocracies can be linked to economic modernisation, increased education levels and the decline of ideological authoritarianism following the Cold War (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). Global trends make autocracies to adapt and develop new mechanisms to ensure their survival.

After the end of the Cold War, many authoritarian regimes collapsed and democratic models began to emerge in their place (Huntington, 1991). However, not all of these countries became fully democratic with strong institutions. Instead, some evolved into authoritarian regimes with some features of the democracy, where elections occurred but were rigged to favour those in power (Levitsky & Way, 2010). These regimes could be described as mid system between a democracy and a full authoritarian regime. While democracies are characterized by free and fair elections where opposition operate without strict restrictions, overt dictatorships eliminate political competition altogether, modern authoritarian regimes in turn presents a political system that superficially resembles democracy (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Elections and opposition parties exist and there may even be some political competition, but the system is controlled to the benefit of those in power (Levitsky & Way, 2010). At first, these regimes were labelled by scholars as flawed democracies, but it soon became clear that the trajectory these regimes were taking was likely to lead them toward more authoritarian models (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman (2019) proposed the concept of Informational Autocracy as a new framework for understanding this new evolving types of modern autocracies. This type of autocracy represents a subtle form of authoritarian control, characterized by media manipulation, selective repression and the suppression of opposition, while at the same time maintaining the facade of democratic legitimacy (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). Informational Autocracy blurs the lines between democracy and authoritarianism and shows how modern autocrats adapt to new political and technological realities.

Informational Autocracy represents a modern evolution of authoritarian rule and the main characteristics of this type of autocracy is a strategic manipulation of information rather than reliance on mass repression or ideological indoctrination (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). Traditional overt dictatorships of the 20th century maintained power through fear, censorship and violence

(Linz, 2000). Informational Autocrats in turn consolidate control by promoting an image of competence and public service (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). This constructed image of competence gives the ruling elite group or autocrat the legitimacy. Andreas Schedler (2002) introduces the concept of "*Electoral Authoritarianism*", where regimes maintain the facade of democratic institutions, such as elections and opposition parties, but systematically manipulate them to entrench power. Informational Autocracy also often has a set of democratic institutions and norms by holding elections and allowing limited political competition, while covertly undermining democratic institutions (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). If traditional dictatorships usually relied on the large-scale violence, then Informational Autocracy employs the targeted repression, such as harassment, fabricated legal charges and forced exile of political opponents (Guriev & Treisman, 2019).

Table 1. Key features of Overt Dictatorship, Informational Autocracy and Democracy

	Overt Dictatorship	Informational Autocracy	Democracy
Main Strategy	Repression	Informational manipulation	Performance and transparency
Information Control	Harsh censorship	Indirect censorship, disinformation	Free media
Elite's Role	Intimidated	Informed but silenced	Engaged in open competition
Legitimacy Source	Fear and coercion	Perceived competence and democratic facade	Real performance and open elections

Source: author's elaboration based on Guriev & Treisman (2019)

Table 1 summarizes these key differences based on the framework developed by Guriev and Treisman (2019). One of the key elements to notice in modern Informational Autocracy is its rapid shift from violent repression to informational control. Traditional dictatorships relied heavily on mass violence, including state-sponsored killings, mass imprisonment, torture and ideological indoctrination (Linz, 2000). Informational Autocrats in contrast, rely less on violence and instead use media manipulation (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). Violence remains one of the tools that information autocrats use to control the regime, but not on the same scale as in a dictatorship, as it relies on selective repression, rather than on mass repression. According to data found by Guriev

and Treisman (2019), there has been a notable decline in the use of mass repression by non-democratic regimes since the 1980s. For instance, while 62 percent of autocrats in the 1980s engaged in more than ten political killings per year, only 28 percent of those from the 2000s did the same (Guriev & Treisman, 2019).

Instead, modern Informational Autocrats tend to use quieter tools. For example, brief detentions in place of long sentences, legal harassment through citizenship revocations or regulatory pressure, surveillance aimed at pre-empting dissent and softer forms of punishment such as job loss, housing denial or travel bans (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). The main aim for that is to silence the opposition without attracting public outrage. In many cases, targeted repression combined with strategic information control is more effective than mass repression and deters dissent while avoiding the backlash often provoked by widespread violence (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). These techniques allow Informational Autocrats to preserve control while keeping the appearance of legality and reducing the likelihood of international condemnation.

The same decline happened in ideology reliance. 20th-century overt dictatorships relied heavily on ideology as a means of legitimizing their power and reshaping society according to their visions (Linz, 2000). Modern authoritarian leaders do not require ideology to maintain power because they do not rely heavily on mass repression. And even though modern Autocrats tend to criticize western democracies, don't explicitly reject democracy itself, proposing alternative versions, like Putin's "*sovereign democracy*" in Russia (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). They tend to pretend to mimic the language and structure of democratic governance. First of all, modern Informational Autocracies are based on formal democratic institutions such as parliament, president and elections. However, elections are often manipulated through media bias and enabling strict restriction of opposition candidates (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). For instance, over 80% of non-democratic regimes from 1946 to 2008 had legislatures and nearly half allowed more than one party to be seated (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Yet they don't always work the way they're supposed to. These institutions might look similar to those in democracies, but they usually don't have real power or independence (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Secondly, Informational Autocrats adopt rhetoric that mimics the language of modern democratic leaders, aiming to appear competent and effective. For example, Guriev & Treisman (2019) through dictionary analysis found out that Informational

Autocrats similar to democratic leaders are focusing on economic performance and public service, with much less emphasis on violence compared to overt dictators.

The type of regime transformation into Informational Autocracy largely depends on a country's development level, where higher development favours less repressive regimes and democracy, while lower development leads to repression and overt dictatorships (Guriev and Treisman, 2020). Also, regime type is strongly influenced by media sector development at the time a leader comes to power, with transformations towards Informational Autocracy more often driven by leadership voluntarily change than by revolution (Guriev and Treisman, 2020).

Propaganda and censorship methods have changed as well. Overt dictatorships employed propaganda and censorship extensively to indoctrinate the population and maintain control over public opinion (Linz, 2000). Informational Autocrats avoid obvious censorship and adopt indirect methods of controlling the media, such as co-opting media owners, using economic pressure, bribing media or applying economic pressure to ensure that journalists and editors align with the government's views (Guriev & Treisman, 2019). Social networks can also be utilized as tools for surveillance by the state, ensuring control without direct censorship.

1.4. Spin dictatorship

Later Guriev and Treisman (2023) expands their findings into a spin dictatorship, a subtype of Informational Autocracy. In essence all Spin Dictatorships are Informational Autocracies, but not all Informational Autocracies are Spin Dictatorships. Spin dictatorship is a more refined, media-savvy version that suits the digital age, where narrative control is everything. In another words, it's the next evolutional step of modern informational autocracy.

An informational autocracy is a regime that controls the information and manipulates what's available to the public through censorship. In contrast, a spin dictatorship goes further and focuses on crafting a new narrative that makes the regime look essential and popular (Guriev & Treisman, 2023). So, the main difference is that informational autocracy works with existing informational flow, while spin dictatorship creates its own set of narratives and information to feed the public and transform their perception.

A good example is Peru Fujimori's regimes. This regime's strategy focused on shaping the media and controlling information, rather than relying on open censorship or violence (Treisman &

Guriev, 2023). By co-opting media owners with bribes and favours, this regime secured mostly favourable coverage, while still allowing a controlled amount of opposition to appear, just enough to make the system look legitimate (Treisman & Guriev, 2023).

Table 2. Key Differences Between Informational Autocracy and Spin Dictatorship

	Informational Autocracy	**Spin Dictatorship**
Strategy	Informational manipulation	Narrative construction
Legitimacy source	Perceived competence	Illusion of full public support and regime indispensability
Ideology	No ideology	No ideology, uses flexible emotional appeals

Source: author's elaboration based on Guriev & Treisman (2019, 2023)

Table 2 shows that both Informational Autocracy and Spin Dictatorship rely on media control. However, they differ in the tactics. Spin Dictatorship creates its own narratives, more flexible to ideological symbols and gain legitimacy through perception of the mass support.

Firstly, Spin Dictators, just like in Informational Autocrats, try to win public support by carefully crafting an image of competence and presenting themselves well in the media. When actual performance is poor, they keep up the illusion of competence by shifting blame onto others and putting on a show of being firmly in control of their subordinates (Treisman & Guriev, 2023). Also, Spin Dictators avoid traditional, top-down personality cults. Rather than demanding ritualistic loyalty, they build their image through media stunts, branded merchandise and pop culture references, looking more like celebrities (Treisman & Guriev, 2023). Overall, the main goal is not only to appear competent, but also to create the perception that the nation fully supports them, creating an all-around perception of full-scale public support (Treisman & Guriev, 2023).

Secondly, Spin Dictatorship doesn't have an ideology like Overt Dictatorship. Instead spin dictators use a flexible mix of appeals to connect with different segments of society, raging from nationalism and populism to tradition and symbolism (Treisman & Guriev, 2023). Spin Dictators don't just lie, they strategically frame and interpret facts to maintain support. When the truth is undeniable, they shift blame for bad news to outside forces and credit themselves for good news (Treisman & Guriev, 2023).

So narrative construction is essential for such regimes. For example, these regimes might rely on external threats narratives to paint themselves as defenders of national interests (Ma, Romanov, Libman & Kostka, 2025). They influence public opinion and justify things like silencing opposition and controlling the media (Ma, Romanov, Libman & Kostka, 2025). Or regime might go further and construct integrate more narratives. They might emphasize national sovereignty and pride in their history to unite the people. They might portray the state as a powerful, historically important force tied to traditional values, often framed as being under threat from the external enemies (Ma, Romanov, Libman & Kostka, 2025). As well as narratives and informational markers might range and be very different in the spin dictatorship regimes as not ideology as well as institutions hold them from creating one that benefit them at certain period of time.

Additionally, Spin Dictatorships show a major shift not only in the internal governance of states, but also in their behaviour in international politics. According to the data, spin dictators are much less likely to participate in wars or military conflicts compared to fear dictators (Treisman & Guriev, 2023). Fear dictators of the past often used war as a method to distract the population, to gain legitimacy or to expand certain ideological positions and their rule was based on direct confrontation (Treisman & Guriev, 2023). In contrast, spin dictators focus on stability and on how the regime looks from the outside (Treisman & Guriev, 2023). That is why spin dictators can use nationalist language or symbolic gestures of aggression, but their main instrument is not violence, it is the creation of an illusion. And even in the case of more aggressive spin dictators, there is a strategy behind the use of force as they prefer proxies, mercenaries and hidden operations in order to avoid high costs (Treisman & Guriev, 2023).

1.5. Predicting Russia's International Behavior Through the Lens of Informational Autocracy and Spin Dictatorship

To sum up it becomes evident that modern autocracy has shifted away from traditional dictatorship features of the 20th century. Based on Guriev and Treisman's (2019, 2023) findings it is possible to indicate a clear definition of Informational Autocracy and Spin Dictatorship:

1. Informational Autocracy is a form of authoritarian rule in which autocrat or elite group maintain power primarily through the manipulation of information, while maintaining the appearance of democratic institutions;

2. Spin Dictatorship is a media-savvy subtype of informational autocracy focused on narrative construction and perception management.

Based on the definitions of informational autocracy and spin dictatorship, one can suggest that Russia's international behaviour is closely tied to the nature of its current regime, whether it is Informational Autocracy, Spin Dictatorship or any other form of rule.

However, both of these regime types tend to avoid direct military confrontation in favour of more cost-effective methods of control and legitimacy gain. Namely, Informational autocracies focus on looking competent and use quiet tactics like media control and selective pressure. Spin dictatorships go further by shaping the narratives, that make the regime seem popular and justified.

If we look at Russia through the lens of informational autocracy and spin dictatorship, it's likely to keep avoiding direct military conflict when it can. As an informational regime, it wants to appear competent and in control and as a spin dictatorship, it's even more focused on shaping how events are perceived rather than what actually happens. So instead of tanks and invasions, it's more likely to use media spin, disinformation and indirect actions like proxy forces or cyber attacks to influence outcomes while keeping its hands clean and its story strong. So, Russia's primal international policy tool would be soft power. According to Szostek (2017), unlike the Soviet Union, Russia does not try to promote its system as a universal model, but instead focuses on weakening trust in Western liberalism by presenting itself as a sovereign and stable alternative. This reflects the main idea of Spin Dictatorship framework, that legitimacy does not come from actual truth or strong ideology, but from controlling how the truth is seen by the public.

2. METHODOLOGY

This thesis adopts a qualitative case study research design because it aims to understand complex political motivations and interpret competing explanations for a single case: Russia's aggression against Ukraine with focus on annexation of Crimea in 2014 and full-scale invasion in 2022. Quantitative methods are not suitable to capture the factors in elite decision-making and domestic regime dynamics. Instead, a qualitative case study approach enables deep engagement with both empirical events and theoretical frameworks, allowing for an analysis of whether regime survival or state security and power-maximising strategy better explains Russia's behaviour.

This thesis uses two distinct theoretical frameworks: Realism, particularly Defensive and Offensive Realism and the frameworks of modern authoritarianism, including Informational Autocracy and Spin Dictatorship by Treisman and Guriev. Realism is an essential theoretical approach in international relations and it is one of the dominant interpretations of the reasons of the Ukrainian crisis. Realism claims external security concerns and the balance of power shapes IR actors' behaviour. However, Realism often overlooks internal political motivations. To challenge Realist viewpoint, the thesis uses Informational Autocracy (Guriev & Treisman, 2019) and Spin Dictatorship (Guriev & Treisman, 2022). These frameworks focus on how modern authoritarian regimes rely on information control and strategic foreign policy to maintain regime legitimacy. Applying these two distinct theoretical approaches to Russia helps to examine whether aggression was motivated by the security concerns and power-maximising strategy or by the need to consolidate internal support.

The process-tracing method is used to track the chronological development of the Ukraine crisis and Russian regime authoritarianism consolidation and link specific actions (Crimea annexation, full-scale invasion) to theoretical expectations. Data collection includes: official government statements, treaties (Minsk Agreements, Budapest Memorandum and etc.), official's speeches, policy doctrines, think tank reports and journalistic investigations with high evidentiary standards (such as BBC, Reuters, Bellingcat), quantitative references where relevant, such as public opinion polling (Levada Center) and election results. These sources allow to trace the chain of chronological events through the motivation of internal elites, linking it to the chosen theoretical basis of the thesis. One must also be careful when examining some subjective sources, such as speeches and statements of officials.

To answer the thesis main question, this study conducts a theoretical analysis to evaluate which framework, Offensive or Defensive Realism or Informational Autocracy and Spin Dictatorship, better explains Russia's aggression. By applying both lenses to key events, the analysis aims to determine which set of assumptions more accurately accounts for the motivations behind Russia's actions in 2014 and 2022.

This study is delimited to examining domestic political developments in Russia and Ukraine from 1991 to 2022, concentrating on how these dynamics influenced Russia's decision to act aggressively towards Ukraine in 2014 and 2022.

3. UKRAINIAN CRISIS

This chapter traces the evolution of Ukraine's political trajectory and external positioning from its independence in 1991 to the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. The chapter focuses on the overview of annexation of Crimea (2014), War on Donbass (2014-2022) and full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022). The purpose of this chapter is to contextualize the conflict within the broader historical and geopolitical shifts that shaped Ukraine's relationship with Russia and the West. By outlining these developments, the chapter sets the basis for further research of the domestic motives of Russia and for assessing which analytical framework, external security concerns or internal political survival, offers greater explanatory power.

The chapter is divided into two main cases of this study: the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Each case is also examined in terms of factors that preceded and accompanied it.

3.1. Crimean Crisis

This sub-chapter researches Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, focusing on the key events leading up to the occupation and its aftermath. It explores the geopolitical context of Ukraine, as a state between Europe and Russia, the Euromaidan revolution and Russia's military intervention in Crimea itself.

3.1.1 Ukraine Between Europe and Russia

Ukraine officially gained independence from the USSR on August 24, 1991, by proclaiming an act of independence in the Ukrainian Parliament (Verkhovna Rada, 1991). Despite gaining the independence, Ukraine was deeply entangled in the political, economic and cultural orbit of Russia. The early years of independence can be characterized as balancing between integrating with the West, but keeping strategic ties with Russia (Kozlovska, 2006). For instance, in the resolution on the main directions of Ukraine's foreign policy (1993) was stated that Ukraine's foreign goals are to „ ...*focus its foreign policy efforts on becoming a reliable bridge between Russia and the countries of Central-Eastern Europe*" (Translated from Ukrainian), as well as establishment of political and military partnerships, mutually beneficial economic cooperation (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 1993). Throughout the 1990s, Ukraine was also a member of the CIS, a regional organization formed by former Soviet republics.

Important agreement in the case of this thesis is Budapest memorandum. It was signed in 1994 and it stated that Ukraine agreed to relinquish its nuclear weapons in exchange for security assurances from Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom to respect its sovereignty and territorial integrity (United Nations, 1994). It is very important to note the existence of this document, because the Russian side very often uses narratives in its rhetoric about how Western countries and Ukraine do not comply with rules and agreements, but very often the Russian side itself avoids its own obligations.

Domestically, throughout the 1990s, Ukraine struggled with corruption, oligarchic control over politics and the economy and weak state institutions. These vulnerabilities made the country susceptible to manipulation by Russia, that was creating narratives and oligarchic ties in Ukraine. This vulnerability would later play an important role in how internal and external factors intertwined in Ukraine's geopolitical trajectory. The Orange Revolution in 2004–2005, triggered by massive electoral fraud and public outcry against a pro-Russian candidate, became a turning point. The protests led to a re-run of the presidential election and brought a pro-Western government and president Viktor Yushchenko (Wilson, 2014). Yushchenko's presidency created favourable conditions for preparing for a deeper level of cooperation with NATO and EU aimed at potential membership in the Alliance and the Union (Kozlovska, 2006). However, the Orange Revolution failed to bring changes, as corruption persisted and Yushchenko's weak, scandal-prone leadership quickly eroded public trust (Wilson, 2014). Russia continued interfering heavily in Ukraine through massive bribery schemes like RosUkrEnergo (Wilson, 2014)

By 2010, Viktor Yanukovych, the former opponent of the Orange Revolution, returned to power. Under his presidency, Ukraine's Western path slowed significantly and ties with Russia were reinvigorated. His government signed the Kharkiv Pact in 2010. It extended Russia's lease on the Sevastopol naval base in Crimea. Yet even during this period, large segments of Ukrainian society, particularly in the west and centre of the country, remained strongly in favour of European integration (International Republican Institute, 2013).

This early period shows the constant push and pull between Ukraine's Western aspirations and Russian influence and shows that Russia's attempts to keep leverage on Ukraine through influence. This legacy of manipulation established the foundation for later, more direct acts of aggression.

3.1.2. The Euromaidan Revolution

Yanukovych's initial pro-Russian deals, such as the Kharkiv Pact and commitment to non-bloc status, failed to satisfy Moscow, which increasingly pressured Ukraine to join the Russia-led Customs Union (Charap & Colton, 2018). Despite economic incentives and political coercion, including gas discounts and trade sanctions, Yanukovych resisted full integration with Russia, attempting instead to balance ties with both Russia and the EU (Charap & Colton, 2018). This struggle ultimately intensified the geopolitical competition over Ukraine's future orientation.

After Ukraine pushed ahead with the EU Association Agreement (AA), Russia escalated economic pressure, including trade restrictions and threats to revoke preferential trade agreements, which would significantly harm Ukraine's economy (Charap & Colton, 2018). Sergey Glazyev, advisor to the President of the Russian Federation on regional economic integration said "... *signing this agreement about association with EU, the Ukrainian government violates the treaty on strategic partnership and friendship with Russia*" (Walker, 2013).

Yanukovych sought concessions from both the EU and Russia. He attempted to use the AA negotiations to gain financial support from the EU while also leveraging Russia's offers (Charap & Colton, 2018). Despite last-minute efforts from the EU, including dropping some of the conditions, Yanukovych suspended AA preparations just before the November 2013 Vilnius summit, calling instead for trilateral talks with Russia and the EU (BBC News, 2013). This move was widely perceived as capitulation to Russian pressure and sparked massive pro-European demonstrations in Kyiv and other major cities (Grytsenko, 2013).

President Viktor Yanukovych's sudden decision to suspend the signing of AA, triggered the Euromaidan Revolution, also known as the Revolution of Dignity, which was a critical turning point in Ukraine's modern history and, perhaps, a key moment in the broader Ukraine crisis. At some point these pro-EU demonstrations evolved into a broader anti-government movement after police violently dispersed students. Both Russia and Western powers intensified their involvement. Russia backed Yanukovych's crackdown against the protestors, while the EU and U.S. engaged diplomatically with opposition leaders (Charap & Colton, 2018). In February, Russian Presidential Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov said the Kremlin is treating what is happening in Ukraine as an attempted coup d'état (TASS, 2014). Also, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov claimed: "*Many western countries, who have tried to interfere in events and played games with insurgents, are also*

to blame. The west has solidly, repeatedly and shamefully avoided criticism of the actions of extremists, including Nazi elements" (Walker, 2014). U.S. officials, including U.S. Senators John McCain and Chris Murphy, visited Ukraine to show solidarity with the opposition during the Euromaidan protests (Voice of America, 2013). Leaked evidence of Western coordination further deepened Russian suspicions of a regime change plot (Charap & Colton, 2018).

The turning point happened in mid-February, when the protests turned violent, resulting in the deaths of dozens of people (Charap & Colton, 2018). Yanukovych and opposition leaders reached a deal, called 21 February Agreement, mediated by EU foreign ministers and a Russian representative. The agreement promised ending the crisis by restoring the 2004 Constitution, initiating reforms, holding early presidential elections, investigating violence and committing all sides to refrain from further force (The Guardian, 2014). However, the deal collapsed almost immediately due to Yanukovych's loss of authority and fleeing the capital.

Ukrainian parliament declared Yanukovych removed in an extra-constitutional vote and appointed Turchynov as interim president (BBC News, 2014). The West, including United States and European Union countries, recognized and supported the new government, disregarding the 21 February agreement (Charap & Colton, 2018). In turn, Russia viewed the developments as a Western-backed coup, refused to recognize the new authorities and insisted on implementing the 21 February agreement (Charap & Colton, 2018).

Ukraine's move towards closer ties with the European Union marked a clear step away from Russia's sphere of influence, that was unacceptable to Russia. Russia's backlash, including its refusal to recognize the new government, was a turning point that set the stage for even more aggressive and desperate actions.

3.1.3. Annexation of Crimea

The new Ukrainian government appeared to be heavily westward: 60% of ministers came from the four westernmost oblasts (Charap & Colton, 2018). On February 23, 2014, the Ukrainian parliament voted to repeal the 2012 language law, which was a legislature that allowed regional languages to be used in official settings in areas where an ethnic minority made up at least 10% of the population (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2014). This legislature had an impact on Russian language influence in the eastern and southern parts of the country, where was a high percentage

of Russian-speaking population. Acting President Oleksandr Turchynov did not sign the repeal into law, so the 2012 law technically remained in force until in 2019, a new law was passed mandating Ukrainian as the sole state language (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2019). However, Russia reacted to this anyway. Later on Russian president Vladimir Putin told a joint session of parliament: "*The so-called Ukrainian authorities introduced a scandalous law on the revision of the language policy, which directly violated the rights of the national minorities*" (Al Jazeera, 2014).

Putin reportedly made the decision to begin "*returning Crimea to Russia*" on February 23, just one day after Yanukovych fled the country (Treisman, 2016). Russian envoy Belaventsev, unfamiliar with Crimea's political landscape upon his arrival on February 22, mistakenly appointed the unpopular Leonid Grach as prime minister, but revoked the decision within a day and replaced him with Sergei Aksyonov, a local figure with underworld ties (Treisman, 2016). Around 25 February 2014, Russian troops without insignia were deployed in Crimea Russian and began seizing military and government facilities (Charap & Colton, 2018). Russia justified its intervention by claiming the need to protect Russian-speaking populations and "*compatriots*" from alleged threats posed by the new Ukrainian government, as well as Crimea was historically part of Russia and wrongly taken away (Treisman, 2016). However, the speed and coordination of the operation strongly suggested premeditated action, aimed at exploiting the power vacuum in Kyiv and preventing Ukraine's deeper alignment with the West. On March 16, 2014, already after the occupation of Crimea by Russian troops a controversial referendum was held in Crimea, reasoning it by „*Nationalist groups have made a number of attempts to penetrate Crimea in order to aggravate the situation, escalate tensions and illegally seize power*" (Verkhovna Rada of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, 2014). According to the final protocol of the Commission of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, 96.77% of voters voted for unification with Russia (State Council of the Republic of Crimea, n.d.). The referendum date and wording were repeatedly changed, culminating in a vote for full unification with Russia (Treisman, 2016). Shortly after, on March 18, 2014, President Putin signed a treaty formally incorporating Crimea into the Russian Federation (Kremlin.ru, 2014).

Putin held a speech in which he proposed main reasons for annexation of Crimea, claiming that the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 was unfair and illegal and that it was "*originally Russian*

territory"; the new government in Ukraine after the Maidan is illegitimate and that Crimea is under threat of repression and violence (Putin, 2014). Especially notable, these quotes: "*On the contrary, we have been deceived time and again, decisions have been made behind our backs, we have been presented with a fait accompli. This was the case with NATO expansion to the east, with the deployment of military infrastructure on our borders*"; he further stated: "*Let me also remind you that statements have already been made in Kyiv about Ukraine's imminent entry into NATO. What would this prospect mean for Crimea and Sevastopol? That a NATO fleet would appear in the city of Russian military glory, that a threat would arise for the entire south of Russia - not some ephemeral, but a completely concrete one*" (Putin, 2014). These quotes highlights perceived existential threat posed by NATO expansion and a deep sense of betrayal by the West, which it claims left it no choice but to act decisively to protect its strategic and national security interests. However, the explanation of the annexation as a response to the threat of NATO expansion is highly questionable. In 2010, Ukraine passed a law barring participation in military blocs (Kyiv Post, 2010).

The US and EU countries refused to recognize the legitimacy of the referendum and condemned it. The President Obama administration perceived Russia's annexation of Crimea as an illegal act that violates international norms and warned that continued escalation will lead to deeper isolation and economic consequences for Russia (Obama, 2014). The High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the Commission denounced Russia's military intervention in Ukraine as a violation of international law and calls for de-escalation through peaceful dialogue (Ashton, 2014). The UN resolution reaffirms international support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, declares the 2014 Crimean referendum invalid and urges all states to reject any change in Crimea's status while promoting peaceful dialogue and international mediation (United Nations General Assembly, 2014). NATO agreed on a package of military measures to reinforce its collective defense, including more air patrols over the Baltic states, increased naval presence in the Baltic and Mediterranean and additional troops in Eastern Europe (Borger & Lewis, 2014).

The annexation of Crimea marked a turning point in Russia's use of direct military force to reverse Ukraine's westward shift. It is relevant to note here how quickly and decisively Russia moved to

exploit the post-Maidan power vacuum, using a mix of military action and emotional historical appeals.

3.1.4. Self-defence, Imperialism or Improvisation?

According to Treisman (2016) there might be three main interpretations of annexation of Crimea: defence, imperialism and improvisation. The first interpretation is Putin acting as a defender, which also corresponds with Richard Sakwa's Defensive Realist interpretation. From this perspective, the annexation of Crimea could be perceived as a response to potential encirclement by NATO and the EU, particularly after the Euromaidan Revolution and Ukraine's renewed push toward EU integration (Treisman, 2016). For Russia, the loss of influence in Ukraine and the potential approach of NATO to its borders could be perceived as an act of threat to their regional security. Seizing Crimea served as a way to preserve the status quo and secure Russia's military foothold in the Black Sea. Russia's references to NATO's eastern expansion and Western support for regime change in Kyiv further illustrate this security dilemma. The perception of Western betrayal of assurances (such as those implied in the Budapest Memorandum) and the collapse of the 21 February Agreement following Yanukovych's ousting reinforced Russia's belief that it must act unilaterally to ensure its strategic depth and sovereignty.

The second interpretation is Putting being an imperialist, which corresponds with John Mearsheimer's and Stephen Walt's Offensive Realism perception. The swift deployment of troops in Crimea, the referendum and the formal incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation reflect not just a defensive action but as power-maximizing strategy. Russia, seeing that Ukraine is inevitably leaving its sphere of control, exploited the power vacuum in Kyiv to extend its influence and revise the regional order to its advantage. In this case, the annexation signalled Russia's willingness protect its interests against the West norms and assert its dominance in the post-Soviet space (Treisman, 2016). Furthermore, Moscow's justification, claiming the need to protect Russian-speaking populations and "*compatriots*" from the alleged threat of repression matches with an Offensive Realist logic of using ethnic ties as a pretext to legitimize territorial expansion and consolidate regional hegemony.

Studying the annexation of Crimea, as an outside observer, not delving into the internal politics of Russia and based solely on the facts of what happened and how Russian representatives argue it, one can conclude that both Defensive and Offensive Realism can actually explain this geopolitical

event. Realism also matches with a long-term Russian effort to retain influence over Ukraine. The gradual shift in Ukraine's orientation, from the Orange Revolution to Euromaidan, signalled a steady move out of Russia's orbit and toward Western integration. For Moscow, this trajectory might represent not just a political loss, but a strategic threat.

However, there is also a third interpretation, claiming that Putin being an improvisor in Crimea annexation. The whole operation of annexation of Crimea is seen as an extreme response to a manageable threat of NATO enlargement. Despite imperialist rhetoric and NATO-related concerns, the operation itself lacked long-term strategic planning. As well as, the annexation of Crimea, intended to prevent Russia's military encirclement, has led to the opposite effect. NATO has increased its military presence in Eastern Europe as a reaction to Russia's behaviour. These points suggests that the annexation of Crimea was an improvising act, rather that pre-planned operation, making both Defensive and Offensive Realism perception less convincing.

3.2. Ukrainian War

This sub-chapter researches the chain of events leading to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It analyzes the protracted conflict in the Donbas region, the diplomatic efforts surrounding the Minsk agreements and the broader political and military developments that signaled a gradual shift toward the invasion.

3.2.1. The Donbas Conflict and the Minsk Process

Following the annexation of Crimea, the focus of the conflict shifted to eastern Ukraine, where pro-Russian unrest escalated into a violent and prolonged armed conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Following Yanukovych's escape in February 2014, tensions in Donetsk escalated as pro-Russian activists staged symbolic occupations of government buildings, raising Russian flags in what they framed as grassroots ideological resistance to the Western-backed Kyiv government (Chebil, 2014).

First of all, it is important to understand the specifics of the Eastern part of Ukraine, including Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Many in the East had deep grievances with Kyiv: over-centralization, economic imbalance and controversial cultural and language policies (Sakwa, 2015). As well as, Russia had a high percentage of support in these regions, that could be distinguished in a clear regional divide in political preferences. For instance, even though

nationwide 48.95% of voters supported the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovych in the 2010 second round of presidential election, the eastern regions of Ukraine showed overwhelming support for him (Central Election Commission of Ukraine, 2010). For example, in Donetsk Oblast, Yanukovych received approximately 90% of the vote, in Luhansk Oblast around 88% (Central Election Commission of Ukraine, 2010). Moreover, in Donetsk, 60% of residents feared the "*Banderovtsy*" (Ukrainian nationalists), 50% feared the new Kyiv authorities and a majority believed that the Maidan uprising was a Western-backed coup (Sakwa, 2015, p. 149). These specific features offer a suitable basis for political instability as well as interference from foreign powers.

Between March and April 2014 protests in Donetsk and Lugansk escalated into building occupations and the declaration of People's Republics: Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) (Case & Anders, 2015). The turning point was marked by the occupation of Slavyansk on 12 April by the arrived trained armed forces, led by Igor Girkin, a former Russian military officer involved in Crimea (Sakwa, 2015). The Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics declared independence, took over TV stations to restore Russian broadcasts and called for referendums and Russian intervention under the banner of forming a new "*Novorossiya Republic*" (Sakwa, 2015). In return, the Ukrainian government responded by launching the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) aimed at reclaiming control over the separatist-held territories. What began as localized unrest rapidly transformed into a low-intensity war involving organized separatist forces, widely believed to be receiving weapons from Russia (Sakwa, 2015). Yet just like with the case of annexation of Crimea, Russia consistently denied direct military involvement. Russian President Putin denied that during a phone call with U.S. President Obama (Deutsche Welle, 2014). However, the evidence from captured soldiers to satellite imagery suggested otherwise. Bellingcat documented at least 149 confirmed Russian artillery attacks on Ukrainian positions in summer 2014, with 137 launched from inside Russian territory and hundreds of impact sites showing cross-border fire (Case & Anders, 2015). This, along with evidence of Russian military equipment and active servicemen in the conflict, provides clear proof of direct Russian involvement in Eastern Ukraine.

In response to the intensifying conflict, diplomatic efforts were initiated to reach a ceasefire and political settlement. The first significant attempt was the Minsk Protocol, signed on September 5,

2014, under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and with mediation by Russia and the EU (OSCE, 2014). The agreement called for a ceasefire, withdrawal of illegal armed groups and decentralization reforms in Ukraine (OSCE, 2014). However, fighting continued and the protocol failed to stop hostilities.

On February 12 2015 the Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements was sighed, commonly referred to as Minsk II. Brokered by the leaders of Ukraine, Russia, France and Germany (the Normandy Format), Minsk II outlined a more detailed 13-point plan including a ceasefire, withdrawal of heavy weapons, release of hostages and constitutional reforms granting special status to the Donbas (OSCE, 2015). However, even though there were early reductions in fighting, implementation stalled, largely due to disagreements over the sequencing of political and security measures. Ukraine insisted on withdrawal of foreign fighters and restoration of border control, while Russia and the separatists demanded political concessions upfront (International Crisis Group, 2016). Putin claimed that Western nations, particularly those in the Normandy format, fail to specify Russia's obligations under the Minsk agreements, while also asserting that the Ukrainian government initiated the use of military force in Donbas (TASS, 2021). As a result, the Minsk agreements remained largely unfulfilled and the conflict became frozen but unresolved, continuing in low-intensity form for years.

Russia's ongoing covert military involvement in Eastern Ukraine can be viewed as a tactic to keep the country unstable and block its full integration with the West.

3.2.2. Strategic Stalemate and the Road to Invasion (2015–2022)

After the signing of the Minsk II Agreement in February 2015, the conflict in eastern Ukraine entered a phase of strategic stalemate. Key Minsk provisions (troop withdrawal, constitutional reform, prisoner exchanges and supervised elections) remained unfulfilled, with both sides blaming each other (International Crisis Group, 2016). The Donbas region remained divided between areas controlled by the Ukrainian government and territories held by Russian-backed separatists. Despite diplomatic initiatives, including the Normandy Format negotiations (involving Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France) no substantial political resolution was achieved.

Around 10,000 deaths, a 500-km military front and growing signs of Russia preparing for a frozen conflict (International Crisis Group, 2016). By 2020, the conflict had resulted in around 13,000

deaths, 30,000 wounded and 1.4 million displaced persons, prompting a UN humanitarian appeal (European Parliament, 2020).

During this period, Ukraine pursued deeper integration with Western institutions. In 2017 the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement was signed and enforced, along with the introduction of visa-free travel to the EU for Ukrainian citizens (European Commission, 2017). This marked a clear step in Ukraine's gradual distancing from Russia's sphere of influence. Additionally, Ukraine introduced constitutional changes in 2019, officially declaring NATO and EU membership as key strategic objectives of the state (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 2019).

International Crisis Group (2016) in its report claimed that despite claiming to support the Minsk agreement and Ukraine's sovereignty, Russia actively reinforces separatist regions to destabilize Ukraine's pro-Western trajectory and keep it within its sphere of influence. At the same time, Russia continued to exert political, economic and military pressure on Ukraine. Russia provided sustained support to the separatist entities in Donetsk and Luhansk, funding 70-90% of the separatist entities' budgets and provides vital resources (International Crisis Group, 2016).

Also, in 2019 President Vladimir Putin signed a decree making it easier for residents of LPR and DPR to obtain Russian passports, claiming that people in these areas were deprived of basic rights, justifying Russia's actions as a form of protection (BBC News, 2019). Passportisation deepens divisions in Ukraine, making it harder for reintegrated areas to hold local elections and function politically due to dual citizenship disqualifications (Burkhardt, 2020). By 2020 Russia has issued almost 200,000 Russian passports to Ukrainians from LPR and DPR (Burkhardt, 2020).

Russia continued framing Ukraine's moves towards NATO as an existential threat to its own national security. In 2021, Putin warned that NATO's military expansion in Ukraine, particularly the deployment of missile systems, could shorten response times to Moscow, forcing Russia to develop similar weapons in response (Soldatkin & Osborn, 2021).

In late 2021, intelligence reports and satellite imagery indicated a significant build-up of Russian military forces along Ukraine's borders. Observers noted that Russia had the necessary components for a large-scale invasion, including personnel to staff equipment, artillery, strategic-level systems, fighter aircraft, helicopters and command and control capabilities (Bowen, 2022).

Diplomatic efforts to avert conflict, including negotiations between US, EU and Russian officials, ultimately failed (International Crisis Group, 2022).

In December 2021, Russia proposed a draft security agreement to NATO demanding legally binding guarantees to limit NATO's expansion, including a ban on Ukraine's accession (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021). The proposal called for NATO to roll back military deployments to pre-1997 positions and to cease military activity in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021). It also sought bans on the deployment of intermediate-range missiles near each other's borders and restrictions on large-scale military exercises (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2021). Russia argued that no country should strengthen its security at the expense of others. NATO rejected Russia's demands, reaffirmed Ukraine's right to choose its alliances, warned of serious outcomes for further aggression and expressed readiness for reciprocal dialogue based on established security principles (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2021).

Between 2015 and 2021, Russia maintained a strategy of controlled instability in eastern Ukraine, using continuous assistance for separatist regions, passportisation and political pressure to block Ukraine's westward path without escalating to full-scale war yet. This phase demonstrates how Russia's pressure campaign evolved from hybrid war into an openly confrontational posture, as the Kremlin's ability to control Ukraine through indirect means increasingly failed.

3.2.3. Full scale Invasion of Ukraine

On February 21, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin officially recognized the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) and Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) as independent states, signing corresponding decrees and friendship treaties with their leaders (BBC News, 2022). In his speech President Putin also threatened that whole continuous bloodshed will be entire responsibility of 'Ukrainian regime' (BBC News, 2022). This move was a direct a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and the Minsk agreements.

On the early morning of February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a "*special military operation*" in his almost one hour speech. In his speech Putin claimed the main goal of the operation was to "*demilitarise and denazify Ukraine*" alleging that Ukraine was committing genocide of Russian-speaking people in the Donbas region (Putin, 2022). He also

mentioned NATO expansion and Western military support to Ukraine posed an existential threat to Russia, claiming the U.S. and allies had crossed Russia's red lines (Putin, 2022). Putin also justified the invasion of Ukraine by presenting a long list of historical grievances. He claimed that Ukraine was an artificial creation of the Soviet Union and argued that it had been turned into an anti-Russian outpost by the West (Putin, 2022). Overall, framing the conflict as defensive local special operation, he positioned Russia as correcting past injustices and protecting Russian-speaking populations. In reality, this signified the start of a full-scale invasion involving a massive military offensive from multiple directions from Russian territory, Crimea and Belarus (Al Jazeera, 2022). Russia began its invasion of Ukraine with long-range strikes targeting military infrastructure, including air defense systems and cities like Kyiv, Odessa, Kharkiv, Dnipro, Mariupol, Lviv and Lutsk (International Crisis Group, 2022). The scale and coordination of the initial attacks made it clear that Russia's objectives went far beyond supporting separatist regions in the Donbas and were sought to overthrow the Ukrainian government and replace it with a more compliant regime.

There are several strong indications that Russia indeed initially planned the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 as a fast, limited operation aimed at quickly toppling the Ukrainian government. First of all, Russia sent in relatively light and mobile forces, such as airborne units and special forces, with limited logistical support (Johnson, 2022). Many Russian units advanced deep into Ukraine without securing supply routes (Johnson, 2022). For instance, Russian forces attempted a direct assault on the capital within the first days, including the failed helicopter landing at Hostomel Airport (Johnson, 2022). Just four days into the invasion, in February 28, 2022, RIA Novosti accidentally published what appeared to be Putin's planned victory statement, that proclaimed Russia restoring its historical unity by reuniting Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians, praising Putin and declaring the end of Western global dominance (Akopov, 2022). It revealed that he expected Kyiv to fall within two days (Johnson, 2022).

However, Ukraine's resistance, bolstered by strong societal mobilization and Western support forced Russia into a prolonged conflict (Johnson, 2022). The Battle of Kyiv, which saw Russian forces fail to capture the capital, symbolized the failure of Moscow's early war plans, making Russian forces to withdraw from the capital in next months of the war.

The invasion sparked widespread condemnation of the Russian aggression around the world. The US, the EU, the United Kingdom, Canada, Japan and many others responded with economic sanctions against Russia, hitting its banks, major industries and influential figures close to President Putin. At the same time, Ukraine gained an unprecedented level of backing from its Western partners, which has greatly changed the course and dynamics of the conflict.

Russian invasion marked a dramatic escalation in its efforts to prevent Ukraine's westward shift. Justified through a mix of false claims and historical revisionism Russia aimed to rapidly reinstall control over Ukraine's political direction. However, this strategy fundamentally misjudged both Ukrainian resilience and the scale of Western unity and support. What was intended as a quick operation to restore dominance turned into a prolonged, high-cost war.

3.2.4. Conclusion: Realist Perspective

Considering the findings and chronology mentioned in the chapter, and without delving into deeper inner Russian domestic motives, it can be said that Russia's actions in the Donbas region may be viewed through the lens of both Defensive and Offensive Realism.

From the perspective of Defensive Realism, Russia's actions in the Donbas region could be explained as a response to increasing threats coming from the West. After the Euromaidan Revolution, Ukraine started to move clearly in the direction of joining NATO and the European Union. The potential enlargement of NATO near borders of Russia might have been perceived as a direct threat to national security. The growing presence of NATO near its borders was perceived by the Russian regime as a strategic encirclement. It corresponds with Richard Sakwa's (2015) point of view, who argue that Russia's response was defensive in nature, aimed at protecting a vital buffer zone and reacting to perceived Western overreach. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the following support for separatist movements in Donetsk and Luhansk could be seen in this logic as steps to protect its national security. These actions might be aimed at preventing Ukraine from becoming pro-Western.

In contrast, Offensive Realists like John Mearsheimer (2014, 2022) claim that NATO's eastward expansion provoked a predictable reaction from Russia, that opposed Western plans to influence Ukraine. By seizing Crimea and supporting separatists in Donbas, Russia sought not only to protect its own security but to project power and influence in a region historically under its control. The

justification of protecting Russian-speaking populations and the ambition of "*Novorossiya*" reflect the Offensive Realist logic of using ethnic and cultural ties to legitimize territorial expansion and regional hegemony. The 2022 invasion, which escalated the conflict into a full-scale war, can be seen as an extension of this strategy, with the Kremlin aiming to reshape the regional order by overthrowing the Ukrainian government and asserting control over all of Ukraine.

4. RUSSIA'S DOMESTIC POLITICAL CONTEXT

This chapter explores the internal political developments in Russia during Vladimir Putin's four presidential terms, focusing on how domestic dynamics shaped Russian foreign policy. From 2000 to 2022, Russia evolved from a Oligarchic Pluralistic system into what an Informational Autocracy or Spin Dictatorship, where the regime relies on narrative control, selective repression and the appearance of legitimacy to maintain power. Understanding the context of Russian domestic evolution is crucial for evaluating whether Russia's aggression against Ukraine was driven primarily by external security fears or by the internal needs of a regime focused on maintaining control and legitimacy.

4.1. The Turbulent 1990s: Weak State and Oligarchic Pluralism

In 1991, the USSR ceased to exist and independent countries emerged in its place, including the Russian Federation. The first president of Russian Federation became Boris Yeltsin, who was Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian SFSR before. President Yeltsin's government launched a rapid transition from a planned economy to a market-based system, known as "*shock therapy*" which resulted in hyperinflation and mass privatization (McFaul, 1995). While the goal was a transition to a market economy, the privatization process was inefficient and corrupted, that influenced public's perception of transition to democracy. The "*loans-for-shares*" scandal also eroded trust in the reform agenda, as it allowed a few wealthy individuals to get control over state assets in exchange for supporting Yeltsin's re-election (McFaul, 1995). This created a powerful class of oligarchs and undermined the legitimacy of democracy in the eyes of many Russians, as they saw the new system as corrupted and unequal (McFaul, 1995).

The political system in the 1990s was formally democratic but dysfunctional. While elections were held, they were often plagued by elite manipulation. Former elites maintained power by manipulating weak and undemocratic institutions for personal gain (White, 2003). In 1993 a so-called constitutional crisis erupted over a power struggle concerning the direction of Russia's political system, with Yeltsin seeking to push through reforms and consolidate presidential power, while the parliament, made up of many conservative and communist members, opposed his agenda (Cox, 2013). The crisis culminated in the use of military force to suppress the parliament opposition and in the aftermath, a new constitution was adopted that significantly strengthened

presidential powers, creating a superpresidential system (Cox, 2013). This move signified a turning point in Russia's political development, as it led to the erosion of the country's fledgling democratic institutions, consolidating power in the hands of the president and undermining the checks and balances necessary for a functioning democracy.

A defining feature of the 1990s was the rise of the oligarchs. A small number of individuals acquired vast economic and political influence through the highly opaque privatization process, particularly the "*loans-for-shares*" scheme in the mid-1990s (McFaul, 2021). Elites in post-Soviet Russia exploited weak formal institutions for personal enrichment and criminal activity during privatization, turning ministries into private enterprises and sustaining corruption through a complicit or ineffective government (White, 2003). These figures not only controlled key sectors of the economy, such as oil, gas and media, but also played outsized roles in shaping public perception and political outcomes. A pure example is Yeltsin's re-election in 1996. With approval ratings decline, Yeltsin was re-elected largely thanks to the financial and media support of oligarchs like Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky (McFaul, 1996). Overall Russia's political system functions as an oligarchy, where elites maintain power through a self-serving balance that prevents strong institutions and undermines genuine democratization (White, 2003).

McFaul (2021) calls Yeltsin's failure to meaningfully reform the powerful repressive institutions, like KGB later enabled former KGB officer Vladimir Putin to consolidate authoritarian rule. In August 1999, Vladimir Putin, then a relatively unknown former KGB officer and head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), was appointed Prime Minister (McFaul, 2021). Putin had never been elected to public office prior to becoming president. He had spent much of his early career in the KGB, later entering politics through connections in Yeltsin's administration (Cox, 2013). Yeltsin's inner circle of oligarchs chose Putin believing he would maintain the status quo and protect oligarchic interests (McFaul, 2021).

4.2. Putin's First Era (2000–2012): From Pluralistic Oligarchy to Informational Autocracy
On December 31, 1999, Yeltsin unexpectedly resigned, naming Putin acting president. This move ensured that Putin would have the advantage of incumbency in the upcoming 2000 presidential election (Cox, 2013). The period from 2000 to 2012 marked a profound reconfiguration of Russia's domestic political system. Under Vladimir Putin's first two terms, Russia transitioned from the fragmented pluralistic oligarchy of the Yeltsin era to a centralized regime characterized by

informational control and "*sovereign democracy*". Putin benefited from a strong presidential constitution and unreformed security services, both of which helped him consolidate power (McFaul, 2021)

4.2.1. The First Term

Putin entered the presidency in 2000 with a promise to restore order and stability after the tumultuous 1990s, advocating for a "*dictatorship of law*" to rebuild Russia's state capacity and address the public's demand for order following the chaos of the Yeltsin era (Stoner, 2023).

Upon becoming president in 2000, Putin moved quickly to neutralize the political institutions and power of the oligarchs who gain a significant influence under Yeltsin's presidency. Firstly, Putin took over national television networks. Putin created the Information Security Doctrine, which restricted freedom of information and used the judiciary to target independent media (Cox, 2013). Powerful oligarchs like Berezovsky, who controlled country's largest television network, ORT (later renamed to Channel One) and Gusinsky, who owned television company NTV, lost their media empires to the new power in Kremlin and fled (McFaul, 2021). Putin didn't need to control every media outlet. Instead, he focuses on the three national television networks: ORT (later renamed to Channel One), NTV and Rossiya24 (opened in 2006), which provided the majority of Russians with news (Gehlbach, 2010). Control was centralized in the state, Gazprom-Media and companies owned by Putin's inner circle (La Lova, 2025). The Presidential Administration oversees news agenda-setting by issuing talking points, assigning curators to guide networks and distributing instruction memos that dictate what topics to cover and how to present them (La Lova, 2025). However, independent media critical of Putin were silenced, with some outlets shut down under the pretence of financial failure (Cox, 2013). Authorities wielded defamation lawsuits, tax inspections and advertising pressure to silence dissenting media voices (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2002).

In 2001, Russian journalists faced repression:

1. On February 6, Rashid Khatuyev and Vladimir Panov of Vozrozhdeniye Respubliki were beaten and their office wrecked after publishing articles critical of the Ingushetian president;

2. On February 20, Novaya Gazeta's Anna Politkovskaya was detained and threatened by Russian forces in Chechnya;

3. In April, the government seized control of independent NTV and its affiliates Itogi and Segodnya, ousting staff and closing operations;

4. On May 18, an RTR news crew was arrested in Irkutsk while investigating corruption;

5. On May 22, journalist Olga Kitova was beaten by police, imprisoned, denied medical care, charged and ultimately banned from office for reporting on police abuses;

6. On June 7, Vladivostok's mayor threatened NTV journalists during an investigation, while police in Kemerovo twice seized the opposition newspaper Dalyokaya Okraina for exposing a candidate's criminal links;

7. On July 26, new military rules in Chechnya forced journalists to be escorted by Interior Ministry agents, restricting press freedom; on September 18, Novy Reft editor Eduard Markevich was murdered after years of threats for criticizing officials;

8. On December 25, military journalist Grigory Pasko was sentenced to four years in prison for intending to share environmental data with foreign media (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2002).

Putin's strategy was to take control of independent media and use them to shape news stories in favor of his government's narrative (Gehlbach, 2010). To keep audiences watching, channels like Rossiya and Channel One timed their main evening news broadcasts for prime time, often airing them right after hit entertainment shows like „*Fabrika Zvyezd*" (Russia's version of American Idol) (Gehlbach, 2010). Overall, the state control over national television became the regime's key tool for shaping public opinion.

Also, Putin's regime started dismantling politically autonomic oligarchs. Putin had Mikhail Khodorkovsky arrested after he began funding opposition parties, delivering a strong signal to other oligarchs about the limits of political dissent (McFaul, 2021).

Public support for Putin remained high throughout the 2000s, aided by rapid economic growth. However, growth in the 2000s was driven by favourable global energy prices, not by new domestic reforms (McFaul, 2021). The Russian economy grew rapidly, partly due to global oil prices and this economic success bolstered his image as a competent leader (Stoner, 2023).

The Putin government maintained electoral institutions but undermined their competitiveness. The term "*sovereign democracy*" captured this idea: Russia would pursue its own democratic model,

free from Western influence, where the form of democracy was preserved, but the substance hollowed out. In 2004, Putin pushed through amendments that weakened democracy by requiring parties to have at least 50,000 members and representation in half of Russia's regions to be registered, effectively ensuring United Russia's dominance in local elections and marginalizing opposition parties (Cox, 2013). In the 2004 Russian presidential election, Vladimir Putin won 71.31% of the vote (Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation, 2004).

4.2.2. The Second Term

Vladimir Putin became President of Russia for the second time on May 7, 2004, marking the start of his second consecutive term. This term continued the process of intensified centralization of power, weakening of democratic institutions and growing use of media control and selective repression to sustain regime legitimacy. It was during this time that Russia moved decisively away from liberal-democratic norms, while still preserving the formal façade of elections, parties and civil society.

Even with the rise of internet access, television still stays the main source of news in Russia, largely because of government-supported access programs, low levels of English proficiency, and ongoing suppression of independent media (La Lova, 2025). Channel One, a state-owned network central to the Kremlin's messaging, remained widely watched in 2019, with nearly 50% of Russians regularly tuning in (La Lova, 2025). During the first and second term of presidency Putin has consistently been portrayed as a competent leader but avoided excessive personalization, focusing on subtle propaganda rather than building a personality cult. From 2000–2012 (when oil prices were high), Putin portrayed himself as a competent manager benefiting from economic prosperity (La Lova, 2025). The state increasingly used managed pluralism, allowing controlled opposition voices to exist, but in a tightly scripted and surveilled environment (Balzer, 2003).

Under Putin, the regime built a myth of authoritarian competence, that was supported by economic growth and rising living standards of 2000s, which helped maintain public support (Stoner, 2023). However, Russian media still blends facts with fiction to keep a sense of credibility, giving just enough real information to make people second-guess what's actually true, that was especially seen during the coverage of the 2008 war in Georgia (Gehlbach, 2010). Television executives, on the other hand keep adapt their content to popular tastes, blending entertainment with news to retain viewership, as seen with programs like "*Fabrika Zvyezd*" and infotainment segments on

NTV (Gehlbach, 2010). Guriev and Treisman's (2020) theory of Informational Autocracy is especially relevant in describing this period. Rather than relying on overt mass repression, Putin's regime emphasized control over information to manage public opinion and maintain legitimacy.

Putin abolished direct elections of regional governors, shifting appointment power to the Kremlin, a move that effectively eliminated an important layer of democratic accountability (Balzer, 2003). The concept of the power vertical became central to Putin's governance: consolidating executive control over all branches of government and eliminating potential centres of opposition. The NGO Law of 2006 introduced burdensome reporting requirements and established a foundation for later designations like "*foreign agents*". The regime aspires to managed pluralism but is not fully omnipotent or always effective; its success varies across regions and issues (Balzer, 2003).

Exactly during this term, the first signs of anti-Western rhetoric began to emerge in Putin's discourse. In his 2007 speech at the Munich Security Conference, Putin openly accused the West of destabilizing global security and voiced strong concerns over NATO's continued expansion to the East (Putin, 2007). Russia's descent into autocracy was also shaped by global factors, such as the 2008 economic crisis, U.S. military actions and the global rise of authoritarianism post-2006 (Stoner, 2023). The change echoes in Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 2008. The concept highlights that Russia seeks constructive dialogue and partnership based on mutual respect and equality, however, it remains cautious about Western policies that it perceives as attempts to contain its influence, particularly through selective interpretations of history and political pressure (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016).

However, the economic boom that had fuelled Putin's popularity in the 2000s began to lose momentum in the years leading up to 2022. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the wave of international sanctions that followed, Russia's annual growth rate dropped to just 2.1% (Stoner, 2023). The stagnated economy made it increasingly difficult for the regime to depend on economic prosperity alone to keep public support.

4.2.3. Medvedev's era

In 2008, Vladimir Putin could not run for president due to Russia's constitutional limit of two consecutive terms. Putin stepped down as president in 2008, installed Medvedev as a placeholder and became prime minister, keeping control behind the scenes (McFaul, 2021). Dmitriy Medvedev

received proportionally unfairly large amount of airtime. Russian national television networks during 2008 elections, compared to opponents (Gehlbach, 2010). Also, the regime used stop lists to control who gets airtime, ensuring politically neutral media field for the regime during the elections (Gehlbach, 2010). Dmitry Medvedev's presidency is often portrayed as a period of tentative modernization efforts and rhetorical liberalization within the rigid framework of authoritarian continuity. Some political moderation and reform occurred under Medvedev, but no significant democratic improvements (McFaul, 2021). During Medvedev's presidency, news coverage of Putin was less intense, possibly due to the need to share media space. This may suggest that an autocrat can relinquish some media attention to adhere to institutional constraint (La Lova, 2025).

The 2011–2012 widespread protests erupted over election fraud, evolving into the biggest anti-Putin demonstrations since the USSR's collapse, with demands like "*Russia without Putin*" (McFaul, 2021). These demonstrations, which were especially strong in large cities, activated politically enlightened Russians who were dissatisfied with economic stagnation and political manipulation. The 2011–12 protests were fueled not just by corruption and fraud, but by a rising creative class, an educated, urban and economically secure citizens who desired political freedom (McFaul, 2021). Rather than respond with concessions, the Kremlin reacted with a systematic crackdown.

4.2.4. Conclusion: Two First Terms of Putin's Presidency

The collapse of the USSR left behind a new Russian state with weak state institutions and a declining economy. The new so-called democratic government attempted to reform the country through rapid market liberalization. However, it resulted in hyperinflation, corruption and rise of oligarchs, which discredited democracy as an ideology in the eyes of Russians. The Russia's political system transformed from the chaotic post-Soviet 1990s to the increasingly centralized system of Informational Autocracy, where public opinion was managed through media.

Putin's two first terms (2000–2012) marked the consolidation of power through the centralization of control over the media and political institutions, which are features of an Informational Autocracy. Rather than overt repression or elimination of all opposition, Putin's regime focused on managing and manipulating information flows to maintain public legitimacy and suppress

dissent. This was achieved by, seizing control of national television networks, silencing independent media and politically autonomous oligarchs and centralizing executive power.

Unlike classical autocracies reliant on brute force alone, Russia's Informational Autocracy deftly combines media control, legal mechanisms and selective repression to sustain regime stability. The public perception of stability and economic growth, largely driven by high oil prices, reinforced Putin's legitimacy.

Overall, it can be concluded that the developed media-informational sector controlled by oligarchs, weak state institutions in the Russian Federation, as well as the change in the constitution in favor of super-presidential powers have opened up opportunities for the emergence of an Information Autocracy. Putin's first two terms were characterized by a a sophisticated control over information and political institutions that preserves a facade of democracy while ensuring centralized presidential authority.

4.3. Putin's Second Era (2012–2022): From Informational Autocracy to Spin Dictatorship

Putin entered his third presidential term amid a stagnating economy and growing public awareness of domestic challenges. This period also saw rising political discontent, exemplified by the Bolotnaya Square protests triggered in part by Putin's controversial "*castling*" maneuver in 2012 elections, which involved swapping roles with then-President Medvedev to return to the presidency.

Figure 1. Putin's approval and disapproval rating 2000-2017
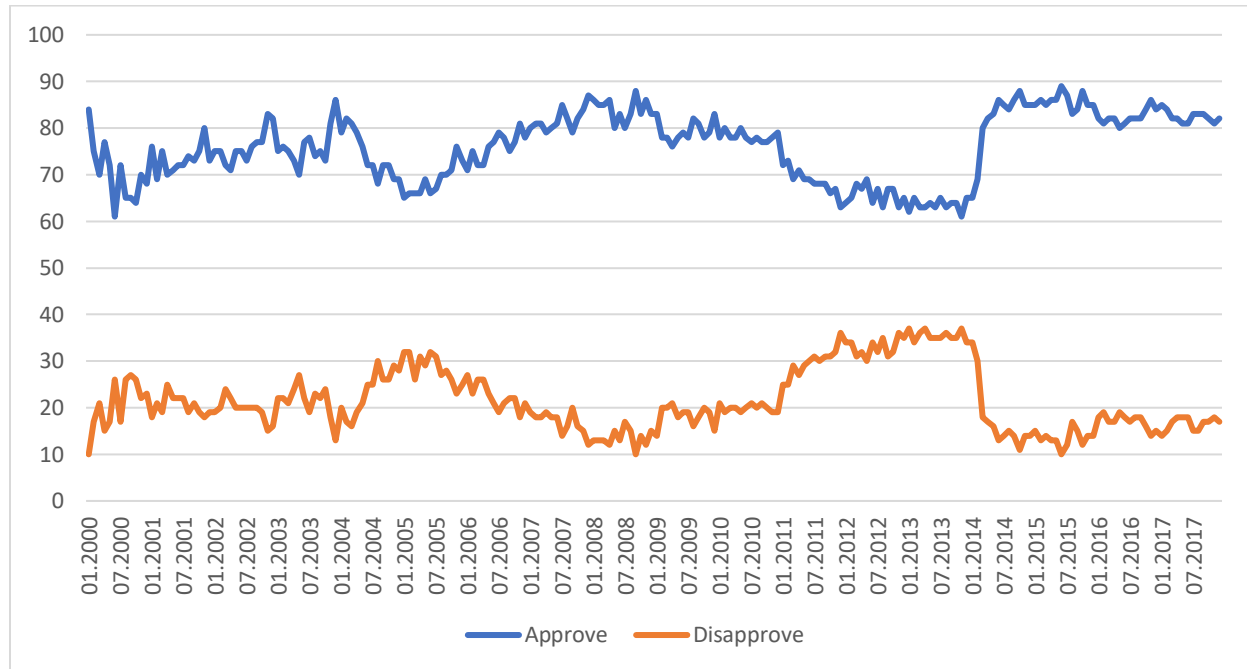
As shown in the Figure 1, official approval ratings in May 2012 showed 69% of Russians supporting Putin while 30% disapproved (Levada Center, n.d.). However, given Levada's operation under state pressure, actual approval was likely even more lower. Yet it still shows a clear downward trend from his first term start in 2000, when approval stood at 84% with only 10% disapproval (Levada Center, n.d.).

4.3.1. The Third Term

To regain support, Putin shifted focus to external and internal enemies, portraying protesters and NGOs as foreign-backed threats, especially from the US (Burrett, 2025). Putin's 2012 return marked a decisive shift away from the relative openness of the Medvedev era toward intensified authoritarianism, ideological consolidation and new set of narratives. Following 2012, the Russian government enacted laws restricting NGOs, curtailing LGBT rights, limiting peaceful protest and reducing foreign influence, silencing civil society and independent media (McFaul, 2021). Overall new narratives could be divided onto three topics:

1. State pride and military glorification, highlighting soviet victory in WWII and defence of the country against Western foes,

2. Traditional values, linking Orthodoxy to Russian identity and geopolitics and promoting anti-LGBTQ+ laws,

3. And anti-Westernism: portraying EU countries and the US as Russia's main adversaries (Burrett, 2025).

The 2014 annexation of Crimea represents a pivotal step in Russian international behaviour. It also revealed Moscow's growing sense of being shut out from the Euro-Atlantic community, strengthening the perception that Russia could no longer integrate into this sphere on conditions it considered acceptable (Svarin, 2016). As a consequence, relationships with the US and the EU were frozen. Domestically, this foreign policy shift triggered a surge of nationalist sentiment, boosting both Putin's approval ratings and the public's sense of national pride (La Lova, 2025). By the end of the 2014 Putin's approval rating raised up to 86% with disapproval of 14% (see figure 1) (Levada Center, n.d.). The annexation served both as a risky foreign policy gamble and a domestic political success, significantly boosting Putin's approval ratings and uniting the nation through patriotic propaganda. State-controlled media framed Crimea's annexation as the "*restoration of historical justice*" and portrayed Ukraine's Euromaidan as a Western-backed coup (La Lova, 2025).

The annexation and ensuing war in Donbas redefined Russia's domestic political discourse, redirecting the emphasis from economic prosperity toward security and sovereignty. Russian narratives increasingly emphasized the defence of national sovereignty, historical ties and protection of Russian-speaking populations abroad. This shift coincided with heightened opposition to Western influence and NATO's perceived encroachment near Russia's borders, which were portrayed as existential threats to Russian security and regional stability (Gorenburg, 2019). Russian media constructs NATO as an aggressive and destabilizing force, highlighting internal Western divisions and portraying its expansion into Eastern Europe as a direct threat to Russia's security and sovereignty (Hinck, Kluver & Cooley, 2018). This narrative not only reinforces domestic support for the Kremlin but also positions Russia as the leader of an alternative, multipolar world order rooted in sovereignty, international law and spiritual values (Hinck, Kluver & Cooley, 2018).

The strong association between Putin and Russia creates a rhetorical barrier, making criticism of Putin appear as criticism of the Russian people themselves (Hinck, Kluver & Cooley, 2018). New

official narratives stressed Russophobia and traditional values domestically, while casting the U.S. as a destabilizing global actor. Russia's identity was framed as distinctively Eurasian and separate from Europe, highlighting sovereign development and important partnerships, especially with China (Gorenburg, 2019). Russia positioned itself as a defender of traditional values against a decadent West and as protector of its near abroad, particularly Belarus and Ukraine, culturally and politically linked former Soviet neighbours (Gorenburg, 2019). Russian media often portrays the West as morally bankrupt and driven by selfish interests, while presenting Russia as a morally upright and spiritually grounded nation that stands as a principled alternative to the current global order (Hinck, Kluver & Cooley, 2018). These narratives also condemned Western interventionism in places like Venezuela and Syria, framing Russia as a stabilizing power that supports global multipolarity and resists the unipolar dominance of the United States (Gorenburg, 2019).

Russian messaging employs a high-volume, multichannel approach to overwhelm, distract and confuse audiences (Paul & Matthews, 2016).

Russia now not only mix the truth but creates narratives. For instance, RT uses fringe voices, conspiracy theories, manipulated research and false experts, all underpinned by whataboutism and the rejection of objective truth (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). The aim is not to glorify Russia but to undermine trust in Western institutions and truth itself, boosting cynicism and confusion to cripple rational debate and enable authoritarian influence (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). Russia's global media efforts are not about creating a coherent narrative but about disrupting reality-based dialogue (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). Examples: Faked stories (e.g., RAND report on ethnic cleansing), Misleading coverage of MH17, Creating and promoting fake experts or social media personas (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). The modern Russian propaganda model, called the "*firehose of falsehood*" is characterized by a high volume of messages spread across multiple channels, shameless use of lies and partial truths, rapid and repetitive messaging and a disregard for consistency or truth (Paul & Matthews, 2016). Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea marked a turning point that intensified media persecution and launched an ongoing information war driven by Kremlin propaganda and troll factories (Reporters Without Borders, 2024).

Despite the spike in approval ratings after the annexation of Crimea, internal problems such as the widely unpopular 2018 pension reform, which resulted in a noticeable decline in public support, and the government's poor handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, led to further drops in approval

(Burrett, 2025). By December 2021, Putin's approval rating had settled back to the levels observed in 2012, with around 65% of the public expressing approval and 34% disapproval (Levada Center, n.d.).

4.3.2. The Fourth Term

Putin's fourth term, beginning in 2018, marked the final evolution of the Russian regime from an electoral authoritarian system into a full-fledged personalist autocracy. This period was characterized by further centralization of power, constitutional manipulation and the removal of any remaining checks on presidential authority. In 2020 a constitutional amendment was proposed and quickly approved to reset presidential term limits starting in 2024, allowing the current leader to run for additional terms and extend their time in office. Voting on constitutional amendments began on June 25 and concluded on July 3, with official results showing 77.92% in favour, 21.27% against and a nationwide turnout of 67.97% (State Duma of the Russian Federation, 2020). Besides that, the 2020 constitutional amendments increased presidential powers, including lifetime immunity and the right to dismiss key officials and highlighting traditional family values and Russian sovereignty (Russell, 2020).

Internally, the repressive apparatus expanded dramatically. Revisions to the "*foreign agent*" laws, "*undesirable organisations*" designations and online censorship laws created an environment in which almost all independent media, civil society groups and political opposition were either shut down or forced into exile (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). The arrest and jailing of Alexei Navalny in 2021, along with the banning of his Anti-Corruption Foundation, showed clearly that the Kremlin has no tolerance at all for any kind of organized opposition.

Foreign policy increasingly became a tool of domestic legitimation. Russia's role in Syria, support for authoritarian allies and cyber operations abroad were framed as proof of global influence. Yet the Kremlin's main fixation became Ukraine. By 2021, Russian state media and officials aggressively promoted the idea that Ukraine was a Western puppet, that NATO expansion posed an existential threat and that the "*Russian world*" must be defended (Bryjka, 2022).

The military build-up on Ukraine's border throughout late 2021 and early 2022, accompanied by maximalist security demands to NATO and the U.S. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine showed a much higher degree of risk acceptance by the Russian leadership than in previous actions, like annexation

of Crimea due to the potential strong international backlash and military entanglement with second largest country in Europe, potentially provoking a long and costly war. However, the scale of the initial military operation and the rhetoric around a "*special military operation*" indicated that Russia did not plan for a prolonged, drawn-out conflict. Russia significantly misjudged the strength and resilience of the Ukrainian military and population at the outset of its 2022 invasion. Russian leadership also miscalculated Western resolve by overestimating Western dependence on Russian resources and believing that economic interdependence would deter a strong response, leading them to expect a short conflict like Crimea in 2014 (Polianskii, 2024).

One of the clearest indicators that the 2022 invasion was premeditated can be found in Vladimir Putin's July 2021 essay, "*On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*". In this article published on the Kremlin's official website, Putin denied the legitimacy of Ukrainian statehood, arguing that Russians and Ukrainians are "*one people*" artificially separated by external forces (Putin, 2021). He presented the modern Ukraine as a kind of Western initiative, which is directed to weaken Russia, and blamed Kyiv for having "*Russophobia*" and serving as an instrument for hostile actions against Russia (Putin, 2021). The essay worked not just as a historical story, but also played a role as an ideological base that prepared the ground for the war. By reframing Ukraine's sovereignty as illegitimate and its Western alignment as existentially threatening, Putin's rhetoric prepared Russian society for confrontation.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought back his popularity, which showed how strong and influential the nationalist narratives can be. However, a lot of Russians either support the war story or just follow it because of being afraid of repressions, especially after any kind of disagreement was turned into a crime in 2022 (Burrett, 2025). Putin's political survival now hinges on the outcome of the war, but even a military victory would not guarantee long-term stability for his regime (Burrett, 2025).

4.3.3. Conclusion: Second Two Terms of Putin's Presidency

The period from 2012 marks a political evolution in Russian regime, transitioning from an Informational Autocracy toward a Spin Dictatorship. The stagnation of the economy coupled with rising public discontent after Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 created pressure on the regime, as old legitimacy tools ceased to work. However, the 2014 annexation of Crimea was a boosted nationalist sentiment and Putin's approval ratings, helping to legitimize Putin's regime

through patriotic propaganda. After Crimean success the regime's information strategy evolved into a more sophisticated tool, that was now creating new ideological narratives about state pride, traditional values and anti-Western agenda. The third and fourth Putin's terms also accompanied with the formalization its autocratic nature through constitutional amendments.

In sum, from 2012 onward, Russia transformed into a Spin Dictatorship, a political regime that maintains power primarily creating new narratives.

5. UNDERSTANDING THE MOTIVES

This chapter brings together the evidence explored so far to dig into the main question of this thesis: Why did Russia go to war with Ukraine? Was it mainly about defending itself against a perceived NATO threat or was it more about maintaining power at home?

5.1. The Security and Sphere of Influence Narrative

Already in the early years after the collapse of the USSR, Russia tried to construct a network of political and economic influence on Ukraine through trade agreements and oligarchic connections. These elements are an indicator of Russia's long-term policy towards Ukraine. A central argument used by Russia to justify its actions in Ukraine is the claim that NATO expansion and encroachment pose a direct threat to Russia's national security and interests. So, NATO perceived here as a threat to Russia's security, its interests, or both. This argument is supported by both defensive realists, who see Russia's moves as a reaction to threat of NATO encirclement and offensive realists, who see Russia's moves as acting to secure its interests in the region.

From the point of view of Defensive Realism, the fall of the pro-Russian government of Yanukovych and the support of the new government by the West was a signal to Russia about a change in Ukraine's course and the transition of this country into the sphere of influence of the West. In addition, according to Russian narrative, the NATO's expansion towards Russian borders threatens the strategic balance and undermines its influence in the region. Defensive Realists would claim that such action was taken to stop the further shrinking of Russia's buffer zone and to preserve the existing balance in its borders. Russia's escalation from the conflict in Donbas to the full-scale invasion in 2022 can also be seen as a response to growing security pressures and threats perceived by the Russian regime, as Ukraine's post-2014 trajectory, pursuing NATO and EU integration signaled to Russia a fundamental geopolitical shift towards Western sphere of influence. From this point of view, Russia's involvement in Donbas, such as backing of separatist forces and giving out passports, was intended to keep a strategic buffer zone and to stop the further eastward expansion of NATO. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 can be seen as a last resort effort to stop Ukraine from becoming a part of the Western sphere of influence. For Russian leadership, Ukraine's closer cooperation with the West was perceived as a serious geopolitical loss that had to be urgently prevented. Also, the circumstances that Ukraine took steps to protect itself,

namely seek for NATO membership, it could unintentionally make Russia feel threatened, which in turn sparked the tensions.

Also, Offensive Realism interprets the annexation of Crimea as a power-maximizing act. And the main goal was, from the point of view of this framework, to increase regional influence at a favorable moment for Russia, when Ukraine was vulnerable. Offensive Realists believe that, in a world without higher authority states act aggressively whenever they see a chance. Russia's long-term strategy was not merely about defense but rather about reasserting dominance in its near abroad. The establishment of proxy states of LPR and DPR, making these states fully dependent on Russia and the issuing of Russian passports to their residents, is another example of strategy of strengthening power and expanding influence over Ukraine. Additionally, the 2022 full-scale invasion's aim was to install a pro-Russian government in Ukraine, also supports this logic.

Nevertheless, there is a number of limitations within both Offensive and Defensive Realist approaches:

1. The idea of NATO encirclement threat is overstated. While Russia frames NATO's eastward expansion as a threat, the alliance is fundamentally defensive.

2.   The decision to join NATO lies with the aspiring countries themselves, not with a central NATO authority directing expansion. The decision to become a member of the alliance mostly depends on the country itself, since NATO functions on the basis of open-door policy regarding the membership. There is no overarching NATO strategy to expand toward Russia's borders.

3. Russia's aggression produced the opposite of its intended goals. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 caused a strong reaction from NATO and led to the increase of its military presence in Eastern Europe. The full-scale invasion in 2022 even more reinforced the unity inside the alliance and pushed previously neutral states like Sweden and Finland to apply for the membership. The Russia–Finland border is approximately 1,340 kilometers.

Even though Realism's point of view on Russian aggression towards Ukraine might look convincing, especially considering the official statements from Russian side, the above-mentioned limitations show that there is a need for more profound analysis.

5.2. Russia's Regime Evolution and Domestic Political Survival

To understand Russia's foreign policy, especially its aggression toward Ukraine, it is essential to look inward. Rather than being solely about security threats or grand strategic goals, many of Russia's recent foreign policy decisions reflect a deeper struggle to preserve regime stability at home.

Based on the evidence presented throughout this thesis, it is possible to trace the evolutionary trajectory of Vladimir Putin's regime, beginning with Oligarchic Pluralism in the early 2000s, transitioning into an Informational Autocracy during his first two terms and eventually consolidating into a Spin Dictatorship (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Evolution of the Russian Political Regime (1991–2022)
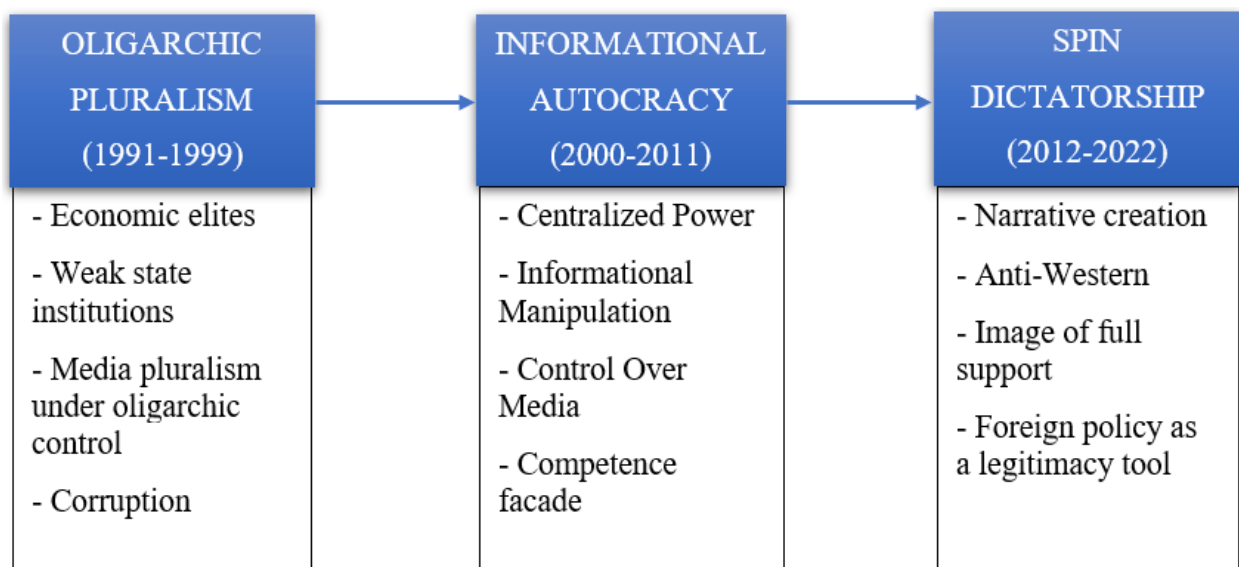
Source: author's own visualisation, based on thesis findings and Guriev and Treisman's frameworks (2019, 2023)

In the 1990s, Russia's political system was formally democratic but dominated by powerful oligarchs who gained control over key industries and media through corrupt privatization. Yeltsin's government relied on their support, especially during the 1996 election, while weak institutions and widespread corruption prevented genuine democratic consolidation. The constitutional changes of 1993, which brought in superpresidential powers and a fairly developed media sector in Russia were the basis for the further emergence of an Information Autocracy.

After the transfer of power to Putin in 2000, Russia began its transformation from oligarchic pluralism to information autocracy. During Putin's first two terms and Medvedev's transition period from 2000 to 2012, Russia underwent consolidation of political power, destruction of the influence of autonomous oligarchs and strengthening of state control over the media. The regime had features of "*Electoral Authoritarianism*" The main instrument of legitimization of the regime during this period was the information manipulation of public perception through the seizure of control over national TV channels such as Channel One and NTV. The Regime built a facade of competence, using economic growth caused by oil prices and state-managed media to portray Putin as a strong and effective leader.

After Putin returned to the presidency in 2012 and the economy began to stagnate, the Russian regime transformed into a Spin Dictatorship, the main instrument of which became control of narratives. The regime has constructed powerful nationalistic and anti-Western narratives that position Russia as a defender of traditional values and a protector against an aggressive West. At the same time, state media spread the image of full support for the regime and Putin. Foreign policy became a key legitimacy tool, especially after the annexation of Crimea, that boosted Putin's approval

The initial transformation from pluralistic oligarchy to Informational Autocracy began when Vladimir Putin was named Yeltsin's successor and assumed power through a voluntary handover rather than a competitive democratic process. The transformation from Informational Autocracy to Spin Dictatorship was largely driven by Putin's declining approval ratings and economic stagnation. The regime was no more able to rely only on economic success and image of technocratic efficiency to keep its legitimacy. Therefore, the strategy was changed, from just managing of information to the active creation of emotional narratives.

Findings indicate that the annexation of Crimea was more of an improvised reaction than a long-planned strategy aimed at boosting domestic legitimacy. It was primarily driven by the sudden loss of Russian influence in Ukraine and the collapse of the pro-Russian regime of Yanukovych. However, despite its reactive nature, the move unexpectedly triggered a surge in nationalist sentiment and significantly boosted Putin's popularity, providing a powerful new source of legitimacy for his regime for the following years. On the contrary, the full-scale invasion of

Ukraine in 2022 appears to have been a calculated and pre-planned move, deeply rooted in the regimes evolving new domestic narratives and priorities. By 2021, Putin's regime was facing the same situation as in 2012: declining approval ratings, economic stagnation and growing dissatisfaction among parts of the population. In this context, the invasion served multiple domestic purposes: it revived nationalist narratives, reinforced the regime's portrayal of Russia as a besieged fortress defending itself from Western aggression and attempted to restore the image of strong leadership.

Figure 3. Putin's approval and disapproval rating 2000-2022
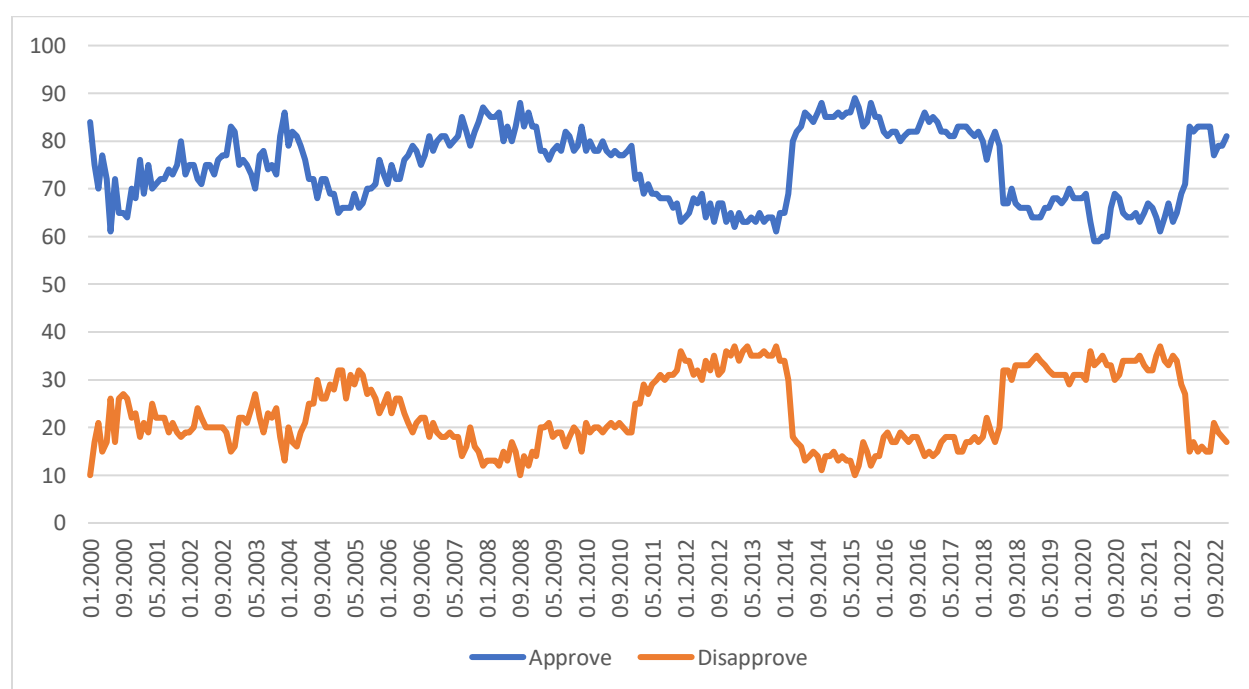
Figure 3 shows a clear pattern in public opinion: before both the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion in 2022, approval ratings of Putin were going down, but right after each act of aggression they suddenly went up again.

Spin Dictatorships typically avoid open military conflicts due to the risks involved, but prefer proven methods of gaining legitimacy through control of information and public perception. But in this case, it is a matter of serious miscalculation on the part of the leadership of the Russian regime. Findings suggest that when Russia was preparing for the 2022 invasion, it didn't actually plan it as a full-scale war, but more like an operation similar to the Crimea annexation, just on a

bigger scale. The Kremlin appeared to believe that Ukraine wouldn't resist much and that the international reaction would be weak and divided.

5.3. Which Framework Works Better?

The Realist view, especially Defensive and Offensive Realism, gives a solid base for looking into Russian aggression towards Ukraine. It highlights Russia's long-standing opposition to NATO's eastward expansion and its desire to preserve a strategic buffer in Ukraine. However, this perspective does not delve deeper into the actual motives of the Russian regime and mostly just takes the official arguments and statements at face value, more or less accepting them as some kind of fixed truth. Defensive Realism explains Russia's actions as responses to perceived encirclement. Meanwhile, Offensive Realism recognises events like the annexation of Crimea and the support for separatists in Donbas as attempts to maximise power and regain dominance in the post-Soviet area. However, these are exactly the kinds of narratives crafted by the Russian regime and widely spread through its media channels. As a result, Realists often end up becoming victims of these narratives themselves, accepting them as truth without really looking deeper into the actual motives behind them. This framework also faces notable limitations: NATO is a defensive alliance without a strategy of deliberate encroachment, expansion decisions are made by candidate countries and Russia's aggression backfired, inviting more NATO presence and even new members like Sweden and Finland.

The core problem when applying the Realist framework to explain Russian aggression against Ukraine lies in its perception of the nature of the Russian regime itself. Realism tends to treat Russia as a rational, institutional actor, much like the USSR, whose decisions are driven by structured and ideological calculations. However, this perception fails to account for the qualitatively different nature of the current Russian regime. Which is explainable, given that Offensive and Defensive Realism are tied to Neorealism, that arose during the Cold War, a period of history defined by the global competition of the USSR against the United States. Yet, unlike the USSR, where policymaking was often institutional and collective, today's Russia is a highly centralized autocracy, where power is concentrated in the hands of a single individual and legitimacy is largely constructed through media control and narrative management. Both case studies, the annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, took place in the time,

when Russian regime had already transformed into the Spin Dictatorship, in which forming of narratives and controlling of public perception became crucial for regime's existence.

By contrast, the Domestic Political Survival framework offers a more nuanced and convincing explanation, particularly when viewed through the evolution of Putin's regime. The transformation from Oligarchic Pluralism to Informational Autocracy and eventually to a Spin Dictatorship, illustrates how Russia's internal dynamics, especially the need to maintain regime legitimacy, have shaped its foreign policy. The annexation of Crimea, even if it might be considered as an improvised step, caused unexpected rise of public support and national sentiments in Russia. It demonstrated that foreign policy can be used domestically as a tool for gaining legitimacy. The whole case of annexation of Crimea has laid the ground for the later actions, like the full-invasion in 2022. By 2021, Putin's approval was declining, the economy was stagnating and public discontent was rising. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine appears to have been a calculated attempt to re-ignite nationalist fervor, reaffirm the narrative of a besieged Russia and secure domestic unity around the regime. The plan mirrored the 2014 Crimea scenario but dramatically miscalculated Ukraine's resistance and Western resolve.

6. CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to explore a central question: "*to what extent can Russia's aggression against Ukraine be explained by domestic political survival rather than external security concerns?*". To address this, two guiding sub questions were examined: first, "*how do Offensive and Defensive Realism explain Russia's aggression against Ukraine?*"; and second, "*how does the evolution of the Russian regime and its domestic political survival concerns help explain Russia's aggression against Ukraine?*".

The analysis based on key insights demonstrated that while external security concerns, particularly NATO expansion, played a role in Russia's justification of aggression, this narrative alone is insufficient to fully explain the pattern of Russian regime motives.

Realist approaches, both Defensive and Offensive, provide certain understanding of the case. Defensive Realism puts focus on Russia's fear of being encircled by NATO, whereas Offensive Realism underlines Russia's ambition to strengthen its dominance in the region. both of these perspectives have difficulties to explain why the aggression intensified at particular moments, especially considering that NATO's enlargement remained mostly unchanged in the years leading up to the 2022 invasion. On the contrary, the attention to domestic political survival logic and the gradual transformation of Russian regime into a Spin Dictatorship appears to be a more persuasive explanation. The regime's reliance on controlled narratives, from one side and growing public dissatisfaction, economic slowdown and falling approval ratings, from the other side, gave strong motivation to use foreign policy as a tool for gaining domestic legitimacy.

Both key events examined in this thesis, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion in 2022, happened during the time when Russian political system had already developed into a Spin Dictatorship (2012–2022), where controlling of narratives and showing of strength were essential for the regime survival. The annexation of Crimea, although it looked spontaneous, unexpectedly increased Putin's support inside the country and showed the strong effect of nationalist narratives. The 2022 invasion, even though probably planned as a fast operation to boost the regime's strength, turned out differently, leading to a long war and pushed Russia into even deeper international isolation.

Overall, domestic political survival, especially the need to preserve the regime's legitimacy, give a more clear and consistent explanation for Russia's aggression than external security concerns alone.

Another possible point of view for future research incorporating both Realist and Informational Autocracy/Spin Dictatorship frameworks is in viewing NATO and EU enlargement not primarily as a military threat, but as a political one. A stable, democratic Ukraine integrated into Western institutions could serve as a dangerous model for domestic opposition within Russia. This point of view, even though it mainly concentrates on internal regime interests, still fits with the basic Realist ideas about how states perceive threats.

Another valuable direction for future research would be to examine post-2022 Russia and how the full-scale war has affected the regime domestically. Unlike the 2014 annexation of Crimea, which brought a clear surge in nationalist sentiment and temporarily boosted regime legitimacy, the long, costly and uncertain nature of the 2022 invasion may have produced different internal consequences. It's worth asking: what are the regime's sources of legitimacy now and have they changed?

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