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International Relations in Russia: development of the discipline and foreign policy

Abstract

International Relations (IR) was consolidated as an academic discipline at the end of World War II, closely linked to the newly acquired American hegemony, which facilitated the consolidation of the realist paradigm during the following decades. At the same time, the development of IR in the Soviet Union was conditioned by the official Marxist ideology, which reduced analytical approaches to the strategic interests of the state. Finally, when Soviet IR specialists gained access to Western literature, they realized that their approaches could be equated with those of the structural realism of capitalist thought. This paper studies the state of the art of the discipline in Russia, from the Soviet period to the present day, and points to a correspondence between theory and foreign policy. It concludes that the absolute predominance of the realist approach in Russia is due to the fact that it is the only one capable of offering an appropriate theoretical framework for dealing with the practical issues of its foreign policy, among which, above all, that of national interest.

Keywords

Structure, power, foreign policy, international relations, international system.

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I Introduction

Russia maintains its character as a global international actor despite the loss of status in the international order following the disappearance of the Soviet Union. The hierarchical structure of the system replicates the degree of influence of each actor in which the cultural factor is a determining factor, so that international relations offer a good reflection of both.

The concept of culture can be explained as a dynamic project of national integration which, once it succeeds over other competing projects and becomes institutionalized in a society, acquires a normative background whose centrifugal tendencies tend to impose it from the center to the periphery (Pietersen, 2020: 13-14). In the words of Julio Cortázar (1914-1984), “culture is basically nothing other than the presence and exercise of our identity in all its strength” (1984: 45).

From this point of view, international relations can be considered a cultural product both in terms of the interactions of all kinds between the different actors in the international system and as a scientific discipline, which, in order to distinguish it from the first meaning, is labeled with initial capital letters. Likewise, the global scope of the discipline’s object of study, which is international society as a whole implies a substantial difference with other social science disciplines (Arenal, 1981: 853).

The confusion induced by both terms has much to do with the dominance of the realist paradigm of the discipline in the West since 1945, whose theses are still largely identified with state policies at the international level (Vargas-Alzate, 2010: 76). In this regard, it is appropriate to introduce the concept of *foreign policy*, which can be understood as the non-algebraic sum of the external relations of an actor, whose main referent continues to be the state, in its international relations. As an object of study, it is characterized by its link with the IR discipline (Lisboa & Bombón, 2021: 76).

In 1939, shortly after the outbreak of World War II (WWII), the British historian E. H. Carr published in Great Britain the book *The Twenty Years Crisis (1919-1939)*. This work lays down the political principles of realism a decade before Hans Morgenthau developed them in his classic *Politics Among Nations*¹ (Gold, 2006: 236). What is relevant is that realism emerged and consolidated during the convulsive decade of the 1940s as a reaction to the ineffectiveness of idealism, which was unable to prevent the rise of totalitarianism in Europe and the outbreak of World War II (WWII) (Díaz, 2024: 357).

¹ Carr wrote his book with the intention of warning about the dangers of the political ideas of idealism and refuting them from a scientific perspective, since he was horrified to see how those utopian ideas were bringing the world to the brink of another war two decades after the end of the First World War. Carr contemplates three fundamental principles of realism, which are: 1.- History is a sequence of causes and effects that can be analyzed by an intellectual analysis, but not from voluntarism (idealism position); 2.- Theory is not the origin of practice (idealism position), but on the contrary; and 3.- Men act honestly because there is a coercive and punitive power, not because of their good nature. Therefore, politics is not a function of ethics (idealism’s position), but the latter is a function of the former. There can be no morality without authority. See: Carr E. H. (2004). *The crisis of the twenty years (1919-1939); An introduction to the study of international relations*. Catarata, p. 110.

On the contrary, Stanley Hoffmann states that IR emerged as a science in the United States (Hoffmann, 1977: 44), despite the fact that Carr was the first to approach international affairs from a scientific point of view. All this conveys an ethnocentric bias, characteristic of the discipline during the second half of the 20th century due to the imposing force of U.S. policies. In turn, these have been intellectually and academically legitimized by the works of Anglo-Saxon realist authors, mainly American. In this sense, Celestino del Arenal has come to state that:

“The discipline has developed ‘in an exclusivist, closed and provincial context, although with pretensions of universal validity’, conditioned both ‘by the ignorance, if not express undervaluation, that those [American] specialists have of other languages and of other scientific and intellectual worlds’, and by their dependence on the foreign policy interests of the United States” (Arenal, 2015: 44).

It is for these reasons that the origin of IR as a discipline is usually associated with the influence of the United States after 1945. However, other positions consider that such origin took place in 1919 within the framework of the League of Nations at the end of World War I (WWI) and that it was from 1945 onwards that it was consolidated as such (Flores, 2024: 15-16). This eclectic point of view seems to be an appropriate time frame in which to locate the origin of IR.

Simultaneously in Russia, the Revolution of 1917 meant the end of the tsarist regime and the establishment in 1922 of the Bolshevik state, after the victory of the Red side over the White side in the Russian Civil War (1917-1922). The revolutionary profile of the still unborn Bolshevik state raised concerns among the victorious powers, which is why it was left out of the Paris Conference (1919-1920) and the League of Nations, which emerged from it. In fact, the USSR was not admitted to the latter until 1934.²

Consequently, during most of the second half of the 20th century, the development of the discipline of IR in the Soviet Union (USSR) will be linked to the ideological factor. However, as will be discussed below, the peculiarities of the Soviet state will condition the approach of its academics in a generic way towards what in the West will be the realist paradigm of IR.

Before Gorbachev introduced his reform program known as perestroika, the official Marxist-Leninist doctrine of the state conditioned any line of research in IR, which was subordinated to the geostrategic interests of the state. In that sense, the approaches of Soviet internationalists focused their studies on the systemic level, which in practice placed them at the third level of analysis, or image, of Kenneth Waltz's structural theory (Morales, 2019: 141-142 and 152). Thus, although they were still unaware of it, the approach of Soviet IR specialists corresponded to a large extent with Waltz's neorealist or structural theory.

² A few years later, it was expelled from the Society in response to the invasion of Finland in December 1939. The attack on the Nordic country by the USSR provoked what is known as the Winter War (November 30, 1939 to March 13, 1940).

On the other hand, from the 1960s onwards, the West began to question the incontestable validity of the realist paradigm from the postulates of other currents, which in fact implicitly amended the hegemonic power of the United States. On the contrary, in Russia the germ of a proper school of IR (in Russian; *mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya*) did not appear until the 1980s.³

As already hinted, this delay was mainly due to the restrictions imposed by the official ideology, but also to the further regression of the social sciences at specific stages of the period. One of these was that of Leonid Brezhnev, which became known as “stagnation” (*zastoi*).

However, later on, Gorbachev’s perestroika encouraged in researchers the “new thinking” (*novoie myshlenie*) open-mindedness in foreign policy (Morales, 2019: 144-145). This is a significant indicator that points to a long-standing and close correlation in the Russian case between IR theory and its transposition into state policies.

Therefore, it can be argued that the contributions of Soviet specialists did not make a great contribution to the development of a theory of International Relations in Russia. Current researchers have determined that the reason was largely due to the conflict represented by the duality between the interests of the state and the class internationalism of the Marxist-Leninist discourse (Lebedeva, 2018: 95).

Finally, the demise of Soviet structures meant that the new state found itself beset by numerous practical issues that required immediate attention. Consequently, as Professor Morales states, “the theoretical study of IR in Russia in the early 1990s took a back seat to applied studies, more useful for foreign policy formulation (2019: 152).

2 International Relations and Foreign Policy in the 1990s: In Search of Identity

There is no doubt that the 1990s was, in all respects, a critical period for Russia, which was manifested in its international relations by the dichotomy between two antagonistic positions: Westernism or Atlanticism and neo-Eurasianism. At the head of the former were President Boris Yeltsin himself and his foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev⁴, supporters of adherence to the structures of Western civilization⁵ with which they felt they shared their Christian origins (Jovani, 2014: 192).

3 However, there had already been a certain openness during the Khrushchev era, when Soviet academics had access to the texts of authors such as Hans Morgenthau or Raymond Aron, which reaffirmed their theoretical orientation towards realist currents. One of the effects of this access to Western texts was that during the 1960s the term “internationalist” (*mezhdunarodnik*) appeared to refer to the specialist in international relations (labeled in lower case).

4 Kozyrev was responsible for the foreign policy of the Russian Federation between October 9, 1991 and January 10, 1996, when he was relieved of the post by Yevgeny Primakov. Kozyrev had succeeded Eduard Shevardnadze, the last foreign minister of the USSR.

5 EU, NATO, IMF, G-7, etc.

On the contrary, driven by the failure of the Yeltsin government's policies, the neo-Eurasianists appeared among the Russian intelligentsia as a serious alternative to Westernism (Sergunin, 2004: 20-21). Neo-Eurasianism is expressed on the basis of civilizational and ideological assumptions that are wary of a Western orientation of foreign policy, because of the renunciation of traditional Russian values and identity that this would imply.

Neo-Eurasianism asserts Russian identity uniqueness vis-à-vis the West, and its ideological assumptions drink from the oldest Slavophile traditions of Russian political thought. Broadly speaking, this considered that the foundation of Russian uniqueness vis-à-vis the West was to be found in both Christian Orthodoxy and Slavic ethnicity (Nugraha, 2018: 98). In this regard, today's neo-Eurasianism retrieves from its sources the messianic idea of the role of the Russian Orthodox Church as the Third Rome.

Closely related to this, the position of neo-Eurasianism holds that the West considers that only its civilization can be associated with progress, while those located in its periphery that do not wish to emulate it would be barbaric (Korovin, 2019: 249-251). Therefore, in the framework of this work and without aiming to be exhaustive, the rejection of neo-Eurasianism to the ethnocentric perception of the world assumed as an argument of authority by the West is of interest.

Neo-Eurasianism remains a controversial term that still arouses debate among academics, political scientists and geopoliticians. Thus, conceptually it has been approached as: a specific Russian school of geopolitics; a Fourth Political Theory⁶; a Multipolar World Theory; a philosophical current and even as a totalitarian political program (Morgado, 2021: 40-41).

In any case, according to Tsygankov, in the mid-1990s three main currents of foreign policy thinking could be distinguished in Russia: Westernists, social democrats, statist and civilizationists (2006: 65). The neo-Eurasianists fell into the last category and among them two clear currents could be distinguished: the reformists or democrats and the Slavophiles.

The latter argued that, thanks to its unique geopolitical position straddling Europe and Asia, but independent of both, Russia could exercise a natural balance of power between the two civilizations and between great powers (Sergunin, 2004: 21). For

6 Duguin, A. (2009). Четвёртая политическая теория. Amfora. There are several editions in Spanish. For example, among others: Duguin, A. (2013). La Cuarta Teoría Política. Eds. Nueva República. The Spanish editions include prologues elaborated by the author himself in that language. Duguin postulates that the three ideologies that have ruled the world during the 20th century, fascism, Marxism and liberalism, have already been overcome and that the reason for Politics has become the very existence of being. This leads to a Fourth Political Theory. Duguin argues that each ideology rests on a historical subject, which in the case of the first three were, respectively: individual, class and state/race. To explain the subject of the Fourth Theory, Duguin turns to Heidegger's philosophy, from which he draws the concept of Dasein (Being) and operates as the subject of that Duguin. In Duguin, A. (2013) The Fourth Political Theory. New Republic. Pp. 51-54.

their part, the reformists, due to their political inferiority, became a sort of adaptive democrats around the concept of Eurasia (Sergunin, 2004: 21-23).

Consequently, the different currents were torn between antagonistic worldviews. On the one hand, there was the vassalage to the West that for many Russians meant the Yeltsein era, and on the other, the recrimination that already at the end of the 1880s the historian Nicolai Danilevsky made of the Russian interest in Western culture, which he called Europeanism.

Danilevsky's work had a decisive influence on the germinal ideas of Eurasianism, in connection with which he wrote that: "for Europe, Russia is not meat of its flesh... and even for Europeanist Russians, Russia can only aspire to be an adopted child of Europe (Danilevskii, 2013 [1888]: 55). From another point of view, the great philosopher Pyotr Chaadaev (1794-1856) lamented that the four great ideas that defined European man: duty, justice, right and order; seemed alien to the Russian mentality (Chaadaev, 2009 [1836]: 21-22)⁷

The tension between Russian or Asian identity that has permeated Russian perceptions since ancient times may partially explain the chaos of post-communist Russia, where the absence of democratic traditions led to a sudden ideological vacuum. The response of Russian leaders was to force an accelerated Westernization which, as had happened other times in Russian history, ended in political, social and economic disaster before coming to the conclusion that it is not a good idea to replace traditional Russian customs with Western values (Chugrov, 1992: 80-81).

Simultaneously, the main political forces of the country (*derzhavniki*)⁸ found a way to consolidate their status through a strong state that would be able to maintain order and stability, thus promoting the convergence of their interests. The term *derzhavniki* denotes precisely the defense of this type of strong state, which, on the other hand, responds to the traditional Russian idea of state structure (Sergunin, 2007: 57).

The influence of the Derzhavniki on Russian political thought at the time provided a valid framework for overcoming partisan differences and developing the concept of

7 The reference corresponds to the text "First philosophical letter to a lady", dated by the author in Moscow on December 1, 1829, although it was not published until 1836 in the magazine *Teleskop* (Moscow). A superficial reading of Chaadaev's letters could create the impression that the author expresses his hostility against Russia, when in fact he is expressing the pain he felt at the state of his homeland. Chaadaev was a contemporary of the tsars who succeeded Catherine the Great (r. 1762-1796), succeeded by her son Paul I of whom even his own mother harbored serious doubts about his ability to reign. In the end he turned out to be an authoritarian and messianic tsar instead of the enlightened reformer he was brought up to be. He was assassinated in 1801 in a plot hatched by former officials. He was followed by his son Alexander I (r. 1801-1825) who, without showing a clear liberal or conservative profile was, in the words of one of his mentors; "too weak to reign and too proud to be led". During his tsarate the Napoleonic invasion took place. Chaadaev died the year the Crimean War ended (1856), but he knew all the wars of imperial expansion waged by Russia during the first half of the 19th century.

8 The collective known as the *derzhavniki* consisted of the industrial lobby, state bureaucracies (civil and military) and moderate democrats.

national security in a broad sense, not only military, on the basis of all the capabilities of the state (Sergunin, 2007: 61-62). Therefore, a very real sense, it can be considered that it is largely due to the *derzhavniki* the restoration of the realist school in Russian political thought in the 1990s.

In those years, a strategy was beginning to take shape that recovered the idea of Russia as a preponderant international actor, which augured its decisive role in the post-bipolar international order. Likewise, the newly recovered realism served as an explanatory framework for conceptualizing the different threats that Russia would face in this new international order.

Among them, those affecting the near abroad were perceived as particularly serious because of the emergence of regimes not favorable to Moscow. This coincided with the Eurasianists, for whom these spaces formed a geopolitical, economic, cultural and civilizational unity with Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan at its core (Duleba, 1998). All this helps to explain Moscow's interventionist policies in the Region from 2008 to the present.

Similarly, although there was agreement between both foreign policy currents on the importance of Russia's geopolitical position, the realists prioritized pragmatic interests over ideology (Sergunin, 2007: 65-66). However, in that 1990s post-Soviet Russia was desperately searching for its (new) identity in a changing world and the realists were faced with the dilemma of considering the near abroad as a bridge between Europe and Asia or as a buffer space.

An analysis based on economic factors prescribed the first option, but, paradoxically, things changed when the security variable was introduced (Sergunin, 2007: 20-21)⁹. In this regard, analysts at the Institute for National Security and Strategic Studies in Moscow¹⁰ concluded in 1997 that, from a political and military point of view, the regions of Central and Eastern Europe should remain a geopolitical gray zone that could serve as a bargaining chip in the event of a serious deterioration of Russia-West relations¹¹.

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¹⁰ Российский институт стратегических исследований (РИСИИ). In English; *Russian Institute for Strategic Studies* (RISS, RISI or RISY). It is a research and strategic analysis center created by decree of President Boris Yeltsin in 1992 as part of the *Foreign Intelligence Service of the FedRus Government* (the former First Directorate of the KGB). In 2009 it came directly under the Presidential Administration, which appoints its staff, composed mainly of retired senior officers from the intelligence branch. The RISS reports directly to President Putin.

¹¹ Evolyutsiya struktur voyennoy bezopasnosti: rol' i mesto Rossii (geopoliticheskiy aspekt). Institut natsional'no bezopasnosti i strategicheskikh issledovaniy. Moskva 1997; Problema obespecheniya voyennoy bezopasnosti Rossii s severoatlanticheskogo napravleniya, p. 5. [Evolution of military security structures: the role and place of Russia (geopolitical aspect). National Institute for Strategic and Security Studies. Moscow 1997. The problem of ensuring Russia's military security from the North Atlantic direction, P. 5]. In: Duleva, A. (1998). From Domination to Partnership: The Perspectives of Russian-Central-East European Relations. Final Report to the NATO Research Fellowship Program, 1996-1998. P. 21

3 21st Century: The State of International Relations in Russia

The place of IR in the landscape of social sciences in Russia can be understood by the classification of IR by the Higher Commission on Accreditation (VKA)¹². This is the body of the Ministry of Education that accredits the degree of Doctor of Political Science (plural) to both internationalist and political science doctoral students. However, Russian academia considers International Relations as its own discipline (Morales, 2019: 149-150).

The current state of the discipline in Russia mostly inherits the statist approaches of the Soviet era, in which great importance was given to the historical method¹³ as a working tool. However, in 2013 already existed in the Russian Federation, the socio-political heir of the USSR, departments of IR in more than 70 universities, which facilitated the expansion of IR as a scientific discipline.

Also, a real milestone was the emergence of academic institutions of IR not subordinated to the state, such as the Russian Policy Research Center or PIR (*Центр политических исследований России*); which is a non-governmental body focused on the analysis of international security issues. Something unthinkable in Soviet times (Lebedeva, 2013: 10).

In any case, since the beginning of the 2000s, the theoretical debate of International Relations in Russia would be fundamentally configured around two approaches: the nationalist or statist, equivalent to realism in the West, and the liberal or westernist, with an indisputable predominance of the former (Morales, 2019: 152). Other currents such as constructivism or poststructuralism, although they occupy their space in the interdisciplinary debate, are in the minority, as is their influence on foreign policy.

Social-constructivism emerged in the 1980s as an alternative theoretical approach to the rationalist currents (neo-realism and neo-liberalism), which did not seem to explain the current changes in the international system. Because they can be instrumentalized by the actors, constructivists reject the concept of structure as a causal variable of a systemic theory of international politics¹⁴ and, therefore, the validity of the principle of anarchy (Wendt, 1992: 394-395).

12 The Higher Certification Commission under the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Russian Federation was established to ensure state scientific certification. ВЫСШАЯ АТТЕСТАЦИОННАЯ КОМИССИЯ. Available: https://vak-minobrnauki-gov.ru.translate.googleusercontent.com/translate/main?_x_tr_sl=ru&_x_tr_tl=es&_x_tr_hl=es&_x_tr_pto=sc Accessed 18/12/24

13 The methodology explains the historical method as that process of indirect experimental knowledge (in time or space) by which one comes to know a fact through an intermediate agent. This method owes its name to the fact that, since past events are not reproducible, it is the only one applicable to the study of history. See: Simiad, F. (2003). Historical method and social science. *EMPIRIA, Journal of Social Science Methodology*. N.º 6. Pp. 163-202. Pg. 165. Available: <https://revistas.uned.es/index.php/empiria/article/download/939/860/2987>. Accessed: 19/12/24.

NdA: since mankind invented writing, the intermediate agent par excellence is the document (in any of the formats in which it can be found today).

14 Instead, it gives causal status to ideas, culture, (international) norms and identities.

Identities are configured on the basis of shared ideas and values and build structures that turn out to be determinant in the behavior of the international actor State (Ibáñez, 2015: 195-196). In this regard, identity, international norms and values are the pillars of the constructivist theory of IR, which raises the possibility of change of the former in international actors.

However, such a change would require two conditions that would be necessary and sufficient: that there are rational reasons for the change in the role of an international actor and that the cost/benefit ratio of such a change is favorable to it. That was the case with Gorbachev's New Way of Thinking which, according to Wendt, was one of the most important political phenomena of the contemporary era (Wendt, 1992: 419-420).

Specialists in the discipline of International Relations resort to classifications as artifices, which facilitate the analysis of the object of study by grouping similar elements together. However, since Russian scholars did not develop their own theory until the 2000s, there is no homonymous Western school of Russian postmodernism (Sergunin, 2016: 125).

In any case, this appears in Russia as a response of a minority part of *academia* to the conviction that, in the 1990s, the country had entered the postmodern era with its profound changes at the individual and social level (Sergunin, 2016: 126).

Russian postmodernists deconstruct the concept of national interest which they considered lethal to Russia's interests, which, at the turn of the 2000s, referred to democratic consolidation and its significance for Russia in terms of relations with the West. In this regard, they argue that the concept of national interest is intentionally artificial to cover up that, actually, the real interest is not that of the nation, or even of the state, but of the ruling elites (Sergunin, 2016: 128). Consequently, Russian postmodernists concluded that Moscow should base its international relations on the concept identity and not on the concept of national interest.

The contribution of postmodernist theorists to the interdisciplinary debate in Russia was to enrich the approach with the discourse of other social scientists, especially psychologists, by assuming that maintaining one's own identity, the "we", implies a narrative that may conflict with that of the "others". For this reason, postmodernist theory holds that each actor must think of his or her own identity as a permanent process of construction-reconstruction, or adjustment, in order to maintain balance with that of the "others" (Kratochvíl, 2004: 4-5).

In short, postmodernists argue in favor of dialogue as the backbone of Moscow's international relations. But the reality is that Russian foreign policy specialists have not attached great importance to peripheral currents of political thought.

About them, most were of the opinion that they do not provide an appropriate theoretical framework for developing geopolitical concepts of their own, which, like "national interest", are presented as factors of continuity (Sergunin, 2007: 96). Somehow, Russian scholars tend to think of the aforementioned post-rationalist approaches as little more than academic extravagances, with little or no influence on foreign policy.

After 1991, foreign policy scholars in Russia were given unrestricted access to the publications of their Western peers, which led to the emergence of a Russian school of thought in the field. Quite a few of its researchers enjoy notable international prestige, among whom some, such as Pavel Tsygankov and Marina Lebedeva, are incorporated into the liberal paradigm according to the Western model.

At the same time, the current led by Alexsey Bogaturov is characterized by adopting an autonomous approach to the Western model in the form of a national school of thought, more consistent with the realist tradition (Bordachev, 2014).

The aforementioned school seeks in the postulates of realism answers to questions which, from the Russian worldview, liberalism cannot satisfy. The most relevant ones have to do, of course, with the concept of national interest and the use of force. For this reason, Russian scholars have overwhelmingly fallen back on the domains of structural realism and neoclassical realism, derived from the former. However, as Professor Bordachev¹⁵ writes, this has been a dangerous intellectual shortcut that omits the previous indispensable contributions of classical realism (2014).

4 Concordance between foreign policy and academia for the benefit of the interests of the state.

The geopolitical theories briefly discussed above were widely spread in the 1990s, promoted by the most nationalistic sectors. Coinciding with the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, these positions have been revitalized by a deterministic neo-Eurasianism that encourages in Moscow the Asian turn of its foreign policy and the disconnection with the West.

In this order of things can be inscribed the speech delivered by President Putin at the XI meeting of the Valdai Club on October 24, 2014, held in the city of Sochi¹⁶, when he stated that:

“The Cold War ended, but not with the signing of a peace treaty with clear and transparent agreements on the respect of existing rules or the creation of new rules and standards. This created the impression that the so-called “victors” of the Cold War had decided to push events and reshape the world to suit their own needs and interests. If the existing system of international relations, international law and existing checks and balances stood in the way of these objectives, this system was declared

¹⁵ Doctor of Science (Political Science), Program Director at the Valdai Discussion Club; Senior Academician at the Center for Integrated European and International Studies of the Higher School of Economics (HSE University). This School has university campuses in Nizhny Novgorod, St. Petersburg and Perm. He is also a member of RIAC (Russian International Affairs Council).

¹⁶ The central theme of the meeting was: “The world order: new rules or a game without rules”.

useless, obsolete and in need of immediate demolition.” (Author’s trans.)
(Putin, October 2014).

This discourse was conveniently adopted by Putin when he returned to the presidency in 2012 after the Medvedev interregnum¹⁷. In this way, he provided ideological support for his foreign policy and informed the domestic and international audience that, under his leadership, the priority of his foreign policy would be Russia’s national interest.

In this regard, it should be pointed out that national interests are not permanent, since they can change according to the needs of the state at each historical moment. To this effect, the Russian case is paradigmatic if one compares, for example, the interests of the state after World War II or during the Cold War with those of the primitive and weak Bolshevik state in 1917-1920, when everything revolved around its survival in a hostile international system.

In any case, President Putin’s frequent reference to Russia’s national interest is made from his own perception of the world, of Russia and the role it should play in world affairs. It is from this perspective that the Russian president has considered the construction of the Federation’s foreign policy since his coming to power (Aguilar, 2023: 96).

Likewise, Putin has also promoted the idea of a culturally different Russia through the successive foreign policy concepts of the Federation since 2008, in which the gradual distancing from the West is manifested (Tsyngankov, 2016: 237-238).

On the other hand, although the liberal paradigm of International Relations has found a place in the Russian academy, the state linkage of its academic institutions of reference is reflected in its documentary production, which moves away from that paradigm. To this effect, academic publications echo the Kremlin’s foreign policy doctrine, which shows its instrumental aspect by synchronizing with its objectives.

In this regard, for example, the MGIMO Journal of International Relations specifies that; “[S]pecial attention is devoted to the analysis of Russia’s role in the international system and its impact on Russia”¹⁸. The aforementioned alignment of academia with foreign policy guidelines is materialized in the themes, approaches and conclusions of its publications, which tend to endorse the official doctrine or narrative of the political leadership.

¹⁷ Due to the legislation in force at the time, Putin had exhausted the time that the law allowed him to occupy the presidential chair. Therefore, he orchestrated for Dmitry Medvedev to run as his party’s (United Russia) candidate in the 2008 elections. Unsurprisingly, Medvedev won the elections and served as president of the Russian Federation from 2008 to 2012. He is currently the deputy chairman of the Federation Security Council; a position that provides high visibility, but little influence.

¹⁸ MGIMO Review of International Relations. Vestnik MGIMO-universiteta. Journal’s description. Available at: <https://www.vestnik.mgimo.ru/jour> Accessed on 10/01/24

Thus, for example, it can be seen that MGIMO's publications justify President Putin's postulates on such central issues as the Ukrainian question¹⁹. Similarly, this institution analyzes the role of the BRICs in an evolving international order, which from Moscow's point of view can only move towards multipolarity (Apanovich & Netswera, 2024).

Similarly, the approach of Russian IR research centers to the recurrent and central problem of national interest is continuist and conditioned, though not determined, by Russia's geopolitical specificity. Consequently, national interest has been the cornerstone of security and foreign policies, but elusive for the Russian leadership (Nazarov, n.d.: 15-16).

While academic and university institutions had woven a fruitful network of cooperation since 1991 with their Western counterparts, as a result of growing geopolitical hostility with the West the Russian government began to question Western higher education models and academic exchanges, which were suspended as of 2022²⁰. Moreover, in the summer of 2021, the Russian government had already enacted a law (Федеральный закон от 05.04.2021 № 85-ФЗ)²¹ prohibiting any academic activity not authorized by the state. It was argued that: "it was necessary to prevent foreign pernicious influence on the educational process"²².

In the context of the emergence of the Russian Federation as an independent state, International Relations focused on applied studies in order to elaborate a new theory of foreign policy. In what was an exchange of roles between academic centers, the IMEMO²³ was oriented towards practical aspects, becoming de facto a think tank,

19 Artizov A.N. Historical Origins of the Current Ukrainian Crisis. MGIMO Review of International Relations. 2022;15(6):7-25. (In Russ.) <https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2022-6-87-7-25> Accessed 11/05/24

20 Burakovskiy, A. (2022, April 1). The war in Ukraine ruins Russia's academic ties with the West. The Conversation. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/the-war-in-ukraine-ruins-russias-academic-ties-with-the-west-180006> Accessed 11/10/24.

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23 IMEMO was founded in 1956 and renamed in 2016 as; "Primakov National Research Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences" in honor of Yevgeny Primakov; former director of the Institute, Federation Foreign Minister (1996-1998) and Prime Minister (1998-1999). Primakov drafted and promoted the Federation's 1996 foreign policy doctrine, known as the Primakov Doctrine; in which Moscow recognizes that the West is its geopolitical adversary and will never allow it to regain the status of a major international power. Furthermore, it presents the need for an Asian turn of its foreign policy in connection with a future Multipolar World Order; in which Russia would occupy a preminent position.

while the MGIMO, together with other university centers, specialized in theoretical developments (Morales, 2019: 152).

As a result of this division of roles among academic institutions, throughout the 2000s scholars distinguished four main streams of strategic thinking, linked to as many visions of foreign policy. Professor A. Fedorov of MGIMO offered the following taxonomy (2006):

- Hard-line traditionalists or statist: they sought to reinstate Soviet approaches, but from different theoretical principles. They considered the confrontation with the West, and therefore with NATO, inevitable, and selectively adopted elements of Slavophile and Eurasianist thought.
- Realists or Pragmatists: they were in favor of Russia's integration into the group of advanced democracies leading the technological, economic and military development of the global era. They warned that remaining on the sidelines of these processes could condemn Russia to isolation, as had happened in the past. Like the statist, they supported the preemptive use of military force. However, neither of these two currents was particularly attractive to the new Russian political and economic elites of the time.
- Supporters of the Multipolar concept: they argued that Russia should follow its own rules, based on its exceptionality as a great power inherited from the USSR. They distrusted the West, especially the United States, which they perceived as their main threat. In response, they proposed selective partnerships with some European states (Germany, France, Great Britain) and with China. Another possibility they envisaged to curb US hegemony was the geopolitical construct known as the Great Triangle: a strategic partnership between Russia, India and China which, to this day, continues to be a reference for Moscow. The concept of a "multipolar world" had already been developed in the second half of the 1990s by Minister Yevgeny Primakov and his collaborators²⁴ (Shabbir, 2023). Primakov rejected a unipolar organization of international power around American hegemony, so he proposed that Russia should balance the great superpower by partnering with other great powers (China and India). The object was to place Russia in its rightful position as an indispensable player in international affairs (Rumer, 2019: 4).
- Neo-imperialists: the foreign policy goals promoted by this current are all too familiar: to ensure Russia's sovereignty and autonomy in international affairs and restore its status as a major international power (Fedorov, 2006). In practice, its supporters seek to update the multipolar project on the basis of Russia's economic take-off since 2000.

²⁴ Along with a multipolar World Order, the other bases of the Primakov doctrine were: Russia's strategic autonomy; regional integration; pragmatism in foreign policy (Russia would act together with partners or allies or unilaterally according to its interests) and non-intervention, although it also admits that Russia must be ready to defend its national interests and to defend its citizens abroad. References to the near abroad are obvious.

Despite their differences, all these currents agreed that Russia should secure and maintain its influence in the areas of the former ex-Soviet republics. From the academic point of view, cooperation with the West was still considered viable as long as the West refrained from interfering in Moscow's internal affairs.

The profound influence of the thinking of Yevgeny Primakov, possibly the most relevant figure in Russian foreign policy since his appointment as Foreign Minister in 1996 by President Yeltsin, is also evident. Paradoxically, the doctrine bearing his name was not embodied in an official text until 1998, by the hand of his successor, Igor Ivanov (Bogaturov, 2022).

The minister understood that a turn to the East in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation was necessary, due to the unacceptable for Moscow decompensation in the relationship with the United States, the rejection of American unipolarity and Washington's unwillingness to count on Russia in international affairs. In short, the United States considered Russia the losing side of the Cold War, which, therefore, in its view, did not justify a deal between equals (Novikov, 2017). All this proved to be a revulsive for Moscow.

Primakov's strategic proposal was to place Russia in its rightful position as an indispensable actor in international affairs (Rumer, 2019 p. 4). For this he proposed Russia should balance the great superpower by partnering with other great powers (China and India).

Russia's foreign policy thinking has evolved as a function of changes in the international framework but presents as a distinctive feature a remarkable continuity in the perception of threats to its security. In connection with this, in a more recent analysis A. Tsygankov identifies three main currents of Russian foreign policy thinking: westernist, statist and civilizationist (Tsyngankov, 2016: 4-8).

International dynamics have de facto left the former out of the game, as evidenced by the 2023 update of the Russian Federation's foreign policy doctrine²⁵. The document was approved by President Putin on March 31 of that year against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine and increased Russia-West tension.

The scenario that analysts of post-Soviet Russia considered the most dangerous has thus become a reality: the eastward enlargement of Western political and security organizations (EU and NATO) (Timofeev, 2027: 18-19). Moscow opposes these

25 It is significant to underline that, despite bluntly naming the US, its Anglo-Saxon allies and the EU countries as the instigators of threats to Russia's security and interests; the document encourages in several articles the establishment of mutually beneficial relations with the EU and, moreover, takes up President Putin's idea prior to the final deterioration of relations with Washington of achieving strategic parity and balance of interests with the US. It can be deduced that Russia's European inclination is still alive, albeit chained to a pragmatic approach to foreign policy. In this regard, see: Concept of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation. 2023, 31 Mar. Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation]. Art.s 61 to 64 (a.i.). Available: https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/1860586/?lang=es&utm_source=telegram&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=obzornye-razbory-ned Accessed 03/01/24

moves of the West head-on, considering that the loss of control over its near abroad is unacceptable.

The result has been a new fragmentation of the European space along geopolitical fault lines which, unlike in the period 1945-1991, have moved to the borders of the Russian Federation (Stent, 2007: 433-434). From Moscow's perspective, this situation directly threatens the socio-political core of historical Russia.

All this helps to understand why the realist approach dominates the Kremlin's political practice, while other perspectives, such as neo-Marxism, social-constructivism or postmodernism, remain in a clearly marginal or even residual position²⁶. Only the former enjoys a certain institutional visibility thanks to the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), led by Gennady Zyuganov.

5 Conclusions

First of all, the main conclusion that can be drawn from this work is that the Russian Federation's foreign policy follows realist principles, which stem from a political culture conditioned by its conception of national interest. After the anomaly of the liberal period of the 1990s, once Vladimir Putin came to power, the Kremlin has returned to a realist approach in its foreign policy. Moreover, this stance is consistent with the tradition of Russian international policy and its perception of the systemic level as hostile.

When Primakov stated in 1996 that Russia had no permanent enemies, but permanent interests, he was communicating to the world that Russia's foreign policy was again oriented toward realistic approaches. Vladimir Putin's leadership has ratified beyond doubt that approach, which was evident in the Russian president's famous speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference.

This speech expressed the symbiosis between doctrinal continuity and accommodation of foreign policy to the secular objectives of the Russian state, which it has traditionally contemplated from the point of view of security. To this end, two closely linked aspects are emphasized: the concept of sovereignty and influence over its near abroad.

On the other hand, the clear predominance of realism in Russian academic thought inherits Soviet-era approaches that, to some extent, give continuity to a perception of the world that is often considered in zero-sum terms. Consequently, despite the fact that Russian academia has been able to access theoretical frameworks other than realism, its academic output is characterized by maintaining a firm alignment with the Kremlin's strategy and its resistance to the entry of alternative paradigms.

²⁶ About them, a majority of Russian internationalists were of the opinion that they do not provide an appropriate theoretical framework for developing one's own geopolitical concepts which, like "national interest, appear as factors of continuity in foreign policy.

Likewise, this paper has pointed out the existence of a structural connection between culture, national interest and foreign policy. Consequently, under this premise it can be deduced that the foreign policy of the Russian Federation will remain substantially unchanged as long as the current circumstances of the international system persist.

However, it cannot be categorically ruled out that, in the future, major exogenous changes may force a change in the national interests of the Russian state. On the other hand, a downward rectification of its current interests, among which the centrality of the near abroad in the Kremlin's foreign policy seems less likely.

Finally, and despite exceeding the scope of this paper, it is suggested that Russia's behavior as an international actor can be explained from the postulates of neoclassical realism. This theoretical framework allows to understand not only the behavior of the state from the structural point of view but also due to the influence of the internal conditions of the state and its domestic policies.

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