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Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi

Journal of Social Sciences

| e-ISSN 2602-229X |



<https://prensip.gen.tr>

ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Biographical Narratives and Routines of Putin's Russia in the Context of the Ukraine Crisis

Ukrayna Krizi Bağlamında Putin Rusya'sının Biyografik Anlatıları ve Rutinleri

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Geliş Tarihi/Received Date: 15.05.2023

Kabul Tarihi/Accepted Date: 02.07.2023

ABSTRACT

The article argues that Russia's decision to initiate an attack on Ukraine in February 2022 was an inevitable move for both its material and ontological security. By adopting an offensive stance and directly engaging in a conflict with a former Soviet country, Russia transformed the ongoing tension with the West into a full-fledged confrontation. At this juncture, the article primarily emphasizes that Russia's assault on Ukraine has solidified its "anti-Western" rhetoric, which serves as a crucial pillar of its ontological security. However, it asserts that while this aggression bolstered the anti-Western discourse to some extent, it also harmed Russia's ontological security in terms of other biographical narratives and routines. In essence, the article examines the historical development of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and delves beyond the concrete steps taken, exploring the dangers posed by such aggressive behavior to Russia's ontological security, particularly with regard to its biographical narratives and routines. Within this framework, the article posits that Russia's ontological security relies on contemporary biographical narratives and routines rooted in the discourse of the "continuing state", "strong state", sovereign democracy, "anti-Westernism," "anti-globalism," and "neo-Eurasianism."

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine Crisis, Offensive Realism, Ontological Security, Neo- Eurasianism.

ÖZ

Şubat 2022'de Ukrayna'ya saldırı başlatan Rusya Federasyonu için söz konusu hamle hem maddi hem ontolojik güvenliği için kaçınılmaz bir hamle idi. Saldırgan bir tutumla Rusya'nın eski bir Sovyet ülkesine saldırması, Batı ile süregiden gerginliği, doğrudan bir çatışmaya dönüştürmüştür. Bu noktada, makale temel olarak, Rusya'nın, gerçekleştirdiği Ukrayna saldırısının hegemonik söylem temeline ontolojik güvenliğinin önemli bir sacayağı olan "anti batıcı"lığı yerleştirdiğini ve söz konusu saldırının, bir yere kadar anti batıcı söylemi güçlendirse de Rusya'nın ontolojik güvenliğinin diğer biyografik anlatılarına ve rutinlerine zarar verdiğini öne sürmektedir. Kısaca makale, Rusya'nın Ukrayna işgalinin tarihsel gelişimini, bu gelişimin somut adımlarının ötesinde bu tür bir saldırgan tutumun Rusya'nın özellikle ontolojik güvenliğinin biyografik anlatıları ve rutinleri bakımından ne tür tehlikeler yarattığını ele almaktadır. Bu çerçevede makale Rusya'nın ontolojik güvenliğinin biyografik anlatılarının ve rutinlerinin günümüzde "sürekli devlet", "güçlü devlet", "egemen demokrasi", "anti-batıcı" ve "anti-küresel" söylem ve "neo-avrasyacı" söylemlere dayandığını öne sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rusya, Ukrayna Krizi, Saldırgan Realizm, Ontolojik Güvenlik, Neo Avrasyacılık.

Please cite this paper as follows/Atıf için:

Kavuncu, A., & Faye, M. (2023). Biographical narratives and routines of Putin's Russia in the context of the Ukraine crisis. *Alinteri Journal of Social Sciences*, 7(1), 57-81. <https://doi.org/10.30913/alinterisosbil.1297155>



INTRODUCTION

Major regional powers inevitably adopt an aggressive stance to secure their own security. In doing so, they increase their chances of transitioning from being a regional power to a global one. Russia, under Putin's leadership, has developed an existential identity and pursued material security, which inevitably leads to tensions with countries it accepts as independent on a regional scale, resulting in a confrontational and aggressive attitude. While this high-intensity tension is necessary for its material security, it can sometimes jeopardize its ontological security.

Upon closer examination of Russia's strategies under Putin, it becomes evident that they increasingly involve a more aggressive attitude, and the invasion of Ukraine serves as a prime example in line with the explanations of "offensive realism." On the other hand, the claim that a powerful state may adopt an aggressive posture for ontological security goes beyond material security and forms the basis of ontological security. From this perspective, Russia's annexation of Ukraine, based on the developments thus far, makes it possible to argue that Russia, although it presents it as an existential necessity (ontological security), is actually risking significant damage to both its material and ontological security through its risky endeavors in Ukraine. Despite the seemingly smooth alignment of Russia's attack on Ukraine with its anti-Western discourse, its other pillars, such as neo-Eurasianism, anti-globalization rhetoric, and even the discourse of a strong state and sovereign democracy, are undermined. In reality, Russia finds itself increasingly cornered by Western expansion moves and is compelled to carry out the strategically important move in Ukraine for border security and geopolitical reasons. In terms of ontological security, the "anti-Western discourse" serves merely as a legitimizing discourse that does not fully respond to this aggressive attitude. Therefore, states sometimes resort to irrational and non-rational conflicts that they prefer over realist steps to preserve their material security, turning their discourse on ontological security into a legitimate justification for a certain level of irrational choice. This point aims to contribute to the ontological security literature by suggesting that ontological security can be viewed as an instrumental object to be evaluated rather than a subject that needs occasional examination.

Russia, under Putin's leadership, has largely succeeded in its international relations efforts to safeguard both material and ontological security. However, it has encountered a stumbling block in Ukraine, where it has essentially hit a wall. Thus, Russia has stumbled upon a setback despite its previous successes in pursuing both material and ontological security in the Putin era.

In this context, this article primarily examines the historical development of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, going beyond the concrete steps of this development to address the dangers posed by such an aggressive stance for Russia's ontological security in terms of biographical narratives and routines. Within this framework, the article argues that Russia's ontological security is currently grounded in the narratives and routines of a "continuous state," a "strong-sovereign democracy," an "anti-Western," and an "anti-global" discourse, as well as "neo-Eurasianist" narratives. After summarizing the historical foundations of the Ukrainian attack and its content, the article discusses the concepts of aggressive realism and ontological security, and then examines how the

foundations of Russia's ontological security are defined by the regime. Finally, it assesses the effects of the Ukrainian invasion on the pillars of ontological security, at least until now.

BACKGROUND OF THE UKRAINE ATTACK OF RUSSIA

Ukraine has historically been a significant geostrategic buffer zone between the West and Russia, given its central location in the Eurasian region. With Russia's expansion into former Soviet countries under Putin, Ukraine has felt the need to protect itself from Russian encroachment by pursuing closer integration with the West. This has resulted in escalating tensions over time. Furthermore, Ukraine's aspirations to join the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, as well as its abandonment of the Minsk agreements, have further fueled the existing fire. President Zelensky and his government have continued to pursue a pro-EU policy, a shift that occurred after the Euro-Maidan protests, as a means to safeguard against Russian influence. In response, Russia has increased its support for the Russian minority population in eastern Ukraine, where the ongoing conflict in the Donbass region persists. Russia's second significant move was the annexation of Crimea. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the Ukrainian crisis, it is essential to delve into the Maidan Revolution, which led to a change in government and regime in Ukraine, as well as the subsequent developments and the annexation of Crimea.

Maidan Revolution and Change of Government in Ukraine

The intervention in Russia-Ukraine can be traced back to the Maidan revolution in 2014. However, according to many Ukrainian political commentators, the roots of Maidan, or Euromaidan, can be traced back to November 21, 2013. It was on this day that the then President Victor Yanukovich declined to sign the association agreement with the European Union, citing unfavorable conditions imposed by the EU. This decision sparked public outrage and prompted calls for citizens to protest (Kvit, 2014). Subsequently, a series of demonstrations and rallies took place. On November 30, 2013, the protests turned violent when riot police brutally beat demonstrators and dispersed them from their encampment. The following day, over a million people took to the streets of Kyiv. Some analysts argue that the protests were not solely about European integration but also a response to the government's brutal treatment of its own citizens. On January 16, 2014, the government passed laws aimed at suppressing the protests. However, many Ukrainian commentators and media outlets labeled these laws as dictatorial. Following the passage of this legislation, the protests escalated from peaceful to more aggressive. Between February 18 and 20, 2014, more than 50 protesters were killed, and by April, the Ukrainian Ministry of Health's press release reported over 100 fatalities during the fierce protests (NewsGuard, 2022).

In mid-February 2014, the Ukrainian parliament gained control and conducted a vote of no confidence against President Yanukovich, prompting his immediate flight from the country (Mulligan, 2022). Subsequently, the Ukrainian Parliament decided to hold an early election by May 2014. The Maidan revolution received extensive coverage in Western media, portraying it as a struggle for freedom. Conversely, the Russian narrative depicted the events as a Western coup against the pro-Russian government in Ukraine. For instance, Russian state-sponsored channels like Russia Today (RT) and

Sputnik News portrayed Maidan as a coup d'état orchestrated by the West rather than a revolution. Another noteworthy example is the RT publications of 2014, where they quoted former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasian Affairs, Victoria Nuland, who stated that the United States had invested over \$5 billion in Ukraine since 1991 (McDonald, 2014; Meandzija, 2020; NewsGuard, 2022). Ivan Katchanovski, a professor at the University of Ottawa, extensively studied the Maidan massacre. In his research, he compiled a broad range of evidence from various published sources pertaining to the protestor killings in Maidan. Katchanovski concluded that the Maidan was a meticulously planned false flag operation aimed at overthrowing the Yanukovich government and seizing power (Katchanovski, 2015). In summary, Ukraine experienced scenarios similar to those witnessed in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan.

The overthrow of the Yanukovich government triggered a series of events in Ukraine that reverberated on the international stage. The first of these was the Donbass War, which served as a catalyst for Russia's subsequent attack on Ukraine. The initial legislative action taken by the new administration following President Yanukovich's downfall was the repeal of the Kivalov-Kolesnichenko statute of 2012, which granted official language status to Russian, on February 23, 2014. This decision sparked outrage among the Russian-speaking population (Baud, 2022). J. Baud, a former colonel of the General Staff, ex-representative of Swiss strategic intelligence, and specialist in Eastern Europe, highlights that this regulation led to the people of Donbas proclaiming autonomy. Consequently, conflicts between the Russian-backed Federal State of Novorossiia and the Ukrainian Armed Forces, known as the Donbass War or the war in eastern Ukraine, erupted on April 6, 2014. The rebels swiftly seized government buildings and established the People's Republics of Donetsk and Lugansk. On June 26, the Lugansk and Donetsk Republics announced their unification, forming the People's Union Republic. However, this de facto state has not received recognition from any international actor.

On February 26, 2014, clashes erupted between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian supporters in Simferopol near the parliamentary building. The pro-Russian faction demanded secession and called upon Moscow for assistance. By February 27, 2014, unidentified armed individuals seized control of government buildings, including the Supreme Council building, in Crimea. Subsequently, a new government was installed with the backing of Russia. On February 28, 2014, a draft constitutional law was submitted to the Duma by 20 deputies, proposing Crimea's admission into Russia. President Putin supported this decision, citing the need to protect the Russian population from perceived threats (Foxall & Kessler, 2014). The following day, the Qurultay assembly of Crimea Tatars voted in favor of implementing the Right of Crimea Tatar People to Self-Determination. The vote received overwhelming support. On February 28, Russian armed forces swiftly occupied strategic locations, such as the Perekop Isthmus, effectively severing the connection between Crimea and mainland Ukraine. Subsequently, a referendum was held to determine Crimea's future. According to official sources, 81.31% of registered voters participated in the referendum, with 96.77% in favor of reunification with Russia. However, these numbers lack international verification as the process was deemed unconstitutional (Bebler, 2015). Consequently, on March 17, 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, leading to the escalation of the conflict on an international scale.

2022 Ukraine Crisis and Russia's Attack

After the occupation of Crimea, the events in Ukraine did not come to an end. The Battle of the Donbass continued for eight years. However, in a significant turn of events, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched an attack on Ukraine on February 21, 2022. In his address to the nation, he declared the recognition of both the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics as independent states. Putin claimed that the Minsk Protocol had been "killed" by Ukraine long before Russia recognized Donetsk and Luhansk¹. It is worth noting that the US government had been issuing warnings of a potential Russian invasion of Ukraine since the end of 2021. President Zelensky responded to the escalating tensions by issuing Decree No. 117/2021 on March 24, 2021. This decree was aimed at recovering the lost territory of Crimea (Ukrinform, 2022), and it also ordered the deployment of troops in the southern regions. Another significant development during that period was the NATO military exercise in the Black Sea, along with increased exploration flights near the Russian border. In response, Russia conducted several military exercises and increased the operational readiness of its military forces. These actions were intended to serve as a signal to NATO that Russia was closely monitoring the situation.

Prior to the climax of the conflict in February, there were some diplomatic maneuvers in an attempt to de-escalate the situation. On February 7, 2022, President Macron met with President Putin, reaffirming his commitment to the Minsk agreements. The following day, President Macron met with President Zelensky. On February 11, political leaders engaged in discussions on how to resolve the issue, but they failed to reach a unilateral decision (Klein & Liptak, 2022). Dissatisfied with the outcomes, Putin announced that Russia would invade Ukraine in the coming days. This was not surprising to many analysts, as OSCE observers had been recording cease-fire violations, and from February 16, 2022, there was an increase in artillery shelling in the Donbas region (OSCE, 2022). On February 21, 2022, Putin officially recognized the independence of the two Donbas Republics and signed friendship and aid agreements with them. Subsequently, on February 24, 2022, Vladimir Putin invoked Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, which calls for mutual military aid within the context of a defensive alliance. In his speech, Putin emphasized that Russia would launch a special operation to "demilitarize" and "de-nazify" Ukraine (Teslova, 2022). He claimed that the goal was to protect the Russian-speaking population that had allegedly suffered from persecution and genocide over the past eight years (see reuters: Osborn & Nikolskaya, 2022). However, these narratives failed to convince other actors in the international arena, and Putin's attempts to legitimize the operation were largely dismissed.

According to Mearsheimer, the roots of the problem can be traced back to 2008 when NATO indicated its willingness to include both Ukraine and Georgia as members. The Russians have been highly vocal since then, perceiving this as an existential threat.

¹ The Minsk Protocol is an agreement signed on September 5, 2014 by representatives of Ukraine, the Russian Federation, the Donetsk People's Republic, the Luhansk People's Republic and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to stop the war in the Donbass region of Ukraine. The protocol failed to stop the war and was followed by a new package of measures called Minsk II, adopted on 12 February 2015. Minsk agreements failed to stop the conflict, but these agreements remained the basis for any future resolution to the conflict, as agreed at the Normandy Format meeting (*Minsk Anlaşması*, 2022).

The current conflict is not solely about NATO expansion but also about transforming Ukraine into a pro-US liberal democracy, which the Russians view as an existential threat (Chotiner, 2022). Mearsheimer argues that Putin's objectives go beyond strategic and geopolitical considerations and reflect his ontological concerns (Chotiner, 2022). However, Kyiv has consistently denied accusations of genocide, asserting that Putin is using this as an artificial pretext to justify his attack. Despite Putin's attempts to legitimize the invasion by claiming to "cleanse Ukraine from Nazism and fascism" and to hold those responsible for crimes against civilians accountable, his narratives have failed to convince other actors, leading to Russia's isolation in the international arena. Experts consistently highlight that all options for Russia lead to a loss.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Given the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, various theories of international relations offer insights into the crisis. The predominant debate revolves around the perspectives of liberals and realists, both of which are likely to emphasize significant challenges as the crisis continues to unfold. Moreover, to date, Russia's attack on Ukraine has been widely interpreted by numerous studies as a strategic move by Russia to safeguard its ontological security. However, this article takes an alternative perspective, viewing Russia's actions through the lens of offensive realism, aimed at securing its material interests. It argues that the concept of ontological security is employed as a discursive tool to legitimize this irrational behavior, which disregards principles of international law. In fact, the article reveals that the Ukrainian attack has inflicted more harm than good to Russia's ontological security. At a theoretical level, the authors contend that material security and ontological security can intersect and influence one another based on temporal, situational, and spatial factors, thereby lacking a unidirectional relationship.

Within this context, the article provides a concise overview of two prominent theories frequently applied to the Russia-Ukraine conflict: offensive realism and ontological security. It is widely acknowledged that the era of equating national interest solely with tangible power in states' foreign policies is coming to an end (Steele, 2008). With the advent of the post-Cold War period, international theories have diverged significantly. In this regard, offensive realism, as a neoclassical realist theory, offers insights into material security concerns, while ontological security emphasizes the existential and self-related concerns of states in the post-Cold War era.

Offensive Realism

Offensive realism, a sub-theory of neoclassical realism, emerged as a response to Kenneth Waltz's defensive neorealism. Like defensive neorealism, offensive realism posits an anarchic international system in which rational great powers, uncertain of other states' intentions and capable of military aggression, strive for survival. While some similar ideas were initially developed within defensive neorealism, Mearsheimer's offensive neorealism offers significantly different predictions regarding the behavior of great powers in international politics. It fundamentally diverges from defensive neorealism in terms of the level of power accumulation necessary for a state to ensure its security and the strategies employed by states to achieve a satisfactory level of security (Johnson & Thayer, 2016). Consequently, Mearsheimer's offensive neorealism presents a more pessimistic portrayal of international politics, characterized by perilous inter-state

security competition likely to result in conflict and war. Therefore, this article argues that although Mearsheimer is indeed a realist, his offensive realism is just one of the various realist theories that may provide an explanation for the Ukraine War. Despite the apparent prevalence of structural realism, it is suggested that classical and neoclassical realism paradigms can offer more nuanced and ultimately more compelling explanations for Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022 has sparked intense debate regarding the relevance of traditional realism as a theoretical approach to International Relations (IR) and politics. Many self-proclaimed realists and think tanks argue that realism fully explains (and even predicts) Russia's invasion of Ukraine, partially attributing it to the haphazard expansion of NATO eastwards, backed by the United States, and the undermining of Russia's status as a major power. Russia is perceived as responding reasonably to changing material realities (Chotiner, 2022; Klein, 2022).

Firstly, John Mearsheimer's offensive neorealism aims to rectify the "status quo bias" found in Kenneth Waltz's defensive neorealism. While defensive realists assume that all states are players content with maintaining the existing state of affairs, offensive realists argue that all states are driven by a desire to revise the international system (Rynning & Ringsmose, 2008). In essence, Waltz posits that states solely act as status quo powers, striving to uphold their position in the international system by preserving the current balance of power. Conversely, according to offensive neorealism, states may actively seek to alter the international system in their favor instead of merely preserving their position. They may employ expansionist strategies when deemed necessary. The Ukraine Crisis serves as an example where Russia displayed such aggressive behavior. Indeed, offensive neorealism suggests that the international system provides significant incentives for major powers to engage in aggressive actions to enhance their security and ensure survival. In a state of anarchy, characterized by the absence of a central authority capable of effectively safeguarding the system, states with aggressive attitudes and intentions "seek and readily find opportunities to rebalance power dynamics by acquiring additional power gains at the expense of potential rivals." States strive to augment their military capabilities at the cost of other states within the system, with their ultimate objective being hegemony, i.e., the sole great power in the state system. In his work, "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics," Mearsheimer contends that "international politics has always been a fiercely competitive and perilous enterprise, and it will continue to be so" (Mearsheimer, 2014). According to him, great powers are driven by the pursuit of maximizing their share of global power at the expense of others, and they consistently harbor revisionist aims, resorting to the use of force to alter the balance of power if they perceive it to be a cost-effective endeavor. Mearsheimer demonstrates that due to the nature of the international system's framework, states are compelled to act aggressively towards one another to enhance their own security, as exemplified in the conflict involving Russia.

At this stage, Mearsheimer argues that violations of international law and human rights are only tolerated to the extent that power dictates in this anarchic environment. According to Mearsheimer, in the realm of international politics, states primarily prioritize international law and moral principles as long as they align with their strategic interests. However, if a conflict arises between international law and a country's strategic

interests, the state will invariably prioritize its geopolitical interests, often disregarding international law and human rights. Consequently, Mearsheimer, as a neorealist, asserts that discussions on rights are not particularly useful (Steele, 2008). In fact, substantial evidence suggests that states, much like individuals, tend to behave in accordance with their biological needs (Johnson & Thayer, 2016). Therefore, when Russia, the offensive actor, attacked Ukraine, it did so at the expense of violating both international law and human rights.

Within this context, the most distinctive aspect of offensive realism, in contrast to defensive realism, lies in its ability to explain extraordinary situations within the international system. Consequently, this theory can provide an explanation for the frequency of conflicts between states. As Snyder highlights, Mearsheimer's offensive realism "expands the scope of neorealist theory by offering a theoretical justification for the behavior of revisionist states" (Snyder, 2002). Thus, offensive realism proves more successful than defensive realism in elucidating the Russia-Ukraine conflict, particularly in terms of understanding extraordinary situations. However, this instrumental theory falls short in explaining certain aspects of the Ukraine case. At this juncture, other studies that have made significant contributions to the Ukraine-Russia crisis focus on Russia's original state position. Several non-realist perspectives challenge the assumptions of realists regarding NATO expansion and propose psychological or conceptual factors as reasons for Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to go to war. Russia is viewed as a complex and multifaceted entity, rather than a strictly rational actor.

Ontological Security

After the end of the Cold War, power-based theoretical approaches have not been entirely abandoned; however, there has been a notable shift towards incorporating different elements of power, such as identity, beyond the traditional focus on military or material capabilities. One such approach that has gained prominence in analyzing the foreign policies of states is ontological security. According to ontological security, states can be seen as entities with a sense of self, similar to individuals. Each state, as a self-contained entity, constructs its own biographical narratives and grounds its actions (routines) upon these narratives. The theory of ontological security, which allows for socio-psychological analysis, centers around the selves of states and emphasizes the stability of their biographical narratives and the consistency between narrative and action. Those in positions of power, who are required to justify their decisions or seek consent, often generate narratives to establish a basis for legitimacy.

The concept of ontological security was first introduced in psychology by R.D. Laing in his work "The Divided Self" (1965). Subsequently, it found its way into sociology through the writings of A. Giddens (1991), and eventually became a concept within the field of international relations by gaining recognition in critical security studies during the 1990s. Laing, who initially transferred the concept from existential theorists to psychoanalysis, defines it as the state of experiencing an unwavering and constant sense of self-identity and autonomy. In contrast, Giddens defines ontological security as "the trust that individuals have in the continuity of their own identity and in the coherence of the social and material environments that surround their actions" (Mitzen & Larson, 2017). This definition incorporates trust in both individuals and the physical environment

as fundamental components for fostering feelings of ontological security. In essence, the concept of ontological security is rooted in the human need for a stable and continuous self, and can be understood as a form of "psychological well-being" (Rumelili & Adısönmez, 2020).

Since the 1990s, critical security studies have challenged the conventional approach of explaining security issues solely in military terms. This has led to the emergence of the ontological security approach, which criticizes the dominance of realism in defining security as solely concerned with the physical security of states. Ontological security-oriented research within critical security studies argues that security should encompass not only concepts like danger, threat, and survivability, but also broader abstract notions related to the internal sense of identity and existence. In international relations, ontological security refers to the state's concern about who or what they are and what they desire. It is a form of security research that focuses on the continuity of state identity and the factors that may pose threats to their internal existence" (Ertem & Düzgün, 2021). The key elements of ontological security for states are the continuity of their narrative identity and the stability in their relations with other states (Mitzen & Larson, 2017). Seminal works on ontological security, as opposed to a purely "physical" or "material" understanding of security in international relations, have been conducted by Huysmans (1998), McSweeney (1999), and Manners (2002). More recent scholars such as Zarakol (2010), Mitzen (2006), Steele (2008), and Rumelili and Adısönmez (2020) have also contributed to the study of ontological security.

However, thus far, the conceptualization of ontological security and its original propositions have not provided a distinctiveness that sets it apart from approaches that prioritize identity or social security over material security within critical security theories. It remains unclear where the differentiation lies between the body-self distinction and material-identity security. According to Rumelili and Adısönmez (2020), referencing Steele (2008), the distinguishing factor of ontological security is that it does not rely on the identification of a threat and the motivation to protect against this threat. Rather, ontological security is rooted in the internal sense of existence and continuity, independent of the fear caused by a defined external threat. It thrives on anxiety and does not involve identifying an external actor or object as a threat to this continuity.

In this context, Russia's insecurity regarding the expansionist strategies of the West, which it perceives as an external threat jeopardizing its survival, serves as a primary catalyst for the attack on Ukraine. This threat does not arise from ontological security, which is concerned with internal continuity and existence, but rather from an external source. Consequently, the ontological security discourse instrumentalized by Russia does not fully account for the Ukraine attack, particularly in the context of neo-Eurasianism and sovereign democracy.

Ontological insecurity is a concept found in the literature on ontological security, as described by McSweeney. It pertains to an individual's need for familiarity through established routines. Ontological insecurity is associated with the erosion of collective identity (Ertem & Düzgün, 2021). It refers to a profound state of incapacitation, characterized by a lack of knowledge about which dangers to confront or ignore, and how to navigate the world effectively (Mitzen, 2006). The continuity of personal narratives is

maintained through actions that align with these narratives, often manifested as interstate routines. Ontological insecurity arises when uncertainties disrupt these routines, which can sometimes include ongoing conflicts. In other words, the cessation of conflict itself can be a cause of ontological insecurity. During conflicts and wars, physical security interests may clash with ontological security interests. According to the understanding of ontological security, states may continue these conflicts despite their physical security interests, as their primary concerns lie in the ontological realm. In such cases, physical security may be sacrificed for the sake of ontological interests, and conflict routines are maintained.

Some experts have argued that ontological insecurity provides a partial justification for Russia's attack on Ukraine, similar to the concept of ontological security. However, the Ukrainian conflict does not fall within the scope of ontological security or ontological insecurity as previously defined. In fact, Russia's actions in Ukraine do not align with its established routines. While conflicts occasionally diminish a state's physical power, it is evident that they derive support, particularly from the social structure, in the ontological sense. Therefore, conflicts are sustained not solely for material interests but also for ontological security. Support from the populace can be garnered by framing the conflict as a struggle against the "other" in terms of identity, just as the West has historically attacked Islamic countries in the name of combating radical terrorism. Similarly, Russia's confrontation with the West, which it considers its other, reinforces its ontological security. Since the end of the Cold War, the routine of this struggle has primarily consisted of tense confrontations rather than concrete acts of aggression, reflecting the Soviet tradition. In contrast, Ukraine has become a site of aggressive and concrete warfare, deviating from Russia's typical routine in its struggle against the West. Except for the two World Wars, imperial powers such as the West and Russia have not engaged in direct face-to-face conflict like the one witnessed in Ukraine. Although this can be seen as a form of proxy warfare, it is unique in its open and overt nature. Consequently, it is crucial to address the elements of ontological security that Russia, under the leadership of Putin, has emphasized, as well as the impact of the Ukraine crisis on these elements, following the aforementioned explanations.

EARLY YEARS IN RUSSIA: "CONTINUING STATE" FOR MATERIAL SECURITY VS. "WESTERN RUSSIA" AS A BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE

The newly established Russian Federation after the Soviet Union can be analyzed in two distinct sub-periods: (a) The 1990s, a period characterized by Russia's efforts to recover and integrate with the West; and (b) the period after 2000, during which Russia achieved recovery and gradually expanded its influence in the CIS countries, adopting a more balanced Western policy instead of seeking integration. These two periods exhibited notable disparities between Russia's discourse on ontological security and its actions concerning material security.

The most significant discrepancy was evident in the contrast between Yeltsin's ideal of a "Western Russia" and the notion that the USSR was not a successor state but a "continuing state." Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation declared that it was not the successor state to the former USSR, but rather a continuation of it. Concurrently, Russia relinquished its nuclear competition with the USA, abandoned

the imperialist policies of the Soviet era, briefly cooperated with NATO, fostered closer relations with other Western powers in the UN Security Council, pursued democratization and a free-market economy, and joined the WTO and the G-7.

The continued existence of a state and its successor state carry distinct legal consequences. In the former scenario, despite changes in government, population, or territory, the same state remains in question. In the latter, one state replaces another entirely (Mullerson, 1993). It is evident that Russia, in its pursuit of Western identity for the sake of ontological security, opted for the notion of a continuing state for practical reasons. However, this decision created a contradiction between its material security and ontological security. One significant crisis faced by Yeltsin's Western discourse was his failure to embrace the grandeur of the collapsed Soviet empire. The Soviet hegemony, which stood in opposition to the West, could not be a foundational element of the new Western Russian identity. Conversely, proclaiming the Russian Federation as the successor to the Soviets and securing a seat on the UN Security Council served as a crucial step for material security, but it did not align with the ontological definition of the new identity. "We are the continuation of the Soviets, but we are not actually the Soviets!"... This contradiction, along with the diminishing support from social elites and grassroots movements, gradually led to Yeltsin's downfall.

However, Russia's "continuing state" thesis should have caused concern among the post-Soviet countries, particularly in the initial years. The fact that Russia was unable and unwilling to effectively engage with the former Soviet region made it easy for the former Soviet countries to accept this thesis for pragmatic reasons. Through the founding treaties of the CIS², Russia successfully imposed its unilaterally declared continuing state thesis on other former USSR states. Russia based its argument on the premise that it constituted the core of this state when the USSR first emerged in international law. Nevertheless, in reality, Russia's continuing state thesis created a significant apprehension and pre-acceptance of future interventions in the former Soviet countries by both parties. Additionally, it is important to consider that the USSR left a substantial debt burden on the recipient countries, not only accounts receivable and rights. Therefore, those states that were creditors of the USSR and had binding agreements silently acquiesced to the Russian Federation's decision, as it spared them from dealing with multiple counterparts or the fear of not finding a suitable recipient (Aladağ, 2008). Consequently, the Russian Federation inherited the permanent membership seat of the USSR in the UN Security Council and the veto power without requiring any approval or modification (Keçeci, 2021)³.

As a result, the former Soviet countries, as well as the creditor nations, accepted Russia's continuing state thesis as a prerequisite for the CIS agreements. This acceptance was driven by practical considerations and differed from Yeltsin's "western Russia"

² Thus, Russia was able to convince the world public opinion by having this thesis accepted by the 3rd countries with the Belojevsk Treaty and the Alma Ata Declaration. The main legal document on this issue was the decision of the Council of Heads of State of the CIS dated December 21, 1991. According to the resolution, the members of the Community support Russia in maintaining the membership of the USSR in the Security Council and other interstate organizations. The decision did not include the phrase "continuing state", it only covered the support of the request of the Russian Federation (Aladağ, 2008; Keçeci, 2021)

³ <http://politikaakademisi.org/2021/02/16/uluslararası-hukukta-halefiyet-meselesi-sscb-orneği/>

argument. Consequently, the Russian state needed to adopt a new and solid stance to address its identity crisis. Notably, Russia had already begun to strengthen itself financially in the past decade. Therefore, with Putin's rise, Russia started to shape its biographical narrative based on a neo-Eurasian approach, aligning with the continuing state thesis.

NEW BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES/ROUTINES WITH PUTIN AND THE UKRAINE CRISIS

Towards the end of the 1990s, there was a notable shift in Russian domestic and foreign policy, with Russia gradually placing the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) at the center of its foreign relations. Several factors influenced this preference. Firstly, the possibility of Turkey's growing influence due to its historical ties to the region, coupled with the expansion of NATO since 1995, which brought the alliance closer to Russia's borders. Consequently, Russia asserted that the security of the concerned region should be sought from Russia itself. It explicitly stated its prioritization of CIS countries and the establishment and strengthening of collective security mechanisms within the CIS, as part of its cooperation with the Near Environment Doctrine. This positioned the CIS within Russia's national security framework, enabling Russia to intervene in any part of the CIS geography when its own interests were threatened.

This shift in Russia's foreign policy during the Putin Era undeniably served the purpose of enhancing ontological security. Russia began constructing a framework that aligned with its desired "biographical narrative" and "routines." To achieve this, Russia responded to the series of revolutions orchestrated by the West in former Soviet republics, which were seen as encircling Russia. This response led to a resurgence of "neo-Eurasianism" as an identity within Russia's biographical narrative under Putin. Secondly, Russia adopted an "anti-Western rhetoric" to legitimize its expansionist strategies and routines against the West, which was viewed as encroaching upon its borders. Lastly, Russia generated discourse on "sovereign democracy" and "anti-globalism" to portray a conservative and strong statist image in its daily domestic and regional politics, aligning with the aforementioned routines. These routines and biographical narratives needed to be compatible or at least not incompatible with one another for a coherent ontological existence, and Russia seemed to have achieved this compatibility flawlessly. The routines implemented thus far yielded results that did not disrupt the internal elements and consistency of Russia. In fact, they even reinforced this consistency.

However, the crisis in Ukraine has begun to undermine Russia's internal consistency by giving rise to "ontological insecurity." This crisis has fueled its confrontational stance towards the West, one of its established routines, but has also caused significant changes in the nature of this routine. Furthermore, Ukraine's offensive actions have inflicted damage on the neo-Eurasian universal discourse, while growing domestic opposition weakens the concept of "sovereign democracy." Moreover, the reactions and concerns of neighboring countries diminish the credibility of the "anti-universalist-globalist" discourse. In the following section of this article, we will examine deeper into these points.

Anti-Western Rhetoric

Although Russia has desired a strategy of alliance with the West since the Gorbachev era, this approach has not endured. According to Russian expert Tsygankov (2013), the negative attitude of Western nations towards Russia has hindered its acceptance as an equal member in Western institutions. The enlargement decision of NATO in 1994, its intervention in Kosovo in 1999 without a United Nations Security Council resolution, and similar events have compelled Russia to reassess its Western policy. In response, Russia has adopted a "multipolarity," "multiplexity," and "regional power" approach with the West, as part of the "multi-vector" foreign policy concept introduced by Yevgeny Primakov during his tenure as Minister of Foreign Affairs. As a Eurasian great power, Russia prefers multidirectional cooperation with regional players such as China, India, and the Islamic world, rather than solely engaging with the West. The objective is for Russia to become an equal actor in international politics, acknowledging that it may not match the strength of the United States. This trend in Russian foreign policy has persisted since Vladimir Putin assumed power in 1999. Indeed, in the post-Cold War era, there have been numerous significant international crises, primarily involving Russia's relations with the EU and, to a lesser extent, the USA. These crises include NATO's intervention in Kosovo (1999), the invasion of Iraq (2003), the expansion of the EU and NATO (2004), the Orange Revolution (2004), the NATO Missile Defense System project (2002-2007), the intervention in Libya (2011), the Crimea problem (2014) (Erşen, 2014), and Russia's support for the uprising in the Donbass region. These events have fueled the discourse on Russia's ontological security, contributing to an anti-Western narrative.

During the first two decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian foreign policy was predominantly reactive (Lukyanov, 2023). However, since the 2000s, particularly after Putin assumed power, Russia has adopted a more proactive stance in its foreign policy. Russia, leveraging its energy resources, has moved away from its perceived weakness as a deposed superpower and has consistently emphasized the need for the West to regard it as an equal interlocutor in international politics. Throughout history, Russian political and social thought has been influenced by two opposing main ideological frameworks: Westernism/Atlanticism and Slavophilia. The only shared aspect between these intellectual and ideological approaches is their reference to the West in shaping Russian identity (Erşen, 2014; Musaoğlu, 2015). Consequently, the "West" has become indispensable in Russia's sense of self.

During the Ukraine crisis, Russia continued to employ anti-Western rhetoric, attributing the conflict entirely to Western provocation. Is the United States using Ukraine to undermine Russia? In a speech delivered at the Business Roundtable's quarterly meeting, President Biden highlighted the emergence of a new world order, led by the United States (SAM, 2022). Moreover, on May 20, 2022, during the semi-annual Munk Debates, the former U.S. ambassador to Moscow claimed that the United States had been misleading Ukraine since 2014 regarding its potential NATO membership (Majeed, 2022). These statements have raised questions regarding whether this conflict is orchestrated to weaken Russia, which President Biden himself has alluded to in several of his speeches. During his press conference on [insert date], Vladimir Putin responded by saying,

"I maintain the belief that the United States does not prioritize Ukraine's security, although it may consider it to some extent. Its primary objective is to curtail Russia's advancement, and that is the crux of the matter. In this regard, Ukraine serves as a mere instrument to achieve this goal. There are various approaches to accomplishing this, such as drawing us into an armed conflict or pressuring its European allies to impose stringent sanctions on us, as the current discourse in the US suggests."

According to ontological security explanations, the continuity of biographical narratives is maintained through actions consistent with those narratives, often in the form of interstate routines. This perspective suggests that there has been a longstanding pattern of conflict between the West and Russia, with occasional interruptions, spanning over a century. When Russia defines its identity within its biographical narrative, it tends to reference the West predominantly in negative terms, thereby reinforcing its own sense of ontological security. As a result, the ongoing conflict with the West has become a stable routine for Russia. Consequently, ending this conflict could potentially create a sense of ontological insecurity for Russia.

It is worth noting that the discussions on ontological security often overlook an important point: any change in the quality of this conflict routine carries the risk of disrupting the established routines, not just ending them. In other words, the routines required for maintaining ontological security, which are fueled by the ongoing conflict, may be disrupted not only by its cessation but also by a radical change in the conflict's nature. This is precisely the situation Russia is experiencing in Ukraine. The routine of conflict, which reinforces the anti-Western discourse, has been disrupted by the intense and direct conflict in Ukraine. Russia's previously tense but cautious conflict with the West has transformed into a direct physical confrontation this time. Although the attack on Ukraine may appear to further fuel the anti-Western discourse, in the long term, it has altered the nature of the routines associated with the anti-Western narrative, much like the events of "Smiling Socialism" in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s or the situation in Afghanistan in the 1970s.

In addition to the Ukraine attack, Russia has also encountered challenges regarding its physical security, which complements its ontological security. In February 2022, the conflict escalated into a military dimension, leading to a rupture in relations with the West. Russia's relationships with the United States and the European Union, in particular, suffered significant damage due to the Ukraine crisis. Sanctions and diplomatic tensions have contributed to a more confrontational climate in international affairs. Responding to its perceived isolation from the West, Russia has sought to strengthen ties with other countries, including China. Many of these countries have increased their business dealings with Russia (Leckie, 2022).

Furthermore, prior to February 24, 2022, Russia was one of the European Union's major trading partners. However, following the Russian invasion, the European Union has taken extraordinary measures to substantially weaken Russia's economic foundation, depriving it of critical technology and markets, thereby significantly restricting Russia's capacity to wage war⁴. Another geopolitical setback for Moscow has been the breakdown

⁴ For example, in 2021, Russia was the EU's fifth largest trade partner, representing 5.8% of the EU's total trade in goods with the world. In 2020, the EU was Russia's first trade partner, accounting for 37.3% of the

of energy cooperation with Europe. This has been a significant disappointment for Russia since gas supplies to Europe were seen as a guarantee for maintaining stability in its relations with European countries, unlike its relations with the United States, which lacked such a guarantee. Russia made every effort to project itself as an exceptionally reliable energy provider to EU members, and its motivation was also driven by the lack of viable alternatives for gas supply to European countries. Many in Moscow believed that Russia's energy weapon, in the form of controlling gas supplies, would prevent Europe from severing ties with the Russian Federation⁵ (Yanovsky, 2023). All these factors not only create financial insecurity but also undermine the Russian people's ontological trust in the Putin regime.

The Ukraine Crisis and “Anti-globalist” and “Sovereign Democracy” Discourses/Routines Inside and Around Russia

After the 2000s, the Putin regime employed the discourse of "sovereign democracy" to counter social movements and color revolutions in both Russian society and post-Soviet countries. Concurrently, it complemented this narrative with an "anti-globalist" discourse, contrasting the Western universalist-democracy explanations. However, the same regime progressively adopted a more aggressive stance in its foreign policy. In parallel to this assertive foreign policy, it implemented increasingly repressive measures both within neighboring countries and its own social structure. Consequently, a clear contradiction emerged between Russia's purported respect for the sovereignty of neighboring countries and its pursuit of an aggressive foreign policy.

Indeed, there are several significant domestic political factors that influence a country's adoption of aggressive realist policies. Firstly, the political ideology of a state plays a crucial role. Countries with ideologies that disregard the desires of their own people and exhibit intolerance towards their demands, resorting to violence when necessary, tend to pursue an aggressive and power-oriented approach in foreign policy, aligned with their domestic practices. Secondly, the treatment of minority groups within a country's borders significantly impacts its foreign policy demeanor. The more exclusionary a regime is towards these minority citizens, particularly in regional or ethno-cultural contexts, the more prone it becomes to adopting an aggressive stance in foreign policy. Thirdly, a state's attitude towards its weaker neighboring countries is an important factor to consider. States that disregard the political aspirations of their weaker neighbors and subject them to social humiliation often lean towards aggressive realism (Musaoğlu, 2015).

country's total trade in goods with the world. 36.5% of Russia's imports came from the EU and 37.9% of its exports went to the EU. (European Commission, 2023).

⁵ However, with the deterioration of relations with the West, Russia's foreign policy prioritises shifting partnerships with China and India, with Southeast Asia coming in third. China's significance is evident, profound, and long-lasting, as is Delhi's. The lengthy history of collaboration in the military and economic domains has doubled since the conflict began, with India and China all profiting from cheap gas (Yanovsky, 2023).

Russian Discourse for the "Fear of Survival" in Neighboring Countries and Ukraine Attack

The rhetoric employed by Russia in response to the color revolutions-coups, which it perceives as Western attempts to encircle the country, revolves around the notion that Russia respects, and will continue to respect, the regimes of neighboring former Soviet countries. This strategic stance aims to rekindle the sympathies of those former Soviet countries that initially leaned towards the West in the early years, thereby fostering renewed affinity with Russia. Consequently, since the 2000s, there has been a growing cooperation between Russia and these former Soviet countries in various spheres, including military, security, economic, and social domains. While this reaction by Russia can be seen as a response to Western encroachment, it also serves as a counter to the Western intervention that champions democracy discourse in the internal affairs and domains of sovereignty of the former Soviet countries. Notably, it is no coincidence that Russia began propagating the concepts of "sovereign democracy" and "anti-globalism" during the period when it started reshaping its Russian ideology towards neo-Eurasianism, assuming a global mission, and forging deep-rooted relationships within its immediate sphere.

In his 2012 article titled "Russia and the Changing World" (Ankov, 2019), Putin expressed the belief that every state possesses the right to safeguard its own security. He contended that the West, particularly the United States, infringed upon the internal affairs of other states under the guise of the "democracy discourse," thereby violating international law and fueling conflicts in the region. According to Putin, the sovereignty of states and their respective regimes ought to be respected, and the West transgressed this principle through the color revolutions. However, for various reasons, the Russian Federation did not adopt a similar stance of respect towards the pro-Western Georgian regime and the pro-Western Ukrainian regimes following the Maidan events. In fact, Russia's military engagement with Georgia in 2008 to protect South Ossetia and its subsequent annexation of Crimea in 2014, exploiting the escalating political crisis in Ukraine as a pretext, undeniably facilitated the spread of influence by Western actors such as the United States, the European Union, and NATO across the former Soviet territory. These actions signify Russia's unwillingness to relinquish its position (Erşen, 2014).

Russia, which pledged to protect the regimes of post-Soviet countries and counter the democracy discourse of the West, has disregarded these principles and taken the risk of violating even the most fundamental document ensuring close cooperation among the former Soviet countries, namely the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) agreements. The founding agreement of the CIS, named after the city where it was signed, took place on December 7-8, 1991, in Belovezhskaya Pushcha, located near Minsk, the current capital of Belarus (Aladağ, 2008). The Alma-Ata Declaration, serving as the supplementary protocol to this agreement, was signed on December 21, 1991, by 11 former Soviet republics: Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine. In essence, all former Soviet republics, except the three Baltic Republics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and Georgia, became signatories to the declaration. According to the CIS Declaration, signatory countries pledged to adhere to mutual recognition and respect for state sovereignty, sovereign equality, the inalienable right to self-determination, as well

as the principles of equality and non-interference in internal affairs. Moreover, the declaration strongly emphasized that member countries would recognize and respect each other's territorial integrity and the inviolability of existing borders. In short, the CIS declaration, as the pivotal treaty defining the parameters of the new era in the region, embodies an agreement in which member states commit to respecting one another's borders (Keçeci, 2021).

In subsequent years, despite the explicit terms of the agreement, there were occasions when Russia violated the CIS agreement due to its expansionist policies. First and foremost is the conflict with Georgia. Despite Georgia's initial non-participation in the CIS and the prolonged succession issues following the collapse of the USSR, it was eventually admitted into the community on October 10, 1993, based on the unanimous decision of the other 11 republics. However, as a result of the events that commenced with the 2008 South Ossetia War and caused significant tensions with Russia, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili announced their decision to withdraw from the Commonwealth of Independent States. Secondly, Ukraine departed from the community after Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Thus, by violating the CIS Treaties, the Russian Federation has demonstrated that it will respect the sovereignty and regimes of neighboring countries only when the regime aligns with its own interests, particularly if it is anti-Western in nature.

Discourses/routines of "Sovereign Democracy" and "Manageable Democracy" in Russian Social Structure and the Ukraine Crisis

The discourse of "sovereign democracy" can be characterized as an anti-Western, particularly anti-American, narrative developed by Russia as a defensive response to the wave of democratization that emerged with the color revolutions in certain regions. It is also seen as a reaction to Western criticism of Russia's "managed democracy" policies aimed at centralizing and consolidating the political system (Musaoğlu, 2015). Putin's speech during the Munich Security Conference on February 26, 2008, marked a significant shift in Russia's rhetoric on foreign policy, rather than a change in actual policy implementation. According to Russian foreign policy expert Trenin, Moscow's message can be interpreted as follows: accept us as we are without interfering in our internal affairs and treat us as equals (Trenin, 2022). Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov stated, "If there is Western democracy, there must be Eastern democracy" (*Министр обороны*, 2014). This highlights the idea that Russian democracy, by combining the concepts of "managed democracy" and "sovereign democracy," differs from Western democracy, drawing on a collectivist understanding aligned with conservatism that has historically shaped the social democratic ideals of this civilization. Consequently, a hegemonic discourse started to develop, paving the way for the suppression of dissenting voices and the establishment of an authoritarian regime. Scholars such as Surkova argue that this centralized-statist approach has existed since Lenin's era and that the resulting strong centralized state represents a Russian form of democracy (Musaoğlu, 2015).

However, the Ukrainian conflict has triggered growing social reactions within Russia and has undermined the Russian people's trust in the concept of "sovereign democracy," similar to neighboring countries. The Ukrainian people and society are not perceived as the "other" that should be attacked, unlike Georgia. Numerous young

Russians who oppose the war have faced censorship for sharing anti-war memes on social media (Vorobyov, 2023). Others, fearing conscription, seek refuge in neighboring countries. NPR reports that many of these young Russians are migrating to Antalya, a popular tourist destination on Turkey's southwest coast, which is now becoming a haven for individuals who do not wish to participate in the conflict (Tanis, 2022). Moreover, ethnic minorities, who have heard that Russia's new conscription policy disproportionately affects people from ethnic backgrounds similar to theirs, rather than Russians living in major cities like Moscow or St. Petersburg, and who claim to have numerous friends detained despite their strong opposition to the war, are also seeking a way out. These examples clearly illustrate the mixed sentiments among young people regarding the conflict.

Furthermore, the Russian government has significantly tightened its control over the media landscape. While state control has always been present, the Ukraine crisis led to even stricter measures in Russia to regulate media and disseminate propaganda. The propaganda propagated in the media serves as a counter-narrative to what is referred to as Western propaganda. Moreover, journalists, activists, and opposition figures who voice dissent against the government's policies face heightened scrutiny, including legal prosecution, intimidation, and imprisonment. These restrictions have been justified by the administration as necessary to protect national security and maintain solidarity. The United Nations human rights committee report has raised numerous concerns about the excessive and disproportionate limitations on rights, such as freedom of speech and assembly, imposed on journalists, political dissidents, lawyers, and human rights activists. Additionally, media institutions and websites have been shut down, further exacerbating the situation (United Nations, 2022). Furthermore, international organizations in which Moscow once actively participated and played a leadership role have shifted their stance against Russia, which it previously viewed as pillars of a just world order (Trenin, 2022). Consequently, the Russian people perceive Russia as increasingly isolated rather than being a "hero against the West." This has caused unease among Russian citizens, both of Russian origin and of other nationalities, as their daily routines are disrupted, affecting their sense of ontological security.

Another significant negative consequence of the Ukraine crisis has been the rise of nationalism in both countries. Many Ukrainians possess a strong sense of patriotism and a deep desire to safeguard their country's sovereignty. Similarly, for many Russians, the government's actions are aimed at protecting ethnic Russians and the Russian-speaking minority in Ukraine. Consequently, many Russians have rallied behind the government's measures. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 garnered widespread support, with many Russians perceiving it as rectifying historical injustices and reclaiming Russia's power and influence in the region. This situation has contributed to the gradual escalation of nationalism throughout the Eurasian region, leading to significant political conflicts at the regional level.

Ukraine Attack and National Identity of Russia: Neo-Euranism

Russia's domestic and foreign policies have been shaped by its responses to international developments, influenced by two distinct historical intellectual foundations: (a) integration with NATO and the West-USA, and (b) an imperialist stance aimed at

strengthening Slavic or Eurasian identity. Westernizers perceive Russian society as an integral part of the Western world, sharing numerous similarities with Western cultures. Former President Yeltsin expressed that post-Soviet Russia shares common values with the West, such as democratization, a market economy, and human rights. Yeltsin believed that Russia should strive to become a significant partner of the Western countries.

However, the prevailing perspective in shaping Russian identity leans toward the second view: an imperial stance aligned with Slavophiles or Eurasians. Accordingly, during the disintegration of the Soviet Union, neo-Slavophile ideology emerged, asserting that Russia's backwardness in comparison to the West cannot be overcome by imitating Western practices. Instead, it proposes a return to Russia's traditional values as a solution to the country's challenges. Leading neo-Slavophile thinker Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn advocated for the establishment of a new Russian/Slavic state comprising Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, while excluding other Soviet republics (Serbest, 2017). As these ideas were being discussed, on December 8, 1991, the three Slavic republics (Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine) came together and signed a treaty aiming to create a new union known as the CIS. This development was regarded as the realization of the long-anticipated Slavic unity. Consequently, neo-Slavophile ideology gained significant influence in Russian politics.

In the following period, the concept of Eurasianism gained increasing appeal in Russia, gradually surpassing Slavism. The limited expansionist vision of neo-Slavophilism came to be seen as inadequate, leading to the gradual adoption of Eurasianism as the official state ideology. Over time, Eurasianism transformed into neo-Eurasianism, which emerged as a response to the Russians' trauma of territorial loss. The ideological perspectives of neo-Eurasianism bear inherent similarities to its predecessor, classical Eurasianism. Their fundamental shared view lies in their radical opposition to universal ideas. However, classical and neo-Eurasianists differ in their geographic definitions of Eurasia. (Bassin, 2011; Serbest, 2017). Neo-Eurasian views can be classified into three primary currents: the Ethnological Current led by Lev Gumilev, the Cultural Current led by Aleksandr Panarin, and the Geopolitical Current led by Aleksandr Dugin (Serbest, 2017).

With Vladimir Putin assuming state leadership in Russia in 2000, the Eurasianist ideology began to expand its sphere of influence. Analysis of the current discourse and practices suggests that Eurasianist thinking has influenced and shaped the thoughts of decision-makers during Putin's tenure. The legitimacy of Russia's policies within the framework of the "Near Periphery" doctrine, particularly designed for the post-Soviet region, has been rooted in Neo-Eurasianist thought. In fact, Putin strives to blend *realpolitik* and idealism through "neo-Eurasianism," which envisions Russia as a superior civilization with a universal mission and a transcendent empire. Consequently, he employs pragmatic strategies and seeks tangible steps towards achieving global power.

When Russia initiated its attack on Ukraine, it found itself in a situation aligned with its inherent "anti-Western" orientation, which forms a crucial aspect of its ontological security. However, by targeting the Ukrainian people, who represent the founding element of the USSR and a significant part of Slavic identity and nationhood, Russia has created a problematic scenario both globally and within its own society

concerning neo-Eurasianism, another fundamental pillar of its ontological security, and the legacy of the USSR. While Russia claims that the attack was carried out to protect Ukraine from a small group of Ukrainian ultra-nationalists, it is widely recognized by both the Russian and Ukrainian populations that this justification is unfounded. Furthermore, despite Russia's assertion that the attack aimed to safeguard the Russian minority in Ukraine, it is well-known, particularly among former Soviet countries, that Russia has historically utilized the presence of Russian minorities as a pretext for imperial ambitions and has engaged in aggression against various nations.

Moreover, neo-Eurasianism encompasses more than just Russian identity. In the realm of neo-Eurasian thought, the Eurasian nation is considered the primary entity. The Russian/Slavic nation constitutes a significant component of this collective identity, with the Ukrainian people being among its prominent constituents. Additionally, due to historical ties and shared kinship, Russians and Ukrainians have intermingled to a great extent. In this complex context, it is evident that the regime led by Putin has faced substantial criticism from its own society, particularly regarding the concept of sovereign democracy.

CONCLUSION

The Ukraine crisis began with the suspension of the EU Partnership Agreement by the pro-Russian government during the Maidan Protests in 2013. Subsequent changes in Ukraine were initiated by the formation of a new government following these events. The newly established government imposed restrictions on languages other than Ukrainian, including a temporary ban on Russian, which is the mother tongue of the majority of the population. For Putin, preventing the alteration of the territories in Eastern Ukraine, which he regards as inhabited by a Russian-accepting population and belonging to Russia, and not allowing Ukraine to be stripped of its Russian identity, hold significance beyond strategic and geopolitical considerations – it has an ontological importance. Hence, Putin, who disregards the existence of the Ukrainian state, signifies through this approach that Ukraine belongs to Russia's essence. Because of the historical, cultural, and demographic ties that bind it to Ukraine, Russia views Ukraine as an indispensable "ontic" territory. Therefore, for a president unwilling to relinquish the Soviet Russian geography, Ukraine is like a severed organ removed from Russia's body.

Ultimately, the offensive stance of Russia in its attack on Ukraine can be seen as a risky step it had to take for its material security. Russia finds itself increasingly cornered by the West's expansionist moves and has been compelled to carry out the strategic move of seizing Ukraine, which holds significant geopolitical importance, in order to safeguard its material security (border security and geopolitical stability). In the context of ontological security, Russia has employed an "anti-Western discourse" to legitimize its aggressive behavior. However, this discourse is an empty hegemonic rhetoric without any substantial basis. Consequently, states sometimes undertake irrational and unwise actions to protect their material security through realist measures, while using discourses about their ontological security not as a result of genuine concerns but as a means to justify their irrational choices up to a certain extent. Building upon this premise, this article aims to contribute to the ontological security literature by suggesting that ontological security

should be viewed not only as a subject that needs occasional examination but also as an instrumental object that should be evaluated.

On the other hand, although this move seems smooth in terms of Russia's ontological security, which is an important pillar of its anti-Western discourse, and even Putin emphasizes that it is an inevitable move for the existential security and national security of Russia, this offensive attack ultimately harms other pillars such as neo-Eurasianism, anti-globalist discourse, and to some extent, strong state and sovereign democracy discourse, thereby undermining its ontological security from other aspects.

First and foremost, with the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has pursued a strategy consistent with its ontological security in terms of conflict with the West, which is part of its routine. However, launching such an angry attack against Ukraine, which has strong historical ties, goes against its routine and damages its ontological security in terms of both the Soviet legacy and the neo-Eurasianist pillar, which is an important aspect of its Slavic identity, a founding element of the Soviet Union. Indeed, Ukraine is not like Georgia for either the Russian state or the Russian people. According to Putin's belief, the Russian Federation is the continuation and representative of the Soviet Union, and in this sense, the Ukrainian people and the Ukrainian state are equally valuable, just like Russia. Attacking Ukraine is thus a significant risk for Putin, ontologically and in terms of the potential reaction from his own society, considering that Ukraine is one of the founding elements of the Soviet Union.

Secondly, Russia has previously shown respect for the power structures in the former Soviet countries and supported them in the face of Western-backed regime changes and democratization attempts. However, by intervening in the internal affairs of Ukraine against a pro-Western regime and abandoning the principle of non-interference, Russia has demonstrated that it is no different from the global model of the West. In this regard, its anti-globalist discourse has been undermined.

Furthermore, in the event of a potential failure, the loss of material security by Russia would also damage its ontological security in terms of the anti-Western discourse. Therefore, the notion that states may sometimes seek to perpetuate conflict with an aggressive stance for the sake of ontological insecurity does not provide a clear explanation in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Within this framework, the crises with Georgia, the Chechen conflict, and the tensions, including the annexation of Crimea and the tensions in the Donbas region, all serve as examples where Russia's ontological security is nourished and strengthened by conforming to the "routine of tense conflict" with the West. On the other hand, Ukraine cannot be considered a conflict that contributes to Russia's ontological security due to its historical and identity-related ties, the direct engagement in conflict rather than distance, and the likelihood of significant material losses.

Russia, just like the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq, has claimed to act in the name of proactive security adorned with ontological security, but in reality, it has attacked Ukraine driven by material security concerns (geostrategic reasons). In essence, Russia's primary goal is the pursuit of material security, while it instrumentalizes ontological security. In this sense, unlike the indirect consequences that the United States faced in its distant regions like Afghanistan or Iraq, Russia seems to be much more

affected both in terms of ontological and material security by hitting a large wall in its immediate neighborhood, similar to the invasion of Afghanistan in the 1970s. Furthermore, not content with just Donbass, launching a full-scale war on the entirety of Ukraine would result in the destruction of Ukraine's ontological and material security, which would require Ukraine to exert even greater efforts to defend itself. Such resistance undoubtedly reminds us of the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan in its final days and is suggested by many strategists as the possible fate of Russia. At the time of writing this article, it was announced that Ukraine has initiated a "counter" attack against Russia. Within this framework, the reality of Russia being structurally confined to the role outlined/determined by the anarchic international order proves the accuracy of the points mentioned above.

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