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### **Power And National Security**

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# 3

## POWER AND NATIONAL SECURITY

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### Introduction

Realist perspectives have been strongly present in studies of Soviet and Russian foreign policies. Especially after World War II, the popularity of realist interpretations of Soviet-Western relations was determined by the necessity of explaining the developments of the Cold War period, the distribution of power capabilities between states, deterrence strategies, and the opportunities for achieving stability and peace (see Hollis and Smith, 1990: 16–45). The development of neorealism is closely connected with the Cold War and scholarly interest in neorealism or disappointment with it reflected major trends – cooperation or conflict – in Soviet-Western relations (cf. Schörmig, 2010: 66).

Many Soviet foreign policy studies were ‘atheoretical’ in that they used some versions of neorealism without, however, explicitly making a claim to being realist (Kanet, 2012: 393). They emphasized the rational and realist nature of Soviet policy and its response to the changes in the systemic environment and distribution of power (e.g. Barrington Moore, 1950; Shulman, 1963).

Because of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the inability of realism to predict the end of the Cold War, other approaches – especially constructivism – have challenged the domination of the realist framework in studies of Russian foreign policy (Kanet, 2012: 393).

Few International Relations (IR) schools of thought have generated as many debates and criticism as realism. There have been many debates and attempts at modifications and reinterpretations within realism itself (Freyberg–Inan et al., 2009). As a result, many contemporary realist studies of Russian foreign policy have a defensive and/or exploratory character in that they try to prove the relevance of the main realist premises.

Despite theoretical challenges, competition and critique, realism has, nonetheless, survived as one of the important approaches to Russian foreign policy. This is seen in a great multitude of various ‘atheoretical’ studies, which refer to basic realist postulates without making a claim to being realist per se. For example, scholars note that Russia has been interested in increasing its power vis-à-vis the West (Mankoff, 2011); Russia has used its energy and other resources to project its power over its neighbours (Nygren, 2008; Newnham, 2011); Russia has challenged the US global hegemony at different levels and in different regions, by using balancing strategies (Blank and Kim, 2015) or a combination of balancing and bandwagoning (Oldberg, 2007). The number of studies which explicitly adopt different realist approaches (alone or in combination

with other theoretical approaches) has been growing as well (Kropatcheva, 2012; Karagiannis, 2013; Bock et al., 2015; Splidsboel-Hansen, 2015; Becker et al., 2016).

Especially in the last few years, realist interpretations have experienced a revival within Russian foreign policy studies, owing to a more assertive, conflictive, militarized and less predictable Russian behaviour, as well as the failures of liberal approaches and institutionalism, which – in contrast to current developments – had predicted Russia's socialization and greater Russian-Western cooperation.

Finally, the popularity of the realist explanations among Russian scholars as well as politicians is an additional factor that draws scholarly interest to this theoretical school (see on IR in Russia: Sergounin, 2009; Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 2010; Romanova and Pavlova, 2012). Bertil Nygren (2012: 518) goes so far as to argue: 'Analysts are . . . advised to use the same thinking and the same perspective as these major policy-makers precisely because the quality of the prediction will improve'.

This chapter provides a review of how realism has been applied to the study of Soviet/Russian foreign policy, although – owing to the limits of this chapter – it is impossible to mention all worthy realist work on Russia. This overview of realist studies of Soviet/Russian foreign policy also reflects the main developments within realism itself, in particular the inclination to enhance structural/systemic perspectives by integrating domestic and ideational variables, in accordance with neoclassical realism (NCR).

This chapter is structured in the following way. The first section discusses some of the major realist perspectives which have been most frequently used by Russia scholars. The second section illustrates how these perspectives were applied in relation to specific questions often raised by Russia scholars. The last section summarizes the main conclusions of using realism, in general, in the area of Russian foreign policy studies, but also pays special attention to the advantages and caveats of using NCR, in particular, as the most useful and promising trend within realism (Devlen and Özdamar, 2009; Freyberg-Inan et al., 2009; Onea, 2012; Wohlforth, 2012).

### Different realisms

Realism – broadly defined – is one of the oldest approaches to studying IR. Realism includes different broad theoretical and philosophical approaches, which deal with general patterns of IR, as well as more specific theories, whose goal is foreign policy analysis, e.g. neoclassical and synoptic realism, defensive, offensive, democratic, liberal, ethical, and cultural (Siedschlag, 2001; Freyberg-Inan et al., 2009; Onea, 2012; Wohlforth, 2012; Ripsman et al., 2016).

What unites all of them is the predominant focus on the exogenous factors: a state's place in the international system vis-à-vis other states and the conditions of that system itself. States are usually portrayed as guided by (largely, even though not always) rational self-interest and competing for power and resources, which are necessary to provide for the survival and security of the state.

As William C. Wohlforth (2012: 38) explains, all realist thought from Thucydides to the middle years of the Cold War – including Hans Morgenthau (1993) – is usually lumped together as classical realism, whose representatives tried to transfer 'the distilled wisdom of generations of practitioners and analysts into very general theories', without, however, always being clear, 'about when their theories applied to specific situations as opposed to general patterns'.

Kenneth N. Waltz (1979) developed the earlier realist ideas further. The focus of his analysis is at the level of the international system, within which states act 'like units' or as 'unitary actors.' Because the structure of the international system (independent variable) determines the behaviour of states, his neorealism is also called structural/systemic. Under the conditions of anarchy,

states try to accumulate power vis-à-vis other states. Neorealism does not study the internal conditions of the states and leaves this as the ‘black box’, which may be important for understanding concrete foreign policy situations. It is not the task of neorealism to open it up, but rather to study general tendencies and systemic effects. States, which act in the anarchic system, use self-help methods (Waltz, 1979: 915). They try to create a balance of power by building up their own capabilities (‘internal balancing’) or aggregating their capabilities with other states in alliances (‘external balancing’) (Wohlforth, 2012: 40). Because changes in the distribution of power are dangerous and may lead to counterbalancing and wars, Waltz generally expects defensive strategies on the part of the states.

Those realists who, in general, agree with Waltz’s balance-of-power premises can be divided into offensive and defensive (Lobell, 2016: 38). They aim to explain concrete policies of states (Lobell, 2016).

Offensive realists (e.g. Zakaria, 1998; Mearsheimer, 2014a) claim that the international system gives strong incentives for power maximization. As a result, states, even though guided by defensive motives, may act offensively in order to alter the balance of power to their benefit and to weaken competitors, inter alia by initiating expansion, wars, and revision of the international order (Lobell, 2016: 39). However, states are ‘prudent territorial expanders’, and ‘may forgo opportunities to increase their power because the costs are too high’ (Lobell, 2016: 41).

By contrast, defensive realists (e.g. Walt, 1987; Friedberg, 1988; Wohlforth, 1993) believe that states prefer cooperative and peaceful means to maximize their security, but may turn to self-defeating expansion and other – what they consider as irrational and ineffective – offensive policies because of domestic- and individual-level pathologies (Lobell, 2016: 47).

Defensive realism has given many starting points to the development of neoclassical realism (NCR). This is a sub-school within realism, which seeks to rectify the imbalance between studying the general – systemic effects and general trends in IR – and the particular – concrete foreign policies of states, paying more attention to the unit level or ‘black box’ (cf. Wohlforth, 2012: 39). Because of its growing popularity within Russian foreign policy studies (Kropatcheva, 2012; Nygren, 2012; Romanova and Pavlova, 2012; Simao, 2012; Splidsboel-Hansen, 2015; Becker et al., 2016), the next paragraphs explain in more detail what NCR is.

The first wave of NCR studies (though they were not labelled as such at that time) came in the 1980s (Rose, 1998: 155). The number of NCR works has grown since the end of the Cold War, owing to disappointment with neorealism. However, as Jennifer Sterling-Folker (2009a: 208) notes, even prior to these events:

[t]here was dissatisfaction with systemic-level theorizing . . . among IR scholars who were interested in the nexus between foreign policy, history, and/or comparative politics . . . The end of the Cold War may have simply legitimized a sentiment that was already present in the discipline.

There is no single text of a ‘mother/father figure who can claim to have given birth’ to NCR (Sterling-Folker, 2009a: 208). Gideon Rose used this term the first time, in order to classify a group of realists who, in their works, underlined that ‘the scope and ambition of a country’s foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities’, but also emphasized the importance of the ‘intervening variables at the unit level’ (Rose, 1998: 146), which shape a state’s actual policy responses to external stimuli.

As in the past, today many realist scholars, including Russia scholars who produce works that could be labelled as NCR, ‘prefer alternative terms . . . prefer to describe their work according

to another realist variant . . . or do not use the term neoclassical realism at all' (Sterling-Folker, 2009a: 208). However, the growing appeal of NCR is also reflected in the multitude of NCR studies per se (Sterling-Folker, 2009b; Onea, 2012; Sørensen, 2013; Smith, 2014; Juneau, 2015).

A neoclassical realist analysis starts with the analysis of structural/systemic variables – a state's power, its position in the international system, and its interactions with other states. The systemic nature of the main argument is consistent with the core neorealist thinking (Onea, 2012: 156).

However, during the second stage of analysis, neoclassical realists turn to 'the classical realist interest in the state, its relationship to society, and its role in determining the "national interest"' (Sterling-Folker, 2009b: 103). This is the level of intervening variables, which can be roughly grouped into two main interrelated groups: (1) perceptions/beliefs/assessments of the international position of the country and of others by decision-makers and the society; and (2) domestic factors or state-society relations – the personality of decision-makers (psychological factors), domestic power division (conflicts/consensus among coalition groups; legitimacy), features of the state (political character, ideology, nationalism, identity, narratives), and others. The growing trend has been to favour more complexity by including several intervening variables.

Most frequently, NCR acts as a 'theory of mistakes' (Schweller, 2006) by showing that the system punishes those states which allow domestic imperatives to 'overcom[e] the state and ideas interrupting accurate readings of interests' (Rathbun, 2008: 310). Even if the influence of intervening factors is presented as normal, it is temporary, and, at some point, the primacy of structural-systemic factors returns (e.g. Dueck, 2009).

Thus, the specialty of NCR is that it tries to integrate the systemic/structural, domestic, and ideational variables into an analysis in a more systematic and coherent manner, but also to show the interaction among these variables. Neoclassical realists have used domestic politics and ideational variables to flesh out the main neorealist concepts. At the same time, intervening variables are introduced to specify, not reject, the influence of the international system.

This short overview of some trends within realism shows an important development: applying realist premises to explain not only general patterns of IR, but also concrete foreign policy situations; as well as considering not only the systemic factors but also complementing the structural analysis by dealing with the 'units'. These major developments within realism are also reflected within Soviet/Russian foreign policy studies.

### **Soviet/Russian foreign policy through the prism of realist perspectives**

This section illustrates that realist approaches have been applied to explain a number of important historic and contemporary topics concerning Soviet/Russian international behaviour: Russian/Soviet empire-building; Russia's power and status aspirations; Russia's new assertiveness in its war with Georgia in 2008; and the ongoing Ukraine crisis. This list of themes, which Russia scholars have dealt with through the prism of realism, is far from being exhaustive. They serve to illustrate when and how realist perspectives have been applied, which variables were studied, and which conclusions – about Soviet/Russian international conduct as well as strengths and weaknesses of realism – were drawn.

#### ***Russian/Soviet empire-building***

One of the most important questions discussed by Russia scholars has been the motives behind Russian/Soviet empire-building. Realists have dealt with this subject as well, and the following two contributions illustrate how.

To start with, William C. Wohlforth (2001) tests whether Waltz's main premises can be applied to the case of Russian expansion. He uses a *longue durée* perspective, as Waltz's realism was not aimed at explaining specific events, but rather long-run tendencies, and draws upon abundant empirical work on Russian history. Russia's expansion is taken as a dependent variable, while the state of the international system is considered an independent variable: anarchy, both at the broader systemic level and especially in its regional dimension (regions surrounding Russia), has constantly generated security problems for Russia. These security concerns are defined as the main driving force behind Russia's expansion; they have also influenced Russian national identity and domestic political arrangements (Wohlforth, 2001: 215).

While realism is prescriptive for states to act rationally, Waltz's approach highlights adaptation and selection rather than strict rational choice (Wohlforth, 2001: 215). In accordance with this, Wohlforth (2001: 215) interprets Russia's expansion as a result of adaptation to external pressures. He writes: 'Maintaining and periodically extending this empire were, thus, necessary in order to attain and retain great-power status, which was necessary to defend the empire' (Wohlforth, 2001: 221). Thereby, Wohlforth's neorealist explanation contradicts the domestic politics approach (which explains Russian foreign policy through its domestic developments and the specific autocratic structures) and also contradicts constructivist premises. According to Wohlforth (2001: 216, 221, 223), it was the specific geopolitical context that had shaped the Russian identity and not *vice versa* – that Russia's identity had led to specific geopolitics. As a result, Wohlforth's (2001: 215) overall conclusion is that, despite all critique, 'neorealist theory turns out to have powerful explanatory leverage over the larger pattern of Russian and Soviet strategic choices'. At the same time, Wohlforth (2001: 227) also admits the limits of neorealism: a 'black box' remains a black box and 'neorealist theory cannot fully explain domestic institutions and ideas'.

Jack Snyder also studies empire-building processes by examining several case studies, including the Soviet one. He has come to the conclusion that, while realist arguments explain quite well some of the periods of the Soviet policy (e.g. Stalin's buck-passing diplomacy of the 1930s and his aggressive policies in Europe in the late 1940s), they were much weaker in dealing with other cases, such as, for example, Khrushchev's diplomatic over-assertiveness and Brezhnev's imperial overextension.

Using the premises of defensive (or what would now be called neoclassical) realism, he shows that Soviet policies were sometimes irrational and counterproductive. To develop an explanation for these Soviet policies of 'overextension' and 'self-encirclement', he not only examines their international position and systemic challenges, but also introduces an intervening variable: the Soviets' perceptions of the systemic incentives (Snyder, 1991: 229). He argues that, throughout that time, there were different schools of thought about the nature of the West's threat and whether to prefer offence or defence, which influenced Soviet foreign policy. In particular, because of misperceptions, the Soviets chose the wrong strategies and did not understand their opponents, e.g. trying to accommodate an unappeasable opponent – Hitler – (on this behaviour, characterized as underbalancing, see also Schweller, 2006). Misperceptions or 'myths of empire' also accounted for policies, which went against the systemic rules of international politics, resulting in more insecurity. Snyder (1991: 12) writes: 'States with myth-producing domestic political orders engage in preventive aggression to forestall hypothetical future threats from states that have not yet taken significant menacing actions'. Besides (mis-)perceptions, international influences (e.g. the character of an opponent, the (in)stability of the status quo, windows of opportunity and others) are also filtered through specific domestic structures (e.g. economic backwardness, self-sufficiency, inclination to expand, and risk-acceptance). His overall conclusion is: 'Realists are right in stressing power, interests, and coalition making', but

they have been wrong in ignoring the role ideology/perceptions and domestic institutions play (Snyder, 1991: 19).

Summing up, while both Wohlforth and Snyder underline neorealism's strength in explaining general longer-term patterns of behaviour, they both admit that it can only account in a limited way for specific cases. This is why Snyder complements the neorealist perspective by studying domestic institutions and ideas, and shows that international aggressive behaviour may be generated by domestic sources of insecurity. At the same time, both scholars agree, in the wording of Wohlforth (2001: 227) that 'the evolution of institutions and ideas cannot be explained without reference to the causal forces neorealism identifies'.

### ***Russia's power and status aspirations***

Realists generally agree that Russia is searching for more power and influence in international relations. However, the concepts of power and influence have been most elusive and are strongly debated within realism. While most realist analyses of Russian foreign policy begin with the analysis of material indicators of power and influence, such as economic, financial and military resources, compared to those of other great powers, realist analyses have gradually started to go beyond this material understanding of power.

For example, to study Soviet foreign policy and its power aspirations, Wohlforth in his book, which was classified as NCR by Rose (1998), also introduced an intervening variable to specify what power is, that is the perceptions by the elites of power and power shifts. He worked with this modified concept of power, by analysing the dynamics of conflict and the easing of tension in Soviet-Western relations. To study perceptions, he used written sources (journals, archives, etc.) and interviews as well as the content analysis method. Wohlforth's (1993: 301–302) conclusion was:

Each [cycle of conflict] was shaped by a change in the power relationship differently interpreted by the two sides . . . In the wake of each shift, each side tried to maximize its own position. Unwilling to go to war to test the power distribution, they reached stalemates after crises, posturing and signaling until a new perceived shift led to another round.

In general, the Cold War was presented 'as an ongoing dispute between the U.S. and USSR over who had how much power and what influence over the international system they were thus entitled to exercise' (Rose, 1998: 159).

Wohlforth's perception-based approach to power is applied to studying the issue of contemporary conflict-cooperation between Russia and the West by Russia scholars adopting an NCR perspective. For example, Elena Kropatcheva (2013) considers the impact of the external variable, which was often neglected in this context – China's rise – on NATO–Russia relations. Even though China's rise leaves many questions unanswered, it has started to impact Russia's NATO policies and NATO–Russia relations. Russian foreign policy responses depend on the perceptions of global power shifts by Russian policy-makers. These perceptions have been changing: before the Ukraine crisis, not only was a hypothetical alliance with China versus NATO discussed, but also the idea of an alliance with NATO versus China was brought up. Today, in Russian foreign policy, China plays an increasingly important role in easing the pressure of Western sanctions on Russia. All in all, Russia is cooperating, competing, or even conflicting with NATO or China at the same time, depending on the issue area and broader international trends. These different patterns in Russian foreign policy are predetermined by

competing domestic perceptions, but also by tactical attempts to instrumentalize these two alternatives while searching for adequate responses to external pressures.

In another article, taking the same theoretical approach, Kropatcheva (2014) explores the impact of another external factor – the ‘shale revolutions’ – on Russia’s energy power in its foreign policy. While Russian energy policy is usually considered in the regional context (Russia’s relations with the EU and the post-Soviet countries), this study has shown that, in order to understand Russia’s energy power, it is necessary to place it in the broader global context as well as to consider how Russian policy-makers perceive Russia’s energy power and the external challenges it faces. Then it becomes clear that Russia is not as powerful as it is often presented in the literature, and energy power capability is also about having a long-term vision as well as institutional and conceptual strength – all of which Russia lacks.

To understand Russia’s power aspirations, Bertil Nygren (2012) links perceptions and domestic institutions/developments even more closely together and, thereby, introduces the special intervening variable ‘Putinism’, to show how intertwined domestic factors, such as specific ideational paradigms adopted by Vladimir Putin, state centralization, FSB-ization and militarization of the society, and others, impact Russia’s ambitions. The ‘Putinism’ variable suggests that Russia’s policy, aimed at increasing its global and regional role, will remain a policy of continuity, regardless of whether this policy matches the available resources (Nygren, 2012: 522).

Because power is increasingly understood by realists not only in material, but also in ideational terms, Russia scholars, who adopt realist approaches, also study not only how Russia uses material or hard-power tools to pursue its power ambitions, but also soft-power tools and international norms as a part of its *Realpolitik* (Ziegler, 2014; Becker et al., 2016).

One more important development in the concept of power by Russia realist scholars is stressing its aspiration for status or prestige (Wohlforth, 1993: 28; Mankoff, 2011: 5). Wohlforth (1993) pointed out this vital dimension of power in Soviet-US relations, observing that while the USSR was struggling to gain the status it perceived it deserved, the US was denying the USSR a greater international role, perceiving its own status to be higher. This theme is further developed in Wohlforth’s later contributions (Wohlforth, 2001, 2009; Paul et al., 2014). The issue of status is used to explain historic events as well as contemporary Russian foreign policy.

For example, according to Wohlforth (2009: 44), the origins of the Crimean War illustrate how a specific material setting can create ‘ambiguity about rank, setting the stage for states to fight over a minor and readily divisible issue that comes to symbolize relative status’. In this case, Russia, which saw itself throughout as defending its identity as an upholder of the status quo, became the offensive revisionist power, with painful results for it (Wohlforth, 2009: 47).

Jeffrey Mankoff also notes that Russia’s foreign policy, especially in such cases as the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, is guided by whether it sees itself as a satisfied or a revisionist power. Russia has been a power dissatisfied with its international status, thus it is interested in revising the international order (cf. Mankoff, 2011: 5).<sup>1</sup>

Summing up, realist Russia scholars have gradually been expanding the understanding of what power means. The variable of domestic structures helps, thereby, to specify how systemic pressures on Russia’s power are filtered through specific domestic conditions. The difference from diverse liberal approaches is that realists still give primacy to systemic factors. To illustrate this point, while Mankoff (2011) analyses domestic power struggles in Russian foreign policymaking and, in particular, differences between Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev during their tandem years (2008–2012), he, nonetheless, comes to the conclusion: ‘Yet it is less the personality of the individual sitting in the Kremlin than the changing strategic landscape that Russia confronts that will play the most important role’ in Russian foreign policy (Mankoff, 2011: 280).



Furthermore, the notion of power is expanded by Russia realist scholars by including the intervening variable of perceptions, that is, how Soviet/Russian policy-makers perceive power and international power distribution/shifts, but also by emphasizing that power means social status and prestige. While this ideational dimension of Russian foreign policy can be and is addressed within constructivist and liberal approaches, the inclusion of ideational/social variables also fits in well with the realist tradition and is not the exclusive prerogative of constructivism and liberalism (Morgenthau, 1993; Rathbun, 2008). Subjective/ideational factors have become a part of realist strategies. As a result, states pursue not only power and security in material terms, but also social status (Wohlforth, 1993; Sterling-Folker, 2002, 2009b).

The difference from liberal/constructivist approaches is that realists still connect ideational/social factors to material and systemic ones. As Wohlforth (1993: 302) notes, perceptions of power do not exist independently of material measurements and follow a broad pattern which is connected to changes in real capabilities (Wohlforth, 1993: 302). In relation to status, he observes that social status is often security-driven (Wohlforth, 2009: 31); 'actors seek to translate material resources into status' (Wohlforth, 2009: 38); 'conflicts about status depend on material capabilities and on polarity that characterizes the system' (Wohlforth, 2009: 39); and status-seeking strategies 'require persuasion' and 'the ability to persuade is linked to material capability' (Wohlforth, 2009: 55). All in all, ideational and domestic intervening variables are introduced to specify the impact of the independent – systemic/structural – variable.

### ***Russia's new assertiveness in its war with Georgia in 2008 and the ongoing Ukraine crisis***

Realism has gained popularity in recent years in attempts to explain Russian policy in relation to Georgia in 2008 and to Ukraine since 2013. Thereby, Russian foreign policy studies reflect a variety of realist variants and explanations and especially modifications and developments within realism.

Starting with the first case of the Russian-Georgian war, Emmanuel Karagiannis (2013) sees US-Russian competition both in its global context, as well as in the South Caucasus specifically, as the main cause of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war and, thereby, explicitly applies John Mearsheimer's offensive realism. The US is presented as an offshore balancer in the South Caucasus with energy interests in the region and with the geopolitical goal of preventing Russia from becoming a regional hegemon. Thus, US policy is understood as the main driving factor behind Russian assertiveness and militarization of its foreign policy. He shows that Russia responded to Georgia's military operation in South Ossetia in a well-calculated manner, using this opportunity to re-establish its hegemony without, however, going so far as to occupy other territories, because of the costs (especially the deterioration of relations with the West) being too high and the benefits being too dubious. As Karagiannis (2013) concludes, Russia needed to fight this war against a weak opponent (Georgia), in order to defend its regional position as well as to survive in the anarchical international system.

Hans Mouritzen and Anders Wivel (2012) also examine the Russian-Georgian war through a more complex – what can be classified as NCR – perspective. They explore the reactions of different actors – Russia, Georgia, the US, the EU, countries in Russia's 'near abroad', and China. In each case, they start their examination with an analysis of the systemic/structural conditions, then move onto the level of interstate relations (geopolitics) if explanations at the previous level are not satisfactory and, if still necessary, go onto the intrastate (socio-psychological factors and decision-making dynamics) level. As a result, they assess which level of analysis has a greater explanatory power in each of the cases. After having examined about forty cases, they

come to the conclusion that, in the case of Russia, the purely systemic perspective works best, and other factors have played a minor role. Thus, for them, it is sufficient to use a systemic/structural perspective to understand the main driving factors behind Russia's policy (which is not true for other cases) – most importantly, the growing US influence and Georgia's closer relations with NATO.

As in the case of the Russian-Georgian war, John Mearsheimer (2016, 2014b) himself but also other leading realists (Walt, 2015; Schweller, 2017) explain Russia's recent Ukraine policy, especially its annexation of the Crimea and the ongoing destabilization strategies in the East, as a defensive reaction to the West's policies. For them, Russia's current assertive policy – in Ukraine, Georgia, or Syria – is logical and predictable, if long-term patterns of Russian-Western relations are considered.

Mearsheimer, in particular, criticizes the policies of NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and democracy promotion. Mearsheimer and other realists remind us of the fact that, from the start, realists opposed NATO's policy of 'expansion' as a mistake (Mearsheimer, 2014b, 6–7; Walt, 2016; Schweller, 2017) and predicted that Russia would counteract at some point. As Mearsheimer (in McFaul et al., 2014: 177) summarizes:

When the United States and its allies take note of Moscow's concerns . . . crises are averted and Russia cooperates on matters of mutual concern. When the West ignores Moscow's interests . . . confrontation reigns.

Thus, realists argue in favour of a so-called 'Russia first' approach, in which the US has more interest in maintaining positive relations with Russia rather than supporting its smaller neighbours with pro-Western aspirations.

Stephen M. Walt explains that Putin is not interested 'in trying to reincorporate all of Ukraine . . . and the "frozen conflict" that now exists there is sufficient to achieve his core goal'. Both in Ukraine as well as Syria, Putin pursues goals 'equally simple, realistic, and aligned with Russia's limited means' (Walt, 2016). According to him, Putin's:

[f]ailing is that it's all short-term . . . he is fighting a series of rearguard actions designed to prevent Russia's global position from deteriorating further, instead of pursuing a program that might enhance Russia's power and status over the longer term.

*(Walt, 2016)*

Adopting the main premises of neorealism, an increasing number of scholars go beyond it, by developing neorealist concepts further and using NCR to interpret Russia's Ukraine policy. For example, Elias Götz (2016a) places Mearsheimer's neorealism into a broader temporal perspective and tests it systematically against the track record of Russia's Ukraine policy since the 1990s. He points to the gap in Mearsheimer's argument that while neorealism traditionally focuses on relations between great powers and on how smaller states react to their power games, 'the question of how larger states deal with smaller neighbours has received surprisingly little attention' (Götz, 2016a: 301). Götz's argument (2016a: 301–302) is that:

[p]owerful states not only want to possess the greatest amount of material capabilities in their part of the world, as originally stated by Mearsheimer, but also seek to constrain the foreign-policy autonomy of smaller neighbouring countries.

They are also pursuing geopolitical and geo-economic interests.

Götz chooses ‘the level of external pressure’ – attempts by smaller neighbouring states to team up with great powers from other parts of the world – as an independent variable, which defines the tools and tactics by which major powers pursue and uphold their dominant regional positions. His hypothesis is that when the level of external pressure is low, the local great power will employ soft-power tools to dominate its neighbourhood; when the level of external pressure is high, it will adopt more assertive policies, including the use of force. If neighbouring states pursue multi-vector policies, then a local great power will use a mixture of soft- and hard-power tools (Götz, 2016a: 302). In the end, he comes to the conclusion that this ‘simple logic goes a long way towards explaining the pattern of Russia’s Ukraine policy over the last 25 years’ and Russia’s current Ukraine policy (Götz, 2016a: 302). However, he also brings up the neo-classical realist factor of ‘state capacity’ (see on this Zakaria, 1998; Schweller, 2006; Taliaferro, 2006; Foulon, 2015; Juneau, 2015) or Russia’s lack of it to explain Russia’s incoherent and less assertive behaviour in the late 1990s, a time of growing external pressure but internal weakness (Götz, 2016a: 316).

A number of Russia scholars also adopt NCR perspectives to emphasize the importance of the factor of perceptions in the case of Ukraine. For instance, according to Flemming Splidsboel-Hansen (2015), Russia’s response to systemic inputs depends on the cognitive filters, intertwined with collective identity, which cause these systemic inputs to be interpreted by the Russian elite as well as the public in a negative way (2015: 147). Even though Russia’s annexation of the Crimea was suboptimal, the way Putin ‘framed’ the developments in Ukraine meant he ‘framed himself into a corner’ from which there was only one way out – annexation of Crimea (Splidsboel-Hansen, 2015: 141).

Andrej Krickovic’s (2016) approach, with his focus on the cases of Russia and China, linking international conflictive behaviour with domestic sources of insecurity, can also be classified as NCR or an adapted version of realism to non-Western realities. Thereby, he further develops the realist notion of an international security dilemma by emphasizing that it can be generated by domestic vulnerabilities. In his view, this was the case *inter alia* with Russia’s reaction to events in Ukraine in 2013–2014. Because of its own insecurities (in particular, the problem of legitimacy and fear of ‘colour revolutions’ (more details in Krickovic, 2016: 8), Russia perceived the ‘Euro-Maidan’ and the loss of power by Victor Yanukovych as instigated by the West. As he explains further:

Thus, the security dilemma created by Russia’s internal insecurities has ‘come full circle’, as Russia’s own concern about foreign meddling has led it to adopt policies that give rise to the same kind of fears in NATO countries . . . Thus, the two sides find themselves in the vicious circle emblematic of the security dilemma – where each side’s efforts to improve its own security threaten the security of the other side.

*(Krickovic 2016: 12)*

While Russia can be viewed as a weak developing state, nonetheless, it possesses significant national power (or what neoclassical realists would term ‘state capacity’) to engage in international security competition (Krickovic, 2016).

Finally, the role of Russia’s perceptions of the developments in Ukraine, the emergence of a security dilemma, and, especially, the perceptions of Russian policy by external actors (e.g. the EU) is also discussed in contributions (Bock et al., 2015; Wigell and Vihma, 2016), which refer explicitly to Stephen Walt’s modified understanding of Waltz’s balance of power theory, that is his balance of threat theory (Walt, 1987). Accordingly, threats emerge under the conditions of the availability of material capabilities, important geographical location, and when a

state is perceived as potentially aggressive. Thus, Russia has balanced against a potential threat of Ukraine's joining NATO, but the EU has also been balancing against the Russian threat.

Summing up, current realist analyses of Russia's policy towards Georgia and Ukraine point, first of all, to the systemic conditions which have encouraged Russia's current behaviour. Realist studies emphasize that Russia's new assertiveness was to be expected and it was only a matter of time before Russia decided to use a window of opportunity to try to restore its regional influence and, thereby, to elevate its power status in the international system. While Russia is being blamed for aggression and even imperialism, most frequently in current Western publications on the topic or in policy-making circles, the contribution of these realist studies is to point to the West's own mistakes for having neglected Russia's security and power/status concerns, for underestimating its strengths (as well as destabilization potential and 'state capacity'), and overestimating its weaknesses.

Besides general 'systemic' trends in Russian-Western relations, most Russian realist studies also point to the importance of inclusion in the analysis of regional geopolitics and geo-economics. The geopolitical approach, which specifically focuses on the impact of geography, distance, borders, physical power capabilities and instruments, and 'zero-sum' games between major powers, which compete over influence and domination in specific regions (Berryman, 2012: 531; Klieman, 2015), this is closely intertwined with realist interpretations of Russian foreign policy (for more examples, see Kropatcheva, 2011; Wigell and Vihma, 2016). The realist geopolitical/geo-economic perspectives underline that 'systemic' trends are brought into concrete regions, but these regions also have their own geopolitical/geo-economic dynamics which impact Russian foreign policy.

While the realist perspectives explain quite well the general contours of and logic behind Russia's foreign policy, as well as the systemic and regional geopolitical pressures it faces, it nonetheless leaves open some important questions. Ambivalent answers are given on Russia's choice of specific tactics and the timing of its assertiveness, even though, to be fair, other theoretical approaches, which focus on single variables, have also been unable to find exhaustive answers to Russia's assertiveness (Götz, 2016b).

For example, why did Russia annex the Crimea in 2014 and not earlier, when there were such opportunities (for example, after the Orange Revolution in 2004–2005)? In the case of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, Russia refrained from formal annexation, so what changed between 2008 and 2014? Furthermore, in the case of Ukraine, it is not clear in the end why Russia used such aggressive tactics as it could have used milder means to pressure Ukraine to move from a more pro-Western policy towards a more pro-Russian course (as was the case in the past): both the EU and NATO lacked commitment to spend resources to support Ukraine or to accept it as a member, and Ukraine was heavily dependent on Russian energy and other financial and economic support. Moreover, realism predicts that rising power capabilities will lead to more assertive foreign policies, but in Russia's case, whether it is a rising or a declining power can be disputed, especially in the mid-2010s, owing to financial crises and low energy prices.

Finally, the main argument that it is the West that should be blamed for Russia's policy is oversimplified. Mearsheimer's critics, such as Michael McFaul (in McFaul et al., 2014) or Alexander Motyl (2015), point to the necessity of considering the factor of Russian-Ukrainian relations (or, in the first case, this would be Russian-Georgian relations) and their domestic politics and developments, including ideology. The main fault of neorealist studies in general is that they fail 'to pay much attention to states' internal structure, domestic factors, and the role of the state level in between the structure and foreign policy actions' (Foulon, 2015: 647).

Russia scholars who have applied neorealism themselves admit some of its limitations. For example, Karagiannis (2013: 88) points to 'additional factors' that likely played a role in the case

of the Russian–Georgian war, for which neorealism cannot account. These can be, for example, Putin’s personal antipathy toward Saakishvili, Russian considerations of honour and prestige (as pointed out in Tsygankov and Tarver–Wahlquist, 2009; Tsygankov, 2012), and human rights concerns for ethnic Russians. Thus, as in the previous (historic) cases, the neorealist perspectives are able to explain the general logic behind Russian actions and the general patterns of Russian–Western relations, which challenged Russia to act in an offensive manner. Nonetheless, to understand the specifics of Russia’s reaction, additional factors need to be included.

To fill the gaps left by neorealism, Russia scholars increasingly turn to NCR and its ability to integrate the study of perceptions/cognitive filters, state capacity, and internal vulnerabilities. NCR can also help to understand why realist thinking became dominant in the concrete constellation of external and domestic influences. All in all, NCR studies of Russian behaviour show how some neorealist arguments can and need to be further elaborated and specified, in order to increase the explanatory power of the theory.

### **Conclusions: the promises and caveats of applying neoclassical realism to Russian foreign policy analysis**

This section starts with a summary of some general conclusions which can be drawn from this overview of the application of realism in relation to Soviet/Russian foreign policy. Because of the growing importance of the NCR perspective within the studies of Russian foreign policy, it then pays special attention to the promises and caveats of applying NCR.

As this chapter has shown, despite ups and downs within realism and all the critique it faces, realist approaches have been frequently – explicitly or implicitly – applied to explain Soviet and Russian foreign policies. Already, the few examples which it was possible to present here demonstrate that Russian foreign policy studies reflect the variety of realist approaches and major developments within realism.

Traditional systemic/structural approaches and their modified versions have been used to explicate longer and more general historic trends in Russian foreign policy (as its empire building/expansion and power/status aspirations), but also, even more, to explain concrete past and contemporary foreign policy situations (e.g. underbalancing, overextension, assertive/aggressive behaviour, costly and ‘irrational’ policies, shifts between conflict and cooperation). Overall, as in the past, realism is usually used to explain Russia’s ‘hard security’ policies.

Realist approaches are a good fit for examining Russian foreign policy in different geographical and policy areas, including global and regional competition as well as cooperation, developments in the post-Soviet space, energy/economic and military policies. With their focus on exogenous factors, realist approaches have helped to turn scholars’ attention to the new external developments, such as global power shifts and new technological developments, which affect Russia’s power, but which are, nonetheless, sometimes neglected. Moreover, realists have started to pay more attention to Russia’s soft power policies as a part of its *Realpolitik*.

The majority of realist analyses of Russian international behaviour are policy-oriented/empirical – often ‘atheoretical’ – studies. This practical orientation reflects the fact that realism was born out of diplomatic practice and often summarizes the common knowledge and general truths which philosophers and scholars have observed in international politics for centuries. This is why realist scholars often include policy recommendations in their analyses.

Realist studies of Russian foreign policy have also focused on theory testing, by generating realism-based hypotheses and exploring their applicability, their strengths, and their weaknesses in concrete cases. Fewer Russia scholars have made attempts at theorizing, that is, at developing some realist theoretical premises or approaches.

According to systemic/structural approaches, Russian foreign policy seems to be less surprising and more logical seen through a long-term perspective. The main motives guiding Russian foreign policy are the same (power, status, and security). What changes is tactics. This is influenced by the changes in capabilities and in the systemic strategic context. Thereby, realists underline both continuities in Russian foreign policy as well as changes, which for them are primarily systemic (and not identity changes, as, for example, for constructivists). The structural realist argument helps us to better understand international enabling factors and constraints on Russian foreign policy.

Besides considering the broader systemic context, scholars who take realist approaches to Russian foreign policy increasingly include in their analyses the factor of regional geopolitics and specific interregional power relations. In addition, the emphasis is placed on both history and geography as impacting Russian foreign policy.

Finally, an important trend within Russian foreign policy studies has been the attempt to specify the meaning of ambivalent realist concepts, especially by using NCR and by complementing the study of independent systemic variables, by incorporating the study of 'unit level' variables, such as domestic structures and ideational intervening variables. Thereby, Russian international conduct is still characterized in terms of 'traditional' realist concepts as pursuit of power, influence, and security; strategies of balancing/bandwagoning; security dilemmas; and others. However, the meanings of these concepts and the reasons behind these forms of behaviour are specified by resorting to intervening variables.

This chapter has shown that NCR offers important advantages by comparison with neorealism, while still using the logic of structural realism, but going beyond it and complementing – often overly deterministic – neorealist interpretations. As a result, a variety of available methods have been used within NCR studies of Russian foreign policy – elite interviews, process tracing, framing, content/narrative analysis, operational code analysis, and opinion polls. The broader and more flexible theoretical framework of NCR allows this methodological pluralism.

Besides having advantages vis-à-vis neorealism, as was shown throughout this chapter, NCR has some important strengths by comparison with other widespread explanations of Russian foreign policy. For example, various domestic policy approaches, which claim the primacy of domestic factors, e.g. Russia's nationalist or imperial ambitions (Bugajski, 2004), the vulnerability of the Russian regime (Stoner and McFaul, 2015; Wesslau and Wilson, 2016), the role of interest groups in Russian foreign policymaking (Dawisha, 2015; Marten, 2015), often overestimate the importance of these specific factors (Tsygankov, 2015: 294–295; Krickovic, 2016: 12) or even admit their secondary role, giving primacy to systemic factors (Charap and Welt, 2015; Marten, 2015). Re-wording Juneau (2015: 3), domestic factors 'account for tilts in foreign policy', while changes in the international balance of power can cause major shifts.

As was shown throughout this chapter, NCR does not reject, but rather integrates main constructivist categories. At the same time, NCR still prioritizes broad systemic factors and links ideational factors to material capabilities. All in all, NCR tries to show the bigger picture of how the single variables, which are studied by alternative theoretical approaches, come into interaction and shape concrete policy results.

Despite these advantages of NCR, Russia scholars have to be aware of some caveats. NCR has been characterized by its critics (including neo-realists) as a 'degenerative' research paradigm that has lost all distinctiveness vis-à-vis liberalism and constructivism (Vasquez, 1997; Legro and Moravcsik, 1999). Indeed, in practice, it is difficult to differentiate some of the studies, which claim to be NCR, from typical liberal or constructivist analyses, and the core realist argument can easily get lost among liberal/constructivist variables.

NCR is also attacked for sporadically filling the gaps left by structural realism (more details in Rathbun, 2008: 295), and for the inability to specify a priori conditions under which it can be falsified (Vasquez, 1997). One more problem is how to avoid over-complexity of research if too many explicatory variables are included.

A liberal critique is also that systemic influences are indeterminate and that it is difficult to say in advance which systemic influences have to be studied a priori. This point is admitted and debated by adherents of NCR (Onea, 2012; Ripsman et al., 2016: 2).

Perception-based NCR is dismissed for being constructivist, and constructivists point to the primacy of culture and the secondary nature of interests or consider identity and interests as being in a dialectical relationship. Neoclassical realists, however, point to the fact that because 'states and leaders are influenced by competing international and domestic norms and cultures and juggle multiple, and often conflicting identities', it would be difficult to predict their foreign policy choices, and to explain many aspects of international politics, it is necessary to consider the importance of relative distribution of material power (Ripsman et al., 2016: 6–7).

Ripsman et al. (2016) have recently tried to answer some of the most widespread criticisms and to develop some testable hypotheses and operational definitions. For example, they explain that the choice between using a structural realist explanation or working with intervening variables (as well as their choice) depends on the nature of the international environment (for example, 'restrictive' or 'permissive' conditions; the imminence of threats or opportunities; clarity of challenges) as well as the time framework of analysis. Their elaborations will be useful for future NCR studies of Russian foreign policy.

In summary, NCR is 'preferable to neorealism' (Ziegler, 2014: 592) and has many important advantages both vis-à-vis neorealism and other theoretical approaches. Those searching for a coherent and cohesive research framework or methodological purity would be looking in vain for this in NCR. Research, using single variables, helps us to better understand the individual factors which are involved in the process of Russian foreign policy-making. However, we also need a second strand of research – an integrative IR framework – which tries to bring single variables into a larger picture of how Russian foreign policy is made. This is what NCR attempts to do. At the same time, the main challenge remains that the core of the structural/systemic argument has to remain at the centre of the analysis, while it needs to be clear why and how intervening variables were chosen, and in which way they specify the structural/systemic argument.

Application of NCR to the Russian case can help not only to improve the understanding of Russian foreign policy in its complexity and international-domestic interaction, but also to further develop NCR postulates. NCR can help address a variety of topics – the unpredictability of Russia's actions, its suboptimal 'irrational' policies, and the shifts between cooperation and conflict as well as continuity and change, as these are shaped by the dynamic relationship between external and intervening variables. The NCR studies on Russian foreign policy should take a longer-term comparative perspective by including different historical periods, geographical areas, and issue areas so as to better contextualize and understand Russian international behaviour. All in all, despite the aforementioned serious caveats, the promises of NCR are strong enough for NCR analyses of Russian foreign policy to be pursued.

## Note

1 For more on states that are satisfied or dissatisfied with status see, for example: Schweller 2006.

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