Russia's Near Abroad

Spatial Identity & Security in a Post-Soviet Space

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Abstract

This essay combines theoretical insights from critical geo-politics and security studies to create a framework by which Putin's view of Russia, his political prescriptions and actions in the international space can better be understood. It describes how the sociospatial entanglement of the post-soviet region that is today known as Russia's 'near abroad' intersects with questions about history, identity and ethnicity on the one hand, and security and geo-political anxiety on the other. Combined, these theoretical accounts reveal how Russian apprehension towards NATO involvement in eastern Europe is exacerbated and multiplied by the region's historically motivated spatial and cultural complexities. By examining speeches made by Putin before his monumental decision to commence the 'special military operation' in Ukraine, the narratives and perspectives that influenced this decision are elucidated. The essay reaches the conclusion that complexities in perceptions on security and spatial identity inform a worldview significantly different from the perspectives that are prevalent in the west, and that this helps explain why much of western analysis on the causes of the war has been ambiguous or inconclusive.

Keywords Spatiality, Security Cultures, Critical Geopolitics, NATO, Russia, Ukraine
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Table of Contents

1 Introduction

Why is the logic behind the Russian perspective on its invasion of Ukraine so seemingly alien to western observers? It seems to be so alien, in fact, that it often appears as if western scholars and analysts would rather skip right past understanding the rationale behind the conflict, and instead prioritize analysis of the war itself and its effects on the parties to the conflict. The purpose of this paper is to develop a way to address this query. To this end, the paper employs theoretical perspectives from critical geopolitics and security studies to construct a framework that can provide better answers to some of the questions surrounding the conflict.

The ways in which the Russian invasion is justified by Putin and agents of his government have been received with disdain and incredulity by observers in the western, developed world. When analyzing speeches and press statements made by the administration to a domestic audience, analysts are confounded by a logical throughline that shares closest resemblance with the essentialist ethno-nationalism of the early 1900s. Arguments are built on ethnic essentialism, imperialist territoriality and nationalism on one hand, and on antagonism with the west and its liberal ideals and principles on the other. The hegemonic western perspectives, themselves long past the point of rejecting this essentialist logic, understandably have a hard time grappling with narratives that it predicates. When these narratives constitute the premise for such drastic action as an invasion, the western analysts suddenly find themselves unable to interpret the reasoning behind it. The ideas that are used to rationalize the Russian position are so foreign to western frameworks that when they are analyzed at all they are often *a priori* dismissed as deceptive framing or propaganda. It is this discrepancy that this paper seeks to address. Rather than presuming that the framing emanating from the Russian administration is inherently deceptive, this paper grants the possibility that the statements analyzed are in fact reflective of genuinely held beliefs.

This paper is structured into 4 separate segments beyond the introduction. The first segment will provide a backdrop for the analysis by further detailing and arguing for the discrepancy observed in previous research on the conflict. It will ignore the

practical historiography of the conflict buildup over the last decade, as this has already been done in a way that is entirely satisfactory and sufficient by other researchers (Kragh 2022, Toal 2017). The background will instead focus on making a case as to why a new framework for analysis is necessary. This will be done by providing a brief account of previous research traditions predicated upon rational actors, and game theories, and discussing their inadequacy in analyzing this particular conflict. These theories will be contrasted with newer strains of academic thought that supplants the notion of rationality for that of leadership bias.

The second part will outline the theoretical framework for this essay. This section posits a framework that combines insights from two disparate theoretical bodies: *Critical geopolitics* (Toal, 2016) and *global security cultures* (Kaldor, 2018). Critical geopolitics contributes with an understanding of how Russia views itself, as well as its immediate neighbors - it's so-called 'near abroad' - by discussing the crucial significance of certain territories and places in the Russian ethos. Secondly, the idea of 'security cultures' as distinct regional or thematic paradigms helps contextualize how Russia understands its own position as an actor in the international system; specifically in relation to 'The West', the United States, and to NATO. This framework provides utility in its ability to explain how the manifestations of these concepts have the capacity to evoke emotional responses, and thus directly influence biases that affect foreign policy decisions. The framework also gestures at a specific dynamic that occurs when these two distinct concepts and their very different sentimental implications intersect, something which will be covered more thoroughly in the conclusion.

The third part is a thorough outline of the methodological approach of this paper. It stipulates the ways in which the paper's hypothesis is tested, highlighting how the material is selected, how it is approached, and how it is to be interpreted. It also discusses some of the limitations of the selected methodology; what it can do, and what it cannot. Beyond methodological considerations, this section recalls the theoretical framework to motivate the thematic distinctions that are made in the material. Considering that the topic is highly contemporary and of a sensitive nature it will briefly address some considerations regarding how these subjects are discussed and analyzed. For instance it argues why it is appropriate for this paper to use 'the Russian perspective' and 'Putin's perspective' interchangeably, rather than addressing them separately. The section also addresses the challenge of interpreting, and inferring

meaning in material that has been translated, likewise the importance of the choice between objectivity and neutrality is discussed.

The fourth section is dedicated to testing the theoretical framework against statements made by Vladimir Putin about the sociospatial identity of Ukraine, and its impacts on Russian security. Here the framework will be used to compare and contrast the different ideas and concepts proposed by Putin in his rhetoric with the intention of providing a coherent account of the worldview that informs his decisions.

After these four parts will follow a brief discussion on the findings of the results. Here, different aspects of the analysis are gathered and combined into a holistic interpretation of the material, together with observations made about meaning and implications behind specific concepts. Further, the observations made about the connections between spatiality and security will be explicated. Lastly this section will ascertain and argue for the utility of the study, suggest further research into the subject, and prescribe other cases in which the framework may be applicable.

2 Background

How could relations between Russia and Ukraine so rapidly deteriorate and result in armed conflict? This question has come to dominate discourse in both public and private settings ever since the Russian Federation on the 24th of February of this year initiated a military campaign against Ukraine. It is raised in public broadcasting and print media, by academics and scholars as well as around dinner tables among friends and families. The subject seems to confound laymen, analysts and academics alike. The contemporary world, unaccustomed to interstate wars, seemingly lacks the toolkits necessary to explain the phenomenon. Further, it is unclear what Putin hopes to achieve. His war strikes many spectators as old-fashioned, archaic and counterproductive. Old-fashioned because the imagery of heavy military machinery and maps with moving front lines seem more reminiscent of the conflicts defining the 20th century (Berkowitz & Galocha 2022, Bishara 2022), archaic or anachronistic because it is being justified using imperialist logic and waged with territorial conquest as an explicit goal (Dickinson 2022, Liik 2022). Ultimately, and most perplexing to the international observers, the war is understood to be decidedly counterproductive. To international observers it appears that Putin's plans have backfired spectacularly (Marksteiner 2022, Münchau 2022, Follain & Pohjanpalo 2022). Especially with the advantage of hindsight, this fallout appears to have been functionally inevitable. Rather than weakening NATO or the west, Putin managed the impressive feat of "galvanizing the world's democracies in ways that seemed unthinkable just a week before" (Shuster 2022). The question then, assuming Putin was indeed aware of the substantial risks, is what animated the Russian president to proceed with his plan regardless of the overbearing risk of catastrophic repercussions.

2.1 Prevailing Western perspectives

The answer to what motivated Putin to resort to such drastic measures has come in several iterations. Thinkers in the developed western world have been generally inclined to analyze the conflict using frameworks that are firmly based in hegemonic western perspectives and academic traditions. Discussions are limited to the frameworks and debates found within the given fields of study. Studies emanating from international relations inevitably reduce the discussion to the ubiquitous debates between the 'Liberalist' and 'Realist' perspectives (Keohane 2021). Institutionalist liberals generally fall short when it comes to providing a salient account of causative factors to the war (Taylor & Rupert 2022). According to liberal precepts, institutional interdependence was supposed to prevent conflict from ever happening in the first place (Keohane 1989). Realists, on the other hand, explain the conflict as a consequence of what they call the "tragedy of great power politics" (Mearsheimer 2001). They emphasize the contest over relative power, regional hegemony and security concerns between Russia and NATO as the foremost causative factor behind the conflict (Mearsheimer 2014, Kirby 2022).

Other fields, too, propose explanations. Certain researchers argue that the primary cause of the war comes down to economic factors and control over strategically relevant resources (Johannesson 2017). Others yet assert that the best explanation is to be found in the field of psychology. They argue that it is the psychology of the strongman - his lack of emotional stability, his tendency to Machiavellianism, to narcissism and to psychopathy - that is to blame (Linden & Wilkes 2022, Thiers 2022).

What all of these perspectives overlook is the possibility that the views and understandings that govern the Russian state's behavior are so fundamentally different from those that govern the western world that any analysis predicated on the western worldview is from the beginning doomed to appear paradoxical, incomprehensible or contradictory (Mölder 2016).

In fact, looking closer at these perspectives one cannot help but find their conclusions sorely lacking. The realist framework describes Russia as a regional hegemon acting in its own strategic interests and governed by a rational administration that, regardless of any rationality, takes decisions that are decisively disadvantageous

(Mearsheimer 2022, Orenstein 2022, Stoner 2022). The realist model, adamant in describing a Russia that crudely acts in its own self-interest, fails to explain how that same Russia is somehow inadvertently maneuvered by the US, influenced to such a degree that it's virtually deprived of agency in any real sense. A materialist perspective, too, fails to explain how securing resources, however strategically relevant, can justify the risk of protracted war, and all associated costs and strategic disadvantages. Reviewing the state of the discourse, it seems little has changed since 1939, when Winston Churchill declared that Russia was 'a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma'.

Unfortunately, all these analyses are immiserated by the same fundamental flaw. The explanations all rely on generalistic theoretical models that are based in a fundamentally western understanding of the world, of geo-politics, of economy and of strategy. They approach the paradoxical nature of the conflict by squeezing it into a rationalistic framework, laboriously trying to work around or explain away how Putin without much hesitation or consideration could violate the norms, rules and principles that are fundamental to the liberal western world-view. If that remains unconvincing they discard political analysis entirely in favor of dismissing Russia's actions as nothing but the madness of a volatile dictator.

2.2 Understanding the "Russian Truth"

In an interview with BBC Newsnight, prominent Russian intellectual Alexander Dugin asserts that if the west seeks to understand Russia, they need to come to terms with what he calls a "special Russian truth". Dugin invokes the concept of "postmodernity" to explain that "if truth is relative" then Russia too is entitled to its own Russian truth and that this is something "the west needs to accept" (Dugin 2016 in BBC Newsnight). Dugin's statement elucidates something very important. The Russian truth, insofar as it is a collection of cultural aspects like norms, principles and ideas, permeates Russian society and culture, and perhaps most importantly, its political administration. This realization carries broad ramifications for how we as researchers should proceed if we seek to understand Russia. It is no longer sufficient to analyze it using the same ubiquitous frameworks based in the rational choice

paradigm that were constructed for analyzing a world governed by liberal-peace principles. Instead, comprehending Russia requires acknowledgement of the perspectives, principles and ideas that animate and pervade Russian society and culture (Mölder 2016, Richmond 2011, Kaldor 2018).

While the idea that truth can be something relative and subjective often sees itself relegated to the periphery in disciplines aspiring to more positivist epistemologies, it is by no means a groundbreaking idea. For philosophy and sociology, in contrast, it is almost considered self-evident. Foucault argued that knowledge as it appears and functions in society is intertwined with hierarchies of power, a relationship that he describes as a "regime of truth". Foucault means that for something to be considered true, there also needs to exist an authority that can support that truth (Foucault 1980). Other philosophers, too, share the perspective that subjectivity, both personal and cultural, is a crucial facet in what is known to be true. 19th century philosophers described the cultural component of one's perception of the world as *weltanschauung*, quite literally meaning 'worldview' (Naugle 2002). Nietzche, too, reacted against the notion of universal truth, believing truth to be "nothing more than the invention of fixed conventions for merely practical purposes" (Nietzsche 1873 in Wicks 2008).

Academic institutions in Eastern Europe as well as experts on the region have come to display an increased tendency towards this very idea. Noting the lacking ability of rational choice frameworks in explaining Russia, many have instead begun supplanting the notion of rationality in favor of analyzing facets of the subjective "Russian truth", including identity, culture, history and national myths as components in Russian decision making (Mölder 2016, Malinova 2017, Chapkovski 2017, Mankoff 2022, Roberts 2017, Andrejsons 2022). Some note that the communal memory of World War 2, as well as the balkanization of the Soviet Union and the transition to national identities in the post-Soviet space are important factors in understanding the complexities of the region today (Cusitcaia & Zaggia 2021, Markwick 2012). Others note that a war over information, or more poignantly a war over perspective, is spreading far beyond the confines of Ukraine or beyond even Eastern Europe (Zolotukhin 2016, Sazonov & Kopõtin 2016). Some yet theorize that linguistic differences make way for misinterpretation of western norms and values, limiting the functionality of normative power (Vibel, Vihmand & Ploom. 2020).

This essay aims to follow suit in providing an account for the spatial and cultural structures that determine Russian actions and agency with regards to the Ukraine war.

It takes the position that the best way to acquire an understanding for the conflict is to take Putin at his word and interpret the meaning behind his words. While it might be expedient to dismiss statements from Putin as propaganda or disingenuous, a much more salient explanation is that Putin does believe the things he says, or at the very least acts as if he does. The solution then, rather than dismiss the meaning behind the statements made by Putin, is to proceed with awareness that the reality which he describes is not necessarily the same as the reality we, as western academics, are assured that we know.

3 Theory

The primary function of this section, and the theoretical framework it presents, is to remedy the discrepancy between western and Russian frames of reference that was observed in the introduction and background. Doing this requires a framework that can observe and account for the most important facets of the worldview that Putin references through statements. This entails categorizing the major themes, narratives and stories that are presented. It also entails interpreting how these themes intersect and reference other concepts such as identity, history or geography that are important to the Russian spatial identity. Finally, the framework provides the means to analyze these interpretations, and from that create a model that can present those 'important facets' in a clear and concise manner. The aim is to combine those facets into a coherent representation of Putin's understanding of the world. For this purpose the paper combines two theories to make up the framework.

The first theory, critical geopolitics, is used to contextualize and understand Russia's view of itself, of its position in the international space, and its understanding of the post-soviet legacy of its regional periphery - in Russia known as its near abroad (Toal 2017, Huasheng 2021). Critical Geopolitics studies geographic areas and concepts known as spaces: countries, regions, borders, and natural features. Factors like culture, history, ethnicity or heritage endow the space with meaning, transforming it into a place. For Russian society, the concept of the near abroad is an umbrella term that encompasses all of those places that were alienated from the nation in the fall of the Soviet Union. It is thus a way of categorizing and organizing those parts of imperial Russia that are today divorced from the territorial state, yet still bear significant sentimental value. The second theory, global security cultures, describes how the practice of security, or "doing security", is found in several distinct iterations in different parts of the world. Depending on dominating narratives, guiding principles, normative landscape, as well as other 'cultural' factors, security cultures are formed that stipulate the way in which governments and populations identify, construe, and respond to perceived threats to security (Kaldor 2018). In this text, understanding of security cultures help explain the Russian relation to NATO, the US

and the west. It thus provides an understanding of why NATO presence in eastern Europe is tantamount to increased geopolitical precarity and anxiety for Russia.

3.1 Russia & The Near Abroad

Critical geopolitics is a field that finds its roots in the *classical* geopolitics of the 19th and 20th centuries. Like other 'critical' disciplines, critical geopolitics is concerned with the examination and reevaluation of the common assumptions made about geopolitics - that is: what leaders, academics and people in general assume about geopolitics and how social structures affect and interact with these presumptions. As such it departs sharply from classical geopolitics, a field that is primarily concerned with national interests and grand strategy. Classical geopolitics, while it has fallen somewhat out of favor since its height of prominence in the early 1900s, is still retained in many forms today e.g. in the generally ubiquitous notion that military force is an expedient solution to problems of security (Dodds et al 2013, Dalby 2010).

Critical geopolitics departs sharply from classical geopolitics in favor of a "more expansive and open conception of the geographical setting of statecraft" (Toal 2017:9). Rather than being concerned with the classic geopolitical imperative of prescribing strategic goals for the expansion of state power relative to other states, critical geopolitics seeks to understand the factors that entice states to act in certain ways. To understand this better, critical geopolitics seeks to examine how people *spatialize* the world; or as Agnew (2003:3) puts it: the world is "divided up, labeled, sorted out into a hierarchy of places of greater or lesser 'importance' by political geographers, other academics and political leaders". This process, he argues, is a geographically informed framework by which "political elites and mass publics" orient themselves, their identities and their actorship (ibid.). Spatialization, in other words, is the (often inadvertent) act of geographic framing; how the ways in which a space or location is portrayed defines it in our imagination. A space can be framed in many different ways. It could be a romanticized description of nature in a national anthem just as well as it could be images of a war-torn country in the media. The ways a space is depicted and referenced in discourse and media has the power to

subliminally affect our imagination, creating associations between the space and emotion. It is through this process that a space acquires meaning and becomes a *place*.

This acquired meaning can have significant real world ramifications. During the wars in the wake of Yugoslavia's breakup in the 90s, for instance, it is alleged that then President Clinton read Robert Kaplan's book *Balkan Ghosts*. The book's framing of the region was said to be so dreary that it affected a sense that "nothing could be done by outsiders in a region so steeped in ancient hatred" (Holbrooke 2011). A more contemporary example can be found in the 3000 people who last year alone were reported dead or missing trying to cross the Mediterranean (UNHCR 2022). For these people Europe was not any tangible territory, but for them it still held a meaning so profound that they were willing to risk their lives to get there.

The focus of the Critical Geopolitician, then, is to determine how the evolution from space to place affects real-world events and outcomes. For the purpose of this paper that entails examination of space and place in Putin's description of Russian society. In order to acquire an understanding of the strenuous and complicated political dynamics of the post-soviet space the most important concept is the Russian expression '*near abroad'*. This phrase, according to Gerard Toal (2017) is instrumental in describing the sense of "difference yet also enduring proximity" between the nations that emerged in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. These borderlands-turned-nation-states had been "familiar" and integral parts of the Russian state for centuries, and even their sudden independence was insufficient to sever that connection. To the Russians the expression "near abroad" came to represent mixed emotions with regards to this new order, it represented tenacious memories of a unified and proud state. "Near abroad", Toal explains, "was not one essential thing. It simultaneously named a new arrangement of sovereignty and an old familiarity, a longstanding spatial entanglement and a range of geopolitical emotions" (Toal 2017: 3). *Near abroad,* in other words, came to represent the profound emotional entanglement of a space associated with all of the sentimentality and affection given to a part of the 'fatherland' that had suddenly and abruptly been alienated and granted a 'new' identity, a 'new' flag, 'new' language, culture and ethnic identity.

Nowhere was this transition as palpable as in the secession of Ukraine. Within Russia proper, Ukraine, together with Russia and Belarus, had for a long time not been considered separate countries as much as pieces of a whole. To this day they are not infrequently referenced in Russia as: *Velikaya Rossiya, Malorossiya* and

Belayarossiya; Great Russia, Little Russia and White Russia, respectively (Purin 2021, Andrejsons 2022, Dreeze 2018). The separation of these three states were in other words a traumatic event for many Russians, and represented a new, uncomfortable world order to which they were expected to adjust. This event was met with skepticism when it first occurred, but it was begrudgingly accepted as long as the countries were still united in the same geopolitical block. When Ukraine started making advances towards Russia's historic enemies in NATO and the EU, the straw was placed that ended up breaking the camel's back (D'Anieri 2019).

3.3 Russia & The West

'Security' politics in the sense conceptualized in this paper can be described, albeit reductively so, as the institutionalization of processes of fear through attempts to mitigate or counteract the entity responsible for it. This encompasses the fear itself: fear of radical actors, adversarial states, terrorism, or even pandemics. It also encompasses the threat, which is the fear's point of origin, and the conceptualized systemic solutions to mitigate it. When addressing the Russian comprehension of the world, the point of origin of its geo-political anxieties are often represented by the United States, by 'the west' or by NATO.

This conclusion can be derived in large part from the Russian perspective on the operating principles of the international space; which constitutes a palpable schism between the Russian and Western ways of perceiving the world. Mary Kaldor means that this schism can be described as different ways of understanding, and 'doing' security, or more succinctly: different *security cultures*. In the west, the paradigmatic view of international space is predicated on principles such as peace, cooperation, interdependence and a system governed by stringent rules (Richmond 2009, Ikenberry 2001, Kaldor 2018). In contrast, the international system in Russia's view is more akin to a game of chess. Grand strategy and fierce competition between states are the imperatives that determine outcomes, and the rules are only relevant so long as following them is more expedient than breaking them (Brzezinski 1997 in Kaldor 2018). Contemporary proponents of geopolitical perspectives "like Kaplan and Mead" thus describe a world where conflict is best "explained in terms of the pursuit of

national interest" and where the effort of states towards "countervailing military power" is the only thing that can curb aggression and maintain peace (Kaldor 2018: 45). While the stalwart advocates of the liberal paradigm generally have a normative approach to the international space, guided by a belief in universal human values, geo-politically minded states like Russia "appear far less interested in what the world *should become* than in *their own positions of power* within it" (Moïsi 2009, my emphasis).

Conceptualized, then, from the Russian perspective, NATO is not a voluntary association of nations, but rather a framework for the perpetuation of American geo-political interests in the world. Toal (2016:27) attributes this difference in understanding of NATO's purpose to an "illusion of transparency". He argues that while "liberal analysts" maintain that NATO is decidedly not a "sphere of influence", since "choice, not coercion, is at its heart" this is poorly communicated to Russia. The illusion of transparency leads the west to overestimate the degree to which Russia is acquiescent to "NATO's benign intentions" (ibid.). Further, while NATO in the western view has transitioned from its original purpose of counterbalancing the Warsaw pact during the cold war, this original view is very much retained in the Russian understanding of the alliance. As such the "benign" alliance still represents the same nefarious, looming specter that it constituted during the cold war. The fear that motivates Russia's security concerns is thus a composite of poorly communicated intentions and historically retained anxieties over the alliance's military capabilities and purpose. From this backdrop it is increasingly conceptually evident that the Russian geo-political situation can be interpreted as one of profound insecurity. The aversion with which Russia approaches NATO and its political expansion is thus not only a question of a domineering attitude with regards to the former soviet bloc, but also one of miscommunication and the retention of historically motivated fear.

4 Method

The previous section outlines a worldview that is very different to many of the preconceived notions about the world that define our western understanding. The methodological challenge of this paper is thus to compare the preconceived notions about spatiality described by the framework to actual statements made by Vladimir Putin. Conducting interpretive analysis based in critical geopolitics and security studies entails paying particular attention to how identities, stories and places are invoked and contrasted with concerns about security developments and imperatives about current and future security risks. For the purpose of the methodology of this study, this means that the analysis will need to categorize the various components of the arguments that are brought up. The components will then be contextualized by linking them to facets of the Russian perspectives on spatiality presented in the theoretical framework. This will form a composite image of the argument contrasted with the worldview which can then be interpreted to discover the ways the arguments and worldview intersect. By connecting the statements to insights into the Russian perspective, the analysis will be able to portray and describe how the statements are likely to be received by a Russian audience, and infer how they are intended to be received.

4.1 Analysis & Analytical Framework

The analytical process of this paper departs from the otherwise ubiquitous notion that the Russian state broadly, and Putin specifically, should be considered as inherently deceptive, dishonest and propagandizing (Fedchenko 2016, Bort 2022, Leon 2022, Ioannes 2022). While this sentiment certainly holds some merit, there is also a danger in outright discounting Putin's words as fiction or fabrication. If it is assumed that all statements made by the Russian president are dishonest, and that he is cognizant of this fact, any interpretation of what he says would be redundant. To rephrase a

common riddle in line with the inquiry of this paper: "if Putin told you: '**everything** I say is a lie', would you then believe him?". This is of course a paradox with no satisfactory answer. The only answer at all is "I can't know" and while that may be good enough for a riddle, it is not helpful in understanding Putin's world. Instead, this paper asserts that we can learn about Putin's motivations by taking him at his word. It may well require thorough analysis and contextualization. However, there is meaning to be derived. Gerard Toal argues that for the intent of analyzing the motivations of leaders it is imperative to listen to "what leaders actually say about why they acted" rather than "conform to existing presumptions about their character, regime, and state" (2017:26). Toal means that instead of resorting to the comfort of shorthand dismissals such as considering Putin a propagandist, a liar or a deceptive orator, a responsible analyst should instead pay close attention to what Putin says, and ask questions about the intentions behind the things that are said. The leading answers that are asked in the process of producing this paper include: How does Putin discuss matters of ethnicity, history, culture? Does he refer to stories or narratives of sentimental importance in Russian society? What ties are made between these culturally significant concepts and matters of security? In what ways do the arguments appeal to these concepts? What implications do they carry for Russian identity?

While the paper makes the decision to trust Putin's account of his own world view, it is impossible to know if it is actually genuinely presented. There could of course be the case that certain concepts are invoked simply because they hold sway with the Russian people. As such, being attentive to what Putin has to say may not necessarily provide proof as to his 'true intentions' whatever those may be. Taking this approach can however help better understand how his messaging is received with the Russian people. As such, this paper does not make a functional distinction between the views of Russian people - and the views of Putin.

While the analysis is conducted with awareness that the support for Putin is not anywhere close to as monolithic as the president himself may like to think, this paper does not make a functional distinction between Putin's opinions and the opinions of the Russian people, rather they are presented as one and the same. This decision is motivated by the fact that the paper's purpose is to analyze Putin's own convictions and perspectives. These in turn are presented by the president as the opinions of the Russian people, without disclaiming any nuance or breadth of opinion in Russian society. As such, while the paper may refer to Russian perspectives, or Russian

worldview, Russian identity and so on, the opinions reiterated here should not be interpreted to be the opinions of the Russian people. Instead they should be considered to be an intersection between Putin's socio-spatially informed perspectives and his geopolitically informed worldview.

This position is not always suitable as this type of generalization runs the risk of essentializing the argument. Toal criticizes geo-political analysis for employing "synecdochic" language where a small component is made to represent the whole. In geo-politics this often occurs in the form of an entire state being reduced to a capital "Moscow" or a seat of power "the Kremlin". While this paper does employ synecdochic language by letting Putin represent what the paper titles a "russian perspective", it does so with intent to not reproduce essentialist perspectives. It also does so with awareness of the discursive power that Putin wields, and thus of his extraordinary ability to shape the Russian narrative.

4.2 Material

The principal material for the study is a speech held by the Russian president on February 21st - three days before the invasion - in which he seeks to explain and rationalize the decision to recognize the independence of the Ukrainian break-away states in the Donbas: the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), and by extension provide legitimacy for the "special military operation" into Ukraine which was commenced 3 days later. Along with this speech, other statements are used to contextualize and provide additional depth.

4.3 Thematics

The thematic approach is predicated on the potential to explain aspects of the Russian worldview using *spatiality* and *security* as leading concepts. Spatial analysis contributes with the distinction between the familiar *near abroad* and the foreign *the west*. Security-cultural analysis provides a framework for analyzing the geo-political

line of reasoning whereby concepts, conceptions and emotions grounded in spatiality are transformed into political actions. In line with this distinction, arguments made in the material will be categorized according to what subject they address. Arguments that address the sociospatial identity of Ukraine are connected to theoretical insights about connections between spatially informed perceptions and emotional structures. Arguments that on the other hand reference the West or concepts that are spatially considered exterior will be interpreted based on insights into the culture of geo-politics that determines Russian perceptions of that deemed external.

The first theme central to Putin's line of argumentation are those narratives that question the merits of Ukraine's sovereignty and stipulate the spatialized context of Ukraine's relation to Russia. This entails arguments that call into question the distinctions between Ukraine and Russia's spatial identities and their configurations, arguments that describe Ukraine's inception as a sovereign state as a historical error, and arguments questioning the arrangement of the current territorial boundaries. This is done through a historiographic account that goes back to the common origin of the countries and recounts history back up to the present and disputes those historic events that separated the countries. Historic events like Vladimir Lenin's decision to give nominal independence to the states under the Soviet Union are disputed, and contervailed with primordialist assertions. History is used to intertwine the stories of historic Russia with the territories that constitute Ukraine, and to call attention to the ties between the peoples of these places. In this way, they call into question the cultural, historic and geographic distinction between Russia and Ukraine, at the same time as they describe places and stories that are meant to reproduce a sense of socio-spatial familiarity. In this thematic category are also references to the 'great patriotic war', or world war 2. Stories from Russian history, from early medieval times up until and including the soviet union, are thereby used to build a narrative that explains the present, but that also illustrates imagined discrepancies between the way things are, and the way they *ought* to be.

The second theme encompasses arguments that treat the spatialities and influences perceived as foreign. Most patently this involves arguments surrounding the US, EU and NATO. These spatial categories are used to imply a threat to security, for russians and ukranians. The US and NATO are consistently described as an external threat seeking to impose influence over Ukraine. Starting from the *Maidan* protests of 2014, Putin describes how the alliance influenced Ukrainian politics to the point of

overthrowing Yanukovych by orchestrating "a coup". Putin consistently links cooperation between NATO and Ukraine as "a direct threat to Russia", thereby implicitly defining integration of Ukraine with western systems as a geo-political concern (Putin 2022/02/21). This theme also encompasses what Toal describes as the "R2P Script" (2022). This re-appropriates normative western language to describe the conflict in the Donetsk basin. While it uses the language of the *liberal peace* security culture to describe Russia's military actions as a peacemaking intervention, it is not meant to provide a salient justification aimed at international audiences. Rather, it is intended to simultaneously evoke memories and imagination to connect the current situation to past genocides, while also other contemporary applications of military force.

4.4 Demarcations

Researching a conflict that is still very much ongoing can be a hazardous task. Not all the facts about the conflict are yet to be decided. Members of the international community, researchers included, are still viewing the conflict through a fog of war - heavily influenced by propaganda, unfounded assumptions and a lack of precise information. More empirical deductions about the 2022 invasion of Ukraine will be made years in the future, when rumors are dispelled and facts are substantiated. As such, any contemporary study of the events needs to be thorough and rigorous in its delineations; what it chooses to present, and more importantly what it omits. Conducting a study on events that currently transpire requires more care and consideration than might be otherwise required when selecting its data, limiting its scope and constructing its methodology. In this section I intend to outline some of the key considerations kept in mind when researching this topic.

Foremost of the considerations is the necessity of assuaging issues that come with the fact that the researched conflict is indeed still transpiring. If the scope of the study would be an analysis of Russian arguments pertaining to the war, without a set timeframe and before the war itself has even reached a conclusion, the study would be left vulnerable to the prospect of future changes in the same argumentation challenging its premature conclusions. In order to mitigate this concern the study will

look only at statements made before the escalation of the war that occured with the inception of the "special military operation" on February 24th 2022. Limiting the scope of the essay in this way makes sure that the study is precise in its analysis, and valid even if later changes in Russian government rhetoric were to challenge its conclusions.

A second concern is that of language. One of the contestations that are central to the conflict is the relative position between the Russian and Ukrainian languages. These languages exist within the same territorial confines, often in immediate proximity to another. The vast majority of Ukranians speak Russian, and for native russophone Ukranians, *vice versa*. The places that are discussed in the speeches analyzed in this essay often have names in both Ukrainian and Russian, and the decision to use one language over another when discussing them is a decision with political significance. This paper, however, does not intend to describe or make assertions about the places themselves, so much as how they are invoked in relation to the Russian socio-spatial identity. As such it does not make a conscious effort to use Ukrainian place names for Ukrainian cities, even if this would in other cases be more appropriate. Instead, this paper simply replicates the nomenclature as it appears in the statements made by the Russian president, since it is the significance of these places within his worldview that is being examined.

5 Results & Analysis

This section presents excerpts from statements made by Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin. The intention is to showcase the arguments used and contextualize them with analysis. While the arguments will be loosely organized based on the thematics outlined in the methods section, the vast majority of the arguments are mutually reinforcing and referential between themselves as part of a wider narrative. For example arguments pertaining to a nazi takeover in Ukraine may also reference NATO by insisting that it is thanks to NATO support that the nazis are able to seize power, or it may reference how officials in the USSR prepared the way for the contemporary "nazi problem" by giving concessions to nationalist movements within the USSR. In this way the interplay between several of these different themes in a single argument serves to link the different parts into a wider narrative structure.

5.1 Ukraine - Russia's Near Abroad

In 2001, in a speech to mark the 10th anniversary of an independent Ukraine, President Putin said "Our [Russia and Ukraine's] roots are in Kievan Rus. Our brotherhood is not a legend, but a historical fact. That is why the common future of Russia and Ukraine is the future of two European states that are very close and interconnected." (Putin 2001). In this address, made 12 years ago, Putin outlines the historically motivated contour of the emotional and socio-spatial entanglement that defines the near abroad. While it is evident from the tone and context of the speech that relations between the states at the time were amicable, yet the address contains a duplicitous subtext. It explicates the historical and geographically motivated unity of the nations and situates them as mutually constitutive components of one and the same primordially actuated geopolitical field (Toal 2017:57). In other words this statement signals a shift in Russian perception of Ukraine in the near abroad from something foreign, yet familiar to something domestic but alienated. Still, in this address, Putin

emphasizes that their shared roots are not those of Russia, but of "Kievan Rus", a historical progenitor that is decidedly distinct from both modern Russia and Ukraine. This address is not in itself entirely out of the ordinary. The post-soviet space is subject to many cases of entanglement of emotionally charged spatiality. Toal, exemplifying this complexity, quotes the words of a Russian journalist saying "it is a strange Russia that includes Chechnya but excludes Crimea" (Vitaly Tretyakov in Toal 2017). What Putin's 2001 address portends, however, is a shift in tone from passive acquiescence of the spatial complexities to a resolute intent to reformulate them into a consistent socio-spatial identity.

This line of rhetoric is a prescient indicator of the more recent reimagination of the spatial, cultural, and historical relationship between Russia and Ukraine. In a speech from the 21st of February of 2022 Putin said: "Since time immemorial, the people living in the south-west of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians." (Putin 2022-02-21). Describing the historic inhabitants as "Russian" is a sharp departure from the previously presented notion that their mutual origines were in "Kievan Rus", a fundamentally distinct polity from later Russian states, and more centered in contemporary Ukraine than Russia (Lieven et al 2022). Ukrainian identity, in this perspective, is nothing other than an offshoot of the primordial Russian identity of these lands. Not only is this a redefined historiographic account, but it omits the progenitor in "Kievan Rus", which has spatial connotations to Ukraine in favor of describing the people of the same polity as "[calling] themselves Russian". This in turn allows for disregard of Ukrainian history and of Ukrainian identity as separate from Russian history or identity by combining them into one and the same spatial and historical identity. This framing is a way to preface challenges to Ukraine's legitimate statehood by appealing to "spatial identity that extends beyond the borders" that Russia inherited after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Toal 2017: 34).

This subordination is further reinforced when describing how parts of what is today Ukraine first became part of the Russian empire. Putin describes how it was through conquest that the Black Sea coast became part of the Russian Empire, thanks to the "courage" of "the soldiers" of legendary general Alexander Suvorov. Connecting southern Ukraine to the historic conquest of those lands from the Ottoman empire implies a fundamental distinction to be found within the conceptualized Ukrainian spatiality. There is, in this meaning a 'Ukraine proper' which can be found

north and west of the Dnipro river, and there is a part that was added to it by the Russian empire. Toal describes how Crimea and Novorossiya in particular are deeply "entangled in historic myths" (2017:208) and by drawing upon these historical events and characters Putin connects these myths to a reality that has turned out vastly different. Instead of these conquests being part of the Russian heritage, they have been alienated from Russia by historic circumstance.

Putin contrasts these myths with modern developments by recounting the "US-built Maritime Operations Center in Ochakov" on the Black Sea coast and how "the United States intended to build similar facilities in Crimea" (Putin 2022/02/21). This juxtaposes historic myth with modern security concerns in a way that places blame with Ukraine. The implicit notion is that they are betraying their duties as stewards of Russian heritage by letting the very agents of Russian insecurity take military control of the region.

By appealing to regional specific myths of their Russian origin, like those of Crimea and Novorossiya, Putin gestures at the idea of some parts of Ukraine being less Ukrainian than others. This idea serves to spatialize Ukraine as a cultural gradient, where the western part of the country is 'the most Ukrainian' and that it becomes progressively more Russian as you move east. Toal describes this very concept by explaining how "Galicia in the west, and Donbas in the east" represent "cliched geographic opposites on a spectrum of divisions over history, identity, and orientation toward neighboring Russia." (Toal 2017: 201).

The allegations of desecration of Russian cultural heritage are concluded with a description of how a statue of general Alexander Suvorov was demolished in Poltava. "What is there to say? Are you renouncing your own past?" Putin asks. "The so-called colonial heritage of the Russian Empire?". At the end Putin asks: "Well, in this case, be consistent.", implying that the lands of Crimea and Novorossiya should be considered part of the colonial heritage they are allegedly seeking to renounce. In another part of the speech, Putin echo's this same sentiment, saying: "You want decommunization? Very well, this suits us just fine. But why stop halfway? We are ready to show what real decommunizations would mean for Ukraine." (Putin 2010).

When describing the origins of modern Ukrainian statehood, Putin references certain crucial decisions made in the early years of the Soviet Union. The first reference is to the decision by Lenin to formalize the Soviet Union as a confederated union, with the right of members to secede stipulated by the constitution. Putin

describes this decision as motivated by "odious and utopian fantasies inspired by the revolution",. While these rights were functionally retracted under Stalin, they were never "cleansed" from the constitution. As such, by way of Lenin's naïvite, members of the Union were able to secede when it started collapsing. Putin continues by describing how Ukraine was given lands, first Polish, Hungarian and Romanian lands by Stalin, and then later given Crimea by Krustchev. In this way Putin connects the contemporary Ukrainian sovereignty and spatial conception to spurious decisions made by the Soviet leadership without regard for either historical ties or potential future consequences emphasizing this point, Putin describes how it should be called "Lenin's Ukraine" as he was "its creator and architect". Putin finalizes this point by asserting that "What happened to our country was caused by the mistakes done by the leadership of the communist party" (Putin 2022/02/21). When saying "what happened to our country", Putin of course does not reference historic atrocities like the holomodor or the genocide of crimean tartars, but rather the balkanization and collapse of the Soviet Union, an event that he has previously described as "the greatest geo-political disaster of the [20th] century" (Putin 2005).

The line of reasoning that Putin employs is not accidental. The implication of his words is a concrete disputation of the merits of Ukrainian statehood and legitimacy. He omits the contextual factors behind these decisions, instead framing these events as consequences of capricious leaders and historical circumstances. First, he disputes the legal legitimacy of Ukraine's sovereignty, as well as the legitimacy of their control over the lands that were added to it during the time of the Soviet empire. This is done by reframing known narratives and stories that define Ukraine's spatial identity, and by questioning the procedures by which they were added. This also supplants the image of a Ukraine exercising agency over its own spatial identity - through historic struggles for freedom and autonomy - with a historiographical narrative where Ukraines socio-spatial configuration has been entirely dictated by careless soviet leaders. In other words, Putin implies that modern Ukraine is not a state with the same merit as other states, but rather that it is a product of fabrication and arbitrary historic events. He implies that Ukraine was manufactured by the Soviet leadership without any real reason, and that it should therefore not be considered legitimate in the same way as other nation-states. The context of these decisions is that the post-world war 2 Soviet bloc pact sought to reconsolidate the ethnic populations within the bloc into

coherent nation-states, something which Putin in turn describes as "giving concessions to the nationalists".

Putin describes how due to these early concessions to nationalists "the virus of nationalist ambitions is still with us". It is the same type of "radical nationalists" and "neo-nazis", that, with support from the west "took advantage of the justified public discontent", seized control over the Maidan protests and transformed "it to a coup d'état" (Putin 2022/02/21). These same "radical nationalists" have since then infiltrated and taken control over the country, threatening ethnic cleansing of the country's Russian population. By connecting the modern the west and the ukrainian elite to historic Nationalism, putin not only alludes to the nefarious intentions of western involvement, but also makes a connection to nazi germany and the memory of 'The Great Patriotic War', or World War 2. This "mythic narrative" of their "heroic struggle against fascist powers" is of seminal importance to modern Russian identity (Toal 2017:43). After world war 2, the label of fascism was redesignated from the German Wehrmacht, and allies, to NATO and the US (Ibid:218). Ukraine too came to be associated with "banderites" who collaborated with the axis occupiers during the war (Goncharenko 2022)

5.1 Ukraine - Battleground for NATO

The connection between historical naziism and contemporary events is thus a rhetorical bridge to shift the narrative focus to present-day security concerns, while transposing the "mythologized memories" of World War 2 onto the modern geopolitical situation (Toal 2017:276). Putin reinforces the notion of NATO as a russophobic or neo-nazi actor by accusing the NATO members in the post-soviet space of influencing the alliance with their "russophobia" and their "complexes and stereotypes about the Russian threat" Putin suggests that it is these countries that "insisted on building up the collective defence potentials and deploying them primarily against Russia." (Putin 2022/02/21).

In Putin's speech, numerous references are made to military threats, implicit and explicit, that relate to possible Ukrainian NATO membership. The security concerns expressed range from concerns about installation and development of ostensibly

'defensive' ballistic missile systems in NATO countries like Poland and Romania. While travel time for these nuclear warheads to Moscow today takes 35 minutes, Putin explains, "ballistic missiles from Kharkov will take seven to eight". Installation of these missiles in Ukraine would also extend the potential effective range of precision weapons carriers making them "capable of striking at our territory to the depth of the Volgograd-Kazan-Samara-Astrakhan line" deep into Russia (Putin 2022.02.21).

In the case of a nuclear war, these weapons systems or ranges would not be of crucial importance, if not for some crucial miscommunications that exacerbates their relative threat. These miscommunications, including misunderstandings of certain key treaties, international norms and American defensive doctrines highlight the volatile discrepancy between two very different security cultures.

For instance, seeing as the Russian geopolitical security culture conceives of the world as an arena for competition over relative power gains, that can lead to miscommunication with the liberal peace perspective which observes the inherent rights of states. This is exemplified in a reference Putin makes to a protocol from a discussion on the unification of Germany where the United States ostensibly "promised the Soviet leadership that NATO jurisdiction or military presence would not expand one inch to the east". Putin continues, by addressing the fact that these "assurances" "turned out to be empty phrases", seeing as many of NATO's members are states east of Germany. While this type of spoken "promise" may be as good as a treaty in a geo-politically oriented foreign policy, the rules-based international order is established firmly on the principle that it is the treaty itself that stipulates international obligations, and not any promises or assurances made in deliberations (Kaldor 2018). This 'miscommunication' makes evident the previously discussed discrepancy between the perspectives.

Again exemplifying this perspective disparity, Putin addresses the fact that "Kiev has long proclaimed a strategic course on joining NATO". While he recognizes that "each country is entitled to pick its own security system and enter into military alliances", he countervails this with a reference to the OSCE charter of 1999 - which he implies stipulates "the principle of equal and indivisible security" which in turn "includes obligations not to strengthen one's own security at the expense of others." (Putin 2022.02.21).

While Putin references the explicit contents of the treaty correctly, he makes the mistake of extending the idea of "expanding one's own security at the expense of the

security of others" to include the prospective Ukrainian NATO membership. From a liberal peace perspective, the idea that a country's choice in alliances and association, especially defensive alliances, would constitute a hostile expansion of security capabilities is inconceivable. The geopolitical Russian perspective on the other hand does not see a functional difference between a defensive and offensive alliance. Putin argues as much, saying that the west is trying to convince them that "NATO is a peace-loving and purely defensive alliance that poses no threat to Russia". "They want us to take their word for it" he says "but we are well aware of the real value of these words". As such, any military buildup on Russia's figurative doorstep is implicitly considered an act of intimidation. "In other words," Putin says, "the choice of pathways towards ensuring security should not pose a threat to other states, whereas Ukraine joining NATO is a direct threat to Russia's security." (Putin 2022.02.21).

Nato presence in Ukraine is consistently connected to the government in Kiev, which is described as illegitimate and acting in discord with Ukraines laws and constitution. The nazis in power, Putin argues, have "unleashed a persecution, a real terror campaign against those who opposed their anti-constitutional actions.". The only anti-constitutional action that Putin mentions is "article 17 of the constitution of Ukraine" which forbids "deploying military bases on its territory". NATO, however, has discovered a workaround, Putin explains. "Military contingents of NATO countries have been almost constantly present on Ukrainian territory under the pretext of exercises". Not only does this mean that they can circumvent the constitution, in Putin's opinion, but it has gone so far that "NATO headquarters can issue direct commands to the Ukrainian armed forces, even to their separate units and squads.". This development, he means, "is like a knife to the throat". In Putin's view there is "no doubt that they hope to carry out these plans, as they did many times in the past, expanding NATO eastward, moving their military infrastructure to Russian borders and fully ignoring our concerns, protests and warnings" (Putin 2022.02.21).

Putin finalizes this line of reasoning by considering the new levels of threat in the region from the US and NATO, adding that "Russia has every right to respond in order to ensure its security. That is exactly what we will do."

6 Conclusions

This paper presents a framework for better comprehending the sociospatial features of the Russian worldview, and how these elements intersect. The analysis reveals an understanding of the world that is vastly different from that of the west. It reveals a Russian near abroad teeming with sentimental significance, beyond which is NATO: An organization that has historically been a looming specter threatening nuclear devastation. NATO, in this perspective, is not seen as a voluntary defensive association of sovereign states. Quite the opposite, it is an extension of Russia's historic geo-political adversary: the United States. Its purpose is to impose American influence on the Eurasian continent; and worse, on Russia's near abroad. NATO, unable to leave well enough alone, has since the fall of the Soviet Union creeped ever closer to Russia's border, taking control of places that are integral to the Russian sense of identity, thus picking at wounds that have barely had time to heal. In Russia's view, it chose not to act when it happened with Hungary, not with Poland, not with Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania. Neither did it act with Czechia, Slovakia, Romania or Bulgaria, but when it came to Malorossiya - "Little Russia", the pressure of geo-political insecurity combined with a violated sense of pride became a volatile concoction just waiting for a catalyst to come along.

The two theoretical perspectives have been applied to statements made by Putin, and have revealed how spatiality is consistently invoked together with issues of security in a way intended to accentuate Putin's political prescriptions. The analysis shows that the arguments made for contemporary political goals consistently references historic traumas, myths and imaginations, linking them to socio-spatial understandings of Russia, Ukraine and the west that are ubiquitous in Russian society. This is done with the intention of promulgating a specific view on security, geo-politics and irredentist notions of Russia's rights over other spaces.

This essay has proposed a framework for better conducting analysis of contemporary Russian political prescriptions, and tested it on selected statements by the Russian president. Still, it implores future studies into the subject to further test the

theoretical framework, methodology and conclusions. A subject particularly suitable for this framework would be the region of Novorossiya, which appears several times in this paper. This place is the center of the spatial identity entanglement that defines the complexity of this conflict and region. As such this paper suggests future research to be conducted on the intersection between security and the spatial identity of the area. This paper also suggests other post-soviet states as topics of research, included but not limited to: Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

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