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Journal of Contemporary European Studies

ISSN: 1478-2804 (Print) 1478-2790 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjea20

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To cite this article: Cenker Korhan Demir (15 Jul 2025): When identity becomes strategy: elite narratives and the road to war in Ukraine, Journal of Contemporary European Studies, DOI: 10.1080/14782804.2025.2534582

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2025.2534582

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2025.2534582

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When identity becomes strategy: elite narratives and the road to war in Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Russia's foreign policy towards Ukraine using an integrated framework that combines neoclassical realism with constructivist epistemology. Prevailing explanations grounded in structural realism or liberal theory often overlook the significance of identity, perception, and elite narratives in foreign policy decision-making. The analysis contends that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 cannot be adequately explained by systemic factors alone, such as NATO enlargement or the erosion of post-Cold War security structures. Instead, these external pressures were interpreted and intensified through intervening variables – including elite-driven identity narratives, strategic culture, existential nationalism, and securitised discourse. Building on neoclassical realism, the article highlights how structural constraints were mediated by domestic political dynamics and leadership beliefs. Constructivist insights further illuminate how national identity and historical memory shaped Russia's threat perceptions and served to legitimise military action. The findings suggest that Russia's behaviour reflects more than strategic calculation; it embodies a deeper ideational contest over status, sovereignty, and regional order. By synthesising realist and constructivist perspectives, the article offers a more comprehensive explanation of the Ukraine crisis and underscores the value of theoretical pluralism in analysing complex foreign policy conduct.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 26 April 2025
Accepted 9 July 2025

KEYWORDS
Neoclassical realism; constructivism; foreign policy; identity; Russia; Ukraine

Introduction

The Ukraine crisis, which began with Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and escalated into a full-scale invasion in February 2022, has redefined the international security agenda. While the roots of the conflict are historically embedded, its intensification has made it a focal point for policy makers, institutions, and scholars. The causes and repercussions of the war have been examined from a multitude of perspectives – security, economic, political, and sociocultural. Among these, Russia's foreign policy trajectory leading to the war remains the most contested and extensively debated topic in international relations (IR).

Since 2014, the IR literature has produced a growing body of scholarship seeking to explain Russia's behaviour. Realist approaches – particularly classical, structural, and

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offensive realism – have dominated the field, often interpreting the conflict through realist concepts such as balance of power and the security dilemma (Lebow 2022; Mearsheimer 2022; Rösch 2022; Walt 2022). Within this broad realist tradition, neoclassical realism has emerged as a particularly promising sub-field, as it bridges systemic incentives with domestic-level variables such as elite perception, strategic culture,[1] and state capacity (Becker et al. 2016; Götz 2021).

The application of neoclassical realism to Russian foreign policy has been well-documented in the literature. While Götz (2021) highlights how Russia's foreign policy reflects both external pressures and internal dynamics, particularly elite perceptions and strategic culture, some others expound upon the role of domestic variables (Romanova and Pavlova 2012; Smith 2016). Simultaneously, constructivist scholarship has drawn attention to the role of identity, historical memory, and political narratives in shaping Russian and Ukrainian foreign policy preferences (Hopf 1998, 2002; Suny 2007).

Although realist, liberal, and constructivist accounts each illuminate important dimensions of the conflict, none alone sufficiently captures the convergence of structural incentives and identity-driven motivations. To address these limitations, this study adopts an integrated theoretical approach that combines the structural focus of neoclassical realism with the ideational sensitivity of constructivist epistemology. In doing so, it explains how systemic constraints – filtered through elite-driven identity narratives and securitisation processes – shaped the strategic choices of both Russia and Ukraine.

Neoclassical realism offers a robust framework for understanding how systemic pressures are mediated by domestic political institutions and elite perceptions. However, its explanatory power has been critiqued for theoretical vagueness, particularly its underdeveloped engagement with ideational factors. To enhance theoretical clarity, the article integrates constructivist insights to clarify how political elites interpret external threats and internal vulnerabilities. This methodological enhancement enables a more rigorous analysis of how discourse, narrative, and historical consciousness influence foreign policy formulation.

The post-2014 period represents a critical juncture in which identity politics and great power rivalry converged. On the Russian side, political elites increasingly portrayed Ukraine's westward orientation as betrayal and existential threat – fuelling a strategic culture framed in terms of historical necessity. On the Ukrainian side, elites responded by constructing a civic national identity centred on resistance, democratic values, and sovereignty. These competing identity narratives were not rhetorical flourishes; they functioned as core mechanisms shaping foreign policy choices, legitimising state actions, and mobilising societal support.

This article proceeds in three sections. The first revisits neoclassical realism and demonstrates how a constructivist epistemology enhances its analytical capacity to theorise identity and perception as causal forces. It proposes a revised causal model in which elite-driven identity narratives function as intervening variables between systemic pressures and foreign policy outcomes. The second section offers an empirical analysis of Russian elite discourse, focusing on strategic culture, identity, securitisation, and the performative construction of threat. The final section reflects on the broader implications of the findings, outlines key limitations, and suggests avenues for future research, evaluating the potential of this integrated framework to advance our understanding of the war in Ukraine.

This study adopts a theory-driven, qualitative approach that integrates narrative and discourse analysis to investigate the ideational foundations of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Instead of testing hypotheses or aiming for broad causal generalisations, it explores how systemic pressures were refracted through domestic ideational filters to produce a militarised foreign policy decision. In line with the epistemological assumptions of neoclassical realism and constructivism, the analysis foregrounds the interplay between material structures and identity-laden interpretations of threat and national status.

Methodologically, the article centres on elite discourses, drawing on official statements, policy documents, speeches by Russian political leaders, and relevant secondary literature. Particular emphasis is placed on Vladimir Putin's public rhetoric, doctrinal texts, and interventions by key figures within the Russian political and intellectual elite. These materials are examined to trace how identity narratives, historical memory, and securitised language shaped the framing of Ukraine's Western orientation as an existential threat. The analysis proceeds through an interpretive, abductive logic, aiming to uncover how historically situated beliefs and strategic culture transformed structural stimuli into a perceived imperative for war.

While this study does not claim exhaustive empirical coverage, it offers a conceptually rich interpretation of a critical case. Russia's decision to initiate a full-scale war provides a strategic setting for theorising the role of ideational mediation in foreign policy decision-making. By examining how identity narratives, historical memory, and securitised language shaped elite perceptions of Ukraine's Western trajectory, the analysis underscores the value of integrating constructivist insights into realist frameworks. Taken together, the findings suggest that Russia's war of choice – and Ukraine's unexpected national cohesion – cannot be fully explained by material interests or structural imperatives alone. Rather, these outcomes must be understood through the lens of elite-driven identity narratives that redefined national interests, securitised sovereignty, and rendered compromise increasingly unviable.

Integrating neoclassical realism with constructivist epistemology

Realism, one of the dominant paradigms in IR theory, encompasses a variety of strands including classical realism, neorealism (or structural realism), and neoclassical realism. All share foundational assumptions – such as statism, anarchy, and survival – yet differ in how they conceptualise the sources of state behaviour. Classical realism, rooted in the works of Morgenthau (1948), places emphasis on human nature, ethics, and prudence in foreign policy. Neorealism, particularly as developed by Waltz (1979), abstracts from domestic variables and reduces international politics to systemic dynamics, treating states as functionally similar units responding to the distribution of power in an anarchic system.

Neoclassical realism, on the other hand, emerges as a bridging paradigm, seeking to synthesise neorealism's systemic focus with classical realism's concern for domestic variables such as elite perceptions, strategic culture, and state capacity (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016; Rose 1998). While systemic incentives delineate the broad parameters of behaviour, neoclassical realism argues that foreign policy outcomes are filtered through domestic-level variables. These include leadership beliefs, institutional

arrangements, historical memory, and social constructions of national interest (Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro 2009).

Within this framework, foreign policy choices are treated as dependent variables, systemic changes as independent variables, and domestic factors – rooted in what is traditionally referred to as *innenpolitik*[2]—function as intervening mechanisms that shape state behaviour (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 33–34). Schweller (2004), highlighting the role of identity and perception, argues that the international system does not present itself to decision-makers as a clear and quantifiable reality. Instead, it is interpreted through subjective lenses, often leading to divergent assessments and policy preferences.

According to Foulon (2015), neoclassical realism is well positioned to bridge several fundamental divides within international relations theory. It connects domestic and international levels of analysis, integrates material and ideational factors, and links present decision-making with long-term historical processes. However, despite its integrative promise, the approach has attracted criticism regarding its handling of ideational factors. Scholars such as Narizny (2017) and Götz (2021) contend that neoclassical realism often employs ideational factors in an ad hoc or unsystematic manner, lacking a coherent methodological framework for explaining their formation and activation. Similar concerns have been raised by Rathbun (2008), who argues that the approach struggles to trace variables such as identity, perception, and strategic culture in a consistent and theoretically grounded way.

To address these critiques and strengthen its ideational dimension, this study incorporates insights from constructivist epistemology – not as a paradigmatic alternative, but as a methodological enhancement that extends neoclassical realism's analytical reach. The integration rests on a shared ontological foundation grounded in classical realism, which recognises that international politics is shaped not only by material structures but also by socially constructed meanings. Classical realism already acknowledges the centrality of psychological and emotional factors in foreign policy (Smith and Dawson 2022), particularly through its emphasis on human nature and ethical judgment. Constructivist methodology, in turn, contributes the analytical tools needed to identify, interpret, and trace the emergence and stabilisation of such ideational factors – enhancing our understanding of how they influence elite cognition and foreign policy preferences, and thereby enriching the explanatory power of neoclassical realist accounts.

In addition, the integration of constructivist insights enhances the framework's capacity to account for how cognitive biases and misperceptions shape elite decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. As Levy and Thompson (2010, 135) observe, political actors often lack complete or accurate information about adversaries' intentions and capabilities, relying instead on subjective inferences. Such misperceptions – rooted in overconfidence, historical analogies, or ideological predispositions – can produce exaggerated or distorted assessments of threat. Overestimating one's own capabilities or underestimating risks often determines whether a situation is framed as a strategic opportunity or an existential threat (Blainey 1988; Jervis 1988).

Understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying Russia's risky foreign policy behaviour requires close attention to the perceptions of individual leaders – particularly in centralised regimes where decision-making is highly personalised. In this context, prospect theory provides a valuable analytical lens. Originally developed by Kahneman and

Tversky (1979), it posits that decision-makers are more inclined to adopt risk-acceptant behaviour when operating within a domain of perceived losses. Taliaferro (2004) applies this insight to foreign policy, showing that great powers are especially prone to pursue risky interventionist strategies in their peripheries to avoid reputational decline or material erosion. These perceptual filters – shaped by prior beliefs, ideological narratives, and strategic culture – mediate how systemic pressures are cognitively processed and politically enacted.

While cognitive filters shape how leaders interpret external developments, these interpretive frameworks are themselves products of longer historical trajectories. Neoclassical realism seamlessly incorporates the historical dimension of classical realism with the systemic emphasis of neorealism. Within this framework, history acts as a structural modifier that informs the relevance and interpretation of systemic stimuli. Historical experiences operate at both the unit level, by shaping intervening variables such as strategic culture and identity narratives, and at the systemic level, by constructing the broader international environment within which states operate (Meibauer 2021). These temporal layers not only contextualise structural incentives but also reveal how historical memory conditions elite expectations and strategic choices.

This synthesis – often referred to as 'realist constructivism' (Barkin 2003; Sterling-Folker 2002, 2009) – retains realism's ontological core while leveraging constructivist methodologies to trace the ideational mechanisms through which systemic incentives are interpreted and enacted. For instance, securitisation theory (Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde 1998; Waever 1995) reveals how political elites construct existential threats to legitimise extraordinary actions. This logic aligns with neoclassical realism's focus on elite-driven foreign policy but enriches it by demonstrating how such perceptions are socially embedded and discursively constructed.

Barkin (2020) advances this argument by critiquing the neopositivist tendencies within neoclassical realism. He contends that while neoclassical realists often claim to derive generalisable predictions from neorealist theory, their actual empirical work tends to rely on historical narrative and case-specific analysis – methods better suited to constructivist epistemology. This methodological mismatch, Barkin argues, undermines the coherence and effectiveness of neoclassical realism. Instead, he proposes explicitly adopting constructivist methods to enhance neoclassical realism's ability to address the belief structures, national interests, and discursive power struggles at the heart of foreign policy decisions.

Constructivist epistemology, particularly as articulated by Wendt (1999) and Onuf (2013), holds that identities and interests are not pre-given but socially constructed through discourse, interaction, and historical experience. By adopting constructivist tools – such as discourse analysis, narrative framing, and securitisation theory – this study gains analytical leverage in explaining how ideational variables emerge, gain salience, and exert causal force. These methods do not dismiss systemic pressures; rather, they illuminate the cognitive and discursive mechanisms through which such pressures are interpreted, reframed, and politicised.

This integration aligns with a growing body of scholarship in realist constructivism (Barkin 2003, 2020; Sterling-Folker 2009), which contends that realism and constructivism are not inherently incompatible but can be fruitfully combined. In this synthesis, neoclassical realism provides the structural scaffolding – power distributions, strategic incentives,

and anarchy – while constructivist epistemology offers the methodological tools needed to examine how these structures are perceived, narrated, and acted upon by political elites. The result is a layered analytical framework capable of explaining both the existence of systemic pressures and the domestic processes through which they are internalised and operationalised in foreign policy behaviour.

Furthermore, constructivist-informed neoclassical realism better captures the contested and evolving nature of national interest. Rather than assuming a fixed or universally agreed-upon interest rooted in survival, it treats the national interest as an empirical question – shaped through ideational contestation, political discourse, and historical memory. This approach also reconciles the tension within neoclassical realism's two-level game framework, which often inconsistently applies realist assumptions to elites and liberal assumptions to broader domestic actors.

In sum, the theoretical framework adopted in this study rests on a neoclassical realist ontology, focused on systemic constraints and state-centric analysis, and is enhanced through constructivist epistemology. It allows for a more refined analysis of how external pressures are interpreted through ideational and institutional filters, shaping concrete foreign policy decisions. The model, as captured in the causal diagram below, follows a sequential analytical process, moving from structural conditions to domestic mediation and ultimately to state behaviour.

As illustrated in Figure 1, Russia's foreign policy decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine was not a direct reaction to systemic shifts alone – such as NATO expansion or EU enlargement – but was mediated through domestic-level ideational filters. These

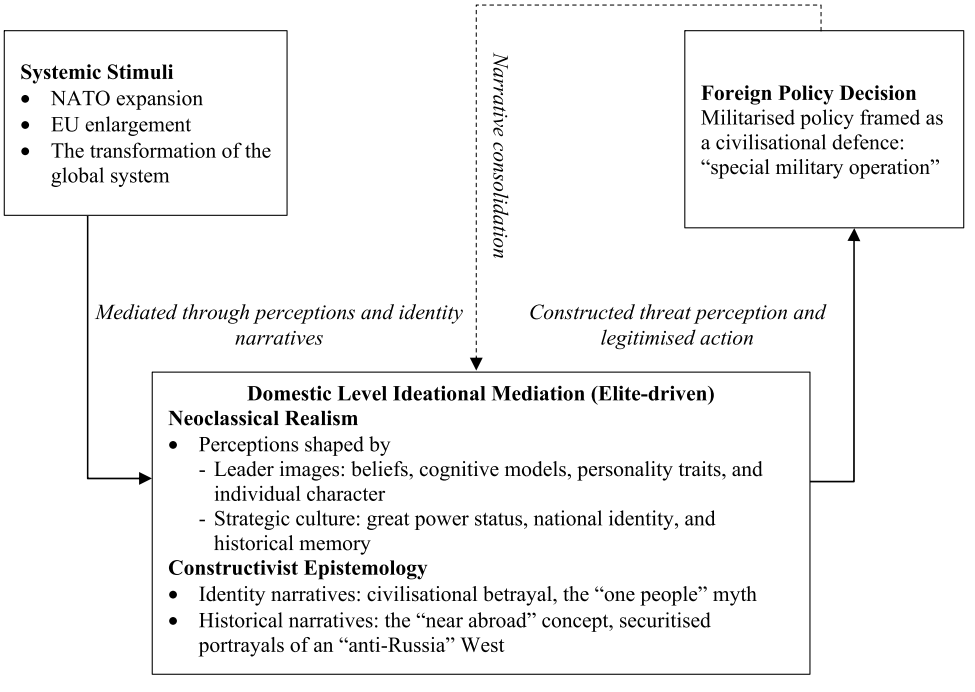

Figure 1. Casual model of Russia's foreign policy towards Ukraine. Source: Author's illustration based on integrated neoclassical realist-constructivist framework

include the psychological and ideological dispositions of political elites, particularly President Putin, as well as historically grounded narratives of identity and civilisation. Constructivist components, such as the invocation of betrayal and the performance of existential threat, transformed external developments into securitised crises that necessitated militarised responses. The following section examines how these theoretical mechanisms manifested in Russia's interpretation of Ukraine's Western orientation, culminating in the 2022 invasion.

Structural and perceptual roots of Russia's foreign policy toward Ukraine

The war in Ukraine is the result of a protracted period of tension shaped by both material and ideational forces that intertwined systemic imperatives with elite-driven perceptions. These forces not only reflected hard geopolitical interests but also deeper historical narratives and psychological framings of threat and identity. This section evaluates the structural constraints and enabling conditions shaping Russian foreign policy as well as the domestic-level intervening variables that transformed strategic anxiety into an existential conflict.

Systemic stimuli

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the global distribution of power underwent a significant reconfiguration, with the United States assuming a preeminent role in shaping the post-Cold War international order. During this period, Russia experienced a pronounced decline in its geopolitical reach and influence, particularly in relation to the newly independent states of the former USSR. This loss of status was interpreted by Russian elites not as a natural outcome of historical change but as the product of a Western-led restructuring of the international system from which Russia was largely excluded. From Moscow's perspective, institutions such as NATO and the European Union expanded eastward without adequately incorporating Russia's strategic concerns, leading to a perception of marginalisation and growing distrust (Becker et al. 2016, 119).

These grievances were further compounded by deeply embedded historical narratives. The memory of Western invasions – such as those by Napoleon and Hitler – remains a potent element within Russian strategic culture. These traumatic episodes have reinforced a longstanding perception of external threat and encirclement, contributing to a persistent siege mentality among Russian elites (Toal 2017, 6). In addition, the ambiguity surrounding Russia's cultural and geographic identity – oscillating between aspirations to be part of the West and positioning itself as a distinct Eurasian alternative – adds to its strategic insecurity (Romanova and Pavlova 2012, 240). As Götz and Staun (2022) observe, Russia's strategic self-conception has become increasingly tied to the belief that preserving influence over its 'near abroad' -a distinctly Russian term originating in the early 1990s- is indispensable for sustaining its great-power status. This psychological framing of insecurity has been instrumental in shaping Russian threat perceptions, particularly when viewed through the lens of expanding foreign military presence along its borders.

NATO's progressive enlargement – beginning with the inclusion of Czechia, Hungary, and Poland in 1999, and continuing with the Baltic states and others in 2004—intensified Russia's sense of strategic vulnerability. Although Moscow remained diplomatically

engaged through frameworks such as the NATO-Russia Founding Act and the NATO-Russia Council (NRC),[3] these mechanisms failed to mitigate its perception of exclusion and marginalisation. A pivotal moment came at the 2008 Bucharest Summit, where NATO declared its intention to eventually admit Ukraine and Georgia (NATO 2008).[4] Russian officials, including President Putin, denounced the announcement as a red line violation – interpreting it as a direct challenge to Russia's regional influence and historical sphere of interest (Dawar 2008).

The implications of this move were significant. It signalled NATO's willingness to expand into states with longstanding historical, cultural, and territorial ties to Russia – despite explicit warnings from Moscow. Internal divisions within Ukraine and Georgia over NATO accession, coupled with unresolved ethno-territorial disputes, rendered these initiatives particularly destabilising. At the same time, the 2008 declaration of Kosovo's independence – quickly recognised by many Western countries – was seen by Russia as a violation of post-Cold War norms and further evidence of selective Western engagement (Toal 2017, 7). Together, these developments entrenched elite narratives of geopolitical marginalisation and reinforced fears of encirclement.

Russia's political and economic resurgence after 2004 (Götz 2017), combined with external pressure and the pro-NATO ambitions of Georgia and Ukraine, encouraged Moscow to adopt a more assertive posture in its near abroad (Götz 2022). Four months after the Bucharest Summit, Russia intervened militarily in Georgia, justifying its actions as a defence of South Ossetia. These shifts were institutionalised in subsequent doctrinal changes: NATO was elevated to a top-tier threat in Russia's 2010 military doctrine (Kropatcheva 2012, 33), and NATO expansion was identified as a principal danger in the 2014 and 2021 security doctrines (Götz and Staun 2022, 484).

These actions unfolded against the backdrop of what Russian elites interpreted as a cumulative security dilemma. Western defensive measures were consistently reframed as evidence of strategic encroachment and the erosion of Russia's buffer space. From an offensive realist perspective, Russia's increasing use of military power can be viewed as a rational effort to assert regional dominance and ensure long-term security (Mearsheimer 2009). In contrast, structural realists argue that NATO membership aspirations alone do not inherently threaten the balance of power, as international organisation membership is not synonymous with immediate strategic reordering (Kleinschmidt 2019, 429).

Russia's initial inability to respond forcefully to early waves of NATO expansion due to post-Soviet weakness did not dispel its anxieties – only deferred them (Götz 2022; Mearsheimer 2022). With renewed state capacity in the early 2000s, Moscow shifted from reactive diplomacy to militarised assertiveness, beginning with Georgia in 2008 and later extending to Crimea in 2014 (Götz 2017). This evolution reflected not only restored capability but also a hardening of strategic narratives that increasingly legitimised coercive action.

In parallel, Russian leadership increasingly framed global politics through a multipolar lens. The perceived relative decline of the United States played a pivotal role in shaping this strategic outlook. Russian elites interpreted U.S. retrenchment – exacerbated by the withdrawal from Afghanistan, domestic political polarisation, and strategic fatigue after two decades of global interventions – as evidence of a waning unipolar moment (Korolev 2018; Tsygankov 2022, 5–6). Within this shifting global context, Russia perceived a strategic opening to reassert its regional influence while the U.S. remained distracted

or constrained. Constructivist narratives of Western decadence and multipolar resurgence reinforced this belief, legitimising Russia's assumption that it could act assertively in its 'near abroad' with limited consequences. This perceived permissive environment contributed to a growing willingness to adopt coercive strategies, culminating in full-scale military action. Ukraine – symbolically central to Russia's historical identity and practically critical as a buffer state – became a litmus test for its revived great power ambitions.

At the same time, Russia's neighbouring states, including Ukraine, did not passively accept Russian influence. Many increasingly perceived Russia as a threat and sought NATO membership not due to Western coercion, but in response to fears of Russian intervention and domination. This perspective highlights the role of neighbouring states' agency and threat perceptions in shaping post-Cold War security dynamics.

Consequently, NATO enlargement, EU activism, and broader Western assertiveness came to define an external environment that Russian elites increasingly interpreted as hostile. Yet, as neoclassical realism contends, such pressures were not determinative in themselves. They acquired causal power through the mediation of domestic perceptions, elite identity constructions, historical narratives, and the strategic culture embedded within Russian policymaking. This layered, ideationally infused understanding provides a more complete explanation of Russia's decision to pursue a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Intervening variables

While systemic factors shaped Russia's perception of threat, neoclassical realism rightly emphasises that such pressures are filtered through foreign policy executives, elite ideologies, and strategic culture. These intervening variables mediate foreign policy outcomes by interpreting external developments through historically and culturally embedded lenses.

A dominant theme in Russian elite discourse is the portrayal of Ukraine not as an independent cultural or political entity, but as an intrinsic component of Russia's civilisational heritage. This perspective reflects more than historical nostalgia; it shapes how Russian leaders interpret geopolitical developments. As McFaul (2020) argues, understanding foreign policy decisions requires close attention to individuals, ideas, and domestic institutions – not merely to structural incentives. In this regard, President Putin's ideological framing, particularly in his 2021 essay 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', offers a revealing illustration:

> I said that Russians and Ukrainians are one people, a single whole . . . Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus, which was the largest state in Europe. Slavic and other tribes across the vast territory . . . were bound together by one language. (Putin 2021)

This civilisational narrative was reaffirmed in his 2022 address, in which Putin collapsed modern national boundaries into a shared historical and spiritual continuum:

> Ukraine is not just a neighbouring country for us. It is an integral part of our own history, culture, and spiritual space. These are our comrades, loved ones, among whom are not only colleagues, friends, former colleagues, but also relatives, people connected to us by blood and family ties. . .. modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia. (President of Russia 2022)

These claims are not isolated expressions of personal convictions; they resonate widely within the Russian political establishment. Many elites reject the notion of a distinct Ukrainian identity, viewing it as a fabricated divergence from a common origin (Bogomolov and Lytvynenko 2012; Kuzio 2022). Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Chair of Russia's Security Council, epitomised this view in 2022 when he openly questioned whether Ukraine would exist as a sovereign state in the near future (Roshchina 2022).

Viewed through this lens, Ukraine's pivot toward the West is interpreted not simply as a geopolitical realignment but as a profound 'civilisational betrayal' – a rejection of the shared identity, history, and spiritual kinship that underpin Russia's self-conception. The concept of existential nationalism,[5] as articulated by Knott (2023), captures this sentiment by equating the preservation of national identity with the survival of the state itself. This logic is reflected in Putin's justification for the invasion, which casts the war in existential terms:

> For our country, it is a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation. . . It is not only a very real threat to our interests but to the very existence of our state and to its sovereignty. It is the red line which we have spoken about on numerous occasions. They have crossed it (Fisher 2022)

In this context, Ukrainian independence is not merely a strategic concern – it constitutes an ontological rupture.

Two major domestic political turning points in Ukraine – the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2013–14 Euromaidan Revolution (Revolution of Dignity) – intensified these threat perceptions. Russian elites interpreted these movements not as democratic uprisings but as Western-backed efforts to sever Ukraine from Russian influence. These episodes validated Putin's civilisational narrative and intensified his determination to respond. Rather than being viewed simply as strategic setbacks, they were seen as ideational affronts that symbolised the unravelling of Russia's sphere of influence and its historical legacy.

Ukraine's constitutional reforms and deepening ties with the EU and NATO further amplified these anxieties (Becker et al. 2016). These developments were increasingly securitised in Russian official discourse, framed by Putin in existential and civilisational terms (Putin 2021; Troianovski 2022). Referring to Ukraine as an 'anti-Russia', Putin and other key elites – such as Leonid Slutsky, head of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs – invoked historically rooted Western hostility toward Russia and Russians (Putin 2021; TASS 2023). Slutsky notably declared:

> The West did not want to give up its brainchild—the 'anti-Russia' project in Ukraine. The West is not ready to give up its hegemonic ambitions.

Within this discursive frame, Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic trajectory was no longer treated as a geopolitical disagreement but as a metaphysical rupture – an existential threat to Russia's civilisational identity that demanded response.

Intellectual influences reinforced elite perceptions. Thinkers such as Alexander Dugin – whose neo-Eurasianist worldview posits an inherent civilisational conflict between Russia and the West – provided ideological scaffolding for Russia's foreign policy. While not codified as formal doctrine, his ideas on multipolarity and spiritual confrontation strongly resonated with elite narratives (Tsygankov 2022, 68). Putin's own Eurasianist language –

evident in his 2012 statement envisioning Russia as a '*leader and centre of gravity for the whole of Eurasia*' – reflects this ideological alignment (President of Russia 2012). As Mankoff (2017, 340) observes, Putin articulated a national project to reframe Eurasia as a cultural and geopolitical alternative to the West.

These ideational frameworks are deeply intertwined with Russia's historical grievances. In 2005, Putin described the collapse of the Soviet Union as *'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century'* and framed it as a national tragedy in which *'tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves outside Russian territory'* (President of Russia 2005). This narrative portrays post-Cold War Russia as a humiliated and unfairly marginalised power in the Western-dominated order. Within this worldview, Ukraine's Western turn is not simply a strategic realignment but a symbolic rupture – a civilisational betrayal and a rejection of Russia's historical identity.

The fusion of civilisational ideology with strategic reasoning reflects a profound concern for ontological insecurity[6] (Smith and Dawson 2022). In this view, Ukraine's realignment threatens not only Russia's geopolitical position but also its identity. The West's efforts to normatively reorient Ukraine are seen as attempts to impose an alien identity on both Ukraine and, by extension, Russia – jeopardising Russia's self-conception and ontological continuity.

This framing laid the groundwork for securitising practices within Russian political discourse. Securitisation theory helps explain how these narratives translated into policy (Buzan, Waever, and de Wilde 1998; Waever 1995). Through repeated official discourse framing NATO expansion and Ukrainian independence as existential threats, Russian elites performed securitising acts – defining otherwise manageable challenges as emergencies that demanded extraordinary responses. Putin's repeated invocation of Nazism, Western decay, and moral degeneration served to mobilise public support and delegitimise compromise (Troianovski 2022). Knott (2023) highlights that existential nationalism exerts its greatest force when intertwined with securitising rhetoric, which frames identity loss as tantamount to physical annihilation.

Recent contributions by Dagi (2025) further illuminate how narratives within Russia construct threat perceptions through mechanisms of othering and identity reinforcement. His analysis identifies how Russian strategic culture institutionalises dichotomous worldviews, dividing the international sphere into 'us' versus 'them', wherein the West is systematically portrayed as an aggressive, destabilising force. These narratives helped consolidate elite consensus and legitimise pre-emptive action as a defensive response rooted in identity preservation.

Contemporary Russian foreign policy reflects a deeper cultural and historical continuity, the roots of which can be traced to pre-Soviet traditions of military interventionism and political meddling in neighbouring states (McFaul 2020). This historical inheritance reinforces the strategic culture underpinning current policies, where military coercion and political influence are deemed legitimate instruments for safeguarding Russia's great power status and identity.

Moreover, domestic political dynamics within Russia reinforced this securitised posture. The tacit social contract between the Russian state and its population – trading political freedoms for promises of stability, national pride, and great power status – played a critical legitimising role (Makarkin and Oppenheimer 2011). Military interventions in Georgia, Syria, and Crimea served to validate this arrangement, strengthening the

regime's domestic legitimacy (Kolesnikov 2023). In this context, the performative reproduction of national unity through external conflict became a defining feature of Russia's strategic culture.

Understanding the cognitive mechanisms underlying Russia's risky foreign policy behaviour requires close attention to the perceptions of individual leaders, particularly in highly centralised regimes where decision-making authority is heavily concentrated. In this context, prospect theory provides valuable explanatory insights. Originally developed by Kahneman and Tversky (1979), prospect theory posits that decision-makers are more likely to adopt risk-acceptant strategies when operating within a domain of perceived losses rather than potential gains. Applied to foreign policy analysis (Taliaferro 2004), this framework illuminates how Putin may have framed Ukraine's westward drift not as an isolated challenge but as a deterioration from a preferred status quo – whether post-2014 or rooted in the Soviet-era geopolitical order.

The framing of geopolitical developments as cumulative losses relative to a historical or ideological baseline heightened the Kremlin's propensity for escalation. Ukraine's deeper integration with Western institutions, NATO cooperation, and efforts to marginalise pro-Russian actors were interpreted not as discrete events but as successive erosions of Russian influence and identity. In this light, the invasion of Ukraine appears not only as a rational strategic response but also as a psychologically driven reaction to perceived decline – a high-risk gambit to restore equilibrium and reaffirm Russia's civilisational self-conception.

Such perceptions reflected not only material losses but also symbolic degradation. As Šćepanović (2024) argues, Russia's great power identity became increasingly tied to the preservation of influence over its near abroad, transforming Ukraine's westward orientation into a psychological and ontological loss necessitating assertive counteraction.

These threat perceptions were not isolated cognitive distortions but were embedded within a broader strategic culture – an institutionalised and historically rooted set of ideas that has long shaped Russia's foreign policy behaviour. Strategic culture in Russia privileges buffer zones as essential to national survival, reflecting a centuries-old fear of encirclement stemming from repeated invasions through its western periphery. The perceived necessity of geographic depth continues to inform Russia's military doctrines and security planning. Moreover, this culture is characterised by a profound distrust of Western intentions, rooted in historical grievances, controversial NATO assurances regarding eastward expansion, and disillusionment with the post-Cold War shift in global power dynamics.

Status anxieties also deeply intertwined with Russia's strategic culture. It's noted that Russia links security with status, viewing the maintenance of a sphere of privileged interests as indispensable to sustaining great power recognition (Mankoff 2012; Šćepanović 2024). Ukraine's westward drift, therefore, was perceived not merely as a loss of strategic depth but as a profound blow to Russia's international standing and ontological security.

Reinforcing this worldview is Russia's self-conception as a great power, which is not merely a matter of international status but a constitutive element of its national identity. As Clunan (2014) argues, Russia's sense of legitimacy and purpose in international affairs is intrinsically tied to its ability to project influence and to be recognised – particularly by the West – as an indispensable global actor. Götz and

Staun (2022) further demonstrate that this outlook necessitates the maintenance of a sphere of 'privileged interests' within the post-Soviet space, reinforcing the expectation that neighbouring states should align with or defer to Russia's strategic preferences.

This strategic culture does more than merely shape elite threat assessments; it also provides a discursive framework that legitimises aggressive foreign policy actions to both domestic and international audiences. It enables Russian leadership to frame military interventions not as opportunistic expansions but as defensive measures aimed at restoring historical justice, protecting co-ethnic populations, or resisting perceived Western imperialism. In securitisation terms, strategic culture functions as a reservoir of legitimising narratives, which political elites draw upon to mobilise public support and suppress dissent. This discursive resource helps explain how actions such as the annexation of Crimea and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine could be framed not only as rational responses to systemic pressures but also as morally righteous and historically necessary endeavours.

Systemic pressures alone cannot sufficiently explain Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. A fuller understanding requires close attention to intervening variables – elite-driven identity narratives, psychological framing, securitised discourse, and strategic culture – that reframed external constraints into a perceived necessity for war. By integrating the systemic insights of neoclassical realism with the ideational depth offered by constructivist epistemology, this study advances a more comprehensive framework for explaining the complex and multi-layered causes behind Russia's decision to pursue full-scale military aggression against Ukraine.

Conclusion

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 must be understood as the outcome of a complex interplay between systemic pressures and perceptually driven variables shaped by leadership beliefs and strategic culture. Viewed through the integrated framework of neoclassical realism and constructivist epistemology, the conflict appears not merely as a reaction to NATO enlargement or Western influence, but as a strategic assertion of Russian identity and historical entitlement, refracted through elite interpretive frameworks.

Neoclassical realism underscores that external stimuli do not directly determine foreign policy outcomes. Instead, systemic pressures are refracted through domestic institutions, elite cognition, and deeply embedded strategic cultures. In Russia's case, President Putin's portrayal of Ukraine's Western trajectory as a civilisational rupture illustrates how leadership perceptions and historical narratives shaped policy responses. These interpretive filters transformed structural dynamics into perceived existential threats and deepened Russia's drive to reaffirm its great power status, escalating securitised discourse and legitimising military intervention.

Constructivist epistemology complements this account by revealing how identity narratives are socially constructed, historically anchored, and strategically mobilised. The invocation of civilisational heritage, historical grievance, and existential nationalism shows that the decision to go to war was driven not by objective calculations alone, but by ideational forces that rendered certain actions not just possible, but necessary. Identity,

memory, and narrative were central in framing external developments as imperatives for action.

Together, these perspectives demonstrate that the Ukraine crisis cannot be accounted for by structural or materialist theories in isolation. A more complete explanation requires recognising the constitutive power of ideas, which mediate the meaning of systemic realities and amplify their perceived urgency. The combined lens of neoclassical realism and constructivist epistemology thus offers a more nuanced framework for understanding how identity and strategy converge in shaping foreign policy choices.

While the study offers a conceptually rich analysis of a critical case, several limitations should be acknowledged. Its qualitative design prioritises depth over generalisability and focuses primarily on elite-level discourse. Broader societal dynamics, opposition voices, and Ukrainian perspectives – beyond their role in Russian narratives – remain outside the scope of this analysis. Future research could expand on these dimensions or adopt comparative approaches to test the utility of this framework across other foreign policy settings.

Ultimately, Russia's actions highlight that geopolitical confrontations are shaped as much by contested meanings of history, identity, and status as by material capabilities or alliance behaviour. This integrative approach underscores the continuing relevance of ideational factors in European security and affirms the need to move beyond reductionist or mono-causal accounts when analysing crises at the intersection of power and identity.

Notes

1. Strategic culture refers to 'the total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation' (Snyder 1977, 8). It comprises a web of interconnected beliefs, norms, and assumptions that influence how political leaders, societal elites, and the wider public perceive and respond to strategic matters (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, 67).
2. *Innenpolitik* theories contend that a country's foreign policy choices in the global arena are shaped by domestic factors like political and economic ideologies, national character, partisan politics, and socioeconomic structure (Rose 1998, 148).
3. The NRC was established in 2002 as a mechanism for consultation, consensus-building, cooperation, joint decision making and joint action. It has not met since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (NATO 2024).
4. As a consequence of Russian aggression in Ukraine, the NATO allies agreed that Russia is the most significant and direct threat to their security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area at the NATO Summit in Madrid in 2022 (NATO 2022).
5. Existential nationalism arises when a state views its national survival and identity as under threat, making conflict a struggle for existence. It involves one polity fighting to assert its right to exist and self-determine, while another seeks to deny that right through ideological, cultural, or territorial domination (Knott 2023).
6. Ontological insecurity may arise either from the breakdown of a predictable social order, as Huysmans (1998) argues, or from the emergence of an alternative order that disrupts established routines, as suggested by Creppell (2011). In both perspectives, identity is maintained through stable and recognisable interactions with the Other. A coherent sense of self often depends on framing the Other as threatening or inferior, making ontological security contingent not only on the continuity of identity but also on the predictability of Self – Other relations (Rumelili 2013). Consequently, actors perceive uncertainty as a threat to their identity security and are thus motivated to restore cognitive and behavioural certainty (Mitzen 2006).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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