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**THE END OF THE END OF HISTORY?
THE WESTERN CONCEPT OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY
AND RUSSIA'S STRUGGLE FOR NORMATIVE HEGEMONY**

Analysis of Russia's Official Discourse on Democracy

Author: Jana Hošková
Supervisor: Dr. Maria Mälksoo

Abstract

By annexing a territory of the sovereign neighbouring state, Russia contradicted the very ideas that underpin the Western concept of liberal democracy, which sets the core principles cementing post-Cold War order. In the context of the Ukrainian crisis that started in November 2013, this thesis aims to explore Russia's current interpretation and implementation of democracy, a notion which grossly differs from the liberal concept that was established and promoted by the West. Contrary to the Western perception of liberal democracy that aspires to potential promotion globally regardless of local political, economic and cultural systems, this thesis argues that democracy needs to be studied in the context of national identity formation. Therefore, Russia's official discourse on democracy is analysed, tracing the conservative turn in Russia's politics since 2012 when Vladimir Putin was elected for a third term as the President of the Russian Federation. Moreover, this thesis perceives democracy as an empty signifier that is hegemonically controlled by the West and open to various interpretations by other, non-Western civilisations, and which can be construed to serve their particular national agenda and contexts. This thesis further reveals how Russia's official discourse on democracy is centred around three important nodal points. These are traditional values, the Near Abroad and information security. Russia often refers to, and uses the content of Western democracy rhetorically, yet in practice it re-interprets the meaning of democracy promotion as threatening its sacred values, violating stability in the post-Soviet space and the 'Far Abroad', and interfering with its information space. Lastly, this thesis concludes that Russia's official discourse on democracy is predominantly about national security preservation and should be interpreted within the context of Russia's relations with the West.

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Abbreviations

| | |
|------|---|
| EaP | Eastern Partnership |
| ECU | Eurasian Customs Union |
| EEU | Eurasian Economic Union |
| ENP | European Neighbourhood Policy |
| EU | European Union |
| FPC | Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation |
| ISD | Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation |
| MENA | Middle East and North Africa |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organisation |
| NATO | North Atlantic Treaty Organisation |
| NSS | National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation |
| PCA | Partnership and Cooperation Agreement |
| UN | Organisation of the United Nations |
| USA | United States of America |
| USSR | Union of Soviet Socialist Republics |

1. Introduction

After the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, optimism became the main characteristic of the post-Cold War thinking. The early 1990s brought about the widespread liberal belief in a universal transition to democracy, followed by its successful consolidation. The Western concept of liberal democracy has become the most celebrated model of governance of the twenty first century. As Francis Fukuyama famously stated “[a]t the end of history, there are no serious ideological competitors left to liberal democracy”.¹ As a result, the objective of spreading liberal democracy and the rule of law abroad has been incorporated in the very heart of foreign policy discourses by leading Western countries.² Both the United States (USA) and the European Union (EU) have adopted the view that liberal democratic government is the exclusive model of socio-political organisation that should be promoted globally.

Nevertheless, more than twenty-five years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, we are experiencing a situation in which “the value, the feasibility, and the prospects of democracy are under intense scrutiny in different parts of the world”.³ On the one hand, there is a growing dissatisfaction with democracy in the Western part of the world, where it is seen as unable to offer a magic formula for general welfare, or to make people feel they can influence the policy-making process. Instead, an atmosphere of political distrust has prevailed in many European countries. At the level of the European Union, populist and Eurosceptic parties are growing in strength, reflecting the increasing discontent of traditional elites held by European citizens. On the other hand, many non-democratic governments claim that despite democracy being a universal value, it does not necessarily have to copy the Western patterns of democracy. These kinds of assertions challenge the whole concept of the universality of democracy and human rights, and bring discussion about particular cultural traditions and their influence on democracy to the fore.

While in many discourses the West acts as a prominent defender of democracy – and consequently humanity, civilisation and rationality – there are other governments

¹ Fukuyama, 1992, p. 211.

² Magen and Morlino, 2009, p. xiii.

³ Przeworski, 2015a, p. 1.

who call the Western rationality into question.⁴ Nevertheless, this thesis argues that we should not underestimate even the most cynical attacks on Western hegemony by various counter-hegemonic discourses. In fact, all the evidence seems to suggest that the world is facing democratic backsliding and authoritarian resurgence. The past decade has been “a period of at least incipient decline in democracy”.⁵ These kinds of arguments by prominent scholars of democratisation disclose the deep crisis of democracy in the West, where it is too closely connected with the particular and unchangeable institutional setting and thus it is not able to respond to the challenges of the globalising world.

In the light of major international issues and current affairs, it is hard to think of a better example than Russia as a state engaging itself in counter-hegemonic attacks on the Western understanding of democracy. The present situation in Russia, which proclaims ‘sovereign democracy’ and employs increasingly assertive foreign policies, framed by the annexation of Crimea, provides a particularly interesting example of a state that seeks to challenge Western hegemony by using terms that are evidently and openly borrowed from the tradition of the West.⁶ By annexing a territory of the sovereign neighbouring state, Russia contradicted the very idea that underpins Western concept of liberal democracy, which sets the core principles cementing post-Cold War order.

Therefore, the main goal of this thesis is to illustrate how Russia is currently, in the light of the Ukrainian crisis, relating itself to the concept of democracy established and promoted by the West, and how it pursues its own specific notion of democracy that differs from the dominant Western discourse.

⁴ Morozov, 2015, p. 9.

⁵ Diamond, 2015, p. 142.

⁶ Morozov, 2010, p. 185.

The main research questions follow:

How is the notion of democracy reflected in Russia's official discourse?

How is the Russian concept of democracy advocated in official discourse, and how is it related to mainstream Western discourse?

How is Russia's national identity projected onto its discourse on democracy?

How are the Western democracy promotion activities reflected in Russia's official discourse and what particular role the EU plays in Russia's interpretation?

Instead of asking if Russia *is* a democracy, this thesis explores what Russia's official discourse on democracy looks like. In spite of the fact that there no universally accepted definition of democracy may exist, finding out what democracy means within a particular culture is a much more feasible objective. This study thus attempts to illustrate the significant influence of national identity on foreign policy that can further explain why some states and civilisations have difficulties accepting and implementing the liberal concept of democracy promoted by the West.

Rather than examining the institutions traditionally associated with democracy (free and fair elections, media freedom etc.) or drawing a comparison between the Russian state of democracy and Western democracy, this contribution focuses on the way that Russian political elites employ the concept of democracy in their speeches. By shifting my study from monitoring the tide of events on the ground to the way Russian democracy is reflected and advocated in political discourse, this study provides scholars of democratisation with a new perspective on current events and the possible future of democracy not only in Russia, but also in the cradle of liberal democracy – the West – where this political phenomenon is experiencing difficulties. The Russian case thus raises

a number of normative questions that are key to the future of democracy as a global phenomenon.

1.1. Rationale for the research

While in the West the idea of a human rights-centred world framed by Western democracy and a market economy has been relatively well established, there are many other non-Western countries and societies that remain sceptical about the viability of this vision. In different parts of the world, the Western vision of world order is often seen as unable to promote a just and stable international system due to its exclusively Western orientation and its unsatisfactory comprehension of other cultures.⁷ Therefore, some scholars suggested⁸ that rather than promoting the dialogue imperative for building an international system that takes diverse viewpoints into consideration, this perspective contributes to further hostility and isolationism among international actors.⁹

Moreover, while a multitude of literature has been produced examining the influences of international structures on the state of democracy within countries, studies analysing the opposite end of this debate are rather rare. The area impact of states' policies on what might be considered to be 'international democracy' has not yet been sufficiently explored. Studies of the prospects of international democracy require openness to the different ways democracy can be practiced in the places around the globe, where formal institutions are resistant to democratisation.¹⁰

This thesis thus argues that contrary to the Western perception of liberal democracy that aspires to potential promotion globally regardless of local political, economic and cultural systems, democracy needs to be studied in the context of national identity formation. New ideas about political orders cannot be constructed by elites at

⁷ Tsygankov, 2003, p. 53.

⁸ See, for instance, Rajae, 2000; Tsygankov, 2003; Koelbe and Lipuma, 2008; Morozov, 2013.

⁹ Tsygankov, 2003, p. 53.

¹⁰ Dryzek, 2006, p. 103.

will. Instead, they need to resonate with existing identity constructions deeply rooted in national institutions and political culture.¹¹

Balancing between the West and the non-West, Russia can serve as an appropriate case study to show that democracy should be studied in the context of national identity. Secondly, studying Russia's official discourse on democracy would help to deconstruct the Kremlin's often defended claim that it poses a unique notion of democracy. Thirdly, by studying how officials themselves justify their policies and how these policies are then interpreted in both the domestic and international context, we have an opportunity to obtain a more in-depth understanding of a particular state action, as well as to prognosticate this action's failure or success.¹²

As Lene Hansen argues, 'facts' and 'events' should be theorized as discursively constituted phenomena. Once established as such, 'facts' and 'events' might be mobilized by critical discourses that challenge the dominant discourse.¹³ It is argued throughout the thesis that this is exactly what Russia is trying to do – to change the Western dominant narrative about democracy and democracy promotion. In order to change this normative viewpoint, it uses the 'facts' and 'events' to offer alternative explanations and thus counter the Western hegemony over the notion of democracy. With this in mind, discourse analysis serves as an appropriate tool to show how Russia uses and misuses the current events in order to justify its critique of the Western normative expansion in the name of democracy. In other words, it is rather the articulation of these 'facts' and 'events' that produce policy and should be studied in order to understand intentions and plans hidden behind the official terminology.¹⁴

Moreover, discourse studies can be differentiated from other approaches, such as the study of norms in International Relations, which generally takes into account only the 'collective understanding of the proper behaviour of actors' of western elites, other knowledge being often omitted. Discourse analyses, on the other hand, also examine alternative discourses that are otherwise silenced or excluded by hegemonic discourse,

¹¹ Marcussen et al., 1999, p. 617.

¹² Tsygankov, 2014a, p. 19.

¹³ Hansen, 2006, p. 214.

¹⁴ Ibid.

and explain how these alternative discourses work, perhaps in resistance to the dominant knowledge or power.¹⁵

What is more, discourse analysis enables to explain how a discourse produces this world – how it selectively constitutes some and not others as “privileged storytellers [...] to whom the narrative authority [...] is granted, how it renders logical and proper certain policies by authorities and in the implementation of those policies shapes and challenges people’s modes and conditions of living, and how it comes to be dispersed beyond authorized subjects to make up common sense for many in everyday society”.¹⁶ Therefore, examining this ‘discourse productivity’ differentiates study of discourse from other approaches that do not explore “how foundations and boundaries are drawn – how states are written [...] with particular capacities and legitimacies at particular times and places”.¹⁷

1.2. Structure of the study

The main scope of this study is the discipline of international relations. Since the focus of the thesis lies in Russia’s discourse on democracy, the study is theoretically positioned in the poststructuralist theory of hegemony. Democracy is seen as an empty signifier that is hegemonically controlled by the West. The main focus of the thesis is the counter-hegemonic discourse prevailing in Russian political thinking that is further promoted in its Near Abroad. Firstly, the concept of democracy, as the core of this thesis, is introduced and further discussed in the context of the transitology paradigm and democracy promotion. It is argued that although democracy has a long history and has been accepted by almost every country in the world, at least rhetorically, it is one of the most contested and debated concepts.

¹⁵ Milliken, 1999, p. 230.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 236.

¹⁷ Weber, 1995, p. 29, quoted from Milliken, 1999, p. 236.

Secondly, the notion of national identity is discussed, describing the process of its formation. It is explained that newly emerged meanings or interpretations in the national context are highly questioned. Only those ideas that are seen as resonating with pre-existing identities embedded in political culture and institutions can constitute a legitimate political discourse.¹⁸

Thirdly, the poststructuralist theory is presented, paving the way for discourse analysis. Special attention is paid to two concepts: an *empty signifier* and *hegemony*. The general idea of discourse theory is that social phenomena are never total or finished. This infers that they can never be ultimately fixed. Therefore, this leads to constant social struggles for definitions of society and identity, with consequent social effects.¹⁹ An empty signifier helps to capture the conceptual problem of democracy in the contemporary world. Poststructuralists borrow the notion from linguistic theory and argue that the linguistic and the social are two co-dimensional spheres of human existence. All socially significant distinctions are reflected by language, which means that any difference in language is a symptom of a social phenomenon. This is especially important in the political process, since any political action must be put into words.²⁰ The precarious situation of democracy in today's world can be put down to the concept being emptied from both ends. At its core, it is depoliticised by being reduced to the existing empirical reality of Western countries. In the periphery, on the other hand, it is relativized by alternative hegemonic views that strive for widening definitions of democracy to the extent where it loses much of its instrumental value.²¹

The next chapter begins with the description of methodology chosen for the thesis. The method of discourse analysis is explained in line with the work of Lene Hansen, and is followed by an explanation of the data sampling process for official discourse analysis.

The main part of the thesis focuses on how Russia contests Western hegemony by offering its own definitions of democracy and other universal values. Unlike most European countries, Russia has decided not to be a part of the disciplinary framework

¹⁸ Marcussen et al., 1999, p. 614.

¹⁹ Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 24.

²⁰ Morozov, 2009, p. 33.

²¹ Morozov, 2013, p. 10.

imposed by the West. At the same time, however, Russia uses the same language as that which has been established in Western discourse to criticise the West and strengthen its own sovereign autonomy.²² This thesis argues that Russia's official discourse on democracy centres around three important nodal points. These are traditional values, the Near Abroad and information security. All of them are interconnected and offer the fully-fledged perspective of Russia's discourse on democracy only when studied together. Nevertheless, to better illustrate the way in which Russian elites have spoken about democracy, the analysis is divided into three parts.

Firstly, the role of traditional values in the Kremlin's articulation of democracy is described, i.e. directed especially towards Russian domestic politics. Secondly, these cultural discursive points are studied against the background of the Ukrainian crisis and the annexation of Crimea, when Moscow's rhetoric concentrates on Russia's role in the global world, where its sovereignty is threatened by the promotion of Western democracy. Thirdly, it is showed how the issues of traditional values and Western policy of democracy promotion materialised in the 2015 National Security Strategy and what it implies for the role of democracy in Russia's official discourse.

²² Morozov, 2010, p. 186.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Concepts of democracy

Yet a term that means anything means nothing. And so it has become with 'democracy', which nowadays is not so much a term of restricted and specific meaning as a vague endorsement of a popular idea. (Robert A. Dahl, 1989)²³

The above quotation by Robert A. Dahl, an eminent scholar in the area of democracy, frames the debate surrounding the concept of democracy, and serves as an apt introduction to this chapter. The aim of this section is not to trace the notion of democracy back to ancient Greece and describe its evolution to its contemporary meaning. Instead, it aims to point out the contradictions of democracy as a political phenomenon that is widely considered to have potential for extension of its reach "to cover billions of people, with their varying histories and cultures and disparate levels of affluence".²⁴ In spite of the fact that democracy has a long history and has been accepted by almost any country in the world, at least rhetorically, it is one of the most contested and debated concepts.²⁵ As Václav Havel, a well-known Czech dissident, wrote in his essay *Power of the Powerless* in 1978 about the Western democracy:

[T]o cling to the notion of traditional parliamentary democracy as one's political ideal and to succumb to the illusion that only this tried and true form is capable of guaranteeing human beings enduring dignity and an independent role in society would, in my opinion, be at the very least shortsighted. I see a renewed focus of politics on real people as something far more profound than merely returning to the everyday mechanisms of Western (or, if you like, bourgeois) democracy. [...] [N]o opposition party in and of itself, just as no new electoral laws in and of themselves, could make society proof against some new form of violence. No "dry" organisational measures in themselves can provide that

²³ Dahl, 1989, p. 2.

²⁴ Sen, 1999, p. 4.

²⁵ Babayan, 2015a, p. 13.

guarantee, and we would be hard pressed to find in them that God who alone can save us.²⁶

Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, the global promotion of democracy has become an integral facet of the foreign policies of many Western countries. A large volume of literature has been produced based on a normative understanding that democracy is the best type of government, with no alternatives that deserve attention.²⁷ This view on democracy follows the ideas that it promotes “freedom as no feasible alternative can”,²⁸ that it is a global standard of political legitimacy, and the “best system for achieving the kind of prosperity and effective governance that virtually all people desire”.²⁹ To the contrary, some scholars point out that as democracy was built on an elite-driven, procedural definition of democracy as polyarchy - not including matters of economic and social justice - Western democracy promotion was predestined eventually to fail.³⁰ There are also those who argue that democracy is not a desirable form of government, as it promotes westernisation, and that it is unattainable because of citizens’ ignorance.³¹

In order to speak about democracy and ask why it has proved unworkable in many parts of the world, including Russia, it is first necessary to introduce a widely accepted definition of the concept. However, to fully conceptualise one of society’s most theoretically and empirically debated concepts can be a daunting task. These difficulties stem from the fact that there are many definitions of democracy based on different understandings of what criteria it should meet. All of the basic attributes of liberal democracy were formulated by the end of the 19th century and shaped in a debate that can be traced back to ancient Rome. Nevertheless, it was only after the World War I that democracy was defined systematically.³² Due to the limited space of this study I will narrow my focus to the two most influential and eminent scholars: Joseph Schumpeter and Robert Dahl. Instead of engaging in the study of democracy as an abstract ideal, they

²⁶ Havel, 1985, p. 25.

²⁷ Babayan, 2015a, p. 13.

²⁸ Dahl, 1989, p. 89.

²⁹ Plattner, 2016, p. 5.

³⁰ Lazarus, 2014, p. 41.

³¹ Gilley, 2009, p. 124.

³² Møller and Skaaning, 2013, p. 31.

both focus on practical, realistic meaning of the term and put emphasis on the election process. The main idea of Schumpeter's 'minimalist' definition of democracy is the election of leaders: politics is fundamentally a competition between alternatives. Therefore, Schumpeter focuses narrowly on popular sovereignty and does not include civil liberties such as freedom of assembly, into defining attributes of democracy.³³

In Dahl's view, democracy is an ideal type of governance, whose lower stage is represented by *polyarchy*: a political order that can be distinguished by two broad characteristics: "Citizenship is extended to a relatively high proportion of adults and the rights of citizenship include the opportunity to oppose and vote out the highest officials in the government".³⁴ More specifically, Dahl enumerates seven institutions, all of which must exist for the government to be classified as a polyarchy: elected officials, free and fair elections, inclusive suffrage, the right to run for office, freedom of expression, alternative information, and association autonomy.³⁵ These criteria can be used to assess the extent to which existing political regimes are polyarchies. According to him, even though polyarchy is "one of the most extraordinary of all human artifacts",³⁶ its procedures are insufficient for achieving full democracy. In spite of the fact that Dahl's polyarchy criteria are less demanding than his standards for democracy (that is effective participation, voting equality at the decisive stage, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda, and inclusiveness), they are still much more thorough than Schumpeter's formula of 'minimalist' democracy.³⁷

Irrespective of democracy's feasibility and desirability, it persists in being the most celebrated form of governance of the twenty first century. Therefore, many governments seek to promote it abroad. Despite refusing to fully implement all the attributes of liberal democracy, some have adopted a localised version of democracy.³⁸ It has since become apparent that many new political regimes in the former communist world, as well as in Latin America, Asia and Africa, differ significantly from the Western

³³ Møller and Skaaning, 2013, p. 31.

³⁴ Dahl, 1989, p. 220.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 221.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 223.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 108-127.

³⁸ Babayan, 2015a, p. 13.

type of democracy. As a result, literature is filled with alternative concepts, such as ‘competitive authoritarianisms’,³⁹ ‘delegative democracy’,⁴⁰ ‘illiberal democracy’,⁴¹ or hybrid regimes,⁴² trying to capture the state of democracy in the transitional countries.

It is important to note that democracy within the mainstream liberal tradition is still the domain of the classical transitological paradigm that is studied in the framework of comparative politics. It is approached as a phenomenon that is limited to the nation-state. Various political regimes are analysed to be classified on the axis between the two ideal poles: perfect democracy on one side, full authoritarianism on the other side. The problematic part of this approach is that the evaluations of a political regime are often based only on the formal criteria of global indexes of democracy, such as Freedom House or Polity IV.⁴³ This rather formalistic approach creates even more doubts when it is dealing with such a complicated country as Russia.⁴⁴ Furthermore, scholars of transitology approach democracy as a universal phenomenon whose criteria cannot be dependent on cultural particularities. Any criticism of Western democracy promotion that calls the universality of Western models into question is refused,⁴⁵ since culture is apprehended in this context as a façade that is used by dictators all around the world to refuse the installation of democratic institutions in their societies.⁴⁶

Moreover, when discussing different views on democracy and its specifics coming from various cultural backgrounds, unique processes of national identity formation and geopolitical position became wholly unacceptable after the United Nations’ World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993. As the final document, Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted at the conference, states:

³⁹ See Levitsky and Way, 2002.

⁴⁰ See O’Donnell, 1994.

⁴¹ See Zakaria, 1997.

⁴² See Diamond, 2002.

⁴³ See for instance Coppedge and Gerring, 2011.

⁴⁴ Migranyan, 2015, p. 15.

⁴⁵ Morozov, 2015, p. 2.

⁴⁶ Shestak, 1998, p. 202.

All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated. The international community must treat human rights globally and [...] it is the duty of States, *regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems*, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms. [...] Democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. [...] [T]he promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels should be universal and conducted without conditions attached. The international community should support the strengthening and promoting of democracy, development and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in the entire world [emphasis added].⁴⁷

Nevertheless, a multitude of literature has been produced criticising the transitological approach. For instance, Thomas Carothers argued in 2002 that “[m]any countries that policy makers and aid practitioners persist in calling transitional are not in transition to democracy, and of the democratic transitions that are under way, more than a few are not following the model. [...] It is time to recognise that the transition paradigm has outlived its usefulness and to look for a better lens”.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Viatcheslav Morozov draws attention to the failure of transitologists to deal with relativist discourses, such as Russia’s ‘sovereign democracy’, by which the transitological paradigm “loses its most crucial battle”.⁴⁹ By the same token, as the post-Cold war period has shown, many authoritarian regimes have persisted and remained to be rather popular since opening public elections to participation by opposition movements in order to mask the authoritarian practice behind their democratic institutional façades. While autocratic leaders changed the façades of their government, the fundamental model of control and domination endured.⁵⁰

When comparing prospects for democratisation in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 and in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) during the Arab Spring, Lucan Way comes to the conclusion that the Arab autocracies of today “enjoy better survival

⁴⁷ Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, 1993.

⁴⁸ Carothers, 2002, p. 6.

⁴⁹ Morozov, 2013, p. 2.

⁵⁰ Brownlee, 2009, p. 6.

prospects than did the communist autocracies of yesterday”.⁵¹ According to him, the single most important factor that helped to facilitate democratisation in the post-communist countries in Europe was the strength of their ties to the West. This is what differentiates their successful story from the course of events in the MENA region. Way points out that the only successful democracies that emerged after 1989 were those that were offered full membership into the EU.⁵² During the 1990s, the EU membership was perceived as synonymous with prosperity, and enlargement came to be seen as “one of the most important variable of political life”.⁵³

In order to explain Russia’s ideas about democracy, the next section will briefly describe the two models of international democracy – multipolarity and democracy promotion – that found their place in Russia’s official discourse on democracy.

a. Democracy within the states system

It is possible to distinguish two main forms of international democracy within the state systems – multipolarity and postcolonialism. As will be shown further in my thesis, the issue of multipolarity holds a particularly important position in Russian political thinking. Some authors⁵⁴ even argue that the concept of multipolarity is deeply rooted in Russian foreign policy philosophy as its key element. Therefore, this subchapter will only focus on the first of the visions.⁵⁵ Multipolarity represents a model of democracy embedded in the idea of multitude of sovereign states balancing each other in order to forestall unipolarity by one superpower. As Andrey Makarychev points out, the logic of multipolarity, understood as a simple redistribution of power among several centres, makes the fundamental attributes of democracy, such as respect for human rights, media freedom, or free elections, either irrelevant or equally acceptable along with planned economy, authoritarianism or even totalitarianism.⁵⁶ The rhetoric of ‘democratic

⁵¹ Way, 2011, p. 18.

⁵² Way, 2011, p. 24.

⁵³ Zielonka, 2003, p. 1.

⁵⁴ See for instance Ambrosio, 2005; Makarychev and Morozov, 2011; Tsygankov, 2014a; Lo, 2015.

⁵⁵ For the latter see for instance McEwan, 2009.

⁵⁶ Makarychev, 2013, p. 48.

multipolarity' can often be observed in countries with significant democratic deficits, such as Russia, Belarus, Cuba, Venezuela, China, Iran, and others. From their standpoint, countries with established democracies have a tendency to regard their particular experiences embedded in Western culture as universalistic, which leads to their assumption that other countries and civilisations have to accept them without reservation, by which they challenge the multipolar world order.

The discourse of many non-Western countries on multipolarity is thus based on challenging the opposite – a unipolar world. Nevertheless, as Makarychev notes, this contrast might be divided into various different contexts.⁵⁷ In the case of Russia's foreign policy thinking, for instance, one can find two different temporal interpretations of multipolarity. According to the first interpretation, the end of a bipolar confrontation between the USA and the USSR resulted in the establishment of the US-led unipolar domination, which is contested by a multitude of rising powers, including Russia. A second interpretation, nevertheless, is based on the view that the multipolarity had been established already at the beginning of the 1990s, and has survived despite the US's constant struggle to create a unipolar system.⁵⁸ What follows is that within the first reading, multipolarity may obtain meaningful democratic features, representing a form of resistance to the structures of hegemony. In the second argumentation, on the other hand, its democratic characteristics are much less obvious, because what matters is "the stabilising nature of multipolarity," which may be based on institutions that originally had little in common with democracy, like the balance of power, or have even attempted to challenge it, when pursuing great power status.⁵⁹ As will be shown below, this vision of a multipolar world gained political legitimacy after the NATO's involvement in the war in the Balkans during the late 1990s, when its Operation Allied Force was launched against Yugoslavia.

Nevertheless, in spite of their prevalence in the literature, the state-based approaches are perceived by many scholars as outdated. As already noted at the beginning of this thesis, the historical period after the dissolution of the Soviet Union was somewhat

⁵⁷ Makarychev, 2013, p. 56.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Bordachev, 2009, p. 61, quoted from Makarychev, 2013, p. 56.

unique. The objective of spreading liberal democracy and the rule of law abroad has become an integral part of foreign policy discourses by leading Western countries. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the idea of democracy promotion became dominant in the Western discourse on democracy.

b. Democracy in a post-international world

This idea of democracy is based on the vision that liberal democratic government is the only legitimate model of political organisation and the model to be promoted globally.⁶⁰ The process of democracy promotion is of particular importance in this approach, founded on universalisation and externalisation of domestic norms.⁶¹ The USA and the EU made the global proliferation of the democracy promotion paradigm an explicit goal of their foreign policy.⁶² The EU itself employed several mechanisms for democracy promotion: control, contagion, convergence and conditionality.⁶³ While in the original founding treaties of the EU, there was no mention of ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’, these terms were incorporated into treaty language in 1992 when the Maastricht Treaty was signed. The EU started to play a direct role in the democratisation process of accession candidate countries from Central and Eastern Europe. In 1993, the Copenhagen criteria were introduced, laying down the formal membership conditions – democracy, the rule of law, the functioning market economy, and implementation of the *acquis*.⁶⁴

In the post-international world, nevertheless, states are no longer a dominant force for change. Democratic perspectives of a post-international world imply more agency for sovereignty-free agents, such as NGOs, civil society groups or professional associations. All of them present an important role of contributors to international democracy, and states learn how to establish a partnership with them to promote a democratic agenda. They interact with non-sovereign actors, advancing the global normative agenda. By supporting local agents of democratic change, external democratic promoters help to

⁶⁰ Magen and Morlino, 2009, p. 1.

⁶¹ Makarychev, 2013, p. 50.

⁶² Börzel, 2015, p. 523.

⁶³ Spengler, 2007, p. 11.

⁶⁴ Baracani, 2009, p. 54.

shape domestic balances of power.⁶⁵ In practical terms, however, democracy promotion in the post-Soviet region, and particularly in Georgia and Ukraine, ultimately failed to meet initial expectations, when a short period of democratic opening after the Colour Revolutions was replaced by democratic backsliding.⁶⁶

As Andrey Makarychev points out, the major problem with democracy is conceptual in its nature: the idea of democracy that was originally used for identifying the type of domestic political regime is being automatically and uncritically projected onto the whole international society. As will be seen in this thesis, this argument is highly relevant in the Russian political context, since these projects of democracy promotion significantly influenced the way the normative type of arguments are used by Russian elites.⁶⁷

Moreover, the theoretical framework of democratisation does not pay much attention to international actors and factors, since it tends to concentrate solely on elite behaviour, political culture or economic issues.⁶⁸ At the same time, theories of international relations often neglect the question of democracy, focusing exclusively on the questions of power, hegemony and dominance. Nevertheless, on the grounds of increased interconnectedness of domestic and international political and economic realities, a phenomenon such as democracy calls for an analytic framework that takes into consideration both domestic and international factors. What is more, Russia's foreign policy and domestic politics are seen in this thesis as two sides of a single political phenomenon. Any strict separation between foreign and domestic policy can thus be fairly counterproductive. Therefore, the issue of national identity will be introduced in the following subchapter, explaining the influence of national cultural context on the acceptance of the ideas that are deemed universal, such as liberal democracy.

⁶⁵ Wolff, 2015, p. 219.

⁶⁶ Makarychev, 2013, p. 50.

⁶⁷ Makarychev, 2011, p. 178.

⁶⁸ Babayan, 2015a, p. 3.

2.2. Democracy and national identity

Thomas Koelbe and Edward Lipuma argue that in many approaches to measuring democracy, the “underlying assumptions are highly a-historical and a-cultural”.⁶⁹ According to them, different cultures and histories simply produce different democracies, and for this reason democracy in the postcolonial regions will not, and cannot, develop in a similar manner to those in the Western European and North American settings. They emphasise the need to ‘democratise democracy’, so that postcolonial efforts to create democratic institutions are given the same opportunity to discuss the questions regarding progress towards democratic regimes, and different conceptions and trajectories of the meaning of democracy are taken into consideration in Western democratic discourse.⁷⁰ Moreover, John Dryzek holds the view that during the past two decades the world has witnessed “increasing interest in extending democracy into an international system long inhospitable to democratic projects beyond the level of the nation state”.⁷¹

As Antony Smith maintains, national identity, a collective sense of belonging to a particular nation, provides “a powerful means of defining and locating individual selves in the world, through the prism of the collective personality and its distinctive culture”.⁷² Lene Hansen describes identity as the ontological and epistemological centre of poststructuralist discourse analysis. According to her, identity is “produced through and constitutive of foreign policy, and it is rationally and discursively constituted”.⁷³ Particular constructions of identity underpin and legitimise policies. Therefore, scholars’ ambitions should be to show how these constructions “impose particular constraints on which subject can gain a legitimate if circumscribed presence and which foreign policies might in turn be meaningfully proscribed”.⁷⁴

Andrey Tsygankov further explains that national identity is a complex phenomenon, a product of domestic and international history, with two important

⁶⁹ Koelbe and Lipuma, 2008, p. 1.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Dryzek, 2006, p. 101.

⁷² Smith, 1991, p. 17.

⁷³ Hansen, 2006, p. 37.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

dimensions: unity and distinctness. The unity dimension explains how homogenous a nation is in sharing various visions and myths about its history, territory, religion, language, and institutions.⁷⁵ National distinctness, on the other hand, describes how different or similar a nation is in relation to other members/nations of international society. A sense of distinctiveness represents the external dimension of national identity. In the process of various identification with neighbour states, as well as with the other international actors, a nation identifies itself and learns about various aspects of its speciality, uniqueness, and commonness in relation to the others. This distinction dimension can then contribute to the understandings of the dynamics of threats and alignments in world politics. Both unity and distinctness create an integral part of national identity and refer to societal boundaries in both inclusive (creating an overreaching collective self-consciousness) and exclusive (separating out those outside the metaphorical or physical boundaries) terms, respectively.⁷⁶

As Tsygankov holds it, national identity building is not contingent on the establishment of a political and economic system based on Western liberal democracy. It will rather “go on so long as nations exist, facing a variety of challenges from within and abroad”.⁷⁷ Identity formation can thus be described as a process that is always open to change and never completed. It is based on making sense of reality by establishing and re-establishing certain meanings. Therefore, identity formation can be described as “a process of obtaining significance, or *signification*, through which newly emerged and highly contested meanings evolve into meanings that are little contested and institutionalized”.⁷⁸

To better illustrate the process of identity formation, this thesis uses the scheme proposed by Andrey Tsygankov that comprises of three stages (see Figure 1). During the first stage, new meanings emerge as a result of historical practices, in a society allowing room for new interpretations of its past and present. At this stage, newly emerged meanings or interpretations are highly challenged and have only marginal influence

⁷⁵ Tsygankov, 2001, p. 16.

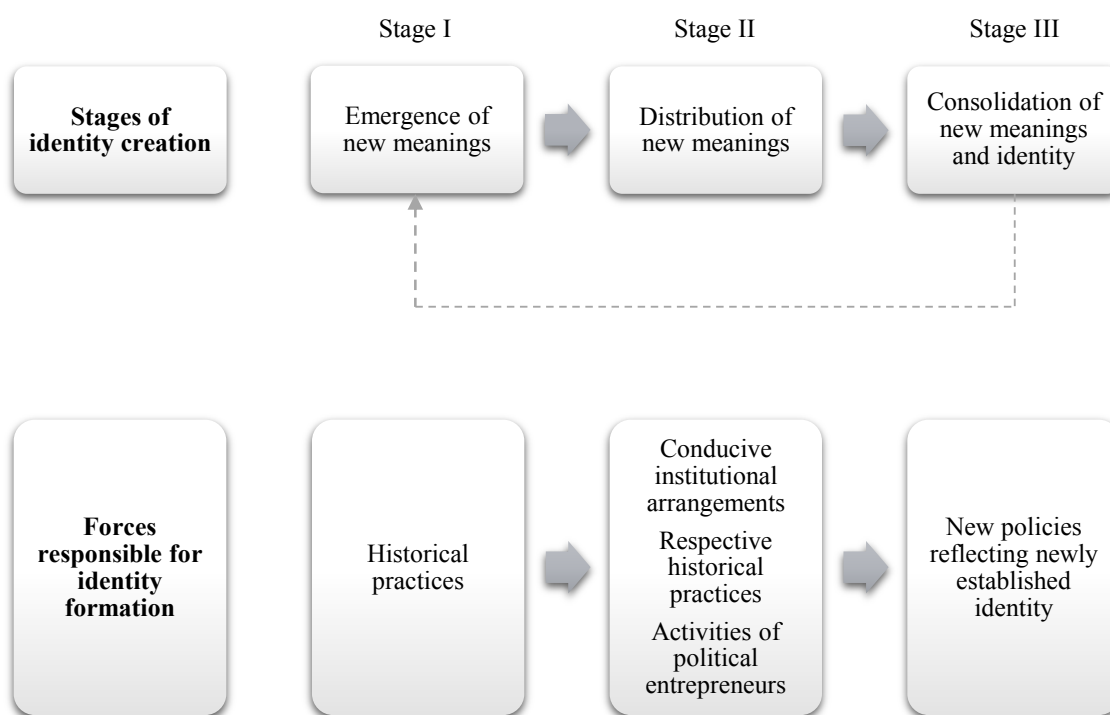
⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

because of the overwhelming power of hegemonic discourse. Nevertheless, at Stage II, the newly emerged meanings acquire a chance to increase their influence. During this stage, the new meanings diffuse across the society by means of conducive institutional arrangements, repetitive historical practices and activities of political officials, thereby increasingly attaining hegemonic status. At the final, third stage, identity formation reaches the point when the new meanings are adequately consolidated and get exploited, both politically and socially, for the purpose of their further consolidation. Meanwhile, however, history does not stop – new meanings emerge questioning the old identity’s content and boundaries and provoking change.⁷⁹

Figure 1. The process of national identity formation based on Tsygankov’s scheme⁸⁰



⁷⁹ Tsygankov, 2001, p. 17.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Discourses on national identity thus result in an inevitable confrontation between Self and Other. Therefore, there needs to be an image of Other to invoke a reflection on Self. Discourses on national identity are thus discourses on national difference. As Georgy Buntilov argues, this difference does not need to be substantial. Nevertheless, the awareness of difference is strengthened by the antagonism between the Self and Other. Historically, political leaders have legitimised their security policies by constructing other countries, communities, sexual minorities, or immigrants as Others, who are threatening the social fabric and security of the national Self.⁸¹

Iver Neumann, for instance, introduced a theory of ‘false’ and ‘true’ Europe, which represents a key feature of Russia’s thinking about Europe. This Norwegian author traces Russian identity evolution back to the emergence of the Grand Duchy of Moscow and Tsardom of Russia (the so-called Muscovy) when it became an independent international actor. According to this pattern, ‘false Europe’ represents, in the Russian interpretation, countries with strong anti-Russian sentiments and those who have lost true European values. These countries constitute Russia’s Other. ‘True Europe’, on the other hand, is a projection of Russian identity – Self – and includes countries friendly to Russia, which are devoted followers of the ‘original spirit of Europe’.⁸²

The EU and the NATO, on the other hand, are not constituted against an external, geographical Other, but rather against a temporal Other: the fear of its own past. Therefore, they reconstructed themselves as alliances based on the defence of liberal values, and this identity connects a universal promise – all states can and should become liberal democracies – while granting Western states the privilege of defending the content of this universality.⁸³ The construction of the Other as temporarily progressing toward the Western Self is thus a central component of discourses on democratisation and human rights.⁸⁴

Identity is thus established through the process of constant competition between old and newly created meanings. This is also the case of the role of democracy in the

⁸¹ Buntilov, 2016, p. 2.

⁸² Neumann, 1996, p. 194.

⁸³ Hansen, 2006, p. 40.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 48.

particular national identity. While it is regarded as a universal principle that should be accepted without any reservations by each country in the world, the national context and social reality of respective states, where the ideas of the political and social order are deeply embedded, is often omitted.

This thesis thus argues that the process of national identity formation is interrelated with discourse formation. Apart from the works of Andrey Tsygankov and Lene Hansen, this contribution is inspired by the study of Martin Marcussen (et al.), who analyses the evolution of the ideas on Europe and European integration in France, Germany and Great Britain from the 1950s until the late 1990s and describes how these ideas interacted with collective nation state identities in the discourses among political elites.⁸⁵ As he argues, it is necessary that the new ideas of political order resonate with pre-existing identities that are deeply rooted in political institutions and cultures, so that they could constitute a legitimate political discourse. Secondly, the moment of ‘critical juncture’ is essential, since it defines a situation in political discourse when identity constructions are open to being contested.⁸⁶ In this case, Marcussen argues, political elites choose among the available and legitimate identity constructions on the basis of their perceived power interests. The combination of the perceived interests and ideas’ resonance then creates the dominant identity construction. Once consensus is achieved on the identity construction, these collective views are institutionalised. Consequently, the number of legitimate identity constructions in a political space decreases, until the moment of another ‘critical juncture’ is reached.⁸⁷ To put it differently, the old understanding of political order substantially delimits the extent to which new ideas can be incorporated in given nation state identities.⁸⁸

Identity formation can thus be described as a process that is always open to change and never completed. This is also the case of universal concepts, such as democracy,

⁸⁵ Marcussen (et al.) explains why the idea of Europe was incorporated in the French nation state identity during the 1980s and 1990s, whereas the West German political discourse has been characterized by a consensual Europeanised vision of German nation state identity since the end of the 1950s. In the same manner he examines why British political elites have shared the same version of British nation state identity since the 1950s and why European identity constitutes the British ‘other’, although a friendly one.

⁸⁶ For the study of ‘critical junctures’, see also Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007.

⁸⁷ Marcussen et al., 1999, p. 614.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 614.

human rights, justice, equality and individual freedom, which all constitute specific types of normative orders and are open to various interpretations. Based on works of Ernesto Laclau, Chantall Mouffe, Viatcheslav Morozov, and Andrey Makarychev, I call these concepts *empty signifiers*. This poststructuralist notion and its relation to democracy will be explained in the following chapter.

2.3. Democracy as an empty signifier: introduction into poststructuralist theory

The conceptual problem of democracy in the contemporary global discourse can be very well captured by the poststructuralist notion of empty signifier. Poststructuralism perceives the linguistic and the social as two co-dimensional spheres of human existence. All socially significant distinctions are reflected in language, which means that any difference in language is a symptom of a social phenomenon. This is of particular importance in the political process, as any political action, by definition, must be put into words, which not only give it a meaning and provide legitimacy, but also set a subject position and ‘place’ in the social actors.⁸⁹

The aim of this subchapter is to introduce the concept of the empty signifier, which is later used to approach the notion of democracy in the light of discourses’ struggle for normative hegemony. Firstly, the evolution of the concept of a *sign* is introduced. Secondly, the modification of the concept within the poststructuralist theory is discussed. Here, the relationship between the *signifier* and the *signified* is further elaborated upon, which enables us to understand how certain concepts, such as democracy and human rights, constitute a specific type of normative order and are open to various interpretations. This will bring me to the last point, where the concept of the empty signifier is presented.

⁸⁹ Morozov, 2009, p. 33.

The notion of a *signifier* has its origin in the idea of a *sign* which was introduced by the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure. His ground-breaking ideas from the beginning of the 20th century introduced a new approach to the understanding of language. Saussure asserted that signs consist of two sides, the form (significant) and the content (signifié), and that the relation between them is arbitrary. The meaning that is attached to words is not innate in them but it rather stems from social conventions whereby we connect certain meaning with certain sounds.⁹⁰ According to Saussure, the meaning of individual *signs* is determined by their relations to other signs, e.g. the word 'horse' is different to the word 'dog' and 'cow'. Consequently, the word 'horse' is a part of structure or network of other words from which it can be differentiated. The word 'horse' thus gets its meaning from everything that it is not. Furthermore, Saussure argued that this structure is a social institution, hence it can change with time. This indicates that relationship between language and reality is also arbitrary, a point developed in later structuralist and poststructuralist theory. The word itself does not dictate the words with which it should be described - for instance, the sign 'horse' is not a natural consequence of a physical phenomenon. The form of the sign is different in different languages (for instance 'Pferd', 'лошадь', and 'kůň') and the content of the sign can also change when it is applied under new circumstances (when, for instance, telling someone 'don't look a gift horse in the mouth').⁹¹

In the Saussurian tradition, language is understood as a semiotic system and a distinction between two levels of language, *langue* and *parole*, becomes important. While *langue* is the structure of language - a network of signs that give meaning to one another - and it is fixed and unchangeable, *parole* is situated language use, the signs that are *de facto* used by people in specific situations. Parole always draws on langue, since it is the structure of language that makes specific statements possible.⁹² The main concept of the Saussurian tradition, a *sign*, is important not only for the comprehension of the initial logic of the concept of a signifier, but also for the understanding of how the nature

⁹⁰ Saussure, 2000, p. 67.

⁹¹ Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 10.

⁹² Ibid.

of relations between ‘name’ and ‘object’ changes, and, last but not least, for providing a good grasp of the discourse analysis.

The poststructuralist starting point lies in structuralist theory. Nevertheless, it modifies it in important aspects. On the one hand, it adopts the structuralist view of *signs*, the meaning of which is derived from internal relations within the network of signs rather than through their relations to reality. On the other hand, it refuses the idea that language is a stable, unchangeable structure and rejects the sharp distinction between *parole* and *langue*.⁹³ Beginning with the first critique of traditional structuralism, poststructuralists do not believe that signs have such a fixed position. Instead, they are of the opinion that signs still gain their meaning by being different from other signs, but those signs from which they differ can change according to the context in which they are used. This does not imply that words are open to all meanings, since this would make language and communication impossible. Nevertheless, it does bear the consequence that words cannot be fixed with one or more definite meaning(s).⁹⁴

Furthermore, there are words, such as ‘democracy’, ‘unity’, or ‘revolution’, that are abundantly used in various discourses, notwithstanding inconsistency among their meanings. While these words are of particular significance for certain discourses on specific issue, they can have practically opposite meaning in different discourses. To put it in into practice, the stark disagreements between the EU and Russia reveal a normative gap that deeply divides the two actors and makes a dialogue between them very difficult. In the official discourse, they interpret the idea of democracy, human rights or freedom differently. They are certainly divided over the meaning of sovereignty and the importance of transnational and supranational patterns of integration.⁹⁵

To use poststructuralist vocabulary, a struggle is taking place for what could be called *empty signifiers*. Those concepts, such as democracy, human rights, justice, equality and individual freedom all constitute specific types of normative orders and are open to various interpretations.⁹⁶ Therefore, it can be seen that the link between the

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 10-11.

⁹⁵ Makarychev, 2014, p. 16-17.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

signifier and the *signified* is not as stable as was argued by Saussure. Instead, as poststructuralists claim, the structure becomes changeable and the meanings of signs can shift in relation to one another.⁹⁷

This brings us to the second poststructuralist critique, related to the distinction between *parole* and *langue*. While structuralists believe that *parole* cannot be an object of structuralist study because situated language use is perceived as too arbitrary for it to be able to tell us anything about the structure or *langue*, poststructuralists are of the opinion that it is in concrete language use that the structure is created, reproduced and changed. People base their speaking or writing on a structure – otherwise speech would make no sense – but they might also challenge the whole structure by introducing alternative ideas for how to fix the meaning of the signs.⁹⁸

A notion of an *empty signifier* was introduced by Ernesto Laclau. He further elaborates on the idea that there is no necessary link between the *signifier* and the *signified*. According to him, an empty signifier is a signifier without anything signified. This means that it can be associated with multiple meanings without having one specific *de facto* meaning. An empty signifier enables individuals to fill the sign with new meanings, and thus fill the abstract idea of the universal with specific content. The signified is emptied of any precise content due to the “sliding of the signifieds under the signifier”.⁹⁹ It follows from this logic that democracy is an empty signifier as the signifier of democracy is so over-coded that it means everything and nothing.¹⁰⁰ According to Slavoj Žižek, the Universal is empty, yet precisely as such is always-already filled in - that is, hegemonised by some particular contingent content that acts as it stands in. To put it another way, the universal is the battleground on which a multitude of particular contents fight for hegemony.¹⁰¹

Contemporary democracy can be seen as precisely such an empty signifier, since it pertains to the totality of humanity and, consequently, directly to human nature. As

⁹⁷ Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 11-12.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Laclau, 2007, p. 36.

¹⁰⁰ Torfing, 1999, p. 301.

¹⁰¹ Žižek, 1999, p. 100-103.

Viatcheslav Morozov points out, being non-democratic in present-day political discourse is almost equal to being non-human. Nevertheless, the privileged position that democracy enjoys is also the reason why democracy is used and abused by all kinds of political elites in order to fill it with their particular historical content.¹⁰² As already discussed in the previous chapter, opposing democracy comes very close to being heretical. It is nevertheless still worth trying for non-democratic regimes to redefine democracy in such a way that a particular political regime matches up to the definition. This struggle between particularities that try to fill in the universal is what Žižek refers to as the fight for hegemony.

According to Laclau, democratic politics are a process in which succession of finite and particular identities attempt to assume the universal tasks surpassing them. As a result, however, they are never able to wholly disguise the distance between task and identity, and can always be substituted by alternative groups. As Laclau claims, incompleteness and provisionality belong to the essence of democracy.¹⁰³ According to him, the universal is incommensurable with the particular, but at the same time, it cannot exist without the latter. “My answer is that this paradox cannot be solved, but that its non-solution is the very precondition of democracy”.¹⁰⁴ Democracy is possible, he argues, if the universal has no necessary body and no necessary content. Instead, different groups compete between themselves to temporarily give to their particularism a function of universal representation. Society thus creates a bundle of empty signifiers whose temporary signifieds are the results of a political competition.¹⁰⁵ A concept of hegemony, which represents a result of the struggle between particular signifiers to endow an empty signifier with concrete meaning, will be the content of the next chapter.

¹⁰² Morozov, 2015, p. 6.

¹⁰³ Laclau, 2007, p. 15-16.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

2.4. Concepts of democracy and the struggle for normative hegemony

The notion of hegemony has its origin in classic Marxist tradition. It first appeared in the writings of Russian Marxists Axelrod and Plekhanov in order to unravel an extraordinary historical situation in which one class (the proletariat) should realise the role of another class (i.e. the dismantling of the feudal system in a bourgeois revolution). Hegemony thus served primarily as a strategic term related to the dislocation of normal development.¹⁰⁶ Antonio Gramsci substituted this rather authoritarian concept of hegemony with a more democratic notion, comprising both political and moral leadership and focusing on articulation of collective will within a national-popular character.¹⁰⁷ Hegemony is hence no longer understood as an alliance of pre-constituted identities, but rather as the production of a new collective identity.¹⁰⁸ According to Gramsci, hegemony “is a relation, not of domination by means of force, but of consent by means of political and ideological leadership”.¹⁰⁹ To put it differently, domination can be described as hegemonic when it is not directly based on violence. Instead, it is secured with the dominant class successfully establishing its own interest as the interest of society as a whole.¹¹⁰

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe further developed this concept within the poststructuralist theory.¹¹¹ In their interpretation, hegemony is largely rid of its economic content.¹¹² Poststructuralist theory expands the notion of hegemony and defines it as “a relationship that can exist between any political identities at any level, from local groups to global forces”.¹¹³ At the same time, Laclau and Mouffe maintain the core idea that

¹⁰⁶ Torfing, 1999, p. 108.

¹⁰⁷ Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 108.

¹⁰⁸ Torfing, 1999, p. 108.

¹⁰⁹ Simon, 1982, p. 21.

¹¹⁰ Morozov, 2015, p. 7.

¹¹¹ They transformed the Marxist tradition in three ways. Firstly, they refrained from the division between base and superstructure, perceiving all societal formations as results of discursive processes. Secondly, they rejected the Marxist conception of society. According to Laclau and Mouffe, ‘society’ is our attempt to define clearly the meaning of society rather than objectively existing phenomenon. Thirdly, they dismissed the Marxist understanding of group formation and identity. People’s identities (both individual and collective), they argue, result from contingent, discursive processes, and as such are part of the discursive struggle. See Jorgensen and Philips, 2002, p. 34.

¹¹² Diez, 2013, p. 200.

¹¹³ Morozov, 2010, p.188.

hegemonic domination is always contingent, and the boundaries which separate antagonist forces are always unstable. Hegemony is described as a power which is simultaneously accepted by way of (partial and hesitant) identification with the source of power and challenged via delimitation of a boundary between the ‘oppressors’ and the ‘oppressed’. Contrary to total domination, hegemony is a system of social institutions and practices (with the underlying discursive articulation) stemming from a decision of a political nature that is still very much alive and can be a subject of reactivation. What differentiates it from pure antagonism, which does not allow for any shared identity between antagonistic forces, is that hegemony partially accepts the hegemonic subordination as legitimate.¹¹⁴

Supposing that unity is understood in positive terms as being a new shared identity among a number of pre-existing identities, it can only be a consequence of a hegemonic operation through elevating a particular identity into a universal status and through generating a variety of empty signifiers in the process. Nevertheless, a necessary precondition of this process is the existence of an external Other, since the universal is established by ruling out those identities which go beyond the existence of this particular type of universality.¹¹⁵

Therefore, from a poststructuralist point of view, the reason why democracy exists as a universal value can be explained by the hegemonic position of one particular subject of history – the West. It came into existence as the subject of global history due to the fact that it imposed itself on non-Western civilisations,¹¹⁶ whose cultural variance was brought about in the act of colonial othering. It has continued to exist as a historical subject since there are communities throughout the world whose identities are characterised – sometimes even violently – as non-Western. At the same time, however, there is no explicit boundary that could divide the West and the non-West. Furthermore, the West is a very broad concept in itself and comprises very diverse countries.¹¹⁷ Discussions about diversity of the member states within the European Union, and the

¹¹⁴ Morozov, 2013, p. 7.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ See also Bhabha, 2005.

¹¹⁷ Morozov, 2013, p. 7-8.

increasing reluctance to its further enlargement, can serve as the most compelling evidence.

Nevertheless, as Viatcheslav Morozov maintains, the non-essentialist understanding of the West as a political community that was historically created by the means of colonialism and reproduced by persisting hegemonic struggles can be very dangerous, since it provides grounds for challenging the universality of democracy as allegedly appropriate only for Western societies, while non-Western countries should, based on this perspective, create their own authentic political order. Another danger hidden in this view is the inclination of many authoritarian regimes to employ pro-democracy rhetoric, claiming to be equally democratic (or even more democratic) than the West. Nevertheless, ‘democratic’ has, in this case, a different meaning based on their own, non-Western, organic way.¹¹⁸

Hegemony is thus seen as an articulation, which in itself is the practice of “establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice”.¹¹⁹ Resulting from the articulatory practice, a structured totality is received that is characterized by Laclau as a *discourse*. Gramsci, as well as Laclau and Mouffe, emphasise a hegemonic struggle rather than hegemony as such. In their interpretation, social forces are the pivotal agents in these hegemonic struggles.¹²⁰ As a result, hegemony can be understood as a political operation through which a particular identity is raised into a position where it can represent the whole.¹²¹ Discourse is then a result of hegemonic practices of articulation. Nevertheless, it is a play of meanings within discourse and the subversion of discourse by the field of discursivity that provide a condition of possibility of hegemonic articulation.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Morozov, 2013, p. 9.

¹¹⁹ Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 105.

¹²⁰ Diez, 2013, p. 200.

¹²¹ Morozov, 2015, p. 25.

¹²² Torfing, 1999, p. 102.

3. Methodology. Towards a discourse analysis

As the specifics of this topic and these theories require, the following study of Russia's perception of democracy and democracy promotion will apply qualitative methods of research. This is especially the case in discourse analysis. Although there are many types of discourse analysis, this thesis will be based mainly on the works of Lene Hansen, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In the previous chapter I introduced the key notions of poststructuralist theory, an *empty signifier* and *hegemony*. In this chapter I will look more closely into the discourse theory, which has its roots in the poststructuralist idea that discourse constructs the social world in its meaning, and that due to the fundamental instability of language, meaning can never be permanently fixed. As stated above, no discourse is a closed entity. Contrarily, it is perpetually transformed through contact with other discourses. Therefore, the key word to this theory is *discursive struggle*. Different discourses, each of them representing specific mode of talking about the social world and its comprehension, are involved in a permanent struggle with one other to achieve hegemony - that is, to fix the meanings of language in their own way. Hegemony can thus temporarily be understood as the dominance of one particular viewpoint.¹²³

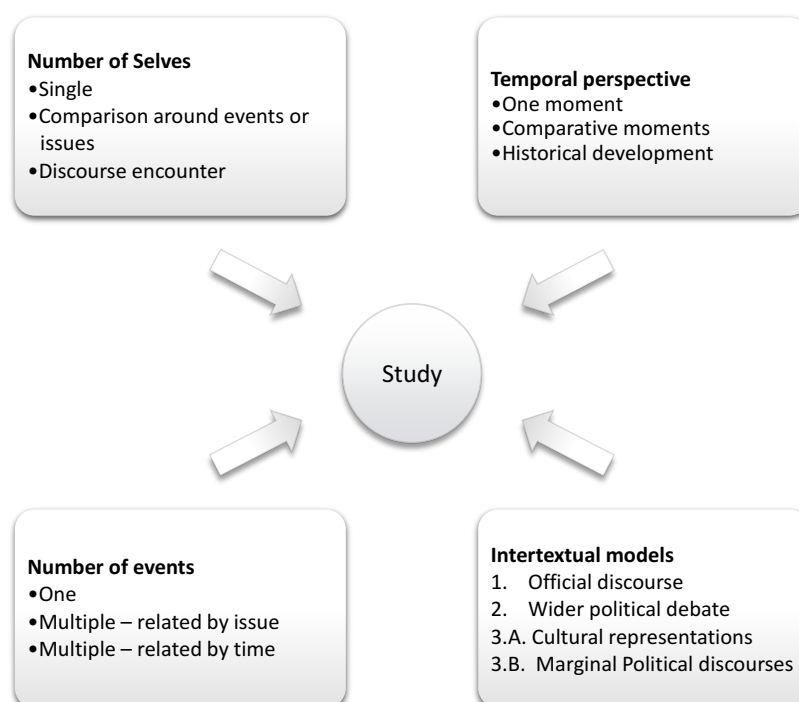
Jorgensen and Phillips point out that not all discourse analysis approaches are based explicitly on poststructuralism. Nevertheless, they all can agree on several key points. Firstly, language is not a reflection of a pre-existing reality. Secondly, language is structured in patterns or discourses. Unlike in the Saussurian structuralism, there is not one general system of meaning but a series of systems or discourses, whereby meanings change from discourse to discourse. Thirdly, these discursive structures are maintained and transformed in discursive practices. Lastly, the maintenance and transformation of these patterns should be thus investigated using analysis of the specific contexts in which language is in action.¹²⁴ According to Lene Hansen, discourses engage and contest each other by challenging the policies, identities and logic through which they are linked.

¹²³ Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, p. 6-7.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 11-12.

When doing so, they often provide different readings of events and facts, especially as discourses develop through the process of time.¹²⁵ To explain the research logic of this thesis, the scheme for the research design of Lene Hansen will be used, as depicted by the Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Research design for discourse analysis based on the work of Lene Hansen¹²⁶



As the scheme shows, one must make a series of choices when preparing research design. Firstly, one should decide how many Selves will be studied. In other words, the key question is how many states, nations or other foreign policy subjects one wishes to examine. In this thesis, a single Self has been selected to analyse Russia's interpretation of democracy.

¹²⁵ Hansen, 2006, p. 32.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 81.

Secondly, the temporal perspective of the study has to be considered. Foreign and domestic policies can be studied as addressing events either at one specific moment or via a longer historical analysis.¹²⁷ In this research, the main focus will be on the period starting from 2012, when Vladimir Putin was elected for a third term as the President of the Russian Federation. As will be illustrated below, this period can be considered to be a crucial turn toward more conservative discourse in the Russian politics. During this period, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula occurred, as well as the war in the South-East of Ukraine. At the same time, it was during this period that the Pussy Riot affair came about, and laws against blasphemy and gay propaganda appeared. Nevertheless, the evolution of Russia's approach to democracy after the dissolution of the Soviet Union needs to be introduced to see current events in context. Therefore, key events from the period preceding Vladimir Putin's third presidency will be included, such as the Colour Revolutions in Russia's Near Abroad.

Thirdly, as Hansen argues, it needs to be decided how many events should be chosen for discourse analysis. The term 'event' is quite broadly defined due to the fact that it can include either a policy issue, such as European integration, or concrete events, such as war.¹²⁸ Since the issue of democracy itself is very broad and has been mentioned in various contexts in Russia's discourses (e.g. the discourses on the Orange Revolution, the EU's democracy promotion, the Pussy Riot trial, or the annexation of Crimea), this thesis uses a dimension of multiple events related by the issue.

Finally, Lene Hansen distinguishes three intertextual models based on the types of sources that are analysed. In this contribution, official discourses will be analysed, centred on political leaders with official authority to sanction the foreign policies pursued.¹²⁹

Moving from the research design to the specific texts that will be analysed, the main sources of the discourse analysis will comprise speeches and interviews made by the Russian political leaders. As Lene Hansen points out, poststructuralist discourse analysis methodologically and epistemologically prioritises the study of primary texts.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Hansen, 2006, p. 77-78.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 80.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 60.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 80.

Therefore, this thesis will work mainly with the statements and speeches of Vladimir Putin and Sergey Lavrov. The selection of texts should include key texts that are widely accessible and frequently quoted.¹³¹ Major speeches, such as the Annual Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly and the presidential speech at the Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, will thus be analysed according to the criteria that the signifier *democracy* is explicitly mentioned there. Furthermore, statements and comments made by the President or the Foreign Minister, reflecting on the Russia versus West discourse and including the notions of human rights and cultural values, will be closely examined to provide a complex picture of Russia's discourse on democracy - for instance, the so-called Crimea speech of March 18, 2014 and events related to the Pussy Riot trial or the EU's democracy promotion in its Eastern Neighbourhood. Furthermore, the often quoted articles written by Vladimir Putin and Sergey Lavrov will be introduced to provide the insight into Russia's interpretation of democracy. The same method of data selection will be applied to official policy documents, such as the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept and the 2015 National Security Strategy.

My thesis does not go beyond official discourse, which may eventually impose certain limitations on the scope of the work. Nevertheless, one should be very careful not to make discourse analysis of places whose linguistic and epistemological codes one has no knowledge of. This is especially the case with authoritarian regimes, where free speech is not guaranteed and where official discursive codes have been strongly enforced by means of propaganda.¹³² Since Russia, with its slogan of 'sovereign democracy', represents an authoritarian regime where political opposition and domestic non-governmental organisations are suppressed, and a tight grip is kept on the sphere of media, the possibility for scholars to develop their research beyond official discourse is rather limited.

Another methodological problem may rest in the reliability of discourse analysis, as the question arises as to whether different analysts would come to the same result were they working with the same set of texts. To avoid this methodological trap, discourse

¹³¹ Hansen, 2006, p. 82.

¹³² Ibid., p. 84.

analysis demands readings to be based on explicit discursive articulations of signs and identities. Therefore, careful analytical attention must be paid to how signs are linked and juxtaposed, how they construct Self and Other, and how they legitimise certain policies.¹³³ This logic will be applied in the next chapter, where Russia's official discourse on democracy will be analysed. The aim of the thesis is to find answers on the following main research questions:

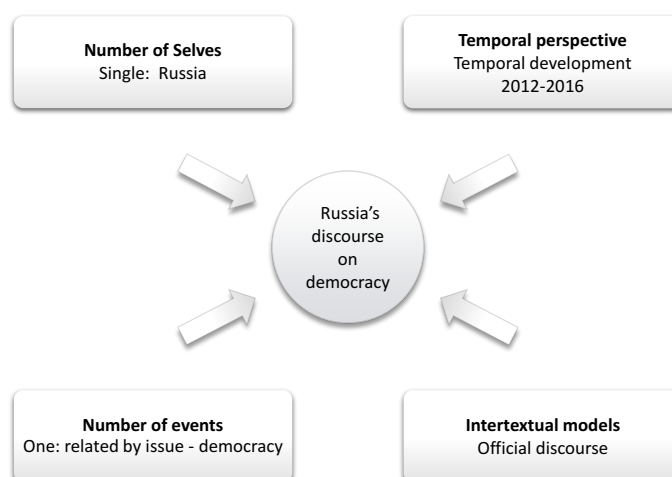
How is the notion of democracy reflected in Russia's official discourse?

How is the Russian concept of democracy advocated in official discourse, and how is it related to mainstream Western discourse?

How is Russia's national identity projected onto its discourse on democracy?

How are the Western democracy promotion activities reflected in Russia's official discourse and what particular role the EU plays in Russia's interpretation?

Figure 3. Research design of the thesis based on the work of Lene Hansen¹³⁴



¹³³ Hansen, 2006, p. 45.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 81.

4. Russia's discourse on democracy

4.1. Russia's post-Soviet development: towards 'sovereign democracy'

In spite of the fact that Russia has been referring to its regime as democratic since the fall of the Iron Curtain, Russia's democratisation story began much earlier. There are those who argue that one should go as far back as the mid-nineteenth century,¹³⁵ whereas others are of the opinion that these democratic concepts have been developing for centuries.¹³⁶ While its heritage is rich, it is also often tragic. The notions of 'democracy' and 'democratisation' have been used by the Communist party throughout the Soviet period. Slogans such as "more democracy, more socialism" were used to indicate the deeply rooted democratic reforms in Soviet tradition. The motto about "the free revelation of interests and the will of all classes and social groups" became a part of perestroika jargon. Although wide-ranging in their effects, such statements did not provide further details on institutional design. Hence, the vague notion of *democratisation* covered everything.¹³⁷

During Yeltsin's regime, the key word was 'sovereignty', which demonstrates that the integrity of power was very much a key political issue. Yeltsin urged for radical rapture and asserted that a Western type of democracy would be installed. Nevertheless, the feelings that a new-born Russian democracy was insufficient or ineffective became soon widespread. Both opponents and proponents of the events of the late 1980s and the early 1990s found considerable defects of the 'crippled democracy', as the state of democracy was termed by Yegor Gaidar, one of the proponents of democratisation in Russia. The flaws of the regime were promptly reinterpreted as 'liberalism' and its inability to effectively consolidate the personal grasp of Yeltsin was regarded as a sign of democracy.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ See for instance Ilyin, 2015.

¹³⁶ See Petro, 1995.

¹³⁷ Ilyin, 2015, p. 73

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 73-75.

Under the rule of the new President Putin, the Kremlin began to strive to restrict and narrow the agenda for democratic deliberation. In 2003, Mikhail Khodorkovski, one of the most visible sponsors of that deliberation, was arrested. Next year, in 2004, Vladimir Putin announced a policy of ‘strengthening the hierarchy of power’. The media was dominated by official discourse, while all the alternative views were marginalised. The main term to distinguish between official and unofficial became ‘sovereign democracy’ (суверенная демократия). This term was first introduced in 2006 by Vladislav Surkov, the first Deputy of the Chief of the Russian Presidential administration, to represent a Russian alternative to Western liberal democracy. Consequently, consolidation of political order within the autocratic framework resulted in reconceptualisation of the constitutional structure of Russia as a sovereign democracy.¹³⁹

Our democracy is viable if it does not reject Russian political culture but is part of it, developing not in defiance of but together with it. Democracy in our country is in some ways like democracy everywhere and in some ways unique—just as the models of the most successful democracies of America, Europe, and Asia are universal and similar to one another but at the same time unique¹⁴⁰

This unique Russian character embedded in the nation’s culture, according to Surkov, longs for strong central authority, charismatic personality, and idealistic political concepts.¹⁴¹ In other words, democracy is present in Russia, yet some changes have been made so it would fit in within Russia's cultural background. As Stephen Holmes argues, while not being authoritarian in the Soviet manner, the Putin system is undemocratic in the specific sense: “it floats above society rather than being rooted in society”.¹⁴² Therefore, Russia’s sovereigns are basically disconnected from Russian society. ‘Sovereign democracy’ is related not to an imagined type of democracy, but rather to Vladimir Putin’s seeking to strengthen his power by non-democratic means of instigating

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁴⁰ Surkov, 2008, p. 11.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁴² Holmes, 2015, p. 56.

the Russian public's outrage over the 'arrogant' West allegedly treating Russia like a vassal state.¹⁴³

Equally important is the way in which memory of the Soviet past evolved. The Bolshevik revolution was condemned, while Soviet modernity was extolled. The period of the 1990s was perceived as the new time of troubles (лихие 90-е, roaring 90s). It was the USSR who represented the main story of Russia's Other, with the goal to prevent the Communist Party from acquiring power. Therefore, a new Russian identity was built on the basis of braking away from the USSR. This nevertheless changed with the new presidential administration. The Great Patriotic War began to be emphasised as a symbol of the most important event in Russian Soviet history. In his Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of 2005, Vladimir Putin proclaimed that the collapse of the USSR was "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century. And for the Russian people, it became a real drama".¹⁴⁴

Tens of millions of our citizens and compatriots found themselves outside the Russian Federation. [...] Many thought or seemed to think at the time that our young democracy was not a continuation of Russian statehood, but its ultimate collapse, the prolonged agony of the Soviet system. But they were mistaken. That was precisely the period *when* the significant developments took place in Russia.¹⁴⁵

President Putin also stressed that Russia as a sovereign nation "will decide for itself the pace, terms and conditions of moving towards democracy [...] taking into account our historic, geopolitical and other particularities".¹⁴⁶

According to Viatcheslav Morozov, the doctrine of 'sovereign democracy', which focuses on the key ideological reference points of the entire first decade of Putin's administration, represents a typical counter-hegemonic endeavour. As he explains, while any hegemony is contested, counter-hegemonic disputes have no other option but to

¹⁴³ Holmes, 2015, p. 56.

¹⁴⁴ Putin, 2005.

¹⁴⁵ Putin, 2005.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

employ the same language as that of hegemony, and thus tend to duplicate the very inequality against which they take a stand. Consequently, the Kremlin criticises the West for what it views as a discriminatory practice. Moreover, this approach can even be described as the one of the most stable patterns in Russia's discourse. Opposing the West's enjoyment of hegemonic position in terms of democracy promotion, Moscow portrays itself as a defender of a more democratic world order, where sovereign equality of nations would be guaranteed as the core standard.¹⁴⁷

Therefore, when Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, the official discourse on Russia as being a great power persisted. At the same time, nevertheless, it sought recognition in terms of market economy and democracy. As Iver Neumann points out, Vladimir Putin's use of liberal slogans such as 'human rights' and 'rule of law' are lacking in seriousness and practical implementation.¹⁴⁸ It follows that the government declaring to be a sovereign or managed democracy evokes the idea that a strong state may act as guarantor of the system of governance. The key problem lies in the fact that the model of governance that Russia claims to realise contradicts a key liberal trend based on the question of how the state may govern *less*. Nevertheless, Putin's vision of what state should do is the very opposite of liberal. It deals with the question of "how the Russian state should rule in a direct fashion and up front, not govern indirectly and from afar".¹⁴⁹ Viatcheslav Morozov provides an apt description of this situation:

As the liberal reforms of the social security system failed, the government tended to opt for paternalistic solutions, such as the measures aimed at raising nativity rates, demonstrating that the stronger state is better in providing security to the people. Foreign policy came to be dominated by the idea of establishing Russia as a strong and independent player on the global stage – here, as in domestic politics, autonomy became an end in itself.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Morozov, 2015, p. 108.

¹⁴⁸ Neumann, 2008, p. 146.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Morozov, 2008, p. 162.

From this point of view, society is perceived to be something that should be managed, rather than something that must necessarily be given a certain leeway. Instead of being a facet of check and balances, the law is seen as one of the tools of the executive. Human rights are then regarded as something that is guaranteed by the state, not as something that inalienably belongs to individuals as human beings.¹⁵¹

4.2. The Orange contagion and immunity-building inside Russia

Being the two largest countries in the European Union's eastern neighbourhood, each having a large population, significant military potential and strategically important energy routes to the EU, Russia and Ukraine seem to be natural partners of the European Union. At the same time, shared cultural values and close political and economic links between Ukraine and Russia led to the latter defining the former as belonging to its 'Near Abroad'. This has posed a special challenge to the European Union.¹⁵² In other words, if there is a country, in relation to which the 'Putinization' of Russian foreign policy is most apparent, one can hardly select a better example than Ukraine. Since his first presidential mandate, Putin has engaged directly and repeatedly in its affairs. Just before the Ukrainian presidential elections in December 2004, he visited Kyiv several times to support Viktor Yanukovich and, particularly, to oppose the pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko. The Orange Revolution that followed the fraudulent elections was thus not only a hindrance for Russian foreign policy, but also a personal humiliation.¹⁵³

What is more, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine is regarded as being a part of the phenomenon that Bunce and Wolchik call 'electoral revolutions'. Although ultimately based upon local dynamics, these kinds of coup d'état seem to be linked.¹⁵⁴ According to this logic, the Orange Revolution was a by-product of the Rose Revolution, during which organisers and activists from Georgia travelled to Ukraine and helped Ukrainian pro-democratic activists, using elections to defeat illiberal incumbents or their anointed

¹⁵¹ Neumann, 2008, p. 147.

¹⁵² Vieira, 2016, p. 129.

¹⁵³ Lo, 2015, p. 8.

¹⁵⁴ Bunce and Wolchik, 2006, p. 284.

successors. Furthermore, success in one state led others to undertake similar actions against the authoritarian regime of their own country. As the Ukrainian example shows, activists were motivated by their Georgian counterparts to mobilise civil society in defence of democracy. Finally, the external environment – and the EU and the US in particular – were very supportive of democratisation, as is illustrated above.¹⁵⁵

The whole wave of Colour Revolutions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) found authoritarian leaders overthrown by popular protests. Therefore, Putin took decisive steps to prevent what he saw as orchestrated Western campaigns from reaching Russia by tightening restrictions on the opposition and establishing pro-regime popular movements, such as *Nashi*.¹⁵⁶ One Russian commentator expressed the Kremlin's viewpoint well: “The day before yesterday: Belgrade. Yesterday: Tbilisi. Today: Kyiv. Tomorrow: Moscow”.¹⁵⁷ As a result, the Colour Revolutions became known as the “virus of orange plague”.¹⁵⁸ The Kremlin interpreted the EU and US support of the Colour Revolutions, and their involvement in civil society, as a source of danger. Therefore, it made efforts to forestall a possible spillover by restricting the activities of politically involved or foreign-funded non-governmental organisations in Russia.¹⁵⁹ By portraying regime change in this way, Russian elites linked the interests of the regime with those of the state itself. To put it differently, Moscow has taken measures abroad and at home to prevent such a phenomenon in Russia.¹⁶⁰

Similar considerations rose to the surface during the protests in Ukraine in 2013 - 2014, originally known as Euromaidan due to its supporters' demands for closer relations with the European Union. One should go back at least to 2003 to understand the context of the conflict. In 2003, the EU launched a new European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) to provide a framework for cooperation with its southern and eastern neighbours

¹⁵⁵ Ambrosio, 2007, p. 232.

¹⁵⁶ Rutland, 2015, p. 132.

¹⁵⁷ Vladimirov, 2004.

¹⁵⁸ Argumenty i Fakty, 2005.

¹⁵⁹ Babayan, 2015b, p. 444.

¹⁶⁰ Ambrosio, 2007, p. 237.

that were not offered the prospect of full EU membership.¹⁶¹ Nevertheless, the application of a similar set of tools within the ENP to the Southern and Eastern members was problematic due to the historical background of their relations and different frameworks of cooperation. Therefore, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was endorsed at the Prague summit in May 2009, focusing on deepening of the relationship with six post-Soviet countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. This initiative was created as one of the EU's flagship democracy promotion instruments and became the 'Eastern dimension' of the ENP.¹⁶² Russia was invited to join, but it refused to be put on an equal footing with other post-Soviet states, without being offered special treatment. Instead, the European Union signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) with Russia in 1994, followed by an agreement on four 'Common Spaces' in 2003. Since 1997, the EU and Russian officials have held summits twice a year.¹⁶³

It was against this background of the EU's neighbourhood policy that the protests on Kyiv's main square called *Maidan* started. They were triggered by the Ukrainian government's unexpected decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, which was made only a week before the third Eastern Partnership Summit in Vilnius. The Kremlin found the Eastern Partnership initiative incompatible with its new grand alternative plan, the Eurasian Union, planned to come into being in 2015. This was a priority for Vladimir Putin, who was determined to avert the extension of the EU's influence, which would most likely be accompanied by democratisation in the post-Soviet region. The Vilnius Summit started a chain of events to the East.¹⁶⁴

Led by the opposition and supported by Western countries – both the European Union and the United States provided financial assistance to political groupings that were in opposition to the government – the Ukrainian protests gained momentum and reached an unprecedented level. The opposition overtly criticised Yanukovich's domestic politics and foreign policy and favoured the country's pro-European development. After a spate

¹⁶¹ The ENP comprises sixteen countries, including Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, the Palestinian Authority, Syria and Tunisia in the South, and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in the East.

¹⁶² Ghazaryan, 2014, p. 84-85.

¹⁶³ Rutland, 2015, p. 135.

¹⁶⁴ Wilson, 2014, p. 17.

of violence in February 2014 where approximately 100 people died on both sides of the barricades, the Ukrainian president Yanukovich fled from power on 21 February. A new government was formed, promising to carry out reforms in Ukraine and sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. Overnight, Ukraine had turned its back on Russia, promising its citizens a 'return to Europe'.¹⁶⁵ In the meantime, Moscow blamed Western governments for causing the disintegration of the country and refused to recognise the new Ukrainian government. As a response, the Kremlin seized control over the Crimean Peninsula and, after holding a referendum on its status, recognised its independence and consequently incorporated it within its own territory.¹⁶⁶

Moscow's strategic interests thus suffered a major setback when Yanukovich resigned from his presidential office. The Ukrainian crisis radically challenged Moscow's position in the post-Soviet space. The Kremlin's relations with Western countries have sunk to the very bottom. Contrary to Russia, the EU and the USA gave countenance to the new Ukrainian government, promising political and economic support, while imposing sanctions against Russia.¹⁶⁷ When analysing Russia's foreign policy, one should thus not omit the fact that the Colour Revolutions and Euromaidan protests were taking place in the context of the Eastern enlargement of NATO and the EU, two crucial Western regional organisations. Vladimir Putin came to believe that Russia was endangered by a Western strategy of siege and containment.

The Kremlin's relations with the USA intensified after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which did not find support from Moscow. Western recognition of Kosovo's independence in 2008 further worsened the situation, which escalated in August 2008, when Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili sent troops to South Ossetia, where several Russian peacekeepers were killed. In response, Moscow undertook a full-scale military invasion in order to force Georgian units back and recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia. What had seemed to be a settlement in Russian-US relations when Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev became new presidents of the USA and Russia, respectively, was heavily disrupted by the 2011 Arab Spring. These dramatic events in the MENA region

¹⁶⁵ Biersack and O'Lear, 2014, p. 248.

¹⁶⁶ Tsygankov, 2015, p. 285.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 186.

were seen, once again, as a demonstration of aggressive Western democracy promotion. Moreover, the Kremlin was appalled by the fate of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. In 2012, Russia vetoed the proposed UN actions to cease the civil war in Syria.¹⁶⁸

With hindsight, some scholars argue that the steps Russia took in Georgia in 2008 set a precedent for what would happen in Crimea in 2014, where the Kremlin used military force to change internationally recognised borders.¹⁶⁹ What is more, it is worth mentioning that Russia's actions in Crimea caused the first formal annexation of European territory since the end of World War II. In spite of the fact that the Kremlin recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the war in Georgia in 2008, it recognised them as independent states, not as new parts of the Russian Federation.¹⁷⁰

4.3. The conservative turn in Russian politics

The engineered presidential elections of 2000, 2004, and 2008 bolstered the legitimacy of the regime. However, once the public - probably fully conscious of the fact that no plausible opposition candidates were allowed to stand for election - quietly accepted the results, the situation changed dramatically in 2012. The demonstrations that took place in winter and spring of 2011 - 2012, found the Kremlin taken aback by the public challenge to its rule and the widespread protests over the election fraud.¹⁷¹ Whereas the series of Colour Revolutions were seen as symptoms of *potential* threat of 'infection' to the regime, the protests of 2011 - 2012 inside Russian territory were understood as a *real* threat. Consequently, preventing interventions coming from the outside became the ultimate goal, according to which the agendas of both domestic and international politics were formulated.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ Rutland, 2015, p. 132.

¹⁶⁹ See also Rutland, 2015.

¹⁷⁰ Wilson, 2014, p. 113.

¹⁷¹ Holmes, 2015, p. 50.

¹⁷² Morozov, 2015, p. 139.

This experience made Moscow realise that it could no longer depend on its old legitimacy formula of manipulated elections without protests. As a result, the demonstrators' slogan of 'Russia without Putin' was answered with the official slogan of 'Russia without Protest'. Demonstrations without explicit official permission were criminalised, independent media were further suppressed and the domestic critics of the regime were vilified by the Kremlin as paid agents of Russia's foreign enemies.¹⁷³ It is argued by some scholars that it was this point at which the idea of the ostentatious display of military power in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea appeared, since Putin needed to find some alternative way to legitimise his hold on power. For instance, Russian economist Sergey Guriev is of the opinion that once Russia could not count on money to buy public acceptance because of the economic recession, "nothing could be more helpful than a small and victorious military adventure. Tangible victories – no matter how small or how costly – boost the ruler's popularity".¹⁷⁴ Territorial expansion can thus be seen as an authoritarian regime's device for increasing its popularity and hanging onto power.

In other words, the recent tide of events suggests a shift towards a more explicitly conservative position, which portrays Russia as a rival of the West, striving to achieve hegemony. This greater assertiveness is apparent both in foreign policy and domestic politics. As outlined above, the Kremlin has begun to actively intervene in civil society and the private lives of individuals under the pretext of dangerous outside subversion that needs to be prevented.¹⁷⁵ Thereupon, normative issues have begun to be articulated in domestic politics, with clear signs of a conservative turn. This new 'morality politics', as it is called by Sharafutdinova, appeared around three major issues: the Pussy Riot trial, the blasphemy law and laws banning gay propaganda.¹⁷⁶

In February 2012, Russian feminist punk-rock group Pussy Riot gave a performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. Although the performers were quickly escorted out of the cathedral by security officials, a two-minute video clip depicting the performance was uploaded to the YouTube server. Through the title 'Punk

¹⁷³ Holmes, 2015, p. 50.

¹⁷⁴ Guriev, 2014.

¹⁷⁵ Morozov, 2015, p. 104.

¹⁷⁶ Sharafutdinova, 2014, p. 615.

Prayer ‘Mother of God, Drive Putin Away’ by Pussy Riot in the Cathedral’, the group protested against the involvement of the head of the Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill I of Moscow, in politics, and particularly against his support of Vladimir Putin’s candidacy in the presidential election. The three members of the group were arrested in March and found guilty of “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred and enmity with respect to a social group”.¹⁷⁷

In a similar vein, since March 2012, non-heterosexuality and gender variance was considered a threat to Russian traditional values. This ‘moral panic’, using the words of Cai Wilkinson, resulted in a federal law being passed in June 2013, outlawing the “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations to minors”.¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, the blasphemy law was adopted in June 2013, together with the measures against gay propaganda. This bill applies to offences against religions that are “an integral part of Russia’s historical inheritance”.¹⁷⁹ The following year, on 5 May 2014, Russian president Putin signed the memory law penalizing “dissemination of knowingly false information on the activities of the USSR during the World War II, committed publicly” by three years in jail. This happened notwithstanding a vocal disagreement of international historian societies and associations, including many Russian intellectuals and historians, as well as human rights activists from all over the world.¹⁸⁰

This shift towards traditional values in Russian domestic and foreign policy became one of the key themes during the annual Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly of 2013:

We know that there are more and more people in the world who support our position on defending traditional values that have made up the spiritual and moral foundation of civilisation in every nation for thousands of years: the values of traditional families, real human life, including religious life, not just material existence but also spirituality, the values of humanism and global diversity. [...] Of course, this is a conservative position.

¹⁷⁷ Kananovich, 2015, p. 345.

¹⁷⁸ Wilkinson, 2013, p. 5.

¹⁷⁹ BBC, 2013.

¹⁸⁰ Khapaeva, 2016, p. 66.

But speaking in the words of Nikolai Berdyaev,¹⁸¹ the point of conservatism is not that it prevents movement forward and upward, but that it prevents movement backward and downward, into chaotic darkness and a return to a primitive state.¹⁸²

According to Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, this morality turnaround starting in 2012 can be interpreted as Moscow's strategy to bring back the legitimacy of the regime that had been disrupted by the domestic protests of 2011 – 2012.¹⁸³ One could therefore argue that the repressive steps taken in domestic politics, such as the Pussy Riot trial, resulted from the same logic as assertive measures taken in Crimea, which only proves the interconnectedness of Russian foreign and domestic politics.

As will be shown below, Russia's official discourse on democracy centres around three important nodal points. These are traditional values, Russia's 'Near Abroad' and information security. Therefore, what follows is a three-stage analysis of Russia's official discourse on democracy as specified through the debate on sovereign democracy, Russia's role in its 'Near Abroad' and Russia's information space.

4.4. Democracy as a means of preservation of sacred values

In his first Address to the Federal Assembly after being elected president for the third time in 2012, and facing surprisingly strong opposition from his citizenry, Vladimir Putin articulated his discourse on democracy around which Russia's normative hegemony was to be constructed. This moment can be considered a significant turning point in Russia's official discourse on democracy. Although the notion of democracy appeared in the speech of the President only six times, the way it is articulated indicates a lot about the shift in Russian politics.

¹⁸¹ Nikolai Berdyaev was a Russian political and religious philosopher.

¹⁸² Putin, 2013a.

¹⁸³ Sharafutdinova, 2014, p. 615.

Democracy is the only political choice for Russia. I would like to stress that we share the universal democratic principles adopted worldwide. However, Russia's democracy means the power of the Russian people with their own traditions of self-rule and not the fulfilment of standards imposed on us from the outside. Democracy means compliance with and respect for laws, rules and regulations. The ruling parties, governments and presidents may change but the core of the state and society, the continuity of national development, sovereignty and freedoms of people must remain intact.¹⁸⁴

From this statement, democracy is viewed as “the power of the Russian people with their own traditions of self-rule” and significantly resembles the quote of Vladimir Surkov’s definition of sovereign democracy introduced in the previous subchapter. Surkov further defined this notion as “a form of political life of society, under which the authorities, their organs and actions are selected, formed and directed exclusively by the Russian nation in all its variety and completeness so that all citizens, social groups and peoples comprising it achieve material wellbeing, freedom and justice”.¹⁸⁵

Interestingly, Putin seems to perceive democracy as “compliance with and respect for laws, rules and regulations”, therefore focusing more on citizens’ behaviour than their empowerment and rights. Throughout his speech one will not find any reference to political, economic or social rights. While citizens might play a significant role in choosing the set of rules that it is obligatory for them to respect, the presidential speech lacks any mention of it. Instead, “a tradition of a strong state” is repeatedly emphasised in the speech. This interpretation of democracy is further reiterated by the statement that “[c]ivilised dialogue is possible only with those political forces that make, justify and articulate their demands in a civilised manner, defending them in accordance with the law”.¹⁸⁶

It can be argued that this speech was being addressed to the opposition movement and points out the regime’s attitude towards opposition in general. One can also argue that these words signal a message that the political scene comprises two key figures: a

¹⁸⁴ Putin, 2012a.

¹⁸⁵ Surkov, 2007, p. 31-32, quoted from Sakwa, 2012, p. 22.

¹⁸⁶ Putin, 2012a.

silenced civil society whose main function is to provide legitimacy to the regime by taking part in the elections, and the sovereign in a Hobbesian sense, who establishes the police order, where every place is framed in its communitarian logic. The people, according to this logic, act as the group of loyal citizens who, individually, try with all their might to serve their Motherland. Nevertheless, there are several groups of citizens who are corrupt agents, putting their private interests before the public good, some of them even descending to the hostile foreign forces. The role of the sovereign is then to protect the civil society from any hostile intervention, on the condition that the people, as citizens, maintain moral integrity and oppose rebellious external influences.¹⁸⁷

At the same time, democracy is linked with traditional values and spiritual identity, as explicitly mentioned in the speech: “Russia’s democracy means the power of the Russian people with their own traditions.” This theme is articulated throughout the presidential address. At the beginning of his speech, Putin proclaims: “In the 21st century amid a new balance of economic, civilisational and military forces, Russia must be a sovereign and influential country. We should not just develop with confidence, but also preserve our national and spiritual identity, not lose our sense of national unity. We must be and remain Russia”.¹⁸⁸ As can be seen, Vladimir Putin promotes the image of Russia as a culturally distinct power, determined to defend particular principles and values in contrast to those of the West and other civilisations. Being particularly concerned with national unity, he draws attention to the traditional values being on the wane in Russia, which could have far-reaching implications for the future of the Russian state. Therefore, those values should be rediscovered and disseminated across Russian society.

It is painful for me to say, but today Russian society suffers from an apparent deficit of spiritual bonds [духовных скреп] [...] that have always, throughout our entire history, made us stronger and more powerful; these are the things we have always been proud of. We must wholeheartedly support the institutions that are the carriers of traditional values,

¹⁸⁷ Morozov, 2015, p. 153.

¹⁸⁸ Putin, 2012a.

which have historically proven their ability to pass these values on from generation to generation.¹⁸⁹

Consequently, he recommends strengthening the institutions of family and schools as the ones that ensure the preservation of Russian values for future generations. It can be seen that democracy gains specific understanding in the discourse articulated by Russian president Putin. It is situated in opposition to the standards being imposed from outside, and, particularly, it contrasts with the Western concept of liberal democracy. The issues of the ‘strong state’ and ‘moral values’ appear repeatedly in the speech. Studying the discourse of the 2012 Address thus shows that the notion of ‘spiritual bonds’ has quickly become a discursive reference point and was often articulated by both the proponents and opponents of the regime, as will be shown below.

By the same token, international Russian-led support for ‘traditional family values’ as the foundations for human rights norms found its materialisation in the so-called anti-gay laws. This kind of moral sovereignty asserts to propose a compromise between international human rights obligations and local socio-cultural norms. Two years later, in 2014, Vladimir Putin returns in his annual address to the traditional values with a vengeance, describing them as equal to a “healthy nation” and “healthy families”: “Our priorities are healthy families and a healthy nation, the traditional values which we inherited from our forefathers”.¹⁹⁰

As Cai Wilkinson suggests, homophobia serves as a political proxy for an understanding of traditional values. In practice, it not only legitimises discrimination and homophobic violence, but also sets a dangerous precedent for traditional values to be misused in order to justify human rights abuses.¹⁹¹ This view was further discussed at the 2013 Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, the theme of which was Russia’s Diversity for the Modern World. In the course of demonstrating a demographic

¹⁸⁹ Putin, 2012a.

¹⁹⁰ Putin, 2014a.

¹⁹¹ Wilkinson, 2013, p. 5.

problem that Europe is allegedly facing in the context of the current migration crisis, Vladimir Putin attempts to justify discriminatory policies against sexual minorities:

Russia does not have any laws punishing sexual minorities for their orientation. We have passed a law that forbids propaganda to minors. But I will tell you again: there is a serious population problem [...] in all European nations and in Russia – a demographic problem. The birth rates are low; the Europeans are dying out; do you understand that or not? Same-sex marriages do not produce children. Do you want to survive on account of immigrants? You don't like immigrants either, because society cannot take in such a large number of immigrants. Your choice is the same as in many other nations: recognising same-sex marriages, the right to adopt, and so on. But allow us to make our own choice, as we see fit for our own nation. [...] Why does everyone like to put so much stress on Russia? Let's not make false accusations; there is nothing frightening here.¹⁹²

President Putin thus rigorously rejects the Western critique of Russia's attitude toward 'non-traditional families' and reinterprets the problem in civilisational terms. The promotion of traditional family values again very much resembles the concept of sovereign democracy based on defence of the right to be particular. It stresses the idea that every nation should have a sovereign right to its own definition of universal values, including the freedom of expression and the prohibition of discrimination. In various statements, the Russian president further criticises what he perceives as Europe's departure from traditional family and religious values. Hence, it becomes apparent that the slogan of 'traditional family values' is an empty signifier through which repression against the external other – the West – is legitimised. Just as 'normal families' are supported, the 'excesses' such as divorce, adoptions by same-sex couples or families without children are penalised.

The issue of traditional values also gains importance in the following address to the Federal Assembly in 2013. The Russian president delivered his speech against the background of the Olympic games, which were accompanied by corruption concerns over

¹⁹² Putin, 2013a.

the megalomaniac Sochi project, but also became a part of a wider effort to portray Russia as a normalized (and thus strong and respectable) actor competent enough to deal with potential security risks.¹⁹³ At the same time, the year 2013 marked the anniversary of the adoption of the Russian constitution, which was remembered at the beginning of Vladimir Putin's speech:

Our Constitution brings together two fundamental priorities – the supreme value of rights and freedoms of citizens and a strong state, emphasising their mutual obligation to respect and protect each other. I am convinced that the constitutional framework must be stable, above all in what concerns its second chapter, which defines the rights and freedoms of individuals and citizens. These provisions of our fundamental law are inviolable.¹⁹⁴

The strong state is once again presented in the presidential speech, and, what is more, it is put on the same level as the rights and freedoms of citizens. Democracy is portrayed as a trait of state institutions, while freedom is often seen as an individual quality or linked to the economic sphere.¹⁹⁵ In the same fashion, the Russian president defends “independence and sovereignty in spiritual, ideological and foreign policy spheres” as an “integral part of our national character”.¹⁹⁶ Moreover, the explicit linkage of democracy and nationalism can be traced in the speech. Since the year 2014 had been the Year of Russian Culture, Vladimir Putin says that 2014 was “intended to be a year of enlightenment, emphasis on our cultural roots, patriotism, values and ethics”.¹⁹⁷ Democracy is therefore perceived as a tool to preserve continuity rather than a device for change:

We have always been proud of our nation. [...] We do not claim to be any sort of superpower. But we will strive to be leaders, defending international law, striving

¹⁹³ Gronskaya and Makarychev, 2014, p. 49.

¹⁹⁴ Putin, 2013b.

¹⁹⁵ Casula, 2013, p. 5.

¹⁹⁶ Putin, 2013a.

¹⁹⁷ Putin, 2013b.

for respect and national sovereignty and peoples' independence and identity. This is absolutely objective and understandable for a state like Russia, with its great history and culture, with many centuries of experience, not so-called tolerance, neutered and barren, but the actual common, natural life of different peoples within the framework of a single state.¹⁹⁸

All the emphases place on Russia's great history suggest that democracy is depicted as Russian, special, and independent. In other words, it is sovereign democracy, which may signify all sorts of specific trajectories that do not leave room for any international comparison or judgement. According to Richard Sakwa, the accent put on the autonomous character of Russia's democratic development also indicates the second question implicit in the message: the autonomy of the regime from society.¹⁹⁹ From this point of view, society is perceived to be something that should be managed, rather than something that must necessarily be given certain leeway. Instead of being a facet of checks and balances, the law is seen as one of the tools of the executive. Human rights are then regarded as something that is guaranteed by the state, not as something that inalienably belongs to individuals as human beings.²⁰⁰ In this regard, national sovereignty implies that democracy is an evolutionary process. Consequently, the view of a leap to democracy founded on the mechanical application of Western norms, which is articulated as having been characteristic for the first decade after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, is refused.²⁰¹

At the same time, Vladimir Putin points out that in the contemporary world, which is dynamic and contradictory, Russia's historical responsibility is growing, not only because Russia is one of the key guarantors of both regional and global stability, but also because it is a nation that consistently promotes its value-based approaches.²⁰² While many countries suffer from lack of moral values due to their openness toward alternative lifestyles, Russia stands as the last bastion of true European values:

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Sakwa, 2013, p. 213.

²⁰⁰ Neumann, 2008, p. 147.

²⁰¹ Sakwa, 2013, p. 213.

²⁰² Putin, 2013b.

Today, many nations are revising their moral values and ethical norms, eroding ethnic traditions and differences between peoples and cultures. Society is now required not only to recognise everyone's right to the freedom of consciousness, political views and privacy, but also to accept without question the equality of good and evil, strange as it seems, concepts that are opposite in meaning. This destruction of traditional values from above not only leads to negative consequences for society, but is also essentially anti-democratic, since it is carried out on the basis of abstract, speculative ideas, contrary to the will of the majority, which does not accept the changes occurring or the proposed revision of values.²⁰³

By drawing a distinction between the majority of people cherishing the heritage of the century-long European culture and the minority deprived of moral fibre, one can apply Iver Neumann's theory of 'false' and 'true' Europe, which represents a key feature of Russia's thinking about Europe.²⁰⁴ As Neumann points out, the notion of 'false' Europe is used as a target of criticism for those elements of European reality that Russia is not able to catch up with.²⁰⁵ From this perspective, the Baltic states, for instance, represent an incarnation of 'false' Europe because of the alleged violations of the rights of the local Russian speakers. Many Russian authors thus speak of a 'democratic deficit' in the European Union. This reasoning is evidently borrowed from European discourse. Overall, these encounters of European and Russian discourses on democracy are an interesting example of identity-based normative struggles for interpretation.²⁰⁶

To provide an illustrative example of the fundamentally problematic status of Europe's image in Russian discourse, one should focus on the extremes of the political spectrum, one of which is represented by the scholars who are active in the Institute for Democracy and Cooperation, which is, despite its name, a propagandistic institution based in New York and Paris, funded by the Kremlin in order to present a Russian vision

²⁰³ Putin, 2013b.

²⁰⁴ See Neumann, 1996.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Makarychev, 2014, p. 93.

of the world. In the discourse articulated by Natalia Narochnitskaya, one of the key representatives of this ideological position, a strong criticism of the EU's indifferent approach towards the discrimination of ethnic Russians in Baltic states prevails:

In Latvia Russians are deprived of the right to study their own language and culture and the President of Latvia says that Russians must become 'Latvians of Russian Origin'. Can you imagine a Russian president saying that, say, Tatars must become 'Russians of Tatar origin?' Is this democracy? This is a disgrace to Europe and the EU!²⁰⁷

In the same fashion, although not as offensively, the violation of rights of Russian citizens in the Baltic countries is articulated by Vladimir Putin in his 2012 article titled 'Russia and the Changing World'. Here, President Putin emphasises the support for Russian culture and compatriots in its neighbourhood.

We are determined to ensure that Latvian and Estonian authorities follow the numerous recommendations of reputable international organisations on observing generally accepted rights of ethnic minorities. We cannot tolerate the shameful status of "non-citizen." How can we accept that, due to their status as non-citizens, one in six Latvian residents and one in thirteen Estonian residents are denied their fundamental political, electoral and socio-economic rights and the ability to freely use Russian?²⁰⁸

As shown by the example of the Baltic countries, the enlargement of the EU is seen as undermining the EU's own normative hegemony, since it does not respect the standards it demands from the outside world. What is more, by insisting on the claims that Russia's aspirations are not inconsistent with Western values, and by promoting values of sovereignty and law, Russia portrays itself as being a better

²⁰⁷ Narochnitskaya, 2004, quoted from Prozorov, 2009, p. 142.

²⁰⁸ Putin, 2012b.

member of the Western community than other states, particularly than the USA and the members of the EU.²⁰⁹

The combination of universal values and plurality of the ways in which different civilisations realise them materialised in the 2008 Foreign Policy Concept²¹⁰ and further reiterated in the latest 2013 Foreign Policy Concept:

For the first time in modern history, global competition takes place on a civilisational level, whereby various values and models of development based on the universal principles of democracy and market economy start to clash and compete against each other. Cultural and civilisational diversity of the world becomes more and more manifest. [...] The reverse side of the globalization processes is the increased emphasis on civilisational identity.²¹¹

Once again, democracy and market economy are seen as universal principles; however, there are different models and different dimensions of them. From the Kremlin's perspective, the international system is defined by multipolarity, rather than the domination of the USA and its partners in Europe. Speaking to the Russian World Affairs Council in Moscow, Foreign Minister Lavrov suggests that the West is opposing the contradictions "between the objectively strengthening multipolarity [in the world] and the aspirations of the United States and the historic West to keep their usual domineering positions between the cultural and civilisational diversity of the modern world and the attempts to impose the Western scale of values on everyone".²¹² These Western values, Lavrov asserted, are "tearing away from its own Christian roots more and more and are becoming less sensitive to the religious feelings of people of other religions".²¹³

Nevertheless, as explained by Bobo Lo, multipolarity is an often misunderstood concept, vulnerable to diverse interpretations. While during Yeltsin's presidency a multipolar order was perceived in cooperative terms – different countries cooperating to

²⁰⁹ Prozorov, 2009, p. 142.

²¹⁰ See Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, 2008.

²¹¹ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, 2013.

²¹² Lavrov, 2014.

²¹³ Ibid.

manage the post-Cold War order, under Vladimir Putin it has gained a civilisation meaning that challenges Western ideas of moral universalism.²¹⁴ Both Putin's statements and passages from the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept thus reflect Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilisations'.²¹⁵ Just as there are different centres of global power, so there are several civilisational 'poles'.

The strategy applied by Moscow obviously includes a moral and cultural relativism and sovereignty, opposing the pressure exercised by the Western-led liberal values. The above-cited passage shows that the Kremlin juxtaposes "global competition [that] takes places on a civilisational level" with "the increased emphasis on civilisational identity". By offering a dialogue between civilisations, the Kremlin signals to the West that Russian values are as good as the Western ones.²¹⁶ Inside the country, Vladimir Putin promotes the vision of state-civilisation by identifying ethnic Russians as "the substance [стержень] that binds the fabric of Russia [as] the Russian people and the Russian culture".²¹⁷ In order to justify its own path to democracy, President Putin compares Russia with the political systems of Western countries, emphasising their flaws and shortcomings.

What kind of democracy is it in the USA – you cannot even consider running in an election if you don't have a billion, or even several billion dollars! Besides, you elect your president using a system of electoral delegates, while we have a direct democracy. Moreover, [...] the Constitution is designed in such a way that the number of electors voting for a given candidate may be greater, while the number of people they represent is smaller. Thus, the President can be elected by a minority of voters. Is this democracy? What is democracy? It is power of the people. Where is people's power here? There is none. Meanwhile, you are trying to convince us that we don't have it.²¹⁸

²¹⁴ Lo, 2015, p. 69.

²¹⁵ See Huntington, 1997.

²¹⁶ Lo, 2015, p. 69.

²¹⁷ Putin, 2012c.

²¹⁸ Putin, 2014b.

As can be seen, Russia's official discourse does not try to distance itself from using the term of democracy. What is more, Vladimir Putin not only stresses the peculiarity of Russia's democracy, but also seeks to achieve universality and generality with the concept of sovereign democracy. Given these points, Russia's official discourse on democracy is centred around the issue of traditional values. As the analysis shows, traditional values represent a nodal point, which changes the meaning of the notion of democracy. Instead of referring to the traditional liberal institutions of democracy associated with Dahl's polyarchy, such as free and fair elections, freedom of expression or the right to seek alternative information, Russian officials equate democracy with Russia's civilisational identity. Enjoying normative hegemony over the meaning of democracy, the Western liberal perspectives put emphasis on the right to oppose and vote out the highest officials in the government. Similarly, political, economic and social rights are inseparable from any definition of liberal democracy, and, as stated in the Vienna Declaration, those rights are "universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated."²¹⁹

Unlike the Western-centred definition of democracy, the official Russia's discourse puts the accent on Russia's mission as the last guardian of 'genuine' European culture. By emphasising the "healthy nation" and "healthy family", the Kremlin limits the scope of Russian democracy only to citizens respecting Russia's authentic centuries-old values and culture. This kind of moral sovereignty thus legitimises discrimination and homophobia, which, in turn, can give way for traditional values to be misused in justifying human rights violations. What is more, even if the citizens act as the carriers of the "spiritual bonds" inherited from their "forefathers", their rights are put on the same level as the strong state. For this reason, democracy, from the official Russian viewpoint, does less to empower than to limit. Accordingly, citizens are expected to silently serve the regime by taking part in elections and thus provide it with needed legitimacy. This Russian logic can be well explained by the poststructuralist theory of hegemony introduced in the theoretical part of this thesis, since the Russia's official discourse on democracy represents a typical counter-hegemonic endeavour. By criticising the West for

²¹⁹ Vienna Declaration and Program of Action, 1993.

discriminatory practice towards Russian citizens abroad, the Kremlin tries to challenge Western hegemony over democracy and positions itself as a defender of a more democratic world order.

4.5. Democracy as maintaining influence in the ‘Near Abroad’

Russia’s shift towards more assertive foreign policy can be observed against the backdrop of the annexation of Crimea and the subsequent addresses of the Russian President Putin. One could hardly find a better example of the increasing assertiveness in Russian official discourse than the Crimea speech that was delivered by Vladimir Putin after the annexation of the peninsula on 18 March 2014. It considerably affected the trajectory of both domestic politics and foreign policy. The speech offers a number of interesting insights into the President’s vision of Western democracy promotion and necessary measures Russia has to undertake.

There was a whole series of controlled ‘colour’ revolutions. [...] Standards were imposed on these nations that did not in any way correspond to their way of life, traditions, or these peoples’ cultures. As a result, instead of democracy and freedom, there was chaos, outbreaks in violence and a series of upheavals. The Arab Spring turned into the Arab Winter. A similar situation unfolded in Ukraine. [...] We understand what is happening; we understand that these actions were aimed against Ukraine and Russia and against Eurasian integration. And all this while Russia strived to engage in dialogue with our colleagues in the West.²²⁰

This statement clearly illustrates the deterioration in relations between Russia and the Western countries and the Kremlin’s sense of insecurity. As can be seen, President Putin attempts to change the existing discourse on the Colour Revolutions. He questions the view that these electoral revolutions became a part of successful democracy

²²⁰ Putin, 2014a.

promotion strategy advanced by the EU and the USA. By stating that these coups “were imposed on these nations that did not in any way correspond to their way of life, traditions, or these peoples’ cultures,” the Russian president offers an alternative explanation of this phenomenon.²²¹ According to Vladimir Putin, these revolutions represent an attempt to further undermine Russia’s role and status in world politics. It follows that the United States, the European Union and their democracy promotion initiatives, such as the EU’s Eastern Partnership project, pose a threat not only to Russia and its cultural space, but also to the whole post-Soviet region. For this reason, Moscow has no choice but to defend the sacred values of its neighbours, who share history and traditions with Russia, to prevent future “chaos, outbreaks in violence and a series of upheavals”.²²² He further insists that Russia must be treated as an equal partner of the West, regarding both the European Union and the United States. In reality, however, Russia’s interests are flagrantly ignored, President Putin complains:

We have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment continues today. [...] They [the Western countries] are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position, because we maintain it and because we call things what they are and do not engage in hypocrisy. But with Ukraine, our western partners have crossed the line, playing the bear and acting irresponsibly and unprofessionally.²²³

The language of the Russian president towards the Western countries, and particularly towards the EU and the USA, reveals feelings of deepening frustration and anger. In this regard, Andrey Tsygankov uses a metaphor of sibling rivalry to describe Russia’s relations with the West.²²⁴ As he notes, Russia’s identity as a great power only came into play when Russia and the Western countries began to mistrust each other and depart from their efforts to cooperate, which is apparently the case of the crisis in Ukraine. Assuming Russia’s perception of the West as that of its significant Other, the discourse

²²¹ Putin, 2014a.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Tsygankov, 2014b, p. 353.

of fear may have become particularly intense and bitter by appearing wholly irrational and resembling sibling rivalry. The primary cause of this behaviour pattern is a sense of betrayal.²²⁵

Using Tsygankov's metaphor, it can be inferred from his speech that Vladimir Putin considers Russia to be under the threat of the Western strategy of siege and containment.²²⁶ Given the fact that the Kremlin believes it has the right to intervene and control events in the post-Soviet space, it is hardly surprising that Russia remains concerned about the EU's involvement in the region.²²⁷ In the context of the planned signing of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU at the Vilnius summit in November 2013, the European Union was seen from Moscow's viewpoint as blatantly ignoring Russia as a world (and especially European) power who has something to say in European politics. As Vladimir Putin puts it in his 2014 Annual Address to the Federal Assembly:

When implementing Ukraine's association project [...] [n]obody wanted to listen to us and nobody wanted to talk. They simply told us: this is none of your business, period, end of discussion. Instead of a comprehensive but – I stress – civilised dialogue, it all came down to a government overthrow; they plunged the country into chaos, into economic and social collapse, into a civil war with enormous casualties. [...] What is this, a civilised way of solving problems? Apparently, those who constantly throw together new 'Colour Revolutions' consider themselves 'brilliant artists' and simply cannot stop.²²⁸

The European Union is thus criticised for excluding Russia from the very discourse on democracy, while portraying itself as the actor who has the last say on the subject. The Kremlin has been resisting the EU's attempt to exert influence in its neighbourhood, stressing constantly the need for a dialogue with the EU on an equal footing only, provided that all the parties involved would partake in creating the norms

²²⁵ Tsygankov, 2014b, p. 353.

²²⁶ See Rutland, 2015, p. 132.

²²⁷ Dias, 2013, p. 262.

²²⁸ Putin, 2014b.

and regulations of their interaction.²²⁹ Therefore, the Colour Revolutions are not only seen as a Western strategy for installing regimes that are dangerous for Russia and destabilising for the larger region, but also as a geopolitical competition provoked by the European Union and its Eastern Partnership initiative. The Russian president criticises the whole international order established after the end of the Cold War, with western-style democracy functioning as a universal goal. In his speech at the 2014 meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club, Vladimir Putin explains the rationale for his concerns about the Western position of normative hegemony:

The Cold War ended, but it did not end with the signing of a peace treaty with clear and transparent agreements on respecting existing rules or creating new rules and standards. This created the impression that the so-called ‘victors’ in the Cold War had decided to pressure events and reshape the world to suit their own needs and interests.²³⁰

In his speech, President Putin offers a good example of redefining the meanings of certain notions. It can thus be seen how concepts can be interpreted differently once they are defined in relation to the nodal point. Criticising the West for its hegemonic incentives under the pretext of democracy promotion enables Russia to concurrently reject the Western critique of the Russian state of democracy and to justify its actions in Crimea as being necessary to protect the Russian population and the land that symbolises an important part of the history of the Russian Empire. In the Crimea speech, the Russian president attempts to give thorough historical reasoning to justify the annexation of the peninsula:

Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptised. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilisation and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. The graves of Russian soldiers whose bravery brought Crimea into the Russian empire are also in Crimea. This is also Sevastopol –

²²⁹ Gretskiy et al, 2014, p. 376.

²³⁰ Putin, 2014b.

a legendary city with an outstanding history, a fortress that serves as the birthplace of Russia's Black Sea Fleet. Crimea is Balaklava and Kerch, Malakhov Kurgan and Sapun Ridge. Each one of these places is dear to our hearts, symbolising Russian military glory and outstanding valour.²³¹

Considering the discursive rationale for Moscow's actions in Ukraine, it is interesting to observe the vocabulary used by Vladimir Putin, when speaking about the Russian people – he uses the word 'russkiy' instead of 'rossiyskiy'. While both words mean 'Russian', they differ in connotation. Whereas the former has largely cultural and ethnic character, the latter acquired rather a civic connotation. Since Boris Yeltsin began to use the word *rossiyane* (a noun form derived from the word *rossiyskiy*) in order to consolidate civic Russianness, the term became the 'politically correct' norm of the official language. Nevertheless, from the mid- 1990s on, this term began to be popularly associated with people of non-Russian ethnic origin.²³²

With this in mind, it may be interesting to analyse Vladimir Putin's speech on Crimea from the languaculture perspective. In the Crimean speech, the word *russkiy* was mentioned 29 times, contrasting with the previous addresses where *rossiyskiy* was mostly used. The Russian president points out that the majority of the Crimean population consists of *russkiy*²³³ population, that Crimea is historically a "*russkiy* land" and Sevastopol "a *russkiy* city".²³⁴ In the same way, he proclaims that "millions of *russkiy* and Russian-speaking people live [i]n Ukraine, and will continue to live there in future".²³⁵ By promising that "Russia will always defend their interests by political, diplomatic and legal means", Vladimir Putin portrays Russia as a guardian of all the ethnic Russians.²³⁶

²³¹ Putin, 2014a.

²³² Тепер, 2016, p. 381.

²³³ In original Russian speech: "Из 2 миллионов 200 тысяч жителей Крымского полуострова почти полтора миллиона русских." See Putin, 2014a.

²³⁴ In original Russian speech: "Крым – это исконно русская земля, а Севастополь – русский город." See Putin, 2014a.

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

Advocating the Kremlin's forceful policy response in Crimea, President Putin shifts the focus from the state to the nation, stressing the Russian rebirth and promoting Russian national consciousness and self-awareness.²³⁷ Nevertheless, the rediscovered national element here is very vaguely defined and often framed in a way that is heavily influenced by civilisational rhetoric. Here, the concept of sovereign democracy gains its importance again, being defined in civilisational terms. By depicting European countries as not being sovereign enough and, at the same time, violating the sovereignty of other states, the Russian president presents Russia as a country that protects the 'national pride' of its citizens and those in Crimea:

If for many European countries, sovereignty and national pride are forgotten concepts and a luxury, then for the Russian Federation true sovereignty is an absolutely necessary condition of its existence.²³⁸

What makes President Putin's speech particularly interesting is that unlike the enthusiastic support for the Crimean referendum, the Kremlin is much more reserved in matters of ethnic Russians and the Russian-speaking population in Eastern Ukraine. While the term 'Novorossiia' (New Russia) began to be used, Putin apparently tried to avoid using this term, except for the 2014 annual Direct Line with Vladimir Putin,²³⁹ where he only noted that "Novorossiia [...] has intertwined its roots with those of the Russian state."²⁴⁰ Nevertheless, as he asserts, "[t]he local people have a somewhat different mentality".²⁴¹ As can be seen, by emphasising the differences between Russians living in Russia and those from Southern and Eastern parts of Ukraine, Putin tries to detach himself from the term, commenting that "what was called Novorossiia back in the tsarist days" should remain a historic designation.²⁴²

²³⁷ Teper, 2016, p. 389.

²³⁸ Putin, 2014a.

²³⁹ The Direct Line with Vladimir Putin is broadcasted live annually by Russia's most popular TV channels and radio stations.

²⁴⁰ Putin, 2014d.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

Moreover, the official propagated story is predicated upon the assertion that the inhabitants of Crimea democratically seceded from Ukraine, and requested to be incorporated into the Russian Federation. Consequently, this provides the Russian president with grounds for claiming to be only fulfilling the wishes and expectations of people by uniting Russian peoples and lands based on a spiritual and cultural conception of the ‘Russian world’.²⁴³

A referendum was held in Crimea on 16 March in full compliance with democratic procedures and international norms. More than 82 percent of the electorate took part in the vote. Over 96 percent of them spoke out in favour of reuniting with Russia. These numbers speak for themselves.²⁴⁴

The referendum on the secession of Crimea included the option of ‘reunification’ with Russia, which indicates a further discursive construction to underline the narrative of Crimea’s connection to Russia, while ignoring the history of the peninsula prior to the latter part of the eighteenth century.²⁴⁵ Moreover, by emphasising the ‘violence and killings’ as well as by labelling Ukrainian protest leaders as ‘fascists’²⁴⁶ and a new government as a ‘junta’²⁴⁷, which removed the previous legitimately elected cabinet of Viktor Yanukovich in “an anti-constitutional coup”,²⁴⁸ the Russian president justifies the need to save the people living in Crimea from the harmful influence of the new, illegitimate, government.

Against this background, there was no way we could support this armed coup, the violence and the killings. Just take the bloody events in Odessa, where people were burned alive. How can the subsequent attempts to suppress people in Ukraine’s

²⁴³ For Russia’s narratives and geopolitics of the annexation of Crimea see Biersack and O’Lear, 2014; Hutchinngs and Szostek, 2014.

²⁴⁴ Putin, 2014a.

²⁴⁵ Biersack and O’Lear, 2014, p. 254.

²⁴⁶ Putin, 2014d.

²⁴⁷ Putin, 2014c.

²⁴⁸ Putin, 2014d.

southeast, people who oppose this mayhem, be supported? I reiterate that there was no way we could endorse these developments. What's more, they were followed by hypocritical statements on the protection of international law and human rights. This is just cynical.²⁴⁹

The referendum held in Crimea, on the other hand, was democratic and represented the will of the people, as argued by the Russian president. In the light of the Kremlin's accusations that the new government in Kyiv is controlled by 'fascist' extremists – or to use another Moscow designation, 'junta' –it is also important to realise the role of the myth of the Great Patriotic War in the official discourse. It symbolises the shared struggle of the Ukrainians and Russians against fascism during the World War II. As some scholars argue,²⁵⁰ the message that Russian officials convey when trying to de-legitimise the new pro-European government in Kyiv aims at evoking the idea that Russia is fighting a new Great Patriotic War. Hence, it is equally important to protect Russia itself, since, according to the logic explicit in Vladimir Putin's speech, the whole coup was instigated by Western powers. Speaking with media representatives in Russia in early March 2014, the Russian president stated:

I think this was a well-prepared action [in Ukraine]. Of course there were combat detachments. They are still there, and we all saw how efficiently they worked. Their Western instructors tried hard of course.²⁵¹

A specific aspect that needs to be highlighted is the constant resorting to the concept of double standards, which occurs every time Russia responds to the critique of its actions in the 'Near Abroad,' and gained particular importance in the rhetoric of President Putin after the annexation of Crimea. When the public disorder in *Maidan Nezalezhnosti*, Kyiv's central square, erupted, Moscow began to see a whole set of

²⁴⁹ Putin, 2014a.

²⁵⁰ See for instance Biersack and O'Lear, 2014, p. 254; Hutchings and Szostek, 2015, p. 191.

²⁵¹ Putin, 2014d.

Western actions starting from Kosovo, to Afghanistan, Iraq and followed by the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine as a one chain of events, aiming at installing pro-Western governments all over the world. To support his arguments, the Russian president invoked Kosovo's 2008 unilateral declaration of independence from Serbia, which was found as non violating international law by the 2010 ruling of the International Court of Justice, as a precedent for Crimea's secession from Ukraine.

[T]he Crimean authorities referred to the well-known Kosovo precedent – a precedent our western colleagues created with their own hands in a very similar situation, when they agreed that the unilateral separation of Kosovo from Serbia, exactly what Crimea is doing now, was legitimate and did not require any permission from the country's central authorities. For some reason, things that Kosovo Albanians (and we have full respect for them) were permitted to do, Russians, Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars in Crimea are not allowed. Again, one wonders why. We keep hearing from the United States and Western Europe that Kosovo is some special case. What makes it so special in the eyes of our colleagues? It turns out that it is the fact that the conflict in Kosovo resulted in so many human casualties. Is this a legal argument? The ruling of the International Court says nothing about this. This is not even double standards [двойные стандарты]; this is amazing, primitive, blunt cynicism. One should not try so crudely to make everything suit their interests, calling the same thing white today and black tomorrow. According to this logic, we have to make sure every conflict leads to human losses.²⁵²

In the minds of many Russian analysts, as well as ordinary people, the actions undertaken in Kosovo by the NATO are a perfect example of cynical abuse of human rights rhetoric, the main purpose of which was geopolitical expansion. It is argued that this turn of events, taking place against the backdrop of the rising oil prices, prepared the ground for the more assertive and independent Russian foreign policy.²⁵³ Many Russian

²⁵² Putin, 2014a.

²⁵³ See Makarychev and Morozov, 2011, p. 354.

experts and policymakers perceive the NATO intervention in the Balkans as an imposition of Western values and rules on the neighbouring territory.²⁵⁴

The issue of ‘double standards’ is frequently raised by the Russia’s officials, often pointing at American troops and military bases, “involved in the fates of other countries even though they are thousands of kilometres away from US borders”.²⁵⁵ As President Putin puts it, “it is ironic that our US partners accuse us of breaching some of these rules, despite the US army being deployed all over the world and thus interfering with the affairs of sovereign states on a massive scale”.²⁵⁶ The Kremlin’s attempts to draw attention to the ‘double standards’ of the EU’s policies in Ukraine are aimed at undermining the EU’s normative power claims, while securing its own needs and interests in the region.²⁵⁷ These arguments not only challenge the moral standing of the critics of Russia’s measures in Crimea. It also signifies that by comparing itself with the USA, Russia is acting as a great power.

Similar considerations appeared during the protests in Ukraine in 2013 - 2014. The Kremlin has persistently criticised the Western-installed regimes in Ukraine under Viktor Yushenko and after the Euromaidan revolution, as well as the regime in Georgia established after the Rose Revolution. Nevertheless, these efforts to de-legitimise pro-Western regimes have not been received well in the West. In fact, some Western scholars blame the Kremlin for ‘autocracy promotion’ in its neighbourhood.²⁵⁸

Other scholars, however, hold the view that unlike the European Union, the Kremlin does not promote a particular type of regime in the ‘Near Abroad’. Tom Casier, for instance, maintains that while it is “reasonable to assume that Russia has a policy of weakening ‘unfriendly’ regimes in the neighbourhood [...] the determining factor for supporting or weakening a regime is likely to be the loyalty to Moscow, rather than the degree of democracy”.²⁵⁹ Yet, Russia made an effort to create its own regime ‘model’ aimed at counterbalancing the EU’s democracy promotion. Based on the concept of

²⁵⁴ Makarychev and Morozov, 2011, p. 354.

²⁵⁵ Putin, 2014e.

²⁵⁶ Putin, 2014e.

²⁵⁷ Smith, 2015, p. 535.

²⁵⁸ See for instance Burnell and Schlumberger, p. 2010.

²⁵⁹ Casier, 2012, p. 33.

sovereign democracy, Russian foreign policy insisted that external actors should respect the “national and historical peculiarities of each state in the process of democratic transformation without imposing borrowed value systems on anyone”.²⁶⁰ It implies that the concept of sovereign democracy is still present in Russian foreign policy thinking, questioning the European values and approaches to foreign policy and calling for equal participation in the global decision making processes. This applies especially to Russia’s ‘Near Abroad,’ where the Kremlin feels more susceptible to the Western influence.

In a similar vein, Thomas Ambrosio suggests that rather than spreading a particular model of government, Russia has tried to create “global conditions under which democracy promotion is blunted and state sovereignty, understood as the ability of leaders to determine the form of government for their country, is further entrenched”.²⁶¹

As a part of the strategy to attract countries of its ‘Near Abroad’ away from the EU orbit, the Kremlin launched its own integration project. The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) has been built on the already existing Eurasian Customs Union (ECU) and was presented as one of the main foreign policy objectives of President Putin, “maintaining the identity of nations in the historical Eurasian space in a new century and in a new world”.²⁶² Unlike the European Union, where the national identities of respective member states are allegedly fading, the EEA is “a union where everyone maintains their identity, their distinctive character and their political independence”.²⁶³

By the same token, the Russian President referred to the democratic nature of the Eurasian economic project, based on principles of democracy, liberty and market economy:

The Eurasian Union will be based on universal principles of integration as an integral part of Greater Europe, united by shared values of freedom, democracy and the laws of the free market. [...] The Customs Union [of Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan] and later the Eurasian Union will be the party holding the dialogue [on the creation of the common

²⁶⁰ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2008, quoted in Smith, 2015, p. 533.

²⁶¹ Ambrosio 2010, p. 376.

²⁶² Putin, 2013a.

²⁶³ Ibid.

economic area] with the EU from our side. We can conclude that in the long run, current Russian foreign policy is aimed at some form of economic convergence between the EU and the would-be Eurasian Union.²⁶⁴

It is worth mentioning that Vladimir Putin is referring to European standards in order to attach more importance to the project. In other words, he attempts to establish regional integration using the European Union as an example and thus mimicking the EU project. Concurrently, in the course of demonstrating the sorry state of the EU's integration project, lacking 'civilised dialogue', Vladimir Putin contrasts the European Union with its Russian counterpart as being more transparent and democratic. "The states that are parties to this [EEU] project inform their partners of their plans in advance, specifying the parameters of our association, the principles of its work, which fully correspond with the World Trade Organisation rules".²⁶⁵ Nevertheless, many Western scholars²⁶⁶ are of the opinion that the EEU project has never been focused merely on economic cooperation in the post-Soviet space. Suvi Kansikas, for example, argues, that "[i]n fact, it was perhaps not about economics at all".²⁶⁷ Instead, they identify the rationale for this initiative as being the geopolitical project of Eurasia.²⁶⁸

To summarise, Russian officials presented several narratives, which created an intertwined discursive structure, explaining Russia's actions in Crimea and justifying its moves. Firstly, the meaning of the Colour Revolutions was changed. Instead of presenting these events as protests against the governments' attempts to falsify the results of elections, an alternative scenario was introduced. These events were described as a Western strategy to overthrow the incumbent government in the post-Soviet space and impose the Western model of governance, corrupted and lacking respect for genuine moral values. Secondly, Crimea's population was described as unanimously disapproving of the new Ukrainian government and, at the same time, being under a threat coming from the 'fascist junta'. Through this narrative the Kremlin, especially through the words of

²⁶⁴ Putin, 2012b.

²⁶⁵ Putin, 2014b.

²⁶⁶ See for example Gretskiy et al., 2014; Kansikas, 2015.

²⁶⁷ Kansikas, 2015, p. 111.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

President Putin, made attempts to bring back memories of Soviet nostalgia, during which Russia defeated Nazi Germany and its allies in the Great Patriotic War. Thirdly, the people of Crimea were described as the ones who democratically voted in the referendum for seceding from Ukraine and being incorporated into the Russian Federation. Given these points, Russia challenged the Western perspective on the conflict as being a result of Russia's assertive foreign policy, by which it violated international law and caused the first annexation on the European territory since the end of World War II.

Furthermore, it can be inferred that the public admission of Russia's role in Crimea was especially aimed at the Russian domestic populace in order to enhance the image of the government as a decisive power in uniting peoples and lands that, allegedly, belong to one Russian world.²⁶⁹ The harsh reaction of Moscow to the Colour Revolutions indicates the degree of the Kremlin's irritation towards the democracy promotion agenda, seeing it as harmful and dangerous to the interests of the state officials.

4.6. Democracy as maintaining control over the information space

The Kremlin's concerns over another wave of Colour Revolutions supported by the West in the name of democracy promotion also appeared in the context of the Arab Spring. These dramatic events in the Middle East and North Africa region were seen, once again, as a demonstration of Western aggressive democracy promotion. Concerns about Western interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states have also been reflected in the growing importance of the information flows for Russia's security thinking. Here, as well, the West was perceived as the main potential aggressor.²⁷⁰ Hence, since the beginning of Vladimir Putin's third term of presidency, a significant shift in the importance of information and social media has occurred, indicating that information security has become an important part of Russia's national security. As stated in the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept, Russia "will take the necessary measures to ensure national and

²⁶⁹ Biersack and O'Lear, 2014, p. 255.

²⁷⁰ Morozov 2015, p. 140.

international information security and prevent threats to the political, economic, and public security that emerge in information space”.²⁷¹ This foreign policy doctrine addresses both domestic politics and foreign policy and presents a breach of information security as the biggest threat to Russia. Therefore, communication and information technologies should be prevented “from being used for military and political purposes that run counter to international law, including actions aimed at interference in the internal affairs”.²⁷²

The role of the concept of information security thus became a priority for Russian elites after the Orange Revolution and the Arab Spring, when the mobilisation potential of communication technologies was revealed. As Vladimir Putin wrote in his article devoted to the policy objectives of his third presidency, “the Arab Spring has graphically demonstrated [that] world public opinion is being shaped by the most active use of advanced information and communications technology”.²⁷³ For this reason “the Internet, social networks and communication technology have turned into an effective tool for the promotion of domestic and international policy”.²⁷⁴ Yet again, a discursive position of the West striving to create flashpoints of tension not only in Russia’s Near Abroad, but also in its ‘Far Abroad’ is accentuated by President Putin:

“Evil must be punished. There must be a democracy.” Look at what happened in Egypt [...] We need to realise that there are probably countries and even entire regions that cannot function according to universal templates, reproducing the patterns of American or European democracy. Just try to understand that there is another society there and other traditions.²⁷⁵

These Western activities in the MENA region are presented as a challenge to Russian national interests, causing the overthrow of legitimate regimes and provoking domestic

²⁷¹ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, 2013.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Putin, 2012b.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Putin, 2013a.

instability and conflict abroad. The Russian President thus changes the Western interpretation of democracy promotion as supporting democratic institutions and bringing stability to the country. Instead, his alternative view presents these activities as bringing chaos and violence into the region. Moreover, referring to the 2012 Benghazi attack in Libya, when Islamic militants attacked the American embassy compound and killed the US Ambassador, Vladimir Putin directly connects the policy of democracy promotion with these attacks, being its “direct outcome”:

Apparently, those who committed the now famous military actions in Libya were also inspired by noble motives. But what was the outcome? There too they fought for democracy. And where is that democracy? The country is divided into several parts which are run by different tribes. Everybody is fighting against everybody else. Where is democracy? They killed the US ambassador. Do you understand that this is also the result of the current policy? This is a direct outcome.²⁷⁶

The argument of the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov follows the same pattern. He links the Arab Spring with the US intervention in Iraq in 2003, which was vigorously criticised by Russia from the outset. During these events, Russia blocked the attempt of the USA to acquire the authorisation of the Security Council for the operation and denounced the alleged violation of international law.²⁷⁷ Thereupon, Sergey Lavrov based his criticism of the Western interventions on a strong Russian tradition of drawing a distinction between the ways in which democratic assistance is understood in the West and in Russia:

The point is that the policy of promoting democracy “by blood and iron” simply does not work. We have seen this over the last year and a half and even over the last decade. We all know about persistent problems faced by Iraq. No one really knows what will happen in the Middle East. The danger of forcible imposition of democracy is that it

²⁷⁶ Putin, 2013a.

²⁷⁷ Makarychev and Morozov, 2011, p. 361.

increases elements of chaos and may bring about a serious governability crisis at the global level. Today everyone clearly feels this danger.²⁷⁸

Supporting democracy abroad has its serious drawbacks, Russian officials are arguing accordingly. In his article published in *Moskovskiye Novosti*, Vladimir Putin puts it in more concrete terms, calling for respect for national sovereignty:

We often hear that human rights are more important than national sovereignty. This is definitely true, and crimes against humanity should be punished by an international court. But if this principle is used as an excuse for a presumptuous violation of national sovereignty, and if human rights are protected by foreign forces and selectively, and if, while “protecting” those rights, they violate the rights of many other people, including the most fundamental and sacred right, the right to life, this is no longer a noble effort. This is merely demagoguery.²⁷⁹

It can be argued that Russian officials attempt to redefine democracy at the global level as a universal value to be emancipated from the Western hegemonic control. Hence, democracy and sovereignty stick out as the two fundamental concepts in this controversy, whose relationship becomes increasingly antagonistic and results in creation of the image of the West as the main Russian adversary:

A unilateral diktat and imposing one’s own models produces the opposite result. Instead of settling conflicts it leads to their escalation, instead of sovereign and stable states we see the growing spread of chaos, and instead of democracy there is support for a very dubious public ranging from open neo-fascists to Islamic radicals.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁸ Lavrov, 2012.

²⁷⁹ Putin, 2012b.

²⁸⁰ Putin, 2014b.

Official Russia's discourse thus serves to warn, explicitly and implicitly, against the danger of a Western hegemonic position that could hamper the stability of the post-Soviet space. As Andrey Tsygankov maintains, Russia's emotional shifts are shaped mostly by the country's historically established relations with the West and cannot be simply reduced to dynamics of prestige and power.²⁸¹ Despite strong criticism, Moscow has historically strived to be recognised by the West and achieved its objectives in cooperation with Western countries.²⁸² As shown above, the Kremlin has not defined its system of values as explicitly anti-Western and wishes to be included within the West as a community of values. Nonetheless, in its foreign policies, Moscow expresses disappointment over the lack of the external recognition of Russia's position and its actions. In a similar vein, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov offers a piercing criticism of the Western vision of the world:

[T]he concept of turning the historical West into a sort of Bastille, from which they can guide the world's economies and fulfil the functions of global policemen, is a dangerous illusion. It is dangerous not because it could be implemented – it is simply unrealistic to build fenced off “oases of welfare and security” in the modern world – but because the attempts to implement it could disrupt international stability even more.²⁸³

Russia thus appears to play a double game. On the one hand, it cooperates with China against any form of external interference in the internal affairs of authoritarian regimes, as clearly demonstrated when Russia vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that would have referred the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court in 2014. On the other hand, Moscow has been constantly challenging not only the universality of Western normative order and its applicability to non-Western countries, but also the quality of democracy itself in Western countries.²⁸⁴ International institutions, such as the United Nations, can be seen as a device for promoting an image of Russia as a good

²⁸¹ Tsygankov, 2014b, p. 353.

²⁸² Tsygankov, 2014a, p. 26.

²⁸³ Lavrov, 2014.

²⁸⁴ Makarychev, 2013, p. 54.

citizen of the world and, more importantly, open the way for the Kremlin to counter Western humanitarian arguments with its own interpretation of a higher morality. Therefore, on the international scene, Moscow can not only use its veto powers in the UN Security Council to block sanctions against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, but also provide a rationale for its actions by pleading international law.²⁸⁵

The protests on the *Maidan* in Ukraine in 2013-2014 further strengthened the assumptions of many Russian officials that these events are part of the Western strategy to undermine Russia's status in the world. The approach that has been taken towards information security since 2012 sees the threats in information space largely through a prism of domestic politics. Russian politicians have made efforts to secure domestic political space against any attempts to attack it from outside. This explains the logic behind the use of the term 'information security' instead of cyber security'.²⁸⁶ In his recent article titled "Russia's Foreign Policy: Historical Background", Foreign Minister Lavrov draws a parallel between the Colour Revolutions and the "information wars" and interprets the wave of the coups d'état in the post-Soviet space as a special Western technique to achieve "global leadership":

We see how the United States and the US-led Western alliance are trying to preserve their dominant positions by any available method or, to use the American lexicon, ensure their "global leadership". Many diverse ways of exerting pressure, economic sanctions and even direct armed intervention are being used. Large-scale information wars are being waged. Technology of unconstitutional change of governments by launching 'Colour Revolutions' has been tried and tested. Importantly, democratic revolutions appear to be destructive for the nations targeted by such actions. Our country, which went through a historical period of encouraging artificial transformations abroad, firmly proceeds from the preference of evolutionary changes that should be carried out in the forms and at a speed that conform to the traditions of a society and its level of development.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁵ Lo, 2015, p. 73.

²⁸⁶ Morozov, 2015, p. 140.

²⁸⁷ Lavrov, 2016.

In order to prevent the future ‘Russian winter’ (the Kremlin’s equivalent to the ‘Arab Spring’), Russia presented a draft UN convention on international information security, prepared jointly by the Foreign Affairs Ministry and Russian Security Council in 2011. The main threats addressed in the document proposed by Russia included:

[T]he use of information technology and means of storing and transferring information to engage in hostile activity and acts of aggression; purposefully destructive behaviour in information space directed against critically important governmental structures of another country; [...] the manipulation of the flow of information in the information space of other governments, disinformation, or the concealment of information with the goal of adversely affecting the psychological or spiritual state of society, or eroding traditional cultural, moral, ethical, and aesthetic values; [...] and mass psychological campaigns carried out against the population of a state with the intent of destabilising society.²⁸⁸

A specific point that needs to be highlighted is the emphasis that the document put on the threat to the “psychological or spiritual state of society” and on the danger of “eroding traditional cultural, moral, ethical, and aesthetic values”. As can be seen, the Kremlin regards such actions as components of information warfare and makes an appeal to the international community to recognise them as crimes against international peace and security. In spite of the fact that the text indicates that countries should protect the freedom of speech on the Internet and “ensure that fundamental human rights and freedoms, and the rights and freedoms of citizens”²⁸⁹ are guaranteed, the draft includes an important stipulation that governments may impose restrictions “for the protection of national and public security”.²⁹⁰ Apart from the ban on the use of the Internet for interference in the domestic affairs of the other states and for the regime subversion,

²⁸⁸ Convention on International Information Security (Concept), 2011.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

Moscow has propounded the militarization of information space, giving national governments *carte blanche* to take control over the Internet within their country.²⁹¹

An overall aim of this international push appears to be to protect its information-psychological area, as termed by Timothy Thomas,²⁹² i.e. the way of thinking of Russian citizens, from future Internet uprisings. To put it another way, the Kremlin appears to be concerned about the change of views of its citizens that could potentially be in contradiction to the official Russian interpretation of the state authority, based on a strong sovereign leader and an influential position of the Russian Orthodox Church, and thus undermine legitimacy of the current regime. In order to prevent ‘contagion’ of the Russian information space that could lead to the demands for democratic opening of the regime, the Kremlin prefers to close it to foreign influence.

Russia’s proposal was, however, rejected by the USA and its Western allies, who considered the Kremlin’s appeals to extend the principle of sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs to the whole global information space to be an attempt to impose state control and censorship over the Internet. The fundamental contradiction between Russia, which is concerned above all with information confrontation that might produce new protests in the name of democracy, and the West, which perceives the main threats in the modern world in terrorism and cybercrime, is clearly established in terminology as well. While the US government speaks of “cyber security” and focuses on the protection of computer networks, the Kremlin prefers to use the term “international information security” and puts stress on political and ideological confrontation.²⁹³

As noted by Bobo Lo, by prioritising national interests over a larger international good, Russia’s behaviour does not differ a lot from any other countries. Nonetheless, what distinguishes Russia from many other countries is the degree to which it employs multilateral mechanisms to project status, influence and moral legitimacy.²⁹⁴ One can thus argue that the Kremlin’s support for “the central coordinating role of the UN as the principal organisation regulating international relations” stems precisely from its interest

²⁹¹ Chernenko, 2013.

²⁹² See Thomas, 2014.

²⁹³ Chernenko, 2013.

²⁹⁴ Lo, 2015, p. 73.

in “collective decision-making in addressing global issues” – to be understood as decision-making by the major powers, including Russia, based on “principles of equality”.²⁹⁵ Therefore, it can be assumed that Moscow appreciates these institutions mainly because it perceives them as a counterbalance of the US’s influence and power.²⁹⁶

In addition to Russia’s activism on the international scene, President Putin signed the new National Security Strategy (NSS) document in December 2015, which describes Russia as a state aiming at the increase of its influence and prestige while strengthening its national unity. Here, Russia is presented as a strong country that is achieving its goals, but, at the same time, feels threatened by the West. From the Kremlin’s perspective, today’s globalized world is witnessing an intensifying clash in the global information space, provoked by certain countries’ attempts to use information and communication technologies for the advancement of their geopolitical goals. These means include, for instance, manipulation of public opinion and falsification of history. According to the NSS, the greatest threat to state and public security comes from “activities associated with the use of information and communication technologies to disseminate and promote the ideology of fascism, extremism, terrorism, and separatism, and to endanger the civil peace and political and social stability in society”.²⁹⁷

Therefore, the threats that could be a hindrance to Russia’s ambitions should be overcome, no matter whether they come from within or without. Interestingly, the document is largely focused on Russia’s own development rather than on foreign policy. One of the most significant topics that is present throughout the document is the Russian spiritual bonds and moral values. The issue of ensuring national information security in the sphere of spiritual life is also present in the 2000 Information Security Doctrine (ISD). Nevertheless, these values are not mentioned so abundantly and their meaning differs to a certain extent as well. In the 2015 NSS document, the “spiritual bonds” are seen as having been reborn and as requiring protection from foreign values that might be spread by poor-quality foreign political culture and information campaigns.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁵ Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, 2013.

²⁹⁶ Lo, 2015, p. 73.

²⁹⁷ National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation, 2015.

²⁹⁸ Olikier, 2016.

As far as the information security is concerned, the Kremlin appears to be most worried about the threat posed by content in the information space. ‘Internet sovereignty’, i.e. the ability of the state to have control over the information space, thus represents a key concept in Russia. Non-interference in its information space is perceived as crucial and Moscow is pressing for the creation of new international measures. While it is widely believed in the Western countries that information should travel freely, Russia places emphasis on the principle of national boundaries. The Internet thus continues to be seen by Russian officials as more of a threat than an enabler.²⁹⁹

As can be seen, the issue of “spiritual bonds” forms the main discursive point that penetrates through all Russia’s official discourses on democracy. It is used to justify both the suppression of the anti-regime protests and a support for “healthy families” and a “healthy Russian nation”. Moreover, it helps to legitimise the annexation of Crimea and the attempts to close Russia’s information space from the external influences. Translated into Tsygankov’s model of national identity formation, the spiritual bonds are deeply embedded in Russia’s culture and history, enjoying the position of a hegemonic discourse (Stage III of the model). A Western interpretation of democracy, on the other hand, has been highly challenged and enjoyed rather insignificant influence because of the overwhelming power of the dominant discourse on traditional values.

Nevertheless, as has been discussed at the beginning of this thesis, Russia cannot distance itself from the notion of democracy, since this concept that is deemed to be of a universal nature has such a power that hardly any country in the world would risk to isolate itself from the rest of the international community.³⁰⁰ Consequently, the meaning of liberal democracy acquires a chance to increase its influence, when entering the Stage II of the national identity process. It is now on Russia to decide about the future of this concept in its domestic space. All things considered, Russia’s case study has demonstrated that better understanding of the process of national identity creation and its influence on the meanings that are entering the national space offers an important insight

²⁹⁹ Giles, 2012.

³⁰⁰ Perhaps with the exception of the North Korean regime.

into the persistent problems with democratisation in different cultural backgrounds and enables us to predicate the prospects of its successful implementation.

Conclusion: History continues

In 1989, against a backdrop of the fall of the Iron Curtain, Francis Fukuyama predicated that liberal democracy might constitute the “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution” and the “final form of human government”, and as such constitute the “end of history”.³⁰¹ He argued that at the end of the 20th century, “it makes sense for us to once again speak of a coherent and directional History of mankind that will eventually lead the greater part of humanity to liberal democracy”.³⁰² While the number of democracies in the world has increased since then, the 21st century has also witnessed a growing dissatisfaction with existing democratic institutions and processes, as well as an expansion of alternatives to liberal democracy. In many discourses the West represents a prominent defender of democracy. Nonetheless, there are other governments and civilisations who found the normative hegemonic position of liberal democracy highly a-cultural and a-historical.³⁰³ Throughout my thesis I have argued that contrary to the Western perception of liberal democracy that aspires to potential promotion globally regardless of local political, economic and cultural systems, democracy needs to be studied in the context of national identity formation. To demonstrate the influence of the process of national identity formation on the acceptance of the meanings of liberal democracy, I chose to conduct a case study of Russia’s interpretation of democracy.

For this purpose, Russia’s official discourse on democracy and democracy promotion has been analysed, tracing the conservative turn in Russia’s politics since 2012 when Vladimir Putin was elected as the President of the Russian Federation for a third term. This study has attempted to illustrate that an unconditional acceptance of the idea of democracy promotion all over the world, without any sensitivity towards the local contexts, makes the understanding of why some non-Western cultures are unable or unwilling to incorporate it into their national systems impossible. To put it differently,

³⁰¹ Fukuyama, 1992, p. xi.

³⁰² Ibid., p. xiii.

³⁰³ Koelbe and Lipuma, 2008, p. 1.

democracy is a concept that “shapes our existence as political beings, but whose meaning is in turn profoundly conditioned by our diverse historical experiences”.³⁰⁴

By the same token, the fact that democracy is almost universally accepted as the only legitimate type of government results in the relativisation of the liberal democratic values by many non-democratic regimes. These governments often describe their regimes as ‘culturally specific’ forms of democracy and misuse the term by automatically calling all institutions and norms built upon the empirical reality of the West ‘democratic’.³⁰⁵

Furthermore, this thesis reveals how Russia’s official discourse on democracy is centred around three important nodal points. These are traditional values, the Near Abroad and information security. As has been demonstrated, Russia’s political elites do not completely deny the concept of democracy. Instead, the Kremlin’s selective adoption of the notion has been reflected in this contribution, corresponding with the concept of sovereign democracy introduced by Vladislav Surkov in 2006. Following the main tenet of sovereign democracy, Russia’s democracy is described not only as different from the European model, but also as a better, more authentic form of democracy than its Western counterpart. Praising Russia’s long history of culture and tradition, Russia’s officials have been striving to underpin a uniqueness of Russian civilisation. Consequently, democracy in the Kremlin’s interpretation has acquired a nationalistic character. Therefore, an important element of Russia’s democracy is a strong national state.

It has been argued at the beginning of this study that elites cannot construct new ideas at will. Instead, any new idea about political order, in order to be considered legitimate, needs to accord with core elements of older visions of the political order, with its deeply rooted values, myths, and symbols.³⁰⁶ In case of Russia, the idea of democracy appears in Russia’s national context to be on an equal footing with sovereignty. This older understanding of political order thus delimits the degree to which the idea of liberal democracy can be incorporated in given nation state identity.³⁰⁷

As has been shown in this thesis, a Western interpretation of democracy entered Russia’s national space after the collapse of communist regime and began to be employed

³⁰⁴ Morozov, 2013, p. xiii.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Marcussen et al., 1999, p. 617.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 614.

in official discourses and foreign policy documents. Nevertheless, after the conservative turn in Russia's politics in 2012, Russian political entrepreneurs began to reinterpret it in nationalistic terms. Since the 2011 - 2012 domestic protests that accompanied the presidential elections were perceived by Vladimir Putin and his government as another Colour Revolution orchestrated by the West, the Kremlin decided to undertake a morality turnaround in order to securitise Russia against further spreading of the 'orange virus' through Russian society. The Colour Revolutions thus represent a phenomenon that gained a special attention in the discourse articulated by Russian officials. These coups raised the fear of spreading Western strategies of democracy inside Russia, aiming to overthrow Moscow's regime. Given a threat of the Western attempts to impose their standards of democracy to the post-Soviet space, one of the top priorities for the Kremlin has become strengthening the state by means of control over its information space. Both the Orange Revolution and the domestic protests of 2011-2012 can thus be regarded as 'critical junctures', during which new ideas about political order can most easily be promoted domestically.³⁰⁸ Under those circumstances, perceived political interests and the power resources of political entrepreneurs to a large degree explain why democracy obtained nationalistic character in Russian context.

Hence, the Kremlin has employed a strategy of constant attack on Western normative hegemony, "a sort of Bastille, from which [the West] can guide the world's economies and fulfil the functions of global policemen".³⁰⁹ This reinterpretation of democracy is closely connected with Russia's historical legacy, and particularly with the Soviet period, during which the Great Patriotic War occurred and became a moment singled out to praise Russia's past glory. Given the fact that nation state identities which have become consensual in a particular polity are likely to remain rather stable over time,³¹⁰ Russian political elite could bring back the legacy of the Great Patriotic War when the Ukrainian crisis begun in November 2013. A victory over fascist Germany was revived especially after the annexation of Crimea. Since the new pro-European government in Kyiv was described as undemocratic or even fascist, Russia's intervention

³⁰⁸ Marcussen et al., 1999, p. 614.

³⁰⁹ Lavrov, 2014.

³¹⁰ Marcussen et al., 1999, p. 614.

for the sake of the ‘Russian land’ and the ‘Russian people’ in Crimea was inevitable, as Russia’s official discourse on Crimea’s annexation explains.

As the discourse analysis revealed, the “spiritual bonds”, closely connected to the Russian nation, are located in the centre of Russia’s morality turnaround and represent the main discursive point that penetrates all Russia’s official discourses on democracy. Translated into Tsygankov’s model of national identity formation, spiritual bonds are deeply embedded in Russia’s culture and history, enjoying the position of hegemonic discourse (Stage III of the model). A Western interpretation of democracy, on the other hand, has been highly challenged and enjoyed rather insignificant influence because of the overwhelming power of the dominant discourse on traditional values. Nonetheless, Russia cannot entirely distance itself from the notion of democracy, since this concept that is deemed to be of a universal nature has such a power that hardly any country in the world would risk to isolate itself from the rest of the international community. Consequently, it can be inferred that the vision of democracy in liberal terms entered the Stage II of the Tsygankov’s model, nevertheless being reinterpreted in the particularistic terms.

As for the role of the European Union in Russia’s official discourse, this thesis found that despite various literature highlighting the EU’s perceived threat to Russia, the European Union is outshone in Russia’s official discourses by the USA. By constantly stressing the multipolar world order, Vladimir Putin questions the whole post-Cold War order based on the U.S. unipolar domination. The EU is thus perceived as a vehicle of the US assertive foreign policy in Europe rather than a global actor making its own decisions. Using Tsygankov’s metaphor of sibling rivalry,³¹¹ the Kremlin appears to feel betrayed by the West, who does not recognise Russia’s ‘greatpowerness’. At the same time, however, Europe as such plays an underlying role in constructing Russia’s national identity. In spite of the fact that Europe is often depicted in Russia’s discourse as a part of the US-led plot against Moscow’s regime, Russia’s identity is formed through communication with Europe. The Kremlin thus appeals to European norms, but falls short in implementing them in the national context.

³¹¹ Tsygankov, 2014b, p. 353.

Moreover, regarding Russia's vision of international democracy, the idea of global democracy promotion is treated very critically in the official discourses, which reveals the Kremlin's irritation towards the Western normative initiatives. At the same time, nevertheless, Russian officials use terms borrowed from the Western vocabulary in order to point out a democratic deficit within the Western countries themselves (e.g. the example of the Baltic countries, where the alleged discrimination of Russian minorities takes place, or the allegedly non-transparent negotiations over the implementation of Ukraine's Association Agreement), as well as in the pro-Western governments in the Near Abroad (e.g. the often criticised state of democracy in Ukraine during Viktor Yanukovich's presidency and during the new post-Euromaidan government that was depicted as controlled by 'fascist' extremists³¹² or 'junta'³¹³).

As a response to the Western principles and norms that are deemed universal, both Vladimir Putin and Sergey Lavrov stress sovereignty and great power identity in order to secure their regime. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that Russia's official discourse on democracy is predominantly about national security preservation and should be interpreted within the context of Russia's relations with the West.

Based on the works of Marcussen and Tsygankov, it has been shown that in order to be institutionalised in Russian national context, the idea of democracy needs to resonate with Russian pre-existing identities and cultures. Therefore, those who produce ideas that are deemed universal share at least some responsibility for how these ideas are seen and understood in other local contexts. As Andrey Tsygankov maintains, since we live in a multicultural world, negative responses to these visions are to some extent unavoidable, but it is in our power to reduce them.³¹⁴ Taking the issue of national context seriously is indispensable for both knowledge acquisition and theory building. Without solving this problem, the research of democratisation becomes more difficult, since it is hard to anticipate if, and how far, one can extend the knowledge outside its social context.³¹⁵ All things considered, the study of democratisation should start by recognising that there is

³¹² Putin, 2014c.

³¹³ Putin, 2014d.

³¹⁴ Tsygankov, 2003, p. 70.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

both diversity and pluralism around the world and that more attention needs to be paid to the processes of national identity construction.

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