Internal and External Factors Shaping Russia’s Foreign Policy towards the Baltic States

Samir Salimzade | 950316T292
Internal and External Factors Shaping Russia's Foreign Policy towards the Baltic States

Abstract

This thesis discusses one of the most serious security challenges faced by the Baltic states since regaining their independence. This security challenge is a product of Russia’s assertive foreign policy towards its western neighbours, which has intensified after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In order to understand the rationale behind the Kremlin’s policy in the region, the thesis aims to analyse how internal and external factors shape the foreign policy of Russia towards the Baltic states. By taking neo-classical realism as its theoretical framework, the thesis uses mixed research methods for collecting data and applies qualitative content analysis to analyse the three main factors that shape Russia’s Baltic policy. The thesis identifies that NATO’s actions in the anarchic international system raise security threats towards Russia. This shapes Putin’s threat perceptions and compels him to react with counteractions, and since the foreign policy in Russia is concentrated mainly in the hands of the president, his perceptions are decisive. Nevertheless, Putin is dependent on Russians’ support and exploits nationalist feelings of the Russian population to pursue his foreign policy. The thesis concludes that the combination of these three factors makes Russia’s foreign policy towards the Baltic states more aggressive.

Keywords: Russia, Baltic states, NATO, Security, Foreign Policy, Neo-Classical Realism

Word Count: 15519
Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to thank the Swedish Institute for the scholarship they granted me, without which this thesis would not be written at Malmö University. I believe, their assistance to students from different countries in the world should be highly appreciated. I would also like to share my gratitude to Dr. Michael Strange, my thesis advisor, who showed me the direction I needed to follow for writing an appropriate master thesis. Moreover, my friends – Aygul Salmanova, Filip Batselé, and Hamidreza Sadeghi – thank you for the comments on my thesis and for taking your precious time to give irreplaceable advice that helped me to bring new ideas to the paper.

The biggest appreciation goes to my parents, and in particular to my mother, who was guiding me throughout my life, supporting me in difficult situations and helping me with her wise advice. Without you, studying in Sweden would remain a dream. Thank you!
## Contents Page

1. Introduction ........................................... 1

2. The Main Threats in the Region – A Brief Overview .......... 3

3. A Literature Review on the Explanations of Russia’s Foreign Policy ........................................... 5
   3.1. The Role of Russia’s Identity and Self-Awareness ............ 5
   3.2. The Role of the Geopolitical Situation and External Threats .... 7
   3.3. The Role of Putin’s Personality and Perceptions ............... 8
   3.4. The Role of Domestic Political Factors .......................... 10
   3.5. Summary ............................................. 12

4. Neo-classical Realism as an Explanatory Theory ................. 13
   4.1. Shortcomings of the Neo-classical Realism ..................... 15

5. Research Design ......................................... 16
   5.1. Ontology and Epistemology .................................... 16
   5.2. Methodology ............................................ 16
   5.3. Data Collection and Analysis ................................... 18
   5.4. Limitations .............................................. 20

6. Analysis .................................................. 22
   6.1. NATO as an External Threat that Shapes Russia’s Baltic Foreign Policy ...................... 22
   6.2. Vladimir Putin’s Threat Perceptions .............................. 26
   6.3. The Role of Public Support in Russia’s Baltic Foreign Policy ........................................... 29
   6.4. Summary .............................................. 35

7. Conclusion ............................................... 37

Bibliography ................................................................ 39
1. Introduction

For the past decade and a half, the foreign policy of Russia towards its Baltic neighbours – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania - has noticeably changed. The time-frame after the dissolution of the Soviet Union till the mid-2000s was a period of genuine pro-Western cooperation for Russia, which was driven by the Kremlin’s awareness of the importance of economic reforms (Thorun, 2008:31). The economic and political cooperation reached a point where Russia was aiming to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but the country’s foreign policy towards the West has gradually shifted as its power kept growing. The Kremlin’s annexation of Crimea and destabilization of the situation in eastern Ukraine in 2014 are some of the latest signs of Vladimir Putin’s increasingly assertive policies towards its western neighbours.

The Baltic states have particularly felt the change in the Kremlin’s foreign policy, for which the conflict in Ukraine became the biggest security challenge since regaining their independence in 1991 (Vilson, 2015:49). This shift in the foreign policy of Russia has also challenged the norms of the international system and changed the balance of security in Eastern Europe, especially after Russia’s annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and launching a hybrid warfare on the eastern territories of Ukraine. Further provocations in the Baltic region that, inter alia, include numerous airspace violations, cyber-attacks, enhanced intelligence measures, disinformation campaigns, as well as demonstrations of the political and military power of Russia, show that the Kremlin tries to redefine international norms and rules and challenge the current world order.

Thus, the aim of this research is to investigate the rationale behind Russia’s assertive policies in the Baltic region. Not surprisingly, the analysis of Russia’s offensive stance in the region has attracted the attention of many academics, think-tank analysts, along with various western politicians and diplomats (Götz, 2017:229). There is a growing awareness that an analysis of the main factors that make the Kremlin behave the way it does is needed for better understanding its relationship with its Baltic neighbours. For this, the thesis picks up three specific variables proposed by neo-classical realists, which are an international anarchic system, perceptions of the leader, and support of the population for that leader, and aims to answer the following research question: How do internal and external factors shape the foreign policy of Russia towards the Baltic states?

In order to answer the research question, a brief overview of the security situation in the Baltic region is provided. This is done with the aim to have a background knowledge about the events that occurred in the region and to understand why Russia’s policy towards the Baltic states is characterized as assertive. After the brief overview, the thesis reviews the existing literature on explanations of the foreign policy of Russia towards its neighbours. By applying different theories
and approaches, the scholarship has identified four main factors that shape the Kremlin’s policies: the role of Russia’s identity and self-awareness; the role of the geopolitical situation and external threats; the role of Putin’s personality and perceptions; and the role of domestic political factors. Since all of these factors have their shortcomings and cannot fully explain the foreign policy of Russia towards the Baltic states, neo-classical realism is chosen as an explanatory theory. The rationale behind choosing this theoretical framework lies in the fact that unlike other theories, while neo-classical realism considers primarily external factors, it also takes into consideration internal variables that play a role in shaping the policy of a state.

By identifying the author’s ontological and epistemological position and taking a positivist stance, the thesis incorporates both quantitative and qualitative research methods for collecting data and uses the qualitative content analysis for data analysis. Since the thesis intends to discuss the role of internal and external factors proposed by neo-classical realists in the process of shaping the foreign policy of Russia towards the Baltic states, the selected data for the analysis is the following: NATO factsheets (reports), speeches, and news; Vladimir Putin’s speeches and interviews; and surveys on the Russians’ support for Putin.

The thesis discusses the gathered data by dividing the Analysis chapter into four sections, where the first three sections discuss the role of NATO as an external threat that shapes Russia’s Baltic foreign policy; the role of threat perceptions of Russian leadership; and the role of public support in Russia’s Baltic foreign policy. The fourth section aims to summarize all important findings, discuss them and answer the research question. Subsequently, the thesis is concluded by re-emphasizing the central puzzle and describing how it has responded to that puzzle.
2. The Main Threats in the Region – A Brief Overview

The aim of this chapter is not just to describe the threats that Russia poses towards the Baltic region. Instead, this brief overview intends to help the reader better comprehend the situation in the region. More specifically, in order to identify which factors shape Russia’s foreign policy towards the Baltic states, one should firstly have a background knowledge about the events that occurred in the region as these events, in their turn, have led to conducting the current research on Russia’s policy.

To begin with, the situation has worsened after the annexation of Crimea and separatist movements in Lugansk and Donetsk regions of Ukraine in 2014, which have rapidly changed the security situation in Eastern Europe. According to some scholars, after the events in Ukraine, the three Baltic countries that have a special place in the geopolitical interest of Russia, are considered to be “the most likely next potential victims of Russian intervention” (Giles, 2016 cited in Vilson, 2017:9; Gladysz, 2016:190). The concerns of being the next targets of Moscow are supported by the fact that 42 percent of Latvian, 30 percent of Estonian, and 12 percent of Lithuanian populations consist of Russian-speaking minorities that are big enough in numbers for being a cause of separatist movements, like in Georgia and Ukraine (Vilson, 2017:21).

It is also necessary to mention that all three countries have borders with Russia (Lithuania has a border with Russian exclave, Kaliningrad) and are considered by Moscow as “historical Russian territories” (Gladysz, 2016:191). The Kaliningrad exclave should be of particular attention here since it is considered as a very serious security challenge for the Baltic states. That is because the exclave is one of the most armed territories of Europe, with thousands of Russian troops, weapons, military aircrafts and ships, and numerous military arsenals located there (Ivanauskas et al, 2016:147). One of the strongest weapons that Russia currently possesses – nuclear-capable Iskander missiles – has also been deployed in the territory of this exclave since 2012, which makes Russia be able to target all Baltic states, Poland, parts of Germany and the Czech Republic (Ivanauskas et al, 2016:151). Moreover, since the Kaliningrad is a strategically important territory for Russia, the latter may do everything possible to have a land corridor to the exclave, which in its turn will prevent the EU and NATO reaching the Baltic states (Kazocins, 2015:59).

Nevertheless, Russia prefers to avoid direct military confrontation with the alliance forces and instead use a hybrid warfare, which it had successfully exercised before on the Baltic states, particularly Estonia, through cyber-attacks and enhanced intelligence measures (Kiesewetter and Zielke, 2015). Additionally, although in 2016 NATO officially recognized cyberwarfare as an operational domain of war, such non-military means of achieving the desired strategic and political
aims have grown during the past years, and quite often they are more effective than traditional military weapons (Kiesewetter and Zielke, 2016:41). While the hybrid warfare might be a very good tactic for Russia to use, it might also be very challenging for NATO due to the difficulties with defining who is the enemy as a result of which, the Article 5 might fail to work in practice. The basic idea behind the Article 5 of the NATO Charter is that if a member of the alliance is attacked by another country, all other members have the responsibility to protect that country and wage a war against the aggressor. The recent study of Braw (2015:36) suggests that if Russia repeats the Ukrainian scenario in the Baltic region, for example with Estonia that has a heavily Russian city Narva, then the Article 5 would be impracticable since no one would be able to prove that those ‘hundred green men’ are connected to Russia.

Scholars have also indicated other weaknesses of the Article 5. For example, even if the Article 5 is activated, Ubriaco (2017:13) is sceptical if other members wage a war against Russia and defend small Baltic states. According to the Pew Research Center poll that he presents in his work, the majority of the NATO members, particularly France, Italy, and Germany are not enthusiastic about sending their troops into the Baltic region and having a military confrontation with Russia (Ubriaco, 2017) Moreover, taking into account the fact that populism has seen a rise in the West, and right-wing parties are gaining more and more seats in the parliaments, the scepticism of Ubriaco might seem valid.
3. A Literature Review on the Explanations of Russia’s Foreign Policy

The security threats raised by Russia towards its neighbours have encouraged the academics to conduct numerous studies on the explanations for Russia’s assertive foreign policy. In his analytical essay, Götz (2017) attempts to explain Russia’s foreign policy towards the neighbouring states by using different theories. He concludes his survey of theories by claiming that mono-causal approaches are not enough for the explanation of Russia’s offensive policies in the ‘near abroad’ (Götz, 2017:248). In the following subsections, the thesis aims to benefit from the research of Götz by making slight changes to the four main areas that he discusses. In particular, this chapter discusses the mainstream literature on Russian foreign policy by dividing it into four subsections: the role of Russia’s identity and self-awareness; the role of the geopolitical situation and external threats; the role of Putin’s personality and perceptions; and the role of domestic political factors. Although the literature mainly discusses the explanation of the Kremlin’s policies towards Ukraine and the western neighbourhood in general, an attempt will be made to apply those issues to the Baltic case, though the possible explanations of Russia’s foreign policy towards Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania will be discussed more in details in the following chapters, primarily within Theoretical Framework and Analysis.

3.1. The Role of Russia’s Identity and Self-Awareness

The mainstream literature on the foreign policy of Russia has identified the role of its Soviet and pre-Soviet historical legacy in formulating the Kremlin’s neighbourhood policies. In particular, these studies have been approached from the constructivist point of view, where identity discourses and status concerns play an important role in country’s everyday life (Wendt, 1992). For instance, Clunan (2014:285) combines social psychology with constructivism and claims that by 1994, the elite had an agreement between themselves: “Russia was a global great power and the rightful hegemon in the post-Soviet space.” This implies that all political elite, including the opposition, supports Russia’s assertive policies towards its neighbours, including the Baltic states. Tsygankov (2012a:52) also added the matters of prestige and status to the historical legacy of Russia since he affirms that the desire of achieving a greater international status is the reason of Russia’s current foreign policy.

Many scholars have also argued that Russia’s imperialist ambitions shape its foreign policy towards its neighbours. These ambitions arise from the instincts of ethnic Russians to restore the ‘historic’ lands of their motherland (Tsygankov, 2015:294). Scholars like Snyder (2014b cited in Tsygankov, 2015) claim that Russia, despite the end of the Cold War, continues its expansionist policy towards the former Soviet lands and that Putin is dependent on imperialist ideas of Russian
Internal and External Factors Shaping Russia's Foreign Policy towards the Baltic States

nationalists such as Dugin and Prokhanov. Indeed, it is enough to look at Putin’s nationalist rhetoric after the annexation of Crimea to understand how imperialist ambitions shape the Kremlin’s policies. According to the findings of Tsygankov (2015:294) gained through the content analysis, during his speech on Crimea, Putin has used the word *Russkiy* over 20 times instead of referring to the more racially inclusive *Rossiyskiy*. Motyl (2015: pp.77-78) also accuses the Kremlin for its neo-imperial ideology, which indicates that Russia should be great again and that all Russian minorities abroad deserve protection from the Kremlin.

In fact, one should analyse the reasons for the annexation of Crimea stated by Putin, for having a better understanding of the situation in Russia. To be more precise, the first reason that Putin has emphasized while justifying the annexation was the fact that Crimea is a historical land of Russia, and it has a special place in Russian history and culture (Motyl, 2015:82). By discussing Putin’s speeches justifying the reintegration of Crimea into Russia, Laruelle (2015:95) found out that Putin referred to historical memory and great power status, along with emphasizing the importance of Russian speakers’ rights abroad. Unsurprisingly, the same justifications, in a certain way, may be applied to all former Soviet states, including the ones located in the Baltic region.

Some scholars, however, such as Cornell (2000 cited in Götz, 2017), have argued that identity, status, and historical legacy do not play that important role in the formation of Russian foreign policy as conventional wisdom might imply. For instance, during the past years, Russia has agreed with a division of the Caspian Sea’s energy resources (something that it opposed to do in the previous years) and promised to close two out of four military bases in Georgia (Götz, 2017:237). Katzenstein and Weygandt (2017:430) also claim that Russia’s foreign policy is becoming moderate over time, which makes the argument on identity and historical legacy irrelevant.

There is also a problem with the imperialist argument since it overstates Putin’s readiness to go as far as nationalists would want him to go (Tsygankov, 2015:295). More specifically, despite the indeed nationalist rhetoric, Putin’s aim was getting the support of the traditional critics of the government, rather than following their ideology and recommendations (Tsygankov, 2015). Moreover, Putin has clearly maintained a political and ideological distance from radical organizations with nationalist ideas (Tsygankov, 2015). This became obvious when Putin did not go on and annex eastern Ukraine; instead, by destabilizing the situation in the region he wanted to penalize Ukraine for not respecting the rules of the game (Laruelle, 2015:95).
3.2. The Role of the Geopolitical Situation and External Threats

For the Kremlin, the geopolitical situation in its neighbourhood plays a significant role in the process of formulating Russian foreign policy towards the bordering states. This is particularly true for its western neighbours since the Kremlin desired to stop the expansion of NATO and US-supported regime changes near its borders, as a result of which it has adopted a combative stance (Shleifer and Treisman, 2011:128). Tsygankov (2010:156) also affirms that geopolitical concerns of Russia were substantiated, because “the [US] regime-change strategy… included a long-term geostrategic presence and greater control over natural resources in the region.” Thus, the foreign policy of Russia was shaped by these factors and aimed at rolling back the influence of Western powers.

By looking to individual leaders and their ideologies and describing Putin as “a first-class strategist,” Mearsheimer (2014:82) argues that the NATO enlargement posed a threat to Russian security and this could not be tolerated by Putin, thus the events in Ukraine affected policies of the Kremlin and according to neorealism, any great power would act in a way Russia did. In particular, offensive neorealism suggests that states prefer to obtain offensive measures to pursue regional dominance in the anarchic international structure, while defensive neorealism holds that states are prone to balance against the threats concentrated near their borders (Waltz, 1979; Walt, 1987). In case of Russia, one can observe the interaction of both stands in the explanation of the Kremlin’s policies towards the Baltic states.

Indeed, some scholars tried to explain Russia’s annexation of Crimea as a response to actions by the West (Allison, 2014; Mearsheimer, 2014; Tsygankov, 2015; Roberts, 2017). In his analytical essay, Allison (2014:1293) uses content analysis in order to discuss Putin’s speeches and finds out that the threats coming from the US and its allies led to the crisis in Ukraine. Moreover, it was the West that organized and provoked this crisis in order to reinvigorate the Alliance and deploy NATO forces near Russian borders (Allison, 2014). Nevertheless, Tsygankov (2015: pp.281-282) argues that the expansion of NATO is not the only factor that poses a threat to Russia since along with expanding NATO membership, the allies also deployed the missile defence system in Europe that raises security threats towards Russia.

Roberts (2017), on the other hand, discusses the role of geopolitics in Russian foreign policy by applying discourse analysis and argues that there is a reason why the actions of NATO pose a threat to Russia. In particular, he claims despite NATO’s reassurances that its expansion is not aimed against Russia, the results of this expansion depict another situation: the desire of former Soviet countries to obtain the membership of both NATO and the EU increases, along with the ‘spirit of Russophobia’ among them (Roberts, 2017:41). In such a situation, the actions of NATO
threaten the role of Russia in the post-Soviet region, undermine its sphere of interest, and question its regional power status (Roberts, 2017: pp.40-44).

Nevertheless, some scholars disagree with these arguments. For instance, one of the criticisms to the above-mentioned explanation in the mainstream research is provided by Ziegler (2012:410), who claims that the geopolitical situation near Russia’s borders does not fully explain its foreign policy. He constructs his argument based on the fact that rapidly growing China is a more serious threat to the Kremlin than the one coming from the Western powers, and the fact that Russian leadership does not consider the former as a threat to its national security is baffling from a geopolitical perspective (Ziegler, 2012). Moreover, China has passed Russia in both economic and military means, it has a long border with Russia, and its influence in Russia’s neighbourhood is increasing (Nye, 2017: pp.12-13).

Scholars like Motyl (2015) argue that NATO is not a threat to Russia. By refuting the argument of Mearsheimer, he claims that structural realism’s explanations fail to incorporate the role of ideology and Putin’s personal calculations in shaping the foreign policy of Russia (Motyl, 2015:81). In particular, he states that “a feeble alliance that lost its sense of purpose after the end of the Cold War and that consists of countries that have slashed their defence budgets… and [which] would certainly never send troops to save Estonia, say, from a Russian takeover” cannot be a threat to Russian security (Motyl, 2015). Taking these counter-arguments into consideration, it would be wrong to say that Russia took a combative stance towards the Baltic states only because of the growing dominance of NATO near Russian borders.

3.3. The Role of Putin’s Personality and Perceptions

Although geopolitics plays an important role in the process of shaping the policies of the Kremlin, it cannot explain why NATO’s presence near Russian borders is a security threat for the latter, while China’s actions are not. Roxburgh (2012) suggests analysing Putin’s personality and his perceptions in order to properly explain Russia’s foreign policy. Putin is considered as a strongman who is “haunted by almost paranoid illusions of weakness and external danger” and who tries to defend his empire against the ‘chaotic darkness’ that western culture and values may bring to his country (Roxburgh, 2012:121; Galeotti and Bowen, 2014:17). This can be a good explanation of why Putin is trying to prevent NATO’s and EU’s enlargement in Russia’s western borders. A number of scholars also indicate that Putin’s mindset of resentment and his anger that has resulted from the loss of Russia’s status in the international arena should be taken into consideration while explaining the foreign policy of Russia (Larson and Shevchenko, 2014:271; Tsygankov, 2014:346).
By analysing Putin’s behaviour, Hill and Gaddy (2012) claim that Putin has many identities: he is a statist, a history man, a survivalist, an outsider, a free marketer, and a case officer. Thus, according to them, Putin wants to create a strong state (Statist), but he does not want to restore the Soviet Union; instead, he wants to expand the scope of Russia’s influence in the world due to his idea of Russian exceptionalism (History Man) (Hill and Gaddy, 2012). Moreover, he understands that economy plays an important role in Russia (Free Marketer) and he is ready to use force and violence in order to achieve his goals (Survivalist) (Hill and Gaddy, 2012). This may lead to the logical assumption that without Putin’s leadership traits on policymaking, Russia’s foreign policy towards its western neighbours would be different.

Nevertheless, the leadership traits for Roberts (2017:30) are not as important as the analysis of Putin’s perceptions of threat and of Russian exceptionalism. Given the strength of presidential power in Russia, Putin’s perceptions of the events happening near Russian borders, as well as his own interpretation of history play an important role in shaping the foreign policy of Russia (Roberts, 2017:32). Bock et al. (2015:103) use balance of threat theory to argue that Putin’s perceptions of the threat posed by the Alliance were correct and the Kremlin reacted accordingly. Thus, the actions of Russia in Ukraine and the Baltic states may be viewed as Putin’s desire “to protect Russian identity… in the face of Western encroachment,” which was also largely supported by the Russian population (Roberts, 2017: pp.30-33).

Unlike his colleagues, Tsygankov (2015:280) explains the foreign policy of Russia by using a framework that combines considerations of power and values perceived by Vladimir Putin in relations with the West. He claims that Putin has been very clear that Russia as a great power deserves respect for its values and national interests (Tsygankov, 2015). Indeed, denial of Russian power by the West, as well as failure to recognize its cultural and historical values, along with national interests, have shaped Putin’s perceptions towards the Western countries and their allies (Roberts, 2017:53).

Nevertheless, not all scholars agree with the above-mentioned assumptions. For instance, Barkanov (2014 cited in Götz, 2017) argues that although the power is mainly concentrated in the Putin’s hands, he is not free in making a decision that shapes the foreign policy of Russia since there is a big role of elite competitions, public opinion, and elections that prevent him from doing whatever he wants. Mearsheimer (2014:81), on the other hand, argues that no Russian leader would allow a military alliance that was a mortal enemy of the Kremlin for many decades to expand towards its western borders. Moreover, it was not only Putin who perceived NATO as a threat but also Yeltsin and Medvedev who had the same belief: NATO’s expansion into Russian spheres of interests is a threat for the Kremlin (Mearsheimer, 2014:82). However, Götz (2017:232) claims that this does not mean Putin’s personal beliefs or perceptions do not matter in the process of
forming the foreign policy of Russia. Instead, he argues that Russia’s near abroad policy would not probably change if Putin was not in power (Götz, 2017).

3.4. The Role of Domestic Political Factors

The representatives of the liberal school of thought, such as McFaul (2014), argue that the foreign policy of Russia is linked with the domestic politics of the country. For McFaul (2014:170), the Kremlin deliberately creates an external crisis to gain support domestically and oppress the opposition. Similarly, Götz (2017:233) uses diversionary war theory to explain that the reason for Russia to engage in conflicts abroad is to distract the attention of the population from domestic political factors. According to this line of reasoning, there is no actual reason to be fearful of the West and the Kremlin uses the western threat image to pursue a revisionist stance abroad (Tsygankov, 2012b:696; Roberts, 2017:36). By correlating Levada Center polls on Putin’s approval ratings and economic growth rates, Treisman (2014:370) argues that Russia tries to unite its population against the external threats and increase nationalist pride and anger at home in the face of decreasing economic performance.

Shevtsova (2010:83) agrees with the above-mentioned claim and argues that the foreign policy of Russia is aimed to distract the population from their problems and boost domestic support by using their nationalist feelings. For liberal scholars, such as Van Herpen (2014), Russian aggressiveness emerges from the mix of nationalism and authoritarianism, thus Putin needs external enemies to make his rule legitimate. Alike Van Herpen, Aleprete (2013: pp.26-27) also expects a more assertive foreign policy from Putin when he needs a domestic support. Tsygankov (2012b:247), however, correlates the rising nationalism and offensive foreign policy in the near abroad, especially towards the Baltic states, Georgia, and Ukraine, with values and interests that are challenged by the West.

Some scholars, such as Götz (2017:233) also tried to explain the Kremlin’s assertive foreign policy by using regime-security theory, and found out that the driving force behind Putin’s policies is an attempt to prevent political turmoil prevailing in neighbouring states from reaching Russia. Allison (2014:1289) explains that the foreign policy of Russia, along with other factors, is shaped by the threat of the ‘colour revolutions’ near its borders that are supposedly supported by the West for geopolitical ends. The Kremlin has already used its power in containing the spread of democracy in its western neighbourhood in order to preserve its own undemocratic political system (Ikenberry, 2014:85). This view of scholars explains the common belief that if a liberal government takes over in Russia, then Russia’s foreign policy towards the Baltic states will be less offensive.
Nevertheless, Smyth (2014:585) argues that despite some protests in the country, the security of the regime was never seriously challenged, and Putin continues to enjoy the support of a large portion of the population. Therefore, there is no need for him to engage in external conflicts and maintain high support rates that he already possesses. This can particularly be observed in the analysis of Tsygankov (2015:296), where he looks at the domestic situation in Russia and argues that pardoning of 20,000 prisoners in 2013, including the members of Pussy Riot and his longtime critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky, shows a sufficiently strong social base for Putin to prevent destabilization within the country. Thus, although there are some internal problems that indeed exist, Putin’s domestic popularity has always been high (Tsygankov, 2015).

This support from the population also points to the ‘super-presidential’ system, in which Putin fills the role of patrimonial leader for the population that demands such kind of leadership, or at least supports it since there is no alternative option (Roberts, 2017: pp.31-33). More specifically, the political system in Russia is structured in a way that Putin is protected against the blames for the foreign policy failures and all bad decisions are the result of bad advice, rather than a mistake of the leader (Roberts, 2017:35). Therefore, despite occasionally unsuccessful policies, Putin maintains high ratings of support from the population.

Another criticism of the importance of domestic factors is the fact that foreign interventions have only a short-term effect of distracting the population from their problems and a long-term effect of the economic crisis, as can be shown in the case of Georgian war, which resulted in huge economic costs and financial crisis in the country (Treisman, 2014:386). Talking about the economic condition, one can observe that the economic boom that was caused by the rise in oil prices led to the increased popularity of Russian leadership, which in its turn resulted in a more assertive foreign policy (Götz, 2017:235). In other words, Russia’s offensive policy in the early 2000s did not aim at distracting public attention from internal problems but rather was stimulated by the growing welfare of the country and population in particular.

The last but not the least, scholars such as Casier (2012:42) claim that Russia does not care about the regime type of the nearby countries and colourful revolutions that occur there; what it really cares about is their loyalty to the Russian government. Thus, as long as they follow the instructions coming from the Kremlin, Russia would not intervene to change the regime type of that country, even if it is a democracy. Nevertheless, it does not mean that domestic political factors do not affect the foreign policy of Russia at all, but rather it means that they are not the main driving forces in shaping Moscow’s policies.
3.5. Summary

To sum up, each of the four main areas that are widely discussed among the scholarship has managed to explain the foreign policy of Russia towards its neighbours, but only partially. For instance, while Russia indeed perceives itself as a great power and the rightful hegemon in the post-Soviet area with imperialist ambitions, it does not always consider its historical legacy while pursuing the foreign policy towards the former Soviet states. Neither does it take a full imperialist stance in its relations with its neighbours.

Some scholars also argue that the actions of NATO near Russian borders forced the latter to pursue an assertive foreign policy towards its western neighbours. Indeed, the expansion of NATO and deployment of missile defence system challenged Russia’s spheres of interest and questioned its regional power status. Thus, according to neorealism, any great power would act in a way Russia did. Nevertheless, those scholars fail to explain why Russia is threatened by NATO, but not by China, a growing power that has passed Russia militarily and economically.

To understand why NATO’s presence is a threat to the Kremlin, one should analyse Putin’s personality and perceptions. Putin is considered to be angry with the West because the Western states have failed to recognize the power, status, and cultural values of Russia and accept it as an equal partner to themselves. Moreover, due to the strength of the presidential institution of Russia, Putin’s perceptions directly affect the foreign policy of Russia, and, unsurprisingly, he perceives NATO as a threat. Nevertheless, scholars like Mearsheimer claim that be it another leader instead of Putin, he would still consider NATO as a threat, thus Putin’s personal beliefs and perceptions affect Russian foreign policy in a certain way but do not fully explain it.

The representatives of the liberal school of thought argue that the Kremlin’s policies are based on domestic factors. They claim that Putin deliberately creates the picture of the enemy in the face of NATO and engages in crises in its neighbourhood in order to gain support domestically and oppress the opposition. Moreover, the followers of the regime-security theory argue that Putin is threatened by the ‘colour revolutions’ near its borders and uses the power to contain the spread of democracy in its western neighbourhood. However, by closely analysing the situation in Russia, one can observe that Putin actually maintains high support from the population, and his assertive policies are stimulated by the economic growth during the 2000s, rather than by his desire to distract public attention or prevent democratic revolutions.

Taking all these factors into consideration, one can observe that the scholarship has used different theories while trying to explain the foreign policy of Russia. By picking up some interesting factors from the literature review, such as the role of the external threats, Putin’s perceptions, and public support for him, this thesis aims to explain the foreign policy of Russia through the prism of neo-classical realism and use those variables in the analysis.
4. Neo-classical Realism as an Explanatory Theory

In order to provide a valid and extensive theoretical framework that can explain the foreign policy of Russia, this chapter aims to fill in the gaps of the previous sections, where some aspects of the Kremlin’s policy were mentioned, and explanations of Russian foreign policy towards its neighbours were provided by discussing it through the lenses of different theories. The current chapter, therefore, will discuss the foreign policy of Russia towards the Baltic states through the prism of neo-classical realism, first by defining it, and then by bringing in the justifications for choosing the theory, as well as by discussing its shortcomings.

Neo-classical realism is a mixture of classical realism that mainly focuses on the state power, and neo-realism, which holds that the international environment, in which states operate, is the primary factor that explains their behaviour (Kitchen, 2010:117; Marsh, 2014:121). Thus, both neo-realism and neo-classical realism emerge from an environment-based ontology (Sterling-Folker, 1997: pp.4-8). In other words, neo-classical realism incorporates both external and internal variables, although Rose (1998:146) affirms that the foreign policy of a state first and foremost depends on its place in the anarchic international system and, specifically, on its relative material power capabilities. Neo-classical realists also argue that due to the anarchic nature of the international system and lack of a supranational sovereign that could regulate the behaviour of states and act as a guarantor of compliance with the international norms, states tend to have a mistrust between each other, thus they may view each other as security threats (Glaser, 1997:171; Liff and Ikenberry, 2014:62; Sterling-Folker, 2002:103).

Nevertheless, systemic variables alone cannot determine the foreign policy of states and provide an accurate and comprehensive explanation of their behaviour (Coetzee et al., 2012:270). Rather, it is a political elite group that is directly involved in the decision-making process and their perception of the state’s relative power capabilities in the international system that shapes the foreign policy (Rose, 1998:147). Therefore, the responsibility of the political leaders is to pursue a foreign policy based on the correct assessments and calculations of the intentions of other nations (Stein, 2013:365). Leaders, however, cannot always have a complete picture about the motivations or strategies that other states want to pursue, which might affect their perception of the situation in the international arena (Stein, 2013; Rose, 1998:147).

Even if political leaders make an ‘accurate’ estimate of power trends, they do not always have enough power to pursue their foreign policy objectives (Taliaferro, 2006:485). Governments are bounded in making important decisions by their accountability to the electorate or citizenry, and when decision-makers have the support of the population, they might easily adopt more aggressive foreign policies and exert more influence abroad (Taliaferro, 2006:488). This shows
the importance of the state power, which is the ability of the government to extract resources for its purposes and which makes it easier for the central decision-makers to achieve their goals (Zakaria, 1998:9). This ability of the government depends not only on the strength of institutions, but also on the ability of leader “to raise and maintain support for national security strategies” (Christensen, 1997:11). State-sponsored nationalism remains one of the most effective tools of state power, which increases the social cohesion of the population against external threats and makes it easier for the leader to mobilize resources for national-security goals (Taliaferro, 2006:491).

Taking all of these factors into consideration, Brown (2011:1076) argues that in order to better understand the foreign policy of a state, it is important to take into account the relative power of a state that operates in an anarchic international system. Additionally, Brown (2011) affirms that domestic factors such as the perception of the political elite and the capacity of a state apparatus to mobilize and extract resources to implement a specific policy should also be taken into consideration while analyzing the foreign policy of a state. To better understand the arguments of neo-classical realists, a table which depicts all important variables mentioned above was created (see Figure 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>External (systemic) variables</th>
<th>Internal (intervening) variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreign policy of a state</td>
<td>Relative material power; anarchic international system; mistrust and security threats</td>
<td>Perception of the decision-makers; state power</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. A table depicting the variables that affect the foreign policy of a state

To conclude, neo-classical realism is chosen as the theoretical framework for this thesis, firstly, because it better explains the study of foreign policy since it connects external and internal variables in its analysis (Lindemann, 2014:35). Secondly, Russia’s relations with the West and its allies can be better explained by the anarchic structure of the international system and uncertainties and security threats that it causes (Kropatcheva, 2012:38). In particular, Trenin (2009:15) argues that the foreign policy of Russia towards the West changes as a response to the policies of the West towards Russia, i.e. Russian foreign policy is reactive. To put it in other words, Russia’s policies to a large extent depend on the ups and downs of other powers, as well as on the change of their weight towards Russia (Graham, 2010 cited in Kropatcheva, 2012:32). Thirdly, neo-classical realism is useful for explaining the foreign policy of Russia towards the Baltics because it also examines domestic variables, such as Putin’s perceptions of the threat, as well as the strength of his government to extract and mobilize resources by using the state-sponsored nationalism.
Internal and External Factors Shaping Russia’s Foreign Policy towards the Baltic States

(Taliaferro, 2006:491). The last but not the least, neo-classical realism acknowledges that the foreign policy does not constitute an ‘autonomous realm,’ thus “we must rest content with mere ‘analyses’ or ‘accounts,’ which include whatever factors appear relevant to a particular case” (Rose, 1998:145). This argument allows to drop the factor of relative material power while analysing Russia’s Baltic foreign policy, and instead to focus on the security threats to Russia, Putin’s perceptions, and his capability to use more aggressive foreign policy for gaining support from the population.

4.1. Shortcomings of the Neo-classical Realism

Waltz (1979:115) argues that one of the shortcomings of the neo-classical realism is the fact that a large number of variables that are operationalized to analyse the foreign policy of a state may transform it from an explanatory analysis into a descriptive one. Lindemann (2014:39), on the other hand, claims that neo-classical realists have simply included domestic level variables in an ad hoc manner “and then used to explain away the anomalies of structural realism.” Some scholars also argue that including perceptions of the decision-makers as an intervening variable “lacks empirical validation,” and that in order to understand those perceptions, one should look at the socio-economic and political aspects of the country’s life (Rosato, 2005:468). Thus, these drawbacks should be taken into consideration while analysing the foreign policy of Russia through the prism of neo-classical realism.
5. Research Design

5.1. Ontology and Epistemology

Before conducting the study, the researcher should introduce his ontological and epistemological stance, i.e. his assumptions about the nature of the social world, and how the knowledge can be created, acquired, and communicated (Scotland, 2012:9; Halperin and Heath, 2012:26). This is important because different ontological and epistemological positions may lead to different research approaches towards the same issue (Crotty, 1998:9). Since the theoretical framework of this thesis is neo-classical realism, the stance of positivist ontology and epistemology is taken. Positivist paradigm implies that reality exists independently of the researcher and the aim of the researcher is to acquire the meaning that resides not in his conscience, but in objects (Crotty, 1998:8; Pring, 2000:59). Moreover, positivist propositions are founded on data and facts, which in their turn help to identify causes that influence outcomes (House, 1991:2; Creswell, 2009:7). These factors are particularly important for the thesis since the researcher’s aim here is not to evaluate the actions of NATO or Putin’s speeches, but rather to describe the data and then analyse it. Moreover, positivist paradigm may help us to understand how the causal factors such as the actions of NATO in the anarchic international system, Vladimir Putin’s perceptions of the threat that NATO poses towards Russia, and the support of the Russian population for the president influence the outcome, i.e. the foreign policy of Russia towards the Baltics.

Nevertheless, one should also acknowledge the limitations of taking a positivist position. The most relevant limitation to this thesis is that the researcher should be aware of the inaccuracy in scientific data, which can affect the results of the research (Scriven, 1970: pp.100-101). In other words, positivists are considered to be inflexible since they see things as they are and tend to neglect unexplained facts. The thesis acknowledges this shortcoming and therefore, uses data triangulation technique to increase the accuracy and reliability of the gathered data.

5.2. Methodology

After the identification of the ontological and epistemological position of the thesis, this section aims to explain the choice and use of particular methods for conducting the research. Since the thesis is based on the analysis of foreign policy of Russia, collected data seeks to describe what is the rationale behind the Kremlin’s policies towards its Baltic neighbours.

For this, the thesis aims to incorporate both quantitative and qualitative research methods for collecting the necessary data. The reason for choosing the mixed methods lies in the fact that by mixing both quantitative and qualitative data, the researcher is able to avoid the weaknesses inherent to each approach and get an in-depth understanding of the issue. Moreover, the thesis uses
Internal and External Factors Shaping Russia’s Foreign Policy towards the Baltic States

textual analysis, more specifically, the qualitative content analysis, for analysing the data. The application of the qualitative content analysis to the current case is useful for depicting the foreign policy of Russia towards the Baltic states and for understanding the causes and purposes behind it – something that the thesis aims to analyse by using neo-classical realism. This method also prevents the researcher from influencing the data by asking the questions that can be biased due to researcher’s beliefs, which is particularly important since some of the gathered data consist of public opinions of Russians, as well as interviews with Vladimir Putin. Another reason for choosing the qualitative content analysis lies in the fact that it allows the researcher to analyse decision-makers’ perceptions and attitudes, and access more documents, along with studying larger populations (Halperin and Heath, 2012:318). For the aims of this thesis, it would be almost impossible to interview the Russian president, as well as to survey a large amount of the Russian population.

Taking into consideration that the thesis seeks to analyse how internal and external factors proposed by neo-classical realists shape the foreign policy of Russia, the selected data should be relevant to the research aims. Since the qualitative content analysis generates data by analysing documents, reports, statistics, and other written, oral, or visual materials (Halperin and Heath, 2012:177), the data for this thesis will be the following: NATO factsheets (reports), speeches, and news; Vladimir Putin’s speeches and interviews; and surveys on the support of the Russian population for Putin. These materials provide a rich source of information about the topic of the thesis. A brief explanation for using each of these documents is given in the following section of this chapter.

In order to increase the reliability of the data and overcome the limitation of the positivist ontology, the thesis uses data triangulation technique. For the actions of NATO, as was mentioned above, the data is gathered from one source but different contexts: factsheets (reports), official news of NATO, and the NATO decision-makers’ speeches. Vladimir Putin’s perceptions, similarly, are taken from the same source but different contexts: from his addresses to the political elite, i.e. to Russian ambassadors, members of the political parties represented in the State Duma, officials of the Defence Ministry, and Federal Assembly; his addresses to the Russian population; and his interviews to the international news agencies, such as Bloomberg, Il Corriere della Sera, Bild, Le Figaro, and NBC. The last but not the least, the data for the public support for Putin in Russia is mostly gathered from one source, but through different contexts: support of Russians for Putin’s foreign policy; approval of the government by the population; and Putin’s popularity domestically, including approval-rates during the elections.

Since the amount of information might be overwhelming, the thesis aims to gather relevant data and uses a priori codes (also known as closed coding), which relies on the themes and
keywords discussed in the literature review chapter (Halperin and Heath, 2012:323). The thesis also incorporates grounded codes (or open coding), which emerge from the data during the research, and mixes these two approaches to coding. The rationale behind mixing a priori codes and grounded codes lies in the fact that not all important for this thesis aspects are covered in the literature review chapter, thus including additional keywords to the existing ones will be useful for answering the research question. The acquired data is analysed separately in the Analysis chapter, where the thesis discusses the actions of NATO in the Baltic region and the threats that they pose to Russia; Putin’s perceptions and counteractions towards the threats posed by NATO; and the role of public support for Putin and his foreign policy within Russia. After discussing each of these factors separately, the ‘Summary’ section of the Analysis chapter combines the main arguments and answers the research question.

Due to the limited scope of the research, the time-period for the selected data is narrowed from March 2014 until March 2018. The idea behind choosing this starting date is justified by the fact that NATO’s policies towards Russia, Russia’s foreign policy towards the Baltics, as well as public support for Putin within Russia have rapidly changed after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Nevertheless, not all gathered statistical data correspond to this time-period, thus a slight change in the time-period might be observed. The geographical area of the research is also narrowed to the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and Russia, with these four states being the main actors of research, along with NATO.

5.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The discussions in the theoretical framework chapter conclude that the international system is anarchic, which leads the states to mistrust each other and look for more security (Sterling-Folker, 2002). Moreover, since political elite is directly involved in the decision-making process, their perception of the situation in the international arena is very important (Rose, 1998). Taking these factors into consideration, one should first and foremost discuss the security threats that NATO poses to Russia in the anarchic international system.

For this, the thesis aims to describe the actions of NATO in the Baltic region from the perspective of the Alliance. This is useful to find out why there is a mistrust between Russia and NATO, as well as to see if those actions of NATO pose a threat to Russia. Therefore, factsheets (reports), speeches, and news related to the role of NATO in the Baltic region have been examined. This is done in order to prove that the actions of the Alliance in the region, as well as the missiles and the defence system that it possesses create a security challenge for Russia and make the latter respond with counteractions that sometimes might not be proportionate to the ones of NATO. Due
to the large amount of data on the official website of NATO (https://www.nato.int) and with the aim to gather relevant information, the thesis uses a priori codes taken from the discussions in the literature review chapter, which are Russia, Baltic states, missile defence system, NATO forces, expansion, and enlargement. Nevertheless, during the data collection, a grounded code – military exercises – has been distinguished (see Figure 2) and data on military exercises have been included in the analysis chapter in order to better understand the possible threats posed to Russia.

As external factors alone cannot explain the foreign policy of a state, the thesis also incorporates Putin’s perceptions of the threat that NATO poses to Russia. For this, Vladimir Putin’s speeches should be discussed to understand his perceptions of the threat, as well as his response to that threat. Since all Baltic states within the research are the members of the EU and NATO, the gathered data is relevant to the scope of the research and contributes explicitly to the process of answering the research question. The data for Putin’s speeches is gathered online from the official website of the President of Russia (https://en.kremlin.ru/). A priori codes that are used in the search include NATO, Baltic states, missile defence system, NATO forces, expansion, and enlargement, while the grounded code is military exercises (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2. A priori and grounded codes](Source: Author’s own illustration)

Discussions of the above-mentioned external and domestic variables might be useful for understanding Russia’s foreign policy towards the Baltics, but they still do not provide the whole picture of the situation. Therefore, another domestic variable – state power – is brought into discussions. Following the argument of Taliaferro (2006), even if there is a real threat to the state and the perceptions of the leader are correct, the leader does not always have enough power to
pursue his foreign policy objectives. However, when the leader has the support of the population, he tends to adopt a more aggressive foreign policy and exert more influence towards the other states (Taliaferro, 2006).

To prove this assumption, the opinions and support of the Russian population towards Putin for the period of March 2013 - March 2018 are to be discussed, and the election results in Russia in 2012 and 2018 will be compared. The rationale behind choosing March 2013 as a starting period and incorporating 2012 elections is driven by the fact that the annexation of Crimea has affected the support for Putin and his government a lot, thus comparing public support in Russia before and after the annexation will serve the interests of the thesis. The data for statistics, surveys, and public opinions is acquired online (https://www.levada.ru) from the Levada Analytical Center, an independent and non-governmental Russian research organization. The reason for choosing namely this analytical center is due to its independently conducted research that does not take into account the interests of the Russian government; in other words, it is one of the most objective research organizations in Russia. Levada Center collects Russian-wide data on a representative sample base, with 1,600 urban and rural population over 18 years from 130 settlements and 45 regions of the country (Levada Center, n.d.). The statistical error in the data of the study does not exceed 3.4% (Levada Center, n.d.). Since some of the data is not available in English, the Russian version of the website was used and the prevailing information was gathered in Russian. A priori codes that are identified in the literature review chapter and used in the search are the following (translated to Russian during the search): Vladimir Putin, public support, domestic popularity, and government, while the grounded code that has been identified during the research is presidential elections (see Figure 2). Including the data on presidential election is essential, since it is a valuable addition to the research on Putin’s domestic popularity. Along with statistical data from the Levada Center, the official data for the presidential elections in Russia was also gathered online from the website of the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation, which is https://cikrf.ru/eng/.

5.4. Limitations

This thesis acknowledges that the conducted study does not provide an absolute knowledge, but rather a limited one. Because of this, it is important to note some obstacles that arose during the data collection process. First, it is worth mentioning that although the Baltic states started feeling more insecure after the annexation of Crimea, Russia has also pursued its aggressive strategy in the region before that event. Thus, the findings of the thesis do not depict the whole picture of the problem. Secondly, although the choice of the Levada Center was justified, there is
always a chance of having some bias from the side of the research institution. The same can be said also about the publications of NATO, which, undoubtedly, will try to protect the interests of the Alliance in the first place, thus creating a portion of bias. Unfortunately, due to the limited scope of the research, it is impossible to bring in additional sources that could check the reliability of primary sources. Coming back to the Levada Center, one should also mention the fact that their statistical data does not represent the opinion of the whole Russian population, although the statistical error rate of these studies is quite low (3.4%) (Levada Center, n.d.).

What is more, some difficulties also existed while analysing Vladimir Putin’s speeches. For instance, sometimes the president might skip some important aspects or might say something that does not reflect the real situation with the aim to protect the national interests of the country or simply gain the public support. Nevertheless, while analysing his speeches, this factor was taken into consideration and Putin’s speeches were compared with official statements of NATO in order to have a more reliable picture.
6. Analysis

Various scholars have attempted to explain the foreign policy of Russia in the ‘near abroad’ region by using different grand theories. This chapter, however, aims to analyse the factors that shape Russia’s foreign policy towards the Baltic states by using neo-classical realism. In the following sections, the thesis uses the qualitative content analysis to analyse the gathered data on three main factors: NATO as an external threat that shapes Russia’s Baltic foreign policy; threat perceptions of Russian leadership; and the role of Russian public support in the Kremlin’s Baltic foreign policy.

6.1. NATO as an External Threat that Shapes Russia’s Baltic Foreign Policy

One of the main factors that might shape the foreign policy of Russia towards the Baltic states and make it more offensive, is the military presence of NATO in the region. For neo-classical realists, the international system is anarchic and since there is no supranational body that could regulate the actions of the states, they are prone to mistrust each other (Sterling-Folker, 2002). This, in its turn, leads to the creation of the security threats. The current section aims to find out if NATO’s policies in the region are indeed aggressive and if those actions pose a threat to Russia. The analysis is done from the perspective of NATO.

By looking at the recent history of NATO, one can observe that the Alliance has increased rapidly in size and accepted new member states from mainly Eastern Europe, including the Baltic region. Although this action was perceived as a security threat by Russia, NATO’s response to this issue is quite simple: since the Alliance did not make any promise to Russia regarding the further expansion (there is no formal agreement of such promise), NATO has all rights to expand to the East (NATO, 2018a). Moreover, every country that joins NATO should undertake and uphold its principles, one of which was developed during the Warsaw Summit (2016) and which states that “the Alliance does not seek confrontation and poses no threat to Russia” (NATO, 2018b; NATO, 2018c). Thus, as the number of the member-states increases, so does the number of states who follow the above-mentioned commitment (NATO, 2018d). Undoubtedly, that commitment can be interpreted in different ways, and taking into account that NATO is a defensive alliance, it is obvious that it should not pose a threat neither to Russia, nor to any other country.

Nevertheless, one can argue that this expansion also leads to an increased military presence of NATO near the Russian borders, thus the Alliance poses a serious threat to the latter. Indeed, in order to secure its eastern members, NATO has adopted several actions. One of such actions was the decision of the Alliance to establish a permanent presence in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania after Russia’s aggression towards the territorial integrity of Ukraine (see Map 1). Following the
Warsaw Summit in 2016, four multinational battlegroups totalling more than 4000 troops have been located in the Baltic states and Poland (NATO, 2017a). The battlegroup in Estonia is led by the United Kingdom, with contributions by Denmark and Iceland, whereas the battlegroup in Latvia is led by Canada, with contributions of Albania, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain (NATO, 2017b). Germany leads the battlegroup in Lithuania, and Belgium, Croatia, France, Iceland, the Netherlands, and Norway contribute to this battalion-sized group (NATO, 2017b). The US in April 2014 has also deployed rotational troops to each of the Baltic states in order to deter Russia and send a message that in case of intervention, the US would engage immediately (NATO, 2017b). The rationale behind deploying a multinational battlegroup is purely political rather than military. In case of an attack, NATO’s military units in the Baltics states might be defeated quite quickly, thus there is no point of sacrificing them. Nevertheless, their mission is not to defeat the Russian army, but rather to provide a guarantee that in case of aggression, other member-states would also wage a war against the aggressor, because their troops would be attacked by Russia too.

Another important action implemented by NATO as a result of Russian aggression in Ukraine was tripling the size of the NATO Response Force (NRF) from 13,000 to 40,000 with the aim to support the land-based Spearhead Force (Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, or VJTF) and NATO Force Integration Units (eight small headquarters in the Eastern flank) (NATO, 2016a; NATO, 2017b). Spearhead Force, in its turn, is capable of reacting to external threats within a couple of days and consists of 5,000 ground troops (to be extended to 6,000-10,000 once fully
Internal and External Factors Shaping Russia’s Foreign Policy towards the Baltic States

operational), which can be increased up to 20,000 troops during a major crisis (NATO, 2016a). This is a very important addition to the existing military power of Estonia (6,600 local troops), Latvia (5,310 local troops), and Lithuania (18,350 local troops) on the one hand, and a serious security threat for Russia on the other hand (NATO, 2016a).

Nevertheless, probably the most serious security challenge for Russia is the location of the ballistic missile defence (BMD) system near its borders (see Map 2). The report of NATO (2016b) shows that there are two main BMD activities that the Alliance is conducting: the first one is Theatre Ballistic Missile Defence (TBMD), which aims to protect NATO forces deployed in the region against short- and medium-range ballistic missile attacks (up to 3,000 kilometres). The second action is the protection of the European territory, populations, and forces against a potential ballistic missile threat. The US, as part of its European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA), has deployed a US BMD radar at Kurecik base in Turkey, Aegis Ashore site at Deveselu Air Base in Romania, and another Aegis Ashore site at the Redzikowo military base in Poland, which will be operational during the 2018 timeframe (NATO, 2016b; NATO, 2016c). Moreover, within EPAA, Germany also hosts the command center at its Ramstein Air Base, whereas Spain hosts four multi-mission BMD-capable Aegis ships that are located at the Rota naval base (NATO, 2016b).

Map 2. NATO’s ballistic missile defence capabilities
Source: NATO (2016b); NATO (2016c)

Other member-states have also contributed to the capabilities of the BMD system. For instance, several allies offer ground-based air and missile defence systems, such as Patriot or
Internal and External Factors Shaping Russia's Foreign Policy towards the Baltic States

SAMP/T, while countries like Netherlands, Denmark, and the United Kingdom have announced to upgrade their ground- and frigate-based radar systems to enhance NATO BMD capabilities (NATO, 2016b). It is also important to note that the NATO report (2016c) denies the possibility of shooting down Russian intercontinental missiles from NATO sites by using BMD system since “their capabilities are too limited, their planned numbers too few, and their locations too far south or too close to Russia to do so.” This argument of NATO would quickly be dismissed by neoclassical realists, since what matters for them is not the assurance of NATO of its peaceful intentions, but rather the military capabilities that NATO possesses, and which, in its turn, pose a security threat to Russia.

Military drills conducted near Russian borders also pose security threats to the Kremlin. During the past years, NATO has conducted a large number of military exercises in the Baltic Region and Poland. In May 2015, for instance, the Steadfast Javelin exercise was conducted in Estonia, with the participation of 13,000 local troops and 600 NATO troops (NATO, 2016d). However, the majority of the exercises did not exceed 10,000 troops for the period 2014-2017, with the scope of military exercises such as Baltops, Sabre Strike, Dragoon Ride, Iron Wolf, Steadfast Javelin (2014), Summer Shield, etc. ranging between 1,000 to 9,000 troops (NATO, 2014; NATO, 2015; NATO, 2016e; NATO, 2017c). Nevertheless, it was the annexation of Crimea in 2014 that forced NATO to increase the number and scope of the military exercises and later at the 2014 Summit in Wales, NATO leadership decided to increase the focus on collective defence (NATO, 2017d). This finding is very important since although NATO was conducting military exercises before, the number of drills increased because of Russia’s actions, which means that the Kremlin itself created this security threat. However, this finding does not undermine the fact that the military exercises of NATO remain a threat to Russia.

To sum up this section, the thesis has found out that the actions of the Alliance pose a threat to Russian security. NATO’s claims that enlargement of the Alliance and deployment of BMD systems are not targeted against Russia are irrelevant here, since what matters in this case is a change in the international environment and capabilities that NATO possesses. The issues of the increased presence near Russian borders, along with the increased amount of military exercises are also crucial factors that affect Russian foreign policy since those actions create a mistrust between Russia and the Alliance and pose a threat to the former. Although the actions of NATO raise security threats towards Russia and shape its foreign policy, they fail to explain how exactly the policy of the Kremlin is shaped towards the Baltic states. Therefore, there is a need to discuss Putin’s perceptions and his response to the security threats of NATO, which the thesis aims to do in the following section.
6.2. Vladimir Putin’s Threat Perceptions

It is true that systemic variables are very important for neo-classical realists, but they alone cannot examine the foreign policy of states. Domestic variables, such as the perception of the political elite, is crucial to take into consideration (Rose, 1998). It is important for a leader to correctly calculate and assess the actions of other states and that is to be analysed in this section. Moreover, following the discussions of the literature review part, one can argue that the decisions on the foreign policy of Russia are almost fully dependent on the president, and his perceptions play a decisive role in shaping the foreign policy of Russia (Roberts, 2017). Thus, the following paragraphs will discuss the perceptions of Vladimir Putin about the actions of NATO that were described in the previous section.

It is enough to look at Putin’s speeches to understand that NATO remains a serious threat to Russia, first of all because of its enlargement policy. Although the question of NATO enlargement to the East has been in the political discourse of Russia for more than a decade, the issue became more serious after the revolution in Ukraine. Putin was seriously concerned with the fact that the desire of Ukraine to obtain NATO membership may become true, which could undermine Russia’s security:

*What did our partners expect from us as the developments in Ukraine unfolded?... we could not allow NATO forces to eventually come to the land of Crimea and Sevastopol, the land of Russian military glory, and cardinally change the balance of forces in the Black Sea area. This would mean giving up practically everything that Russia had fought for since the times of Peter the Great, or maybe even earlier – historians should know* (President of Russia, 2014a).

Moreover, Putin claims that Russia’s opinion about the expansion of NATO was never taken into consideration, thus NATO neglected the good intentions of Russia and its readiness to cooperate: “… when we rightfully asked: Do not you find it possible and necessary to discuss this [the expansion] with us? They said: No, this is none of your business” (President of Russia, 2014a). Putin also states that unlike Russia’s friendly actions, such as stopping the flights of its air forces near the US borders for ten years, or proposing to create a new European system of security, the West never appreciated this and continued moving closer to the Russian borders (President of Russia, 2014b; President of Russia, 2016a). In particular, he affirms that Russians were deceived since NATO, although unofficially, promised not to expand beyond the eastern borders of the former Federal Republic of Germany (President of Russia, 2014c). Putin thinks that the
expansion of the military alliance to the East, the presence in Russia’s backyard, the conduction of military drills, the adoption of an ‘offensive’ defence strategy, as well as the deployment of military infrastructure, such as the ballistic missile defence system, poses a threat to the security of Russia and undermines its national interests (President of Russia, 2017a).

This was also mentioned during the meeting with the ambassadors and permanent envoys of the Russian Federation, where Putin reemphasized that Russia is threatened by NATO’s actions:

_The number of military exercises [of NATO] has increased dramatically, including in the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea. We are constantly accused of military activity, but where? Only on our own soil. We are supposed to accept as normal the military build-up on our borders. Rapid reaction forces are being deployed in Poland and the Baltic countries, and there is a build-up in offensive weapons. All of this seeks to undermine the military parity achieved over a period of decades_ (President of Russia, 2016b).

Probably the most dangerous threat that Russia is concerned about is the ballistic missile defence system. In many of his speeches, Putin has emphasized that the BMD facilities, which NATO deployed in Europe, raises security threats in the region and forces Russia to use countermeasures (President of Russia, 2017b; President of Russia, 2017c; President of Russia, 2018a). In particular, he claims that the missile defence systems in Poland and Romania “create a threat to our [Russian] strategic nuclear forces and disrupts the strategic balance – an extremely dangerous development for international security” (President of Russia, 2017b). Putin also affirms that the missile defence system is not used purely for defence, but rather as part of nuclear capability that is established at the periphery: “It [BMD] is not about preventing missile and nuclear strikes, but it is about minimizing a possible counterstrike. These are the things that are postulates today, and the experts understand this perfectly well” (President of Russia, 2017d).

Following the arguments of neo-classical realists, Russian policy towards the West, including the Baltic states, is reactive (Trenin, 2009). Indeed, Putin argues that the aggressive rhetoric and offensive actions close to Russia’s borders give no choice to him but to increase the defence capabilities of the country (President of Russia, 2016c). Nevertheless, the question is whether the countermeasures of the Kremlin were adequate and proportionate. A few months after the annexation of Crimea, Putin told that he would soon announce new nuclear weapons that Russia has been developing during the past years (President of Russia, 2014e). Moreover, despite depicting itself as the one who is threatened by the actions of NATO, the Kremlin was continuously reminding the West that Russia is one of the most powerful nuclear states in the world and that
these are not just hollow words, but a reality (President of Russia, 2014d). These speeches show a clear picture that Russia went beyond the protection of its national interests and repeatedly, by its actions and rhetoric, posed a threat to the Western world. Putin, however, would not agree with this argument. He claims that Russia only to a certain extent contributed to the increased tensions between the two sides, but only as much as the national interests of the Kremlin required so:

_We are not attacking in the political sense of the word. We are not attacking anyone. We are only protecting our interests. Our Western partners – and especially our US partners – are displeased with us for doing exactly that, not because we are allowing security-related activity that provokes tension_ (President of Russia, 2014c).

Whether Putin is indeed limited by the national interests of Russia while pursuing such kind of foreign policy is irrelevant for neo-classical realists, since it is a fact that the threat coming from NATO exists and that Putin reacts to that threat. What is particularly interesting here is that almost in all of his speeches about NATO for the past five years, Putin was repeatedly claiming that the West does not listen to Russia’s concerns (President of Russia, 2014c; President of Russia, 2014f; President of Russia, 2016a; President of Russia, 2016d). During the recent presidential address to the Federal Assembly on March 2018, Putin said: “… nobody really wanted to talk to us about the core of the problem, and nobody wanted to listen to us. So, listen now” (President of Russia, 2018b). These words should be carefully taken into account because it gives an impression of possible changes in Russia’s policies. That is not to say that Russia’s foreign policy will be more aggressive from now on; in fact, these words could also be aimed at gaining the support of population during the upcoming elections in March 2018. Nevertheless, after these words, Putin started describing Russia’s newly developed invincible nuclear weapons that can (as claimed by Putin) overcome missile defence systems all over the world, and one can argue that Putin’s words were directly aimed towards the West and NATO (President of Russia, 2018b).

However, although this rhetoric of the Russian president poses a threat to the Baltic states, Putin has reportedly claimed that NATO members should not be afraid of Russia’s intervention because he thinks that only a crazy leader would attack the Alliance (President of Russia, 2015).

_I believe that all sensible people who are involved in real politics understand that references to threats posed by Russia to, let us say, the Baltic States are absolute nonsense. Do you think we are going to start a war with NATO? How many people are there in the NATO countries? About 600 million, right?_
Russia's population is 146 million. Yes, we are the largest nuclear power. But do you really think we are going to use nuclear weapons to take over the Baltics? Nonsense! (President of Russia, 2016a).

Indeed, invading and annexing the Baltic states, which are the members of NATO, might have devastating results for Russia since it would be too costly and far too dangerous. Spreading fear is easier, as well as spreading disinformation for manipulating the opinions of Russian-speaking people both in Russia and in the neighbouring countries.

To sum up, the actions of NATO indeed posed security threats towards Russia. The current section found out that Putin perceives the actions of NATO, such as the expansion of the Alliance to the East, the military presence in the Baltics region, an increased number of military drills near Russian borders, and the deployment of ballistic missile defence systems as a serious threat to Russia, which undermine its national interests. Neo-classical realists, such as Trenin (2009), argue that the foreign policy of Russia towards the West is reactive, i.e. it changes as a response to the western policies. Indeed, analysis of the current section depicts that Putin’s calculations and assessments of the situation near Russian borders forced him to reply with counteractions, which shaped the Russian foreign policy towards the Baltics and made it more aggressive.

6.3. The Role of Public Support in Russia’s Baltic Foreign Policy

As claimed by neo-classical realists, understanding the anarchic international system is not enough to explain the foreign policy of a state. After considering one of the main domestic variables, perception of the leader, this section aims to take into consideration another domestic factor, which is state power – the ability of leader to raise support for his national security policies (Christensen, 1997). State-sponsored nationalism is one of the key tools of the state power that leaders use to unite the population against external threats, and which allows the leader to pursue his national security goals (Taliaferro, 2006). When the population is united and supports the leader, then he may easily adopt a more aggressive foreign policy and exert more influence abroad (Taliaferro, 2006). Following these argumentations, the current section aims to discuss the increased public support for Putin in Russia as a result of the Crimean annexation, and its implications for the Kremlin’s foreign policy towards the Baltic states.

While discussing Putin’s popularity, it is worth looking at the events that happened in Russia’s neighbourhood and the results that it brought. In particular, all changes in the public opinion of Russians about the socio-political condition within the country should be analysed vis-à-vis the annexation of Crimea. Due to the artificially induced patriotic rise, Putin’s popularity has
seen a huge increase (see Figure 3). While Putin’s approval rating was equal to 61 percent in November 2013, i.e. five months before Putin ordered to annex Crimea, this number has increased almost by a quarter with the mean equal to 82 percent, and the mode equal to 85 percent in 2014 (Levada Center, 2017a). Public support for Putin in Russia has kept being high during the following years too, ranging between 80 to 89 percent during 2015-2017 (Levada Center, 2017a). As can be seen from these numbers, the actions of the Kremlin in Crimea received universal approval of the population of Russia and it shows an almost total unity of the population. This is something that happens quite rarely, for example when the most important aspects of the entire population are concerned, such as a threat to its existence or an event equivalent to it.

![Figure 3. A graph depicting Putin’s approval rating](image)

*Source: Levada Center (2017a)*

Along with the rise of support for Putin, the Russian population has also changed its mind about the government in general. Statistical data gathered by Levada Center (2017b) shows that approval of Medvedev’s work as a Prime Minister has seen an increase from 46 percent in November 2013 to 62 percent in March 2014. Nevertheless, unlike the public support for Putin in Russia, Medvedev’s rankings did not remain stable and gradually decreased to 44 percent in November 2017. Another survey by Levada Center (2017c) depicts this situation better. To the question “what do you not like in Vladimir Putin,” the second most popular response was his ‘soft’ attitude towards the ministers and not firing Medvedev from the position of Prime Minister. By analysing the popularity of the Russian government in general, one can observe a tendency similar to the ranking of Medvedev. For instance, while the approval rate of the activities of the Russian government was as low as 39 percent in November 2013, it has seen a rise of 19 percent, reaching 58 percent in March 2014 (Levada Center, 2017b). The mean approval rate of the Russian
government for the period of April 2014 – November 2017 is approximately 53 percent; in other words, almost half of the population of Russia do not support their government’s policies and activities (Levada Center, 2017b).

These numbers show that unlike a huge rise in the approval rate of all political institutions that is caused by the annexation of Crimea, the model of ‘good president and bad surrounding,’ typical for the post-Soviet states, remains in the public consciousness of ordinary Russians. In other words, all bad things happening with the state are caused by the actions of governmental officials surrounding Putin and most of the times they are the ones to blame, while all good things are directly attributed to the policies of the president. The population also thinks that Putin is deceived by his close surroundings and that he does not get reliable information about the condition of the population. For instance, 58 percent of the surveyed Russians think that Putin either gets incomplete and distorted information, or the truth about the real situation in the country is hidden from him (Levada Center, 2017c). Such a positive image of the president can also be found in other surveys. For instance, while in 2013 Putin’s popularity was mainly justified with the absence of alternative candidates to the position of the president (42 percent), in 2014 the situation has changed and the most common opinion (74 percent) was that Putin successfully and adequately copes, or will cope in the future, with the solution of Russia’s problems (Levada Center, 2014).

As can be seen from the statistics, Putin enjoys huge support from the population. Findings of the Levada Center (Levada Center, 2014) indicate that the average rating of Vladimir Putin’s activities as president (on a scale from 1 - the lowest to 10 - the highest) reached a value of 7.33 in 2014, which is higher than that observed during the previous years. Moreover, in 2017, 63 percent of the respondents evaluated Putin’s policies as 7 and higher (Levada Center, 2017c). The number of Russians who positively assess the activities of Vladimir Putin as president of Russia prevails over the ones who are dissatisfied with his work. At the same time, Putin is supported not only by those who fully share his views and positions (31 percent), but also by those who are ready to support him as long as he leads the country along a democratic path (23 percent). Another 17 percent of respondents do not see a worthy replacement for Putin, while 6 percent hopes for his further successes (Levada Center, 2014).

To the question “what does attract you in Vladimir Putin,” which was an open question and with the respondents themselves able to name more than one characteristics, 19 percent of the respondents described him as a decisive, manly, courageous, firm, strong-willed, strong, calm, brave, self-confident, and a real man (Levada Center, 2017c). The characteristics describe Putin as a strong politician, which can also be observed from the fact that 18 percent of the surveyed population are particularly satisfied with Putin’s foreign policy, his support for the army, and protection from the West (Levada Center, 2017c). The foreign policy of Russia during the Putin
era was particularly supported by the population as can also be seen from the Levada Center’s survey, where to the question “how successful is Vladimir Putin with solving foreign policy problems?” (on a scale from 1 - the lowest to 5 - the highest), the average rating was 3.94 (Levada Center, 2015). People also believe that Putin made the world to respect Russia, increased its prestige, and did not allow the Western powers to ‘wipe their feet’ on Russia (Levada Center, 2017c). 16 percent of the respondents described Putin as an experienced politician and a strong leader, while 15 percent of the surveyed population depicted him as an intelligent, educated, and a smart person (Levada Center, 2017c).

Along with supporting the president, people also have a positive attitude towards him. For instance, in 2015, 73 percent of the respondents claimed that they have a favourable impression of Putin, while this number was equal to 52 and 58 percent in 2013 and 2014 respectively (Levada Center, 2015). As was argued before, a dramatic change can be observed in the ratings after the annexation of Crimea and Putin’s tough stance on this issue. Moreover, some (10 percent) respondents, according to the survey of Levada Center (2017d), claimed that they admire Putin, 32 percent had sympathy for him, and 27 percent could not say anything bad about him (see Figure 4).

What is particularly interesting is that 70 percent of the respondents believe that the almost absolute concentration of power in the Putin’s hands benefits Russia (Levada Center, 2015). Despite being considered as an authoritarian regime, 77 percent of the respondents claim that they (fully/probably) trust Putin (Levada Center, 2017d) (see Figure 5). In comparison with the previous two years, this number has gone down, especially if compared with the year 2015 (83
By looking at the statistics mentioned above, this thesis argues that Putin has the final word on the policies of Russia. He created a system of loyalty, faithfulness, and complete subordination to one person, i.e. to him, thus establishing the president as a central figure of the state. This also explains the high rates of support towards Putin among the population, as well as distrust of the population towards the political institutions and persons surrounding him. The survival of the state regime, therefore, mostly depends on Putin’s personal popularity, which kept rising after the annexation of Crimea. By looking at the situation from the neo-classical realism’s perspective, one can observe that Putin’s strategy of using populism and nationalism, while ignoring the international legal system in order to achieve geopolitical goals of Russia, positively affected the maintenance of the authoritarian nature of the regime.

Such kind of support for Putin has also affected the recent presidential elections in Russia in 2018, the results of which were not surprising at all. Putin won the elections with 76.69 percent of votes, while the final turnout was 67.54% (Central Election Commission, 2018). The question of the turnout was very important for the current government, since they put a goal to reach 70 percent turnout rate and 70 percent voting rate, and they failed to reach the former (Levada Center, 2017e). However, this voting rate is the highest for Putin during his 4th presidential term, and undoubtedly it is also connected to the Crimean factor that was described above. To better understand the situation, one should have a look at the results of the 2012 presidential elections, where Putin got 63.6 percent of votes (Levada Center, 2018a). Back in 2012, only a fifth of the respondents wanted Putin’s re-election during the next presidential elections, while more than half of the respondents preferred to see a new person as president (Levada Center, 2018a). This...
situation has changed dramatically after the annexation of Crimea, when two-thirds of the respondents wanted to see only Putin, and no one else, as president, and one can observe the same situation even now (Levada Center, 2018a). Thus, the overall emotional background of the 2018 electoral campaign was fundamentally different from the previous one.

And although one can question the transparency of the 2018 elections because of the tendency of the autocratic states to falsify election results, findings of the Levada Center prove that even without those falsifications, Putin would still have won. A public survey conducted in August 2017 shows that out of those who were ready to vote at the time of the survey, 60 percent of the respondents supported Putin’s candidacy (Levada Center, 2017f). Moreover, to the question “would you want to see Vladimir Putin as president after the end of his current term,” 67 percent of respondents replied ‘yes’ (Levada Center, 2017f). By looking at the responses of the surveyed population to this question from October 2013 to August 2017, one can see that after the Crimean annexation the percentage of people saying ‘yes’ increased from 33 percent to 67 percent (see Figure 6). Moreover, in March 2018, just before the presidential elections, 70 percent of the respondents claimed that they support measures for the development of the country, as proposed by Putin during his speech on 1st of March (Levada Center, 2018b). This shows that before the elections, there was a high level of support and trust to the president. Therefore, despite the possible violations during the elections, Putin’s popularity remains high amongst the Russian population.

![Figure 6. A graph depicting desire of people to see Putin as president](Source: Levada Center (2017f))

To sum up this section of the analysis chapter, Putin has almost full support of the population: his popularity is high, he has a positive image among the population, people trust him and vote for him in the elections. This factor depicts that Putin also has the ability to raise and maintain support for his policies, which describes the state power – an important variable for neo-
classical realists (Zakaria, 1998; Christensen, 1997). By coming back to the argument of Taliaferro (2006), one can conclude that since the Russian population supports Putin and his policies, he may adopt a more aggressive foreign policy towards the Baltics and be almost sure that the population will still support him. In other words, public support for Putin plays an important role in the process of shaping the foreign policy of Russia.

6.4. Summary

This section aims to summarize and combine the main points discussed in the Analysis chapter in order to answer the research question, which is: how do internal and external factors shape the foreign policy of Russia towards the Baltic states?

While talking about the external factors, the arguments were based on neo-classical realism’s assumptions that the international system is anarchic, which leads the states to mistrust each other and look for more security. As the analysis of external factors does not allow to have a full picture of the foreign policy of a state, internal factors, such as the perceptions of the Russian leadership and public support for the president in Russia, have also been discussed.

By applying these assumptions to the Baltic case, the thesis has found out that the deployment of 4,000 multinational NATO troops in the Baltic region, as well as tripling the size of the NATO Response Force to 40,000 is a serious threat to Russia. Putin is also concerned about the increased number of military exercises in the region. As was discussed before, the number of NATO military drills has increased after the annexation of Crimea with the aim to protect its member-states bordering with Russia, which was a countermeasure to Russian actions. However, although these actions are considered as a ‘response’ to Russia’s aggressive foreign policy, Putin still believes that these military exercises remain a threat to Russia. Enlargement of NATO also remains a threat to Russia, but it can primarily be attributed to potential member-states, rather than the ones that are already members of the Alliance.

As was also discovered, the deployment of the ballistic missile defence facilities in Europe is often mentioned in Putin’s speeches. This is probably the most important threat that NATO used to pose to Russia. During the process of writing this thesis, Vladimir Putin has partially responded to the research question of the thesis when he appealed to the Federal Assembly on March 2018. During his speech, he noted how a specific external factor (the deployment of BMD system) shaped the foreign policy of Russia not only towards the Baltic states, but also towards the West as a whole. Since the BMD system threatened the security situation in the region, Russia was forced to use countermeasures and increase its military capabilities, which led to the development of invincible nuclear weapons that can possibly overcome the BMD facilities all over the world.
Taking all these factors into account, the thesis argues that the actions of NATO indeed posed a threat to Russia. Deployment of NATO troops and the BMD system near Russian borders, expansion to the East, as well as the increased amount of military drills in the Baltic region forced Russia to adopt a more aggressive foreign policy and respond with counteractions. Thus, one can conclude that these factors shaped the foreign policy of Russia towards the Baltics.

Nevertheless, this would hardly be possible if Russian society did not support Putin and his foreign policy. For this, the assumption of neo-classical realists was taken into account, which states that the decision-makers are prone to adopt more offensive foreign policy when they face no domestic opposition. After carefully analysing the situation in Russia, the thesis argues that Putin’s popularity has seen a huge increase after Crimea was annexed. Public support for him and the government has also seen a rise, though for the latter it was not a long-lasting increase. This shows that people mainly blame the government for all mistakes, while praising Putin for the successes, and the presidential elections of 2018 clearly demonstrated this.

One of the main findings of the thesis was that the majority of the population believe the concentration of power in the Putin’s hands actually benefits Russia. This implies that Putin managed to create a system of loyalty, faithfulness, and complete subordination to him, where he is the central figure of the state and has the final word on the policies of Russia. Taking into account the fact that this system became more powerful after the annexation of Crimea, the thesis argues that Putin’s foreign policy directly affects public support for him, which in its turn allows Putin to conduct more offensive policies. Thus, by combining both external and domestic factors that were discussed above, the thesis argues that the increasing threat posed by NATO, perceptions of Vladimir Putin, and the support of the population to give a worthy rebuff to the Alliance shaped the foreign policy of Russia and made it more aggressive towards the Baltic states (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7.** External and internal factors that shape Russia’s Baltic foreign policy

*Source: Author’s own illustration, based on the Analysis chapter*
7. Conclusion

To conclude, the thesis aimed to research the rationale behind Russia’s assertive policies in the Baltic region. After enjoying a period of normalization of the relations between Russia and the West till the mid-2000s, the Kremlin has shifted its foreign policy towards the Baltic states and it became more offensive. In order to explain the reasons for such a shift, the thesis argued that the application of the three factors proposed by neo-classical realists, which are an international anarchic system, perceptions of the leader, and support of the population for that leader, to the Baltic case would assist in finding an answer to the research question.

By reviewing the literature on the explanations of Russia’s foreign policy towards its neighbours, the thesis has identified the drawbacks of each approach used by academics. That is to say, despite its own shortcomings, neo-classical realism was chosen as an explanatory theory since it better explains the foreign policy of a state by including both external and internal variables in its analysis. In particular, neo-classical realism is useful for explaining the foreign policy of Russia by combining various factors, such as the external threats coming from NATO, Putin’s perceptions, and public support for him in Russia.

To investigate the central puzzle of the thesis, quantitative and qualitative data was gathered, such as the factsheets, speeches, and news related to NATO, Vladimir Putin’s speeches and interviews, and surveys on the support of Russians for the president. Moreover, the qualitative content analysis was used and the analysis chapter was divided into four sections, where each factor that shapes the foreign policy of Russia towards the Baltics was examined, followed by a short summary of the chapter. While analysing the external factors, the thesis has based its argument on neo-classical realism’s assumption that the international system is anarchic and it creates security threats and mistrust between the states. Moreover, since external variables per se cannot fully explain the foreign policy of a state, it is therefore important to include domestic variables, such as Putin’s perceptions of the threat posed by NATO’s actions, as well as the support of the Russian population for Putin in his foreign policy.

Applying these arguments to the Baltic case has shown that the deployment of NATO troops in the region, increased military drills of NATO in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, coupled with the enlargement of NATO eastwards pose a serious threat to Russia’s national interests in the region. Moreover, one of the most important issues for Putin is the location of the BMD system in Europe, which, according to him, is not used merely for defence, but rather as a part of nuclear capability that is established at the periphery. These actions of NATO have stimulated Russia to adopt counteractions and pursue a more offensive foreign policy towards the Baltic states and the examples of such aggression have been shortly mentioned in the introduction and brief overview...
chapters. However, Putin would hardly be able to pursue his policy abroad without the support of the population for him. Taking into account that he has the full support of Russians, as the research has shown, the thesis concludes that the increasing threat posed by NATO’s actions in the region, Vladimir Putin’s perceptions of the threat coming from the Alliance, and the support for his policies from the Russian population have shaped the foreign policy of Russia towards the Baltics and made it more aggressive.

Despite its findings, the thesis acknowledges that it does not provide absolute knowledge, but rather a limited one due to the confined scope of the research. Nevertheless, it does contribute to the field of global politics and broader social concerns by analysing the growing security imbalance in Eastern Europe that threatens the existing order established after the Second World War. Furthermore, the thesis argues that by understanding the logics behind Russia’s dissatisfaction with external actors’ actions and by trying to prevent further escalation, peace in the region may gradually be achieved.
Bibliography


Internal and External Factors Shaping Russia’s Foreign Policy towards the Baltic States


Internal and External Factors Shaping Russia’s Foreign Policy towards the Baltic States


Internal and External Factors Shaping Russia's Foreign Policy towards the Baltic States


Internal and External Factors Shaping Russia's Foreign Policy towards the Baltic States


Tsygankov, A. (2012b). Assessing Cultural and Regime-Based Explanations of Russia's Foreign Policy. ‘Authoritarian at Heart and Expansionist by Habit’?. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 64(4), pp.695-713.


