



Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences

Department of International Relations

**IDENTITY IN RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS  
UKRAINE**

Tunahan KOÇ

Master's Thesis

Ankara, 2023



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## ACCEPTANCE AND APPROVAL

The jury finds that Tunahan Koç has on the date of January 10, 2023 successfully passed the defense examination and approves his MA Thesis titled “Identity in Russian Foreign Policy towards Ukraine”.

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12/01/2023

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## ETİK BEYAN

Bu alıřmadaki bütn bilgi ve belgeleri akademik kurallar erevesinde elde ettiđimi, grsel, iřitsel ve yazılı tm bilgi ve sonuları bilimsel ahlak kurallarına uygun olarak sunduđumu, kullandıđım verilerde herhangi bir tahrifat yapmadıđımı, yararlandıđım kaynaklara bilimsel normlara uygun olarak atıfta bulunduđumu, tezimin kaynak gsterilen durumlar dıřında zgn olduđunu, **Do. Dr. Anar SOMUNCUOĐLU** danıřmanlıđında tarafımdan retildiđini ve Hacettepe niversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstits Tez Yazım Ynergesine gre yazıldıđını beyan ederim.

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## ÖZET

KOÇ, Tunahan. *Rusya'nın Ukrayna'ya Yönelik Dış Politikasında Kimlik*, Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Ankara, 2023.

Bu tez, Rusya'nın Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde geçirdiği kimlik dönüşümlerini iç, dış ve tarihsel faktörlerle bağlantılı olarak ve bu dönüşümlerin bu ülkenin Ukrayna'ya yönelik dış politikasındaki değişikliklerde oynadığı rol bağlamında analiz edecektir. Bu tez, Ukrayna'nın Turuncu Devrimi sonrası dönemde Rusya'nın Ukrayna'ya yönelik değişen politikalarının ve bu ülkedeki "Euromeydan" olaylarının, bu iki ülkenin birbirine bağlı kimlik dönüşümlerinin bir yansıması olarak ortaya çıktığını savunacaktır. Bu doğrultuda bu tez, kimlik dönüşümleri ve algılardaki değişimlerle ortaya çıkan farklı dış politika tercihlerini sosyal inşacılık teorisi ile açıklayacaktır.

Ukrayna, Rusya'nın iki devletin ortak güçlü tarihi, kültürel, dini ve etnik bağlarını algılaması ile tarihsel olarak Rusya için önemli bir yer olmuştur. Özellikle Sovyetlerin dağılmasından sonra Ukrayna da Rusya gibi kendi ulusal kimlik dönüşümleri dönemine girmiş ve ortak bir Ukrayna kimliği oluşturma ve pekiştirme çabası içinde olmuştur. Bu tezin ortaya koymayı amaçladığı gibi, Rus ulusal kimliğindeki dönüşümlerin Ukrayna ulusal kimliği üzerindeki etkisinin, henüz oluşum ve konsolidasyon sürecinde olan Ukrayna ulusal kimliği üzerindeki etkisinin boyutu, iki ülke arasındaki kimlik dönüşümlerinin birbirine bağlı doğasını algılamak için çok önemlidir. Devletlerin dış politika tercihleri üzerinde karşılıklı etkileri vardır. Bu çalışma, Rusya'nın bu ülkeye yönelik değişen politikalarını, kimlik, ulusal benlik ve halen dönüşüm halinde olan algılar çerçevesinde iki düzlemde göstermek amacıyla bu ülkedeki 2004 ve 2014 devrim süreçlerinde Rus bakış açısına ve tepkilere odaklanmaktadır.

### **Anahtar Sözcükler**

Rusya, Ukrayna, Turuncu Devrim, Euromeydan, Kimlik



## ABSTRACT

KOÇ, Tunahan. *Identity in Russian Foreign Policy towards Ukraine*, Master's Thesis, Ankara, 2023.

This thesis analyzes the identity transformations that Russia has been going through in the post-Cold War period in connection with internal, external, and historical factors, and the role these transformations played in the changes in this country's foreign policy towards Ukraine. This thesis argues that the changing Russian policies towards Ukraine in the periods after Ukraine's Orange Revolution and the "Euromaidan" events in this country emerged as a reflection of the interconnected identity transformations of these two countries. In this direction, this thesis explains different foreign policy preferences that emerged with identity transformations and changes in perceptions by social constructivism.

Ukraine has historically been an important place for Russia with the Russian perception of the shared strong historical, cultural, religious, and ethnic ties of the two states. Particularly after the Soviet disintegration, Ukraine, like Russia, entered into the period of its own national identity transformations and strove to create and consolidate a common Ukrainian identity. As this thesis aims to put forward, the extent of the influence of transformations of Russian national identity on the Ukrainian national identity, which has still been in the process of creation and consolidation, is crucial to perceive the interconnective nature of identity transformations in the two states with mutual influences of these on their foreign policy choices. This study focuses on the Russian perspective and reactions in the 2004 and 2014 revolution processes in this country in order to show the changing policies of Russia towards this country, within the framework of identity, national self, and perceptions that are still in transformation in two countries.

### **Keywords**

Russia, Ukraine, Orange Revolution, Euromaidan, Identity

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## **NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION**

In this study, Russian sources and the works of Russian authors were used, and both the names and works of these authors (except for the English versions available in the literature) had to be converted from the Russian alphabet system to the Latin alphabet. This study, which aimed to transform names and works made of Russian letters with English letters, utilized the system created by Stephen P. Morse (<https://stevemorse.org/russian/rus2eng.html>).

## INTRODUCTION

The Maidan events in Ukraine in 2014, the change of administration in Kyiv with the ouster of a pro-Russian one, and Russia's political and military response to it marked significant changes in the region. Russia's annexation of Crimea, the civil war in eastern Ukraine and the potential Russian influence in it, and the outbreak of war in 2022, on the one hand, made the two former Soviet republics hostile to each other and, on the other hand, worsened the already deteriorating Russia-Western relations. To be sure, all these events had their roots in history and relations between those parties, with underlying factors emerged previously.

Within the historical insight, the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to the creation of an independent state of Ukraine, which had been under Russian rule and influence for centuries. On the Russian part, the loss of Ukraine territories meant serious consequences in terms of Russian geopolitics, security perceptions, history, status in the world, and, more significantly, identity processes while for many Ukrainians this meant a new phase with new hopes and expectations in their history.

In the early 1990s, Russia and Ukraine, with their long-shared history, and ethnocultural and linguistic ties, became separate entities and stepped into the path of the search for the creation and consolidation of new identities. On the Russian side, after the collapse of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, the need for a new identity search has been mainly rooted in the necessity of locating the new state and its titular nationality somewhere in a newly formed international order and defining its role, status, and responsibilities in this structure. On the other hand, for Ukrainians and the Ukrainian political elite, a new titular identity was necessary to make the new state meaningful and legitimate with the emphasis on a distinct Ukrainian identity independent from the Russian one.

Without a doubt, in both states, new identity processes could not, yet, have been completed without the impact of several historical, cultural, ethnic, and religious ties, which the two sides share, with additional remarkable influences of foreign powers and the international political environment on the two sides. As a matter of fact, both the strong influence of these two countries on each other and their ongoing relations with the West have played a considerable role in both the Russian and Ukrainian identity processes. Furthermore, such a situation has still created identity crises and conflicts in the Russia-Ukraine-West triad with significant reflections on their mutual political relations during the post-Cold War era. In this regard, the revolutions of Ukraine both in 2004 and 2014 have significant consequences for identity processes in Ukraine and Russia with the significant, but different, political responses of the latter. The second revolution in Ukraine not only brought about harsh political reactions from Russia but also a Russian military intervention in Crimea and secessionist insurgency in the eastern parts of Ukraine that would lead to a war between the two sides in 2022. These events and situations in the period after 1990 constitute the research subject of this study.

This study seeks to answer the question of how identity and related concepts affected Russian-Ukrainian relations, in which the West was in an important position for both sides in various aspects, as well as the relations between Russia and the West in the post-Cold War period, and how these concepts caused hostile relations and an eventual war between the two states within a social constructivist understanding with the eventual purpose of contributing to the current academic literature with different perspectives, methods, intellectual implications and uncovering the determinant impact of identity issues on foreign affairs of states and international relations. In this way, it will be possible to provide a rational, competent, and multidimensional explanation of the events taking place in this region.

This thesis is built upon the conventional constructivist theory with shared understandings and methods of critical constructivism to provide insights for issues regarding socially constructed concepts of identity, institutions, self and other, state

interests, rules, norms, culture, practices, values, change, the nature of power, the impact of structure on world politics and its relation with the agency and etc. The main reason for this theoretical choice is that constructivism provides “alternative understandings” regarding such issues in contrast with the mainstream international relations theories with its distinct research patterns that combine “different fields and disciplines” (Hopf, 1998, pp. 172, 196). Another underlying reason for this theoretical choice lies in its compatibility and promising nature for explaining and demonstrating the significance of identity in Russian foreign policies towards the West and Ukraine in recent years. In line with the hypothesis of this thesis, this theoretical approach is helpful in terms of discovering, explaining, and making connections between identity-related issues, political culture, constructed state interests, and Russia’s foreign policies in the post-Cold war era and particularly within the years of political crises experienced by this state since November 2013.

To mention the core precepts of the theory, in essence, conventional constructivism deals with the issues of agency, structure, practices, norms, rules, values, institutions, change, the nature of power, state interests, identities, and the interrelationships between them in international relations. In terms of structure and agency issues, constructivist scholars, unlike mainstream theories, strongly emphasize the prominent role of agency in the formation of structure and how they mutually constitute each other with the concept of “intersubjectivity” (See Kratochwil & Ruggie, 1986; Onuf, 1989; Adler, 1997; Hopf, 1998). In addition to the issues of intersubjective relation between the international structure and agency, many leading constructivist figures focus on the role of rules, norms, practices, values, history, culture, and institutions to demonstrate their remarkable functions in collaboration in the process of construction of international structures and social reality (See Onuf, 1989; Koslowski & Kratochwil, 1994; Wendt, 1995; Jepperson, et al., 1996; Hopf, 1998; Reus-Smit, 2013; Tsygankov, 2015). The issue of change is a key issue in international relations and history, and how conventional constructivism approaches is another important matter of subject. Constructivism's main achievement is its open stance toward change. According to Emanuel Adler (1997), providing “theoretical and empirical explanations” for changes

in the social world is one of the key goals of social constructivism (p. 325). In terms of the nature of power, it is emphasized in constructivism that there is an ideational power, including discursive power, as well as material. With regard to discursive power, some leading scholars such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and other critical theorists come to the fore. The power of ideas also forms the core element of the work of Alexander Wendt (1995), who regards the “shared knowledge, practice, and material resources” as the constituent elements of social structures (pp. 73-74). The important point is that while constructivist intellectuals do not ignore material power, they only assert that ideal power, with the discursive one, is as important as material power (Onuf, 1989; Hopf, 1998; Reus-Smit, 2013).

In addition to the above-mentioned key concepts that are important for this study, the issue of identity and state interests constitute the most important elements for this thesis. However, it should be remembered that all these concepts are interrelated and have impacts on each other. The issue of identity is a fundamental issue in the field of social constructivism and constitutes one of the main fields of study within this theoretical framework. Moreover, in this theoretical framework, identities and state interests are studied in conjunction. As Ted Hopf (1998, 2002) and Andrei Tsygankov (2016) put forward, identity is a fundamental concept in the context of domestic and international relations and is critical in how social groups regard themselves in comparison to "the constituent others" that is because the formation of identities is relational with the necessary existence and impacts of the different “Others” on the “Self” while this "implies" what their interests are. As a matter of fact, Alexander Wendt (1992) does not accept exogenously rooted state interests originating independently of social context and identity-related meanings (p. 398). In another work, Ronald L. Jepperson, Alexander Wendt, and Peter J. Katzenstein (1996), on their part, put forward that differentiation and changes in identities of states have substantial impacts on the state interests and related state policies. Moreover, according to Hopf (1998), the existence of identities avoids danger in a way as it imposes state interests and related state actions because through predictability, in this way, the concept of identity ensures order in both



domestic and international environments (pp. 174-175). The avoidance of danger through identities is another significant function of this framework.

To be sure, this does not mean that identity processes occur independently of constructed reality and structures. As Hopf (1998) notes;

the producer of the identity is not in control of what it ultimately means to others; the intersubjective structure is the final arbiter of meaning. Constructivism instead assumes that the selves, or identities, of states are a variable; they likely depend on historical, cultural, political, and social context. (pp. 174-175)

Apart from these, social constructivism examines “nationalism, ethnicity, race, gender, religion, and sexuality, culture, domestic politics, and other intersubjectively understood communities” in the context of identity processes and reveals their role in international relations (Hopf, 1998, pp. 192-195). In another study, Hopf (2002) explains the whole identity process with the "identity-discursive formation-cognitive structure" model. In this model, individuals with different identities come together to form a widespread discursive formation, and these common discourses create a kind of social reality by forming larger cognitive structures. Moreover, the formed cognitive structures in the last phase, as social realities, limit identities and discursive formations of individuals, and begin to have an effect on them. In this way, Ted Hopf demonstrated how identity processes occur domestically besides the way through interstate relations.

When the mainstream theories, namely neorealism, and neoliberalism, are examined, it can be said that they do not shed light on the aforementioned concepts, especially the concept of identity. As a matter of fact, these mainstream currents, which do not examine most of the concepts above, cannot put forward successful explanations on the issue of identity and state interests. Neorealism treats state identities as unitary, without taking much into account internal and historical factors, and considers them as self-interested identities that focus only on similar/common state interests in the international arena. On the other hand, neoliberalism treats identities as unitary in the

same way and treats them only as the ones with the aim of modernization. Naturally, in the neoliberal understanding, state interests are the same with the common goal of modernization, economic/political gains through cooperation, etc. These two mainstream theories ignore many of the concepts, which are mentioned above and properly scrutinized by constructivism. Even in the case of agency and structure, these theories deal with these two concepts independently of each other without taking into account their influence on each other and the basic identity roles in their change. The theoretical merits of these theories must be acknowledged, but from the point of view of this study, mainstream currents are insufficient to explain identity and other factors associated with it. According to leading constructivists, one of the main reasons underlying the failure of mainstream rationalist theories is their narrow view of identities and interests as “pre-given” and “exogenously” formed (Wendt, 1992; Hopf, 1998). As a concrete example, Tsygankov (2016) criticizes neoliberal thinkers for their unrealistic arguments in the Russian context and their failure to explain the “conservative turn” in Russia (pp. 10-16). According to Tsygankov, in general, mainstream theoreticians ignore the local, historical, and cultural aspects of identity in Russia in their assumptions of Russian identity. The failure of these theories to explain the great changes in the international arena is obvious. The most striking example was undoubtedly the end of the Cold War, and these theories could neither predict nor provide a solid explanation for this change. This case and assertion have, in fact, been the main booster of constructivist critique against mainstream theories (Guzzini, 2013, p. 196). Last but not least, there is not enough focus in rationalist theories on the power and potential of ideational elements as much as on material elements (Reus-Smit, 2013, p. 224). Nicholas Onuf (1989), on his part, rejects the “sharp distinction” between “material and social realities” with an equal impact of one on another (p. 40).

When the new Russian Federation, established in the early 1990s, and the different identity projects and processes in this country are analyzed within the framework of changing state interests and policies, the vital role of social constructivism reveals itself. As Anne Clunan (2009) sets forth, as a newly created state, Russia was in need of creating a new identity, interests, and an international role different from the former

Soviet one, and emphasizes that Russian identity formation processes with its related interests and role formation processes are valuable examples of such identity and interest formations as significant research fields of social constructivism (p. 1). Different from the mainstream insights, according to Ted Hopf (2005), there has been no single Russia while the Russian self is constructed and reconstructed with the “discursive constructions under the strong impacts of “domestic and external interactions” (pp. 225-226).

In the Russian context, it is crucial to examine how Russia's unique history, which experienced a totalitarian and imperial past during the imperial and Soviet eras, and domestic conditions play a role in current identity projects, as opposed to mainstream currents. This fact can lead social constructivism to a prominent place in comparison with neorealism and neoliberalism. Considering that the principal subjects of this study are the changing historical and current relations between Russia-West and Russia-Ukraine, what the West and Ukraine mean for Russia should be discussed from a historical perspective. These matters of the subject increase the importance of identity and historiography agendas of constructivism. The important thing is to be able to see that both the West and Ukraine have historically been associated with different meanings to Russia at different times. As a political reflection, the West has, historically, been the constituent “other” for the Russian understanding of “self”, Russian discourses, and, indirectly, Russian foreign policies (Hopf, 2005, pp. 227, 238). On the other hand, different images of the West have traditionally resulted in different understandings of Russian identity and Russian “behaviors” to the outside world (Tsygankov, 2016, pp. 1-2, 18).

In addition to the significant effects of external factors on Russian identities, internal factors in Russia are important as mentioned in this study frequently. In the context of Russia, different kinds of Russian nationalism and political elites with different ideas play a very important role in shaping Russian identity in the process, and these key factors are important research topics of this study. In this statement, the role of the

political establishment of the federation, namely the key figures influential in the Kremlin comes to the fore. In reality, the periods of Kozyrev, Primakov, and Putin witnessed changing identity patterns, state interests, and political actions both in domestic and international environments. In terms of nationalism, there have been different kinds of nationalism in Russia with varying levels of power and influence. All of these have tried to be influential on Russian politics and identity structures with different political and intellectual aims. Undoubtedly, these matters are also indispensable with regard to understanding the underlying causes of Russian foreign policies during the post-Cold War era by revealing the strong potential of constructivism.

In sum, all the concepts and factors, both domestic and international, are crucial to shed a light on the social nature of international relations in general, and current Russian political behaviors towards Ukraine and the West in particular. Social constructivism is the most suitable and coherent approach to this thesis with its agenda, new groundbreaking approaches to the crucial issues of debates in the international relations theories, and unique insights and methodological notions embracing the analysis of all these concepts and factors, unlike the mainstream rationalist theories and their narrow-minded approaches and understandings of study on the Russian foreign policies as well as other fields of international relations studies.

In the academic literature, there are scholars and works that explain these events mostly from the perspective of identity and identity-related issues. Parallel with this, many leading scholars analyze Russian foreign policies, and, directly or indirectly, events in Ukraine within the insight of identity and identity-related patterns (See Molchanov, 1996; Hopf, 2002; Torbakov, 2011, 2017; Kasianov, 2012; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2016; Tsygankov, 2016; Zevelev, 2016; Laruelle, 2016; Ploky, 2017; Samokhvalov, 2017; Donaldson & Nadkarni, 2019). In fact, the common matter of subject that all these intellectuals have analyzed is the identity processes and identity projects, which emerged in Russia after the Cold War and influenced the public opinion and ideas of the

opposition of the Kremlin, and its reflection on the foreign policy decisions of the Russian administrations, which have to take into account the opinion of both the Russian public and the political elite of the opposition. These scholars generally try to establish a strong link between the identity processes and related mechanisms and Russia's foreign policy and its policies toward Ukraine in particular with the mutual impacts of identities and foreign policy patterns on each other.

On the other hand, the need for reformulation of the past to form and consolidate a new identity constitutes another significant aspect of identity formation processes. Some scholars draw a strong connection between the interpretations of history and past (related with the Russian imperial eras and Soviet period) and reconstructed identities with the subsequent problematic aspects, as in the case of Russian and Ukrainian ones (See Friedman, 1992a; Molchanov, 1996; Lukyanov, 2005; Oushakine, 2009; Samarina, 2009; Kasianov & Miller, 2011; Torbakov, 2011; Miller, 2016; Kasianov, 2018).

The significant place of Ukraine in Russian identity is another important subject of matter. In this respect, leading scholars focus on the historical, linguistic, and cultural ties that Russians and Ukrainians share by virtue of their Slavic roots, Kievan origins, shared legacy, the traditional Russian perception of a single and big Russian nation that gathers Russians, Ukrainians, and Byelorussians under a common roof, Russia's security interests (See Furman, 1997, as cited in Torbakov, 2014; Molchanov, 1996, 2002; Tsygankov, 2015; Kasianov, 2018).

On the part of Ukrainians, the matter of identity is seen as a value-oriented civilizational choice. In line with this, some intellectuals interpret the Ukrainian perceptions towards the West and Russia in terms of identity structures regarding civilizational inclinations, values, etc. (See Torbakov, 2014).

Many scholars, including the above-mentioned ones, also use rhetoric that emphasizes the impact of Russia-West relations and identity concerns, which are rooted in these relations, on the Ukraine crisis and the connections between them with significant concepts of equal partnerships, equality in bilateral relations, observance of great power status of Russia by the West, etc. (See Molchanov, 2000; Kosachev, 2007; Lukyanov, 2010, 2016; Torbakov, 2014, 2017; Zevelev, 2016; Tsygankov, 2016; Kasianov, 2018).

In summary, many leading scholars mainly focus on the significance of identity issues in Russian policymaking processes, bilateral close ties of Ukrainian and Russian identity, and the identity issues between Russia, the West, and Ukraine as the indispensable root of the current events while some others mainly emphasize the domestic authoritarian nature and imperialist tendencies of Russian political elite. Notwithstanding the differences in opinion and proposed conclusions of scholars, this study does not claim that these scholars with their ideas reject the significance of geopolitical considerations, state interests, security concerns, economic and political structures, and related issues. Rather, all these scholars admit the remarkable role of these factors in the policy choices and state actions with special attention given to the identity issues in the analysis of the important events and understanding of the underlying roots of Russia's foreign policy toward Ukraine.

In this respect, as the above-mentioned scholars tried, it is important to analyze underlying factors of political responses on the side of Russia to properly evaluate the Ukraine crisis in 2014. In this vein, this thesis, as mentioned above, aims to put forward identity-related factors and perceptual causes of different Russian reactions to Ukrainian revolutions within the process in addition to the state security interests, geopolitical factors, and security issues.

In line with the stated objectives and perspectives, in the first chapter, this thesis examines the Russian identity projects in the post-Cold War period, Russia-Western

relations in the 1990-2014 period and their mutual interaction with Russian identities, and finally the "compatriots" and "Russian World" concepts forming soft power policies of Russia, respectively. In the second part, it analyzes the formation of a new Ukrainian identity with independence in the period of 1990-2014, the various difficulties experienced in this process, the importance of Ukraine to Russia, conflicts in identity and history between the two sides with the potential effects of a separate and unique Ukrainian identity and historiography on Russian identity and historiography, the perspective of the Russian political elite towards Ukraine. and, finally, Ukraine's tough situation between Russia and the West. In the third and last chapter, it evaluates Euromaidan and its aftermath and Russia's reactions (the annexation of Crimea and the events in Eastern Ukraine), the process of legitimization of Russian policies by the Russian administration, and the discourses it used (especially those on the Crimea, Donbas, and Minsk agreements) with a highly critical and accusative attitude toward the West and, finally, the results of the survey, in which the Russian people, influenced by the Russian media instruments, expressed their perceptions and opinions in the post-Euromaidan period.

The main sources of this study are the works of distinguished academic elites who are at the forefront of International Relations discipline and Russian studies, the writings and discourses of political leaders and prominent Russian identity constructors in accordance with the social constructivist perspective, the surveys of research centers in order to show the ideas of Russian society, especially after 2014. While these resources are accessible, they are essential in providing key data to achieve the purposes of this study. In this study, along with quantitative data such as survey results, a qualitative technique such as comparative historical research is also applied. Lastly, evaluating the data to be obtained from these sources in this study includes comparative, objective, and analytical perspectives.

## CHAPTER I

### **RUSSIAN IDENTITY PROJECTS, RUSSIA-WEST RELATIONS, RUSSIAN EXISTENCE OUTSIDE RUSSIA**

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of many independent states, new identity debates have occurred in all these countries and the governments of these countries have brought different identity projects to the fore in order to ensure national unity, solidarity, and independence. Identity projects in Russia, which include different ethnic/religious structures and went through very difficult periods in many areas after the Cold War, are very important in this context. The most important point of these projects is that they had a significant impact on Russia's domestic and foreign policies in the following years. Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, different circles put forward many different identity projects that took their intellectual roots from previous periods, shaped them in accordance with the conditions of the new period, and tried to spread them among both the public and the political elite. In this way, these circles wanted to shape both the domestic and foreign policy of Russia with their own identity ideas in various contexts. With all these efforts, the most important thing is how the Kremlin developed a perspective on these identity projects, to what extent it implemented these ideas, and which ones it promoted during the Yeltsin and Putin eras. This issue constitutes what is important for this study. The main reason for this is to show how the Kremlin uses these identity projects pursuant to political ends and how these identity projects mutually affect Russian politics in the future. All identity projects that the Kremlin prioritizes (or need to prioritize as a consequence of the public opinion and pressures rooted in various spaces) in foreign policy play a key role in explaining Russia-West relations, Russia-post-Soviet states relations, and Russia's "compatriots' policy" and "Russian World" concept towards ethnic Russians and others with ties to Russia living in the post-Soviet zone.



This chapter first examines the identity projects that various segments put forward and promoted in Russia since the early 1990s, how and in which contexts the Kremlin has brought these projects and their ideas to the fore, and how the administration has used them for political purposes with the mutual impacts of identity projects and Kremlin's identity politics. Secondly, it examines how the Kremlin-led identity politics affected Russia-West relations between 1990 and 2014 and how these policies were affected simultaneously. Third and lastly, it examines the Kremlin's policies of diaspora, "compatriots" and "Russian World" towards ethnic Russians and non-Russian populations having ties to Russia in neighboring countries, under the influence of these identity processes.

### **1.1 RUSSIAN IDENTITY PROJECTS**

With the disintegration of the USSR and the emergence of the Russian Federation, various political actors in this country, namely political elites, intellectuals, prominent religious figures, etc., have brought to the fore many different identity projects, ideologies and related discourses that take their origins from earlier times. While the leading Russian political actors, mainly the political elites around the Kremlin, have brought some of these to a dominant position in Russia's domestic and foreign policies from time to time with the non-negligible impact of other thoughts as well, they have marginalized others that certain circles embrace in Russia. To be sure, it would not be wrong to say that Russian administrations and other political figures in Russia adopted and used the perspectives and discourses that were the products of different identity projects at the same time within the process. Furthermore, the inclusion of different types of nationalism and ideologies developing in Russia in the identity processes is quite important to see their significant impact on the formation of these different identity projects and their reflection on the people and the Russian administrations. In addition to these, certain sectors and leading figures have directed these identity projects to shape Russian public opinion and promoted them in various ways in this direction. Considering the identity projects reflected in the perspectives of different political elites since the early 1990s, identities of Western; civic Russian, whose defenders emphasize the concept of Russianness without regard for ethnic entities of citizens; ethnic-Russian,

with which certain factions put stress on the special and supreme role of people with Russian ethnic origin; imperial Russian, whose intellectuals highlight the imperial period and glorious Russian past, and non-Western Eurasian come to the fore. This section describes different Russian identity projects and how the Kremlin has used and promoted them since the 1990s.

The Western identity project comprises one of these projects. The main supporters of this identity project have been principally the liberals in Russia since the end of the Cold War. The essence of the Western identity project, as the Russian liberals set forth, is the belief that the Russian identity is a liberally-oriented Western identity and the belief that Russia and its people share the same fate, future, system, and values with the West. In this direction, after the Cold War, according to liberals, Russia should get closer and cooperate with the West in every field and even be like the West completely. Likewise, what Russia should do is follow the path of the USA and Western European countries, which are the representatives of the West. According to Ted Hopf (2002), who underlines similar features, liberals argue that Russia should have a strong economy, while at the same time they believed that Russia should be integrated into the West, which includes the USA and Western Europe, beyond the alliance (p. 214). Moreover, as Hopf proceeds his remarks, according to liberal Westernizers, in this way, plus cooperation through multilateral organizations, Russia would regain its "rightful" position in the world with a "benign unipolar" order under the US leadership. On the other hand, Tsygankov (2016) notes that while liberals assume a "natural" link between Russia and the West, they articulate this through key values of "democracy, human rights, and free-market" (p. 5).

The proponents of Russian civic identity, on the other hand, have tried to construct a Russian identity based on the civic nationalism that emerged in Western Europe, and tried to bring together all people living in Russia, regardless of ethnicity or religious affiliations, in a common Russian identity, *Rossiyanе*, by aiming to imbue all citizens with the awareness of belonging to the Russian Federation as a common state. In this

identity project, securing people's rights and freedoms against the state, as an established requirement of civic nationalism, has an important place. In fact, it can be said that this project, which is shaped by a nationalist movement and identity features originating from the West, can certainly associate Russia with Western identity. In the post-Cold War era, Valery Tishkov became the most important intellectual figure of this identity project movement (Kolstø, 2016, pp. 32-33).

It can be said that the concept of patriotism has also had an important place in the identity formation process. In this study, the concept of patriotism is discussed under the umbrella of civic identity. Indeed, when viewed in the context of Russia, the political establishment has developed the concept of patriotism in a way that all Russian citizens, regardless of ethnic and religious affiliations, would work for and serve the interests of Russian state. This fact may actually relate this concept to the civic identity to be formed and promoted among the masses rather than other identity projects. However, this does not mean that other identity projects and their advocates have not used this concept. They similarly used this concept to bring their own policy, thought, and value systems to the fore. As a matter of fact, during the period in Russia, all political segments treated and presented nationalist issues under the patriotic stamp since no political figures and discourses without connection to the patriotic claims were seen as legitimate (Laruelle, 2009, p. 1). Despite this, the important thing here is which identity project can be associated with this concept the most. The answer is the civic Russian identity. Finally, Orthodoxy has an important place in the concept of patriotism. As Anastasia Mitrofanova (2016) asserts, Russian patriots, generally with statist inclinations, maintain their “traditional” Orthodox roots (p. 107).

Additionally, in the context of Russia, the minds of the supporters of civic identity project have periodically been shaped by the impact of different ideologies, with the changing worldviews and political orientations of the political figures in the Russian administrations. In this regard, statism, as an ideology, has an important place in the civic identity. For example, while the defenders of the Western identity approached this

identity project with liberal assumptions, figures with statist ideology tried to consolidate this project in line with their worldviews. The ideology of statism, which was important in the historical framework in Russia, gained strength among the figures around Kremlin from the mid-90s. At the core of the statist ideology lies the understanding of a strong state with competence in every field, the need for stability, and the view of an equal role in the international arena without an ‘inferior’ role prescribed by liberals, as perceived by statist, in relations with the West. From the perspective of statism and leading statist, the values of power, stability, and sovereignty constitute the most important values rather than the ones such as freedom and democracy, as prescribed by liberals while they put the main emphasis on the state power to implement these values (Tsygankov, 2016, pp. 6-7). According to Russian statist, the world order is not a “unipolar” system, but a “multipolar one” without the supremacy of the US in world politics and in absolute equality between the sovereign states, despite an implicit “hierarchy” differentiating between great powers, including Russia, and other states (Hopf, 2002, p. 218). Within this identity insight, statist consider that Russia is not a purely Western country, that the country has different interests and values different from the West, and advise that cooperation should be made on pragmatic bases. In fact, this point of view makes statist different from civilizational identity thinkers, as the first is inclined to cooperate with the whole world, including the Western states, on the condition of the serving the interests of the country, while the other is against it (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 99). The most important factor that distinguishes statist thought from ethnonationalist thought is the homogeneity of the population and the priority of the state and state power while this differs the position of civic identity defenders under the impact of the statist ideology from the one of ethnic identity promoters. As the name of the ideology suggests, according to this view, the state takes precedence over ethnic identity. For the statist, as long as the state is strong and large, the ethnic elements that make up the Russian society and the Russian ethnic identity do not matter much (Kolstø, 2016, pp. 5, 22).

The greatest strength of statist thought, which stands out compared to other ideologies and ideas, is that it has a strong historical place in the Russian state tradition. It can be

said that since the times of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, a statist view has prevailed with the traditional emphasis on state power, stability, order, and centralized power accumulated at the hands of Moscow rulers. Looking at the imperial period, the imperial rulers aimed at a high level of loyalty among imperial subjects, mainly the Russian core, to the state and its ruler, the tsar while the policies were followed in this direction, as in the case of “official nationality” promoted by Count Uvarov (Riasanovsky, 1959). This means that the main emphasis was on the state rather than ethnic or civic notions of Russian nation during the imperial era. As Marlene Laruelle (2009) defines the historical context, the statist tradition was supported by “dynastic fidelity” and “ideological one” during the imperial and Soviet eras (p. 3). According to Astrid Tuminez (2000), while this is the case, the concepts of ethnic or civic nationality have not historically developed in society (pp. 25, 39).

Within the statist circles, there are some differences in terms of how to take a stance against the West. Some advocates of this ideology prefer to take a more aggressive stance in foreign policy, while others follow a more moderate perspective by considering Russia's economic and other problems. Andrei Tsygankov (2016) summarizes this situation as follows: "some statistes advocated relative accommodation with the West, while others favored balancing strategies" and this difference can be well observed in the policies of Primakov and Putin. (pp. 6-7). To be sure, Putin, in his early period of presidency, preferred an opportunistic accommodation with the West with high awareness of state capabilities and insufficient economic base different from Primakov who supported Russia's alliance with non-Western states to balance the Western hegemony under the US leadership.

Considering the parties that support the statist ideology, Tsygankov (2016) puts the military industries, the army, and security services at the forefront (p. 100). According to Tsygankov, the principal cause of such support for statism lies in the exports of arms and new military technologies. In fact, this view may mean that leaders and figures with pro-Western and liberal views have taken Russia back in terms of military technology

and arms sales compared to the USSR period. Liberals, whose main focus was economic development and rapprochement with the West, could not be expected to work on these areas within this insight. However, the statist who did not put the relations with the West so much in the foreground and prioritized state power could support these sectors. Those who were aware of this were likely to have ideas from the old Soviet era and put their interests first, undoubtedly saw statist thought as a way of salvation.

The promoters of ethnic Russian identity, which is related to ethnic Russian nationalism focus on the primary role of the Russian ethnic group living in Russia and the search for hierarchy related to other ethnic groups, unlike the civic one. In this perspective, Russian 'authentic' ethnic identity and culture should be protected from other ethnic identities and cultures. From the perspective of Russian ethnic identity, ethnic Russians should be seen as the main core of Russia by both political leaders and other ethnic groups, interests of this ethnic group should be protected, and Russian culture, language, and even faith should be spread among these other groups. In this context, unlike the statist ideas, the interests of ethnic Russians are at the forefront, not the state (Kolstø, 2016, pp. 1-2, 22). Moreover, the ethnic nationalists who support this project state that the Russian people need an ethnocultural base in the self-identification process. In connection with this, Aleksandr Khramov (2013) criticizes the intellectual figures, particularly Tishkov, who proposed the civic identity, on the grounds that they think that only the civic component is sufficient in the Russian self-identification process (p. 229). It is necessary to look at the background of ethnonationalism, which began to spread in Russian society in the early 2000s. In this respect, xenophobia, negative reactions against illegal immigration, and government spendings in the Caucasian emerge as the basis of the increasing prevalence of the ethnic-nationalist perspective among the mass Russian public. In this regard, while focusing on the inevitable rise of ethnic nationalism in Russia through anti-immigration and xenophobia by claiming that xenophobia affects more than half of the Russian society, Verkhovsky (2009) draws attention to the fact that for years, political parties such as the Russian Communist Party and Rodina have successfully spread xenophobia and anti-migration

perspectives in the society by using them for political purposes (pp. 94-95). Kolstø (2016), on the other hand, argues that the presence of the ethnic Russian population outside the borders of Russia with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the migration movements from Central Asian countries and the Caucasus fueled ethnic nationalism in the federation, and mentions that Russian nationalism is on a path that slides into ethnic nationalism with "racist" and "xenophobic" feelings (pp. 1-3, 7-8, 24). Grove (2011), on the other hand, links the reactions of ethnic nationalists to the Kremlin with the Putin administration's allowing immigration from Central Asia and the Caucasus and spending billions of dollars for the Caucasus. According to Emil Pain (2014), by 2013 xenophobia and hostility toward immigrants reached increasingly high levels, according to survey data while the image of the enemy for Russian ethnic nationalists would embody itself with primarily Muslims coming from Caucasia.

There is no doubt that the ethnic Russian groups remaining in the former Soviet geography and the issues related to their rights and freedoms were also important factors that strengthened the discourse of ethnic nationalism promoted by ethnic nationalist figures and intellectuals in Russia. Pal Kolstø (2016) attributes the orientation from statist to ethnic nationalist perspective to the "new diaspora" in the former Soviet zone with the migrations from the Caucasus and Central Asia (p. 24).

Another important point is that ethnic nationalism in Russia and the associated ethnic identity project predates the 1990s. With its most concrete examples, the concept of Russian ethnic nationalism can be associated with the period of the USSR. Nikolai Mitrokhin (2003), on his part, dates Russian ethnonationalism to the 1950s and 1960s with his examples of leading ethnonationalist figures such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn (pp. 19-20). According to John Dunlop (1983, 1985), most post-WWII Russian nationalists are actually "culturalists" (or "vozrozhdentsy") with their concerns about Russian cultural traditions, the Russian countryside, and to some extent Orthodoxy. These, in fact, constitute the principal focus of Russian ethnic nationalists that Dunlop spoke of culturalism. On the other hand, as Marlene Laruelle (2009) puts forward,

contemporary Russian nationalists mainly have inspiration from the works from the Soviet period (p. 2).

Aside from the main emphasis on Russian ethnic identity and culture, there is no consensus within this group. Some view negatively some lands such as the North Caucasus where different ethnic and religious groups are concentrated and want Russian-dominated regions to be retained. According to Anastasia Mitrofanova (2016), the 'true' nationalists (she may probably have phrased it this way to indicate that such nationalists saw themselves as such) who distinguish themselves from "statists" and "patriots" argue that Russia should be an ethnically homogeneous country and a new type Soviet Union or a new Russian empire are not in their agenda (pp. 106-107). The most important intellectual mastermind of this type of ethnic nationalism, which can be defined as separatist, is Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. As an anti-communist Soviet dissident as he showed in his prominent letter to the Soviet leaders (Solzhenitsyn, 1974), Solzhenitsyn (1990) believed that except for Belarus and Ukraine the Russians should give up the non-Russian-Slavic lands and that the imperial thought should be abandoned, and he wrote articles in this direction. On the other hand, some advocate the transformation of Russia into a nation-state within its current borders. As Marlene Laruelle (2009) notes, there have been "separatist" thoughts and "radical" inclinations within the ethnic-nationalist currents, yet, in general, the ethnonationalists support the preservation of the current Russian borders and even reunification with post-Soviet lands provided that ethnic Russians are hierarchically in a superior position in terms of rights, interests, and position dominates the ethnonationalist environment in Russia (p. 43). As understood from the remark of Laruelle, some elements of statism can also be found in the ethnonationalist ideas, particularly the protection of current borders and even an enlargement across the post-Soviet zone with a strong state ruling over various nations, cultures and huge spaces. Nevertheless, the most important point of difference between the statist thought and ethnonationalist teachings lies on the importance that ethnonationalists give to the role of Russian ethnic core while in the statist ideology, there is not much significance to the role of ethnic Russians, rather to the state and its power structures in general. Besides these, some others act with the understanding of



historical Pan-Slavism and, regard countries such as Ukraine and Belarus and the Slavs living there as a natural part of Russia while Solzhenitsyn's views can be evaluated within this context as well (See Solzhenitsyn, 1990). It can be mentioned that such ethnonationalists with pan-Slavist and irredentist views are also interested in the regions where ethnic Russians are concentrated in the former Soviet geography and concentrate on the Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, Northern Kazakhstan, and the Baltic regions.

Apart from these, other groups have emerged with ethnic-nationalist opinions that can be defined as the more extreme right and ultra-nationalist/fascist. Similarly, this type of nationalism became strong during the Soviet period and stood out as anti-regime factions with a "larger element of statism" and "aggressive messianism" and fascist ideas (Yanov, 1978; Laqueur, 1993; Duncan, 2000; Shenfield, 2001). Since the 2000s, such fascist nationalists have aimed at an ethnically/racially pure society, which led to the emergence of various violent movements in Russia (Verkhovsky, 2016, pp. 76-77). As a matter of fact, skin-head groups that emerged over time, increasing violence against foreigners and immigrants and pogroms support this statement. However, they have remained marginal in the eyes of the state and the public in general and have faced various law enforcement and judicial processes, particularly after the fascist-inspired protests in Moscow in 2010 that necessitated repressive actions in the eyes of the Russian administration.

Many of the ethnic nationalists with ultranationalist orientations are against illegal immigration and have xenophobic thoughts, but it can still be argued that some, or most, of these, also desire the preservation of current borders. In fact, ethnic nationalism and associated identity have their origins in the latest period of Imperial Russia to preserve the empire under the banner of Russian nationalism with Russian supremacy over other imperial subjects and a certain level of Russian chauvinism. Later, during the Soviet period, ethnic nationalism, despite all negative prospects, survived with the help of the ones who sought to promote ethnic Russian interests until the Glasnost period. With the free environment provided by Glasnost, ethnic Russian nationalists and identity

doctrinaires who already had different views were able to develop their views and disseminate them among the public through various sources. In addition, the immigrant flows from the Caucasus and Central Asia and the negative news and propaganda spread by the media against the immigrants caused an increase in xenophobia in the regions where ethnic Russians live predominantly, which was in the interest of the advocates of the ethnic nationalist movements, particularly of the ultranationalist circles.

Imperial Russian identity, on the other hand, is related to Russia's historical administrative system and empires. In fact, arguably, Russian imperialists desire for a Russian Empire whose borders exceed the current ones. Moreover, the Russians, who had possessed an expanding empire since the time of tsardom, actually had an empire in a way during the USSR period in addition to the pre-revolutionary Russian imperial system. It can be stated that the USSR had a rigid administration system whose power was mostly based in Moscow. Moreover, Moscow's dominance area in the USSR period was much larger than in the imperial period. Given these, Russia has never had a nation-state and democratic government tools like Western European nations. That's why, the culture of ethnic and civic identities did not exist traditionally in Russian history (Tuminez, 2000, pp. 25-39), as mentioned above. Moreover, the traditional imperial identity patterns with the works of imperialist intellectuals have still an impact on the current identity structures, public opinion, and state policies. According to Alexander Motyl (2004), Russians are not, still, able to improve democratic structures because of the "yoke" of the past imperial traditions (pp. 174-175). Moreover, the current state of ethnic and religious variety in Russia with a large territorial size is another factor that favor an imperialistic character. As Emil Pain (2016) states, the fact that Russia currently has an imperial order as a result of the fact that Russia has structurally different ethnic groups and the territories they dominate, plus the enormous size of the Russian Federation, also trigger these imperial thoughts (pp. 62-63).

Considering that imperialists aim to contain different national and ethnic identities by the nature of imperialist ideology, it can be said that the homogeneous ethnic Russian state is not on their agenda. In this context, Pal Kolstø (2016) argues that for imperialists, similar to statist, ethnic concerns do not occupy an important place as long as the state is large and powerful. (p. 5). Although it is different from the ethnic nationalists in this way, from time to time, Russian chauvinism and the “naturalness” of Russian ethnic supremacy are also encountered in imperial nationalist discourses. The historical examples of the Black Hundred Movement and Pamiat (later Russian National Union and National Republican Party of Russia) with their allegiance to monarchism, Orthodoxy, and significant levels of Russian ethnic supremacism can confirm this allegation (Laqueur, 1993; Shenfield, 2001; Kolstø, 2016; Pain, 2016). But in general, it is possible to distinguish the circles that defend the imperialist identity from the ethnic Russian nationalist circles with their perspective on the nation state. Indeed, with exceptions, the bridging role and unifying role of Russian culture between peoples within the old imperial borders is mostly emphasized rather than pure ethnic Russian nationalism in the perspective of the defenders of imperialist identity. In this context, it is necessary to highlight the dominance of the civic nationalist view in this identity project rather than an ethnic one. Furthermore, with the special emphasis on a large and powerful state without a particular concern on the role of ethnic Russians in general, arguably, strong traces of statist ideas can be found in the teachings of the imperial Russian identity promoters.

Considered together with the West, Russia's imperial character, as assumed and perceived by imperialists, has been shaped by the concept of great power while this identity has, historically, been constructed in a defensive way against the “Western” other. Emil Pain (2016) claims that since the 19th century, Russian imperial identity developed with a kind of "essentialism and defensive imperial character" with a perceptually persistent “external threat” (pp. 50-51, 60-61). Undoubtedly, the concept of great power traditionally took its origins from the imperial period in the framework of the formation of the Russian self. According to Iver Neumann (2008), the concept of great power since the times of Peter the Great indicates that this view played an

important role in the development of Russian identity. This view shows us the extent of importance such a discourse has under the umbrella of imperial identity. It should not be surprising that in such a case, imperial awareness among the Russian political elite, academic elite, and the public would be at a significant level. Moreover, under the impact of imperialist thoughts, some political and academic circles advocated the expansion of Russia's territory after the Cold War and even reunification of the old union under Moscow's domination.

Eurasian identity, as another significant identity project, is a point of view, in which the advocates of civilizational perspective emphasize that Russia is a unique civilization, different from Western and Eastern civilizations. The historical antecedent of this perspective, Eurasianism, which emerged in Russian "emigre" culture in the period between the two world wars after the Bolshevik revolution, developed over time and had leading intellectuals such as Lev Gumilev during the Soviet era. Since the 1990s, this identity project has come to the fore with the contribution of many scholars with different views, such as Alexander Dugin and Alexander Prokhanov. According to this view with the founding myths created by Dugin (1996, 1997, 2000), Russia is defined as neither a Western nor an Eastern civilization. Russia, in fact, belongs to the Eurasian civilization and is the pioneer of this civilization with Russian supremacy and messianism. In this view, which divides the world into two opposing groups (Eurasians and Atlanticists), some parts of Europe and Asia (named as Heartland) are depicted as being within this civilization, with the 'natural' sphere of influence of Heartland over the parts of Asia and Europe also called Rimland. This perspective supports an alliance view between different ethnic identities and beliefs existing in Eurasia; that is because each of these constitutes natural allies of Russia and one another in Eurasia's struggle with the Atlantic world. The Atlantic powers, defined as imperialist naval powers, are the enemies of the 'peaceful' land civilization of Eurasian civilization, and a specific discourse of coexistence between the two parts is rare. In short, according to Dugin, in this theory and identity project, Russian messianism, the supremacist role of the Russians and bipolar world discourses are dominant. Plus, neo-Eurasianists bring together imperial nationalism and ethnonationalism in a way. As a matter of fact, the

supremacist discourse of the Russians and the primary role of the pioneer imply the assumptions of ethnonationalism to some extent. According to Laruelle (2009), within the context of the Eurasian Empire, there is no mention of equality between nations and ethnic groups, rather it emphasizes Russian supremacy over other imperial subjects (p. 43). Furthermore, the neo-Eurasianist project by its nature aims for an imperial order in Eurasia while the Russian-led Eurasian Empire discourse supports another discourse of great power articulated by Russian imperialists. Emil Pain (2016) asserts that neo-Eurasianists have, all the time, tried to promote the brand of “empire” (pp. 68-69). To be sure, neo-Eurasianist teachings are different from the ethnonationalists who prefer an ethnically homogenous Russia. Wayne Allensworth (2009) states that Eurasianists aim for a united empire with different ethnic and religious groups while “pogrom nationalists”, he labels such ethnonationalists in this way, creating polarizations between ethnic Russian and other non-Russian groups living in the Russian Federation and the former Soviet Union zone (p. 105). Aside from these their demands and proposals for foreign policy actions differ from the ones of statist. Tsygankov (2009, 2016) states that while statist are open to pragmatic cooperation with anyone including the Western states, Eurasianists principally defend the notion of a unique Russian identity free from the West and the main step is forming alliances with non-Western nations to balance the West with their emphasis on “zero-sum” nature of cooperation with the West.

In general, the Eurasianists disseminate this identity project in Russia through *Zavtra* Newspaper and *Izborsk* Club. Moreover, this thought and its affiliated structures bring together intellectuals with different views. In fact, while Dugin is mainly interested in the concepts of great power and empire, Prokhanov leans a little more towards the “positive” Soviet period and highlights the socialist economy in his writings. In his works, Prokhanov (2011a, 2011b, 2016, 2019a, 2019b, 2020) clearly focuses on the glorious Russian/Soviet past, Soviet messianism, the sacred merits of a socialist economy, etc. On the other hand, there are others with other inclinations including Orthodox nationalist and ultra-nationalist ones. In these structures, it can be

seen an alliance, at least temporary, between “Reds” and “Whites” (Allensworth, 2009, p. 105).

It is necessary to examine how the political establishment, which can be described as the Kremlin, handled and used these identity projects, and how these projects were reflected in the policies of political leaders influential in the Russian politics. Without a doubt, before doing this, it is important to emphasize that no identity project can be handled independently of each other in Russian domestic and foreign politics; that is because all these projects developed by their initiators at the same time, more or less reflected, simultaneously, on the policies of the leading figures of political establishment and affected the political discourses. The political segments have used various identity discourses, popularized by various circles among the people, for their own political purposes and for the sake of gaining support from the public. It should not be ignored that Russian administrations need to take the public opinion into consideration regardless of the authoritarian nature of the administrative structures. In this context, what is the most important issue is that the Kremlin has brought different identity discourses to the fore from time to time without ignoring others.

In examining how the Kremlin has used these identity projects periodically since the 1990s, it is necessary to mention the civic identity project, which is intended to be constructed in Russia's domestic politics and social life. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the large-scale crises encountered in every stage, Yeltsin's administration from the very beginning tried to bring together the citizens of the Russian Federation, which includes different ethnic and religious groups, in order to strengthen the newly established state in political, military, economic and other aspects. The solution was a Western-style Civic Identity project for the Yeltsin administration. As a matter of fact, in this way, the Russian administration would have brought together people with different religious and ethnic ties, prevented possible separatist attempts, and also strengthened the newly established state.

Putin and Medvedev administrations also took this identity project seriously and worked in this direction. While the Russian administration was developing this project with liberal ideals until the mid-90s, it blended statist thoughts and civic identity notions after Primakov replaced Kozyrev. In fact, this means that the civic identity project, which has always been on the agenda of the Kremlin, can be associated with both Russian Western identity understanding and statist ideology. As Marlene Laruelle (2009) clarifies, Russia still shows the characteristics of a federation with equal rights among ethnic groups and no “official” mention of ethnic Russians in terms of role and position (p. 42). As a matter of fact, high-level Russian political leaders, who were proponents of both views, generally did not prioritize ethnic and religious identities, despite periodical exceptions. For example, as Ted Hopf (2002) asserts, Russian liberals, from the beginning, did not prefer an ethnonational perspective with respect to the Russian identity both in domestic and foreign policy settings (p. 214). Moreover, in all these periods, Moscow tried to strengthen this project with the concept of state patriotism. Especially after the bloody events in 1993 and perceived “political polarization”, the Yeltsin administration deemed a national ideology necessary in the name of national unity, brought "patriotic centrism" to the fore, and later Primakov, Alexander Lebed, and Vladimir Putin (patriotic programs in education; discourses on historical continuity, Russia’s historical greatness, its primary place in the world arena, the existence of Russian sphere of influence; rehabilitation of the Soviet Past constitute remarkable examples) also benefited from this ideological perspective (Laruelle, 2009; Blakkisrud, 2016).

Looking at the Yeltsin-Kozyrev period, it can be said that in addition to the civic identity, the Russian administration wanted to construct a Western identity among the Russian society. One of the most important reasons for this was, undoubtedly, the administration's desire to modernize Russia in various fields, especially the economy, in cooperation with the West and to overcome the legacies of the communist past and shocks in the early post-Soviet period. Moreover, prominent figures in the administration, especially the foreign minister Kozyrev, exhibited a Westernist/Liberal attitude, believed that the best step for solving Russia's problems was getting closer to

the West, and moreover, they thought that Russia was actually a natural member of the West. In fact, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, liberal-minded political figures obtained a real chance to transform Russia into a modern Western state with liberal/democratic components (Tsygankov, 2009, p. 187). According to them, free market, liberal economy, democracy and Westernization were the main goals. Shock therapy initiated by Egor Gaidar and privatizations are the most concrete examples of this. However, with the economic problems in the country, the civil war in Chechnya, and the foreign factors that are mentioned later in detail in this work, liberal and Western-minded actors would lose power, and statist thinkers would have a powerful role in the administration instead. The result would be the loss of attractiveness of liberal/democratic thoughts among the high-level political elite around Kremlin and the mass public. As Emil Pain (2016) states, the later period under the leadership of Putin would demonstrate a sharp contrast with the administrative policies of Yeltsin's early years (pp. 57-58). Although Emil Pain's thought has merit in terms of the quality of democracy, human rights, free market, relations with the West, etc., it cannot be said that Westernization has completely disappeared in Russia during the Putin period. As Tsygankov (2016) notes, being aware that Russia needs modernization and economic recovery, of the demands of commercial elites, and that the state's resources were limited, Putin gave importance to cooperation with the West, at least during the first and second terms of presidency, besides the ideology of statism, did not follow confrontational policies toward the other side, and gave importance to modernization in various fields (pp. 137-139).

During the Medvedev period, the interim period, Medvedev gave the equal level of importance to modernization and relations with the West. As Tsygankov (2016) confirms this statement, Medvedev's coming to office and the policies he carried out showed that the Russian administration was not captive to any ideology (p. 182).

It can be said that during the Yeltsin-Primakov period, the Kremlin developed a discourse and policy mostly within the framework of statist ideology. It was noted



above that the policies proposed by the liberals did not achieve the desired successful results and not solve the persistent problems while the statist gained strength. All these contributed to the high level of influence of *siloviki* (security class), Tsygankov asserts (2016, p. 180). Moreover, it is noteworthy that in the parliamentary elections in 1993 and 1995, communist and nationalist opponents gained a significant success. One of the most significant events was, to be sure, the protracted Chechen War. As a matter of fact, the war caused a widespread belief of the need for a “strong state, stability and order” among Russian public and politicians of various political orientations while the 1999 elections confirmed such a “consensus” shared by them (Laruelle, 2009, pp. 23-24). In this period, where confrontation with the West was avoided, the Russian government, which sought multipolarity and alliance with non-Western powers, tried to balance the Western hegemony in this period. In this regard, the notions of Russia as a great power, this state’s special interests and right for influence in the post-Soviet zone gained importance. As a matter of fact, Marlene Laruelle (2009, 2016) states that, like other leading politicians such as Yuri Luzhkov and Aleksandr Lebed, Primakov believed in the need of preservation of Russian interests in the “near abroad” without confrontation with the West, the logic of empire or ideological affiliations similar to the communism during the Cold War. On the other hand, according to Primakov, the liberal values were not incompatible with the great power status of Russia while alliances with other great powers such as China and India to balance the West was crucial (Tsygankov, 2009, 2016).

In the first two terms of Putin's presidency (2000-2008), apart from the modernization and Westernization, he brought the statist thought to the forefront. Underlining the importance of modernization and cooperation with the West though, Putin often stated that Russia needs to be a strong state, a great power, and follow a “unique” development path with different and difficult conditions in the country in addition to his strong emphasis on “sovereignty” and “non-interference” by the West in Russian politics, different from the liberal arguments (See Putin, 1999a, 2005a, 2006, 2007c). Another important point is that, unlike Primakov, Putin, who gave more importance to pragmatic relations with the West, at first, followed less confrontational and balancing policies

toward the West. In fact, in relations, unlike Primakov, Putin gave priority to the USA and European states, often emphasizing that Russia has a “European and Western identity” rather than an “Asian” one (Tsygankov, 2009, p. 189).

For this period, lastly, it is important to examine the concept of Sovereign Democracy, which emerged in 2006, as it is indispensable in order to see the statist thought and the related democratic development of Russia. Vladislav Surkov, the intellectual father of this concept, for many times, defended the democratic nature of Russia, emphasized the concept of state sovereignty and focused on the concept of non-interference in internal affairs of states in international relations (Surkov, 2006a, 2006b; Yedinaya Rossiya, 2006). Undoubtedly, various circles have accused this concept of trying to legitimize Russia's undemocratic nature and the government's incompatible policies with democracy, human rights and liberal values (Lipman, 2006).

After the interim period with Medvedev and with Putin's third presidency, ethnic nationalism and ethnic identity discourses left their mark on Russian politics. To be sure, it can be said that, as mentioned above, ethnic identity discourses and their popularity among the public have existed since the beginning of the 2000s. As a matter of fact, along with the ongoing political and economic problems in Russia, along with the migrations from the Caucasus and Central Asia to the Russian-majority regions, and the existence of Russian ethnic population outside of Russia led to the popularization of this type of nationalism among the people from the 2000s onwards. In terms of economic and political problems in Russia, Marlene Laruelle (2009) states that the unrealized social expectations can lead to the “symbolic and economic frustrations” through nationalist frames among society (p. 15).

The opposition to the Kremlin, whether moderate or radical, exploited the ethnic nationalism spreading among the people as a political tool. Increasing anti-immigration waves, xenophobia, protests, and organizations in this direction (such as DPNI and

other fascist organizations) played an important role in this period. In such an environment, the main purpose of the Kremlin, which did not want ideological polarization and ethnic nationalism to be used by rivals, was both to monopolize ethnic nationalism and to prevent ideological divisions (whose negative impact had been experienced during the events in Manezhnaia) in this way. Because of this, Putin and the top political elites started to use the concepts and views of ethnic nationalism more than before with the use of the term “Russkiy” to denote Russian people rather than the civic term “Rossiyane”. A remarkable example was the article of Putin in 2012 in which he emphasized the “historical role” of Russian ethnic core with a different understanding of civic nationalism of the previous decades (Putin, 2012b). In addition, the Kremlin created alternatives to the DPNI and other fascist organizations, suppressing these groups by not allowing them to be present on the political scene (Verkhovsky, 2016, pp. 78-81). Moreover, Putin administration would benefit from the Maidan events in Ukraine (plus the annexation of Crimea) by “stealing the thunder” of ethnonationalist instruments of the opposition through using the ethnonationalist arguments (Kolstø, 2016; Hale, 2016). Undoubtedly, other important reasons for the change in political discourse can be explained with Putin's controversial election, protests (including liberal and nationalist groups) and the tension between the liberal segment and the Putin administration. According to Henry Hale (2016), Kremlin, which lost the support of liberals in Russia and encountered the pressure of nationalists, turned the “nationalist and ‘conservative’ themes” into the new base of support (pp. 236-244).

Considering the widespread ethnonationalist views and increasing anti-immigrant attitudes among the people, the Kremlin had to monopolize and keep these discourses under control. As emphasized many times in this study, Russian public opinion has, all the time, been important for the Russian administrations, despite the authoritarian nature of the regime, and political leaders must take public opinion into account. As Verkhovsky (2009), White and Feklyunina (2014), and Hale (2016) also emphasize, the Russian government needs popular support and popularity among the people and therefore gives importance to public opinion and pressures.

Aside from these facts, the Kremlin's adoption of the concepts of ethnic nationalism and its monopolization and use does not mean that the Kremlin acts entirely with the ideas of ethnic identity. In general, it is worth emphasizing that the Putin administration has been careful in this regard. The Kremlin, which does not want to endanger domestic unity in a multinational structure and only wants to keep ethnic nationalism under control, actually uses nationalist concepts discursively, but does not reflect these concepts in practice and blurs these concepts (Shevel, 2011; Blakkisrud, 2016; Hale, 2016; Laruelle, 2016). The fact that Putin also mentions the dangers of ethnic nationalism in terms of fragmenting Russia shows that Putin clearly does not fully embrace the ethnic nationalist identity and related policy proposals (See Putin, 2012b).

The Kremlin, in fact, brought the conservative discourse to the fore also in this period as well, during Putin's third term as the president. It is most possible that in this way, the Putin administration wanted to create a strong alternative to ethnic identity project and discourse while keeping ethnic nationalism under control. As Marlene Laruelle (2016) argues, with conservative policies and the promotion of them, Putin aimed at marginalization of both nationalists and liberals (p. 275). With the problems and worsening relations with the West, and the ongoing problems within the country, Moscow wanted to benefit from Eurasianist/conservative discourses, which were, to some extent, spread among the public and utilized by the opposition as a tool. The administration has reinforced this new perspective with conservative policies, laws and programs. With the new conservative/ Eurasianist perspective, which was further promoted among the public through the means mentioned above and media, the Kremlin wished to locate Russia in a "Eurasianist grammar" as a "second Europe" different from the West/Western Europe perceived under liberal values (Laruelle, 2016, pp. 290-293).

Moreover, the Kremlin has cooperated to a certain extent with the Russian Orthodox Church, which avoids ethnic nationalism and emphasizes Russian civilization with conservative and religious values. According to Anastasia Mitrofanova (2016), the

Russian Orthodox Church, acting on the principle of universality, rejected ethnic identity, with some exceptions among its members, in addition to rejecting the statist civic identity and "isolationist" civil identity (pp. 108-114). On the other hand, in his speeches, the emphasis by Putin on the Russian language, culture, morality, Christian and traditional values, and the role of Orthodox Church is outstanding in the closer stance between the Kremlin and the Church (see Putin 2013a, 2013c). During the events in Ukraine, in relations with the West that deteriorated, and in domestic issues, the Russian administration often used these discourses to legitimize its policies.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that, especially with the annexation of Crimea, the Kremlin was able to utilize imperial Russian nationalism, in which Russian imperialists had, all the time, questioned the borders of the Russian Federation in the post-Cold-War era and advocated the Russian expansionism in the "near abroad" as well as depriving those who use ethnic identity discourses. As a matter of fact, such an expansion towards the former Soviet geography pleased the circles with the imperial mentality, and eliminated the imperial tools in the hands of those who opposed the political establishment. According to Emil Pain (2016), in the annexation imperial nationalists found "a great enthusiasm" and ignored the political conflicts with the administration (p. 70). As Kolstø (2016) argues, the annexation of Crimea led Putin to use both the ethnic and imperialist notions with expansion of the state and reunification of ethnic Russians (pp. 5-6). Emil Pain (2016), on his part, interprets the previous remark of Putin that describes the fall of the USSR as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe for Russia as a sharp contrast to the notions shared by the leaders in 1990s (pp. 57-58; See also Putin, 2005a). Such a statement actually showed an imperial mentality shared by the political elite, especially those around the Kremlin, and implied that the Kremlin could use imperial views in the following times.

As can be seen, this thesis, which examines the interaction of identity and politics from a social constructivist perspective, does not ignore material facts and political interests and concerns.

## **1.2 MUTUAL IMPACTS OF RUSSIAN IDENTITIES AND RUSSIA-WEST RELATIONS BETWEEN 1990-2014**

With the end of the Cold War and the establishment of a new Russian state, the period of ideological confrontation between the West and Russia, which existed during the Cold War, was ending. In the following period, the world expected much closer and better relations between the two former rival poles. To be sure, to analyze the mutual impacts of changing Russian identities to be adopted by the Kremlin and relations between Russia and the West on each other, it is necessary to evaluate the course of the relations between the West and Russia and the importance of the interactions between these parties in the construction of Russian identity/perceptions with the impact of these on the relations between the West and Russia. Likewise, such scholars as Molchanov (1996), Laruelle (2016), Tsygankov (2016), Zevelev (2016), Torbakov (2017), and Samokhvalov (2017) refer to the important role of the historical interactions between the West or Europe and Russia in the processes of identity and perception of the Russian people. According to them, the meaning of the concepts of the West and Europe have changed in Russian perceptions with different Russian identity patterns over time.

To evaluate the relations between Russia and the West in chronological order, the Yeltsin-Kozyrev term comes first. The Russian Federation, which was under Yeltsin and Kozyrev in the first half of the 1990s, went through the process of democratization, economic liberalization, solving its internal problems, reforms, and economic and political integration with the outside world through greater levels of cooperation and partnership with the outside world in the post-Cold War period with the Western identity understanding in the foreign affairs. The necessity that Yeltsin gave to these processes can be understood from the messages he gave to the Russian Federation Federal Assembly in the years between 1994-99 (see Yeltsin 1994, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999). Similarly, Foreign Minister Kozyrev repeatedly underlined the necessity of Russia's integration with the "civilized" West and viewed Russia as a natural ally of the democratic and liberal West. (See Kozyrev, 1992a, 1992b, 1992c, 1994). Furthermore, the foreign policy concepts of 1992, 2000 and security concepts of 1997, and 2000,

which showed Russia's official political position, clearly stated that Russia's domestic economic, political and social problems need to be resolved, and that Russia's democratization and transition to free-market economy need to be guaranteed, and that close cooperation and close relations should be established with the outside world (Moscow State Institute of International Relations [МГИМО], 2002). Yeltsin, similarly, confirmed this point of view both discursively and through the agreements he signed. For example, during his term, the significant documents signed are: the "Charter of Russian-American Partnership and Friendship" in 1992, the "Treaty between the Russian Federation and the US on the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms" in 1993, and START II, both of which were not entered into force, Convention on the prohibition of the development, production, accumulation and the use of chemical weapons and their destruction signed in 1993 and entered into force in 1997, the partnership and cooperation agreement between Russia and the European Community in 1994, "Contract on Comprehensive nuclear test ban 1996" (not ratified and enter into force), and the "Fundamental Act on mutual relations, cooperation and security between the Russian Federation and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization" signed in 1997. Discursively, the Camp David declaration given jointly by American president Bush and Yeltsin in 1992 and the joint statement by US President Clinton and Yeltsin in their meeting held in Vancouver in 1993 form outstanding examples. However, in this process, it is crucial to remark that the Russian political elite gave less importance to foreign policy than in later times due to its internal problems (Rumer, 2007, p. 14). A crucial reason was the internal problems to be solved during the early period as mentioned in the previous section in detail.

During Primakov's foreign ministry and prime ministership, a relative cooling and divergence are observed in Russia's relations with the West. As analyzed in the former section, with his statist ideas, he was a strong advocate of a powerful Russian state and its great power status relatively independent of the influence of the West. In this direction, to sum up his foreign policy toward the West once again, far from the economic fundamentals, Primakov advocated close relations with emerging Asian countries such as China and India, and it seemed that Russia wanted to balance the West

by emerging as a great power and collaborating with such countries with an observable distance toward the West (Tsygankov, 2016; Ploky, 2017). Nevertheless, it is not wrong to state that Primakov avoided a completely confrontational attitude in relations with the West.

Vladimir Putin, after his ascent to the Presidency of Russia in 2000, began to attach great importance to establishing close ties and strengthening cooperation with the West with a pragmatic approach. As a matter of fact, with his election, Putin sought close relations and cooperation with the European Union with a friendly attitude (Tsygankov, 2016; Samokhvalov, 2017; Ploky, 2017). Marlene Laruelle (2016), on her part, draws attention to the Russian discourse of the European identity of Russia as emphasized by Putin (p. 276). In his article published in 2007 in the *Sunday Times*, Putin argues that “Russia is Europe’s natural ally” (Putin, 2007b). Stating that Putin has similarities and differences with the previous prime minister Primakov in his foreign policy preferences, Tsygankov (2016) and Ploky (2017) underline that Putin adopted the view that Russia is a great power, but sought continuous cooperation with the West. Putin, like previous administrations, believed that Russia's internal problems need to be resolved and that this would only be possible within the framework of close relations with the West, internal reforms, and economic liberalization. His speeches to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation between 2000 and 2007 and even the ones in 2012 and 2013 confirm this statement (see Putin, 1999a, 2000, 2001a, 2002, 2003a, 2004, 2005a, 2006, 2007c, 2012c, 2013d). Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (2006, 2007, 2008) also underlined the importance of cooperation with the Western states, especially in the field of security. During the period 2000-08, outstanding examples of Putin’s cooperative approach towards the West can be observed in his joint declarations and signed documents such as the “Joint declaration by Putin and EU leaders on strengthening dialogue and cooperation 2000”, “Memorandum of Understanding between Russia and the US on the Establishment of a Joint Center for the Exchange of Data from Early Warning Systems and Missile Launch Notifications in 2000”, his remarks for cooperation against international terrorism in his speech on September 24, 2001, the establishment of a “NATO-Russia Council” in 2002, his joint declaration with the



American president Bush in 2002, his remarks on cooperation during the 58th session of the UN General Assembly in 2003 and the Bucharest Summit in 2008 (see Knizhnyy Mir, 2008). The document titled "Russia's National Strategy until 2020" was approved in 2009, and even the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation in 2013 drew similar positive conclusions in this regard (See thailand.mid.ru., 2009 & VoltaireNetwork, 2013).

In terms of cooperation between the West and Russia, which was at the forefront in this period, the September 11 attacks in 2001, the "Global War on Terror" led by the USA, and the cooperation between Russia and the USA against terrorism had an important place. In particular, during the war in Afghanistan, the intelligence and logistics opportunities offered by Russia to the USA and its allies, and the military bases established by the USA in the "near" abroad were important indicators of this period of cooperation. Putin's pragmatic approach during his first term as president was actually important in this cooperation against terrorism. The main reason for this is that the Moscow administration, which branded the war in Chechnya as a campaign against terrorism and concerned on jihadist circles in the Caucasus, wanted to destroy fundamentalist terrorism in the regions close to its borders and wanted to create a positive international image by acting with the West in this war. All these form the pragmatic aspect of the cooperation between Russia and the West on the war on terror in a global scale.

Despite all these positive developments, the quality of relations and cooperation between Russia and the West did not reach the desired level in the coming years and the Russian administration displayed a more assertive stance over time. Without a doubt, there were important perceptual/identity-related reasons for this attitude. First of all, the desire for Great Power status shared by leading figures promoting the ideology of statism and the ones preferring the Russian imperial and Eurasianist identity frameworks, which Kremlin-oriented political elites wanted to be recognized by the West, did not find a reciprocal response from the Russian point of view, was important.

(Rumer, 2007; Torbakov, 2017). The great power status has, in fact, been an important element in Russia's foreign policies since the Kozyrev period. Kozyrev (1992a, 1994), in his articles, clearly emphasizes the great power status of the state as a "normal" great power.

The alleged Western-supported color revolutions in the former Soviet geography (Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, Kyrgyzstan in 2005, later in 2010) and the alleged Western pressure on Russia and its borders, both of which were also against the Great Power status in the Kremlin's perception, created a negative attitude in the Russian political elite, principally around the Kremlin, towards the West (Rumer, 2007; Tsygankov, 2015, 2016). NATO's policies both in the Balkans and in the "near abroad" of Russia have been another contentious issue between the West and Russia's political elite within the post-Cold War era. The leading Russian figures in/close to the Kremlin correlated the military actions in Yugoslavia on the one hand and NATO policies in the post-Soviet or former Communist bloc states on the other with Russian great power status. Vsevolod Samokhvalov (2017), for example, draws attention to the NATO military actions in former Yugoslavia and Kosovo with minimal attention to Russia's interests and great power status by the West during these actions while the Russian ruling elite perceived this as a signifier of the lack of recognition of "equality" of Russia with the Western great powers. Aside from the Balkans, NATO's expansions towards the former Soviet zone and allegedly sphere of influence of Russia and the allegedly unilateral actions of the United States such as the development of a missile defense system in Europe to be initiated by the US without the participation of Russia, unilateral US withdrawal from the ABM treaty, also created strong reactions from Moscow (Rumer, 2007; Tsygankov, 2015). These formed important underlying reasons for the assertive policies with the negative perceptions towards the West and for the strengthened statism in the political minds while the Westernist/liberal arguments lost much more intellectual power to a certain extent.

The Russian political elites in the Kremlin with statist orientation started to show a more assertive course of Russian foreign policies with the lesser role of liberal-minded politicians and circles as a result of Russian changed identity perceptions influenced by the course of relations and related perceptions (about status, equality, Russian interests, and values, etc.) between the two sides while this fact would have certain impacts on the relations between Russia and the West. As Eugene Rumer (2007) puts it, the West got used to seeing Russia as a declining power that would gradually disappear from international politics while the subsequent years and assertive policies of the Russian state came as a shock for the political elites of the Western states (pp. 7-8). On the other hand, Andrei Tsygankov (2015) states that the Russian political elite saw the Western policies and actions as ignorance of Russia's "interests, equality with the West, status in 'Eurasia' and values" as in the case of the conflict in Georgia, and officialized the assertive course of foreign affairs with a formal document titled "A Review of the Russian Federation's Foreign Policy" in 2007 (pp. 280-291). With regards to the insight of "equality" of Russia, Timothy Snyder (2018) notes that "the basic line of Russian foreign policy through 2011 was not that the European Union and the United States were threats. It was that they should cooperate with Russia as an equal." The official discourses of Russian leaders can show such views. In the message Yeltsin (1998) gave to the Federal Assembly, it is among the important topics that Russia has an important position in world politics, that Russia's position in the world should be moved further, and that Western states and their allies sometimes pursue policies contrary to the interests of Russia. Vladimir Putin (1999b), on the other hand, had been emphasizing the basis of equality in the relations between Russia and other countries in the message he gave to the Security Council in 1999, before he was the President of Russia. Possibly as a result of such negative perceptions towards the West, cooperation between Russia and the West in security areas remained limited with perceived a rivalry that emerged between the two sides in economic, military, and political matters; and periodical tensions in relations. As Samokhvalov (2017) exemplifies, Russia started to exhibit an increasingly negative attitude towards the participation of the European Union and OSCE in the processes of security issues in the Black Sea, and at the same time, in his 2008 speech in Bucharest, Putin criticized NATO and its members for both anti-Russian attitudes and non-implementation of commitments.

Putin's successor Dimitry Medvedev, to a significant extent, continued the assertive course of foreign policy, which was witnessed during Putin's presidency. In the early phase of the Medvedev period, the relations with the West were strained due to the 2008 Georgian War. In the context of the Russo-Georgian War, in his speech to the Federal Assembly in 2008, he accused NATO of sending its navies into the Black Sea using the crisis in Georgia as a "pretext" (Medvedev, 2008b). In addition, Medvedev, during the global crisis, mainly accused the "aggressive" US economic policies of the global economic crisis (Tsygankov, 2016). Similarly, in his interview with Reuters, he continued such accusations about the economic crisis (Stott, 2008). All these examples prove the statist-led assertive policies and negative views of the West on the side of the Kremlin. Despite the initially worsened relations and negative attitudes between Russia and the West, Medvedev attached great importance to reestablish close ties and multidimensional cooperation with the West in the following period. His proposal for a new comprehensive security treaty for Europe with the inclusion of the Russian Federation is a tangible example of this understanding, as Tsygankov (2016) notes. As Tsygankov points out, and as primarily understood from Medvedev's speeches to the Federal Assembly, as well as in his article *Go Russia* Medvedev drew attention to the importance of reform and modernization programs in Russia in various fields, especially in the economic field and in order to realize these, he saw close cooperation with the West as necessary (Medvedev, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2011a). The main reason for this was undoubtedly the persistence of Russia's internal problems, the limited resources, and the necessity of cooperation with the West to solve them, as the previous administrations had also been aware. For this reason, elements of Western identity come to the fore again, to a limited extent though, in addition to the statist point of view, albeit the strongest one, and the strengthening imperial and Eurasianist identities.

The historical debates between Russia and Europe during Putin's second term in the presidency and Medvedev's term are worth to be mentioned. The debates on the history of Ukraine were also made with European states and negatively disaffected the relations between the two sides, which are analyzed in the following sections in detail. The main

subject of the historical debate was the legacy of the Soviet Union. As Torbakov (2011) notes, in a historical discussion forum held in Vilnius in 2009, the participants emphasized Europe's totalitarian past in the Soviet period, and official documents published by both the European Parliament and OSCE branded Nazism and Stalinism as two similar totalitarian regimes (pp. 211-217). Moscow has described these documents as "aggressive anti-Russian provocation" and misinterpretation of history. As Torbakov also points out two important points in this context: on the one hand, these discussions coincided with a period when Russia and the European Union were competing geopolitically due to the enlargement policy of the latter, on the other hand, this historical debate had the potential to damage Russia's European identity and its role as the savior of Europe. In fact, in the speech delivered on the 60th anniversary of Victory Day, the Russian leader emphasized that Europe and the world were liberated and saved by Russia (Putin, 2005b).

The change of duties between Putin and Medvedev in 2012, and this process itself, marked a significant shift in Russia's foreign policy. As some scholars also refer, in this context, the leading political elites around the Russian political establishment started to embrace a "new conservative turn" (See Byzov, 2014; Laruelle, 2016; Tsygankov, 2015, 2016; Zevelev, 2016; Robinson, 2019). As explained in the previous section, the Kremlin, using the Eurasianist identity as an intellectual weapon against ethnic nationalism, has developed a conservative discourse that emphasizes the Russian religion, language, traditions, traditional socio-economic patterns, and the Church in this direction. Moreover, as explained in this section, in addition to the worsened West-Russia relations over time for various reasons, the tensions experienced after the election of Putin allowed the Kremlin to develop its conservative and Eurasianist discourses in a fundamentally anti-Western manner. The alleged Western role and support in the protests against Putin and the Magnitsky case are important in making these relations worse. Moreover, the ideological polarizations, which the Kremlin and Putin had kept under control for a while, increased with the 2012 protests, while ethnic and liberal circles were getting stronger and they formed a strong bloc against the Kremlin. In such an environment, the Kremlin, which wanted to both preserve political

support and prevent ideological disintegration, prioritized conservative rhetoric. Byzov (2014), on the other hand, draws attention to the active liberal minority and mostly the passive conservative majority since the 1990s and highlights that the Russian political elite has given more attention to this majority since 2012; that is because this conservative majority had played a major role in Putin's election as president for the third time, and the administration saw this as an important support in the increasing “polarization” in the country. What Byzov clarifies is that the Putin administration, in the third term, which had already lost the support of liberals with protests, gave significant consideration to the opinions of the conservative majority, the principal supporter of the president and his political party. Besides these, the concern on the concepts of political regime, established politics, sovereignty, and order were influential in the adoption of conservative approaches by the Kremlin. It should be kept in mind that the Kremlin administrations with statist political views gave significant importance to these concepts over time. One of the leading Russian political experts, Boris Mezhev (2016) observes that the Russian administration defined conservatism as protecting the existing system, territorial integrity, strong administration, state sovereignty, and stability. Likewise, some other scholars also argue that the administration of Vladimir Putin used conservative and Eurasianist ideas to a large extent to legitimize the political administration in the country, implement policies in the direction desired by the administration, secure the sovereignty of the country, and increase the power and influence of the Russian state both internally and externally (Tsygankov, 2016; Zevelev, 2016).

It is also vital to remark that there were ongoing problems, mainly economic, in Russia during the process. Worsening relations with the West at a time of Russian need for the West led Kremlin to use anti-Western rhetoric to divert public attention from economic issues to foreign affairs. Being aware of this necessity, it should not be ignored that the Medvedev administration had tried to improve its relations with the West. However, the Putin administration, which saw that another reset policy was getting harder under the changing conditions, aimed to get rid of the economy-based reactions among the people through conservative discourses and policies. Umland (2013) and Snyder (2018) blame

the Putin administration for such a conservative turn as it tries to make up for its failures to resolve domestic issues. According to these scholars, the Russian government needed and cooperated with anti-Western ultra-nationalist Russian intellectuals. In particular, Snyder accuses the Putin administration of targeting the European Union and successful Western institutions by showing its own failure as a success. According to the scholar, the Russian administration maintained close relations with especially anti-union and ultra-nationalist political groups in the European Union states and saw the Eurasian Union project as a trump card against the EU.

The tangible reflections of conservative attitudes among Kremlin elites can be reached in the discourse of Putin and state politics. Already, in his speeches to the Federal Assembly in 2012 and 2013 with his article titled *Russia and the Changing World*, Putin puts clear stress on these matters (see Putin, 2012c, 2012d, 2013d). In the *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* in 2013, such an attitude can also be well-observed (VoltaireNetwork, 2013). The conservative laws enacted by the administration and the elevated importance of the Russian Orthodox Church confirm the rising importance of conservatism as well.

To be sure, the adoption of anti-Westernist Eurasianist and conservative approaches by the Kremlin affected the relations, already problematic, between Russia and the West negatively in the following times. The perception of the West as a “threat” to the great Russian civilization, as now adopted by the circles in Kremlin, would be a remarkable aspect of the tense and worsened relations between the Russian and West, as observed in the Ukraine crisis (Zevelev, 2016). Vsevolod Samokhvalov (2017), as an example, notes that the perception of Europe had a more negative meaning for Russia during the period of Putin’s reelection to the presidency after the years-old debate on the role of “master-apprentice” between the two (see also Neumann, 2016; Morozov, 2016; Torbakov, 2017). At the heart of this debate is whether Russia or Europe (Western Europe) plays a predominant role. While the circles advocating the Western identity ascribed a superior role to Western Europe and the USA, as they advocated taking the

West as an example in the development of Russia, the circles who defended the great Russian civilization and the imperialists who emphasized the glorious Russian past and greatness undoubtedly claimed Russia to have a superior position in relations with Europe. The Russian administration, which mainly adopted Eurasianist and imperial rhetoric, naturally put more emphasis on Russia's pioneering position.

In the following years, the Ukraine Crisis, the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the events in Donbas, and the Ukraine war in 2022 brought the relations between the West and Russia to the level of confrontation experienced during the Cold War period.

The most important conclusion to be drawn from this subsection is that, as the conventional social constructivist approach puts at the forefront, material facts have an important place in the identity and perception processes. As in this study, the important thing is to examine how the material facts and social/ideational concepts form a whole and their impact on international relations and Russia in particular.

### **1.2.1. Russia's Approach towards the Western-Led International System**

The international system that the West has desired to construct since the 1990s and Russia's reactions to it is an important subject of analysis. Parallel to this, this subsection touches upon the issues, which have led to both conciliatory and confrontational relations between the Russian and the West side within time. In this regard, the discussions on international/regional organizations and their structure, duties, and institutional power and authority, discussions on the multipolarity of the international system, the concept of Sovereign Democracy, the changing energy agendas of the two sides, and the developments in the Middle East have been key issues.



The international/regional organizations, the United Nations structures, the United Nations Security Council, and OSCE, for a limited time though, have been the institutions that the Russian political elite has attached great importance in terms of politics and security from the very beginning with disagreements between Russia and the West on the power, authority and mission of them. The basis of the disagreements was undoubtedly the West's desire to dominate the international system with security and economic organizations such as NATO and the EU, rather than institutions such as the UN and OSCE, as the Kremlin perceived. When the Foreign Policy Concepts of the Russian Federation were adopted in 1992, 2000, and 2013; the National security concepts of 1997 and 2000; Russia's Military Doctrine of 2000; and the annual messages of Boris Yeltsin to the Federal Assembly between 1995 and 1999 are examined closely, the importance that this state attaches to the UN and the UN Security Council and the emphasis on their further strengthening can be seen (See Yeltsin 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999; VoltaireNetwork, 2013; МГИМО, 2002). Similarly, in these documents and the president's annual messages, it is understood that Russian administrations had a negative attitude towards the efforts of states and other international organizations, especially NATO, to reduce the role of the UN. Yevgeniy Primakov (1996) likewise emphasized the importance of institutions such as the UN and OSCE in his article and emphasized that NATO cannot replace them. Similarly, Putin emphasized from time to time that the United Nations is the most effective and competent institution in the international arena, and advocated making the United Nations more effective (Putin, 2001a, 2003a, 2003b, 2007a, 2013d). In his Munich speech, Putin (2007a) emphasized that NATO could not replace the UN and stressed that the political and military policies of the countries would be legitimized only under the umbrella of the UN. The leading figures in Kremlin had, in fact, already embraced this approach which is reflected in the Military Doctrine of 2000 (See МГИМО, 2002). In addition, in the Syrian Civil War, where Russia and the West have different views and interests, Vladimir Putin addressed the United Nations and the Security Council as the sole legitimate mechanism for a solution in Syria, both in his article titled *Russia and the Changing World* and in his message to the Federal Assembly in 2013 (Putin, 2012d, 2013d). Undoubtedly, this kind of emphasis on the UN in the process and the negative attitude toward the rising role of NATO relative to the UN clearly show how

the Russian administrations have perceived NATO and the West over time. The rise of NATO and its political and military activities around the world over time have been an important factor in the construction of negative perceptions on the parts of the Russian political elites over the West and in the weakening of liberal circles in Russian domestic and foreign policies.

The Kremlin's different perspectives and approaches toward OSCE actually show the influence of distinct Russian identity ideas that the Kremlin embraced in different periods. During the period of liberal dominancy in Russia, and to a certain extent even in the period under Primakov, the leaders generally attached great importance to OSCE in terms of European security and Russia's place in it. In this regard, Kozyrev and Primakov generally focused on the strengthening of this institution and its primary role of it in European security with their positive attitudes (See Kozyrev, 1994; Primakov, 1996). According to Samokhvalov (2017), Russia's leadership desired the emergence of OSCE as the primary institution of the European continent through efforts of strengthening the institution. To be sure, the most important reasons for such support were the leadership's concerns on national sovereignty, territorial integrity, the desire to protect ethnic Russians living outside Russia, to strengthen the Russian position in the European security, and their desire to strengthen an alternative structure to NATO, and the USA, in Europe (Morozov, 2005). Especially Russian statesmen with statist understanding attached significant importance to these concepts and related interests and it is not surprising that they wanted to utilize this institution for the sake of achieving these principles and state interests. From the beginning of the 2000s, the Kremlin's view of this organization was negative, and the importance of this institution decreased for Russia. Although statesmen with statist ideas relied on this institution at first, they perceived that they could not actually get what they wanted and achieve the objectives of Russia. Both the criticism of OSCE in the Russian elections, the reports of human rights violations in the Chechnya war, and the double standards, as perceived by the Russian leaders, negatively affected the views toward this organization (Morozov, 2005). The discourses of political leaders sometimes reflected such negative judgments (See Lavrov, 2007, 2009; Putin, 2007a; Medvedev, 2008b). Particularly, the articulation

of an alleged “bloc-based” mentality in the political discourse on OSCE showed the negative perceptions of Russian leadership towards the Western state. Moreover, as Samokhvalov (2017) exemplifies, Russia tried to exclude OSCE from post-Soviet and Balkan geography even in the late 1990s. This shows that even Yeltsin developed a negative perspective toward OSCE in his last years in Russian politics.

Aside from these, the most outstanding problems between Russia and the West, some of which are also mentioned above, have been the expansion of NATO towards Eastern Europe, the military infrastructure of NATO in new member states close to Russian borders, and the ballistic missile systems to be deployed in Europe by the USA. In the Russian Federation National Security Concepts of 1997 and 2000, the Foreign Policy Concept of 2000, and the War Doctrine adopted in 2000, the Eastward expansion of NATO and the military deployment of NATO in areas close to the Russian border was considered contrary to Russia's security interests (See МГИМО, 2002). In addition, while the National Security Concept of 1997 drew attention to the danger of a new split, similar to the Cold War, in the European continent, the Foreign Policy Concept adopted in 2000, mentioned that Russia-NATO relations would be based on the condition of adherence to the framework of the founding agreement signed between the two sides in 1997. One of the most important details of this founding agreement was that NATO would be obliged not to deploy military infrastructure and weapons in the new member states. Similarly, in his messages to the federal assembly, Boris Yeltsin (1995, 1996, 1997, 1999) was generally negative about NATO's expansion to the East. Not surprisingly, Primakov (1996) also took a rather negative view of NATO enlargement, noting that there should be no new splits in Europe, arguing that Western states had failed to honor their commitments to the Soviets not to enlarge NATO in the early 1990s.

One of the important reasons for the transition to assertive policy from a pragmatic point of view during the Putin period was the enlargement of NATO and the convergence of the military structure to the Russian borders. In his speeches both in

Munich and to the federal assembly, Putin (2007a, 2007b) accused the West of enlarging NATO, violating its obligations to the Soviets in the early 1990s, and establishing an anti-ballistic defense system in Europe by ignoring Russia's security concerns. In his speech to the federal assembly in 2007, he also criticized the new NATO members' non-participation in the CFE Treaty. Similar accusations can be seen in Putin's speech at the Bucharest Summit in 2008 (See Putin, 2008). Medvedev (2008b), in his speech to the federal assembly, defined NATO enlargement, anti-missile systems to be established in Europe, and new NATO military bases in Europe as the “encirclement” of Russia. Similar accusations and warnings can be seen in the statements of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (2007, 2008, 2009). Considering the political conjuncture of the period, it was not surprising to observe that the same accusations and warnings were present in Putin's speech to the federal assembly and Russia's 2013 foreign policy concept before the Russian military intervention in Ukraine in 2014 (See *VoltaireNetwork*, 2013)

Compared to NATO enlargement, definite and negative judgments against EU enlargement did not come to the fore in Russian political discourse within the process, at least until the Maidan events in Ukraine. Only in the Foreign Policy concept of 2000 was it stated that in EU enlargement it would be a necessity for Russia to ensure that its interests are taken into account by the Union (See МГИМО, 2002). Even in his speech to the federal assembly, Putin (2004) evaluated the EU enlargement positively and pointed out that it offers great opportunities for cooperation in many fields. From these examples, it can be inferred that Russia did not show much opposition to EU enlargement, at least until the assertive policies of the Kremlin in the middle of the 2000s and the Ukraine crisis. However, both the assertive turn in Russia and the inter-related geopolitical rivalry between the EU and Russia, assessed in this study, would reveal a negative attitude of the Kremlin against EU expansionism. The Ukraine Crisis in 2014, actually would show the most tangible example of Russian opposition against EU enlargement close to the borders of Russia.

The fact that Russia advocated a multipolar international system over time was an explicit example of Russian reaction to a unipolar international system that the West wanted to impose all over the world, as perceived by the Kremlin. In this vein, the concept of unipolarity and American hegemony was mostly rejected by the Russian political elite, and the concept of multipolarity came to the fore in the political discourse in general. The strongest emphasis on multipolarity is more related to Primakov's arrival at the foreign ministry among the political elite (Tsygankov, 2016). Primakov mostly embraced the idea of a multipolar international system in which Russia was a power center among others, opposing any state to be a hegemon. Primakov's belief in multipolarity can also be seen in his writings (See Primakov, 1996). Even though the discourse of multipolarity came to a very strong place with Primakov, the one who began to use the discourse of multipolarity in the full sense was Kozyrev. Although he could not put it into practice, Kozyrev (1994), in his article, clearly pointed to the multipolarity in world politics rejecting the possibility of a “unipolar” or “bipolar” system (p. 63). The Russian discourse on multipolarity was not limited to foreign ministers, though. As a matter of fact, in the messages, he gave to the federal assembly, Yeltsin also referred to the creation of a multipolar world and the duty Russia would take for this (See Yeltsin, 1998, 1999). In the National Security Concepts of 1997 and 2000, in the Doctrine of War adopted in 2000, and in the Foreign Policy concepts of 2000 and 2013, there are statements about the importance of multipolarity in the international system and that Russia would make contributions in this direction (see VoltaireNetwork, 2013; МГИМО, 2002). The references to multipolarity in Putin's speeches stood out in this direction (See Putin 1999b, 2007a). Just like other leaders, Sergey Lavrov occasionally advocated multipolarity, arguing that unipolarity was incompatible with reality (see Lavrov, 2007, 2008).

Russia's relations with the West over time were also influential in the emergence of the concept of Sovereign Democracy, which was mentioned in the previous section in detail, and at the same time, the Kremlin tried to legitimize this concept by putting Western policies, Russian sovereignty, political and economic independence, and non-interference from an outside power in the foreground. The main issue here was that the

Russian administrations had a reactionary idea that, Western-style democracy could not be prevailed everywhere, and that the West could not impose impositions on other countries in this direction and could not have the right to interfere in the internal affairs of others by this means. The Putin administration, which proceeded with a statist point of view in general, advocated state sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of Russia by foreign states, especially the West. In any case, this was one of the starting points of the concept of Sovereign Democracy, and Putin generally defended it through relations with the West. In his speech in Munich, Putin blamed the US and NATO members for interfering in Russia's internal affairs with his strong emphasis on state sovereignty (Putin, 2007a). Moreover, these views were also emphasized in the War Doctrine published in 2000 and the Foreign Policy Concepts of 2000 and 2013. Putin, on the other hand, underlined the great importance he attached to the concept of "national sovereignty" both in his speeches to the federal assembly in 2012 and 2013 and in his article dated 2012 (See МГИМО, 2002; Putin, 2012c, 2012d, 2013d).

The energy issue is another important topic that still negatively affects bilateral relations between Russia and the West in the post-Cold War period. The main reason for the confrontation on this issue is that Russia aims to be a primary energy power and even a monopolist in the region with the help of a firm control on energy assets and transmission routes whereas Western countries engage in new energy constructions in a way that harms Russia's strong position in energy trade in the region by projecting a new energy system in the region. Particularly the statist political figures, who wanted to promote the view that Russia is a great power both in the regional and global senses with a Russian sphere of influence on the so-called "near abroad", wanted to use Russia's enormous energy reserves and trade in this direction. As a result, the Kremlin, which wanted to impose Russia's status on the West and intended to show Russia's regional dominance to the countries in the former Soviet zone, used natural gas exports to these countries as a political means through prices, threats of energy cuts, and, if necessary, realized energy cuts. Natural gas cutoffs to Ukraine (2006, 2009) and Belarus (2004) are examples of this. Even under Yeltsin, during the nuclear weapons crisis with Ukraine, the Kremlin had used natural gas as a political tool with the threat of price

hikes and cutoffs. The EU members, on the other hand, accused Russia of using energy exports for political purposes and began to search for alternative natural gas exporters and gas pipeline routes (plus LNG resources) in order to reduce its natural gas dependence on Russia with the encouragement of the US (See Rumer, 2007; Klare, 2008; Umbach, 2011; Crandall, 2011; Roberts, 2011; Cohen, 2015). With this understanding, the EU has designed new pipeline projects to bypass Russia while projects such as Nabucco and South Corridor are great examples of this. Perceiving these projects as a threat to energy power, the Kremlin tried to prevent the construction of new gas pipelines by putting pressure on potential exporters and transit states and also put forward its own pipeline projects as strong alternatives. Projects of Nord Stream, Blue Stream, and Turkish Stream are important in this regard. With these projects, the Russian administration aimed at competitiveness and wanted to bypass Ukraine, and desired to maintain its role as the main energy exporter in relations with Europe. It should be emphasized again that this energy role of Russia is very critical both in terms of the status that is wanted to be imposed on the West and in terms of getting Russian special influence to be accepted in the post-Soviet zone. Within this framework, according to Umbach (2011) and Crandal (2011), the Russian ruling elite is highly concerned because of the threats to Russian energy “monopoly” in the European context as a result of the alternative routes and new resource searches of the EU members. Moreover, John Roberts (2011) argues that from the perspective of Russian leaders, the field of energy is a “zero-sum game” in which Russia either wins or loses (p. 171). Finally, with the Third Energy Package, the EU tried to hinder the monopoly of the Russian-State-led Gazprom in the fields of pipelines and gas distribution in the European Union countries. As Ariel Cohen (2015) implies, the Russian administration aimed to have a monopoly in this gas trade in the areas of production, transportation, and sales (p. 4). Undoubtedly, the reason for this was that the Kremlin wanted to strengthen and maintain its primary position in the natural gas trade in Europe. EU countries, which wanted to prevent this in various ways, would undoubtedly have problems with Russia.

The Middle East, on the other hand, has historically been a region that has been the subject of common interests and conflicts between the West and Russia. Undoubtedly, during the post-Cold War period, the conflicting interests and policies between the West and Russia in the region, and the new order that the West wanted to create in the region (likewise, the Kremlin administrations mostly deemed that they were not in the interests of Russia), created conflictual debates and viewpoints between the two sides in general. Both in the 1990s and the 2000s, this geography, which is close to the borders of Russia, has been important mainly because it poses threats to Russian national security with terrorism, instability, arms and drug smuggling. Especially when the Muslim population in Russia and the war in Chechnya are taken into consideration, the Middle East, which is an Islamic geography, is of great importance in the political calculations of Russian ruling circles. The main reason for this is that “destabilizations”, turmoil, wars, the rise of fundamentalism, and the rise of terrorism in this region can disaffect the Muslim-dominated Russian regions, namely the Russian national security (Rumer, 2007; Tsygankov, 2016). On the other hand, trying to create a civic identity within Russia independent of religious and ethnic ties, the Russian governments, not surprisingly, struggled with identity projects based on Islam and fundamentalism. In this context, the Syrian civil war comes to the fore. As a matter of fact, the civil war, fundamentalism, and the rise of terrorism in this country might have posed threats to Russia. Moreover, the interests and policies of Russia and the West in this country during the civil war have been different. Unlike the West, which preferred a military intervention in Syria, Russia (in cooperation with China and Iran) tried to prevent this. Putin, with this insight, frequently referred to the possibility of military interventions only under the umbrella of the UN, with the decision of the UNSC, that the previous interventions in this geography did not bring positive results, and the necessity of stability in the region by opposing potential military actions against Syria and Iran (Putin, 2013d). While referring to these, Putin's emphasis on the sovereignty of states and the fact that Western systems should not be imposed on others by force is striking. In fact, benefiting from the Middle East example, Putin clearly states that the West must give up imposing their systems on other states, especially on Russia, and that the West must attach more importance to the concept of sovereignty without interfering in their domestic politics. What is more, it is not a coincidence that the Kremlin, in which



mostly a statist idea is glorified, brought these concepts to the forefront, wanted to protect Russia's interests in this geography (as understood by the Kremlin), and desired to "balance" the West in the Middle East with the help of China.

In fact, all these show how perceptions, images, and interests shaped around identity/ideology affect the relations between the West and Russia.

### **1.3. RUSSIAN COMPATRIOTS AND RUSSIAN WORLD CONCEPT**

#### **1.3.1. Russian Ethnic Existence and Russia's Compatriot Policy in the Former Soviet Zone**

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of newly independent states, around 25 million ethnic Russians started to live under the independent administrations of these new states without the supreme control of Moscow. The majority of ethnic Russians abroad after 1991 were mostly located in the East of Ukraine and the Crimean Region, the Transnistria Region of Moldova, the Northern regions of Kazakhstan, the Baltic countries, Belarus, and partly in Kyrgyzstan (See Washington Post, 2014). Over time, these ethnic elements created diasporic organizations in these countries and tried to defend the socio-economic, political, and citizenship rights of ethnic Russians in these countries and tried to influence the Russian public opinion and political elites on these issues. In fact, the problems of these ethnic Russians in these countries and the expectations of them from the Russian administration have started to draw attention of Moscow since the mid-1990s while the Kremlin gave a greater importance in the following years as observed in the current events in Ukraine and related policies of Moscow in this country. The Russians deemed the Kremlin as "a source of support" with its potential "active involvement" in their claims and efforts in their host countries (Zevelev, 2001, pp. 21-22). In addition to their demands from Moscow, the problems experienced by the Russians have been a matter that concerned the Russian government with the mass immigration to the Russian Federation within the process. A strong indicator of this was that between 1990 and

2003, more than eight million former Soviet citizens, mostly ethnic Russians, from these countries (especially Central Asian countries) migrated to Russia (Peyrouse, 2008).

The most critical issue related to the Russians abroad and migration has been the socio-economic and political problems that Russian minority face in the newly independent states since the break-up of the USSR. In the socio-economic and political sense, the ethnic Russian minority who lost their privileges and high status, which they had possessed during the imperial and most of the USSR eras, except for the last periods of the Soviet Union, began to experience difficulties due to new conditions, tried to protect their rights with the support of Russia, and some migrated to Russia as stated. In the process after the disintegration of the Soviets, as Sebastien Peyrouse (2007, 2008) explains the conditions through Kazakhstan and Central Asian states, the newly established states, even if they generally adopted a civic identity pattern, have promoted their ethnic cores, which constitute the majority, in order to realize their national unity and integrity by carrying out most of the policies in this framework while ethnic Russians felt grievances for new language policies, their social, economic, political and cultural marginalization, ethnic competition and problems, “unstable environment” and even potential "Islamist movements" in these states, in spite of the “formal equality” and civic nationalism there. In his studies, Peyrouse, who emphasized the rising authoritarianism in this region, also implied that the Russians were deprived of political rights in such a political environment. With virtually the same theses in terms of previous privileges, status, and rights of Russians, Igor Zevelev (2001), on the other hand, discusses the situation of ethnic Russians through the anti -Russian attitudes, particularly in Baltic states, and constitutional regulations in all post-Soviet states (pp. 104-116). According to him, the constitutions, by themselves, created strong distinctions between the majority and minority Russian groups with the primacy of the former in these countries.

The presence of the ethnic Russians was undoubtedly a key issue for the newly established states. It is usual that political administrations, who were generally trying to ensure national unity and solidarity via civic identity patterns, with the exception of the elements of titular ethnic nationalism, were concerned about the Russian ethnic group who inhabited these countries and whose number they could not underestimate. As Igor Zevelev (2001) points out, even in "well-established" societies, emerging migrations and internal diasporas are damaging their identity harmony (p. 19). Similarly, ruling elites in Baltic states, Central Asian states, as well as states such as Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova, worried about the existence of this diaspora with regard to possible threats to a harmonic identity and the potential policies of Russia. In their thoughts, the policies of these administrations could fuel ethnic nationalism among the Russian minorities in their countries, making the goal of civic national unity impossible while Russia could use them as a trump card in bilateral relations, and what is worse, Russia could respond through military means (Kolstø, 2001, pp. 297-299).

It is necessary to evaluate how the Russian administration developed a perspective on diaspora problems and implemented policies in the 1990s. As stated in the previous sections, the 1990s was a period of chaos in terms of socio-economic and political conditions in Russia. Especially in the early period of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian administration was trying to get rid of the effects and remnants of communism and the USSR's past and to establish a new system in Russia on democratic and liberal principles. In fact, this was the most important political target of the Yeltsin government. Under all these circumstances, to be sure, Yeltsin's administration could not deal with diaspora problems much at first. The only thing that the administration could do was to try to attract the attention of the international community on these issues and to try to solve the diaspora problems through international law and structures, mechanisms of the Commonwealth of the Independent States, and bilateral contacts with the new states (Edemsky & Kolstø, 1995). What is more, the Russian administration was well aware that the resources it had in order to carry out an active policy in this regard were limited and that harsh policies would harm its integration with the West (Edemsky & Kolstø, 1995; Zevelev, 2001).

The opposition factions, with the support of some wings of the military establishment, against Yeltsin and his policies frequently brought up these issues to the political agenda and tried to use these issues as a weapon against the administration. Natalia Kosmarskaya (2011), in this regard, refers mainly to the role of nationalist and patriotic circles, which were against the Kremlin, such as the Russian Liberal Democratic Party and the "Congress of Russian Communities (KRO)" that is an organization in Russia to observe and defend the rights of Russians abroad, as well as the Russian media, in bringing the Russian compatriot issues to the political agenda and popularizing them among Russian public (p. 58). The efforts on the diaspora issue, such as the declaration named "On Measures for the Defense of the Rights of Russian Compatriots" in 1994, made in the Duma by the opposition forces, which became stronger in the parliament as a result of the 1993 Duma elections confirm this as well (See [pravo.gov.ru](http://pravo.gov.ru), 1994). In addition, Yeltsin's administration was under the criticism of communist and nationalist circles for allegedly "betraying" the Russians abroad (Edemsky & Kolstø, 1995). Moreover, such pressures came not only from the opposition but also from within the political establishment. As Edemsky and Kolstø (1995) note, prominent political figures such as Presidential Adviser Sergei Stankevich and Vice President Alexander Rutskoi supported more active and "assertive" policies on diaspora issues with some level of criticism on the approach of Kozyrev's team. This example can confirm the critical perspectives even within the political establishment inside.

The Yeltsin administration, on the other hand, made a relative policy change in order to prevent the exploitation of problems of ethnic Russians abroad by the opposing factions and to alleviate the political, public, and diaspora pressures, by starting to display a more assertive attitude toward the protection of Russian minority within time. To be sure, the underlying reason for such a turn in policy was the political calculations of the Kremlin in the domestic politics. Natalia Kosmarskaya (2011) notes that the main factor in the Kremlin's return to the diaspora was "political and ideological" assessments (p. 57). Marlene Laruelle (2015a) interprets the Yeltsin administration's presidential decree entitled "On the Principal Directions of the Federation's State Policy Toward Compatriots Living Abroad" and the decree concerning the first financial aid to outside

compatriots as a counter and alternative response in order to weaken the opposition (p. 92). Regarding the pressure of the compatriots, the Russian minority outside of Russia and their lobbies developed a negative perception of the Kremlin when they could not receive the support and assistance, they expected from Moscow to achieve their political ends in the post-Soviet states. Sebastien Peyrouse (2008) explains this with feelings of "abandonment" and "strong resentment" among the Russians (p. 9). In terms of public opinion, Elizabeth Teague (1994) states that the notions on Russians shared by the public opinion, on which imperial thought is still influential, both serve as a political tool to the opposition in their political struggle with Yeltsin and create support among the public for political figures who adopt an assertive stance in this regard (pp. 81-82). According to her, even the Kremlin had begun to gain support among the public with assertive and power rhetoric. This implies that there was significant public interest in compatriot issues, and Yeltsin administration tried to turn this situation in its favor by weakening the opposition.

In such policy/attitude changes, there were, no doubt, other internal and external factors besides Yeltsin's domestic political concerns. While the internal factor was the mass migration to Russia, the external factor was the inability of CIS and other international/regional organizations and even bilateral relations to realize Russian demands and expectations in these states such as their political positions and the status of "Russian language." Undoubtedly, it should be noted that the Kremlin instrumentalized these issues with a human rights dimension and started to use it as a leverage both in domestic politics and Russia's relations with the neighboring states. On the extent of mass migration, Russia, which was in a chaotic situation in the 1990s, had difficulties in finding effective solutions for the incoming refugee flow and the demands of the new arrivals, with its insufficient resources and economic problems (Teague, 1994, p. 81). According to Andrei Edemsky and Pal Kolstø (1995), the Kremlin administration, which wanted to solve the compatriot issues with a more assertive policy, aimed to prevent irregular migration to the country experiencing economic difficulties.

In this process, tensions with the Baltic countries and Ukraine increased, and Russia pursued a "dual citizenship" policy, in which the Kremlin sought official recognition of the dual citizenship right of compatriots from the administrations of these states, and, later, a "compatriots' policy" for the ethnic minority (sometimes with more comprehensive approaches to be mentioned below) in these countries. In this regard, the issue of the withdrawal of Russian soldiers from the Baltic lands in 1992 was associated with the guarantee of the rights of the Russian minority there, while Yeltsin and Kozyrev even made parallel statements in one of his statements even though the Deputy Foreign Minister Churkin rejected such a correlation in president's statements and this statement did not slow the military process in Baltics (Edemsky & Kolstø, 1995). Similarly, that Moscow delayed the signing of the "Big Treaty" with Ukraine on the grounds that the rights of the Russian minority in Crimea were violated is a related example. Without doubt, it is necessary to gain insight into the issues of compatriots in Crimea. The most important aspect of these issues in the peninsula was related with the autonomy and political rights of ethnic Russians in their disputes with the central government in Ukraine. To be sure, both the pro-Russian sections in the peninsula, Russian political sections in sympathy with them in Russia, and later the Moscow administration tried to introduce these issues as the violation of human rights in the following period.

With dual citizenship, the Russian administration thought that the compatriot problems would be alleviated, the pressure on it would decrease and the demands of ethnic Russians would be answered. Also, in this way, besides solving the problems related to the diaspora, the Kremlin aimed to prevent the migration wave and solve this issue in a civic way rather than an ethnic pattern (Zevelev, 2001, pp. 132-134). The administrations of other states, on the other hand, opposed the dual citizenship demands and caused the failure of this project. Without a doubt, in this objection, the possibility that the belief on the part of the political elites of other countries that their independence could be damaged through dual citizenship had an important place. As Peyrouse (2008) explained in the context of Central Asian countries, these states wanted to maintain full

dominance over their citizens, opposed a strong influence on them by Russia, and did not support a policy that could strengthen Russia's hand in the future (pp. 12-13).

With this unsuccessful project, the Yeltsin administration developed a "compatriots" policy and tried to cover up the failure in foreign policy in this way. The concept of "compatriots," which has a more flexible meaning by definition, has been the subject of discussion with different interpretations that describe exactly who is included under this term in the process. As Mikitaev clarifies the concept, this concept includes three groups living in the former Soviet geography: individuals with Russian citizenship, former Soviet citizens who have not acquired the citizenship of their states, and those who have citizenship of post-Soviet countries and want to maintain various ties with Russia, such as culture and language (Mikitaev, 1995, as cited in Zevelev, 2001, p. 143). According to the definition in the 1999 "Concept of the Russian Federation's State Policy toward the Compatriots Abroad", Moscow could apply this concept and policy to Russian citizens living outside of Russia, former Soviet citizens with or without new citizenship, those who have immigrated from their homeland in history, and even the ones with historical, ethnocultural, religious, and legal ties with Russia (See President of Russia, 1999). In such a definition, it is demonstrative that the Kremlin made a broader and flexible definition for Russian compatriots rather than preferring an ethnic framework. There is no doubt that the civic identity concepts that Russian administrations originally wanted to construct have great importance in this policy, because the ethnic line to be followed here could cause problems in the formation of a civic identity within the federation. According to Natalya Kosmarskaya (2011), one of the most important reasons why the Kremlin expressed this concept in a broad sense was related to Russian domestic politics because the preferences here were an integral part of the civic/ethnic identity rivalry in Russia (p. 60). Considering the civic identity efforts under Yeltsin and his successor, Putin, the logic of this becomes clearer. With these concerns, the Vladimir Putin administration tried to purify the concept of compatriots from a sole ethnic understanding in this way.

During the Putin era between 2000-08, the administration's use of the Russians as a "divided nation" in political discourse became widespread, and it took the "compatriots" policy more seriously and made it more systematic. The organization of *Russkiy Mir* and related policies, discussed in the next section, also better explain the systematic development of policies towards compatriots in the near abroad. As Kristina Kallas (2016) argues, Putin turned the compatriot policy, which mostly remained unrealized in practice during Yeltsin's period, into a "programmatically" one in his two terms of presidency, and supported it with "implementation programs" and material aids under institutional roofs (pp. 4-5, 9). On the other hand, among the measures taken by Putin against the demographic crises in Russia was the encouragement of the migration of the Russian compatriots to the federation (unlike the Yeltsin administration's attitude toward migration). "The Concept of the Demographic Development of Russia 2001-2015" and Putin's participation in the "First World Congress of Compatriots Living Abroad" in 2001 and the emphasis that these populations should migrate to Russia, which was articulated on both occasions, and "repatriation programs" are the most concrete examples of this, limited success and efficiency notwithstanding (Peyrouse, 2007; Laruelle, 2015a; Kallas, 2016). As can be seen, the demographic realities of Russia in this period and the desired migration movements to Russia made Putin closely interested in compatriot issues in the 2000-08 period.

In the meantime, it is noteworthy that in the ongoing process with Putin since Yeltsin's time, the Kremlin tried to use the Russian "Compatriots" concept and related policies for achieving Russia's desire to play an active role in the former Soviet geography and for a regional hegemony here. In a way, the Kremlin used ambiguity, flexibility, and broadness in the definition of the concept of "Compatriot" as a tool in Russia's foreign policy towards these regions in a pragmatic way over time. Thus, the ambiguity in the definition would both hinder the strength of ethnic identity defenders in domestic politics and strengthen Russia's position in regional foreign policy. According to Zevelev (2001), Russian rulers considered the Russian ethnic minority in the post-Soviet states as an instrument of "manipulation" and "influence" in the post-Soviet zone (pp. 72-73). Similarly, Byford (2012) argues that a significant aspect of the compatriot



policy is the purpose of the Kremlin to facilitate a “projection of Russian statehood” outside Russia in regional and international settings (p. 716). In the process of legitimization of the annexation of Crimea, Putin's arguments on the ethnic Russian presence and, more generally, the Russian "Compatriots", which included the Russian-speaking populations in Ukraine, actually highlight some sort of instrumentalization of the concept (Grigas, 2016; See also Putin, 2014b).

When the post-Cold War Russian existence in the post-Soviet zone, their problems, and the "Compatriots Policy" are examined, it is correct to note that the circles advocating ethnic Russian nationalism/identity gained strength while the ones with their civic identity theses were disaffected in Russia's domestic political settings around the mid-1990s. It has already been stated above that certain political and media circles with nationalist orientations spread ethnonational perceptions on Russians abroad and problems that ethnic Russians experienced, as they argued, among the mass public in Russia, and they created a means of pressure on the Russian administration. As also mentioned above, the strong resonance of these views among the society caused Yeltsin to give importance to these problems more actively. Laruelle (2015a), on the other hand, exemplifies this situation with the strengthening ethnonationalist forces, the emergence of the "Congress of Russian Communities (KRO)" in 1992 through the ideas of prominent nationalist scholars such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the transformation of *KRO* with the help of Dimitry Rogozin and his Rodina party, and the successful efforts of these circles to normalize many ethnonationalist ideas deemed "radical" before (pp. 91-92). According to Zevelev (2001), the presence of the 25 million Russian population outside and the ongoing ethnonationalist demands within Russia had a major blow to the civic identity process (pp. 24-25).

The strengthening of ethnic nationalist thoughts with diaspora and related issues during the period does not necessarily mean that the main political establishment would have followed an ethnic nationalist perspective within the process. In fact, Putin and senior political figures in the Kremlin have used discourses tied with ethnonational identity in

certain periods and certain situations. The ethnonationalist rhetoric used by Moscow during the annexation of Crimea and justification of this event was more of an instrumentalist perspective and has never been in a dominant position in political discourse and policies in general. This means that despite everything, the Kremlin has developed a civic identity and has a limited ethnic perspective on certain political episodes in foreign affairs. As Marlene Laruelle (2015a) clarifies, while political authorities discursively applied ethnic nationalist thought only to issues of compatriots and ethnic Russians outside of Russia, in practice and legislation, they largely eliminated the ethnic nationalist cores of them. Moreover, as the author emphasizes, the administration has never pursued such a “nationalist agenda”, even though the circles that emphasize ethnic nationalism and identity in the country can sometimes influence the Kremlin's policies and discourses in a quite limited way.

### **1.3.2. Russia's Use of Soft Power and the “Russian World” Concept**

Today many states utilize the power of soft-power instruments to gain a positive image in the world and boost the gains in international settings. As Joseph Nye (1990, 2005) defines, soft power is the ability of a party to direct other parties along the lines of its own policies and values, mainly through "attraction" without using "coercion" or its economic power, through resources such as cultural values, political values/choices (need to be perceived as legitimate), and institutions in a world where state parties perceive military conflicts and even militarization itself as too “costly” as a result of multidimensional interdependence among them. There are other intellectuals who define soft power as well. As an example, Niall Ferguson (2003) focuses on the primary role of “cultural and commercial” tools in terms of soft power. In another account, soft power covers the means of influence other than military and economic power tools through "attraction" and "legitimacy" (Cooper, 2004).

The Russian Federation has also sought to ensure its influence in its “near abroad” and strengthen the ties both with the titular nations of the newly independent states and Russian compatriots in the post-Soviet zone by boosting the positive international image

and prestige in the world with the help of soft-power structures. The most important soft power resources of Russia are undoubtedly Russian culture, values, and Russian language, which has been used as the language of communication between peoples in this geography in the Soviet period. The soft-power instruments used by Russia mainly in its “near-abroad”, in particular in Ukraine, can be listed as follows: Russian ethnicity, compatriots or “diaspora”; Russophone population; non-Governmental Organizations and pro-Russian associations including cultural institutions, youth movements, civil society groups, think tanks, political figures, etc. in these states funded by Russia; Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate; values rooted in ethnic, cultural, historical, political and religious ties; the Black Sea Fleet located in Sevastopol; the strong Russian media influence in these states, foundations such as Russkiy Mir, Roszarubezhtsentr (later Rossotrudnichestvo), the International Association of Teachers of Russian Language and Literature (МАИРЯЛ); Russian language and various programs for the Russian language education in many parts of the world; distribution of Russian passports, which is mentioned in the former subsection, and “repatriation” programs for Russian compatriots (For further research, See Tishkov, 2008; Kudors, 2010; Conley et al., 2011; Bogomolov & Lytvynenko, 2012; Shapovalova, 2014; Simons, 2014; Laruelle, 2015b; Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015; Feklyunina, 2016).

Aside from the potential gains to be obtained through the soft power instruments, there is another significant cause that pushed the Russian political establishment to embrace soft-power channels in the post-Soviet area. In this regard, color revolutions were at the forefront. The Kremlin perceived the revolutions and changes of government in post-Soviet states in the zone of "Russia's near abroad" as political defeats and against its interests while this sense of “defeat” pushed the Kremlin to apply soft power measures in the post-Soviet zone (Laruelle, 2015b; Feklyunina, 2016). Moreover, it is crucial to mention the instrumental use of soft power mechanisms by Moscow in the “near abroad.” Russia’s use of soft power and its understanding of this concept has been clearly different from the original version as preached by Joseph Nye. As Sergunin and Karabeshkin (2015) clarify, with significant differences between the use of soft power by the Kremlin and the Nye’s version, method, and understanding, the Russian political

elite started to try to make use of soft power mechanisms to create a “positive image and attractiveness” in the minds of peoples and the political elites of the post-Soviet states but in a very pragmatic and instrumental way with a possible “zero-sum game” perception that is not incompatible with the soft power understanding of Joseph Nye (pp. 349, 352).

As a result of these revolutions, realizing that close relations with the governments of the states were not sufficient, the Kremlin understood that close relations should be established with the society of these countries and started to adopt soft power mechanisms. The perceived necessity of the use of “soft power” was reflected in the discourses of Russian rulers and predominated official documents of the Russian Federation within time (See President of Russia 2008). As a matter of fact, Sergey Lavrov, in his message to the Russian newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* in 2008, already stated the priority of soft power instruments to protect and strengthen the state’s ties with the Russian compatriots abroad), while “soft power”, as a new method of implementation of foreign affairs, was articulated in the *Russian Foreign Policy Review* in 2007 for the first time (Kudors, 2010, p. 2). On the other hand, Sergunin and Karabeshkin (2015) exemplifies the importance the Kremlin attribute to soft power mechanisms with the remarks of Putin on the failures in achieving the 2008 Foreign Policy Concept, which mentioned the strategies for the use of soft power, in a speech in 2012, the president’s speeches to the Federal Assembly in 2012 and 2013, in which he referred to Russia’s soft power instruments and the necessity of developments in these fields and with significant references in the Foreign Policy Concept of 2013, in which the higher levels of importance attached to the soft-power channels can be observed (pp. 349-350; See also Putin, 2012a, 2012c, 2013d; VoltaireNetwork, 2013). To be sure, how the concept is perceived and applied by the Russian state is an important matter with strong criticisms in this regard; however, the crucial matter regarding this study is the considerable level of attention given to the soft power by the Russian ruling elite.

Last but not least, the priority given to the Russian compatriots in the post-Soviet states by Russian political elites in their soft power policies created tense relations with the political elites of other Commonwealth of Independent States as a result of rising levels of negative perceptions and anxiety towards Russia. The administrations of these states perceived the Russian soft power politics mainly directed towards compatriots abroad as an attempt to maintain the influence of the Russian power in the post-Soviet territory, and any attempt to create some kind of “Russian ‘fifth column’” as threatening for the very independent existence of these states (Conley et al., 2011; Simons, 2014; Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015).

The “Russian World Concept” appears as one of the most important (and subject to harsh disputes) narratives of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation. The notion of social wholeness connected to Russian culture is known as the "Russian World." The idea of "Russian World" encompasses the country's culture and its engagement with many other cultures and Russian compatriots abroad through customs, history, and the Russian language. To sum up the historical background of this concept, a 19th-century scholar, Panteleimon Kulish, a member of the Brotherhood of Saints Cyril and Methodius and a leading Ukrainophile created the term; however, the “Slavophiles” mainly utilized the concept in the subsequent years and the contemporary Russian scholars “rediscovered” it after a brief period of the disappearance of the term during the Soviet era (Plokhy, 2017). As understood from this statement, the concept has its roots in the 19th century. With regards to the concept’s rediscovery, development, and adaptation to the contemporary era and current circumstances, some scholars such as Petr Shchedrovitsky, Efim Ostrovsky, Vitaly Skrinnik, Natalya Narochnitskaya, and Russian statesman Valery Tishkov come to the forefront (Kudors, 2010; Plokhy, 2017).

For many political scholars, the core tenets of this concept bear similarities in perceptual terms, notwithstanding some insignificant differences they put forward. Such intellectuals as Petr Shchedrovitsky (2000), Valery Tishkov (2008), Andis Kudors (2010), and Valentina Feklyunina (2016) define and interpret the concept with a

special emphasis on the Russian world without limit of contemporary Russia, no limit of concern and interests of Russian peoples and rulers, a global network of Russians who speak and think Russian, the significance of global networks of diasporas, the crucial place of Russian language, Russian culture, and to a considerable extent Orthodoxy. More precisely, according to Tishkov, people “who preserve ties of culture, language, and identity with Russia” with an outstanding “interest” in their fatherland belong to this world. What is more important in the remarks of Tishkov about the Russian-speaking populations, he estimates an 80% Russian-speaking population in the Baltic states and Ukraine with high proportions of this population in the post-Soviet states. The general emphasis on the culture, language, and identity-related ties with Russia to explain the Russian World Concept also demonstrates itself in the purposes and strategies of an officially supported institution called the Russian World Foundation formed in 2007 (See Russkiy Mir Foundation).

There has been official support from the government for the concept during the period. In this regard, the Kremlin's discursive and material support for this concept and related foundations is very important. In this regard, Putin's presidency is significant with the Kremlin's supports. In fact, such scholars as Tishkov (2008), Kudors (2010), Sergunin and Karabeshkin (2015), Feklyunina (2016), Zevelev (2016), and Ploky (2017) refer to the presidency of Vladimir Putin and supportive policies during his terms, the creation of a formal institution, which was created as an NGO though, with official support in 2007, in which Putin also declared as the “international year of Russian language,” related remarks in the foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation approved in 2008 to exemplify the official support in this term (See also Russkiy Mir Foundation; President of Russia, 2008). What is more, Russian Orthodox Church of Moscow is another important institution with which the Russian World Concept gains a significant strength. As the remarks of Patriarch Krill show the political program and orientation of the church, in general, the support from the Russian ecclesiastical circles for the Russian World Concept revealed itself during the period that coincided with Putin's terms in the presidential and prime minister posts (See Patriarch Krill, 2009, 2010). The Church's related emphasis is on the significant place of Ukraine and Belarus in the Russian

World as the fundamental core of the “holy Rus” as interpreted in the Russian ecclesiastical circles. As a matter of fact, in the Orthodox patriarch’s remarks, there are repeated references to the significance and “divinity” of these lands, particularly the Ukrainian lands.”

It is not surprising that the Russian World Concept with such teachings mentioned above and considerable vagueness have the potential of creating complexities and problems in the relations between Russia and other post-Soviet states, particularly Ukraine, with a significant level of anxiety on the parts of these states. Aside from these, another important effect of the Russian World as a concept and discursive position in Ukraine is the political division created among the Ukrainian population among which some segments approve of the notion of Ukraine’s belonging to the European civilization as a part of “Wider Europe” while the rest of which, mainly pro-Russian factions in this country, is inclined to see Ukraine as an indispensable part of the “Russian World” (Feklyunina, 2016).

In parallel with the anxieties, this concept encountered critical doubts and accusations on such grounds that these Russian scholarly and political elites have turned the concept into foreign policy leverage to realize the state’s goals in foreign affairs within the process, as perceived in a point of account; that Russia would use this soft power element, the Russian World, to increase Russian political influence in the countries around it and to set the agenda of these countries with the principal help of closer ties established with the Russians and Russophones living abroad (Laruelle, 2015b; Sergunin & Karabeshkin, 2015; Ploky, 2017). From the perspective of Timothy Synder (2018), the Russian World concept would mean a loss of the “individual” character of Ukrainians and justify the Russian interventionism in Ukraine in the subsequent years. Such criticisms and accusations of the concept must have influenced the political calculations of the political elites of the post-Soviet states and deteriorated perceptions of Russia.

## CHAPTER II

### A NEW UKRAINIAN IDENTITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON RUSSIA-UKRAINE RELATIONS (1990-2014)

With the disintegration of the USSR, all the newly independent states as including Russia sought new identities and historiographies. In this direction, the political rulers in Ukraine started to construct a new identity and historiography. Undoubtedly, Ukrainian governments faced various internal and external difficulties in this process and could not create a consistent identity and historiography during the period in question. While there were problems arising from both regional differences and different political orientations and perspectives of populations, the influence of Russia abroad made this process very difficult. Moreover, during the period, there were problems with Russia on the issues of Crimea and the Russian compatriots, the Black Sea Fleet, nuclear weapons of the Soviets, and natural gas trade, while Ukraine continued to be dependent on Russia in various fields, and there were various ties between the two countries. Plus, Ukraine seemed to be a country that had a hard time choosing between the West and Russia and was stuck between the two sides. A part of the Ukrainian people and political elites defended Westernism, while the other part advocated rapprochement with Russia after Ukrainian independence. Externally, on the one hand, the EU and NATO structures were attractive to the Ukrainian administrations in various fields, on the other hand, Russia was trying to attract Kyiv to its side through economic awards and pressure. All these conditions made a coherent and new Ukrainian identity and historiography quite complicated.

On the other hand, Ukraine has historically been at the forefront of Russian identity and related historiography. When the Russians were in an identity crisis after the breakup of the USSR, new Ukrainian historiography that opposed the traditional Russian historiography theses certainly provoked reactions in Russia. The reason for this was that Russian historiographers, both in the imperial period and in the major part of the



USSR period, saw Ukrainians as a whole with Russians, produced history theses in this way, and identity constructions emerged in line with them for centuries. Even looking at the post-1990 Russian identity constructions, it can be seen that the defenders of ethnic, imperial, Eurasianist Russian identities (to some extent, the advocates of civic identity) questioned Ukraine's independent existence from Russia and a new Ukrainian identity/historiography incompatible with the Russian one by various historical theses. The reason for this was that advocates of these identity projects, even, to a considerable extent, the civic one, preferred to use traditional Russian historiography and thus perpetuated the classical perceptions of Ukraine. In addition to the opposition of all these identity-builder political circles to the independence of Ukraine and the new Ukrainian identity/history, these also frequently brought up the Russian ethnic groups in this country. To be sure, the Kremlin, which was aware of the ideas related to this identity that became widespread in the Russian public and political elite in this way and came under pressure, began to embrace these, acted with similar ideas and arguments over time, and this situation, generally, affected the bilateral relations with Ukraine in the following period.

Finally, the continuing geopolitical rivalry between the West and Russia and the security concerns of the Russian administration has been reflected in Ukraine. During the period, Russia constantly opposed Ukraine's NATO membership and integration with the West, and this had been an important factor affecting both Russia-Ukraine and Russia-West relations. Beyond any doubt, as mentioned in the chapter, Ukraine's integration with the West was incompatible with ethnic, imperial, and Eurasianist Russian identity and history theses as well as with the political ends of the Kremlin under the influence of civic and Western influence (though temporarily), and increasingly, the Russian administration used identity theses to explain its policies towards Ukraine and its reasons for opposing that country's Western integration. In fact, it can be said that identity theses also provided a discursive weapon to the Kremlin in its relations with Ukraine and the NATO membership prospect of this state.

Also, as mentioned in the chapter, Russia had various political and economic interests in Ukraine. In order to protect these interests, Russia, which wanted to attract Ukraine to its sphere of influence, always wanted to impress Kyiv with awards and pressures. During all these political efforts, it is noteworthy that Russia supported pro-Russian political figures in Ukraine and utilized useful Russian identity theses emphasizing the unity and brotherhood of the two peoples in its political discourse.

## **2.1. A NEW UKRAINIAN IDENTITY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY AFTER THE INDEPENDENCE**

The disintegration of the USSR and the emergence of newly independent states provided a historical opportunity for the titular nations in all these new states to construct and promote new identities while this situation led political rulers to achieve political purposes regarding the futures and national interests of these states through these identities and identity-related projects. As mentioned in the previous chapter, all the post-Soviet state governments turned to these identity projects with the desire to ensure political stability, national unity, and solidarity in their countries and to bring all the people living in the country together under a common roof. Successive Ukrainian administrations similarly attempted to create and develop a new, unique, and inclusive Ukrainian identity, in compliance with the goals of sustaining national independence and national unity among all ethnic and religious groups. Undoubtedly, Ukrainian administrations have faced various difficulties in the context of both domestic and foreign politics during the identity processes. In the domestic context, the ethnic diversity of the country (especially the existence of ethnic Russians); the population that accept Russian as their mother tongue and their propensity to display pro-Russian attitudes; and the ethnocultural, sociological, and historical differences of the region have made it difficult to build a common identity. In the external context, with its political, historical, ethnocultural, linguistic, and economic ties, Russia has been an effective external power in the identity processes of Ukraine. To be sure, Russia is indispensable both in internal and external contexts within the identity formation process as a result of these ties between the two states, and the powerful Russian impact on a significant part of the population in Ukraine. The reason why Russia was at the

forefront in both internal and external contexts is that while post-independence Ukrainian administrations and Ukrainian nationalist intellectuals were building the new Ukrainian identity, they described Russians and Ukrainians as different and Russia as the "other", saw this country as a former imperial center, and they aimed to get Ukraine away from Russia with efforts of Westernization and democratization. These attitudes and policies caused reactions among ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine, and negative reactions from Russia. Along with all these difficulties, it cannot be said that there have been common ideas and policies among the Ukrainian administrations. For example, the Yanukovich administration, which had a pro-Russian attitude, and the one of Yushchenko, which was completely Western-oriented, differed greatly from each other. This was another important challenge in this process, damaging the Ukrainian identity process. For these reasons, the period between 1990 and 2014 passed with uncertainties. However, the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the "civil war" (though disputed term) that started in the east of Ukraine (with Russia's important role) completely distanced this state's governments from the impacts of Russia, and nationalist and Westernist ideas gained power in the political mind with the nationalist figures in the administration more than ever before. In fact, it may not make much sense to call the events in Donbass a civil war, because the decisive influence of Russia in the events here cannot be ignored. In particular, the influence of Igor Girkin (a former Russian army officer and FSB officer) and Alexander Borodai (a current Duma member and Russian nationalist), as well as many other Russian and Ukrainian-born pro-Russian figures (who have important connections with Russia) in this war actually indicates that the war in this region is more than an ordinary civil war (See Vice News, 2014; Wall Street Journal, 2014; Moscow Times, 2020).

Looking at the first years of independence, it can be said that there was a historical chance for Ukraine to form a new Ukrainian identity. In Ukraine, whose independence was unquestionably confirmed in the international arena for the first time, the political and academic elites had the opportunity to build an identity project that would secure Ukraine's independence and bring the people living in this country together for a common purpose. As a matter of fact, before independence, the Ukrainian people had

never had such an opportunity. Historically living under the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and then the Russian Empire (including the USSR) with limited autonomy depending on the main centers, Ukrainians had not been independent and free in their choice of identity after the disappearance of their self-governance under the rule of Hetmanate. Before their independence, Poles and Russians had constantly included Ukrainians in their own identity processes, depriving them of a unique Ukrainian identity. In the short-term independence of the 1917-1920 period, it is certain that an initial German control over the Ukrainian administration in general, and then the ongoing civil wars overshadowed this independence. The period under Nazi rule cannot be considered an era of independence for Ukraine as well. On the other hand, it can be seen that the Ukrainian intellectuals in the Austro-Hungarian lands of Galicia and later the Ukrainian diaspora abroad during the USSR period made limited efforts on an independent Ukrainian identity. According to Molchanov (2002), the history of an independent Ukraine and the phase of "nation building" began with the independence referendum with the subsequent state supports for a new national identity (pp. 167-168, 201-202). Thus, it is obvious that for the first time, with the independence, the Kyiv administration has the opportunity to support new identity attempts with serious state support. In the end, it should not be forgotten that state support is indispensable for certain circles to make an identity project widespread in a country (this is also important in the context of Russian identity projects).

Looking at the 1990s, it can be stated that the Ukrainian administrations tried to create a civic identity within the country. Without a doubt, this does not mean that the successive Ukrainian administrations ignored the Ukrainian ethnic identity, culture, nationalism, history, and language that the rulers brought to the fore with official policies within the period. But here, the purpose of creating a civic identity by embracing the Ukrainian elements foremost, rather than a purely ethnic line, was to avoid the negative reaction of the ethnic Russian and pro-Russian populations living in the country and in this way to ensure national unity among all citizens. As Molchanov (2002) argues, Ukraine has developed a more "inclusive" citizenship project compared to countries such as Latvia and Estonia and has approached other ethnic groups

tolerantly by legalizing the "1992 Law on National Minorities" that protect minority rights and with the 1996 constitution, which included articles ensuring minority rights (pp. 210-211). To be sure, this process continued with the principal inclusion of ethnic Ukrainian elements in the process by the administrations and academic elites. The reason for this was the desire to create a "nation-state" to a certain degree in countries such as Ukraine of the ruling classes who wanted to ensure the independence and national unity of the country. As Rogers Brubaker (1996) describes, such countries (including Ukraine) fall within the scope of "nationalizing states" and the rulers of such states do this by emphasizing the language, culture, demographic position, economic situation, and political hegemony of the ethnic group/nation that is the founding core of these states (p. 63). That is why the Ukrainian administration has promoted Ukrainian nationalism, culture, and language from time to time while at the same time trying to create a civic identity pattern from the very beginning. This, on the other hand, disturbed the pro-Russian segments or those with various ties to Russia in Ukraine and received harsh reactions from the Russian administration and Russian nationalist politicians.

History and national memory, on the other hand, emerged as important tools of the state's rulers and academic elites who tried to build a new Ukrainian identity and a common future in Ukraine. As Serhii Plokhy (2017) states, since the times of disintegration of the Soviet Union, history, like language, culture, and nationalism, has been a powerful instrument of "political mobilization" in the former Soviet states. Similarly, Jonathan Friedman (1992a, 1992b) states that history can never be "objective" and argues that history is mythology to create the present. From the perspective of Taras Kuzio (2006), historiography forms an indispensable aspect of the identity processes of a nation (p. 407). In this direction, from the beginning, the Ukrainian administrators wanted to create a unique Ukrainian history, together with academic support. The main purpose here was to legitimize state independence, to gather the people living in Ukraine under the umbrella of the Ukrainian state in line with a common history, and to reveal the Europeanness of Ukraine and its people (different from "Asiatic/Eurasian Russia" as perceived). From the perspective of

Polegkyi (2019), a common past is indispensable for the creation of a common identity because it creates a “sense of belonging” in the society (p. 359). Another important point in this new historiography was undoubtedly to separate Ukrainian historiography from Russian historiography. In fact, as Andrew Wilson (1997) argues, the main task of the nationalist intellectuals living in Ukraine and Belarus was from the very beginning to separate the history of these countries from Russian history, to reveal their own “golden ages” and to emphasize the genuinely democratic and European characteristics of these countries, unlike Russia (p. 183).

In the new Ukrainian historiography, Ukrainian nationalist intellectuals highlighted the 1000-year-old “golden age” concept and national heroes in history. According to this 1000-year-old view of history, a Ukrainian history since Kievan Rus’ has continued uninterrupted, even without independence, with culture, national resistance, Ukrainian nationalism, and language. With this understanding, nationalist historiographers in Ukraine shared the idea that the heritage of Kievan Rus’ belonged to Ukraine, which had been shared among emigre intellectuals before, and focused on the “memories of Cossack ‘freedom’ and resistance, on the independence years between 1917-20, and, to a variable degree, to the organizations such as OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) and UPA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army) during the WWII (Hunczak, 1993; Magocsi, 1996; Wilson, 1997; Kuzio, 2002; Molchanov, 2002; Plokhy, 2006; Torbakov, 2014; Kasianov, 2018). In one of his works, former Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma (2003) also argues for the continuity of Ukrainian history and explains it through unique Ukrainian culture with the elements of songs, melodies, poems, etc. (p. 26). The Ukrainian national figures in this uninterrupted 1000-year history, though controversial, have an important place in the new Ukrainian historiography. Of these, controversial (especially in the context of Russia) historical figures are Bogdan Khmelnytsky, Ivan Mazepa, Mykhailo Hrushevskiy, Symon Petlyra, Mykola Khvylyovy, and Stepan Bandera. According to Torbakov (2014), these figures, with the exception of Khmelnytsky (also open to dispute), were Ukrainian figures who did not want to remain under Russian rule, and the new Ukrainian historiography revealed these figures as national “heroes” and ignored those who advocated the “unity” of Russia and

Ukraine (pp. 196-197). This, not surprisingly, caused strong reactions among pro-Russian sections in Ukraine and high-level politicians, nationalist sections, and nationalist historians in Russia. There were also discussions about Khmelnytsky, but this study addresses the debates on this subject and the ones about the other characters in the following sections in detail.

From a social constructivist perspective, identities emerge and develop with the perception of "self" and "other". The emergence of a new Ukrainian identity is closely tied to these concepts. With the independence, nationalist Ukrainian political figures and academic elites mostly found the concept of the "other" in Russia. The main reason for this was that the Ukrainians, who had lived under Moscow for centuries, had been prevented from embarking on an independent identity project by the former imperial center. Moreover, both in the imperial period and the USSR period, the Russian central government and its academy formed a Ukrainian identity based on the Russian point of view. Even at the time of independence, it was clear that a significant portion of the Ukrainian population still had been under the impact of former stereotypes in terms of identity. Moreover, the greatest ties of Ukrainians in terms of language, history, ethnocultural, sociological, and religious aspects were with Russians. Considering these realities, nationalist Ukrainian politicians and intellectuals saw that they had no choice but to marginalize Russia in the construction of a new identity. Otherwise, they were well aware that without doing this they would not be able to build a consistent Ukrainian identity based on full independence in the international arena. As Taras Kuzio (2001) emphasizes, the rulers of new states that gained independence from the old administrative center constructed their new identities by marginalizing their "old metropolis" during the early phases (p. 346). Besides such a necessity, these nationalist sections undoubtedly believed that there was a certain important difference in values between the Ukrainians and the Russians. The belief in the difference of values came from the nationalist Ukrainian intellectuals, primary including Mykola Kostomarov and Taras Shevchenko, who long ago expressed the basic value differences between Russians and Ukrainians with perceived Ukrainian values of democracy, individualism, Europeaness, and liberal perspectives in contrast with the opposite Russian ones

(Isaievych, 1996; Molchanov, 2002). Moreover, the struggle between Russia and Ukraine in various fields such as history, myths, geographical borders, and culture in the post-Cold War period was also important in consideration of Russia as the "other". According to Anna Triandafyllidou (1998), the struggle between Russia and Ukraine on these issues may potentially damage an independent and unique Ukrainian identity, and may also lead Ukraine to review its identity processes in order to claim disputed elements such as culture, history, existing lands and national symbols (p. 602). That is why the nationalist sections, who did not want this situation harm the unique and "authentic" Ukrainian identity, made Russia the "other" while forming the Ukrainian identity, and once again revealed the difference between the two sides while they were continuing to embrace such contested elements to consolidate the bases of Ukrainian identity different from the Russian one. The former Ukrainian president also clearly noted that the two peoples are different, based on their differences in many areas, involving language, culture, past, future, and Europeanness (according to him, Russia is a Eurasian or Asiatic while Ukraine belongs to Europe) (Kuchma, 2003, pp. 11, 16, 26).

While all these nationalist-oriented political and academic elites were trying to create a new Ukrainian identity, whether civic or ethnic, various difficulties were observed in the process, and these difficulties prevented the creation of a consistent and consolidated identity. The main difficulties were that different political segments in Ukraine have different perspectives and different policies in the field of identity and sharp differences in identity orientation between Ukrainian regions. In terms of the administrations, the Kravchuk and Kuchma administrations continued to attach importance to the efforts to create a new and unique identity, despite a limited extent, and during the Yushchenko period, the administration accelerated the process with a more anti-Russian and Western perspective. Especially compared to previous periods, the Yushchenko administration took an openly nationalist stance on historically controversial issues concerning Russia, brought a much more pro-Western identity perspective to the fore, and these led to a political standoff with Russia. In this context, the administration's description of the famine of 1932-1933 as genocide, of the USSR as a totalitarian rule, its decommunization process, its generally implicit definition of



Russia as an external "invader", and its emphasis on national figures fighting against Russia negatively affected the mutual approaches with Russia (Kasianov, 2018, pp. 177-178). The pro-Russian Yanukovich, who came after him, followed different identity and history policies from Yushchenko, reversed some policies on these subjects, and carried the Ukrainian identity process to a very different dimension, although he took a more neutral stance in these matters. Under Yanukovich, the administration's efforts to neutralize nationalist elements in Ukrainian identity and history (such as the revocation of the title given to Bandera) were an example of this (Kasianov, 2018, p. 179). In short, the problem was that different political parties and segments that follow pro- and anti-Russian policies affected this process in different ways, and this seriously damaged the Ukrainian identity process.

Another important challenge in creating a consistent Ukrainian identity was the regionally diverging opinions and orientations among the people. Populations living in Western and Eastern Ukraine (plus Crimea) had very different ideas about identity, history, preferences of language (generally Russian in the East and Crimea), and the role of Russia. As a matter of fact, these regions had gone through different historical development processes while Crimea and Eastern Ukraine had lived under Russian control for centuries, Western Ukraine had lived under the control of Moscow for a shorter and intermittent period. Unlike the East, the people in the West had historically been under the influence of Poland, and there had been differences in language, culture, and even in church affiliations (like the difference between pro-Russian Russian Orthodox Church and others) between the West and the East with the influence of different church authorities that have different ideologies and views. These differences and intellectual orientations that have survived to the present still pose a significant challenge in the formation of Ukrainian identity. In the 1990s in Crimea, the people of the region even questioned their loyalty to Ukraine, and the problems between the autonomous republic and the central government marked this period and caused Russia to be included in the process (Szeptycki, 2014; Useinov, 2014). With regard to the reflection of regional differences on national identity, Szporluk (1997), Wilson (1997), Molchanov (2002), Kuzio (2001, 2002), Szeptycki, (2014), and Kasianov (2018) come

to the conclusion in an implicit way, different historical influences in different regions caused the emergence of different "political cultures," "national consciousness," and "civilizational experience" among these regions, thus preventing "national consolidation".

The issue of religion and affiliations to different churches form another hardship for creation of a unified Ukrainian identity across the country. With the effect of historical events in Ukraine, different churches have emerged and belonging to different churches has emerged among the people, and this situation has existed up to date. Religiously, the Ukrainian people are divided. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (Uniate Church) are active in Ukraine and cause religious division among the people. When analyzed on a regional basis, it is seen that the rate of adherence to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of Moscow Patriarchate is high and the position of this church is strong with pro-Russian insights of the people in the southeastern region, which had been under the control of Russia for centuries, while the Greek Catholic Church has an important position among the population in the Western region (Galicia) (See Mitrokhin, 2001). In this regard, it can be suggested that this situation has also made things difficult for the central governments and nationalist circles to form a common Ukrainian identity in such a religiously fragmented country during the independence period.

Other important factors had been the material facts, Ukraine's dependence on Russia, Russia's occasional interference in Ukraine's internal affairs through "compatriots," and Russian policies creating concerns among the Ukrainian political elite. In fact, the material facts and dependency on Russia mean that Ukraine is highly dependent on this country, especially in the economic and energy fields. Especially the main partner in Ukraine's trade and chief natural gas supplier has been the Russian Federation from the very beginning. Moreover, the corruption and economic problems that have been persistent in the country since the 90s were preventing the administration of this country

from advancing completely to the Western axis. According to Molchanov (2002), the Kuchma administration turned its direction to Russia after the West conditioned economic aid with economic and human rights reforms in Ukraine (pp. 178-180, 184). Furthermore, as Molchanov proceeds his argument, Ukraine is located between the “reality” of internal problems, its location in the sphere of influence of Russia, its “Russian/Soviet past” and dependence on this state, and the “imaginary” Western future.

On the other hand, the Ukrainian administrations perceived the Russian criticisms against Ukrainian policies in the name of its compatriots in Ukraine as an intervention in the internal affairs of this country. This situation, in contrast to the economic and energy ties with Russia and its internal problems incompatible with the West, was a factor that distanced Ukraine from Russia. Undoubtedly, Russia's ability to have a say in Ukrainian politics through its compatriots was a complicating factor in the Ukrainian identity process. As a matter of fact, when the pro-Russian political segments and people in Ukraine were uncomfortable with the policies of the central government, they first turned to Russia as a base of support. As Molchanov (2002) notes, during the period of problems between the central government and Crimea, while ethnic Russians in Crimea were pleased with Russia's involvement in the process, the central government perceived this as interference in their internal affairs and relations between the two countries deteriorated due to concerns (p. 215). Kuchma (2003), on the other hand, implied that the difficulty of this situation was actually caused by the pro-Russian segments in the country with his remark that the measures taken for the protection of Ukrainian culture would be characterized as discriminatory (p. 290). On the other hand, the war in Georgia in 2008 and the distribution of Russian passports among the people in Crimea during the period both increased the concerns in the Ukrainian administration on Russian policies on the compatriots in Ukraine. In this context, it was not a coincidence that Russia put forward minority rights in its military operation in Georgia. The Ukrainian administration's concerns (already existent) about the potential Russian actions in Crimea in the name of minority rights increased after the Georgian war, and the Foreign Minister criticized Russia for the "mass distribution of Russian passports" to

the people in Crimea, though such criticism on passports was not new (Hedenskog, 2008, pp. 23-25, 34-35).

Finally, the historically strong ties between Ukrainians and Russians, a common origin, the Russians' refusal to accept a separate Ukrainian identity as perceived by Ukrainians, and the conflictual policies implemented by Russia throughout the period have made both the Ukrainian nationalist political and academic elites deem Russians as the "other," and have also made difficult for them to form an independent and unique Ukrainian identity different from the Russian one. In terms of the problems with Russia, Russia's role as a regional hegemon and policies in this direction, the border problems experienced for a period, Russia's full claim on the nuclear arms and the Black Sea Fleet, Vladimir Putin's definition of Ukraine as a "complex state formation", Ukraine's distrust towards Russia and the "ontological anxiety" it has experienced have come to the fore since the independence (Molchanov, 2002; Kuzio, 2001, 2006; Szeptycki, 2014; Kasianov, 2018; See also Putin, 2008). On the other hand, the view that Ukrainians do not have a separate identity as regarded by Russian politicians and the mass public, and discourse on common origins between the two people negatively affected the Ukrainian identity process because the country with which Ukraine had problems on historical issues and national memories is Russia, with which Ukraine had ties and dependencies in various fields, and moreover, there is a substantial population supporting Russian history and identity theses within the country. From the perspective of Igor Torbakov (2014), while Moscow rejects Ukraine's independence and different national identity, the two sides' different historical theses are in constant conflict as they base upon the same origins (pp. 187, 196). Molchanov (2002), on the other hand, expresses that Russians have difficulty for internalizing the idea of the "otherness" of the Ukrainians, whom they think have a common language, history, culture, and identity (pp 7-11).

Moreover, Russia is an active power in the region and as mentioned above, it is a state that raises concerns in Ukraine and other regional countries with its policies and

military actions from time to time. Therefore, unlike the Baltic states, the rulers of Ukraine, which does not have a NATO membership, could never fully confront Russia and develop fully independent identity policies in the face of dependency on Russia, internal problems and pro-Russian segments, and the potential military threats from Russia. Indeed, the Ukrainian political elite has, all the time, been opposed to a military struggle with Russia in any case with the considerations of material realities.

The events in Euromaidan, the annexation of Crimea by Russia, and the civil war in the east of Ukraine, on the one hand, caused the country to be dragged into chaos, on the other hand, strengthened the hands of the Ukrainian nationalists and pro-Western political figures in the administration, making the Kyiv administration turn into a unique Ukrainian identity construction process in a completely nationalist and Westernist direction. As a matter of fact, in the post-2014 period, both Poroshenko and Zelensky administrations adopted Ukrainian nationalism and Westernism with substantial efforts to create a unique Ukrainian identity independent from Russia. As Kasianov (2018) argues, as a result of the events in 2014 and its aftermath, Russia was no longer just an "other" but also an "enemy" for Ukraine, and the nationalist central government and local administrations in Ukraine presented the controversial historical elements and heroes much more in line with the nationalist historiography (pp. 179-181, 184). As a result, the problems that arose in Ukraine with the direct and indirect actions of Russia, in a way, strengthened the hand of the nationalist political segments in Ukraine, which made Russia completely "other" and tried to build an independent, distinct, and Westernist Ukrainian identity. The reason for this is that, as a result of the events, the positive image of Russia has undoubtedly been shaken in Ukraine, and the uncertainties about the role of Russia have been eliminated to a great extent among the mass public and political factions.

## **2.2. SIGNIFICANT PLACE OF UKRAINE IN RUSSIAN IDENTITY FORMATION PROCESSES AND HISTORIOGRAPHY**

Ukraine has, historically, been an important place in Russian history and the processes of Russian identity both in the imperial/Soviet periods and post-Cold War era. In this respect, besides Ukrainian lands being of key importance in Russian history, interactions between the Ukrainian and Russian peoples in the historical process are of crucial importance in the emergence of present-day Russia and a new Russian identity. Historically, the common ancestral homeland of these two peoples, Kievan Rus'; the Pereiaslav Agreement, which was a milestone in the unification of the two countries; the common historical, linguistic, ethnic, cultural, and religious ties between the two peoples are crucial in order to analyze the general Russian perception (mainly among Russian ethnic and imperial nationalists and civilizational figures) towards Ukraine and its people, and its independent existence separated from Russia.

The geopolitical location and lands of Ukraine can be regarded as the backbone of the Russian vital interests with their special role in the national security of Russia against the outside world for centuries. However, the distinct location and lands of Ukraine have historically meant other significant aspects for the Russian national identity as well because of the historical interpretations of Ukraine and the significant place of Ukraine in several Russian identities. To be sure, as a result of the separation of Ukraine, the majority of Russians realized the loss of lands and ethnic Russian people left in the newly established Ukrainian state. However, there was a third important point of loss for Russians and their identity. The existence of a separate Ukrainian state and identity would mean a necessary share of history and myths between Ukrainians and Russians to the disadvantage of the latter. In such a situation, it is unsurprising to observe an identity crisis in Russia because the Ukrainian objection to traditional Russian interpretations of the past, and Ukrainian claims on the certain historical assets such as the heritage of the Kievan Rus' have a negative impact on the traditional Russian understanding of the history through which Russian identities are constructed. According to Molchanov (2002), Ukraine's claims on the historical possession of Kievan Russia and Russia's deprivation of this historical heritage is a move that will

fundamentally pose threats on the Russian national identity while the Kievan Russia play a “complementary” role for the Russian people and identity (pp. 183-184, 188). As Plokhy (2006) underlines, the heritage of the Kievan Rus has, all the time, been an indispensable aspect in the Russian efforts to create an identity and make sense of their “self” in their relations with the West (p. 10). On the other hand, when the ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious similarities between the Russian and Ukrainian peoples are taken into account, the importance of Ukraine in terms of Russia and Russian identity can be understood. Moreover, traditionally, Russians have viewed Ukrainians as part of a single Eastern Slavic nation. Particularly, Russian nationalist groups saw the independence of Ukraine as a move that shattered a single Russian nation and perceived this as a "tragedy" (Molchanov, 2002, p. 121).

Moreover, Ukraine is also important for Russia in terms of the Crimean issue, the perception of great power, and the Europeanness of the Russian people and state. When examined in terms of Crimea, Crimea has been an important place in terms of Russian history and identity throughout history. The possession of Crimea by Ukraine with the independence was undoubtedly an important loss for Russian history and national identity. As Molchanov (2002) argues, Russians and Russian politicians, in general, were concerned with the status of Crimea during the dissolution process of the Soviet Union with their perception of the “loss of ‘ancestral Russian lands’” (p. 251). Apart from that, Ukraine has historically been a region that has strengthened Russia's perception of great power since the imperial times. As Torbakov (2017) mentions, Ukraine can be deemed as the “pride place in the dreamworld of Russian greatness” (p. 70). Historically, the tsarist and imperial Russia (even the Soviet Union) fought many wars for the Ukrainian lands and expanded to the West through these lands. This means that as it expanded to the West, the borders of the empire expanded, and different communities were taken under rule. In this way, Russia has historically become a major power on the world stage. In addition to being a great power, with these conquests Russia also became a “European great power” (Torbakov, 2017, 73-74). Furthermore, as Kasianov (2018) put forward, the loss of Ukraine contradicts with the “world power” myth of Russia according to which Russia can be a member “world power” family in

the world as long as Russia possess the Ukrainian lands (p. 184). Lastly, it is crucial to emphasize that while Russia fought wars and conquered Ukrainian lands, the imperial elite justified these actions with the historical theses of gathering Russian lands (Plokhy, 2017). Lastly, it is crucial to analyze the great power competition for influence in the region through the peninsula. As mentioned in this work, with its valuable naval ports and geostrategic location, the peninsula has a significance for the dominance in the region and the Black Sea. Tsygankov (2022) interprets Russia's annexation of Crimea as a result of the "geopolitical competition" of influence on the region between the West and Russia, which want to be an important political actor in shaping the Eurasia (pp. 1551-1552).

Historical alliances against the West between the two peoples are also important in the identity discourses of Russian ethnic and imperial nationalists. Tsygankov (2015) draws attention to the joint efforts of these two peoples against the West since the 17th century in terms of general Russian perceptions (pp. 287-288). As a matter of fact, Russian ethnic and imperial nationalists perceive the wars waged by joint efforts of Russians and Ukrainians against the West as remarkable indicators of the historically developed fraternity concept between the two nations, although the Ukrainian nationalist historiographers deem these joint efforts against Polish and the Western nations as a purely military alliance in the history.

Whether Russian political elites and the mass public consider the Ukraine nation as one of the branches of the one Russian nation or a separate nation in need of an independent state is an important matter of dispute. This work argues that traditionally the Russian political elite and many parts of the Russian people do not consider the Ukrainian people as other. Similarly, from the perspective of Kuzio (2001, 2006) and Torbakov (2014), Russian people and the political elite, in general, do not still regard the Ukrainians as the "other". Moreover, they have difficulty in defining Ukrainians as other. According to Molchanov (2002, 2015), with the historically formed "cultural, ethnic, identity, linguistic, religious and ancestral ties" and the intense



“interpenetration” between the two peoples in these fields, Russians have still continued to endeavor to adapt to Ukrainian “other” throughout the post-Cold war era. In a similar insight, Plokhy (2006, 2017) in his studies, on the other hand, by emphasizing the common historical, cultural, and linguistic ties from Kievan Rus’, demonstrates the close ties between the two peoples with the discourse of the East Slavic Union and explains the reason why the Russians do not regard the Ukrainians as a different nation but simply as a part or “subbranch” of the single Russian people.

Apart from assumptions of academic scholars, such an attitude towards Ukraine and Ukrainians had a place in the studies of prominent scholars, schools of thought and in the minds of leading state elites in 19th and 20th century Russia. Zevelev (2016), on his part, focuses on the historical insight of Russians towards the Ukrainians as “other” (p. 6). According to him, the leading schools of thought such as “Slavophiles and Westernists” with such prominent Russian figures as Danilevsky, Dostoevsky, Uvarov, and many others represented Ukrainians as “Little Russians” as the branch of the “one Russian people” with the combination of other branches of “Great and White” Russians while they were overtly separating the non-Russian nations in the Russian Empire. Plokhy (2017) interprets the policies of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great in the Western borderlands of the Russian Empire within this understanding. All these explain the intellectual background of such perceptions and the reason why the considerable part of Russian people and political elite historically have not seen the Ukrainians as a different nation, and they have problems in this regard under current conditions.

Considering historically, the Russian imperial and USSR administrations (with the efforts of Stalin) built and developed the unity of the three Slavic peoples as a common foundation myth. An important reason for this was to legitimize the territorial expansion of Russia during the imperial period (as in the case of the share of the Polish lands) and the Stalin era during the Second World War with historical theses and to bring the imperial subjects together under a common identity framework. By demonstrating the unity of the Belarusian and Ukrainian peoples with the Russian people, the Russian and

Soviet administrations claimed the necessity/naturalness for these peoples to be connected to Russia, and to act on the aim of protecting their rights, they seized these lands and legitimized the conquests in this way. It should be noted that in contrast with the first years of the Soviet Union, the policies of Lenin aimed at forming the Ukrainian nation changed with Stalin, and the perspectives of imperial identity and history in the imperial period were revived. Undoubtedly, there were pragmatic reasons other than the justification of conquests for the Moscow administration to carry out such policies in the period that began with Stalin. The most important thing, to be sure, was to ensure the political mobilization of the people, who could not be gathered under a common identity and purpose with revolution and the sole mechanisms of ideology, and to guarantee the vital support of the majority Russian population in the Second World War. According to Brandenberger (2010), the Stalin administration adopted imperial Russian history and "Russocentrism" to a limited extent, "selectively" and carefully to utilize them instrumentally to achieve political mobilization at the end of the 1930s and during the Second World War (pp. 727-729).

Undoubtedly, the Bolshevik revolution, the change of power, and regime change in Russia brought changes in the geography of Russia and Ukraine compared to the imperial order and perspectives during the Lenin period. In particular, the policy of *Korenizatsiya* is a policy that marked the first times of the Soviet era. In this period, the Soviet administration tried to ensure that the peoples living in the union (including the Ukrainians) were active in their own culture, language, public life, and politics. During this period, Moscow granted a certain level of autonomy to the federal republics that formed the union, encouraged their political rulers to belong to the ethnic people who formed that state, and gave certain freedoms in areas such as culture, language, and public life.

However, with Stalin's accession to the head of the union and the conditions of the Second World War, the central government abolished these policies, gave weight to the Russification policies that would continue during the Brezhnev period, and brought

identity projects and historiography from the imperial period to the fore. In these periods, as Kuzio (2002), Molchanov (2002), and Ploky (2006, 2017) argue, Moscow and its affiliated academic world, which emphasized the supreme role of Russians, Russian history, culture, and language, reversed the process.

Stating that Soviet historiography approached, during the post-Lenin period, the Russian imperial historiography and that the Soviet political elite began to adopt the myths, legends, and 'elder brother' role of the Russians of the East Slavs from the imperial period, Kuzio (2002) suggests that the Soviet policies in Ukraine and Belarus were different from those in the non-Russian republics (in compliance with the perception of the two Slavic people as a constituent of a single Russian people while the others were perceived as non-Russian foreign minorities), and he claims the traditional understanding of the Pereiaslav Agreement in the imperial period have returned to the historical and political agenda of the Moscow rulers (pp. 244-246). Molchanov (2002), on the other hand, implies that the imperial-era belief in the common past and future of Ukraine and Russia was also in the minds of the Soviet political elite and that this played a major role in giving Crimea to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic (p. 111). In this understanding, according to Molchanov, Russian and Soviet rulers had never thought of the possibility of an independent Ukraine in the future. According to Ploky (2006, 2017), while the Soviet administration initially supported the creation of a separate national identity, historiography, and ethnic formation in Ukraine, the administration in Moscow with the rise of Stalin gave weight to the Russification policies and many political, academic and intellectual figures who had similar understanding encouraged during the times of Lenin in Ukraine were faced with purges and arrests. With Stalin believing in the "leading role" of the Russians in the union, Soviet historiography approached the historiography of the imperial period, as seen in the reinterpretation of Pereiaslav, as Ploky remarks. According to Ploky, a Soviet History Book written during the Stalin era adopted a discourse similar to the imperial point of view and highlighted the "historical mission" and role of the "gatherer of other people" of the Russians.

In parallel with these, the justification for Soviet annexation of Western Ukrainian and Belarusian lands, under Polish rule in the interwar period, was made through the Soviet duty to free “fraternal” Ukrainian and Belarusian lands from the foreign rule and ensure their “reunification with their brethren” with particular references to the policies and perceptions of former Russian czars and emperors. Ploky (2017) notes that a similar policy of Russification and anti-Ukrainianism was also valid under Brezhnev. Observing the closeness between the Soviet-Imperial historiographies and closer perceptions toward Ukraine, which started with Stalin and continued after him, shows what kind of attitude and perception the Russian administrations under Stalin and Brezhnev had toward Ukraine in the historical process. According to Ted Hopf (2002), in the period that started with Stalin and continued with Khrushchev, Soviet history was built on the tsarist/imperial Russian history to a limited and selective extent, Russian language and culture were brought to the fore, the Russians were elevated to a supreme layer among other peoples while the Soviet identity was, indeed, a Russian identity (pp. 55-58, 68-69).

The most fundamental building block in the creation of this myth was undoubtedly Kievan Russia, which has historical importance in the emergence of the three Slavic peoples. This first Russian state was integral to both the formation of Russian identity and history and the creation of this myth. From a parallel perspective, Molchanov (1996, 2002, 2015) and Ploky (2006) state that this state has a critical importance for the "single Russian identity" while emphasizing that it constitutes both a "cultural material" and elements of a founding myth for the three Slavic nations. According to these scholars, with this ancestral heritage, the Russians constructed a myth that they saw the other two Slavic peoples as "sub-branches" of a single Russian people, while the tsarist and imperial Russian governments legitimized their conquests in Ukraine and Belarus by asserting the Kievan Rus' roots of these peoples. Apart from this myth, in fact, Kievan Russia has a very important place in Russian history and identity, as this state gave the Russians at least 1000 years of history and a historical origin. More precisely, because Kyivan Rus' is considered the “grandmother state” of present Russia and provides a “cultural authenticity” for Russian history and identity, disprove of

Russian historical myths regarding Kyivan Rus' and breaking its vital links with this state can impose serious damage on the Russian identity (Molchanov, 1996, pp. 183-184). As explained in the next section, this founding myth would be interpreted differently by the political and academic elites of Russia and Ukraine later, and it would reach a level that would cause identity crises.

The Pereiaslav Agreement signed in 1654 between the Cossack Hetmanate and the Tsardom of Russia, which would be the subject of intense debate between the political and academic elites of Russia and Ukraine, is important in terms of Russia's historical and national identity. This agreement paved the way for the incorporation of Ukrainian lands into Russian Empire and signified a milestone in Russian expansionism in the former Kyivan lands. The principal source of debate is whether this agreement would mean a reunification between the two peoples or strategic cooperation that would preserve the autonomy of the Hetmanate against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Notwithstanding conflictual interpretations, which are analyzed in the following subchapter in detail, almost all Russian scholars and intellectuals render the Pereiaslav agreement and subsequent events as the “voluntary reunion of two fraternal peoples” while this agreement actualized the “centennial longings” of the two peoples (Molchanov, 2002, p. 67). Within this understanding, Russia is considered to be the ally and defender of the Ukrainian people, who were in need of Russian protection, as Molchanov proceeds his remarks. Ploky (2006) notes that such a similar approach reflects itself on the thoughts of Empress Catherina II with her medal struck after the incorporation of Polish lands into Empire, on the studies of Mikhail Pogodin, a prominent Russian historian, historical survey of Nikolai Ustrialov in addition to the thoughts and studies of prominent Russian imperial scholars during the imperial era while, despite certain differences during the Soviet era, both the two remarkable commemorations held by Soviet political elites in 1954 and 1974 and the use of the paradigm of reunification to describe these events are highly demonstrative for the assertion of continuity under different periods and circumstances (pp. 203-204, 208-209). Undoubtedly, an interpretation of Pereiaslav in line with the Russian historical

thesis supports both the myth of the unity of the two peoples and the theses of Russian ethnic and imperial identity.

In fact, the term Ukraine and related concepts are also a prominent issue for understanding Russia's historical perspective. Until the Soviet period, Russians used to define the Ukrainian people as “Little Russians” during the imperial period, and the name "Ukraine" had negative connotations in the Russian perception as a concept. Perhaps the most important reason for this may be that the Russian political elite thought of the term Ukraine as a political trap devised by Western nations, especially Poles, to damage the empire and divide the single nation, involving Russians, White Russians (Belarusians), and Little Russians (Ukrainians) into fragments. As Szporluk (1997) asserts, Russian rulers tended to interpret the name “Ukraine” and Ukrainian nationalism as a conspiracy of Germans, Austrians, Papal state, and particularly the Polish to destroy East-Slavic union (p. 105). Within this insight, Russian imperial authorities strove to impose comprehensive restrictions on the imperial minorities and to destroy the Ukrainian movement, Ukrainian language, and the term “Ukrainian” itself, particularly after the Polish Uprising in 1863 through Valuev circular under such considerations, as Molchanov (2002) and Plokhy (2017) remark. It is possible to say that this point of view has been valid to a certain extent until today, except for the Soviet period. As Plokhy refers, the same negative perception towards the Ukrainian term and related Ukrainian concepts came to the fore during the times of the First World War and the Revolution in 1917. Whereas such a negative connotation would be forgotten with the rise of Soviet power in the former imperial lands and the use of the term “Ukraine” and “Ukrainians” became prevalent both in the political sphere and intellectual circles during the Soviet periods, the post-Soviet period can be classified by the resurrection of the term “Little Russia” with the studies of leading scholars such as Mikhail Smolin with the different certain perceptual differences between the terms of “Ukraine” and “Little Russia” with their specific representations for East Slavic peoples and their identities, as Plokhy completes his key remarks.

After the brief explanation of the historical importance of Ukraine, it is also a significant detail for this study to examine how Russian political elite and people perceive Ukraine's independence in the post-Cold War period. When the situation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union is considered, Russians have experienced difficulty in making sense of and coming to terms with a separate Ukrainian state and nation. In general, in this regard two different approaches can be mentioned, the first can be attributed to the majority of Russians who did not take the Ukrainian separation seriously and believed in the prospect of returning Ukraine to the motherland with the approach of “wait-and-see” while the second Russian group deemed the Ukrainian separation as the “inevitable step” of the new Russian state to be a “normal nation-state” (Molchanov, 2002, pp. 96-97). However, as Kasianov (2018) argues, for many Russian political elites and a significant part of the mass public, the separation of Ukraine from Russia is a consequence of “a whim of fate” or “tricks and deception” of foreign powers, that is, the West (p. 182). As a more negative perception of Russia, some scholars point out that, to a considerable extent, Russians negatively correlate the collapse of the Soviet Union with Ukraine's independence (Vrublevskyi & Khoroshkovskyi, 1997; Torbakov, 2014).

When the similarity in the Russian identity perceptions and the place of Ukraine in these perceptions are considered, it can be clearly argued for continuity in Russian thoughts, feelings, and perceptions regardless of the changing eras, circumstances, state ideologies, and forms. The political and scholarly elites of Imperial Russia, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation, all demonstrated significant similarities within history and this trend still continues.

### **2.3. CONFLICTUAL DEBATES OVER HISTORY BETWEEN UKRAINE AND RUSSIA**

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War is important not only with regard to the significant changes in international relations but also to its impacts on the fate and future of former Soviet nations with their newly created states and identities to be reformulated. Ukraine, in this regard, is a crucial case with its identity reformulation processes, interrelated identity perceptions and new historiography, and its significant impacts on the Russian identity processes in the post-Cold War era. To be sure, Ukraine has, all the time, been important for Russian identities and related historiographies for centuries; however, the principal matter of subject of this subchapter is related with the different interpretations of history by Ukrainian historiographers, its promotion by the Kyiv administrations (with exceptions without a doubt), and its impact on the Russian identities to be constructed and related historiographies. Unlike the non-Slavic former Soviet nations, which have also been in the process of identity formations and historiographies showing differences from the Russian imperial and Soviet eras, Ukraine and Belarusian post-Cold War identity formation processes and newly-created historiographies have been interrelated with the ones of the Russian Federation and its titular Russian nation. It can be observed that with the independence, political and academic circles in Ukraine have started to make efforts to create a new national identity and national historiography independent of Russia. The main reason for this is the quest of the Ukrainian administrations to build a common past and ensure national unity in domestic settings. As Klymenko and Siddi (2020) mention, in countries such as Poland and Ukraine, governments generally interpreted historical events in a way that would serve their domestic policy purposes, but this was reflected in the foreign policies of these countries and the tensions over history with other neighboring countries (pp. 945-946).

The biggest reaction to the nationalist historical interpretations of Ukraine came from Russia, which has a common bond and history with this country in general, as mentioned above. To be sure, such connections and ties in identity patterns were open to create complexities both in the construction of a new Ukrainian identity and on



Russian national identity (See Ulyanov, 1996; Kuzio, 2001, 2002; Molchanov, 2002). As Torbakov (2014) assesses this situation, the interrelatedness and close connection in terms of reformulated identity patterns and reconstructed historiographies between Ukraine and Russia mainly originated in the close historical, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural ties of these East Slavic people; however, such close ties and relations can exacerbate the problems within the process of reformulation of national identities, as seen in the case of the identity-related relations between Ukraine and Russia since the 1990s with the efforts to create “distinct identities and historiographies” from a common past and the same “historical material” (pp. 187, 196). Furthermore, as Dmitry Furman explains, the situation rooted in identity and historiography issues resembles the problems that emerged among brothers who have claims on the heritage of their “parents, primogeniture, and legacy” (Furman, 1997, as cited by Torbakov, 2014). This is just one of the major problems during the reconstruction of a new Ukrainian identity in a different manner from the Russian one. To be sure, it should be mentioned that the Ukrainian political elite had certain reasons for a new identity by believing in the necessity despite the prospect of problems with Russians. One of them was the need for providing an environment in which national governments could ensure political mobilization among their societies. According to Ploky (2006, 2017) and Kasianov (2022) with the creation of independent states separate from Russia, the political elites of the newly created states sought to realize the political mobilization of their nations to consolidate the fundamental basis of their nation-states and their political legitimacy in this way while they utilized the “history, language, culture, and nationalism” to construct different “cultural, economic, and political trajectories”, but this would also mean the disruption of “one-all Russian” historiography that was prevalent in the imperial and Soviet Russian perceptions and comprised the all-historical phases of East Slavic history while the emergence of separate Ukrainian and Belarusian identities break the centuries-old perception of Russian identity. Moreover, administrations of such post-Soviet states as Ukraine and Belarus searched for a unique history independent from Russia to consolidate their identity and history writing efforts. In this regard, as Wilson (1997), Torbakov (2014), and Wanner (1998) point out, Ukraine and Belarus would enter into the process of searching for their “lost Golden Ages” prior to “forcible incorporation” of their nations into the rule of Russians while both of them

strive for demonstrating their historical adherence to “democracy” and the “European World” unlike the “Asiatic” Russia. With the independence, the adoption of the new “Ukrainian flag, hymn, state emblem, and currency” is highly demonstrative with respect to the reflection of Ukrainian historical resistance culture against the Russians since all these symbolic assets stem from the independent Ukraine state between 1917-20 while in the post-Cold War era, the constituent “other” of newly formulated Ukrainian and Belarusian identities is Russia, as Wilson proceeds his assertions. Such perspectives would, unsurprisingly, be received negatively by Russia. The principal reason for this was the threat perception of high level Russian political elites and historiographers, according to whom distinct history theses with different understanding of the past would lead a significant blow to the Russian historical theses.

It is important in this regard that nationalist Ukrainian historians and intellectuals brought some controversial historical Ukrainian figures, whom Russians have not tolerated, to the fore during the creation of the new Ukrainian historiography. These historical figures include the ones who have historically troubled histories with Russia with their pro-Ukrainian and, to a significant degree, anti-Russian insights, values, and thoughts such as Ivan Mazepa, Mykhailo Hrushevskiy, Mykola Khylyovy, Stepan Bandera, Mykola Kostamorov, Serhii Shelukhyn, Mykhailo Drahomanov, Viacheslav Lypynsky, and Taras Shevchenko (Molchanov, 2002; Ploky, 2006; Torbakov, 2014). In fact, the most important expectation of the Russian rulers from the Ukrainians has, historically, been their respect and acceptance of Russian “greatness” and supreme role for reunification among the three Slavic societies. As Torbakov emphasizes, many Russian political elites and public masses still expect the Ukrainians' approval of such Russian “greatness” with their crucial support for the traditional Russian historical narratives that are helpful in consolidating the power and prestige of the Russian state; whereas, regardless of Russian expectations, Ukraine's official policies and academic circles started to embrace different narratives that put emphasis on the Ukrainian historical aspirations of “freedom” and movements of “resistance” against Russian rulers. In such a case, it is likely that there would be a history-related identity conflict between the two sides.

The legacy of the Kyivan Rus has been a significant matter of dispute within history and still continues to be with further levels as a consequence of the emergence of an independent Ukraine state and a newly formulated Ukrainian historiography. The claims whether this state belongs to the history of the Russians or the Ukrainians lie at the basis of these debates. Nationalist Russian and Ukrainian views further exacerbate these disputes. Such scholars as Wilson (1997), Kuzio (2001, 2002), Molchanov (2002, 2015), Plokhy (2006, 2017), and Torbakov (2014), in this regard, point to the clashing interpretations and related tensions between the interpretation of this ancestral legacy by pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian historiographies. The principal opinion that unites the perspectives of these scholars is that while pro-Russian historiography has traditionally interpreted the Kievan legacy as the “common cradle of all-Rus”, which includes Ukrainians as a sub-branch, with the strong historical ties of this ancient state with the Russians, pro-Ukrainian interpretation of this has principally focused on the Ukrainian aspect of the Kyivan state with the main emphasis on the “Ukrainianness” of it. According to these scholars, the debates on this issue have a strong historical background as in the case of intellectual debates that occurred in the mid-19th century and during the Soviet era; what is more, the debate and related-clashing tensions in the different interpretations have been further exacerbated by the emergence of powerful pro-Ukrainian historiography with the support of the independent Ukrainian state and administrations. In Russia and Ukraine, Kievan Russia is undoubtedly an integral part of the history and identity projects of the two nations with its indispensable role in their identities and historiographies. As a matter of fact, both sides accept this state as the beginning of their history and as the place where their nations have their origins. Particularly as Molchanov, Kuzio, and Wilson underscore, the pro-Ukrainian interpretations of this historical “homeland” of the Russians, as perceived by them, the Ukrainization of the Kyivan Rus’ and its legacy harbor significant problems and risks for the traditional Russian perceptions and interrelated identity patterns and historiography by depriving the Russians of its Kyivan legacy, given the historically indispensable role of Kyivan Rus’ played in the Russian identity constructions.

The Pereiaslav Agreement, signed in 1654 between Hetmanate and Russian Tsardom, is another crucial topic concerning the Russian and Ukrainian historiographies with different interpretations. Does this agreement signify a reunification between the two Eastern Slavic people or just an agreement for a military alliance that was misinterpreted by the Russian imperial political elite and scholars? This question is still a matter of conflicting debate among Russian and Ukrainian scholars. While Russian historiography has traditionally described it as a step of reunification, nationalist Ukrainian historians and intellectuals tend to describe it simply as a military alliance as in the case of the historical interpretations of Ukrainian nationalist historians such as Mykhailo Hrushevsky during the imperial era. Within history, the administrations and affiliated academic world in Russian Empire and even the Soviet Union utilized the “reunification” paradigm to explain the Pereiaslav Agreement and justify the Russian expansions across the former Kyivan lands through this understanding. Aside from the justification of Russian territorial expansionism in these lands, this perception of the reunification of fraternal East Slavic peoples, which constitute the single Russian nation in the Russian perceptions, has traditionally affected the identity perceptions and historiography of the Russian people, as mentioned in the previous section. Over time, such identity-related perceptions have also reflected on the assumptions and policy calculations of Russian political elites while certain imperial and Soviet policies were conducted in line with identity-related perceptions with the strong impact of the interpretation of the past in addition to the material interests of these states in the former Kyivan lands. However, with the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of an independent Ukrainian state, the new Ukrainian historiography has changed the balance. The strong historical arguments that Ukrainian historians put forward about Kievan Russia have negatively affected traditional Russian historiography and identity projects, in which the imperial and ethnic identity defenders have found the historical past in Kyivan Rus. The most important reflection of the difference in interpretation of this event would be on the “reunification paradigm” thesis mostly shared by Russian rulers and historians. As Ulyanov (1996), Molchanov (2002), Plokhly (2006), and Torbakov (2014) shed light on the dispute, the pro-Ukrainian stance in the reinterpretation of the event has historically challenged the common “official” reunification paradigm of Russian historiography by rejecting this and arguing for strategic aspects and the ones

of liberalization of Ukrainian people from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and “Cossack” nationalism.

The Russian victory in the Battle of Poltava in 1709 against Sweden that was backed up by the forces of Ukrainian Hetman Ivan Mazepa is a significant milestone in Russia’s path of being an empire during Tsar Peter I. Ivan Mazepa, as a prominent historical figure, has been a matter of contentious debate between two historiographies in recent times. While in traditional Russian historiography, Mazepa is regarded as a “treacherous figure” in all-Russian history, pro-Ukrainian historians are inclined to deem him as a historically “heroic” figure in the path of Ukrainian independence against Russian rule (Torbakov, 2014, pp. 198-199).

The period between 1917-21 has been another outstanding topic of different perspectives between the pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian historical insights. In Russian historiography, the revolution period is described with the terms “Civil War” and “Russian revolution” emerged with the clashes between “White” and “Red” forces while from the principal Ukrainian perspective, these years signify the “War of Independence” and “Ukrainian Revolution” to create an independent state entity of Ukrainians regardless of the foreign occupations and administrative changes in Ukrainian lands in this period as exemplified by the Ukrainian People’s Republic in 1917-1920 (Kuzio, 2001; Molchanov, 2002; Torbakov, 2014). Moreover, as Torbakov also asserts, the inclusion of the Ukrainian Republic and independence demands of people to the national historiography is important within the structures of a “millennial narrative” to be formed by Ukrainian historians and scholars. Undoubtedly, this short-term state and struggle for independence would be an inseparable part of the 1000-year-old historical discourse of the Ukrainians.

The debates on the Stalin period and World War II are highly remarkable in the perceptual interpretations of the events and Russian identity processes during the post-

Cold War era. The underlying difference between Russian and nationalist Ukrainian interpretation is the very essence of this war and relatedly the start date and denotation of this war. In this regard, the differences in interpretations of the events during the Stalin period in the Soviet Union and World War II (See Serhiychuk, 1993; Kuzio, 2000). As Torbakov (2011, 2014) and Molchanov (2002) clarify, while a clear majority of Russians even today consider that the war started in 1941 with the German invasions in the Soviet lands rather than 1939 and denote the war with the terms of “Great Patriotic War” and “Sacred War”, which was waged with a fraternal collaboration of the Russians and Ukrainians with their common political aims against the Nazi military aggressions, the nationalist Ukrainian historians reject the very Russian term of “Great Patriotic War” by arguing the start date of the war as 1939 and mostly focus on the catastrophic devastations on Ukrainian lands led by Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia during the war period. The differences in interpretation between Ukraine and Russia regarding this period should be evaluated in terms of the identity and history policies of the governments of these countries. It can be argued that especially during the Yushchenko period, the Ukrainian administration wanted to interpret this period in the perspective of the suffering of the Ukrainian people and thus create a common Ukrainian past. As Budrytė (2021) sets forth, states such as Ukraine and Lithuania have developed an understanding of history within the framework of "historical national traumas" and "anti-Soviet resistance" with their nations having experienced suffering in history (p. 984). On the Russian side, it is clear that under the Putin administration, the Kremlin is trying to construct a common Russian identity and history by positively interpreting the years of Stalin and the Second World War within a thousand years of "glorious" Russian history. In parallel with this, Kasianov (2022), states that the negative interpretations of neighboring states on the second world war years, different from the Russian history thesis, on the one hand, disaffect the Russian "image" related to the role Russia played in the war against Nazism in this war, on the other hand, challenge the "unifying historical myth" in Russia (pp. 78-79).

It is also important how Russian and nationalist Ukrainian historians developed a historical perception towards organizations such as OUN and UPA during the Second

World War. Generally, the first side defines these organizations as fascists, Nazi collaborators and traitors, while the other side describes them as national resistance organizations. As Molchanov (2002) notes, from the perspective of nationalist Ukrainian historiography and Ukrainian nationalists, these organizations are accepted as “national liberation movements” to save Ukrainians from the Nazi Germans and Soviet Russians (pp. 83-85). Kasianov (2018), on the other hand, states that although controversial in Ukraine, nationalist circles see these organizations as “freedom fighters” (p. 180). Moreover, there is no common approach toward these organizations even within the Ukrainian society. On one hand, traditionally, Russian historiography along with the “pro-communist” and “pro-Russian” Ukrainians have marked these organizations with a label of treacherous nationalism and accused their members of collaboration with Nazi Germany and its crimes against Ukrainians by retaining the “Soviet condemnation” against Ukrainian nationalism as embraced by these movements; on the other hand, within the insight of Ukrainian nationalist narrative, mostly prevalent in the Western parts and the capital of Ukraine, and approach of officially supported Ukrainian historiography, these movements are portrayed as “national liberation movements” against the two “totalitarian” German and Soviet powers despite the early close military ties and common responsibilities on crimes against humanity between Germany and Ukrainian nationalists (Serhiychuk, 1993, as cited in Wilson, 1997; Bazhan, 1969, as cited in Molchanov, 2002; Torbakov, 2014). In particular, it is noteworthy that the Yushchenko administration brought the UPA and OUN to the forefront through prominent Ukrainian figures. In this way, in fact, it can be said that the Yushchenko administration aimed to glorify Ukrainian nationalism through prominent historical Ukrainian nationalist figures in this period (Coulson, 2021, p. 9). Bringing these nationalist formations to the fore also confirms the existence of the “anti-Soviet resistance” perspective in the Ukrainian historical policy of that period (See Budrytè, 2021).

With regards to the crimes against humanity and horrors in Ukraine committed during the Stalin period, the great famine that occurred in 1932-33 in Ukraine is of great importance. While official Ukrainian nationalist historiography with the presidency of

Yushchenko tends to interpret this event as a genocide imposed on Ukrainian population, the Russian side denies such accusations. In this regard, the resolution of the Ukrainian Parliament that described the famine officially as “Holodomor,” which is a term used by the nationalist Ukrainian historiography to denote the famine as a “man-made famine” and “genocide” directed against Ukrainian people with the description of events during the Stalin period as crimes against Ukrainian people is significant (See Maksymiuk, 2006). In this way, the Yushchenko administration's goal of creating a common national consciousness among the Ukrainian people through national suffering in history, as stated above, has an important role in the Yushchenko administration's bringing this historical event to the forefront as a "genocide". According to Coulson (2021), the Kyiv administration under Yushchenko turned this historical event into a “founding myth” for a common Ukrainian past and identity through “victimization” while with this the “other” for Ukraine can be formed through the former imperial center of Russia (pp. 1-2). As mentioned, the Russian side has consistently denied these accusations. In line with this, the Russian political elite and historians deny such Ukrainian claims with the emphasis on the “unfortunate consequence of the flawed collectivization” stating that other nationalities also experienced the catastrophic results of this collectivization similarly (Torbakov, 2014)

As can be observed through such different historical interpretations, there is a strong emphasis among Ukrainian nationalists and nationalist historiography on crimes committed during the period of Stalin, the national struggle against both Nazis and Soviet Russia, and calamities caused by “two foreign aggressors”. Such a stance is problematic for Russian historiography and identity structures for a variety of reasons. In terms of the “Great Patriotic War” and Stalin-era, the fact that the nationalist Ukrainian side does not define the WWII like the Russians (Sacred/Glorious War), opposes the Russian theses on this issue, and mainly focuses on the crimes against the Ukrainians during the Stalin period are inconsistent with the historiography of Russia, and the history and identity policies of the Putin administration. As Torbakov (2011) points out, the Putin administration was trying to provide unity and solidarity in Russian society by highlighting the past victories (primarily the Glorious War) as indispensable



episodes of the “Russian glorious thousand-year-old history” (pp. 219-220). Moreover, according to Torbakov, this historical victory was the only means by which "social cohesion" could be achieved in Russian society. According to the scholar, for these reasons, the Russian administration and historiography focused on the "sacred" war and victory myths in this period rather than the horrors of the Stalin era. However, the nationalist Ukrainian side's own historical theses that would refute the victory theses and characterize the Stalin era with the crimes both damaged this history and identity process of the Russian administration and caused reactions from Russia. According to Kasianov (2022), during the nationalization of history in countries such as Ukraine, the nationalist historiography emphasized the crimes committed during the Stalin era, placed the Soviet period in the imperial past and almost removed it from the cognitive process of these nations while pursuing the policy of creation of a comprehensive common past for the society (pp. 69-70).

All these interpretational differences towards the historical events and the attempts by the new Ukrainian historiography to disapprove of the traditional Russian historiographical theses are of crucial importance to analyze the intellectual and political disagreements and tensions between the two sides with the significant impacts on the Russian identity formation processes.

It cannot be said that there is a complete consistency regarding the policies on history implemented by the Ukrainian administrations within the post-Cold War period. As mentioned in the previous subsection, the Kravchuk and Kuchma administrations avoided raising the historical events too much that would lead to conflict with Russia, partly due to material facts and dependence on Russia in various fields. The Yushchenko administration, which fully defended Ukrainian nationalism and Westernism, brought controversial historical events to the fore, which led to a deterioration in bilateral relations with Russia. In this period, highlighting the historical Ukrainian figures mentioned above, Kyiv defined the 1932-33 famine as a human-made genocide with the definition of "Holodomor". On the other hand, the pro-Russian

Ukrainian Regions Party under the leadership of Yanukovich, which came to power in 2010, tried to neutralize this kind of nationalist historiography officially, avoiding conflicts with both Ukrainian nationalists and Russia in this regard with a relatively neutral stance. The Euromaidan events, the annexation of Crimea, and the war in the east of Ukraine strengthened the hand of the nationalists in Kyiv, while the Poroshenko administration, which came to power, re-officialized a nationalist understanding of history. Especially in the Poroshenko era, the aim of creating a sense of national unity against a perceived enemy among the Ukrainians at a time of troubles came to the fore.

#### **2.4. ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS OF RUSSIAN POLITICAL ELITE TOWARDS UKRAINE**

Detailed analyses of the periodically-changed perceptions and discourses of the Russian political elites towards Ukraine are vital to shed a light on the underlying causes and recent historical background of the current crises in Ukraine. Within this framework, in this subchapter, the discourses, which have reflected the perceptions at the same time, between the years 1991 and 2014 are analyzed. To be sure, the independence of Ukrainian lands and nations from the Russian core has been a certain matter of struggle for Russian policymakers to deal with since the very beginning of the dissolution process of the Soviet Union. In this respect, the historical, ethnic, and religious ties constitute principally challenging aspects for Russian policymakers to Ukrainian independence while ethnic Russian population and Russian-speaking people form another crucial element in the minds of Russian statesmen. Despite the positive developments, which underscored the bilateral agreements and shared understanding on Ukraine's independence between the highest-level statesmen of Russia and Ukraine, without no doubt, the idea and process of creation of Ukraine entirely independent from Russia was a matter of challenge for many political figures of Russian Federation in the first decade of the separation. As Jeremy Lester (1994) argues, many Russian political elites resembled the separation to the emergence of two Germanies at the end of the Second World War and believed in the inescapability of the future "reunification" of the two Slavic states and continued to keep the faith in this regard even during the first half of the 1990s (p. 227).

Undoubtedly, the factions who had difficulties in accepting the independence of Ukraine had such a point of view, while the independence of Ukraine was not a significant problem according to the liberals with liberal thought strong in the administration at the beginning. As Mikhail Molchanov (2002) points out, the liberal Russian policymakers, particularly Andrei Kozyrev, who dominated the foreign policy agenda in the early 1990s, deemed the separation of Ukraine as an inescapable stage and even a “beneficial” event in the process of Russia’s democratization, liberalization, and “integration” to the world structures as a “normal” great power while these liberal statesmen were mainly inclined to ignore post-Soviet zone, including Ukraine, in their foreign policy calculations to keep Russia from excessive economic and political burdens of these geographies by focusing mainly on the internal economic developments and other political reforms (pp. 93-99). However, this would not mean, as Molchanov emphasizes, that even liberal-minded Russian political elites were ready to separate Ukraine from the Russian mind completely; on the contrary, while many of these liberal statesmen admitted the necessity of getting rid of political and economic burdens of the post-Soviet republics and keeping the Russian influence in these states at a minimum level, they believed in the necessity of keeping closer relations with the other East Slavic nations, whom they considered as the larger part of the all-Russian nation, to facilitate their integration to the West as pursued by Russians.

Andrei Kozyrev, who was the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation within the period 1992-1996, was a leading figure with regard to such liberal assumptions towards the independence of Ukraine. In one of his articles, Kozyrev (1992c) put stress on the significant merit of independent developments of former Soviet republics freed from former “totalitarian oppression” as the equal partners of the Russian Federation with the help of the creation of the Commonwealth structures among these new republics (pp. 3-4). Like the foreign minister, Boris Yeltsin was not an opponent of Ukrainian independence despite his initial hesitation and even opposition. According to Plokhly (2017), while the first Russian president Boris Yeltsin was against the prospect of the independence of Ukraine in the dissolution process of the Soviet Union as seen in his threats on the possible territorial revisions in case of independence

of Ukraine, he eventually felt the need for approving the independence of this state with the strong support of Ukrainian public votes in the referendum. It is outstanding that in the early 1990s when the Russian Supreme Soviet and nationalist politicians frequently put the independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine into question, Boris Yeltsin rejected such statements and parliamentary resolutions in this direction without hesitation (Zaborsky, 1995; Shapovalova, 2014). Russian President Yeltsin's moderate and conciliatory attitude in the bilateral negotiations with Ukraine was highly demonstrative in respect of the dominant liberal considerations among the highest level of Russia's political elite class in the early years of the post-Cold War era. As a matter of fact, in the concept of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation published in 1993, there existed outstanding remarks concerning the good relations between the Russian Federation and other states Commonwealth of Independent States, particularly Ukraine, and potential gains for Russians rooted in good-neighborly relations and multidimensional cooperation with these states (President of Russia, 1993). In his annual message to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation in 1995, president Yeltsin underscored the necessity of solving outstanding disputes between Russia and Ukraine and developing the bilateral ties between the two "fraternal" nations (Yeltsin, 1995).

Unlike Yeltsin and high-level politicians with liberal ideas, political groups with nationalist ideas (whether ethnic or imperialist), including communists, had negative judgments about Ukrainian independence and territorial integrity. In terms of Ukrainian territorial unity, after just a brief time of Ukraine's independence, the statement published, in the "Rossiyskaya Gazeta" in 1991, by the press service secretary Pavel Voshchanov (1991), who brought up the prospect of revision of the state borders in favor of the Russian Federation different from the former Soviet Union administrative borders was highly outstanding as this statement clearly pointed to the possible Russian revisionism in terms of territorial boundaries with a disregard of Ukrainian borders in the early phases of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, within the same brief period, the mayor of Moscow, Gavriil Popov, in an interview on Central Soviet Television, put the Ukrainian sovereignty on Crimea into question (Sasse, 2007, p. 223)

while the mayor of St. Petersburg, was highly critical of the transfer of the Russian region of “Novorossiya” to Ukraine based on the ethnically-related arguments and considerations (Sobchak, as quoted in Solchanyk, 1994, p. 48). The influential ethnonationalist Russian figure Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1990), who had been an ardent defendant of Slavic unity between Russians and Ukrainians, suggested plebiscites in separate regions of Ukraine to see the choices of people by defending the Russianness of the regions of Novorossiya, Donbas, and Crimea. Some more radical Russian politicians, particularly Zhirinovskiy and his Liberal Democratic Party, went so far as to advocate the complete destruction of the independent Ukrainian state while many others solely argued for the incorporation of Russian-dominated regions of Ukraine into Russia during the early years of independent Ukrainian state (Molchanov, 2002, pp. 102-103). From the perspective of Zhirinovskiy, there can only be a single great Russia rather than separate Ukraine and Russian Federation (Szporluk, 1993, p. 368). Moreover, Zaborsky (1995) notes that Ukrainian political elites were concerned with the attitude rising from the Russian “Civic Union”, “Industrial Lobby”, the “Democratic Party of Nikolay Travkin” and the “Communist Party of Zyuganov” all of which supported the prospect of economic, political and military pressures in the case that Ukraine does not wish to voluntarily reunite with Russia.

The ongoing internal and external problems in this period, the relative loss of power of liberal values, the weakening of the power of liberal statesmen as in the case of the departure of Kozyrev and the strengthening of statist with Primakov who was the foreign minister and prime minister during the second half of the Yeltsin administration helped the nationalist and imperialist perspectives to gain strength at the political arena and among the mass public. According to Mikhail Molchanov (2002), the Russian political elite, who were gradually disillusioned by the “transatlantic unity” and the promises of liberalization attempts, started to adopt nationalist viewpoints with strong imperialist elements with their growing negative attitudes towards Ukraine (p. 104).

Although there were positive approaches towards Ukrainian independence and territorial integrity in general during the Yeltsin period, it can be said that the Russian administration actually had some expectations from Kyiv. As mentioned in the previous sections, there were demands for the protection of the rights of the Russian minority and Russian-speaking population, and the facilitation of dual citizenship. Apart from that, the Moscow administration hoped Ukraine to take Belarus as an example in bilateral relations. As a matter of fact, the “Treaty on the Creation of a Union State of Russia and Belarus” in 1999 was a significant milestone in the developing relations between the two Slavic nations with greater levels of cooperation and partnership in the absence of Ukraine. In this regard, Molchanov (2002) notes that the then-Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov considered this significant event as a “milestone” in the path of the “unity of the three Slavic peoples” (p. 105). From the perspective of Molchanov, the high-level politicians in Moscow expected similar attitudes and policies from Ukraine as seen among their Belarusian counterparts while they were highly attentive not to impose pressure on Kyiv.

Moreover, apart from these expectations, the period between 1990 and 2000 between the Russian and Ukrainian governments was a period of problems and temporary tense relations. These problems were Soviet nuclear weapons in Ukraine, the Crimean issue with the ethnic Russian majority, and the sharing of the Black Sea Fleet and its presence in Crimea.

A crucial issue to be settled by the two states was the nuclear arsenal Ukraine had possessed after the dissolution of the USSR. It can be seen that Russian high-level politicians attributed great importance to the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons in Ukraine from the start of the last decade of the 20th century. In the concept of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation in 1993, it was stated that the preservation of the non-nuclear status of Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan should be ensured with their subsequent signature on the “Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons” without any nuclear weapons (President of Russia, 1993). According to this concept, the nuclear

arms located in the newly independent post-Soviet states should be delivered to the Russian Federation. Even the ardent liberal then-Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev (1992a) pointed to Russia's special "responsibility" and "obligations" rooted in the history, great power status, and its permanent membership in the Security Council of the UN both in the post-Soviet region and the world, in general despite his strong emphasis on the equality among the Commonwealth member states. From this perspective, Kozyrev advocated the denuclearization of the Commonwealth states with the supreme control of Russia over the nuclear arsenals with the non-nuclear status of other post-Soviet republics. From the Ukrainian perspective, nuclear weapons were a guarantee of independence and national security while, particularly, the nationalist factions were opposing the de-nuclearization of the state. As Robert H. Donaldson and Vidya Nadkarni (2019) argue, during the nuclear negotiations, the Kravchuk administration was under the intense pressure of the nationalist sections who were against the non-proliferation agreement, on the one hand, and it was under the influence of suspicions and threat perceptions against Russia due to the tense relations due to the BSF and Crimea issues with Russia (pp. 175, 184). The problem was solved when Ukraine gave up on nuclear weapons with the primary help of US mediation and the signing of the "Budapest Memorandum" in 1994 that would guarantee Ukraine's security. Another important point here is that the Russian administration, which wanted to solve this problem in its own favor, put the natural gas card on the table during the negotiations. Such scholars as Drezner (1999), Riabchuk (2009), and Ghaleb (2011) imply the indispensable role of natural gas and its weaponization at the hands of the Kremlin in its negotiations with Kyiv for issues regarding the nuclear arsenal and Black Sea Fleet within the process.

Crimea formed the second important problem in bilateral relations during the Yeltsin era. The decisions taken by Ukraine's parliament in 1995 that abolished the constitution of Crimea, which had been adopted in 1992, and the presidential post of this autonomous republic by incorporating Crimea legally under the power of Ukraine's president and parliament led to the harsh reactions on the part of Russian political elites. Boris Yeltsin, who had kept his distance from the radical Russian politicians and

parliamentary factions who went as far as advocating the incorporation of the peninsula into the Russian Federation, under pressure started to support some demands of these Russian politicians regarding the interests of Crimeans and called for dialogue between Ukraine's administration and Crimean political elites and he warned the Ukrainians that the "Big Treaty" (Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation) could not be signed under these conditions (Shapovalova, 2014, p. 237). Furthermore, even the foreign minister Kozyrev declared that Russia was ready to monitor the rights of Russians in the newly created independent states in the former Soviet zone (Sasse, 2007, p. 234) despite his former positive attitude towards these states. Moreover, it can be argued that the Russian administration during the period of Boris Yeltsin tried to use the problems in Crimea and the Russian minority as a means of pressure on Ukraine and to protect its interests in the region in the 1990s. As Natalia Shapovalova (2014) asserts, despite the relatively positive attitude Boris Yeltsin did not hesitate to utilize such Russian claims on Crimea and Sevastopol with the support coming from pro-Russian movements in the Crimean Peninsula as a "pressure tool" on Ukrainian statesmen in the negotiations concerning the Black Sea Fleet in order to maximize Russian gains in these bargains just as the Black Sea issue and Russian population in this region would be used as a "soft power" instrument. (pp. 227, 235, 238-239). Arguably, the main factor hindering the problems in Crimea to grow further, even if they could not be solved, is that Yeltsin administration was distant towards the pro-Russian factions here and does not bring this issue to the fore. According to Anatol Lieven (1999), Sasse (2007), and Shapovalova (2014), the separatists in Crimea could not get support from the Yeltsin administration, and the Russian administration did not take a step to support Russian separatism despite opposition pressure and parliamentary decisions. In addition, as Sasse emphasizes, Crimeans' perception of Kuchma as pro-Russian during the 1994 elections, while the tensions in Crimea continued, and his victory in this election, at least in the first period, made the atmosphere alleviated.

The disagreements over the share of the Black Sea Fleet and the use of the naval ports in the Crimean Peninsula were important factors that strained the relations between the two countries. However, despite periodical tense relations between the administration of



these two states, the two sides succeeded to reach agreements to solve issues concerning the Black Sea Fleet with a subsequent impact of gas trade and Ukrainian debts, and soon after they signed the *Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation* in 1997. In their joint statement given in 1997, Boris Yeltsin and then-Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma declared that the agreements that solved the issues of the Black Sea Fleet and the status of Sevastopol, which they deemed as an indispensable part of the “heroic” and glorious past and as a “symbol of brotherhood” between two nations with their emphasis on fraternity between their peoples, would ensure the friendly relations and cooperation in many fields. However, the eventual signing of agreements on the “division of the Black Sea Fleet” and the “Big Treaty” between the administrations of Boris Yeltsin and Ukraine resulted in strong criticism of the Russian parliament and media when president Boris Yeltsin made remarkable efforts for the ratification of the agreements by the parliament that tried to block these with vetoes (Shapovalova, 2014, pp. 237-238). Moreover, in his speech to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, Yeltsin (1998) mentioned that most of the past problems with Ukraine have been eliminated. However, in his speech, he underlined the necessity of greater levels of “strategic partnership” with Ukraine and complained about the “slow” process in this regard without a comprehensive common understanding with the Ukrainian administration.

In this way, with the resolution of the nuclear weapons and Black Sea Fleet issue in favor of Russia, and the relative ignorance of issues in Crimea by the Russian administration, the relations between the two countries were partially improved with the agreements made in the late 1990s. However, this did not mean that the anxieties and "doubts" between the two countries were eliminated, as the Ukrainian parliament delayed the approval of the Black Sea Fleet agreement for one and a half years, whereas the Russian parliament approved the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership only in 1999 (Donaldson & Nadkarni, 2019, p. 187).

The accession to power of Vladimir Putin and his pragmatic policies towards Western and CIS countries in order to modernize Russia in every field by facing Russia's economic, political, and military realities, as mentioned in the previous sections, provided a favorable and friendly environment for the Ukrainian administration because, within the framework of pragmatic policies, the Russian administration put political disagreements aside and gave more importance to cooperation in the economic, political and security fields between countries. According to Plokhly (2017), Putin, who wanted to strengthen close economic ties and cooperation with the former Soviet countries, gave importance to close relations in his first term, which helped Ukraine by providing a positive political environment in its relations with Russia. His emphasis on economic integration via the channels of the “Common Economic Space” and “Eurasian Economic Community” (now Eurasian Economic Union) confirms such a viewpoint of the Russian president, as he stated in his speech to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation in 2004 (Putin, 2004). The significance Russia attributed to the Ukrainian independence and bilateral relations between the two states can be observed in the Russian president’s attendance at the ceremonial events of the tenth anniversary of the independence of Ukraine (Molchanov, 2002, p. 105).

Notwithstanding the pragmatic policies with the positive attitude of Vladimir Putin towards the post-Soviet states including Ukraine, the Russian president put a special emphasis on the necessity of good relations with these republics free from the influence of the West that Putin deemed as “manipulative” and “disruptive” (Molchanov, 2002, p. 105). In this regard, it can be inferred from such an approach that Vladimir Putin’s general attitude towards the West was considerably doubtful despite his pragmatist policies during his first presidential term. The topic regarding Western influence and military enlargement in the post-Soviet zone is further analyzed in the next section.

Russian growing influence in the Crimean Peninsula despite the approval of Ukrainian legal “sovereignty” on Crimea and settlements of issues regarding this region can be well observed as of the 2000s. As some scholars argue, while a significant faction of the

Russian political elite, still, could not accept the complete separation of Crimea from Russian soil, pro-Russian political movements in the peninsula, which possessed “anti-Ukrainian” feelings, continued to be supported by Russia (Useinov, 2014; Shapovalova, 2014). As these scholars point out, the Russian administration was increasing its influence here through "soft power" mechanisms, "intelligence facilities" in Crimea, the Crimean media, and the Orthodox church, in addition to supporting these pro-Russian formations that would have a facilitating effect in the Russian annexation of the peninsula in 2014, as Useinov adds.

The principal turning point in Moscow’s attitude towards Ukraine and the West emerged with a “revolution” in Ukraine. The Orange Revolution, which was supported by the West in Russian perceptions, resulted in the election of a pro-Western Ukrainian administration and the defeat of the pro-Russian candidate whom the Kremlin backed up. The Russian administration supported Yanukovich in the first and repeated elections in 2004. Even Putin's visit to Ukraine during this period showed his support for Yanukovich. However, the fact that a pro-Western and nationalist figure won the repeated election after the first one, which Yanukovich won but was cancelled due to mass protests, instead of the candidate Russia desired, and that the Kremlin thought that this result was supported by the West, caused a negative image of Ukraine and the West to emerge in the mind of the Russian administration. As a result of this process, there were four important negative outcomes in the mind of the Russian administration. The first was the perceptual loss of Ukraine to the West, the second was that the economic integration led by Russia and Ukraine became difficult with the pro-Western economic inclination of the Yushchenko administration, and the third was that the chance of purchase of pipelines by the Gazprom would disappear and the fourth was the belief that the existing rights of "compatriots" living in Ukraine would be damaged. As Donaldson and Nadkarni (2019) assert, in Russia and the West in general, this result marked the drift of Ukraine to the West and a significant loss in Russian foreign policy (p. 188). According to Serhii Plokhy (2017), the elections in Ukraine in 2004 were quite important for Russia’s interests for two reasons: the “future of post-Soviet integration” and the prospect of “Russian ownership on the network of gas pipelines”, and if the pro-

Russian candidate had won, his election would have facilitated the realization of the two Russian interests while the outcome was the opposite. In connection with this statement, as Michael Klare (2008) suggests, the Putin administration, which succeeded in nationalizing the oil and gas resources in Russia, wanted to put the natural gas pipelines and facilities used in gas exports to other countries under a Russian monopoly in the mid-2000s, through Gazprom (p. 112). From the perspective of Tsygankov (2015), with the election of a pro-Western candidate and declined influence of Russia in Ukraine, the Russian political establishment perceived the prospect of future NATO membership of Ukraine in contrast with the Russian-led post-Soviet integration, of reinterpretation of the history mainly concerning the past events of the World War II and the elevation of the “status of Ukrainian language” with a possible decline of the Russian language in Ukraine would become evident (pp. 281-282, 288-289).

As a result of the Orange Revolution, it should be noted that the Russian administration did not respond in a military style and only tried to balance the results of this revolution with economic and political means. As Tsygankov (2015, 2016) puts it, in contrast with numerous expectations, Russia contended with sole economic/political pressures and its soft power structures in this state with the high level of “interdependence” between Ukraine and Russia in spite of domestic radical political recommendations that sought much more such as higher levels of economic sanctions or even supporting Russian separatism in Ukraine let alone the measures involving Russian military interventions in this state as a result of the consideration on growing Russian ties and cooperation with the West. As a matter of fact, Russia, which was still in the process of modernization in many fields during this period, did not want to jeopardize the ties and economic cooperation it was developing with the West due to a military conflict with Ukraine. However, it should be noted that the Putin administration started to adopt more assertive rhetoric and policies as a result of the color revolutions (particularly in Ukraine) in the post-Soviet zone as a result of the perceived Western role in these events and perceptual losses of Russia, as well as pragmatism.

In the process, one of the tensions between the Yushchenko and Putin administrations was about the future of the Black Sea Fleet (abbreviated as BSF). The basis of the disagreement was the Yushchenko administration's demand for all costs of the BSF to be covered by Russia, and the desire not to extend the time limit of the base used by Russia, which would expire in 2047, according to previous agreements. The negotiations in the intergovernmental commission, which was headed by Putin and Yushchenko, on the issues concerning the BSF did not bring success to actualize the expectations of the two sides with the unsolved disputes while Russians showed their unwillingness to come to terms with Ukraine in order not to undertake all economic costs of the Black Sea Fleet and not to pave the way for negotiations concerning the departure of this fleet from Crimea as of 2047 (Shapovalova, 2014, p. 246).

In the face of Ukraine's Western and NATO-oriented policies with the Yushchenko administration, to be evaluated in the next section in detail, Moscow started to use the pro-Russian factions in Crimea and Russian "compatriots" issues in Ukraine. Particularly against the NATO membership prospect of Ukraine, Russia exploited the Crimean issue to put pressure on the Ukrainian government to block Ukraine's accession to the NATO structures while the protests in Crimea were organized by pro-Russian forces including *Nashi* and the *Eurasian Youth Movement*, which were funded by Russia, before the international military training called "Sea Breeze-2006" against NATO with the participation of Black Sea Fleet officials and intelligence support (Hedenskog, 2008; Tishchenko et al., 2008; Shapovalova, 2014). In this period, the political tension in Crimea increased. The parliament of Crimea and the local administrations declared their regions as "NATO-free territories", the parliament in the peninsula adopted the "NATO-free" status of the autonomous republic, and the State Duma of the Russian Federation recommended the government serious political reactions involving the reconsideration of Ukraine's sovereignty on Crimea with special arguments on the "1774 Russian-Turkish Peace Treaty" in May 2006 (Shapovalova, 2014, p. 247). Immediately after the proposals of the Russian State Duma and declarations of local Crimean administrations, the Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation adopted a supportive discourse towards the break-away republics in

Moldova and Georgia with the emphasis on the “self-determination” rights of the peoples of these republics while the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, warned Ukraine and Georgia of fundamental changes in territorial situations in case they accede to the NATO in his speech in June 2006 (Shapovalova, 2014; Tsygankov, 2015). To be sure, such a discourse was not a coincidence during a period in which the political situations of Crimea, Russian compatriots, and NATO prospects of Ukraine were harshly debated.

As for the Russian "compatriots", the Putin administration frequently brought this issue to the agenda after the Ukrainian revolution and tried to keep the Kyiv administration under pressure through the rights and freedoms of those living in Ukraine. Although not exactly on this issue, it can be stated that Putin tried to put pressure on Ukraine in the field of energy and Russian energy subsidies to this country in his speech in Munich (See Putin, 2007a). Putin's speech at the Bucharest summit in 2008 reveals that he put pressure on the Ukrainian administration through "compatriots" and territorial issues, especially during a period when Ukraine continued to follow NATO-oriented policies. Putin (2008), in this speech, clearly put stress on the complexities in Ukrainian statehood by arguing the different interests of many neighboring states on the parts of the current Ukrainian state with still unsolved territorial problems by paying his special attention to the Russian compatriots and regions of Ukraine that were dominated by ethnic Russians. According to him, a possible NATO membership of Ukraine could be dangerous for Ukraine as a state of complexity. According to Plochy (2017), Putin's main attendance goal at this NATO Summit was to warn the West against the membership of Ukraine and Georgia in NATO while, immediately after his return to Russia, he decided to make Russia's relations with the breakaway republics in Georgia official and invade Georgia in the summer of 2008. The warnings of Putin in Bucharest and Russian military actions in Georgia must have been well-addressed to the NATO members; as a matter of fact, the concerns on the Ukrainian and Georgian territorial integrity, their membership prospects in NATO, and considerations on “Membership Action Plan” with these countries were being discussed in the aftermath of these events, as revealed by the leaked *Wikileaks* documents (wikileaks.org, 2008). In an interview

with Dimitry Rogozin, Russian permanent representative to the military alliance, carried out by the BBC, Rogozin expressed the threat of the collapse of Ukraine in case of a possible NATO membership of this state before the NATO Foreign Ministers' meeting in Brussels on Georgia's and Ukraine's NATO membership issues (Kommersant, 2008).

On the other hand, as stated in the previous section, the Yushchenko administration accelerated the Ukrainian nationalist historiography, which caused tension between the two countries as it had features that contradicted Russian historiography. Aside from the conflicting historical interpretations over World War II and the high-level significance that Vladimir Putin attributed to this historical event for Russian history, president Putin also expressed the feeling of Russian past glories and patriotism with the help of historically prominent Russian nationalist figures and military commanders (Plokyh, 2017). During his visit to the Donskoi Monastery in Moscow in May 2009, Putin asks a reporter whether she had read the diaries of General Denikin and expressed a statement of Denikin: "Denikin discusses Great and Little Russia, Ukraine. He writes that no one may meddle in relations between us; that has always been the business of Russia itself" (Kyivpost, 2009). In fact, with this speech, Putin was addressing the history of Russia and Ukraine as a whole in contrast with the nationalist Ukrainian historiography, while at the same time interpreting the past events in an inclusive way from the perspective of the Russian historiography, with the emphasis on "glorious Russian past." Similarly, according to Plokyh (2017), Vladimir Putin gave the message that no matter the political orientation of Russia, Russians never permit Ukrainians to separate themselves from the Russian core while he emphasized the bilateral nature and internal matter of debates between the two peoples free from the influence and meddling of the others, that is, the West he implied. Even before the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin (2003b) also talked about the "Great Famine" that emerged in Ukraine in the early 1930s. In this speech at the 58th session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2003, while he defined the period of starvation as the "national tragedy of Ukrainian nation" he made the point that other peoples in the Volga region, in the Northern Caucasus, and other regions of the Soviet Union were also affected by the Great

Famine. This statement of the president was before the Orange Revolution; however, general historical interpretation of this event among the Russian historians and scholars reflected on the discourse of the highest-level official of the Russian Federation at this time. In line with the general Russian historical theses, it should not be forgotten that as Miller (2012) argues, Putin developed a "reconciliatory comprehensive approach", with which the main purpose of the Kremlin was to make peace with the Russian past and construct a glorious history from the Kievan Rus' period without intervals, to Russian history from the very beginning, and the administration was disturbed by the historical theses of neighboring states holding Russia responsible for historical events and rejecting all achievements, especially the "Great Victory", during the Soviet period (pp. 255-257).

On the other hand, it can be seen that there are similar approaches when looking at Russian history books supported by the Kremlin. As David Wedgwood Benn (2008) and Alexei Miller (2012) examine, in the 2007 controversial history book published by Filippov and Danilov, which is thought to be Kremlin-supported, even if admits the crimes and horrors of the Stalin era, shows the Nazi danger and external hostile environment that arose at that time as the underlying reason of Stalin's policies, by telling the positive aspects of the Soviets in history, the victorious years during the communism. In addition, although there are warnings about the broad powers of the Russian presidency, there are praises for Putin, a great emphasis is placed on the concept of "Sovereign Democracy," and anti-Westernism/Americanism elements are prominent in this book. As Wedgwood has pointed out, this way the book receives great criticism from the West, especially for containing controversial interpretations of historical and current events.

In particular, in response to the Ukrainian historical theses (also theses in Baltic states), which were put forward in a way to refute the Russian history theses, during the Yushchenko period, the Russian administration even founded a historical commission under the leadership of Medvedev. In the Russian President's decree No. 549, "About



the Commission under the President of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests", it was stated that with the commission, the coordination among the Russian institutions would be ensured with the aim of "countering attempts to falsify history to the detriment of Russia's interests" (consultant.ru., 2009). The creation of such a commission clearly demonstrated the prevalent perceptions among the Russian political elite towards the reinterpretations of the historical facts and events in the independent republics that emerged from the former USSR. In addition, the formation of this commission during the presidency of president Medvedev reflected the similar perceptions on politics and history he shared, as possessed by a significant number of Russian political class. In his speech at a meeting with ambassadors and permanent representatives of the Russian Federation in international organizations on July 15, 2008, president Medvedev (2008a) described the accusations due to historical events, for example, the Great Famine, which had been originated from such hostile reinterpretations and directed against Russia, as "immoral" and "opportunistic." From the perspective of Torbakov (2011), this political action of Moscow clearly strove to marginalize the attempts to question the victory of the Soviet Union in the Great Patriotic War (p. 210).

The relations between the Medvedev administration and the Yushchenko administration showed a significant level of deterioration and coldness. The fact that the Russian administration did not send an ambassador to Ukraine in 2009 and Medvedev's open letter to Yushchenko marked the further deterioration in bilateral relations. In an open letter through his video blog to Yushchenko on 11 August 2009, Dmitry Medvedev clearly blamed the president and his administration in Kyiv for a variety of reasons (President of Russia, 2009; Tsygankov, 2015). First of all, Medvedev accused Ukraine of not complying with the "principles and partnership with Russia" with an emphasis on the violation of the Treaty of 1997 signed between the two states. Secondly, he blamed the Ukrainian administration for its support for the Georgian government under Mikhail Saakashvili and its "anti-Russian" stance during the 2008 Russian-Georgian War. Third, according to Medvedev, the Ukrainian government preserved its desires to become a part of NATO despite the notions and feelings of the Ukrainian people while the other

side always, implicitly, referred to the “Russian threat” even though there is nothing of this sort in the perception of Medvedev. Fourth, the Ukrainian policies attempting to hamper the Russian Black Sea Fleet's actions and activities in the Black Sea were seen as a “violation” of the bilateral agreements by the Russian president. Fifth, Medvedev denounced the historical reinterpretation efforts of the Kyiv administration as demonstrated in the “heroization of Nazi collaborators”, “glorification of the role played by radical nationalists”, and the use of the term “genocide” in the international platforms with regard to the Great Famine in Ukraine. Lastly, the president critically mentioned the interventions of the Ukrainian government in the public sphere with examples of the strains on the Russian language in the many fields of life and negative government actions against the Russian Orthodox Church activities in Ukraine. According to Medvedev, Ukrainians showed their prevalent support for the Orthodox unity in the East-Slavic geography and welcomed the Russian Orthodox Church activities. The Russian president explained the decision not to send an ambassador to Kyiv for the above-mentioned reasons. It is remarkable to note the remarks of the Russian president in the last part of his letter with regard to the way how Russian political elites considered the relations between Russians and Ukrainians. As a matter of fact, he emphasized the fraternity between the two nations aside from being neighbors thanks to the “feelings, history, culture, religion” common to them. With the “close economic cooperation, strong kinship, and human relations” the president believed that the administrations of the two states were required to preserve and strengthen these feelings, ties, and common features. According to him, this was also necessary for the “welfare” of the two peoples in the world with globalized economies. The main assignment and responsibility of the political elites of the two states should be blocking efforts to “artificially” separate the two close peoples and hampering the negative feelings of younger generations of the two peoples against each other in the future, as completed his words, Medvedev. In one of his interviews, Medvedev made statements about the coming presidential elections in Ukraine. In these statements, he emphasized the state sovereignty and free choice of the Ukrainian people as the citizens of an independent state; however, he said he expected a Ukrainian president who would respect the choices of the Ukrainian people and would make efforts for greater levels of cooperation and good relations with the Russian Federation (see Dyomkin, 2009). In

addition to the close bilateral relations, Medvedev expected the future Ukrainian president to respect Russian language without the imposition of restrictions on this language, and to support the “joint economic projects” with/of Russia in an environment in which there is no enthusiasm for participation in a “foreign military bloc.” Clearly, he emphasized the last point for the Russian demands for the non-accession of Ukraine to NATO. With these, arguably, the Russian president showed his support for the pro-Russian Yanukovich in the 2010 elections.

In 2010, the Ukrainian elections resulted in the victory of pro-Russian Victor Yanukovich with the low-level popularity of former pro-Western Ukrainian president Victor Yushchenko. To be sure, this was an outcome that the Russian political elite desired. As Tsygankov (2016) asserts, Russia’s “diplomatic, economic and cultural tools” finally brought positive results to Russia with the election of a pro-Russian candidate by reversing the Orange Revolution for the eventual benefit of Russia with stronger Russian influence in the post-Soviet republics (p. 224). Furthermore, as Tsygankov notes, having the advantage and encouragement of the pro-Russian administration in Kyiv, Russia was able to add an additional twenty-five years for its lease of the Russian naval base in the Crimean Peninsula with the promise of gas price discounts while Russia went as far as to call for the Ukrainian political elites to enter into the Customs Union by proposing further discounts in the gas prices.

What was more important for Russia is that the new pro-Russian administration would no longer pursue policies toward joining NATO. As Tsygankov (2015) notes, the Yanukovich administration in Kyiv seemed to give up the former administration’s desires for being a part of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in addition to other positive developments and improved levels in bilateral relations with the emergence of a pro-Russian administration in Ukraine (p. 281).

The positive developments in the relations between Russia and Ukraine notwithstanding, arguably, the levels of partnership between the two states could not reach as far as the Kremlin desired. As Shapovalova (2014) and Tsygankov (2015) argue, the bilateral relations could not be continued without certain limits even during Yanukovich's term in Ukraine's presidential post, and the "delimitations agreement" concerning the maritime boundaries in the Seas of the Black Sea and Azov could not be signed despite a limited degree of successful bilateral negotiations. As Shapovalova asserts, the Kerch Strait and its continental shelf with its oil and gas reserves continued to be a matter of political debate between the two states during this period. The principal reason for the limited success in relations between the two states was the political environment in Ukraine and possible public reactions among the Ukrainian society as Yanukovich made political calculations in domestic settings. In addition, even if the new administration abandoned NATO membership plans, Ukraine's ties with the EU continued to strengthen during this period, which was not in line with the interests of Russia, which wanted to bring Ukraine to its sphere of influence economically and politically through Ukraine's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. Such scholars as Anders Åslund (2013), Rilka Dragneva and Kataryna Wolczuk (2014), and Serhii Plokhyy (2017) draw attention, the Yanukovich and Putin administrations had different opinions within the framework of different interests, because, on the one hand, the Putin administration was trying to completely distance Ukraine from the EU and was completely opposed to the Association Agreement by struggling to include Ukraine in the Eurasian Economic Union, while on the other hand, even if the Kyiv administration gave up its efforts to join NATO, it was seeking to enter into close economic relations with both the EU and the Eurasian Union. As these scholars emphasized, the Putin administration, which saw the Association Agreement to be signed in 2013 as a strong obstacle to regional integration, therefore started to exert political and economic pressure on the Kyiv administration, as a result, the Yanukovich administration gave up signing the agreement in November, 2013 and the events that followed emerged.

Finally, it is necessary to draw attention to the references made to the historical unity and brotherhood of the peoples of Russia and Ukraine, which became more and more frequent over time during the Putin and Medvedev eras. Vladimir Putin has referred to such a bond between Ukraine and Russia since he acceded to the presidency. For example, in his speech on Russian Navy Day, Putin (2001b) underlined the significance of the Russian navy with regards to the security of the shores of two “fraternal” states by emphasizing the glorious past, patriotic mission for the “motherland”, and historically prominent figures of the navy. In this speech, the emphasized terms of “fraternity”, “friendship”, “glorious past” and “great Russian motherland” were highly outstanding concerning his unity discourse regarding the two peoples. Similarly, in the open letter of Medvedev to the Yushchenko administration, it is remarkable to note the remarks of the Russian president in the last part of his letter with regards to the way how Moscow considered the relations between Russians and Ukrainians (President of Russia, 2009). He emphasized the fraternity between the two nations aside from being neighbors thanks to the “feelings, history, culture, religion” common to them. With the “close economic cooperation, strong kinship, and human relations” the president believed that the administrations of the two states are required to preserve and strengthen these feelings, ties, and common features. With his third term in the presidency, Putin, to a greater extent, continued to put stress on the terms of “fraternity” to define the relations between the two nations and use the discourse of “one people/nation” to clarify his perception of the inseparability of the two peoples during the period after 2010, as he already did from time to time before this period. The Russian president’s visit to the 14th International bike show in Sevastopol on July 24, 2010, was a significant example in this respect and would provide him with the chance of addressing the fraternal and historical ties between the Russians and Ukrainian nations once again. In his speech, Vladimir Putin (2010) emphasized the significance of the historical places, the patriotism of the heroes, which defended “the motherland”, and the togetherness of the Russian and Ukrainian navy officials like the high level of togetherness and “unity” between the two “fraternal” peoples. During the celebration of the 1150th anniversary of the birth of Russian statehood, then-president Medvedev (2011b) focused on the “common historical and spiritual roots” of the three East-Slavic nations with his expectation of the same understanding to be shared by his Ukrainian

and Belarusian counterparts. What is more significant was that, during the period when Moscow pressured Yanukovich to join Eurasian Union, in his speech to the ambassadors, Putin (2012a) remarked his respect for the free choice of the Ukrainian people in their participation in the union. However, even while he was accepting Ukraine as a sovereign and independent state, Putin did not hesitate to relate Ukraine to the common Russian history and roots again at the same time. In his speeches to the conference called Orthodox-Slavic Values: The Foundation of Ukraine's Civilizational Choice on July 27, 2013, and the Valdai Club on September 19, 2013, he emphasized the Russian respect for the independence of Ukraine in his second speech, he mainly focused on the Kievan roots, "common Dnieper roots", shared "tradition, mentality, history, and culture" of the two peoples with the linguistic ties in these speeches (Putin, 2013a, 2013b). In these speeches, he mentioned remarkable developments in many fields and economic successes that Ukraine achieved when they constituted a unity with Russians, who backed Ukrainians during the imperial and Soviet eras.

The rising influence of the Russian Orthodox Church and Christian values in the Russian political establishment constitutes another component of the conservative domination, which was explained in the previous chapter, that embraced the unity discourse regarding the historical bonds of the three Slavic people including the Ukrainians. Patriarch Krill clearly put forwards similar theses concerning the common, history, roots, and culture shared by the Russians and Ukrainians, various ties (particularly religious ones) between them, and a single Great Russian nationality consisting of Russians and Ukrainians as the subbranches (Krill, 2009). In another speech, Patriarch Krill (2010) argued for the unique Russian civilization with the significant place of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan in this civilization. According to Krill, Russian people, as a one-Russian nation in the perception of the church, must have a powerful "civilizational consciousness" while, in this context, one of the most important tasks falls on Ukraine. Krill stated that Ukraine's main task was to "reset" its sovereignty and related understandings by working on the mechanisms for the Russian World. All these steps in the path of the Russian World were necessary for the sake of Great Russian unity, security, and prosperity, as he completed his remarks.

In his addresses to the events organized by the Russian Orthodox Church, Vladimir Putin (2013c), on his part, emphasized the role of the “adoption of Christianity” for the Russian civilization and civilizational developments in many fields with his emphasis on the historical role of the Orthodox Church for the great Russian people. Furthermore, according to Putin (2013b, 2013c) in these two speeches, it was Christianity and the embrace of the “Orthodox faith” that historically determined the distinct characteristics and “mentality” of the one-Russian nation while these provided Russia with its “rightful place” among the world civilizations. What is, possibly, more important was that he remarked that it is the Orthodox values that principally strengthen the “family ties” among Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians. It can be observed that the administration embraced the discourse and language of the Russian Orthodox Church regarding the Russian civilization, one-Russian nation, and the Eastern Slavic nations including the Ukrainians as of the second decade of the second millennium.

In addition to the frequency of these discourses, it is necessary to look at the underlying political considerations. One of the rationales for the Russian administration to use these discourses in the post-2000 period was undoubtedly to create a positive image of Russia in the eyes of the Ukrainian people and to embellish Ukrainian historiography with Russian historiography with the help of pro-Russian Ukrainian administrations to be elected by people with their positive attitude and strengthened ties to Russia. Moreover, the significant point to be noted here is that the Putin administration, which adopted the conservative/civilizational ideology after 2011 and wanted to benefit from the discourses of ethnic and imperial Russian nationalism and neo-Eurasianism, began to express these discourses more frequently. The purpose of this was to guarantee the support of ethnic/imperial nationalists, conservative/civilizational sections, Eurasianists, and the Orthodox Church, which advocated the unity and fraternity of Ukraine and Russia at a time when relations with the West were declining and political problems in Russia were experienced. It can also be argued that until the Maidan events, the Kremlin tried to further distance Ukraine from the West with these discourses and the pro-Russian administration in Kyiv and to establish an East Slavic alliance against the West

as preached by ethnic/imperial nationalists, conservatives, including the church circles, and Eurasianists.

## **2.5. UKRAINE BETWEEN THE WEST AND RUSSIA**

During the post-Cold War era, NATO expansions towards the post-Soviet zone created a tense atmosphere between Russia and the West. Concerns and negative attitudes about NATO's eastward expansion have been expressed from time to time in the Russian Federation's foreign policy concepts and national security concepts (See [nuke.fas.org](http://nuke.fas.org)., 1993, 1997, 2000a, 2000b; ArmsControlAssociation, 2000; [thailand.mid.ru](http://thailand.mid.ru)., 2009; VoltaireNetwork, 2013). The repeated formal expression of such concerns implies that the Russian political establishment had, in general, an extremely negative perception with respect to NATO's enlargement to include Ukraine towards the borders of the Russian Federation. When looked at periodically, Yeltsin did not care much about NATO's enlargement in eastern Europe at the beginning, because Russia was in a transitional period and he was aware of its various problems, while the administration was proceeding with its policy of rapprochement with the West. As Tsygankov (2016) notes, until 1993 Moscow did not object to NATO's enlargement policy (pp. 76-77). But almost everyone, except Russian liberals, was against such a development. In this direction, both ethnic and imperial nationalist sections, conservatives, Eurasianists, and military sections were opposed to NATO enlargement for various reasons (mainly security issues, NATO policies in the Balkans, and anti-Western attitudes) and put pressure on the Yeltsin administration. In such a political environment, Yeltsin had to change his attitude and discourse on this issue. Yeltsin began to criticize NATO's rapid expansion in Eastern Europe and its military existence near the Russian border and began to express his negative point of view in this regard (See Yeltsin, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999). There were statements that even Kozyrev reflected the negative Russian point of view, in which he criticized NATO enlargement (See Kozyrev, 1994). Not surprisingly, Primakov, who had a cold approach to the West, also sharply criticized NATO's expansion (See Primakov, 1996). Aware of the realities of Russia



and the necessity of close relations and cooperation with the West, the Putin administration avoided being too critical of NATO enlargement, at least until the color revolutions. Without a doubt, whether he had a positive or negative attitude towards such expansions is disputable, however, until the color revolutions, Putin avoided confrontations with the West due to the economic realities and Russia's need for the West. In his speeches to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation and the UN General Assembly, Putin (2002, 2003a) clearly emphasized the need to develop close relations with the EU and NATO. However, the situation changed with the color revolutions in post-Soviet geography. The Putin administration started to embrace an assertive manner in foreign policy by opposing the NATO enlargement towards post-Soviet states such as Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia. In this regard, Putin's speeches at the Munich conference and Bucharest Summit were highly outstanding. In these speeches, Putin (2007a, 2008) warned the NATO members about the potential accession of these states to the Atlantic Security Organization with the highly critical attitude towards NATO expansions and military infrastructures established by NATO near the borders of Russia. The official recognition of the breakaway republics of Georgia and subsequent war was highly descriptive with regards to the assertively determined manner of Moscow to obstruct new memberships of NATO among post-Soviet states.

With regard to Ukraine, Ukraine plays a key role in the perceptual relations between Russia and the West. In this respect, Ukraine has an important place for Russia both in terms of Russian civilizational values, and the geopolitical position of this country for Russia's security interests and Russia's influence in its "near abroad." Many academic scholars such as Molchanov (2002), Torbakov (2014), and Tsygankov (2015) argue that Ukraine's possible future membership in NATO, the transatlantic security organization Russia is not a member, is perceived as a security threat by the Russian political elite in Russia's strategic defense vis a vis the West.

In addition to security concerns, it can be said that there has been a great power struggle over Ukraine between the West and Russia to gain geopolitical influence in the region

during the post-Cold War era. It was already stated in this study that Russia has been trying to establish an area of influence in the former Soviet zone from the very beginning. Moreover, one of the main stakes in the convergence of NATO and Ukraine was the future of Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet. According to Molchanov (2002), the Russian ruling class perceived NATO's possible expansion towards Ukraine as a movement aimed at depriving Russia of its historical sphere of influence with the prospect of the removal of Russian naval bases from Crimea (p. 274).

It should be noted that both the Crimean Peninsula and the Black Sea Fleet are closely linked to Russian history and associated identity processes. As a matter of fact, the Russian empire started to dominate Crimea, which is historically important for Russian history, in 1774 and this dominance continued until the early 1990s. The Crimean war between the West and Russia in 1853-1856 made this peninsula more important from the perspective of Russian civilization, perceived differently from the West by Russian conservatives and the ones having belief in the unique Russian civilization. As Molchanov (2002) clarifies, there was a certain difficulty for Russia in the loss of Crimea along with the independence of Ukraine; that is because Crimea was an "ancestral land" of the Russian people (p. 251). So, as the Russian administrations perceived, Ukraine's potential NATO membership meant the loss of this centuries-old Russian territory to the West. On the other hand, NATO's expansion into Ukraine was jeopardizing the future of the Black Sea Fleet. As a matter of fact, if Ukraine were a member of NATO, Russia would have two options: first, to withdraw the navy from Crimea and transfer it to another port in a peaceful manner, or in the worse scenario, a direct confrontation with the West. To be sure, given the realities of Russia in the 1990s and early 2000s, the latter possibility does not sound very realistic. Even if the first option was peaceful, it would put the Russian administration in a difficult situation in two respects. Firstly, such a withdrawal under the threat of the West would, most possibly, be described as a "humiliation" by Russian society and various political circles, and secondly, the new port (most possibly a base in Novorossiisk with limited capacity) where the navy would be located would significantly limit the effectiveness of

the Russian naval forces in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean (Molchanov, 2002, pp. 260, 274).

During the Putin era, it was already mentioned that the administration embraced an assertive stance against the NATO enlargement towards post-Soviet states including Ukraine as a consequence of color revolutions. An important reason for the deteriorated relations between Russia and Ukraine/the West was the increased chance of Ukraine's membership in NATO with a pro-Western administration in Kyiv as a result of the Orange Revolution. It should also be noted that in Georgia, at the same time, the pro-Western Saakashvili administration came to power with the target of NATO membership. In such an environment, Moscow's relations with the Kyiv and Tbilisi administrations deteriorated while Russia continued to support separatists in Georgia. Before the revolution in Ukraine, as mentioned in previous sections, the Moscow administrations of Yeltsin and Putin had some expectations from Kyiv. As in the case of Belarus, Moscow hoped for a strategic alliance with Ukraine and expected Kyiv to show its loyalty to Moscow with a significant level of "belonging" by rejecting the NATO membership prospect (Molchanov, 2002, pp. 247, 273). However, the accession of Yushchenko to the Ukrainian presidency revealed the opposite side of the expectations.

To be sure, another significant reason lying in the views of Putin against the NATO membership prospect of Kyiv was his political orientations and, to some extent, the pressures of nationalist feelings in Russia. It should be remarked that Putin had a strong statist orientation and believed in the Russian right to a sphere of influence in the post-Soviet zone without the influence of the West and some sort of containment by the West through NATO expansions to the Russian borders. On the other hand, nationalism of all sorts (except for civic one) continued to gain intellectual power and influence the minds of the masses in Russia. In this respect, Putin could not ignore such feelings to keep them under Kremlin's control. As Molchanov (2002) asserts, nationalist segments in Russian domestic politics started to be more powerful and draw the attention of high-

level Russian politicians by finding a common language and approach with the statist against the Russian liberals (p. 125). According to the scholar, Vladimir Putin was ready to pay attention to the opinions of nationalists and statist together and pursue policies as recommended by these political segments.

The gas disputes and gas cutoffs to Ukraine in 2006 and 2009 were highly related to the policies of Kyiv inclined to the membership of the European Union and NATO. As a matter of fact, the Russian administration interpreted the attempts of Kyiv for membership in the European Union just as a step in its integration with the West and membership in NATO. That's why, while the Ukrainian administration pursued policies in compliance with the EU policies and membership in this union, the success level is highly debatable though, crises emerged in terms of gas prices. The unsolved crises led to two times of gas cutoffs to Ukraine and the European Union since the gas routes were passing on the Ukrainian territories. To be sure, the Russian administration justified the demands for the rise in the gas prices and cutoffs with the international gas markets (See Grib & Gavrish, 2007) while the Ukrainian side accused Russia of utilizing gas exports as a political weapon. This study argues that Moscow utilized the gas exports to Ukraine to obstruct the EU membership of this state and warn the European Union member states by reminding their energy dependence on Russia. In a similar perspective, Plokhly (2017) points to the fact that Russia did not hesitate the gas trade between Russia and Ukraine as a political weapon for political pressure on the pro-Western Ukrainian administration to increase Russian economic control on Ukraine and make the relations between Ukraine and the EU members more complicated.

One of the reasons why Ukraine's NATO membership prospect has created a coldness in relations between the West and Russia is the perceptual processes of the Kremlin administration toward the West. The fact that Russia's interests and values in Ukraine and its "near abroad," as perceived by the Russian political elite, were not recognized by the West played a major role in the problems between these two sides. Some scholars defend this point of view by arguing for the important role of this issue in the

emergence of the Ukraine crisis, which is analyzed in the next chapter in detail (Tsygankov, 2015; Samokhvalov, 2017). The key point here is that one party's lack of recognition of the other party's interests and values, as perceived by the latter one, can lead to problematic relationships in a historical aspect.

In addition to all these facts, Ukraine has a very important place for Russia in terms of identity issues, as Ukraine has a multifaceted function concerning the Russian identity processes. According to Torbakov (2014, 2017), in addition to the view of Ukraine as the “sphere of the identity of Russia” in Russian perceptions, Russian influence over Ukraine is important for Russia since it serves to the realization of Russia's “greatness” and its great power status with the “European” identity. On the other hand, as Tsygankov (2015) points out, while the Russians generally saw the West's expansionist policies toward Ukraine as pushing the two friendly countries away from each other, many Russian political figures saw Ukraine as the last bastion for the preservation of the Russians' unique values (pp. 288, 291-292).

Besides security/geopolitical and identity-related issues, the geography of Ukraine plays an important role in Russia's energy trade with Europe. A high proportion of the natural gas trade between Russia and European states is still provided by pipelines passing through the territory of Ukraine (Tsygankov, 2015, p. 288). When it comes to such an important energy trade and the geopolitical importance of Ukraine, Russia would, without a doubt, strive to keep its political and economic influence in this country at high levels. Undoubtedly, Ukraine's possible integration with the West through NATO and the EU and the possible influence of the West on Ukraine would contradict Russia's energy trade interests in this country. Indeed, in this way, the Kremlin administration was aware that it would probably never be able to establish a Russian monopoly over the natural gas pipelines and gas facilities in this country.

For these reasons, the Yushchenko administration's pro-Western policies and NATO/EU membership goal constituted one of the main factors that set the stage for highly tense relations between Russia and Ukraine during the 2004-10 period. As stated in the previous section, the accession of Yanukovich to power, which the Kremlin saw as pro-Russian, provided a softening in the relations between the two states. Aside from other positive developments in bilateral relations such as the extension of the lease of the naval port in Sevastopol with favorable prices in gas imports from Russia, Moscow was pleased to observe that the Kyiv administration gave up the NATO membership ideals of the former administration (Tsygankov, 2015, p. 281).

It is also important to note that Russia has been trying to create alternative security and economic corridor stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok against the European Union and NATO. These initiatives, which emerged especially during the Medvedev period, did not find the expected response by the European states. As a result, the Kremlin decided to further develop its own economic union initiative, the Eurasian Economic Union and wanted to include the post-Soviet countries within this economic organizational structure with various incentives. In terms of military security, the Kremlin considered the Collective Security Treaty Organization, which was previously established under the leadership of Russia, as an alternative military cooperation organization to NATO. On the economic side through the Eurasian Union, the target was to provide the highest level of regional economic integration and to create a strong alternative to the European Union with the customs union, common market, and even a common currency like the EU, as of the 2010s. Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan took an important step in this direction by forming the Customs Union. Having already established close relations with the pro-Russian administration in Ukraine, the Kremlin wanted to include Ukraine in the Customs Union. As Tsygankov (2016) notes, the Kremlin went as far as to call for the Ukrainian rulers to enter into the Customs Union by proposing further discounts on gas prices (p. 224). In a speech made to a meeting of Russian ambassadors and permanent representatives, Putin (2012a) remarked on the economic benefits of the Eurasian Economic Union with the significance he attributed to the economic partnership among Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan while he explained

why the prospect of participation of Ukraine to the Union was so crucial for the future of this economic initiative. Putin, in fact, utilized many channels and platforms to point to the significance of Ukraine for the Eurasian Union and to convince the Ukrainian political elites to realize the Russian desire in this respect. This matter was also mentioned in the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation as the official state policy to draw Ukraine to the “extended integration processes” (VoltaireNetwork, 2013). For certain, the Russian administration believed that with Ukraine's participation in the Eurasian economic integration, both the Eurasian Union would become stronger and it would distance the neighbor state from the West. In this way, the administration thought that it would completely eliminate Ukraine's EU and NATO membership chances, and thought that in this way it would achieve a victory against the West. These perceptual attitudes can actually explain why Putin exerted intense political and economic pressure on Yanukovich not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU with demands of Ukrainian participation in Eurasian Union structures.

## CHAPTER 3

### EUROMAIDAN AND SUBSEQUENT EVENTS IN UKRAINE

The events that took place in Ukraine in late 2013 and early 2014 would suggest a major change in Ukraine and would create profound differences in Russia's perspective on this country. The decision of the pro-Russian Yanukovich administration not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU as a result of the Russian pressure caused the start of mass protests in the Independence Square (Maidan Nezalezhnosti) in Kyiv in November, 2013. The small-scale pro-EU protests that started due to the administration's refusal to sign the Association Agreement grew as a result of the harsh police interventions against the youth camped here and turned into an unrest against the Yanukovich administration. In the following days, the use of violence and force by the police against the demonstrators caused the protests to grow even more and the country was dragged into chaos. Afterwards, as a result of the violent clashes between the police and the demonstrators and the increasing number of deaths, Yanukovich signed a reconciliation agreement with the opposition leaders on February 21, 2014 while Russia and the EU were mediators of this agreement. However, soon after the signing of the agreement, Yanukovich left the capital first possibly due to his concerns on his life and security in the capital or possibly due to his doubts on the functionality of the compromise agreement (there are different estimations with regard to the causes of his escape from the capital) (see Baunov et al., 2015) and, then took refuge in Russia, on 24 February, 2014. As a result, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine (Ukrainian Parliament) dismissed Yanukovich from the presidency, dissolved the government and created a new provisional government with pro-Western figures.

On February 22, 2014, Russia responded to the fall of the pro-Russian Yanukovich administration by launching a military operation in Crimea on February 27. After the Russian army gained control of Crimea, the pro-Russian administration established in Crimea declared its independence on March 16 after a controversial referendum. Soon after, Russia admitted that it had intervened militarily and declared that Crimea was



officially attached to Russia. In response, Ukraine and many countries, especially Western countries, condemned this annexation and declared that they would not recognize it with their respect for the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Moreover, Russia was expelled from the G8 and faced various economic sanctions.

The change of administration in Ukraine encountered with a certain level of instability in Ukraine, separatist movements emerged in Eastern Ukraine and the events turned into a civil war that has still continued in the region up to date. With the overthrow of the Yanukovich administration and the establishment of the new administration, this time pro-Russian activists started protests in the cities of the Eastern Ukraine region against the new central administration. Protests soon gave way to Russian-backed separatists taking control of government buildings. In response to this, Kyiv launched "anti-terrorism" operations. However, apart from partial successes and reestablishing government control on some parts, some regions in the East remained under the de-facto rule of Russia-backed separatists. In fact, Russian forces allegedly entered Ukrainian territory in support of the separatists and recaptured some of the territory lost by the separatists.

In such a problematic period, Ukraine had to sign two ceasefire agreements, the Minsk Agreements, in 2014 and 2015, the first with the contributions of the Trilateral Contact Group (Ukraine, Russia and OSCE parties) and the second with the support of Germany-France. It should be noted that these ceasefire agreements were frequently violated during the period. It is also worth mentioning the Normandy Contact Group, which was created in 2014 to establish peace in the region from the very beginning of the process. In this group, Germany, France, Ukraine and Russia were the main negotiating parties, and discussions were held on the ceasefire and other measures to be established for peace in the region. The Ukrainian administration and the West blamed Russia for the events in the region, while Russia claimed that the main responsibility was on the other side. On the other hand, the Western states imposed economic

sanctions on Russia, which they held responsible for the events in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, and the relations between the two sides became much worse.

The tense relations, mutual accusations, negative perspectives and discourses between the West, Ukraine, on the one side, and Russia, on the other side, did not contribute to the resolution of the problems in Ukraine, and resulted in Russia's recognition of the two separatist republics in Ukraine on February 21, 2022. Before this political move, as of March 2021, Russia's military build-up on both the Ukrainian borders and the Belarusian border with Ukraine was a harbinger of the war in February 2022. In this process, Russia strongly denied the allegations of attack on Ukraine and made a series of demands from Western countries. The most important among them was the termination of the military activities of the NATO countries in Ukraine and the assurance that Ukraine would never be accepted as a member of NATO. In addition, the Kremlin continued to accuse the Kyiv administration of escalating violence in the Donbass region and violating the ceasefire and related commitments as described in the Minsk agreements and related documents. The move that would worsen all these processes eventually came from Russia, which started military actions in Ukraine as of February 24, 2022, and started to carry out intense air bombardments across the country. Moreover, the already deteriorated West-Russia relations have come to the breaking point. The West has started to impose much harsher sanctions against Russia, and at the same time, it has started to send military and financial aid to Ukraine, which is still fighting against Russia.

### **3.1. RUSSIA'S POLITICAL REACTIONS TOWARDS EUROMAIDAN AND DOMINANT DISCOURSE AMONG RUSSIAN POLITICAL ELITE**

The perceptions of the Russian political elite towards what happened as a result of the Euromaidan events in Ukraine are vital to shed light on the underlying factors that had a strong impact on the subsequent Russian reactions and interrelated crises that erupted in this country. In this regard, it is also important to analyze how Russia's political elite interpreted the events in Ukraine, the West's role in the change of power in Kyiv, and

the relation between the protests and EU/NATO enlargements toward Ukraine. Within this context, the anti-Western discourse, which had become dominant over time even before the protests in Ukraine among the ruling elite, reached an unprecedented level during the post-Soviet era while the world started to witness confrontational relations, at least in the discursive realm, between the Russian Federation and the West that had been quite usual during the bipolar world order of post-Second World War period.

The overthrow of the Yanukovich administration and the emergence of a new “Western” regime in Kyiv encountered a harsh reaction on the part of Russia’s elite who deemed the administration change in this state as a “coup d’état” with its “illegitimate” and “unconstitutional” methods during the process while Moscow rejected to recognize the new administration in Kyiv. To be sure, the main problem for the Russian political elite was not the sole “illegitimate/unconstitutional” methods in the process of regime change in Kyiv; rather, the new Ukrainian political figures in power, their changed policies, and how they were perceived by Russia like Russian leaders’ perception of a political loss in Ukraine. As Tsygankov (2015) puts forward, the change of power in favor of Ukrainian Westernizers was regarded as an “ultimate betrayal of Russia’s interests and values” by the Russian president (p. 292). According to Dmitri Trenin (2014), the events in this country constituted a major importance for Russia because in the perception of Russia’s political elite, the events led to a new power structure in Kyiv dominated by “pro-Western” politicians and “anti-Russian” Ukrainian nationalists (p. 6). From this perspective, as Trenin mentions, Moscow perceived great threats on the Russian language, culture, and identity as a result of the political power gained by Ukrainian nationalist and pro-Western factions while the Kremlin did not hesitate to brand the new administration as “ultranationalist” and even “fascist.” In terms of the perceived political loss by the Russian leader, Natalia Shapovalova (2014) asserts that the ouster of a pro-Russian regime with a new pro-Western one was seen by Putin as a “second fiasco” after the Orange Revolution (pp. 261-262). For this reason, as Shapovalova proceeds her remarks, Putin would understand that he could not count solely on a pro-Russian administration in Kyiv, and start to implement different

policies, including significant support to pro-Russian factions and demands of federalization in Ukraine with a desired decentralized Ukraine.

The two speeches given by Putin in 2014 in the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation are highly outstanding with regards to the Russian perceptions of illegitimate change of power in Ukraine, the role of ultranationalist factions during the events, and concerns on the future of Russians and Russian-speakers with their supposed orientation towards Russian culture and identity in Ukraine (Putin, 2014a, 2014b). In these speeches, Putin drew attention to the illegitimate nature of power change in Kyiv, repressions of ethnic minorities, including Russians and Russian speakers, at the hands of Ukrainian ultranationalists, and violence committed by these factions in Ukraine. According to him, Ukrainian ultranationalists also started to make attempts to impose assimilation policies on ethnic Russians and Russian compatriots through “repressive” policies on language and revisions of history. Putin accused Ukrainian nationalists of having agenda of “neo-Nazism”, “Russophobia”, and “anti-Semitism” with their alleged ideologies rooted in the historical personality of Stephan Bandera. Similar accusations of the illegitimacy of actions during the ouster of Yanukovich and concerns on the Russian minority rights were articulated in the remarks of the then-Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in an interview (See Medvedev, 2014). The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov (2014a, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b, 2020d, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c), on many occasions, including in interviews, briefings, articles emphasized the similar aspects shared by Vladimir Putin with his special focus on the illegitimate change of power in Kyiv, ultranationalist nature of new Ukrainian administration, violent events occurred in the aftermath of Euromaidan protests, concerns on Russian language, identity and culture with the “assimilationist” policies of Ukraine on the ethnic Russians and compatriots with the new historical interpretations by the nationalist factions that have been inclined to disprove Russian theses on the past. In his interview dated 2014, he particularly pointed out the role of the Ukrainian Svoboda Party, which was an ultranationalist faction as Lavrov put it, in the new coalition established in Ukraine. In his remarks, Lavrov clearly used an accusative discourse against the Ukrainian administrations led by Petro Poroshenko and

Volodymyr Zelensky with the claim of Ukraine's non-compliance with the terms of Minsk obligations. With regard to the Ukrainian elections, then-Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and State Secretary Grigory Karasin, in an interview, both criticized the elections for the lack of democratic aspects and most candidates for their "anti-Russian" and "Russophobic" discourses (See Lenta.Ru., 2019). The same Russian discourse also found a place in several official documents of the Russian Federation such as the presidential decree titled "On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation" published in 2015, the Foreign Policy Concept approved in 2016, and the National Security Concept in 2021 with the statement by the Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation in 2020 (See GlobalSecurityOrg, 2015; President of Russia, 2016; Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 2020; pravo.gov.ru., 2021).

The West's role in the Ukrainian revolution in 2014 as perceived by the Russian political elite forms an indispensable aspect of the path of current crises in Ukraine and Russian reactions towards this state within the process. The Russian political elite treated the events as a plot of the "West" with clear accusations towards the Western states, in particular the US, of causing the events in Euromaidan and illegitimate change of power in Kyiv (See Trenin, 2014; Withnall, 2015; Glebov, 2020). As Tsygankov (2015, 2016) puts it in his works, Russian political leadership considered the West as behind the events and "unconstitutional" change of power in Ukraine. Furthermore, as Tsygankov notes, the Russian political elite saw the West as responsible for the violation of the compromise agreement before the ouster of Yanukovych from power. Another significant indication for the Russian leadership was that, as Tsygankov argues, the West, which deemed the Eurasian Union project as unacceptable for their own political projects in the region, tried to integrate Ukraine into their side by keeping a distance between Ukraine and Russia while this Western policy culminated in the Maidan protests and "illegitimate" change of power in Kyiv. According to Zevelev (2016), the Kremlin perceived the events in Ukraine as a "coup d'état" supported by the West in a space that is a part of the Russia's "exclusive zone of interests" and "responsibility" while this constitutes an important aspect of the Russian national

identity (p. 13). Dimitri Trenin (2014), on his part, and Tsygankov (2015), as mentioned above, emphasized the understanding of the “betrayal” of Russian interests and values by the West.

Vladimir Putin (2014a, 2014b, 2019), in his speeches to the Federal Assembly and the Crimea speech, and his interview, clearly accused the West of what happened in Ukraine with the Maidan events and preventing the Eurasian integration. According to him, the West planned and projected what would happen in Ukraine from the beginning and backed the new Ukrainian authorities up. In his address to the Federal Assembly in 2014, he also criticized the European Union for the lack of dialogue with Russia during the negotiations of the Association Agreement to be signed with Ukraine and for the disregard of Russian interests in the Union. Dimitry Medvedev (2021), similarly, put stress on the West’s role in the events in Ukraine in his article. Sergey Lavrov (2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2020c, 2020d, 2021b), in his remarks on an occasion, his interviews, and speeches held the West responsible for the “unconstitutional coup” in Ukraine and criticized the other side, mostly the US, Germany, and France for the violation of the compromise agreement as the guarantors of the agreement. Lavrov, in these speeches also criticized the West for its perceived mentality of “either with us or against us” in the world with its latest reflection on Ukraine. Within this insight, Ukraine was forced to choose either Russia or the West, as Lavrov put it, clearly without an attempt to achieve an efficient dialogue with Russia. Incidentally, the same accusation can be observed in his speech of Putin (2014b) when he declared the annexation of Crimea. Lavrov (2020e) also accused the EU of “tearing away” the states in the post-Soviet zone from the Russian Federation through programs such as the “Eastern Partnership” and preventing the Eurasian Economic Union project from realizing itself with the help of “artificial obstacles.” From the perspective of the Foreign Minister, all of these led to the current crises in and Russian reactions towards the post-Euromaidan Ukraine. In the official document of the “National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation” in 2015, it was stated that “the support of the United States and the European Union for the unconstitutional coup d’état in Ukraine led to a deep split in Ukrainian society and the emergence of an armed conflict” (GlobalSecurityOrg, 2015). As the accusative rhetoric

of Putin, Medvedev, and Lavrov demonstrated, Moscow held the West responsible for what happened in Ukraine.

The prospect of NATO membership of Ukraine has, all the time, been the last thing the Russian political elite desired since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In this regard, a strong correlation between this NATO membership prospect of Ukraine and the Maidan revolution can be well established. As a matter of fact, the Russian ruling elite did not approve of a new pro-Western administration in Kyiv because of the strong possibility of NATO membership of this state in the near future. Because, according to the Kremlin's political calculations, a pro-Western administration in Kiev would first sign the European Union Association Agreement, which was not signed by Yanukovich, and take a vital step for NATO membership. According to this view, Ukraine would eventually become a NATO member. According to Rühle (2014), although the agreement in question was not affiliated with NATO, Moscow perceived that the signing of this would be a critical step by Ukraine in its way for NATO membership (p. 1). Such a fear of the Kremlin undoubtedly had a significant impact on Russian policies on Ukraine. On his part, Glebov (2020) interprets the Russian politics in Ukraine during and after the Euromaidan with the connection between Russia's "syndrome about NATO's expansion" and the outstanding events in Ukraine (pp. 158-159). By virtue of these, it is necessary to evaluate Russia's policies in both Crimea and Eastern Ukraine as of 2014 in this direction. Drawing parallels with these insights, Dimitri Trenin (2014) argues that Putin, with the awareness of the risk of NATO membership of Ukraine, started to conduct policies in order to prevent Ukraine from being a member and pull this state back to the Russian influence mainly through the annexation of Crimea, in which the pro-Russian forces are influential, and supporting the decentralization of Ukraine (pp. 6-8).

In addition, it is necessary to examine the meaning of the potential loss of Ukraine to the West for Russia in the light of civilizational borders and geopolitical interests. As seen in the Eurasian view and the views based on East Slavic unity, Ukraine is an

integral part of the great Russian civilization while at the same time forming a civilizational border between the West and Russia. In other words, the loss of Ukraine would mean both a significant blow to the power of Russian civilization and the violation of the West to the borders of Russian civilization. As Zevelev (2016) emphasizes, besides Ukraine's NATO membership was negative for Russia in terms of national, political and economic interests, it was also completely inconsistent with Russian understanding of identity and civilizationist views, which accepted Ukraine as a whole with Russia and deem it in the civilizational borders (p. 4). However, this does not mean that geopolitical interests are ignored. In one respect, there is a great geopolitical rivalry over Ukraine with diverging interests between Russia and the West, and Ukraine's loss is a great loss for Russia in a geopolitical sense. From the perspective of David Svarin (2016), the main problem of NATO enlargement is the clash of geopolitical interests between the Russian and West (pp. 135-136).

In parallel with civilizational views, Vladimir Putin (2014b), in his speech to the Russian parliament dedicated to the annexation of Crimea, mentioned the Russian concerns over the “deployment of NATO military infrastructure” close to the Russian borders and their objections to the closing moves of this military infrastructure to the borders through Ukrainian lands. Moreover, he emphasized that the NATO membership prospect of Ukraine would inevitably mean the NATO naval and military deployment in Crimea and Sevastopol, which are sacred places for the Russian glorious past and national identity. While the first remark mainly was to do with the geopolitics and Russia’s national security interests, the second remark was highly outstanding in terms of how the Russian president and political elite deemed the consequences of NATO membership of Ukraine for the Russian “glorious” history and national identity. Aside from these, Putin also emphasized the West’s lies and violations of commitments to Russia after the Cold War with his example of NATO enlargements. This discourse is also significant; that is because the president has repeatedly articulated his claims about the “broken promises” of NATO members both before and after the Maidan events. As a matter of fact, the revolutionary events in Ukraine and the new pro-Western Ukrainian administration have remarkable indications of “broken promises” and Russian



humiliation by the West within the process (Rühle, 2014, pp. 1-2). Putin (2014c), in an interview, mentioned his concerns over the NATO infrastructure that was brought closer to the borders of the Russian Federation. In a speech, Sergey Lavrov (2015) focused on the “NATO-centrism” and importance of the dialogue, compromises, “respect for a negotiating partner’s interests”, and the “desire to find consensus” without “diktats or ultimatums” between the Russian Federation and NATO members while he blamed the NATO states of disregarding these principles and related the Ukrainian crises and subsequent confrontation between Russia and the West with the policies of the other side. In another address, Sergey Lavrov (2021d) accused the NATO members of violating the fundamental norms, which are the backbones of the Russia-NATO council with their policies both after the formation of the council and during the events in Ukraine. In the Military Doctrine of 2015, the expansion of NATO and its infrastructure toward the Russian Federation’s borders was defined as a certain security threat to the Russian Federation (Glebov, 2020, p. 157). Exactly the same remarks can also be found in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation in 2016 (See President of Russia, 2016).

As in the case of the pre-Maidan period, the deterioration in relations between Russia and the West has continued since the Maidan events. The crisis in Ukraine has started a new era of “heightened rivalry, even confrontation” between the Russian and West (Trenin, 2014, p. 3). The events in Ukraine, the allegedly crucial role of the West in the regime change in Kyiv as leading Russian political figures put forward (observed in the discourses of Putin, Lavrov, and Medvedev etc. mentioned-above), and Western economic sanctions on Russia as a response to the actions of the latter in Crimea in 2014, the Eastern Ukraine within the process, and lastly the military invasion in 2022 would cause a greater distance between the West and Russia whereas the latter would be reoriented toward China in the subsequent period (Tsygankov, 2016, p. 254). In addition, such worsened relations have reflections on the anti-Western attitudes and anti-Western discourse of the Russian political elite within the post-Maidan period. In parallel with this argument, there has been a growing anti-Western discourse both by the Russian political elite and state-controlled mass media (Alexeev & Hale, 2016, p.

192). Meanwhile, which aspects of the perceptions shared by the Russian political elites shaped their discourse deserves particular attention. The civilizational course of discourse gained an unprecedented level of significance after the Euromaidan (See Tsygankov, 2016). As Zevelev (2016) and Makarychev (2020) underscore the main components of civilizational discourse shared by the political elite and media, the particular stress on the concepts such as “compatriots”, “Russian World concept”, “Eurasianism”, “Russian conservatism”, and “great Russian civilization” is highly demonstrative to observe the preferred anti-Western discourse and attitude by the Russian political elite. In addition, as Zevelev notes, since the events in Ukraine, the political elite in Moscow have started to articulate the “historical animosity” between the Russian and West more often.

Another crucial component of the underlying causes of the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West has been the desire of Moscow for the recognition of its great power status by the West and equal rights to be consulted and to participate in global affairs, as mentioned in the previous chapters. As Heller (2020), Larson and Shevchenko (2014), and Tsygankov (2016) argue, the Russian political elite perceived an “ignorance” and even a “betrayal” of the Russian interests by the Western states in this regard. Moreover, according to Tsygankov, this perception would contribute to a greater level of “assertiveness” in Russian politics in the international arena over time. What is more, the president Vladimir Putin justified Russia’s military actions in Georgia and Ukraine with the understanding and the particular rhetoric of “challenging” the international order under the United States hegemony (Dal & Erşen, 2020, p. 6). To be sure, such perceptions were not new; rather, from the start, and as mentioned in the previous chapter, all these negative understandings and feelings were shared by Moscow during the period before the revolutionary events in Ukraine.

Last but not least, the discourse on the perceptual humiliation at the hands of the West and “broken promises,” which had been given by NATO members not to enlarge the alliance towards former Warsaw Pact states, as claimed by Russia’s ruling elite, has also

continued to be articulated in many occasions (Rühle, 2014, pp. 1-2). Such kinds of discourses can clearly reflect the negative perceptions and attitudes of the Russian ruling elite toward the West.

As mentioned above, these kinds of negative considerations of the West and the policies of the latter can be found in the remarks of the Russian political elite, principally Vladimir Putin, Sergey Lavrov, and Dmitri Medvedev on many occasions while in some crucial official documents, an anti-West viewpoint can be marked.

Despite all the negative aspects of the actions of Russia in Ukraine and already high levels of tension in the bilateral relations between Moscow and Kyiv administrations, it may sound interesting to observe the remarks of the Russian president and Russian ecclesiastical elites that continued to emphasize the unity between Russian and Ukrainian people as a single people. As a concrete example, in an article titled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, Vladimir Putin (2021a) put an emphasis on unity and commonalities between the two peoples with the merit of historical insights. On the other hand, as an example of the viewpoint of the ecclesiastical authority, Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk (2019), in his briefing, interpreted such unity among Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians within the framework of “spiritual” space and arguments while he accused the Ukrainian politicians of interfering the canonical works of Russian Orthodox Church and imposing “discriminatory laws” on the Ukrainian Church under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. In this way, the continuity of the Russian discourse of unity between the two peoples, which already existed before the Maidan events, even after the revolution in Ukraine, Russia’s harsh responses and military actions, and highly tense relations between the two states’ administrations can be underlined.

### **3.1.1. Political Elite's Discourse and Legitimization of the Annexation of Crimea**

The revolutionary events in Ukraine and the change of administration in Kyiv faced harsh reactions from Moscow, and Russia annexed Crimea in a short time. At this point, the main issue that is important for this thesis is what kind of perspective the Russian political elite had on Crimea in the process of the annexation of the peninsula and what kind of discourse was used by them concerning the legitimization of this annexation. In this respect, it is necessary to look at the discourses of high-level Russian political elites, especially Vladimir Putin, on the issue of Crimea after the annexation and how these are interpreted by leading thinkers. Such scholars as Tsygankov (2015), Alexseev (2016) and Kolstø (2016) explain the Russian political discourse on Crimea with the important role and impact of ethnic nationalist perceptions on the political elite. In addition to this, there are other scholars, including Igor Torbakov (2014, 2017) and Igor Zevelev (2016), who regard this annexation as a result of the great Russian civilizational ideas. Moreover, it is important to examine the extent to which ethnic nationalism is adopted and “utilized” by the Russian political elite in the justification of the annexation, as discussed by Pal Kolstø (2016). In addition to these, some scholars try to explain this annexation by taking the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West to the fore without disregarding the civilizational aspects (See Shapovalova, 2014; Laruelle, 2016; Glebov, 2020; Heller, 2020).

In his speech to the Russian parliament to declare the annexation of Crimea on 18 March 2014, Vladimir Putin (2014b), firstly, drew attention to the ethnic Russian and Russian-speaker population on the peninsula. Secondly, he accused the Soviet regime of the transfer of a “historical Russian land” to the sovereignty of the former Ukrainian SSR without any consideration given to the ethnic composition of the peninsula and “consultation” of indigenous people. As he proceeded with his words, the peninsula emerged as a part of another state with the dissolution of the USSR with the “empty promises” of a single currency, economic space, and military forces within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Putin clearly articulated the phrase “plunder” to interpret the separation of Crimea from the Russian Federation in

this speech while he described the Russian nation as one of the “biggest divided ethnic group” in the world. It is noteworthy that, between the lines of the speech, he mentioned the initial failures of the early Russian Federation administration of adequate protection of the Russian population in Crimea due to internal issues and early desires for good relations with Ukraine. However, as he said, Russian administrations have, all the time, expected Ukrainian counterparts to respect and protect the rights of the ethnic Russian and Russophone population in Crimea while the current conditions in Ukraine with the Maidan events showed the futility of such expectations. As he maintained in this speech, the Russian population in the peninsula, which had been already a ‘victim’ of policies of the Ukrainian administrations, was now faced with greater dangers with the rise of “ultranationalist, neo-Nazi, and Russophobe” political powers to the power in Kyiv. According to the Russian president, the new Kyiv authorities had already started to impose certain restrictions on the rights and freedoms of the Crimean people. Moreover, he claimed that Russia responded to the demands of the citizens of the Crimean population who called Russia to protect their rights and ‘lives’ during the “revolutionary” events. It is clear that Putin, along with the discourse of ensuring the rights, freedoms, and security of the ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking population in Crimea, tried to gather great support behind him and tried to legitimize this annexation. Similarly, Putin (2014b, 2014c) made similar statements both in his speech to the Federal Assembly and in an interview with French journalists. Similarly, on some occasions, Sergey Lavrov (2018, 2021a, 2021b) articulated the concerns shared by Vladimir Putin regarding the rights and security of the Crimean population.

Strong traces of ethnic Russian nationalism on the part of the Russian political elite can be seen in all these discourses. As Kolstø (2016) emphasizes, in his Crimean speech, Putin displayed an ethnic approach to the Russians for the first time, using the phrase "Russkiy Narod" as this change is important for Kolstø; because it characterized the evolution of the minds of the political elite from a statist point of view towards an ethno-nationalist point of view (pp. 6, 18-19). From the perspective of Mikhail A. Alexseev (2016), with his rhetoric and policies on Crimea, Putin was showing his determination to increase Russian influence in the post-Soviet zone and Russia's

territorial expansionism in the region with the adopted ethnic-nationalist tenets (p. 160). According to Tsygankov (2015), Putin not only did not “ignore” the Russian population in Crimea who sought help from Russia but also started to use the discourse of protecting Russians abroad in an ethnic direction that had been used by nationalist circles since the 1990s. It is also noteworthy to mention that the use of the concepts of *Ruskkii* and ethnic nationalism was not new for Vladimir Putin in 2014. In fact, as Kolstø and Alexeev (2016) note, this kind of ethnic nationalist discourse was not a completely new concept, even though it was the first time it gained such power; as a matter of fact, Putin had already started to use the phrase of *Russki* to denote Russian people in his articles published during the 2012 presidential elections and mentioned the important role of Russian ethnic identity and core within Russia's multicultural state and civilization (pp. 38-39, 160-161).

Certainly, during this process, it requires considerable attention to examine to what extent ethnic nationalism affected the perceptions of the political elite and how the political elite used ethnic nationalism to justify the annexation of Crimea. Does the use of ethnic nationalist discourse in official discourse mean that ethnic nationalism exerts an indisputable influence on the political elite? Most possibly, this is not the case. The indisputable fact is that the rhetoric and judgments of ethnic nationalists found a prominent place in official discourse and influenced the perceptions of the political elite to a certain extent (Zevelev, 2014); however, even in this case, it would be unrealistic to claim that the Russian political elite was acting only under the influence of ethnic nationalism (Kolstø, 2016, pp. 6, 37-38, 40). Kolstø maintains that the Russian administration used imperialist nationalism and Eurasianism as well as ethnic nationalism in order to justify the annexation of Crimea in this period, and in fact, the Kremlin started to use much more the ethnic nationalist rhetoric of the opposition in Russia, “in effect stealing their thunder.” After a brief analysis of such theses, it can be said that the Kremlin is not entirely a prisoner of ethnic nationalist discourses despite a certain degree of impact on the discourse of the Russian ruling elite.

It is necessary to examine Russia's political and military actions in Crimea under the roof of great Russian civilization. As stated earlier in this study, the Russian civilizational discourse has come to an important position with the rise of the Russian Conservatism on the part of Russia's political elite since the 2010s. The Russian civilizational discourse undoubtedly shaped the perceptions and discourse of the Russian ruling class, primarily Vladimir Putin, in the Crimean process. As a strong example, Putin's historical theses providing a connection between the great Russian civilization and Crimea allowed him to present spiritual and civilizational arguments for the annexation of Crimea (Zevelev, 2016, p. 13). The historical civilizational correlations made by Putin to justify Crimean annexation support this view. In addition, according to Torbakov (2014, 2017), the events that took place in Ukraine in 2014 must be perceived by the Russian political elite as a civilizational choice and as Ukraine's move away from Russian civilization. Such a perception of the events in Ukraine in the environment of the civilizational clash that has emerged between the West and Russia recently would have negative consequences for Ukraine. On the other hand, as Tsygankov (2015) pointed out, while the Russians generally saw the West's expansionist policies toward Ukraine as pushing the two friendly countries away from each other, many figures from the political elite saw Ukraine as the last bastion for the preservation of the Russians' unique values (pp. 288, 291-293). Furthermore, Tsygankov states that if Putin had not reacted in this way to the events in Ukraine, his claims for leadership in Eurasia would have failed. As Putin and his close circle understood, Russia had to be a powerful center of civilization in the Eurasian geography during this period while Putin considered himself the leader of the great Russian civilization. Without a doubt, Russia's unresponsiveness to the perceptually detrimental events on its borders would have struck a blow to this civilizational center discourse. In connection with this, Dmitry Peskov (2014), the spokesman of the Kremlin, called Putin "a guarantor of security for the great 'Russian World'". This interpretation also points to the power of civilizational view and discourse. As the most concrete example, with a closer look at Putin's speeches to the Assembly in 2014, it can be seen that he referred to the historical and spiritual importance of Crimea to Russian civilization (Putin 2014a, 2014b). His particular emphasis on "Orthodox" roots in Crimea, ancient "chronicles" the sacred events with Prince Vladimir, "graves" of Russian military personals, the

historical importance of Sevastopol, and Crimea's glorious memories, all of which are significant both for ethnic Russian nationalism and great Russian civilization in general, is crucial in this regard.

In the context of civilizational perceptions and discourse, it is necessary to prioritize the great Russian civilization and the concept of the Western 'Other'. The lands of Ukraine and Crimea have a very important place between the Western and Russian world, both in terms of geopolitical and civilizational borders (Laruelle, 2016, p. 276). According to Marlene Laruelle, the lands of Ukraine and Crimea are geopolitically seen as the "final bulwark of Russian national security" to the West, while citing Alexeev's public opinion data on the annexation of Crimea in Russia, the remarkable support of ethnic minorities for the annexation confirms the "geopolitical/civilizational readings" in relations between Russia and the West rather than sole ethnic nationalist concerns and perceptions. According to Sergii Glebov (2020), Crimea is articulated in political discourse as a kind of "bridgehead" against NATO and is an important military base in the defense of the Russian World against the West in the perceptions of Russia's ruling elites (pp. 159-159). According to Glebov, it is important that Putin cited the fact that the peninsula, which was important to the Russian world, would have come under NATO's control in the future if Russia had not done anything as a discursive means of justification for legitimizing the annexation of Crimea. From the perspective of Natalia Shapovalova (2014), with the annexation of Crimea, Russia would show its resolve to an "open confrontation" with the Western powers if necessary as it did during the Cold War era (pp. 260-261).

Besides all these arguments, the Russian political elite refused to define the unification of Crimea and Russia as an annexation. In two important speeches he made to the Russian parliament on Crimea in 2014, Putin (2014a, 2014b) underlined that the majority of the people of Crimea decided on independence from Ukraine and reunion with Russia as a result of the referendum. Similarly, the then-prime minister, Dimitri Medvedev (2014), and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov (2014a, 2014b,



2021b), rejected the definition of an “annexation” unequivocally, emphasizing that this unification was made by the people of Crimea on their own decision and free will. In addition to these, both Putin and Lavrov from time to time legitimized the independence of Crimea with the referendum decision and its union with Russia with the example of Kosovo, whereas, they accused the West of hypocrisy.

It can be said that in the discourses of the Russian political elite that justified the annexation of Crimea, ethical humanitarian values and values such as human rights emerging from Western liberal thought also took place. On some occasions, particularly the speech of Putin (2014b) to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation on 18 March 2014, the president of Russia used, as an outstanding example, the rhetoric of protection of basic rights, freedoms, and security of people in a country within the process of revolutionary events and rise of ultranationalist powers that had Russophobia and anti-Russian policies towards the Crimean population, as Putin argued. The claims shared by the ruling class that Russia only sought the protection of Russians and Russophones in the peninsula from a “criminal”, “fascist”, and “illegitimate” Ukrainian regime have a powerful “normative-ethical point” that is helpful in the justification of Russia’s actions in Crimea (Heller, 2020, p. 178). In short, the Russian political elite also preferred to use ethical and normative arguments in this process among others. Certainly, it is obvious that such a point of view and rhetoric actually shows that Russia now implemented a normative policy for which the Russian political elites had blamed the West before with the concerns on and accusations of the violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states.

With the perceptions shared among all these political elites and their strong reflection on the discourses, the Russian political elite sought to legitimize the annexation and events in Crimea.

### 3.1.2. Russia's Unofficial Role in East Ukraine

Unlike the events in Crimea, it was observed that the events developed differently in the eastern region of Ukraine, where the Russian ethnicity is highly concentrated. With the revolutionary events in Kyiv, the separatist movements that gained momentum in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions caused the loss of the control of the Kyiv administration in these regions, and these regions have become a field of conflict between government forces and pro-Russian separatists since then. The Russian Federation, which officially annexed Crimea, did not officially support the separatists in this region and did not recognize the separatist republics they established. However, there have been strong claims and evidence that Russia supported the separatist forces here, albeit unofficially. The Russian political elite consistently denied such allegations, and blamed the Ukrainian administration and the West for the conflicts in the region, referring to Kyiv's non-compliance with the Minsk agreement. In this process, the Moscow administration continued to insist on Ukraine's decentralization process and special status to be granted to the Donbas region, in addition to the Minsk agreement, to ensure lasting peace in the region.

Whether Russia supported the pro-Russian separatist forces in the Donbas region, albeit not officially, has been a matter of considerable debate. As far as it was reflected in the various media channels during the conflicts, and according to both Ukrainian and Western sources, Russia was supporting these insurgents while these allegations were supported by information and images from the region. As this work argues, Russia, though unofficially, supported the separatists there on a large scale and in various ways. Conditions such as Russia's military support to the separatists in eastern Ukraine, the transfer of fighters from Russia to the territory of Ukraine, Moscow's supportive rhetoric of the separatists and the constant warning to the Kyiv administration not to take definitive military measures for the war in the region, and the inclusion of Russia in the Minsk Process and Normandy Format as a primary actor support this opinion. Plokhyy (2017) argues that, despite the unofficial role of Russia in the battles in the Donbas region, Russia did not hesitate to send troops to the Ukrainian territories to save the breakaway republics in Eastern Ukraine. Besides this, such scholars as Plokhyy,

Trenin (2014), and Shapovalova (2014) note, Russia supported the insurgents in Donbass with Russian “volunteers, political activists, and mercenaries” by making it easier for them to cross the border. Another outstanding proof of Russia’s support to the separatists was, as mentioned above and as Tsygankov (2015, 2016) refers to, Moscow’s warnings to Kyiv not to use military force in the region and accept the demands of separatists and deployment of troops across the Ukrainian borders as a strong message in this regard. Besides, it is important to analyze how the West perceived the role of Russia in this region. As a matter of fact, Russia's support to the separatists in Donbas is an important factor in the sanctions that the West and NATO countries impose on Russia.

The situation in the Donbas region was different from the one in Crimea. As a matter of fact, Moscow neither officially recognized the separatist republics in this region nor followed an annexation policy towards these lands. Russia was content with only providing support to the separatists in this region. As Victor Jeifets and Nikolay Dobronravin (2020) argue, in its relations with the separatists in the region, Russia did not go so far as to recognize them as independent states, and did not question Ukraine's sovereignty in the region in the process (at least until 2022) (p. 199). Undoubtedly, this attitude of Russia in the region met with reaction from within Russia because nationalist circles thought that the independence of these regions should be recognized and annexed to Russia. In parallel with this, Laruelle (2015c) makes a strong correlation between such a discomfort among Russian nationalist circles and Putin’s definition of the region as *Novorossiya*, albeit short-lived when Putin described the eastern regions of Ukraine as *Novorossiya* and defined these lands as an important part of Russian history, and criticized the attachment of these lands to Ukraine by the Soviets. Such statements of the Russian president actually show his perceptual processes towards the region and partly show that he has a particular perspective that questions Ukraine's sovereignty in this region. Unlike Crimea, it is necessary to examine why the Kremlin pursued such a policy in this region in the first place. The answer can be given as follows: The Moscow administration calculated that the annexation of Crimea and the separatist movements in eastern Ukraine would be sufficient to bring Kiev to heel. Similarly, Serhii Plokhly

(2017) argues that Putin thought he could draw the Ukrainian administration to his side without the need for further military action in the Donbass. When the discourse of the Russian political elite is analyzed, there was a certain rejection of the claims that the separatists in Ukraine were supported by Russia and that there were Russian military activities in this country. An important point in the discourses shared by the political elite is that the independence referendum organized by the separatists in Ukraine was only respected but not officially recognized. In this respect, Lavrov's statements were remarkable. Lavrov (2014b, 2014c) expressed the respect of Russia for the referendum held in these lands and the decision of the people by pointing out that the choices should be implemented through negotiations between the peoples of the region and Kyiv. Besides this, Lavrov flatly denied the allegations about Russian military activities in Ukraine and stated that there would be no military operation. To interpret the term "respect", it is possible that the Kremlin sympathized with the results of this referendum and thought that it could be used as a trump card in the future.

At a time when the conflicts in the eastern region of Ukraine continued, the Russian political elite's respect and sympathy for the separatists in the region, and the accusations against the Ukrainian administration of what was happening have an important discursive aspect. The Moscow administration clearly showed its sympathy for the pro-Russian separatists fighting in this region (Trenin, 2014, pp. 6-8). The most outstanding thing here was to make the Donbass people a unique and distinct actor in Russian discourse, separate from Ukraine. In these discourses, it was obvious that the people of Donbass were intended to become a political actor by the Kremlin during the events in the region. In this direction, it is necessary to look at the discourses of the leading Russian political elites. According to Dimitry Medvedev (2014), the ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking population living in this region could not live their rights freely in Ukraine and he argued that their rights are endangered by ultra-nationalist segments that have seized power in Kyiv. The Russian foreign minister argued that the views of the people living in this region were not adequately covered in the Ukrainian media, that they wanted to live as normal and equal Ukrainian citizens with their rights be protected, that the people in this region only wanted to shape their future by

opposing only to the "illegal coup/regime" in Kyiv and "Russophobia," and that they opposed "fascist" and "Nazi" historical Ukrainian figures by desiring to celebrate May 9 as a commemoration of victory (Lavrov, 2014c, 2018, 2019a). As these examples show, the Russian political elite was able to create the political actorness of the Donbass people.

The condolence messages issued by Putin and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the assassination of the former Head of the Donetsk People's Republic, Alexander Zakharchenko, actually revealed Russia's political support towards both this leader and the separatists in the region. In his message, Putin portrayed the murdered leader as a hero who took office in a difficult time and expressed Russia's support for the people living in the region, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs blamed Kyiv for what happened and expressed its support for the people of the region (See Putin, 2018; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

Kyiv administration was blamed by the Russian administration because of the violence and military operations in the region. According to Lavrov (2018, 2019a), the main party intensifying the war was the Ukrainian administration, since the main aggressor was not the separatists in the east, but the Ukrainian forces through the "anti-terrorism" operations. Medvedev (2014), similarly, denounced the military actions of Ukraine in the region by demanding guarantees for the local peoples of security under the banner of anti-terrorist operations, as he argued.

It was also frequently mentioned in the discourses of political leaders that Kyiv did not comply with the decisions and measures taken in the Minsk agreement. Russia's political elites, who mentioned this situation on many occasions, accused the Kyiv administration of not implementing the obligations of the Minsk agreement in both the Poroshenko and Zelensky periods and attributed the slowness in the implementation of the measures, approved in Minsk Agreement and the negotiations in Paris Summit, to

the policies of Kyiv (Lavrov, 2020a, 2020b, 2021c; Zakharova, 2020). On these occasions, it is also remarkable that Russian ruling elites also accused the West of the lack and slowness of implementation of the measures approved through the Minsk agreement, Paris Summit, and Normandy Format. As a matter of fact, Russian elites claimed that the West and Ukrainian political elite saw the Minsk agreement itself as a means of continuing sanctions and pressures on Russia while such an approach is problematic both for relations between states and the process of ensuring lasting peace in East Ukraine. From this perspective, the Western states and Ukrainian administration regarded the processes of Minsk and others as a tool of “play” while not implementing the measures effectively. As Lavrov argued principally, the Western states should force the Kyiv administration to implement all the measures rooted in agreements and related resolutions of the United Nations Security Council.

With the problems that appeared in eastern Ukraine, Russia started to insist from the beginning that the region should be given a special status and that the country should be subjected to the decentralization process (Tsygankov, 2016; Plokyh, 2017). Sergey Lavrov (2020b, 2020f), who thought from the very beginning that decentralization in Ukraine was necessary, mentioned that the special status to be given to the lands in the eastern part of Ukraine was also stated in the Minsk Agreements, and drew attention to the references to the decentralization process in Ukraine and the commitments of the Kyiv administration on this issue in his meetings held in April 2014 with John Kerry, Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine Andrey Deshchitsa, and High Representative of The EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton. Similarly, Maria Zakharova (2020) said that at the Normandy Summit held in Paris in November 2019, Russian, German, French, and Ukrainian leaders talked about seven basic steps to establish peace in eastern Ukraine, including granting special status to the Donbas region. Despite this, the Ukrainian government has slowly or not implemented steps and commitments regarding the decentralization step as alleged by Russian political elites (Lavrov, 2020b, 2020f; Zakharova, 2020). Zakharova, on the other hand, emphasized that the commitments arising from the agreements were slowly and partially fulfilled by the Kyiv administration.

There was an important reason why Russia insisted on decentralization in Ukraine and on granting special status to the Donbas region. Indeed, the decentralization of Ukraine would give each region a “veto power” over the country's foreign policy (Plokyh, 2017). It is very likely that the veto power of each region on foreign policy would be a major obstacle to Ukraine's dreams of membership in the European Union and NATO. The Russian political elite believed that the pro-Russian federal regions to be established in the eastern part of the country would hinder the NATO and European Union membership processes. The main reason for the rejection of the Kyiv administration to apply federative measures and include them to the state constitution was the eventual purpose of the NATO membership of the country in the future. The Ukrainian administration was well aware that if they approved of such measures, Ukraine would not have been a member of the North Atlantic Security Organization in the future. This was not an outcome the Kyiv desired. The fact that the Ukrainian administration did not transform the country into a federative system in the process and did not give special status to the eastern regions was probably related to this sort of thinking.

### **3.1.3. Russian Mass Public Opinion on Events in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine**

Russian society experienced new perceptual processes that shaped their thoughts towards the events in Kyiv, the change of power there, the annexation of Crimea, the civil war in the east of Ukraine, the economic sanctions imposed by the West, and the people of Ukraine and Ukraine, in general. However, without a doubt, it is necessary to pay great attention to the role of the media, which plays a decisive role in these perceptual processes. To enumerate the main reasons for this, since Putin came to the presidency in 2000, the Kremlin's control of the media, the restrictions on social media and websites, and the fact that these tools generally act with Kremlin policies and directives, and most importantly, that the Russian public opinion is prone to change through mass media. As Khvostunova (2013) stated, with Putin's accession into the political arena, most of the important media institutions either came under the control of the Kremlin or fell into the hands of Putin's close circle (See also BBC, 2022). One of the remarkable points here is that the Russian people generally reach the news through

the media controlled by the Kremlin and have a significant trust in this media (See Levada Center, 2014; BBC, 2022). In particular, the media has been in a primary position in ensuring that the politics and ideological thoughts driven by the Kremlin, together with Euromaidan, are disseminated to the society. While the annexation of Crimea and the events in Donbass were occurring, the Russian media generally tried to legitimize the Kremlin policies, and at the same time took on the task of creating an enemy perception towards Ukraine and the West. Krill Martynov (2015) states that the media in Russia acts as an "enemy manufacturer". Lapshov (2014) similarly draws attention to the fact that in times of war the media has the task of creating "enemies" and "demonizing" the other side, and in this way, explains the reason why many volunteer movements from Russia travel to the Donbass region through the impact of Russian media.

Looking at the issue of creating enemies, examples of this can be seen a lot in the Russian media as of 2014 with the eventual purpose of disseminating official narratives and ideological thoughts among the public and realizing the political purposes during the Russian indirect and direct military interventions in Ukraine. The policy of creating the image of "enemy" in the media shows itself in many different programs, videos and news in the process, with principal themes of "inhuman" events in Ukraine, "fascist, Neo-Nazi Ukrainians with their Western sponsors", "Western-backed coup and events caused by the West," etc. (Dougherty, 2014; Fedor, 2015). The Russian media, acting with Kremlin directives, tended to disseminate selected information manipulatively among the public to achieve political purposes of the Kremlin. The reason for this is the desire of the parties to influence people in a manipulative way and to turn the war in their favor, because war is not only fought with military instruments (Roman et al., 2017). Moreover, such news reports can be fake but instrumental for achieving political ends and promoting official narratives of the Kremlin (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016)

As this work argues, the impact of the Russian media can be observed, to a considerable extent, on the thoughts and perceptions of the Russian people. In order to discover the



opinion of Russian society on these issues as of 2014, it is necessary to look at the surveys conducted in Russia. In this regard, survey data of leading Russian survey companies such as Levada, FOM, and VTsIOM are analyzed in this study. Some scholars who have studied these issues are also examined in this study. In this context, firstly, the thoughts of the Russian people towards the Maidan should be analyzed.

In the previous subsection, it was stated that the Russian political elite saw the change of power in Crimea as an “illegal coup”, which was supported by the West. Besides, from this perspective, the West played a major role in what happened in Ukraine, as the Russian political elite argued and media showed. According to two surveys conducted by Levada Research Center in January 2016 and March 2017 and the results of a survey shared by VTsIOM in February 2016, Russian people thought that the West played an important role in the process (Levada Center, 2016a, 2017b; VTsIOM, 2016). In this regard, the rates were close to 50% in the two Levada surveys where multiple answers were given. On the other hand, in both Levada surveys, the events in Ukraine in 2014 were defined as a “violent coup d'etat” with a large percentage, which was 80% in both while the percentage of a survey held in January 2014 by the same center had been even higher with 84%. Moreover, according to the survey of VTsIOM, Russians were inclined to see Ukraine as “lost” as a consequence of the events in Euromaidan. These results show that the Russian people, like their political rulers and media, put an important responsibility on the West for these events, and that they saw these events as a coup and associated them with negative perceptions.

In the previous section, it was stated that the Russian political elite accused the groups that came to power in Kyiv of having fascist and Nazi connections. In connection with this point of view and discourse, it should be noted that the Russian political elite used anti-Nazi rhetoric that emphasized the “Great Patriotic War” in order to mobilize patriotic feelings among the Russian people in the face of the events in Ukraine (Alexseev & Hale, 2016, p. 210). Moreover, that was the exact content of news the Russian media disseminated among the public. It would not be wrong to say that such

discourses strongly influenced the public opinion. In a survey held in November 2018, as a response to the question “What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about your people?” 53% of the respondents chose the answer “our past, our history” while 87% of the respondents defined the “Victory in the Great Patriotic War” as an important historical event of pride in Russian history among the multiple answers (Levada Center, 2019a).

Undoubtedly, it is very important to analyze how the Russian people evaluated and whether they supported the annexation of Crimea. The Russian political elite had to get the support of its people in Crimea and to justify the military action in the public base with the principal help of Russian media. Considering the results of the surveys on Crimea, it is possible to say that there were such results that would please the Russian administration. According to data reached through the surveys held by the Levada Center, the rate of support for the annexation of Crimea was at least 80% and continued at these rates (Levada Center, 2016c, 2018, 2019c, 2021b). On the other hand, based on the results of surveys published in March and June 2014 by VTsIOM, the rates of support for the annexation of Crimea were over 90% (VTsIOM, 2014a, 2014c, 2014f). According to the results of the survey conducted by the FOM, the participants were asked about their views on annexation both five years ago and at that time, and the rate of support for Russia's policy was around 80% (FOM, 2019). In a survey held in March 2016, as a response to the question “Do you think that Crimea should be a part of Russia, Ukraine, or do you think it would be better for Crimea to be an independent country, like Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or Transnistria?” 87% of the respondents answered as it “should be a part of Russia” – the percentage of the same answer was 64% in March 2014 – and 64% of them put forward the thesis of “Crimea has always been Russian” as an argument for the justification of this choice (Levada Center, 2016c). Similarly in another survey held by VTsIOM, 89% of the respondents regarded Crimea as a part of Russia (VTsIOM, 2014a). Furthermore, in these surveys, a clear majority of respondents regarded the reunification with Crimea with the perception that “Russia is returning to its traditional role of superpower and asserting its interests in the post-Soviet space” by rejecting the idea of the violation of the international laws and the

idea of “returning Crimea to Ukraine.” The first point of rejection was also shared in the surveys held by the Levada Center (2018, 2019c, 2021b). The second point of rejection can be seen in a survey in which 92% pointed out that “the decision for Crimea is irrevocable” (VTsIOM, 2014f). The surveys also showed important perspectives on whether the annexation of Crimea has benefited or harmed Russia. According to three surveys conducted in March 2018, 2019, and 2021 by Levada Center, nearly 70% of the participants stated that these people had a positive perception (Levada Center, 2018, 2019c, 2021b). A clear majority of support in this regard can also be observed in a VTsIOM survey in March 2014 with a percentage of 76% (VTsIOM, 2014c).

With the annexation of Crimea, it is necessary to evaluate the direction in which the opinions of Russian citizens towards Vladimir Putin changed. As an example, a survey conducted in March 2014 showed that the speech of Putin, in which he declared the annexation of Crimea, gave a positive impression to the 66% of the survey participants (FOM, 2014a). In another survey held in June 2014 by FOM, among other things, participants opted for “Annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol to Russia” at most to mention the favorite action of Putin in his third presidential term while, according to the most, the most positive change with Putin was experienced in the field of foreign policy (FOM, 2014b). In parallel with these examples, the approval rating of Putin would increase in March to the level of 80% among the Russian public according to the figures of the Levada Center (Shapovalova, 2014; Alekseev, 2016; Alexseev & Hale, 2016). The supportive attitude of the Russian mass media is crucial in such approval rates of the Russian president while these percentages can clearly confirm such a statement.

It should be kept in mind that Russian society is not a homogeneous society, on the contrary, it involves different ethnic groups. In this context, Crimean politics was an issue that could lead to different perceptions and ideas among different ethnic groups. However, surprisingly, it can be argued that non-Russian ethnic groups supported Russia's Crimean policies, similar to ethnic Russians with data reached through survey centers including NEORUSS, Levada, FOM, Romir, and the others (Alekseev, 2016;

Alexseev & Hale, 2016; Laruelle, 2016). Alekseev points out that the opinion of non-Russian ethnic groups on this issue cannot be fully reached, as surveying centers in Russia do not methodically distinguish participants by definition of ethnic Russian or non-Russian ethnic group members. A principal source of Alekseev's claim about this is the data published by FOM and VTsIOM in March 2014 in a joint study carried out in different republics and regions of Russia (See FOM & VTsIOM, 2014). According to these data and as Alekseev interprets the results, apart from being relatively low in Chechnya compared to other regions, great support was given to the annexation of Crimea and Russia's policies towards Ukraine from the republics and regions where all ethnic minorities constitute the majority. Moreover, it can even be said that there was more support from ethnic non-Russian groups than from ethnic Russian groups. Alekseev, who emphasizes that the reactions from Tatarstan were also important when the Tatar population living in Crimea is considered, maintains that the Russian government did not face a great reaction, contrary to expectations, and the region continued to support Putin.

How the Russian public perceived the events in eastern Ukraine and the role Russia played there is a matter that needs to be discussed. In fact, the public had been aware of the high tension in the region since the beginning of the process. Numerous surveys conducted confirm this statement (See Levada Center, 2016e, 2017a). How the public thought about whether a war was being waged between Russia and Ukraine in this region and whether there were Russian forces in these lands is another important issue. In this regard, the rates of the answer given by survey participants of Levada Center who did not think there was a war between the two states were 57% in April 2014; 60% in February 2015; 65% in January 2016; 64% in February 2017 (Levada Center, 2016a, 2017b). Furthermore, the rate of those in the Levada survey held in January 2016 who thought there were no troops of Russia's military forces was 52% similar to the proportions in 2014 and 2015. In fact, according to survey data by VTsIOM in July 2014, a majority of participants did not take into account the possibility of war seriously between the two states while 66% of them considered that "Russia should not send troops to Ukraine" (VTsIOM, 2014e). As Serhii Plokhly (2017) notes, after the

annexation of Crimea during which there had been a strong “euphoria” among Russians and the conflict in eastern Ukraine, Russians were less inclined to support the military actions outside. To be sure, the role of the media in this regard can be said to be limited, because it should be said that apart from the media, economic costs and possible human losses in case of a large extent military campaign in Ukraine were also effective in these ideas.

Survey centers asked the participants about the solution to the problems in Eastern Ukraine and the future of this region. It is noteworthy that, preferentially, the participants generally advocated the independence of the two separatist republics, which were established in east Ukraine, or their reunion with Russia. In fact, according to the Levada Center surveys, while the preference for the union of these republics with Russia was 48% in March 2014, it was revealed that this rate tended to decrease until May 2016 (Levada Center, 2016e). In May 2016, the rate was only 22%. According to data taken by the same 2016 Levada survey, the rate of those who wished for independence for these republics gradually increased over time from 12% in March 2014 to 38% in May 2016. In a survey held by Levada Center in May 2019, 29% of the survey participants opted for the choice of independence of these republics while 27% of them preferred a reunion between Russia and these republics with a slight rise in the percentage in this preference (Levada Center, 2019d). In the results of a survey published in April 2021, a serious uncertainty can be seen among the Russian public (Levada Center, 2021a). The proportion of those who chose the answer “DPR and LPR should become independent states” was only 28%, the proportion of others preferring a reunion was 25%, and, most importantly, the rate of the ones who were uncertain was 21%. Looking at these rates, it is possible to say that the Kremlin and the Russian media have successfully turned the people of Donbass into a political actor in the eyes of Russian mass public. The results of the survey express the support for the people of Donbass, as an actor, to decide their own future independently of Ukraine (though a highly disputed subject), as the Kremlin desires.

During the conflicts in eastern Ukraine, it would be logical to examine which side the Russian society held responsible for these violent conflicts and how it viewed the side it considers the victim. In this regard, the surveys conducted by VTsIOM are instructive. For example, in a survey dated March 2017, a strong feeling of sympathy and “compassion” toward the people of the Eastern Ukraine and a negative feeling toward the Ukrainian administration that caused the violence and hardships for people in the region, as survey participants perceived, can be observed (VTsIOM, 2017b). Survey results published in August 2014 by VTsIOM, on its part, showed that “a two-third” of Russian society considered the rhetoric and politics of Vladimir Putin in the Donbas region as peaceful while for 47% of participants, the president only aimed at ensuring peace in the region (VTsIOM, 2014g). It is probable that the sympathy for the people of this region had a significant relationship with the concept of the Russian World with the primary manipulative impact of the Russian media which promoted the Russian World concept and the importance of the Donbass region as propagated by the ideologues of this concept. According to a survey held in 2014, participants, who reflected on the ideas of Russian society in general, emphasized the significantly indispensable place of Donbas in the Russian World (VTsIOM, 2014h).

The sympathy for the people living in the Donbas region was connected with the belief in the Russian society that it was necessary to help the people in this region as a result of the works of the Russian media that mainly focuses on the alleged “hardships and problems” of the people there. In a 2015 survey, the support rate of the Russian society for helping this region by Russia, even against the possibility of developing relations with the West, reached 58% (VTsIOM, 2015). Moreover, in a survey in 2017, 82% of the respondents believed that aid to this region should be continued (VTsIOM, 2017a). It is also worth mentioning that the Russian administration facilitated the citizens in eastern Ukraine to have a Russian passport and the public showed its support for it. According to a survey conducted in May 2019, %70 of the Russian society supported this (Levada Center, 2019d). The successful effect of the media-supported Russian official narrative on the public can be observed again.

In 2021, in the Donbas Region, the violence of the conflicts between Ukraine and the separatist forces in Donbass increased, and in this period, Russia and Ukraine accused each other of violating the terms of the ceasefire agreement. As a result, relations between the two states deteriorated. Meanwhile, the escalation of tensions and conflicts in eastern Ukraine would certainly affect the Russian public's opinion of the region with the indispensable role of the Russian media that portrayed the principal cause of the problems and tension was the Kyiv administration. According to the Russian society, as it is understood from the surveys, especially the West and the Kyiv administration were responsible for the increasing tension and rising violence. The survey results showed that 48% of the Russian society blamed the US and NATO countries while 20% of it put the responsibility on Kyiv for the emerging events in that period (Levada, 2021c). Besides that, in this survey, 65% of the society showed its willingness to support the “incorporation” of these regions into the Russian Federation, in case of the willingness on the part of the breakaway republics in this regard.

The increasing tension in the region and the visible deterioration in the relations between Russia and Ukraine would also affect the views of the Russian society about a possible war by February 2022 through again the media channels. As a matter of fact, a survey conducted on February 7-11, 2022, just before the war in Ukraine, showed that now 45% of participants paid significant attention to the possibility of war between Ukraine and Russia (Levada Center, 2022). In this survey, 58% of the survey participants preferred the separation of these regions from Ukraine through either incorporation or independence of the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. These data showed that the Russian society was now preparing for the reality of war by considering the strong possibilities.

The “revolutionary” events that took place in Ukraine, the change of administration in Kyiv, and the reactions from the Russian political elite towards this resulted in a negative perspective towards Ukraine in Russian society in general with the primary role of the Russian media. As a matter of fact, with the 2014 survey conducted by

NEORUSS, the Russian society began to express the sharp lines between them and the Ukrainians after the events in Ukraine, stating that the biggest difference between them was in the field of "international relations," with the depiction of the administration in Kyiv as an anti-Russian puppet of the West (Alexseev & Hale, 2016, pp. 210-211). The Russian society showed a negative attitude, in a survey in 2014, toward Petro Poroshenko while 43% of respondents defined him as the representer of the interests of the West (VTsIOM, 2014d) while only 31% of the society would have a positive attitude toward Volodymyr Zelensky in the 2019 elections (VTsIOM, 2019a). In such a perceptual environment, it can be said that even Putin's continued portrayal of the two peoples as one nation was not enough and that this point of view was finding less and less support among the Russian society (Plokhy, 2017). The surveys showed that while the rate of approval of "one nation" of Ukrainians and Russians in Russian society was 81% in 2005, the rate tended to decline within years by experiencing the lowest levels of "46% in September 2015 and 49% in May 2016 (Levada Center, 2016e).

As a comparison of the Russian perceptions toward Ukraine between the years 2014 and 2016, a survey conducted by Levada Center in January 2016 is highly demonstrative. According to the survey data, while %60 of the Russian people showed a generally positive attitude toward Ukraine, the percentage decreased to 26% in 2016 with the rise of negative attitudes (Levada Center, 2016b). In another survey conducted in May 2016 by Levada, the rate of negative attitude toward Ukraine among Russians was 45% (Levada Center, 2016d). According to another survey conducted in 2019, different perspectives on the Ukrainian government and the Ukrainian people in Russian society stood out (Levada Center, 2019b). According to the survey data, in February 2019, 64% of the Russian society had a very negative attitude towards the Ukrainian political elite, while 57% had a generally positive attitude towards the Ukrainian people. According to another survey conducted by the same research center in 2019, there is a significant improvement in positive perceptions (47%) towards Ukraine (Levada Center, 2019e). But with the survey results in 2020, this would appear to be temporary with the lower rates of positive attitudes toward Ukraine. (Levada Center, 2020). Contrary to Levada's data, two surveys by VTsIOM in 2019 showed that the Russian public actually has a



positive outlook toward Ukraine (VTsIOM, 2019b, 2019c). As a matter of fact, 68% of the respondents showed a positive perception of Ukraine while “one-third” of the society regarded Ukraine as a “fraternal country.” Besides, a clear majority of the Russians defended the need for “improved” relations between the two states with the necessary efforts and measures. To be sure, the increase in tensions in eastern Ukraine in 2021 and 2022 would undoubtedly cause more negative attitudes towards Ukraine in the polls (See Levada Center, 2021a, 2022).

Finally, it is necessary to look at how the economic sanctions from the West in response to Russia's policies in the Crimea and Donbas region were interpreted by the Russian society and how much anxiety they caused in the society. It would be wrong to say that the sanctions caused a lot of anxiety in the society and made the society question the decisions and actions of the Russian government. Indeed, according to a 2014 survey, only 26% of respondents predicted that these sanctions could create problems (VTsIOM, 2014b). According to another survey conducted two years later, the rates of those who did not worry about the sanctions and the prospect of “isolation” in the international environment were 59% and 58%, respectively (Levada Center, 2016f). Moreover, in this survey, while 43% of the respondents claimed that “Western sanctions have ‘Insignificantly’ worsened the economic situation in Russia,” a part involving 20% of them stated that “Western sanctions have not affected the economic situation in Russia.” Among the respondents of this survey, 70% argued that Russia should “continue its present politics.”

All these perspectives, which were reflected in the survey results, actually constituted the desired result of the Kremlin administration. It is clear that the Russian society largely shared and supported the Russian government's perspectives and policies on Ukraine, Crimea, and Donbas. As stated before, the Kremlin always needed popular support among public. Moreover, the support to be obtained by the public was also vital for Moscow's decisions and policies in Ukraine, as the Kremlin must have known very well that nothing could be achieved without popular support. The importance of the

media and the impact of media on the public opinion has been highly demonstrative during the post- Euromaidan period. The results of the survey showed that although there was not a very homogeneous public view, the Kremlin was finding the support it was looking for from the society with the control of media.

#### **3.1.4. War In Ukraine**

On February 24, 2022, the world witnessed the entry of Russian forces into the territory of Ukraine and their airstrikes in various cities of Ukraine. In fact, in the months before the Russian attacks that started on February 24, the West and the Ukrainian administration accused Russia of preparing for war, and the Russian administration flatly denied these allegations. As a matter of fact, Russian military units had been deployed on Russian territory close to the Ukrainian borders for months, and the Russian army, sometimes together with the Belarusian army, had conducted military exercises from time to time. In such an environment, the Ukrainian administration and the West frequently voiced their concerns that a war would likely break out in Ukraine's territory in the near future. The general discourse of the Russian administration during this process was that the Russian army on the Ukrainian borders was in this region solely for training and military exercise purposes and was on Russian soil in a way that was not contrary to international law. In this regard, it is necessary to analyze the discourses of the leading Russian political elites.

In an interview with Russia's Foreign Minister, in a period of tense debates over the military presence of Russian troops across Ukrainian borders, Sergey Lavrov (2021e, 2021f) underlined that military activities were carried out on Russian soil without any "hostility." Moreover, Lavrov (2021e, 2021f, 2021g) blamed NATO countries for their military activities and military systems in the regions close to the Russian borders and considered these countries' navy in the Black Sea to be a violation of Montreux. Similar to his previous speeches analyzed above, the foreign minister continued to point out that the obligations arising from the Minsk agreement were not being fulfilled by Kyiv, that the Ukrainian administration also used the Crimean issue as a tool to not implement

these obligations, and that countries such as Germany and France turned a blind eye to this 'reality'. He also blamed the Kyiv administration for the extensive blockade that targeted the Donbas region. The Minister also expressed that, connected with the "Russian mentality", his country absolutely did not want war while the West was escalating the situation in Ukraine. In addition, Lavrov, in a speech to Valdai, argued that the United States had a great influence on the Zelensky administration (Lavrov, 2021d). In fact, this view could mean: The Zelensky administration does not comply with the obligations arising from the Minsk Agreement and the UN Security Council resolutions, and behind this is actually the administration of the USA and Western countries. From the minister's point of view, this showed that he held Kyiv and the West equally responsible for the developments and deadlocks in Ukraine.

Vladimir Putin (2021b), in his speech at the expanded meeting of the Foreign Ministry Collegium, drew similar conclusions with his emphasis on the West's role in the deteriorating conditions in Ukraine and the non-compliance of Kyiv with the obligations of Minsk and UNSC resolutions. Moreover, he accused the West of carrying out military actions and establishing military infrastructure in the regions close to the Russian borders and the Black Sea, and providing Ukraine with "lethal weapons." He also criticized the NATO block for disregarding the interests, concerns, and warnings of Russia during the process. Finally, in his speech, the Russian president said that the necessary response would be given against NATO and that a war in the region would not benefit anyone. Exactly the same point of view and references were observed in Lavrov's speech to the State Duma in early 2022 (See Lavrov, 2022).

To examine the perspective and discourse of the other prominent Russian political elite on these issues, two news reports published by NPR and Anadolu Agency in February 2022 just before erupted war in Ukraine are analyzed (NPR, 2022; Teslova, 2022). According to the news published in NPR, it was discussed that the Moscow administration defined the West's claims of war in Ukraine as a "hysteria" and "absurdity" and that this view was shared by the public with a perception of a kind of

Western game. As the reported news shed light, Russian officials, such as Yuri Ushakov and Maria Zakharova, strictly denied the claims of invasion and war in Ukraine by denouncing the West. According to Zakharova, with such methods, the West was making a kind of war propaganda with accusations of Western lies. The principal responsibility was loaded on the shoulders of the NATO states for the tense environment in Ukraine by these figures once again. According to this news report, Sergey Karaganov, “a Russian foreign policy analyst with close ties to Kremlin thinking”, Russia had to do something to prevent NATO expansion and ‘militarization’ in Ukraine while arguing that Russia had no plans for the invasion of Ukraine. According to the news published by Anadolu Agency, Zakharova accused the West of needing war and claimed that provocation and disinformation were always the preferred methods by the West. In a Valdai discussion talk in January 2022, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Sergei Ryabkov (2022), claimed that Russia was only conducting military exercises within the borders and there was no intention of war in Ukraine with his harsh criticisms against the NATO block countries for what was happening in Ukraine, non-compliance of obligations by Kyiv, military exercises and bringing military infrastructure close to the borders of Russia, and militarization in Ukraine.

Despite all this rhetoric, the possibilities and concerns expressed by the West would come true as of February 24. However, before focusing on the war itself, the official recognition of the breakaway republics of eastern Ukraine by Moscow, and the speech of the Russian president in which he declared the decision of recognition were crucial events that should be evaluated. As a matter of fact, the remarkable events on February, 21st are crucial to understanding the perceptions on the part of the Russian political elite. In his address dated February 21, 2022, Vladimir Putin (2022) repeated his previous rhetoric and used a discourse, with which he actually tried to legitimize the decision to recognize two separatist republics in Ukraine. In this speech, Putin's various emphases can, in fact, be found in his previous speeches: the historical ties between Ukraine and Russia, accusations against the Soviet administration for preparing the ground for the separation of the two peoples, and of the historical injustice done to the

Russians, emphasis on the strategic mistakes on Ukraine made by the last Soviet administration, criticisms towards the Ukrainian governments during the independence of Ukraine, persistent problems, instability, and corruption in this state, etc. In addition, the illegal coup that took place during the Maidan events, the role and power of radical nationalist groups, and the violence in the country were also reflected in his speech. Criticizing the nationalist sections and oligarchs in Ukraine in the post-Soviet period, Putin underlined the important role and support of the Russian people in the independence process of this country from the very beginning. He also made a remarkable reference to nationalist policies and, accordingly, the nationalist historiography that was intended to be reconstructed in Ukraine and would lead to anti-Russian perceptions among people, as the president argued. According to Putin, the 'coup' by radical nationalists has damaged Ukraine in all its aspects, leading to still ongoing internal divisions and civil war. In the process, Putin also touched upon the situation of compatriots living in Ukraine in his speech and criticized the anti-Russian laws enacted by the Ukrainian parliament over time. The Russian President once again expressed that Crimea had been connected to Russia by the will of the people. In fact, as stated by Putin, these statements were not new.

In the abovementioned speech, Putin (2022) focused on the last period after his usual interpretations of the historical events regarding Ukraine and the Euromaidan events. From this point on, Vladimir Putin, who was more critical of the Kyiv administration and the West, drew attention to the strategic threats to Russia of Ukraine's NATO membership prospect and the militarization of this country by NATO. Indeed, discussing Ukraine's Military Strategy document of 2021, Putin claimed that Ukraine is seeking to form a confrontational bloc with NATO countries against Russia. In addition, according to Putin, with the support of Western countries, Ukraine could have nuclear weapons while it was only a matter of time. Ukraine with a nuclear power would bring serious threats to the national security of Russia, as the president argued. Putin, who also made statements about NATO, complained about the military activities of this military bloc on the territory of Ukraine, the deployment of military infrastructure in the lands of this country, and the closer proximity of NATO to the Russian borders. From

the perspective of Putin, Ukrainian lands started to be seen by the West as “a theater of potential military operations,” particularly against Russia. Narrating that the NATO navies anchored in Ukraine's Black Sea ports had also started to pose a threat to the Russian Black Sea Fleet, Putin said that all these were a threat to Russia. Reminding that the NATO navy came to the port of Ochakov, Putin emphasized the importance of this port to Russian history in this speech. Stating that Ukraine's NATO membership prospectus is a free choice and sovereign right of this state, Putin argued that a country's membership in this bloc should not pose a threat to another country, putting forward the principle of "equal and indivisible security." In this regard, he implied that Ukraine's membership in the alliance would mean danger to Russian security. Considering that Russia's security interests and concerns, with Russian proposals in this regard, were ignored by NATO, Putin expressed that they were ready to give the necessary responses if necessary.

In the last part of this speech, Vladimir Putin (2022), mainly blamed the Kyiv administration and mentioned the situation in Donbas. Accusing Kyiv of not fulfilling its obligations arising from Minsk and UNSC decisions, Putin underlined the negative impact of the 8-year violent civil war in Donbas on the people here. Stating that Russia had always worked to ensure peace in the region, Putin added that all hopes were in vain and that he did not see a positive prospect for the future. In the process, Putin, who argued that the Kyiv administration continued its anti-Russian approach, argued that new decisions were needed now. With such reasons put forward, Putin declared the necessity of recognition of the independence and sovereignty of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic by the Russian Federation. With this recognition decision, the Moscow administration signed the Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance with these two separatist republics.

When the discourse of the Russian president in this speech is examined, a multidimensional inference can be made. Indeed, this speech is a reflection of the negative judgments of the Russian political elite towards Kyiv, NATO, and the West in

general. As a matter of fact, the Russian political elite must have seen that the relations with the Kyiv administration had reached an incomprehensible point on the Donbas issue and in relations with Ukraine in general. Moreover, since Ukraine's NATO membership prospects were perceived as a zero-sum game for Russia, Russian administration saw Ukraine's growing rapprochement with NATO and the emergence of NATO military presence in this country as an irreversible point. In fact, with this speech, most probably the Russian political elite was now well prepared for military intervention in Ukraine and discursively justified this military attack. Only three days later, the Russian armies officially entered Ukraine territories and carried out heavy airstrikes on many targets determined in this country. The already deteriorated West-Russia relations, on the other hand, were going through one of their worst times since the end of the Cold War. In the ongoing war, the West supports Ukraine financially and militarily and began to impose much heavier sanctions on Russia.

## CONCLUSION

This research aimed to identify the role of the identity and related mechanisms in the current Ukrainian crisis/war since the events in Euromaidan and relations between Russia-Ukraine and Russia-West in a triangular understanding. With the quantitative and interpretative analysis of sources, this study concluded that identity and identity-related patterns with a substantial impact on perceptions played an indispensable role in Russia's politics and attitudes towards Ukraine and the West and in current events in Ukraine.

This study touched upon the identity processes in Russia after the collapse of the USSR and its reflections on both the political administration and the people. In this process, this study tried to reveal to what extent different identity projects in Russia had been influential on the foreign policy of the Kremlin and showed how identity and related factors had affected the relations between Russia-West and Russia-Ukraine. More importantly, this study drew attention to how the administration, which adopted different ideas of identity, pursued changing policies towards Ukraine and the West over time. Undoubtedly, these different policies and political attitudes were the concrete products of various identity projects and related ideas. The most striking reflection of this was the differences between the Yeltsin-Kozyrev period when pro-Western, liberal, and democratic policies were carried out, the Yeltsin-Primakov period when the attitude towards the West became clearly negative with statist thought, and Putin's third and fourth presidential terms when the political establishment completely adopted anti-Western policies with civilizational/ethnic Russian nationalist/imperialist discourse and insights.

The study observed that while different ideas concerning identity with their roots in history affected the minds of Russian governments in different ways after the 90s, the Kremlin utilized these from time to time with political and economic concerns. The



study illustrated that the Yeltsin and Putin administrations, which promoted different identity projects during the period with the primary impact of political and economic concerns, formed a foreign policy within the framework of the ideas that emerged in line with these projects, and that this situation played a decisive role in Russia's relations with both Ukraine and the West. The fact that liberal values and ideas, which were strong in the political establishment at the beginning, lost their importance due to various reasons explained in the study, and Moscow's inclination to a more statist ideology by staying in a civic identity understanding clarified the reason why Russia became more "assertive" and followed incompatible policies against the West and Ukraine as of 1995s. Like Yeltsin, Putin's relatively moderate policies with the West and Ukraine at the beginning together with the economic realities, gave the way for more assertive policies in foreign affairs since the political leadership was increasingly under the influence of identity projects that were strengthened in Russia and opposed to liberal thought, and Putin's statist policies, especially with the effect of the color revolutions. Influenced by these identity ideas and statist ideology, Yeltsin's administration, when Primakov was foreign minister and prime minister, and later Putin's administration, with exceptions, tried to bring institutions such as the UN and OSCE (for a time though) to the fore, opposing the enlargement and strengthening of NATO in general.

Arguably, even the war with Georgia during Medvedev's early presidency was a continuation of this process. However, it was the economic realities that prompted the Medvedev administration to adopt friendly policies with the West after a short while. Considering that the Russian economy needed to be modernized, the Medvedev administration, under the influence of Russian economic circles, pursued a policy of rapprochement with the West, and this process could be possible with a reset period in relations with the Obama administration.

The potential support of the conservative and other liberal/anti-Western segments, the loss of support by liberals for Putin, who came back to the presidential office with the

controversial presidential election and protests, and Western criticisms of the democratic nature of Russia under Putin have led the Putin administration to promote a more civilizational/conservative identity project, and related currents of this thought have influenced Kremlin's policies towards the West and Ukraine in the ongoing process. Putin and his close circle, who already had a statist point of view, given great importance to the concept of state sovereignty in the previous periods, accused the West of interfering in Russia's internal affairs. In his third term, Putin's administration, which made the same allegations again, accused the West in this direction and emphasized Russia's independence in its internal affairs, and in fact, laid the foundation for Russia's growing distance from the West. Moreover, the increasing prominence of the new global powers in the Asian continent in the world economy led Russia to establish closer relations with these powers against the West as a strong alternative and helped the Kremlin to distance itself from the West in economic and political terms.

Moreover, the Putin administration wanted to politically benefit from the ethnic and imperialist currents of thought that were getting stronger in the society during these periods and tried to deprive the opposition of identity weapons in their hands. At a time when relations with the West were strained and liberal support was lost with protests, Putin and his administration started to defend the ideas coming from these circles, using their rhetoric, putting more pressure on Ukraine, and the Russian policies that emerged after the Maidan can be explained within this framework. Especially in the discourse used by the Kremlin during the annexation of Crimea, ethnic identity and nationalism had a great impact.

Despite these, this study actually revealed that during the Yeltsin and Putin eras, no identity project was fully embraced by the Kremlin and was not fully effective in Russian foreign policy. As a matter of fact, as mentioned above, besides influencing the ideas and perceptions of the administrations, the ideas and political concerns that became widespread in the society, and the Russian administrations used them from time to time under strong pressure or for the sake of realizing their political goals. But the

important point here was that the people and political elites were affected by different identity ideas and this created significant pressure on the Kremlin through opposition in the State Duma. As explained in the sections on the Russian Diaspora, Compatriots and the Russian World, ethnic nationalist thought in Russia was getting stronger, this situation created great pressure on the Yeltsin administration, and as a result, the administration had to take various steps to protect Russian diaspora outside. Undoubtedly, this situation adversely affected relations with Russia and other former Soviet Republics. To be sure, the ethnic Russian identity project, which had been strengthened during Yeltsin's period, also affected the Putin administration, and in this direction, Moscow undertook more concrete policies for ethnic Russians and compatriots. The Kremlin, which established the Russian World Foundation and implemented different related soft power elements, actually had two purposes. The first was to gain the sympathy of the peoples of the countries that were independent in the former Soviet geography, and the second was to control the rising ethnic nationalism with such moves. As explained in this study, although there are different ideologies and orientations, Russian governments have always followed a civic identity pattern, taking into account the sociological structure of Russia and trying to control other identity-related inclinations in the public sphere.

As it is often stated during the study, the relations between the West and Russia have been in a mutual interaction with the Russian identity in the post-Cold War period, as in the past. The policies implemented by the West during the process caused the strengthening or weakening of different identity projects in Russia, and at the same time, the strengthened identity projects were influential in the Kremlin and became determinant in Russia's policies towards the West. In this way, identity issues can explain Russia's policies towards the West, close relations between them during the Yeltsin-Kozyrev period, its opposition to NATO (even its opposition to the EU during the Euromaidan), and the importance it attaches to the economic and military initiatives it has developed under its leadership. In fact, Russia's opposition to the association agreement between Ukraine and the EU just before the revolution in Euromaidan and its efforts to include Ukraine in its economic union is a great example of the opposition to

the European Union's enlargement to the borders of Russia and a reflection of Russia's desire for strengthening its own economic integration project as an alternative to the West. To list the important issues affecting the bilateral relations: Russia's economic realities, the democratization movement and liberal thought that was at the forefront in the first period, the statist ideology and related concepts/images that gained strength later, the anti-democratic developments in Russia, and Russian perception of violation of great power status and sphere of influence of Russia by the West as perceived. Recognition is an important issue here because NATO's expansion in the former communist geography, NATO's approaching to the borders of Russia and color revolutions were perceived both as a threat to Russia by governments (like the opposition of the Kremlin) and as a threat to Russia's great power status and 'legitimate' sphere of influence. In such a political environment, Ukraine has always seemed to be a region stuck between Russia and the West with a rivalry for influence on it after the Cold War. This explains why the relations between Ukraine and Russia need to be explained in a triangular insight. As a matter of fact, this study concluded that the tripartite relations between Russia, Ukraine, and the West cannot be considered independently of each other. The tripartite relations as a whole either got better or worsened in the process. In this way, it was clearly seen that the competitive environment that developed as a result of the identity and perception processes over Ukraine even caused the gas cuts in 2006 and 2009 as a tangible outcome in addition to the events in Ukraine as of 2013.

While this study put forward all these concepts of identity and perception related to identity to explain these issues, it did not ignore economic conditions, political interests (again related to identity), and other material resources. As a matter of fact, the energy trade between Russia and the EU, Ukraine's location as a transit state between the EU and Russia, differences of interest in the Middle East and the Balkans, and Russia's security concerns were also frequently explained in the study.

This study evaluated the role of identity in the relations between Russia and Ukraine by examining the chance of creating a new identity and historiography that Ukraine gained with independence and examining the potential effects of this situation on traditional Russian historiography and related identity processes. In this direction, this study discovered the historically great importance of Ukraine for Russia in various fields and revealed that the emergence of new Ukrainian historiography and identity, which is not in accordance with the Russian history theses, negatively affected the Russian side in a perceptual sense. In particular, unlike the previous administrations, the coldness in relations between the two countries as a result of the identity and history policies during the Yushchenko administration (later the one under Petro Poroshenko) can only be explained in light of identity issues. At the same time, for the Ukrainian side, the image evoked by Russia during the period and the perceptions towards this state had key importance in terms of Ukrainian identity and historiography while the Russian side (except for liberals), in general, could not completely go along with the Ukrainian separation from Russia.

In light of all these perspectives, Russia's reaction and political actions towards the emergence of a pro-Western and Ukrainian nationalist administration instead of a pro-Russian administration as a result of the events in Ukraine can be explained properly. As this study emphasizes, the Kremlin perceived the events in Euromaidan and results as a loss to the West and thought that its interests would be damaged, and also calculated that with the rise of nationalists in Ukraine, the anti-Russian sentiment would increase in this country and there would be moves against traditional theses of Russian identity and history. Along with the annexation of Crimea and efforts to legitimize it, the civil war in Eastern Ukraine and the general attitude of Russia toward this were the product of these perceptual thoughts and imaginations.

This study, which examines the attitude and anti-Western discourses that hold the West and Ukrainian nationalists responsible for the events in Ukraine as a result of the Kremlin's perceptions and political maneuvers, pointed out that the Russian

administration successfully spread similar ideas among the Russian mass public through the media channels as observed in the survey data. The main reason for looking at the public opinions together with the survey studies was to discover whether the policies towards Ukraine and the West implemented by the Kremlin as of 2014 were deemed appropriate by the mass public. The most important reason for this is that since the early 90s, political administrations, which took into account the opinions of the public, have been aware that they should always seek approval from Russian society despite the authoritarian nature of governance. In this way, this study benefited from the survey data as it thought that the Putin administration attaches great importance to the public in the post-2014 period, as it generally did in identity projects before. As an example of concerns over public opinion on identity projects, while Putin's ethnic Russian emphasis on the annexation of Crimea benefited from the views and discourses of ethnic nationalists, it also created a great opportunity for support from imperialist, Eurasian, and circles belonging to civilizational/conservative thought to the political establishment. Political concerns played an important role here, but it should not be ignored that the implementation of different identity ideas and adoption of related discourses by the administrations during both Yeltsin and Putin periods is a clear reflection of the identity-based ideas that have become widespread in Russian society and the political elite. Such ideas and related rhetoric first become widespread among the people and the political elite, and then the administrations put these ideas into practice, even if it does not voluntarily.

To provide better insights into the implications of this study, future studies could focus on the current war and crises in Ukraine within a social constructivist framework and with an identity-based insight. Since the war and related events in Ukraine are very new, it is difficult to make inferences and forecasts for the future. For this reason, as time progresses and developments in the region continue, the quality and adequacy of the inferences related to the ones in this study will increase.

With regards to the academic literature and international relations theory, this study supported the theses of leading figures and works that studied these subjects in an identity-based insight and social constructivist theoretical framework thanks to the successful illustrations on the indispensable role of identity, related mechanisms, and perceptions on Ukrainian revolution in 2014 and current events in Ukraine with the help of discourses of high-level political elites of Russia and Ukraine and survey data to explore public opinion under the impact of media in Russia as of 2014. In terms of identity issues, this dissertation evaluated the progress of identity projects on their way to the mass public, political elites, and, eventually, the political establishment of the Russian Federation, which also promoted and utilized them in compatible with the political purposes and concerns. Moreover, this study confirmed how the concept of identity constructs a tripartite relationship mechanism besides forming the relations between Russia-West and Russia-Ukraine in a limitedly separate insight. This study, revealing the explanatory theoretical power of identity and related concepts undoubtedly supports the social constructivist approach. Moreover, this work, which synthesized the idealistic elements with the material infrastructure without ignoring one side like the other international relations theories, also correctly reflected the social constructivist perspective. Unlike other international relations theories, which look at events only in one dimension and naturally have difficulty in analyzing events or cannot explain them logically, this study successfully explains the events that constitute the subject of the study, with the multidimensional and integrative perspective of social constructivism and constitutes a concrete exemplary model in explaining other events in the international arena. Finally, this study contributed to the academic literature in this context by successfully showing how accurately identity and related concepts can explain both the Russia-West-Ukraine tripartite relations during the post-Cold War era and the crises in Ukraine after 2014.

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## APPENDIX 1. ETHICS BOARD WAIVER FORM

	<p><b>HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES ETHICS COMMISSION FORM FOR THESIS</b></p>
<p><b>HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS DEPARTMENT</b></p>	
<p>Date: 12/01/2023</p>	
<p>Thesis Title: Identity in Russian Foreign Policy towards Ukraine</p>	
<p>My thesis work related to the title above:</p>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Does not perform experimentation on animals or people.</li> <li>2. Does not necessitate the use of biological material (blood, urine, biological fluids and samples, etc.).</li> <li>3. Does not involve any interference of the body's integrity.</li> <li>4. Is not based on observational and descriptive research (survey, interview, measures/scales, data scanning, system-model development).</li> </ol>	
<p>I declare, I have carefully read Hacettepe University's Ethics Regulations and the Commission's Guidelines, and in order to proceed with my thesis according to these regulations I do not have to get permission from the Ethics Board/Commission for anything; in any infringement of the regulations I accept all legal responsibility and I declare that all the information I have provided is true.</p>	
<p>I respectfully submit this for approval.</p>	
<p><b>Name Surname:</b> TUNAHAN KOÇ</p> <p><b>Student No:</b> N19131885</p> <p><b>Department:</b> INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS</p> <p><b>Program:</b> MASTER</p> <p><b>Status:</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MA    <input type="checkbox"/> Ph.D.    <input type="checkbox"/> Combined MA/ Ph.D.</p>	<p>Date and Signature</p>
<p><b><u>ADVISER COMMENTS AND APPROVAL</u></b></p> <p style="margin-top: 20px;">APPROVED</p> <p style="margin-top: 40px;">_____ Assoc. Prof. Anar Somuncuoğlu</p>	



**HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ**  
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**TEZ ÇALIŞMASI ETİK KOMİSYON MUAFİYETİ FORMU**

**HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ**  
**SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ**  
**ULUSLARARASI İLİŞKİLER ANABİLİM DALI BAŞKANLIĞI'NA**

Tarih: 12/01/2023

Tez Başlığı: Rusya'nın Ukrayna'ya Yönelik Dış Politikasında Kimlik

Yukarıda başlığı gösterilen tez çalışmam:

1. İnsan ve hayvan üzerinde deney niteliği taşımamaktadır,
2. Biyolojik materyal (kan, idrar vb. biyolojik sıvılar ve numuneler) kullanılmasını gerektirmemektedir.
3. Beden bütünlüğüne müdahale içermemektedir.
4. Gözlemsel ve betimsel araştırma (anket, mülakat, ölçek/skala çalışmaları, dosya taramaları, veri kaynakları taraması, sistem-model geliştirme çalışmaları) niteliğinde değildir.

Hacettepe Üniversitesi Etik Kurullar ve Komisyonlarının Yönergelerini inceledim ve bunlara göre tez çalışmamın yürütülebilmesi için herhangi bir Etik Kurul/Komisyon'dan izin alınmasına gerek olmadığını; aksi durumda doğabilecek her türlü hukuki sorumluluğu kabul ettiğimi ve yukarıda vermiş olduğum bilgilerin doğru olduğunu beyan ederim.

Gereğini saygılarımla arz ederim.

Tarih ve İmza

**Adı Soyadı:** TUNAHAN KOÇ  
**Öğrenci No:** N19131885  
**Anabilim Dalı:** ULUSLARARASI İLİŞKİLER  
**Programı:** TEZLİ YÜKSEK LİSANS  
**Statüsü:**  Yüksek Lisans  Doktora  Bütünleşik Doktora


**DANIŞMAN GÖRÜŞÜ VE ONAYI**

UYGUNDUR

Doç. Dr. Anar Somuncuoğlu



## APPENDIX 2. ORIGINALITY REPORT

 <p style="text-align: center;"><b>HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES MASTER'S THESIS ORIGINALITY REPORT</b></p>
<p><b>HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS DEPARTMENT</b></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Date: 12/01/2023</p> <p>Thesis Title : IDENTITY IN RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS UKRAINE</p> <p>According to the originality report obtained by myself/my thesis advisor by using the Turnitin plagiarism detection software and by applying the filtering options checked below on 12/01/2023 for the total of 219 pages including the a) Title Page, b) Introduction, c) Main Chapters, and d) Conclusion sections of my thesis entitled as above, the similarity index of my thesis is 6 %.</p> <p>Filtering options applied:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Approval and Declaration sections excluded</li> <li>2. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Bibliography/Works Cited excluded</li> <li>3. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Quotes excluded</li> <li>4. <input type="checkbox"/> Quotes included</li> <li>5. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Match size up to 5 words excluded</li> </ol> <p>I declare that I have carefully read Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences Guidelines for Obtaining and Using Thesis Originality Reports; that according to the maximum similarity index values specified in the Guidelines, my thesis does not include any form of plagiarism; that in any future detection of possible infringement of the regulations I accept all legal responsibility; and that all the information I have provided is correct to the best of my knowledge.</p> <p>I respectfully submit this for approval.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Date and Signature</p> <p><b>Name Surname:</b> TUNAHAN KOÇ _____</p> <p><b>Student No:</b> N19131885 _____</p> <p><b>Department:</b> INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS _____</p> <p><b>Program:</b> MASTER _____</p>
<p><b><u>ADVISOR APPROVAL</u></b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">APPROVED.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">_____ Assoc. Prof. Anar Somuncuoğlu</p>



**HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ  
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ  
YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZ ÇALIŞMASI ORJİNALLİK RAPORU**

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SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ  
ULUSLARARASI İLİŞKİLER ANABİLİM DALI BAŞKANLIĞI'NA**

Tarih: 12/01/2023

Tez Başlığı : RUSYA'NIN UKRAYNA'YA YÖNELİK DIŞ POLİTİKASINDA KİMLİK

Yukarıda başlığı gösterilen tez çalışmamın a) Kapak sayfası, b) Giriş, c) Ana bölümler ve d) Sonuç kısımlarından oluşan toplam 219 sayfalık kısmına ilişkin, 12/01/2023 tarihinde şahsım/tez danışmanım tarafından Turnitin adlı intihal tespit programından aşağıda işaretlenmiş filtrelemeler uygulanarak alınmış olan orijinallik raporuna göre, tezimin benzerlik oranı % 6 'dır.

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- 5-  5 kelimedenden daha az örtüşme içeren metin kısımları hariç

Hacettepe Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Tez Çalışması Orijinallik Raporu Alınması ve Kullanılması Uygulama Esasları'nı inceledim ve bu Uygulama Esasları'nda belirtilen azami benzerlik oranlarına göre tez çalışmamın herhangi bir intihal içermediğini; aksinin tespit edileceği muhtemel durumda doğabilecek her türlü hukuki sorumluluğu kabul ettiğimi ve yukarıda vermiş olduğum bilgilerin doğru olduğunu beyan ederim.

Gereğini saygılarımla arz ederim.

Tarih ve İmza

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**DANIŞMAN ONAYI**

UYGUNDUR.

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