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## **RUSSIA: LIVING FROM ITS PAST?**

### **Abstract:**

*Since the end of the Cold War Russia has been treated as a defeated state. Western countries usually perceive Russia not only as a defeated state but also relating it to Soviet Union. Beyond that the West has Orientalized Russia, segregating it from the “western club” of developed states. But Russia’s recovery from the collapse of the 90’s made it more assertive towards the West. It’s proposed here that this assertiveness is due to it’s orientalization, it’s inferior status perceived by the West. The inferior perception by the West has triggered a process of identity’s reconstruction which will be analyzed through a perspective of ontological security. The more Russia has it’s great power status denied, the more aggressive it becomes regarding it’s foreign policy. As the international hierarchy continues to treat Russia as that of “behind” the modern states, and the more it feels marginalized, it will double down on efforts to regain its great power status it will have to dispose power. Russia’s ontological insecurity might lead it to a path of aggressiveness.*

### **Keywords:**

*Russian Federation; Crimea; Ontological Security.*

## **Introduction**

This research proposes to carry out an analysis with the primary intention of trying to raise possible motivations for the assertiveness of the Russian Federation in recent years, especially with regard to the West. The temporal clipping does not have absolute accuracy, since this Russian aggressiveness toward the "West" is not linear, there are times when the Russian government

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tries to conduct more cooperative policies, there are many ups and downs in this relationship.

However, the point that should stand out most in this research is the search for ontological security by the Russian Federation. That is, their ontological insecurity is the most explored hypothesis to try to understand aggressive acts by the Russian government, with more emphasis on Vladimir Putin's policies, and the issue of annexation of the Crimea. Which means that the construction of identity is a nodal point to be observed. However, it is not assumed here that we will find "answers", but indicative and perhaps more questions will be raised.

This research also has the purpose of understanding certain aspects of Russian foreign policy, especially due to the continuous description of it as being schizophrenic, among other adjectives that end up mischaracterizing and even masking what would be behind certain attitudes on the part of the Russian government.

For those analysts who consider Russia inconsistent and unpredictable, with a schizophrenic foreign policy, the justification is in the acts and speeches in Russian government. For these same, makes no sense that in the early 1990s Russia aligned ideologically with the West, and later declared contrary and had reactions very hostile to Western policies. However, what these analysts might not see is the possibility of a Russian identity change, not schizophrenia, and the possibility of an identity that does not fit into certain patterns, but it has been built in a hybrid way. And this is what<sup>2</sup> suggests when he brings to the analysis of Russian identity "cooperative pragmatism" from V. Putin largely. Furthermore, the question of the annexation of Crimea has been poorly analyzed within the manner prescribed in this research.

The utilization of official texts and speeches of Russian officers, besides the president, are justified by the obvious importance of the same, and, in addition, such texts have very different content of much of diplomatic and presidential speeches. These documents appear to be quite close to the reality of the actions of the Russian Federation, both speeches, such as the documents have content that, in fact, show the Russian motivations quite clearly, so are of great relevance.

The main research question is to try to understand Russian motivations for their actions related to the recent annexation of Crimea. How was the Russian government mobilized to the point of annexing Crimea? Some analysts ensure that such actions are motivated only for strategic reasons, but what is proposed in this research is that the Russian government is acting in accordance not only with material interests, but the ideational factor is very present in their choices

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<sup>2</sup> A. Tsygankov, *Vladimir Putin's last stand: the sources of Russia's Ukraine policy*, "Post-Soviet Affairs", vol. 31, no 4/2015, pp 1-25.

of foreign policy. That is, the hypothesis is that there may be materials /geostrategic interests for the annexation of the Crimea, but also the identity issue has great influence in decision making.

Given the assertion, it's important to understand the Russian relationship with the West and demonstrate how some events can illuminate the present research in order to corroborate the idea that the government of V. Putin seeks identity redefinition of the Russian Federation<sup>3</sup>. Some moments of clash of Russia under the V. Putin administration include the independence of Kosovo, NATO expansion to the East, the possibility of missile defense installation in Poland and the Czech Republic, the possibility of including Georgia in NATO<sup>4</sup>, the intervention in Libya, considered by Russia as being something out of the limits of the mandate, the various vetoes of the Federation so that there wasn't an intervention in Syria, among other issues.<sup>5</sup> However, it is not only tension that defines the Russian vs. West/NATO relationship; there have also been moments of cooperation. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks Russia and the United States worked together against a common enemy, terrorism.

It is conceived that the Russian Federation under the administration of President V. Putin, since the late 1990s acts in accordance with the objective of (re) building the Russian identity in order to make this state a great power again, and this occurs shortly after what many analysts call the "identity crisis"<sup>6</sup>. Although one of Russia's way of justifying the interference in Ukraine is based on "saving people".

Since its intervention in the Crimea that had begun in March 2014, Russian President V. Putin spoke of R2P to justify their interference in Ukrainian territory. Putin made it clear that he had a duty to protect the population of Crimea, but there were no signs of any of the four crimes under ICISS report – Responsibility to protect. Moreover, humanitarian intervention, according to Responsibility to Protect criteria should be the last resort, and / or the state, if Ukraine had no ability to protect its citizens.

Of course, since the crisis began, there was division among the population; those that were pro-Russian and those who were pro-EU along with dropping

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<sup>3</sup> E. Kropatcheva, *NATO-Russia relations and the Chinese factor: an ignored variable*, "Politics", v. 34, no. 2/2013, pp. 149-160.

<sup>4</sup> A. Tsygankov, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-25.

<sup>5</sup> M. Barabanov, *Russian Interests in Syria: myths and reality. Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST)*, Moscow defense brief, 30.04.2012, <<http://mdb.cast.ru/mdb/42012/item1/article1/>> (30.05.2019).

<sup>6</sup> B. Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion and Mythmaking*, New York 2002.

a discriminatory law regarding the Russian language<sup>7</sup>. In order to try to justify their actions, the Russian president made use of many rhetorical devices. One of his reasons for intervening in Crimea was by pointing to the Western mistakes in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, as if that made their righteous deeds. As V. Putin likes to quote the case of Kosovo and make comparisons with the case of Crimea. Indeed, Kosovar independence set an important precedent in the international arena, but it seems that the cases are different. We will not go into detail about the cases of Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. The use of the word "error" is removed from V. Putin rhetoric to describe the activities already mentioned. In the case of Afghanistan, the Russian President had forgotten to mention that he assisted the West in some of its measures such as providing intelligence to the location of terrorists. In Iraq despite knowing of complaints from Russia, his government has done nothing about it. In fact, regarding the intervention in Iraq the Russian government had made mention of international law.

Regarding resolution 1973 that decided an intervention in Libya and mentioned the R2P it should be remembered that Russia abstained. In Libya, the constant complaint of the Russian leadership is that those involved in the intervention exceeded its mandate. Having been an intervention that had caused divisions in opinions, in fact, in Libya, there was a humanitarian emergency, and while it is not the purpose here to discuss the background of the same<sup>8</sup>. Interestingly, during many of his last speeches, Vladimir Putin mentioned the issue of Syria. After all, since the beginning of the crisis in Syria, the Russian government was ranting contrary to any kind of intervention in the country, because according to the government's position of V. Putin, an intervention in Syria would be contrary to international law and standards, would run counter the principle of nonintervention and sovereignty of Syria, so vetoed all attempts to pass resolutions in the UN Security Council with regard to this case. However, it is quite clear that in Syria, exceptions are made to the complexity of the situation, there is a humanitarian emergency taking place<sup>9</sup>.

According to the Russian government, intervention in Ukraine was held under the auspices of international law. However, despite clashes between Tatars civilians, pro-EU Ukrainians and the share of pro-Russian population,

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<sup>7</sup> J. O'Sullivan, The difference between real journalism and Russia Today, "The Spectator", 6.12.2014, <<http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/9390782/the-truth-about-russia-today-is-that-it-is-putins-mouthpiece/>> (30.05.2019).

<sup>8</sup> V. Pacer, *Vladimir Putin's justification for Russian action in Crimea undermines his previous arguments over Syria, Libya and Iraq*, European Politics and Policy, 2014. <<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2014/03/11/vladimir-putins-justification-for-russian-action-in-crimea-undermines-his-previous-arguments-over-syria-libya-and-iraq/>>, (30.05.2019).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

there is in fact no evidence to support a humanitarian emergency in the region. According to the principles and criteria of R2P at least, Russian justifications for their interference in Ukrainian issues do not hold up. Another controversial point Russia shares outside with respect to the Budapest Memorandum signed with the United States, United Kingdom and the Russian Federation in 1994 recognizing the independence, sovereignty and borders of Ukraine, Russia would give up using force against the integrity and Ukrainian sovereignty. Regarding the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 in order to be justified again, the Russian government said that if what happened in Ukraine was a revolution, so now it is another country and not even mentioned in the memorandum in question<sup>10</sup>. This attempt at justification is not convincing, Ukraine, under any circumstances, became another State.

With regard to legal matters dealing with interventions, the United Nations Charter also unlikely, the Russian government can convince the international community, despite its rhetorical turns. Starting from Article 2 (4) of the UN Charter, the Russian government no longer has legitimacy because this stretch, as previously stated, prohibits the use of force against the integrity and sovereignty of another State. As laid earlier, the Charter itself already brings itself loopholes for intervention and the use of force contained in Chapter VII thereof, which are in self defense, or the use of force should be sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council. The issue of Crimea does not pass the test of these two gaps. One of the justifications most frequently used by the government of V. Putin to intervene in the Crimea is to protect its citizens. There seems to be consensus regarding how the protection of citizens who are outside their country of nationality should occur. Typically, the extraterritorial protection of citizens is carried out only by consular means and not by sending troops without the state's consent<sup>11</sup>. Another justification widely used by the Russian government is that the Ukrainian president had given consent to an intervention in the Crimea. However, the letter of consent in the hands of the Russian government is deposed President Viktor Yanukovich, who no longer has presidential powers. However, V. Putin's government insists that Yanukovich as the deposition process was done illegally, the Russian Federation still recognizes him as president of Ukraine. Among many attempts to justify its unilateral intervention in the Crimea, one of them also used is that the population of Crimea has the right to self-determination as described in the United Nation's Charter, citing the following excerpt from the article 1 (2): *To Develop friendly relations Among nations based on respect for the principle*

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>11</sup> J. Lenarz, (et al), *Ukraine: A Regional Crisis with Global Impact. Humanitarian Intervention Centre*, Humanitarian Intervention Centre Policy, 2014.

*of equal rights and self-determination of peoples and to take other Appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace;*

Thus, the process of self-determination should be used when a population is being oppressed by their government or suffering serious human rights violations, which was not the case in Ukraine. In addition, the use of this United Nations Charter device must be in accordance with the rules, and must come from the people who are suffering, as occurred in the case of Kosovo, which is independent with the help of the United Nations, and Kosovar population, in fact, was suffering from the oppression of their rights by Serbia. Furthermore, when a population decides to become independent, and opts for self-determination device, it does not confer the right of other nations intervene in the process, as was done in the Crimea by Russia. The decision of a people for self-determination should be unilateral, Russia illegally interfered throughout the Crimean independence process and then attacked that territory<sup>12</sup>. So far the intervention of the Russian Federation in Crimea has not experienced any legality or legitimacy test according to their justifications for such military action on Ukrainian territory.

### **Historically**

Historically, what is the place of the Russian Federation in the International scene? What is your role in it? Is the Russian Federation an insider or outsider? Over the centuries, Russia had been a Western allied, enemy, neither, friend, with a pragmatic cooperative relationship, but to a large extent it seems to be an enigma. What sounds right is that since the collapse of the Soviet Union, no matter how many Russian efforts have been made to "take part," the West's treatment of the Federation has not changed. Russia has since remained stigmatized as a defeated power, relegated to the background of the international scenario.

Especially since the annexation of the Crimea in 2014 many analysis that arise about Russia, it's role and it's place in the international scene. The issues raised about Putin's Russia vary. In a scenario of prevalence of certain political and economic systems, in which certain imperatives of international law and its derivatives are in force, the Russian Federation does not appear to integrate or even integrate and "fulfill" its oscillating what was explicit when annexing part of Ukrainian territory, and yet the government garnered broad support from its population. Following the annexation of the Crimea to the Federation, it became subject to economic sanctions and political pressures, but it does not yield to the pressure, and still makes it appear that this type of attitude is perfectly natural. Perhaps this is normal in a Russia that seems to be living in

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem.*

another century, but for much of the international community its acts are inadmissible and alien to the current order.

In the midst of the crisis with Ukraine, the debate over the Russian search for paper and space on the international scene has been exacerbated, especially as Russia has not yielded to international pressures. Despite criticism especially from the West, the withdrawal of the Russian Federation from the G8, sanctions, in addition to political pressures, appear to have had no effect. The act may be illegal, in addition to the possibility of disruption of order and security in Europe, which for a major power belonging to the UN Security Council symbolizes still more strongly the paradox of Russian government behavior<sup>13</sup>. In this sense, there are analysts who believe in the possibility that Russia under President Putin is in the process of returning to Soviet practices and that the West must then return to treating Russia as a Soviet Union and continuing the containment of Russia<sup>14</sup>.

The annexation of the Crimea to Russia in 2014 has been analyzed in various ways, often by purely material means, but they do not account for the provision of a broader understanding of the overall picture. Therefore, the present research will use postcolonial perspectives and some of its concepts in order to try to understand what the annexation of the Crimea has to say about the role of Russia in the contemporary international scenario considered here as an injunction, periphery. In this way, it is proposed to think about the possibility of a "colonized" dimension of Russian thought that unfolded as acts of resistance from a hybrid identity<sup>15</sup>. This means that as an act of resistance because it is "colonized" by the thought of Western modernity, the Russian Federation once again changes its foreign policy paradigm, becoming more and more assertive about this idea of domination, and thus "colonizes" its surroundings in order to "civilize" the Self, considering that Russia considers itself, despite being a great power with great relevance for international politics, left aside by the West<sup>16</sup>.

It is said that the annexation of Crimea to Russian territory should not be considered as an obvious policy, but that it was constructed from meanings that are part of its own context and are tied to this decision-making. Therefore, in order to give body to how the answers will arrive the methodology will

<sup>13</sup> I. Mannteufel, *Opinion: Crimea reflects Russia's fate*, 2015, <<http://www.dw.com/en/opinion-crimea-reflects-russias-fate/a-18316771>>, (30.05.2019).

<sup>14</sup> J. Goldgeir, *To Contain Russia the U.S. Should Return to Cold War Policies*, (2014), New Republic, <<http://www.newrepublic.com/authors/james-goldgeier>>, (30.05.2019).

<sup>15</sup> A. Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, Delhi-Oxford 1983.

<sup>16</sup> D. Trenin, *Ukraine Crisis Causes Strategic, Mental Shift in Global Order*, Carnegie Moscow Center, (2015), <<http://carnegie.ru/2015/05/17/ukraine-crisis-causes-strategic-mental-shift-inglobalorder/i8q4>>, (30.05.2019).

be composed by the discursive analysis in conjunction with concepts of the studies of semiotics. To do so, Bakhtin<sup>17</sup> posits that language is practical, influencing how subjects perceive themselves and perceive others. This understanding is reflected in the language, the subject, then through his pronouncement demonstrates his understanding of what is being said. Language has a cognitive component that relates to specific relationships. According to this logic brought by Bakhtin we have that the foreign policy of a State, here, the Russian Federation is exposed according to its own system of meanings.

“For Russians a strong state is not an anomaly, it is not something against which one should fight. On the contrary, a strong state is a source and guarantor of order, initiator and main moving force of any changes”<sup>18</sup>. “Sustainable development of society is impossible without a functioning state”<sup>19</sup>. “Russia’s role is important as the role of the state, which defends its values”<sup>20</sup>.

In the system of signs<sup>21</sup> of Russia, a great state, as demonstrated in the previous passage, is not an anomaly, which brings the signicity (system of signs of social life) itself, opening a breach within monology. Even when the Russian government puts itself as a great power it ends up placing itself in a position of inferiority when, in a certain way, it asks to be recognized as equal. The orientation of the Russian government to place itself on the international scene as a great power is not recent, so some of its acts can be understood from a notion of resistance (Bhabha), and from approaching the West, actions of a State with a hybrid identity and may appear contradictory.

Russia's national interests in the international sphere lie in upholding its sovereignty and strengthening its positions as a great power and as one of the influential centers of a multipolar world, in development of equal and mutually advantageous relations with all countries and integrative associations and primarily with the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States [...]”<sup>22</sup> (National Security Concept of Russian Federation, 2000).

The excerpt of the official document of the Russian Federation demonstrates this ambiguous movement of this State, which denounces the

<sup>17</sup> M. Bakhtin, *Marxismo e filosofia da linguagem: problemas fundamentais do método sociológico na ciência da linguagem*, São Paulo 1986.

<sup>18</sup> V. Putin, *Address to the Federal*, <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17118>> (30.05.2019).

<sup>19</sup> V. Putin, *Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club*, <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243>> (30.05.2019).

<sup>20</sup> V. Putin, *New Year Address by Acting President Vladimir Putin*, <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22280>> (30.05.2019).

<sup>21</sup> M. Bakhtin, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> *National Security Concept of Russian Federation*, 2000, <<https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/gazeta012400.htm>> (30.05.2019).

West as a source of threats with "unipolarity", while at the same time placing the relevance of integrating in that same West, and calls for an international multipolar scenario. In addition, on many occasions, it is clear that Russia is a great power, evidencing the need for such predication frequently, that is, perhaps for the reason that many do not agree with this position of Russia in the hierarchy of international politics.

V. Putin's speech in 2014 shortly after the formal annexation of the Crimea into Russian territory is quite elucidative in relation to the ambiguous and liminal propensities of the Federation. The Russian president justifies his actions on the basis of Western values and norms, "according to the Charter of the United Nations" that is, it is a Western-minded state, but still trying to demonstrate resistance to it. Putin tends to show that Russia follows an alternative path to Western modernity, and ends up in the liminal between the modern and the traditional in rescuing the glorious past of imperial Russia, so the appearance of being in a limbo may be, in fact, the presentation of an alternative modernity. He still demonstrates the attempt to be superior to the West by manifesting his ability to do the same as the West when Putin compares the annexation of Crimea to Kosovo's independence. And in making this comparison he places himself in the same position as his Western counterparts.

Vladimir Putin underlines the need to re-establish Russian identity based on the traditional and the modern at the same time, with its foreign policy being "independent", ie with the creation of "Russian World" according to Zevelev<sup>23</sup>. In this sense, focusing on the annexation of the Crimea brings a range of questions since, in fact, Russia did not gain much from annexation, on the contrary, it lost in several aspects, especially in the political sphere and with the sanctions it had suffered. So, ideational issues need to be taken into account. It is understood here that the possibility exists that Russia does not seem to fit the standard of behavior expected by modernity in force.

Russian identity is one of the most sensitive issues for this research, after all, it is an interesting starting point when it comes to trying to identify some of its motivations in foreign policy, whereas during the last Russian government it took years for some attitudes to be considered controversial such as international action locks in the face of the Syrian crisis and annexation of the Crimea, just to name a few of them. These attitudes may be hiding more than strategic and material concerns. Among the hypothesis is that the Russian involvement with the annexation of Crimea is that this event can be read as a proxy, issues not necessarily related to Ukraine, but with the West, especially to the construction of its identity. In this sense, such actions should send

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<sup>23</sup> I. Zevelev, *The Russian World Boundaries. Russia in Global Affairs*, 7.06.2014, <<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/The-Russian-WorldBoundaries-16707>> (30.06.2019).

a message to the West, in this relationship that seems ambivalent within their statements of a Russian feeling for example. This may mean that the Russian government, supported by its national identity, has the West at its core, its actions are guided in the centrality of the West.

The Russian Federation believes that with the collapse of the USSR it is promoted to the First World. However, although it is quite associated with a certain greatness, as can be seen in works such as Thompson *Russia and the Soviet Union* or even the work of Kalb *Imperial Gamble*, works that relate contemporary Russia to the Soviet Union and / or imperialism. In addition, the Russian government strives to perform performances worthy of a major Western power, such as emphasizing its war power, intervening in complex issues such as the crisis in Syria or even annexing part of Ukrainian territory.

However, this same "great" Russia that possesses material capabilities, has the ability to make interventions and confront the West to defend what is of its will, is also the same Russia that continues to complain of being neglected by the West, and constantly recalls the moments when it was left out of important decisions of the international scenario, which can be seen in the speech delivered by Vladimir Putin in 2014 when the Crimea is formally annexed. That is, there is a certain incongruity between the lines. For one does not see itself while a state suffering from postcolonial symptoms does not, "provincialize" the West, and continues to perpetuate masked mimetic behavior.

Emotions here matter as the sense of insecurity about the modern illusion of a unified identity leads States to a quest for ontological security. That is, ontological (in) security literature in connection with emotions is a bridge between explanatory possibilities and how this can fill analytical needs in certain scenarios, and how these approaches to some extent provide the shortcomings of some mainstream analyzes of International Relations about the Russian Federation.

As Koschut<sup>24</sup> puts it, emotions are analytical categories, but they are also within the spectrum of transformations, normative resistances, identity construction, among others. For Koschut<sup>25</sup> the analysis of emotions cannot be separated from the social context, identity and language. For the discursive expression carries within itself several meanings, it does not express only what is being directly discourse, as it carries between the lines the most intuitive emotions and meanings<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> S. Koschut, *The Power of (Emotion) Words: on the Importance of Emotions for Social Constructivist Discourse Analysis in IR*, "Journal of International Relations and Development, 21(2) 2017.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> T. Solomon, *Attachment, tautology, and ontological security*, "Critical Studies on Security", Vol. 1, No. 1/2013.

## Ontological Security

Here it's important to have in mind what holds together what has been written in the previous pages, which is Russia's ontological insecurity. Meaning that, Russia's government lost more than it gained annexing Crimea. The motivations to annex a part of Ukraine's territory were justified on legal, moral, humanitarian, among many others by Russian government. The problem is that with this action Russia lost material capabilities and "soft power" seeming just an irrational government. As said Russia and Crimea does share a historical past, Crimea was once part of Russia, and still these possible explanations alone miss the ideological component. Russia wants to be great again.

In order to be a great power again it needs recognition, sustainability of the biographical self, the identity of a Great Russia. But, as put, since the collapse of the Soviet Union Russia's been left aside in many important decisions regarding the international scenario. Besides if it doesn't belong among the Great Powers Russia doesn't see itself belonging anywhere else. So if Russia is being left aside, or feels like this, unheard, it will creating aggressive atmosphere to act as a "hero", to act as a great power. Russian identity insecurity created the opportunity to become an actual agent, motivated some sort of creativity for Russia's foreign policy decision makers to go back to a familiar routine of aggressiveness towards the West.

As it feels like it's being "othered" by the West, the search for its nemesis was the "best" approach to bring some certainty to the Russian public about it's identity. Crimea's annexation created the opportunity of ontological security and physical security since the government is drawing a red line, again, to the West, especially to warn NATO. In order to stablish a "modern" identity and be recognized as such, Russia's way of showing off that it can be a great "modern" power was acting aggressively.

Being treated as a stigmatized defeated country helped to build a structure of insecurity about Russia's identity, and this sense of insecurity can be a trigger to an aggressive agency.

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