

# THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION AND BELARUS IN THE DISPUTE WITH THE WEST. A NEOCLASSICAL REALIST PARADIGM PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** *The contemporary international stage has undergone considerable changes/ developments in recent years, with emphasis on the tensions between actors such as the Russian Federation and the West. This paper aims to analyse the Russian Federation's foreign and security policy in the dispute with the West, highlighting the importance of Belarus in this script. By using a neoclassical realist framework that incorporates both systemic and intervening variables to explain foreign policy, I have been able to observe the evolution of the Russian Federation on the international stage after the end of the Cold War. The neoclassical realist "causal chain" showed us why a country like Russia decided to pursue specific objectives, on the international theatre.*

**Key words:** *The Russian Federation, the EU, the USA, Belarus, neoclassical realism, foreign policy.*

## 1. Introduction

The events of 2014, when Crimea and Sevastopol were annexed, created the feeling that the West was unprepared, not anticipating the actions of the Russian Federation. However, there has been a repositioning of the EU/ NATO, and several actions have been taken to condemn Kremlin's leadership, trying in this way to limit the effects of those events as much as possible.

Naturally, in this context of the conflict between the West and the Kremlin, the need to understand what drove the Russian Federation's foreign and security policy arose. In the post-2014 period the attention focused on the position of different states which are at the confluence of the interests of those two actors. In this category we find, among others, the Republic of Belarus.

The main objective of this paper is to explain the trajectory of the Russian Federation's foreign and security policy in the dispute with the West, highlighting also the position of Belarus. Subsequently, a second objective is to try to bring new perspectives to the present debate on Kremlin's foreign policy in the field of international relations.

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In terms of methodology, I will use document analysis (direct documents – speeches, strategies, agreements etc. and indirect documents – papers/ books of the most well-known researchers on this subject), and conceptual analysis.

From the theoretical point of view, I will use only the most frequently invoked elements of the neoclassical realist paradigm perspective which “ [...] builds upon the complex relationship between the state and society found in classical realism without sacrificing the central insight of neorealism about the constraints of the international system” (Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, 2009, p.13).

The term neoclassical realism appeared in 1998 when Gideon Rose used it for the first time in a review paper of four books and one anthology of articles, published in *World Politics*, in which he claimed that this new theoretical perspective is “ [...] a useful framework for carrying out the kind of midrange theorizing that so often is the best social science can hope to achieve” (Rose, 1998, p. 168).

According to Rose, neoclassical realism depicted in the books mentioned in the footnotes, separates itself from other forms of realism through the fact that “It explicitly incorporates both external and internal variables, updating and systematizing certain insights drawn from classical realist thought” (Rose, 1998, p. 146). This theoretical framework is a realist one because “its adherents argue 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” (Rose, 1998, p. 146), and it is also neoclassical because “they argue further, however, that the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level” (Rose, 1998, p. 146).

## **2. The Russian Federation and the Neoclassical Realist Paradigm Perspective**

For analyzing the Russian Federation’s foreign and security policy, we must start from the systemic level. In this process, a first step is to look at neorealism, which “defines an international system as comprising only a structure and the interacting units” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, p. 36). The structure is seen as “ [...] a set of constraining conditions that affect actors’ behavior, modeling the political process in the system” (Waltz’s work as cited in Dîrdală, 2006, p. 128). The characteristics of the structure of the international system are: “the organizing principle of the system [...] the second echelon of the structure refers to the specification of the functions of the units [...] the third echelon of the structure refers to the distribution of capabilities” (Dîrdală, 2006, pp. 128-129).

Developing on Waltz’s conception of structure and system, neoclassical realism embodies the next two elements: one is that “ [...] while the structure of the system imposes constraints by delimiting a range of possible strategic responses and bargaining outcomes, the system itself cannot dictate the behavior of individual units” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, p. 36), and the second one is that “ [...] the system’s anarchic ordering principle generates pervasive uncertainty among the units” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, p. 36). This international anarchic system represents “ [...] a self-help environment” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, p. 37), in which we find a “ [...] struggle for power amongst units within the system” (Smith, 2016, p. 17). Neoclassical realists adopted the “

[...] elements of national power approach, which sees power as a means to an end, not an end unto itself, and which separates 'power' from 'influence' " (Wohlforth and Schweller works as cited in Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, p. 44).

In this international environment, neoclassical realist paradigm assumes that " [...] states respond to the uncertainties of international anarchy by seeking to control and shape their external environment" (Rose, 1998, p. 152), and that they " [...] are likely to want more rather than less external influence [...]" (Rose, 1998, p. 152).

### **2.1. Systemic Stimuli/ Factors – The Relative Distribution of Power**

At the level of independent variable, where the systemic stimuli are, we will look at the relative distribution of power. Other two systemic elements identified in the book of Lobell, Ripsman and Taliaferro (*"Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics"* - 2016), are the clarity of the international system and the permissiveness-restrictiveness of the strategic environment. In what follows, I will not explore the contested concept of clarity, even if the authors mentioned above claim that it can be measured a priori "based on relative capabilities, expressed intentions, and the time horizon, as well as the salience of optimal policy responses" (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, p. 50), also admitting that "While this is not a precise formula, it is a good start" (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, p. 50). I will omit from my analysis the permissiveness-restrictiveness of the strategic environment.

In order to determine a state's material capabilities, which can be a challenging endeavour, neoclassical realists use various measurements like a country's gross domestic product (GDP), level of annual defense spending, or national morale, and so on (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, p. 44).

In the process of determining the present relative capabilities of the Russian Federation, I used the *State Power Index 1991-2017*, elaborated by Piotr Arak and Grzegorz Lewicki. Regarding the methodology of this power index, the authors state that: "due to the evolving nature of international attitudes – we put emphasis on the hard power (economic and military dimensions), we do not neglect soft power [...]. Our index measures 7 dimensions which attribute different weight to different sets of factors" (Lewicki, 2017, para. 11). The results from those seven<sup>2</sup> dimensions, ranked the Russian Federation (State Power Index -5.25) in the third place, after China (State Power Index -12.49) and the United States of America (State Power Index -16.22), data presented by Arak & Lewicki (2017).

Supplementing the image detached from the Power Index cited above, the *Military Strength Ranking for 2017*, in which there are a total of 133 countries, situated the Russian Federation in the second place, with an Index of 0.0929, after the United States of America, which is in the first place, with an index of 0.0857. In this system of measuring the annual global fire power, it is better for a country to be closer to the perfect value of 0.0000 ("Military Strength Ranking", 2017). This instrument of measuring the global Fire Power is " [...] based on each nation's potential (conventional)

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<sup>2</sup> Economic Sub-index (40%), Military Sub-index (20%), Land Sub-index (10%), Human resources Sub-index (10%), Culture Sub-index (10%), Natural resources Sub-index (5%), Diplomacy Sub-index (5%).

war – making capability across land, sea and air. The results incorporate values related to resources, finances and geography with over 50 different factors [...]” (“Military Strength Ranking”, 2017, para. 1).

Furthermore, according to the *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, which analyzes the military expenditure in the world, the United States is in on the first place, for the year 2016, with a value of 606 233 million dollars. The Russian Federation spent just 70 345 million dollars. In the second place, we find China which increased the military expenditure reaching at 225 713 million dollars in 2016 (“Military expenditure by country, in constant -2015- US\$ m., 2007-2016”, 2017).

The relative distribution of power reveals the nature of the international system, which, from a neoclassical realist perspective, can be unipolar, bipolar or multipolar. Before cataloging the present international environment as a unipolar one, it is necessary to explore this concept.

It should be noted, however, that in the following, I will not follow the entire debate of the last decades (discussions that focused on the polarity of the international stage, how to define the concept or what dynamics it implies), I will only highlight the elements I consider relevant for this paper.

This concept of polarity denotes “ [...] the number of great powers or major states in existence within a system at a given time, depending on their control over sufficient material components of power as well as the political and bureaucratic means to extract and mobilize these resources when necessary” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, p. 45).

With the year 1991, when the Soviet Union imploded, the bipolarity which characterized the dispute between the two great powers ended and it opened the discussion about the nature of the international system post-Cold War. The first predictions were that we will have a multipolar world, but Charles Krauthammer emphasizes, in his article from *Foreign Affairs*, “*The Unipolar Moment*”, that “The immediate post-Cold War world is not multipolar. It is unipolar. The center of world power is the unchallenged superpower, the United States, attended by its Western allies” (Krauthammer, 1990, p. 23). William C. Wohlforth, unequivocally asserted, in his paper from 1999 (“*The Stability of a Unipolar World*”), the fact that “ [...] the system is unambiguously unipolar. The United States enjoys a much larger margin of superiority over the next most powerful state or, indeed, all other great powers combined than any leading state in the last two centuries” (Wohlforth, 1999, p. 7). This last paper saw the unipolarity as a condition of the international system that cannot be categorized as being just for “a moment”.

To overcome unipolarity and to move to multipolarity, Wohlforth points out that the regional powers must “ [...] translate their aggregate economic potential into the concrete capabilities necessary to be a pole: a defense industry and power projection capabilities that can play in the same league as those of the United States” (1999, p. 30). Thus, the possible scenarios in which a similar pole to the US might appear are: “either true unification in Europe and Central Eurasia (the European Union becomes a de facto state, or Russia recreates an empire) or unipolar dominance in each region by Germany, Russia, and China or Japan [...]” (Wohlforth, 1999, p. 30). Using Wohlforth’s arguments, from my point of view, if we consider a shorter period, a united Europe is unlikely (even

more in the current context in which the UK decided to leave the European Union), and also a recreation of the "Russian Empire" does not seem realistic enough, despite Moscow's obvious wishes. Also, the possibility of a unipolar dominance in a specific region of an actor like the Russian Federation does not seem feasible soon, especially in a post-Crimea world in which the West takes notable actions to prevent another revisionist event like the annexation from 2014.

Even if it can be said that there is a competition between Kremlin and the West (here mainly represented by the EU) for Belarus, it is important to underline that "[...] regional and second-tier competition should not be confused with balancing to restructure the system toward multipolarity" (Wohlforth, 1999, p. 36). Thus, Belarus can be perceived as an element in a wider regional image of the Russian Federation which wants, among other things, "[...] to use its neighborhood as a source of regional and global influence" (Krastev, Leonard, Bechev, Kobzova, & Wilson, 2010, p. 40).

Even though there are a lot of limitations regarding the indicators of aggregate power, corroborating the information extracted from the *State Power Index 1991-2017, Military Strength Ranking for 2017* and those from the *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute* about the military expenditure in the world, with the arguments presented above, it can be said that the US remains far more powerful than its main competitors.

## **2.2. The Intervening Variable – the Perceptions of FPE**

Neoclassical realists identify four categories of intervening variables: the images and perceptions of state leaders, the strategic culture, the state-society relations and the domestic institutions. In this sub-chapter we will explore the perceptions of the Russian foreign policy executive (FPE). Neoclassical realism argues that "[...] each of the intervening variables [...] vary slightly in their influence over specific aspects of the dependent variable (DV) at specific times" (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, p. 91), thus the "[...] leader images should matter most in the short term" (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, p. 91). However, I will not limit my analysis to an individual leader and I will try to find the most important actors from the Russian FPE. Browsing through a longer period, this research sets out to reach a higher degree of complexity, therefore involves several different elements and levels of power, in contrast to a specific situation of crisis.

Steven Lobell's foreign policy executive model is composed of a range of actors, "[...] president, prime minister, or dictator, and key cabinet members, ministers, and advisors charged with the conduct of foreign and defense policies" (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, p. 61). This actor perception is very important in explaining the Russian Federation's foreign policy, because "FPE often possesses private information and has a monopoly on intelligence about foreign countries" (Ripsman, Taliaferro & Lobell, 2016, p. 61).

With the disintegration of the former Soviet colossus, the necessity to rethink the foreign policy of the resulting state appeared. In the first stage, the elite of the Russian Federation adopted a policy characterized "[...] by an acute emphasis on relations with the United States and Europe to the virtual exclusion of Russian historic partnerships with Eastern states or even the states of the Near Abroad" (Belopolsky, 2009, p. 14), but this direction will soon be questioned, with the reopening of the debate between the

Westernisers/ liberals and the Eurasianists/ national-patriots. In this first period, the Russian Federation believed it will be able to maintain its status as a major power and its position in the international system.

The liberals, like Andrei Kozyrev, the first post-soviet foreign minister, “ [...] saw strong common interests with the West, calling for integration and cooperation and identifying Russia’s interests with the ‘civilized’ world and its values” (Light’s work as cited in Belopolsky, 2009, p. 17), but soon an opposite group will appear and they will consider that “Russia had gone too far in its courting of the West and had to begin addressing questions of national interest” (Blacker’s work as cited in Belopolsky, 2009, p. 18).

Starting with the year 1993, in the Russian space, the vision of Eurasianism began to develop “ [...] a balanced policy between East and West [...] ” (Rangsimaporn, 2009, p.44), highlighting “ [...] the need to preserve Russia’s freedom of action and the importance of defending Russia’s national interests, even when this produced some discomfort in the United States or other Western countries” (Marantz, 1997, p. 82).

The main representative of Eurasianism was Evgeny Primakov, who took over the position of foreign minister from Kozyrev on January 5, 1996, marking the end of an era. In his first conference as foreign minister, Primakov said that: “Russia was and remains a great power. Its foreign policy should correspond to that status” (“Primakov wants ‘great’ Russia but calms the West” as cited in Rangsimaporn, 2009, p. 45). From this position, Primakov stressed that the Russian Federation’s foreign policy had to encompass both: on the one hand, there are the ties with the West and those with states like China, India, Japan, or the countries from the Middle East, on the other hand, Kremlin must expand its influence in the former soviet space (Tsygankov, 2010, p. 98). This vision is common to the period of Vladimir Putin’s leadership, “his foreign policy approach has been marked by the pursuit of a Eurasianist policy while simultaneously undertaking a policy which links Russia with European partners. This was particularly evidenced in the mid-2000s [...] ” (Belopolsky, 2009, p. 21).

The post Cold War unipolarity outlined a reality in which the Russian Federation was no longer a global actor, like the United States of America, and was perceived as “a geopolitically important actor” (Belopolsky, 2009, p. 22).

Kremlin administration’s response to the US hegemony was to participate sustainably in the construction of a multipolar world, which was “ [...] largely a defensive measure. Rather than seeking direct confrontation with the United States, Russia attempted to create conditions which allowed it to resist American influence and protect traditional spheres of influence from American encroachment” (Ambrosio’s work as cited in Belopolsky, 2009, p. 26).

Despite the ideas regarding a multipolar international environment, the Russian Federation under Vladimir Putin adopted a more nuanced approach, in the process of regaining the position of great power, understanding that “ [...] Russia could only encourage the establishment of a multipolar world when Russia itself was strong” (Bajarunas’s work as cited in Rangsimaporn, 2009, p. 107). Thus, in the first years of his first term in office, Putin adopted a collaborative attitude with the United States (for example he supported the US actions in Afghanistan after 9/11), but that will change (despite a short interlude during the period Obama-Medvedev, when American-Russian

relations intensified), becoming more assertive after “the 2003 US-led war in Iraq in the face of Russian and Chinese opposition, the lack of substantial US concessions on strategic arms reduction, US abrogation of the ABM Treaty, US support for the so-called ‘coloured revolutions’ in the post-Soviet space during 2003-5, and continued NATO eastwards expansion [...]” (Rangsimaporn, 2009, p. 108).

Also this list can be completed with the American intention of developing missile defense systems in Europe, or with the intervention in Libya from 2011, facts which contributed to Vladimir Putin’s vehement position in which he condemned the unilateral hegemonic actions.

The perception of the Russian Federation’s elite regarding the European Union, after the end of the Cold War, was predominantly in the lines described so far. In the first stage Kremlin’s administration, in support of its vision of multipolarity, “[...] sought to detach the EU from the NATO-US ‘conglomerate’ and to promote the European project as a reasonable alternative to the expansion of the Western military and political bloc” (DeBardeleben’s work cited in Bordachev, 2016, p. 563), but as Timofei Bordachev<sup>3</sup> pointed out, “the events concerning Ukraine proved such an approach to be infeasible” (2016, p. 563).

In the early 2000s, Moscow still wanted a strong EU, “partly due to its modernization agenda, partly because of poor knowledge of what the EU was and how it functions, partly because of its desire at that time to integrate into Western structures, and partly because of the EU propaganda [...]” (Suslov, 2016, p. 10), but this situation suffered substantial changes. The reality of 2004 revealed a context in which the Russian Federation’s vision regarding the ex-soviet space was in antithesis with the desire of the European Union to expand.

The following moments are important for the process of Kremlin’s change of perception regarding the EU: in 2003 “*Wider Europe — Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours*” appeared, which addressed the need for developing a zone of friendship and prosperity at the border of an enlarged Union (“Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament”, 2003, p. 4); in 2004 the European Neighbourhood Policy was launched, which had as an objective to “[...] enable neighbouring countries to share the benefits of EU enlargement in terms of stability, security and well-being” (“Communication from the Commission - European Neighbourhood Policy - Strategy paper”, 2004, para. 22). One could add to this list the coloured revolution from Ukraine in 2004 and the round of EU enlargement from 2004. After all these events, Vladimir Putin will see the European Union more and more as a rival.

One can say that the assertiveness of the Russian Federation on the international stage had substantially increased, and “This combativeness recently reached its apogee with Russia’s de facto invasion of Ukraine over American protests and in the face of American and European sanctions” (Rivera & Rivera, 2017, p. 1). It is important to mention that, between 2012 and 2013, the European Union supported the European path of some states from the ex-soviet space, namely Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia. These actions contributed to reaching this climax.

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The report called "*Russian views of the International Order*", published by the RAND Corporation in 2017, specifies that "Russian leaders and analysts currently articulate a view that the US-led order is expanding to encompass the entire world, thereby threatening the security of Russia and its neighbors and undermining Russian influence in its near abroad" (Radin & Reach, 2017, p.32).

Vladimir Putin had repeatedly expressed his position regarding the contemporary order of the international scene, the most famous references being the speech from 2007 from the Munich Conference on Security Policy, in which he said: "I consider that the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world" ("Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy", 2007, para. 15), or the intervention from the Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club from 2014, in which he accused the USA that "instead of establishing a new balance of power, essential for maintaining order and stability, they took steps that threw the system into sharp and deep imbalance" ("Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club", 2014, para. 18).

This position was also supported by other representatives of the Russian FPE, as Sergey V. Lavrov, the minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, who declared at the 72<sup>nd</sup> session of the UN General Assembly that: "The West structured its policy according to the principle of 'who's not with us is against us', having chosen the path of reckless eastward NATO expansion and provoking instability in the post-Soviet space and encouraging anti-Russian sentiments" ("Statement by H.E. Mr. Sergey V. Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation", 2017, para. 8).

Adding these last elements, it must be specified that, in this internal picture of the Russian Federation, Belarus can be found in the category called by the Russian elite "near abroad", concept which "[...] does not have an uncontested geographic range" (Radin and Reach, 2017, p.10), or in that of "spheres of privileged interests" (Medvedev's interview as cited in Trenin, 2009, p. 3). In 2008, when he was the president of the Russian Federation, Dimitri Medvedev said that this last concept contains "[...] regions where countries with which we have friendly relations are located [...]. It is the border region, but not only" (Kramer, 2008, para. 5-6). This major importance of Belarus for the Russian elite gets a more visible form through the common projects in which the two states are involved. With the occasion of Independence Day in Belarus celebrated in 2017, in the congratulation message from the Russian president it is stressed that: "Mr. Putin noted with satisfaction the positive dynamics in the cooperation between the two countries, the high level of interaction within the Union State, the Eurasian Economic Union, the CSTO and the CIS [...]" ("Congratulations to President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko on Independence Day", 2017, para. 2).

### **3. Discussion and Conclusions**

After analyzing the systemic variable, we are able to see that the current international environment is unipolar, the relative distribution of power between the first ranked, the United States, and the next competitors, represented by China and the Russian Federation is significant.



Also, summarizing the information obtained at the level of the intervening variable, it can be said that the perception of the Russian FPE is one in which the present international system is seen as a unipolar one, led by the United States of America. Moreover, the Kremlin's elite believes that this unipolarity represents a danger to the entire international scene, implicitly for the Russian Federation, and, at the same time, it does not even reflect the true balance of power. At a regional level, Moscow perceives the EU's actions as a threat to its "spheres of privileged interests", where we find Belarus.

Neoclassical realist theory sees the approach of a state like the Russian Federation as a mélange between external stimuli and internal constraints, assuming, like structural realists that "[...] states (i.e., their FPE's) would prefer to balance rather than under-balance or bandwagon, and prefer internal balancing to external balancing" (Ripsman, Taliaferro, & Lobell, 2016, p. 146). Neorealism considers that this process of counterbalancing a possible aggressor "[...] can be accomplished by internal efforts (increasing their own capabilities) or external (creating alliances)". (Dîrdală, 2006, p. 130)

Thus, in a unipolar environment in which there is a consensus of the Russian elite on the nature and the level of external threats, neoclassical realism tells us that we will have a confident and assertive Russian state that intends to gain even more influence over the international scene, balancing the position of the United States of America/ European Union. This desire of having more influence can also be a cause of concern for Belarus.

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