

Russia's Discourse on Identity, Sovereignty and Foreign Policy: Listening to Russian Parliament to Understand Russian Foreign Policy

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Paper prepared for the EUSA 2022 conference, Miami

Draft – Comments are very welcome

Introduction

Russian foreign policy arguably relies on two key tendencies: first, its quest for primacy in relations with its neighborhood countries, and, second, its aspiration at a great power status (Gunitsky and Tsygankov 2018). Having no solid history as a nation-state to rely on, in the last two decades, Russian Federation leaders have been actively reconstructing the narrative of regional or global power status. This discourse aims at presenting, justifying and operationalizing a special place of Russia and of Russians in Europe and Eurasia and thus shapes the possibilities of its interaction with neighbors, the European Union and Asian powers. In this paper, I focus on the nexus between Russian parliament's take on Russia's identity, sovereignty and vision of the European/Eurasian region, - as a basis for Russian foreign policy towards its European neighbors.

I show that both identity and sovereignty are to a large extent instrumental in Russian institutional discourse and serve as tools for claiming and supporting Russia's status as a great power. In terms of identity, a voluntaristic choice between (Eur)Asia and Europe is made possible by presenting Russia's identity as multifaceted, composite. In terms of sovereignty, it is used either as an absolute concept (principle of equality between states based on sovereignty) or as a relative one (only great powers possess real sovereignty), depending on the foreign policy to justify in a given case.

This study relies on a corpus of parliamentary debates in the lower chamber of the Russian parliament (Duma) between 2004 and 2021. It offers a quantitative overview combining statement analysis and content analysis, and a qualitative study of statements on identity and sovereignty.

Russia's attack on Ukraine inevitably influences the formulation and reception of this paper. Political statements about Russia's place in Europe and its policy towards the neighborhood made in previous years are now read with the knowledge about the war. In this context, my analysis tries to avoid presenting one line of foreign policy as inevitable and all developments as leading to the current state of affairs.

The following section presents the conceptual framework, before the paper presents the data and the results of the quantitative overview of discourse, mapping the discursive options. Qualitative analysis fills the options with substance – first, on identity, and then on sovereignty.

What is Russia?

Russia has an extremely short non-imperial and no mono-ethnic history: just as 300 years ago, it hosts a multitude of ethnicities, languages, religions, cultures and traditions. It could not develop a type of nationalism supportive of a nation-state (Gellner 1997, Hobsbawm 1990), nor can it discard its imperial legacy. It continues to exist as a patchwork of different administrative units, with varying degrees of autonomy and is connected to many neighboring states by strong economic, cultural, and family ties. Thus, its variety of self-identification and nationalism is complex and ambiguous.

In an overview of Russian nationalism, Kolsto (2016: 22-24) offers two organizing dimensions: statist vs. ethnic orientation; and imperial vs. focused on a core (Russian) people. Intersections produce four types of nationalism: statist empire-saving nationalism; ethnic supremacist nationalism; statist Russian Federation nationalism; and ethnic core nationalism. These types are not temporary stages but “coexisting phenomena” (Kolsto 2016: 27) and all currently have proponents in Russia. Institutional actors can borrow from a wide pool of ways to define political identity of the Russian state to formulate and justify ambiguous and changing foreign policies (Shevel 2011: 195-196).

Still, not all these options have been and are now equally influential. While both ethnic core nationalism and statist Russian Federation nationalism find permanent proponents in the Russian parliament (Liberal Democratic Party and United Russia, respectively), the statist empire-saving nationalism is king on the discursive field. Scholars note that the only stable, anchoring elements of conceptualizing nationalism in Russia may be the strength of the centralizing statist tendency (Pain 2016: 60) and the appeal of the narrative of Russia’s civilizational uniqueness (Shevel 2011: 191, Laruelle 2016). The two trends support supporting the self-description of Russia as a unique civilization, precious and fragile, organized and protected by a strong central government.

The essence of the civilizational uniqueness actually may be defined differently: it may be based on the special position of Russia as a bridge between Europe and Asia, with a combination of European and Asian geography, history and culture. Alternatively, it may affirm an own version of Europeanness, different from and even often formulated in opposition to the Europeanness as defined and embodied by the European Union. In this view, Russia is European but non-Western, since it traces its lineage to the Eastern (not

Western) Roman Empire (Laruelle 2016: 293), represents the Orthodox (not Catholic nor Protestant) version of Christianity and stands for the traditional communal values (Buntilov 2016) vs. individualistic values of the socially liberal Europe. In this version of identity self-description, Russia thus contests the normative monopoly of the EU over the definition of “European values” and of the meaning of “Europe” in general (De Angelis 2011, Browning and Christou 2010).

Either way – via its Eurasian or European, but non-Western, self-identification, Russia affirms independent actorness, which its elites often proclaim unfairly denied by “the West”. Beyond the affirmation of actorness, civilizational uniqueness underpins claims to a special, leading role if not globally, then at least regionally. For instance, Gunitsky and Tsygankov (2018: 1) claim that Russian foreign policy towards its European neighborhood can be best understood in terms of its quest for a great power status (*derzhavnost'*), which requires primacy of Russia in bilateral relations with neighbors and especially with post-soviet states. Since great power status is core to its understanding of own statehood, Russia’s “geopolitical primacy in Eurasia [is seen as] the only way to preserve sovereignty and independence” (Gunitsky & Tsygankov 2018: 7).

Historically, after a brief period in the 1990s, marked by a discourse of ‘normalcy’, the self-image as a great power quickly returned and underpinned the formulation of foreign policy options compatible with this status. This move was manifest across the society: in the official discourse¹ (see Lo, 2002: 48ff.), but also in public opinion. Asked whether Russians were a nation as others in April 1992, 80% of respondents said yes; but already in 1999, only 36% said so and 57% rather saw Russians as a people with a special role in world history – the proportion largely unchanged until 2016 (Levada Center 2016b).

A stronger economy and military since the 2000s brought the capacity closer to ambition and offered a boost to the great power discourse. Consequently, Russia’s foreign policy focused on keeping a “buffer zone of domination” around its borders, securing a voice in international policies of other countries and being “exempt... from the rules that ordinarily govern interstate behavior” (Galeotti cited in Giles 2019: 13-14)². A worldview where states can be great powers includes also lesser powers, which do not possess full actorness and decision-making autonomy – and thus, do not enjoy full sovereignty. Only

¹ I can illustrate this logic with a quote from MP S. Markov (United Russia), 2.4.2008: “Our history is great and tragic. We are a great country and our victories are great. We won over historic pretenders to hegemony like Napoleon and Hitler. Our tragedies are great as well. Well, this is simply how our history is, how our country is, how our people is: we are great and this is to be reckoned with – by ourselves and by others”.

² Bo (2002: 52) notes that this orientation was to a big extent defensive and motivated by a fear of encirclement and isolation: if Russia were to retreat from post-soviet neighbor states, its influence would quickly be substituted by the West and it would not only lose great power status but would find itself in an extremely vulnerable position from the security point of view.

great powers can be truly sovereign in international politics in this understanding, and the ability to oppose actors seen as great powers and to act against their pressure becomes a sign of full sovereignty and great power status. Compliance, on the other hand, means “lesser power” status linked to lacking autonomy, weakness of the state and danger to civilizational uniqueness.

Data and method

Scholarly literature on contemporary Russian foreign policy has been focused on the speeches and articles by the top leadership (mainly, Putin and Medvedev) and on materials published by prominent ‘ideologists’ close to power. Much less attention has been paid to the public discourse in the lower chamber of the Russian parliament – the State Duma. This lack of attention can be explained by a relative weakness of the parliament in the Russian political system: unlike in the 1990s, it now rarely opposes the executive in what concerns the legislative process (Hutcheson 2017). Moreover, although the constellation of the main parties in the State Duma has been stable since 2003, political parties do not possess major political power (Hutcheson 2013, 2017).

Despite this relative weakness, the State Duma is the most legitimate national platform for public political debate, where various opinions and explanations of policy orientations and concrete policies are presented. The debates are regular, open and carefully recorded, allowing a dynamic study of political positions and their argumentative support. Duma is also the platform where the representatives of the government present and defend new legislation and policies. Compared to press releases by the government and to speeches by state leaders, Duma debates are more emotional, rhetorically rich, explicit and argumentative. The abundance of material makes tracing trends and identifying options in the discourse possible.

This paper relies on three types of data. First, statements on regional integration made in the State Duma between 2004 and 2017– the period of active discussion of European and Eurasian integration initiatives. Statements are recorded when a speaker expresses a clear position on the membership or identity belonging of a European country (including Russia itself) in the main regional organizations and initiatives³. For each statement, I look at whether the speaker supported, supported under conditions or rejected a country’s membership or belonging to a regional integration body. Additionally, I recorded the justifications the speaker gave for her position: for instance, speakers can present

³ See full codebook for this part of data here: “Constructing Europe’s Borders: Codebook”, with Marie-Eve Belanger und Frank Schimmelfennig, ETH Zurich, Centre for Comparative and International Studies, doi: 10.3929/ethz-b-000414771. After 2017, the number of statements – as defined in the project – drops dramatically, therefore it does not make sense to include the data for further years in the comparison.

membership as warranted based on cost/benefit calculations, on geopolitical reasons, on values, governance principles, etc. I recorded all used justifications (“frames”) for each statement⁴. For this paper, I am using this data in two ways: to trace relative frequency of different forms of identity self-definition for Russia, and to trace relative salience of sovereignty as a justification for regional integration and belonging arguments.

Second, I collected quantitative data on the use of sovereignty-related key terms in the speeches at the State Duma between 2004 and 2021, to identify trends in the salience of sovereignty as a topic of concern and debate. The list of search terms is in the appendix.

Third, I did qualitative analysis by mapping themes in the discourse about identity and sovereignty of Russia and its neighbors between 2004 and 2021. I illustrate the options and trends in the presentation and justification of Russia’s identity and sovereignty-related policies with the most representative quotes, based on this overview.

All three types of data come from a full dataset of the official minutes of parliamentary debates; the coding and analysis were aided by MAXQDA software.

Parliamentary discourse on Russia’s identity

The dynamic of Russia’s self-identification over time is presented in Figure 1. I grouped self-referential statements across three options: Russia as belonging to Europe, Russia as part of Eurasia or Russia as a stand-alone self-referential civilization (see Laruelle 2016 for a similar tri-component typology of Russian self-positioning). The figure illustrates the ambiguity of the identity attributions: there is no simple turn “away from Europe”, neither after the Crimea crisis nor in times of internal destabilization (popular protests of 2012 could create a suitable occasion). Nonetheless, Eurasian self-identification becomes more prominent since 2011, possibly as a means to claim fuller international autonomy by distancing from the influence of “the West”. Deyermond (2016) notes another explanation of this dynamic: one important way to affirm its great power status for Russia is to insist on multi-polarity. To discursively create a “pole” opposing “the West”, Russia can choose to associate with rising powers of China and India, for instance, in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO):

At the Saint-Petersburg forum, Putin has voiced the crucial initiative for Big Eurasia. Big Eurasia is United States’ nightmare: Eurasia that unites the Eurasian Economic Union, members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organizations, including such world giants as China, India, ASEAN countries, Eurasia joined by the

⁴ See full description of the frames and rules of aggregation here: “Constructing Europe’s Borders: Frames definition and Aggregation Protocol”, with Marie-Eve Belanger und Frank Schimmelfennig, ETH Zurich, Centre for Comparative and International Studies, doi: 10.3929/ethz-b-000415761

European Union... Obviously, compared to Big Eurasia all transatlantic or transpacific cooperation initiatives appear to be dwarfs (Nikonov, 21.06.2016).

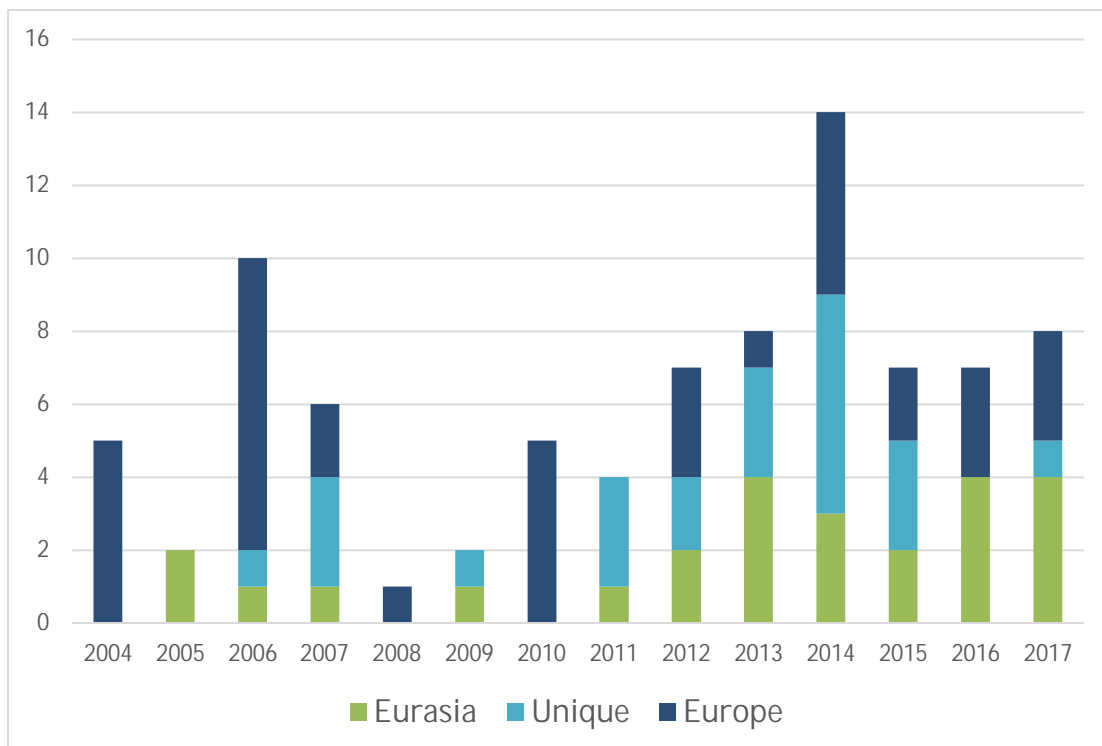


Figure 1. Self-referential identity attributions, number of statements per year⁵

The general idea of Eurasia, depicted in this and similar speeches in the Duma, is a continent-wide cooperation network, including all countries that would find it beneficial to join. The continent could then become a pole of power in a multi-polar world system; or, more simply said, an overwhelming counterweight to the USA. To such a geographic and geopolitical unit Russia would like to belong. The benefit of such an agglomerate is that it helps Russia avoid international isolation and, at the same time, does not put it into the situation of normative inferiority, as often is the case in its relations with Europe.

Along with Eurasian identity, however, European identity is equally present. I do not observe a simple turn “away from Europe” in terms of identity, neither after the Crimea crisis nor in times of internal destabilization. Russian parliamentarians do refer to Russia as a European power, although they highlight certain conditions. Russia can be part of Europe *if* the EU and its members accepts it as an equal partner:

⁵ This coding included only very clear and explicit statements of the speaker’s position about Russia’s identity. A lot of discourse in the Duma is not grasped this way since it is often vague, implicit, intertextual (refers to official documents or reports on the position of other actors) and thus is not captured.

...we want to be in Europe, but we want to be in Europe on equal terms, not as a servant, as it is the case when we rush to fully implement those decisions of the European Court of Human Rights that European countries do not consider obligatory to implement (Tarnavsky, 01.12.2015).

On the other hand, the choice is not simply that of Russia being 'in' or 'out' of Europe. The debate about Russia's position in Europe hinges on the definition of 'Europe' itself. A recurrent feature of Russian discourse on Europe, traditionally (Neumann 1996) and presently (Prozorov 2007: 318), is the division between a *true* Europe and a *false* Europe. This differentiation becomes especially relevant and useful for Russian élites, when the ideological confusion of the 1990s gives way to a more assertive identity stance in the 2000s. This is the logic behind the following statement:

Russian culture has always taken the best from the West-European culture, and creatively reinterpreted the best examples of it. Today there are no such examples, Western culture recently has been producing and exporting emptiness. At first we were tempted by this emptiness, but now we seem to have understood that in reality we are the only remaining mainstay of the classical European culture in the world (Yampol'skaia, 15.11.2017).

This "*fracture* of the image of Europe itself into the true and false components" is a consequence of the perceived conflict between Russia's belonging to Europe and its exclusion, as it makes it possible to turn exclusion into self-exclusion (Prozorov 2007: 318, original emphasis).

This multitude of possible identities is not something that speakers in the Duma are ready to "provide" to Russia's neighbors, however. In line with the theoretical expectations, Russia's claim to regional or global power status leaves it with more options than the "smaller" nations. I recorded a discourse presenting a rather fatalist approach to regional integration avenues for some countries – some states are depicted as just "meant to be together" with Russia. What are these states? High on the list are Ukraine (over a third of all such statements) and Belarus (17%), then follow Moldova (5,5%), Georgia, Armenia, Serbia, Azerbaijan and Montenegro. A whole plethora of reasons is given by the speakers to justify this "fate": common history, culture, religion, economic ties, family ties, security, choice, national interests, etc.:

Ukraine and Byelorussia – these are, mind you, our brotherly Slavic peoples, what one would call "gens una sumus" – we are one tribe (Kur'yanovich N.V., 21.09.2021).

Because of these strong links and mutual interests, arising from these links, the future and sovereignty of these nations are inextricably linked to Russia's:

Only in a union with the workers and peasants of Russia can Ukraine be self-reliant, independent and sovereign; it is simply not conceivable otherwise. Not conceivable! This

is what we see. Let us amass everything together, and then we will have a corresponding result (Ziuganov G.A., Communist Party, 08.06.2021)

Three points are important at this stage: first, Russian institutional discourse does not focus on one type of identity for Russia. The options of Eurasian-ness or European-ness are both open, even though the Eurasian option is more present since 2011. Second, there is an element of volition in Russian identity self-attribution: Russia can choose to belong or not to belong to Europe by emphasizing either common or specific aspects of history and culture. The choice between possible identities depends on which one allows the realization of Russia's great power ambitions: if it can ally with Europe on equal terms and offer a counterweight to the US, it will do so. If Europe insists on its normative superiority in relations with Russia or chooses to isolate it, Russia will ally with the Asian powers. Identity is instrumental to guaranteeing great power status of Russia. Third, identity and regional integration options of Russia's neighbors, especially Ukraine and Belarus, are not open: these countries are presented as bound to Russia by history, culture, and economics, but also by Russia's security needs. Their sovereignty is thus dependent on the sovereignty of Russia (as they cannot afford full autonomy), but also Russia's sovereignty is dependent on theirs (as keeping these countries in its orbit is a direct expression of Russia's great power status, which guarantees its autonomy). This point is further developed in the following sections, focusing on sovereignty.

Salience of "sovereignty" discussions in the parliament

Let us look first at how often sovereignty (keeping control over the decision-making process) is used as a justification for positions on the regional integration and belonging of European countries, including Russia, in the Duma. Speakers explained their positions clearly in terms of sovereignty (often, among other reasons), in 150 instances between 2004 and 2017. Most of those statements were about Ukraine (33,3%), about a quarter – about Russia (22,6%), followed by Georgia (8%). The frequency of this explanation varied across the years rather dramatically: in 2013, full 27% of all statements included reasoning in terms of sovereignty. 2013 was the year of intensive discussions about Ukraine's choice between two major regional integration options: the Association Agreement with the EU or the Eurasian institutions chaired by Russia. In 2009, sovereignty was used as an explanation for why the choice of the Commonwealth of Independent States was more beneficial than the Eastern Partnership for Russia's neighbors (sovereignty appearing as a reason in 15,6% of statements). In 2005, it was used for a variety of topics, but in all other years it was not a prominent argumentation strategy.

If we open up the focus to the discussion of sovereignty in general (not limited to the topics of regional integration and belonging), we can observe a clear difference between pre-2012 and post-2012 discourse (Figure 2). From December 2011, a major wave of protest rolled over Russia, motivated namely by legislative elections, but also the return of Vladimir Putin for a third term as president in 2012.

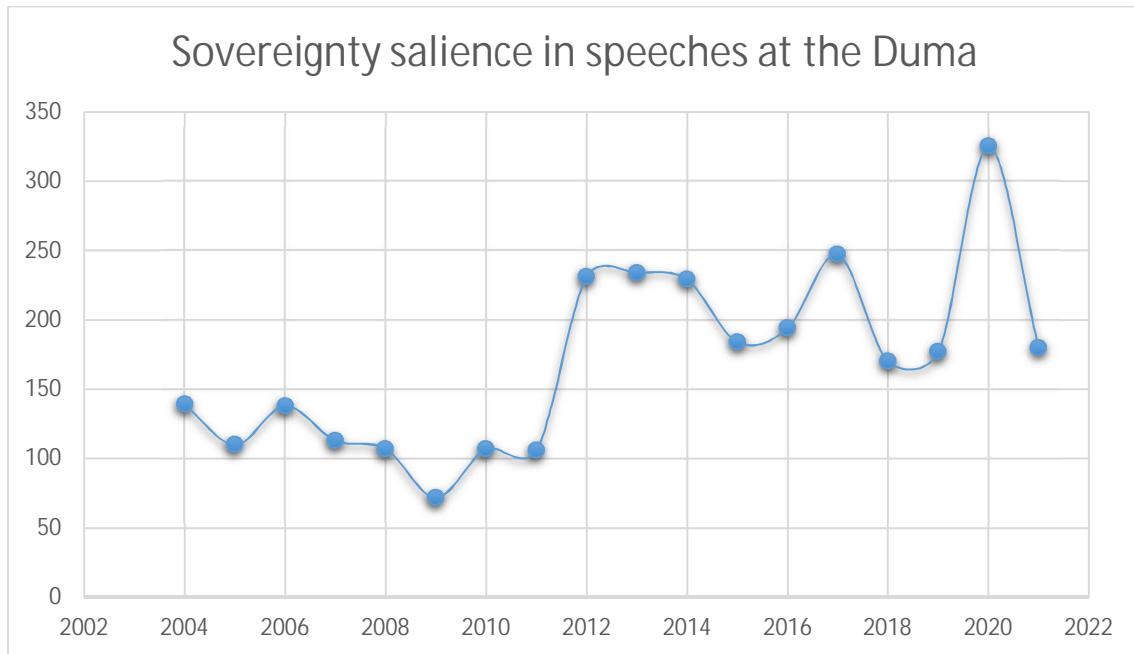


Figure 2. Frequency of use of sovereignty-related key terms, number per year

Figure 2 clearly demonstrates the ubiquity of discussing sovereignty in the State Duma since the protests. Speakers in the Duma connected the protests to a trend of “color” revolutions in Russia’s neighborhood, thought by them to be fueled by external influence and machinations. To respond to these threats, the Duma adopted a series of laws on foreign influence and “foreign agents” allowing the authorities to trace and punish actors receiving funding from abroad and involved in political activities (very broadly defined) – both organizations and individuals. The 2020 peak is explained by the amendment of the Constitution, which included the preservation of sovereignty as a major goal of state policies and thus served as the basis for more legislation allegedly fighting foreign influence. While the intensity of the discussions varied, the salience of sovereignty as a major topic for discussing both foreign and domestic policy has never returned to pre-2012 levels. The following sections explain how sovereignty is conceptualized and instrumentalized in Russian parliamentary discourse.

Sovereignty and the place of Russia in the world order

Russian MPs and representatives of the Government (speaking as guests in the Duma) often refer to the principles of post-World War II order as inviolable (Duma debate of March 21, 2007). Especially the regional order in Europe, as defined by the victorious powers after the defeat of the Axis, is used as the legitimacy standard for regional international relations. Importantly for Russia, the Soviet Union was among the great victors and acknowledged for its massive contribution to the defeat of the inhumane regimes in Germany and Italy. Its influence on the countries of the Warsaw Pact was also long undisputed⁶. When speakers in the Duma refer to international law or general principles governing inter-state relations, they therefore refer to this agreed-upon setup, highly reminiscent of the Concert of Europe, with great powers as rule makers and rule guarantors in the international system⁷. This setup is not only important for the international role of Russia, but is also a bulwark against centrifugal tendencies in the Russian Federation itself, which – if weakened and contested in its leadership – could fall apart just as the Soviet Union did⁸.

The anti-revisionist discourse is therefore very present in the Duma. The outcomes of the World War II, including the recognition of Russia as a superpower (exemplified by its permanent seat in the UN's Security Council and undisputed control over its immediate neighborhood) are not to be questioned. In this context, the Eastwards extension of the European Union and especially NATO, but also domestic nationalism in post-soviet states, which questioned the benevolent role of the Soviet Union in post-WWII Eastern Europe, are seen as violations of an established regional order, and humiliation for Russia. For example, Kosachev links the Baltic States' NATO membership with reinvigorated anti-Russian rhetoric and renewed attempts to revise common history and even glorify Nazism (22.10.2004). A full version of this argument is given by Ostrovsky in 2009,

⁶ Public opinion surveys showed strong support for Russia's great power ambitions. When asked whether Russia should strive to preserve its status of a great power, an overwhelming majority answer positively (86% in August 2008, 76% in October 2016). In the same vein, those nostalgic about the Soviet Union cited as one of the two main reasons to regret its dissolution the loss of the feeling of belonging to a great power. In 2006-2016, between 43 and 56% of respondents chose this explanation for their regret (multiple choice was possible). Arguably, this reason is invoked more often in times of stability and prosperity (Levada Center 2018c). The most common reason was the breakup of a united economic system (Levada Center 2016a).

⁷ This is in contrast with Hurrell's view that Russia refers to international law because it is a weaker actor's appeal to external authority (Hurrell cited in Deyermond 2016).

⁸ The Speaker of the Duma stated in 2020, for instance: "We have only one country (even though our political party interests may be different). We have lost the country once already, and especially those who are attacking the Constitution now should understand: you are responsible for the dissolution of the country..." (Volodin V.V., 14.07.2020).

while discussing a new agreement on military cooperation in the framework of the Union State of Belarus and Russia:

I am sure that in this room there is no need to remind the audience that in Europe and globally, conventional arms are being built up. The unified NATO armed forces are still planning to expand eastwards, completing their ranks by Eastern European countries. The ratification of this agreement is especially relevant on the 65th anniversary of the Great Victory. The efforts to revise the outcomes of the World War II are, unfortunately, extraordinarily strong. They disregard the settled post-war conditions and the strategic balance in the world (16.12.2009).

Ostrovsky sees an immediate threat in these revisionists efforts and uses it as an irrefutable argument in support of “unifying efforts” with Belarus and other post-Soviet states to build a system of regional security.

The role of the World War II as a major foundation for Russia’s sovereignty and importance, - only strengthened since the 2000s, thus makes perfect sense. WWII resulted in a bi-polar world, while the Cold War resulted in a uni-polar world; so, the only way for Russia to claim its super power status is to spring back to the post-WWII world or try to reconstruct it by allying with the Asian rising powers. With time, the victory in the WWII becomes so central to the discourse that it constitutes the main element of Russia’s historic and civilizational identity:

We are together the heirs of a civilization of values – values of freedom and justice, and it is very important that our young generation... respects our thousand year old history... understands what our Victory is – something the West does not understand – that such a Victory nobody ever had. It was the greatest Victory in the history of mankind, over the most fearsome foe in history and at the highest cost. If somebody else can show such a Victory, let them show it now, when we celebrate its 75th anniversary! (Nikonov V.A., United Russia, 23.06.2020).

Sovereignty is thus used as an anti-hegemonic concept, - in the context of politico-military hegemony of the US, but also of normative hegemony claimed by the EU (Neumann 1999, Diez 2004). On the connection between sovereignty and multi-polarity as the main organizing principle of a new world order, Lavrov’s speech in the Duma on 14 October 2015 offers a succinct illustration:

The West, with the US at the helm, are trying to slow down the natural process of the development of a new, more just, more stable and well-centered world order. Their efforts to impose on other states their transformation recipes have led to chaos and anarchy. Increasingly, states reject these efforts. Russia will continue an independent, multi-vector foreign policy, corresponding to its national interests and guaranteeing the country’s sovereignty, security and strong positions in the contemporary, highly competitive world.

Our country traditionally occupies key positions in international politics and fulfills the outmost important role of guaranteeing balanced international relations. At the same time, we do not impose anything on anyone, do not try to fit everybody into one standard, and do not force anyone to sacrifice peace and welfare in the name of some values.

This short extract contains all the main elements of the multi-polarity-centered discourse on sovereignty: Russia, respecting sovereignty of states, is opposed to the West and the US, which impose on states ready-made solutions relying on normative hegemony claims. Russia is at the same time a strong international player and a bulwark of diversity in international politics, which is necessary for peace and welfare. Its sovereignty is guarantee of sovereignty of other states.

Finally, the sense of Russia's vulnerability is especially well visible in the Duma, where extreme views are much more likely to be voiced than in the official discourse by the executive. Thus, MP Romanov in 2015 claims that Russia is under existential threat as it lost genuine sovereignty with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

There are surely interested parties, which aim at preventing Russia from restoring its national, public and popular sovereignty. [...] It is undeniable that at some point Russia will restore its sovereignty and regain its right to exist as an independent state. [Russia] since 22 years has been paying tribute to the West: in money..., people, brain power, resources – and it is not changing today, but sooner or later it will stop... (01.12.2015)

Certainly, his was a fringe view, not shared by most MPs, but in general, the analysis of parliamentary discourse proves that conspiracy theories about evil-intentioned forces, which dream of dismembering Russia and depriving it of independence and any strength, are widespread throughout the 2000s and the 2010s⁹. This radical view becomes more acceptable in the parliamentary rhetoric with time – and in 2020, while discussing “sovereignty-boosting” legislation aimed against foreign intrusion into Russian affairs, many MPs refer to pervasive insidious actions and plans by hostile “agents of influence”. Thus, the Speaker of the Duma proclaims:

There are those who wish to dismember our country, such statements are constantly made, - and today we can offer an efficient riposte: not only does the Constitution have a clause [about the protection of sovereignty and territorial indivisibility], but we have adopted today a law that punishes for calls, for desire, for intent to dismember our country. This is a good response to those who has dreamt about erasing our country from the world map (Volodin V.V., 22.07.2020).

⁹ For instance, MP Mironov (leader of the parliamentary faction “A Just Russia”), connects various threats (anti-Russian actions of the Baltic States, conflict in South-Easter Ukraine, blockade of Crimea, Middle East events and militants' actions in Afghanistan close to Central Asia) to a plan to hurt Russia and reminds that such plans often failed in the past, with devastating consequences for their initiators (01.12.2015).

This rather alarmist discourse polarizes international relations further and frames opposition to any actions of Russia by the West as motivated by the wish to weaken Russia or by vaguely defined Russophobia:

For some reason beyond Russian borders a number of malevolent actors voiced opposition to our amendments [to the Constitution]. One would think: why do they care? This is our Constitution indeed, our internal affairs and concerns. This means then that we have touched upon some sensitive issues, this means then they had long-term unfriendly plans on Russia. And thus, by introducing these amendments, we – so to say – stopped them in their way, and thus defended ourselves, strengthened our sovereignty (Tereshkova V., United Russia, 10.3.2020)¹⁰.

The discourse about extremely malevolent foreign powers, setting up Russia for failure and infiltrating all areas of domestic politics (via media, civil society, opposition parties, business, etc.) has turned highly paranoid. This rhetoric had been present before 2020 and even before 2014, but from 2020 on its tone has become almost hysterical:

“Mister Global” peaks out from each pocket in Russia, it had participated in the formulation of our [old] Constitution, in selling off of our property, in each pocket today here is an American spy, we are all under control (Ziuganov G. A., Communist Party, 19.01.2021).

Russia is now presented in the state of war with the West, where the West uses “all non-military instruments” of a coup, such as economic sanctions, discrediting authorities with fake stories, ideological takeover in education and economic management, mocking traditional values, rewriting history, decomposing some elites by consumption culture etc.¹¹

We can thus conclude that in relation to Russia itself, speakers in the parliament have conceptualized sovereignty as based on two foundations: first, the perceived vulnerability to Russia to evil intent and actions from outside and, second, its aspiration to global power status matching its historic legacy and civilizational uniqueness. These two elements offer a good explanation for the approach of the speakers to the sovereignty of Russia’s neighboring states – the approach marked by security concerns and justifications for limitations to the sovereignty of these states to satisfy Russia’s national security and other interests. These concerns result in the conceptualization of the neighborhood’s sovereignty as impermeable to the West and South, but permeable to the East and North (that is, to Russia itself). In the following sections, I will thus differentiate between the

¹⁰ She is not the only one to use this rhetoric. I can give another example to illustrate the ubiquity of this logic: “The West, embodied in European democracy, cannot rest. They have spoken themselves into agreeing that the Russian Federation must refuse the amendments, which have been suggested and included into the Constitution. This means that we have touched upon something very sensitive, and we should be insisting on it” (Ryzhak N.I., Just Russia).

¹¹ Speech by Tolstoy P.O, vice-Speaker of the Duma, on 10 February 2021.

discursive formulation of the sovereignty of Russia's neighbors in their relations to third powers and their sovereignty in their relations with Russia.

Scholars of contemporary Russia highlighted the existence of a double standard in Russia's approach to sovereignty of post-soviet states. Thus, Deyermond (2016: 14) notes: "If Russia has emerged [...] as the pre-eminent global defender of traditional conceptions of state sovereignty, its approach to state sovereignty within the space of the former Soviet Union has been radically different" and marked by the history of nominal sovereignty of Soviet republics, with real sovereignty situated in Moscow. She argued that this logic was carried into Russia's relations with the independent states created after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and underpinned the difficulty Russia had to fully acknowledge their sovereignty.

I will show that Russia does insist on full sovereignty of its neighbors, understood as refraining from any attempts at influencing domestic politics and even the motivation of domestic actors, by other states than Russia. Such attempts are indeed regarded as threats not only to their but also to Russia's sovereignty and security (Deyermond 2016: 15). In addition to the existing literature, I demonstrate the rhetorical moves allowing Russian élites to legitimate the distinction between Russia and other states when post-Soviet states' sovereignty is at stake – the logic of differentiating between public (state) and popular sovereignty.

Russian MPs are concerned about post-Soviet states' sovereignty when these plan to join regional integration frameworks, not controlled by Russia. In the case of Ukraine and Moldova's plans to sign Association Agreements with the European Union in 2013, the parliamentary discourse reminds one of classic cases of Eurosceptic European discourse, with their focus on the loss of democratic control and asymmetric dependency on Brussels, but with more pronounced geopolitical undertones. Pushkov, Chair of the Duma Committee on international affairs, said on 20 September 2013:

The beautiful words about the protection of sovereignty and the right of free choice of the Eastern Partnership countries in fact dissimilate the aspiration of the European institutions to put these countries in the situation of dependence on the European Union and include them into the sphere of its exclusive political and economic influence. The Enlargement Commissioner Füle has just announced: "We support Ukraine because Ukraine needs to have the right to take sovereign decisions". But in fact the European Parliament and Mr. Füle understand 'sovereign decisions' only as those decisions that distantiate Ukraine from Russia and include it into the EU's sphere of influence. Moreover, the pressure on Ukraine

in this context is without a precedent. [To the EU], Armenia's decision to join the Customs Union was extremely painful, it was a shock, which provoked a counter-attack via the Eastern Partnership project... It has become evident that the European politicians exercise direct political pressure and openly torment Ukraine to force the official Kiev into giving up a part of Ukrainian sovereignty and de facto submit its trade and market relations to Brussels' control. [...] Ukraine will have to change its laws according to the example of the EU without being able to influence the decision-making in vital spheres of its economy.

In a similar way and even more dramatically, Ukrainian plans to join NATO in 2006-2008, are presented as deeply damaging to the country itself: Ukraine's membership in NATO is forced, not willed and against its own interests; it also fundamentally endangers Russia's security (debate of 07.06.2006). This logic extends to states, which were never part of the Soviet Union, but can still be considered by Russian élites to enter into Russian sphere of influence due to historic links and shared culture. We can take as one example the discussion of Montenegro joining NATO, in 2015. MP Likhachev (Communist Party) proclaims:

... the Russophobe, pro-American, anti-popular project of pulling Montenegro into NATO ... violate the democratic principles. The people's will is forgotten. Amoral reigns. Montenegro is pulled into the same organization, which several years beforehand bombed Yugoslavia and caused enormous human suffering... ...Montenegro, by making this step, loses its sovereignty, loses its competencies in foreign policy and defense... And... the trend of tearing Montenegro away from Russia is markedly accelerated (20.11.2015).

More recently, the Speaker of the Duma explained that American support of Ukrainian protesters effectively lead to the "loss of the country" to foreign rule:

...we saw how representatives of the State Department in Ukraine were feeding demonstrators with cookies – how did it end? There is no country, only foreign advisors in place! (Volodin V.V, United Russia, 23.12.2020)

Therefore, the sovereignty of post-Soviet states – its impermeability to the West, in this discourse, is inextricably linked to Russia's own security. Outside of the benevolent influence of Russia, post-Soviet states may be manipulated by the Western powers into taking self-destructive decisions:

...in fact, the "Eastern Partnership" of the European Union is the instrument, which is used in the framework of the civilizational battle, - I can say it without exaggerating - and aims at amputating some states from the process of Eurasian construction, Ukraine in the first place. We obviously need to consider current events from a political point of view, we need to support the sober forces in Ukraine who listened to the economists and experts and grasped that this way can lead Ukraine to an external regulation of its economy, regulation from Brussels (Slutsky, 10 December 2013).

When it is opportune, the incompleteness of post-Soviet states' sovereignty is framed as a clash between the popular sovereignty (will of people) and state sovereignty (will of the élites). If Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus or another neighboring state declared its wish to cooperate with or join the EU or NATO, speakers in the Duma presented this choice as either the choice of a minority – not that of the people, or as unwise and economically and politically detrimental to the country itself, or as a threat to Russia's security and interests. The first rhetorical move is the most interesting: it detaches the government (as in the case of Moldova) or an active minority (as in the case of popular protests in Ukraine in 2013) from the country itself and denies this actor legitimate agency.

A reasonable, pragmatic version of this discourse can be found in the following example: in June 2006, when Ukraine was considering applying for NATO membership, MP Ryzhkov cautioned Duma against too harsh reactions, pointing out that “only a part of the establishment pushes Ukraine in this direction”, while the majority of the population (60-65%) opposes the idea (07.06.2006). More radical claims were made in 2007, when pro-European and pro-Western Yuschenko dissolved the Ukrainian parliament. Yuschenko was criticized by Russian MPs for wishing to hold onto power by illegal means and for promoting oligarchic interests rather than responding to the will of the people (06.04.2007). All his subsequent actions, which were interpreted as not suiting Russian interests, could then be framed as based on illegal power. Later, in 2011, when pro-Russian Yanukovich acceded to power, anti-Russian actions in Western Ukraine were interpreted along similar lines:

[T]hese scoundrel are not all Ukraine. This is the smallest part of Ukrainian citizens who, while realizing their impotence, their inability to achieve power by legal means, without the support of the majority of Ukrainian population, make use of similar vandalistic actions, and provocations (Ostrovsky, 11.05.2011).

An additional argument is introduced in 2008: MPs claim that élites and populations in post-Soviet states are targets of massive pro-Western and anti-Russian propaganda (04.06.2008). This propaganda blurs their understanding of their own interests and geopolitical realities. An interesting consequence of this logic is that Russian MPs and élites, allegedly not influenced by Western propaganda, are in a better position to clearly see the interests of the neighbors and defend them. Russian elites see interests better because they are based on some immanent qualities, such as ethnicity, language, religion, culture in general, as well as from some intrinsic qualities of the territory – geographic position, size of the population, lack of energy resources, etc.

To sum up: speakers in the Duma situate the agency of post-Soviet states with ‘the people’, based on the concept of popular sovereignty, and then deduce the interests of

‘the people’ from immanent qualities of the territory and population of these countries. When these intrinsic interests are not claimed by national élites, Russian MPs declare that the national political will is corrupted, through propaganda or illegal domestic actors. This logic allows them to “defend” popular sovereignty and non-interference into the affairs of post-Soviet states from outside, while leaving the option for Russia to intervene by denying agency to an ‘unfriendly’ government just as well as to ‘unfriendly’ popular protesters.

Deyermond (2016) traces Russia’s difficulty to acknowledge these states’ full sovereignty to the lack of the precedent: in fact, Russia did not have to deal with an independent Belarus, Moldova or Ukraine, or even Caucasus republics for a long time, if ever. Long history of common statehood in the framework of Russian Empire and then under the unifying ideological, anti-nationalist umbrella of the Soviet Union made it difficult to see the fates of post-soviet states as separate. Moreover, as noted above, these new sovereignties are a reminder of Russia’s vulnerability. Scholars note that Russia for a long time did not have a unified coherent approach to post-Soviet space or to CIS members (Lo 2002: 72-77). The élites hesitated how best to address the security needs of Russia in the new reality of post-soviet states’ independence. In the remainder of the paper, I will distinguish between a cooperative evolutionary approach and an imperial approach. The two approaches are united by the overarching foreign policy motivations, as outlined in the introduction: Russia’s primacy on the post-soviet space and its status as a great power. The difference between the approaches is located at the level of tools and policies, not ultimate goals.

Evolutionary cooperative approach

The evolutionary cooperative approach accepts the reality of the post-soviet states’ independence and sovereignty and argues for close ties based on mutually beneficial cooperation: economic, political and military. MPs are most likely to argue in this way when discussing Eurasian integration. They refer to benefits from trade in a large market, from gains in security and international power, and reason in terms of a common future. Economic integration would be a start and it could eventually not only bring tangible economic and social benefits, but also serve as the foundation for further, political, integration.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov in a speech on the topic of the Commonwealth of the Independent States (CIS) in March 2007, noted that some post-soviet countries, such as Ukraine, hesitated whether to choose the Russia-centered or the Euro-Atlantic vector of foreign policy. In this situation of competition, he advocated for an economy-centered approach to the cooperation within the CIS region, deprived from political undertones. A

more active “lobbying” of Eurasian integration, suggested by Zatulin (United Russia) would not work, according to Lavrov, as the benefits of cooperation were the only really convincing argument. At several points, Lavrov underlined that Ukraine was welcome to join the Single Economic Space and that it should take this decision independently, based on its national interest. According to Lavrov, the slow and non-binding character of the CIS work was a benefit rather than a drawback, as additional political pressure could harm the prospects of cooperation and reintegration. He highlighted that a sort of rivalry for the post-soviet states is being imposed from outside the region, but that Russia is “not going to fall for such provocations; we are building transparent, understandable relations with the CIS countries, based on sober economic calculations” (21.03.2007).

The further we go down the timeline towards the beginning of the 2000s, the more likely we are to find discourse exemplifying the evolutionary cooperative approach to the post-soviet states. In 2004, MP Ryzhkov acknowledged the new international politics reality as inevitable:

[L]et us, nonetheless, be realists and stand on firm ground. Today, unfortunately, there is no dilemma of keeping the old country [the Soviet Union] intact and dissolving it: all this has, unfortunately, already taken place... if we really wish to build a common economic space with Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Bielorrussia¹², we cannot avoid recognizing the borders between us (23.01.2004).

A strategy advocated by the MPs to keep post-soviet states close was to support the pro-Russian domestic political actors (exactly what they denied as legitimate political option to Western states and the EU):

I am deeply convinced that during the upcoming meeting the Supreme Rada will formulate its position [on the actions of vandalism in Western Ukraine during the celebration of the anniversary of the WWII victory], in the same way as the head of the Ukrainian state has already done... Without a doubt, the reaction of the Ukrainian authorities, of the Supreme Rada is an exclusively sovereign right of Ukraine. I consider it inappropriate to indicate to our colleague how they should act from here, the highest legislative authority [of Russia] (Ostrovsky, 11.05.2011).

With time, however, and especially after the breakout of the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea, similar discourse becomes rare and, when used, sounds cynical:

¹² The official country names of ‘Belarus’ and ‘Moldova’ are used relatively rarely in the Russian parliament and then mostly by representatives of the Government. Most MPs prefer to use soviet-times names of Bielorrussia and Moldavia – both are more familiar to Russians, but also clearly refer to these states’ recent history as soviet republics. Simply by using the old state name speakers legitimize claims of reintegration or, at least, of a continued priority relationship with Russia.

We should not [...] interfere into the internal affairs of a sovereign state, as has been stated by the President of our country Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin several times on different occasions, when he was asked about the situation in Ukraine. He has declared several times that the opinion and decisions of the Ukrainian people are a sovereign right of the people, government and authorities of Ukraine. Only the Ukrainian people may take such decisions, no interference from the Russian Federation will take place, and we support this in word and action – we are not interfering into internal affairs of Ukraine (Lebedev, United Russia, 22.01.2014).

Imperial approach

In 2002, Bo notes that “only a small minority supported an actively imperialist approach towards the region” (51). This is possibly true for the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, but we witness a rise in imperial discourse among the Russian élites and in the parliament since then. As foreshadowed by Lavrov in 2007, the talk about externally imposed competition for the post-soviet space begins to frame the neighbourhood’s choices as vital for Russia. While it is true that Russian élites were disunited as to how to interact with the CIS countries, they were unanimously opposed to efforts to involve these states in the European or Western (Euro-Atlantic) sphere of influence. This “reactive character of the imperial syndrome” (Bo 2002: 52) can be demonstrated by the way in which the EU’s efforts to include six post-soviet states into an institutional cooperation framework (Eastern Partnership) triggered an activation of the Eurasian, Russia-led integration initiatives in late 2000s. For example, in 2012, when proposing a new closer integration project (a confederation) between Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, MP Hudiakov explains:

How can we not recall the statement made by the American State Secretary Hillary Clinton on December 6, 2012 in Dublin - a scandalously cynical statement that the USA are developing effective ways to slow down and stop integration processes on the post-soviet space!¹³ In these conditions, the LDPR faction believes, we should put on the agenda the issue of deeper civilizational integration [...] between Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (18.12.2012).

Since the 2010s, there are more and more references to a geopolitical civilizational battle Russia is involved into, where the Eurasian integration projects are a key tool to preserve and increase Russia’s weight regionally and globally. MP Nikitin notes in 2012, the year of the most intense discussion about Eurasian integration:

¹³ This is indeed what Clinton said in Dublin (Financial Times, December 7 2012: <https://www.ft.com/content/a5b15b14-3fcf-11e2-9f71-00144feabdc0>, accessed on 31 August 2019).

Due to a worldview crisis, the authorities in the last 20 years have not yet managed to formulate a common national idea and its own civilizational project, which would succeed in guaranteeing national unity in Russia and people's integration on the post-Soviet space. Scientists confirm that with an alien worldview Russia has no future, so that a correct choice of the worldview, of a development model and of a civilizational project is the key challenge in Russia's destiny; Russia's existence itself hinges on it (16.05.2012).

This existential fear, fueled by domestic protests, underlies the shift from the evolutionary to an essentialist approach to the neighborhood. The imperial approach finds its fullest expression after the radicalization of the Russian institutional discourse linked to the Ukrainian crisis. This radicalization can be linked to the major foreign policy motivations: unlike Georgia or Moldova, Ukraine has been absolutely key to Russia's control of the post-Soviet space and especially of its identity as a great power. I will give an extensive examples of such discourse, which illustrate well the connection between the conditional sovereignty of post-soviet states, Russia's own, higher-level, sovereignty and its self-understanding as a great power, fighting against uni-polarity and externally imposed hypocritical restrictions in a competitive world politics:

24 years ago I witnessed, as a popular representative and deputy Head of the Supreme Council of the Russian Federal Soviet Republic, many tragic events of those years: the national betrayal by the élites, the sovereignty parade and the destruction of our great Fatherland, the expulsion of Russians from post-soviet states, the unashamed pillage of national wealth, and the poverty of the majority. The USA and the West were applauding the disintegration and hastily recognizing the independence of the Baltic and other republics, while we were facing a painful question – will Russia return on its historic path? So the latest events – the referendum [in Crimea], the voluntary return of Crimea to its Motherland, the ratification of the reunification treaty yesterday are among the brightest moments in the life of many and many in Russia. It seems that we have grown the wings, our forces have been increased tenfold and the hope and the self-assurance have returned.

Why is there then such a wild uproar and threats towards Russia from the West? Who are they, today's judges of Russia? This has been mentioned in this room already: the leaders of the USA and Europe, blood-stained from the murders and tortures in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya, Syria and other counties have now dressed the togas of peacemakers! Abraham Lincoln said once that a small part of the population can be fooled for a long time, many can be fooled for some time, but whole countries and continents may not be fooled forever. It seems like Obama and his predecessors were bad students of history. How else can we explain that while paying lip service to democracy and human rights, the West has been shedding all pretenses in enforcing a new, sinister, uni-polar world order? International law has been replaced by the right of the strong to cause mayhem, by the information wars based on lies and fakery, by using new ways of extinguishing whole states and peoples via coups and civil slaughter – such are the signs of this new world order! All the while the

Western satellites of the USA, gathered at the base of its throne, having forgotten their honor and identity, rush into approving or even participating in this aggression (Goryacheva, A Just Russia, 21.03.2014).

As this very eloquent speech demonstrates, full sovereignty of Russia is connected both with its great power status and the rejection of sovereignty claims of post-soviet republics: Russia's greatness was deeply undermined by a "parade of sovereignties", humiliating for Russia, but for these states as well. If Western countries can only be American satellites and are obliged to abandon their identity and honor, what fate can post-soviet states expect if not to become satellites of the satellites and lose themselves even more dramatically in the uni-polar world or, in the worst case, become targets of aggression?

A final argument in relativizing post-soviet states' sovereignty in relation to Russia are the deep social connections. Sizeable Russian-speaking and Orthodox populations in neighboring states are defined as "compatriots", claimed to be in need of pro-active protection and used as a justification for closely monitoring and influencing domestic policies of these states:

Today the West is trying to deny to us the right to state sovereignty, deny the right to defend the rights and legal interests of our compatriots, deny the right to reintegrate Crimea into Russia – the land where the light of sacred christening beamed onto our peoples (Yushenko, CPRF, 07.04.2015).

In the course of the 2010s, several legislative changes made it easier to obtain residence permits and then citizenship for Russian-speaking migrants from post-soviet states. Simplified naturalization also made it possible for many residents of Ukraine to obtain Russian citizenship, thus providing further reasons for intervening in domestic affairs of Ukraine. In fact, the "support of compatriots who reside abroad, in fulfilling their rights, protecting their interests and preserving general Russian national¹⁴ cultural identity" became part of the new Russian Constitution (part 3, article 69). MP Krashennnikov (United Russia) directly linked this constitutional clause to the protection of Russian sovereignty (10.03.2020).

In the case of Belarus, the existence of the Union State of Russia and Belarus was instrumentalized to justify "brotherly support" during major protests against the hijacked elections in 2020:

Somebody has said here ... that it is an internal affair of Byelorussia – but this approach is absolutely wrong. This is a Union State, this is our common affair! ... We have helped and will help Bielorusia... we will support the aspiration to independence and worthy life that

¹⁴ The word used in Russian is "rossiyskaya" (it refers to political, not ethnic, identity).

Lukashenko has formulated in the last years. This is a question of our historic survival (Ziuganov G.A., 15.9.2020).

Here again, restrictions on the sovereignty of a post-soviet state are presented as necessary to the preservation of Russia's sovereignty and identity.

In general, imperial discourse has gained firm ground in Russian parliament since 2013 and has all but suppressed the evolutionary cooperative discourse, which has remained only in official statements about Eurasian integration and speeches refuting claims about Russia's imperial ambitions and double standards towards sovereignty.

Conclusion

In this paper, I demonstrated how identity and sovereignty are to a large extent instrumental in Russian institutional discourse and serve as tools for claiming and supporting Russia's status as a great power. Relying on a corpus of parliamentary debates in the lower chamber of the Russian parliament (Duma) between 2004 and 2021, I showed that Russia's identity is kept intentionally complex, composite and multifaceted, to allow a voluntaristic choice between (Eur)Asia and Europe. . Over the years, speakers in the Duma kept the identity options open, but insisted more and more on the intransigent, strict respect of "national interests" in international interactions, avoiding making concessions and compromising autonomy. Thus, more important than the choice of a particular identity is Russia's ability to define this identity on its own and thus maintain international agency vis-à-vis other important actors, such as the EU or the USA. For this reason, civilizational uniqueness – which underpins Russia's claims to a special place in the region and is a common reference in parliamentary discourse – does not have a hard core in the discourse, but is vague and malleable.

When conceptualizing sovereignty, speakers put it in the context of global politics and distinguished between great powers and other states. Tracing the "origin story" of Russia as a great power to the post-World War Two international setup, parliamentarians presented Russia as enjoying full sovereignty and acting as guarantor of sovereignty of "lesser" states, including post-soviet nations. Russia's sovereignty in a way extended and overlapped with that of post-soviet states – and guaranteed their autonomy from other powerful actors (mainly, the USA). This extension of sovereignty is justified by common history, culture, identity, economic and social ties. In particular, MPs depict significant Russian-speaking minorities or big numbers of residents with Russian citizenship as "compatriots" to whom Russia's sovereignty is directly connected. Their protection is now a constitutional obligation of the Russian Federation.

The discourse about Russia's sovereignty as a guarantor of a multi-polar world and international law recedes in the background after the domestic protests of 2011-2013. The protests increased the feeling of vulnerability of Russia to what the speakers in the Duma perceived as destructive foreign influence. The focus of the rhetoric moved to an increasingly alarmist rhetoric about hostile intent brewing all around Russia's borders. In this context, the incomplete and vulnerable to external influence sovereignty of post-soviet states could be seen as less and less tolerable.

While Russia's complex identity allowed it to balance between Europe and Asia to maximize its clout in changing and highly competitive world politics, post-soviet states were most often denied flexibility. In this discourse, Russia, due to its long history as a federal center and a 'protector' in the framework of the Russian Empire and of the Soviet Union may legitimately claim to understand the interests and wishes of these states' populations. According to Russian parliamentarians, the West's foreign policy in relation to post-soviet states was motivated by revengefulness or pure self-interest. Allegedly, the West approached their sovereignty cynically by only recognizing it as long as these states made the 'correct' choice to distance from Russia and their "genuine" identity and culture. This logic meant that when the West does not respect the full sovereignty of post-soviet states, it 'aggresses', but when Russia does the same, it 'protects'.

When discussing post-soviet states' sovereignty vis-à-vis Russia, MPs used two distinct approaches: evolutionary cooperative and imperialist. The first approach relies on the belief of the benefits of integration, based on mutual interest, the positive impact of trade on the economy and welfare, and on the hope of a common future. In this version, post-soviet states should understand the benefits of cooperation and integration and join Russia's economic integration frameworks, contributing to their own and Russia's strength. Russia is represented in this discourse as a pole of attraction, of soft power, a leader and driver of integration. The second approach is deeply nostalgic of the Soviet Union and the nominal sovereignty (Deyermond 2016) of the soviet republics: while to the external world, the republics' sovereignty was impermeable, they were effectively governed from Moscow. An important element of this imperialist discourse is fear – new sovereignties remind Russian élites about the precariousness of Russia's own unity as a multi-ethnic state. Since the domestic protests and the crisis in relations with Ukraine between 2014 and 2021 (I am not studying the discourse in 2022), a more prominent confrontational discourse about world politics in general has guaranteed the monopoly of the imperialist discourse in the parliament. The same speakers who before 2012 supported the evolutionary cooperative path turned to fiery nationalist rhetoric. Russia's international role depicted as that of an independent pole of influence in a multi-polar

world, battling against the aggressive imperialistic West, led by the USA, is so heroic, that it leaves little space for post-soviet states' sovereignty.

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Appendix: Search terms for coding the salience of the concept “sovereignty”

Суверенитет*

Суверенн*

Колониал*

Государственность*

Иностранный агент / иностранные агенты / иноагент* / инагент*

Агент влияния / агенты влияния

Пятая колонна

Вмешательств* (for this search term I completed a manual check to avoid irrelevant codings)