# Russia and the "Near Abroad": (Re)producing Identities through Foreign Policy

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The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine was preceded by a flurry of narratives on the history and identity of Russia and Ukraine, promulgated most prominently by President Vladimir Putin himself. In the now infamous essay "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians," published in 2021, Putin (2021) wrote that he is "confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia" because their "spiritual, human and civilizational ties […] have their origins in the same sources". To many in the West, these narratives seemed bizarre and fabricated at worst and epiphenomenal to the underlying power politics at best. Yet, as many scholars of Russia have argued, these narratives of identity are central to Russia's foreign policy and its underlying interests.

One prominent effort at engaging more systematically with this dynamic is Andrei P. Tsygankov's (2012) theorization of honor in International Relations (IR). Tsygankov (2012, p. 28) argues that Russian honor — and Russian values in general — are "rooted in Eastern Christianity [and] include a distinctive concept of spiritual freedom and the ideal of a strong and socially protective state capable of defending its subjects from abuses at home and threats from abroad." The purpose of this essay is to probe this statement by relating it to Russia's foreign policy in the "near abroad." In doing so, this essay challenges two assumptions at the core of that undertaking: first, that there are such *things* as Russian values or Russian identity outside of practices (discursive and material) that reproduce it, including foreign policy, as Tsygankov (2012) seems to claim; and second, that there is such a thing as a pre-existing "near abroad" onto which Russia projects its foreign policy underpinned by interests emanating from its pre-formed identity. Rather, this essay argues that the discursive construction of a "near abroad" with a particular identity, and the concomitant performative material practices of foreign policy, such as war-making, are essential to the (re-)production of Russian identity itself. In other words, through discursive and material practices, the "near abroad" is constructed as a necessary Other to Russia's Self.

This essay proceeds in three sections. The first discusses the place of identity in IR and critiques Tsygankov's (2012) constructivist reading of Russian identity and its implications for foreign policy. By drawing on post-structuralist literature, I argue that identification as a process is more analytically useful than identity as substance. The second section looks at discursive constructions of Russia's self-identity. It takes the two aspects of Russia's identity that Tsygankov (2012) identifies — the Orthodox conception of spiritual freedom and the idea of a strong and protective state — in turn, to show how various actors discursively produce them. The third section demonstrates how the discursive construction of a "near abroad" and the foreign policy practices accompanying it are crucial in sustaining the narratives of Russia's self-image identified in the previous section.

## Identity in IR: The Case for Seeing Identity as a Process

The question of honor and values in foreign policy is part of a larger question of the place of identity in theories of IR. The concept of identity has been subject to incessant debates in IR theory ever since the term was introduced to the discipline in the late 1980s (Berenskoetter, 2010, p. 3596).

Kenneth Waltz put forward the theory of structural realism or neorealism in his seminal book "Theory of International Politics." Waltz (1979) sets out to create a structural theory of international politics, which he sees as more

"scientific" than the prevailing explanations, which he labels as being "reductionist." These "reductionist" theories, such as Lenin's theory of imperialism being a consequence of the capitalist mode of production, aim to understand, in Waltz's (1979, p. 18) view, the whole (international system) through the attributes of its parts (states). In contrast, Waltz's (1979) systemic approach "must omit the attributes and the relations of units" (p. 40) to demonstrate the structural conditions — or what he identifies as the anarchic structure of the international system — which he believes solely guide the behavior of states. One of the effects of the anarchic structure of the international system that Waltz (1979) posits is that states are functionally undifferentiated "like units" (p. 97), meaning that "if some do relatively well, others will emulate them or fall by the wayside" (p. 118). Neoclassical realism, while adding factors such as (mis)perception and domestic politics into the mix, also gives primacy to the structure of the international system, which determines "intangibles" such as identity (Tsygankov, 2012, p. 18). It is clear that particular social identities of states do not figure prominently in these rationalist accounts of state behavior, and if they figure at all, they are posited as pre-given and independent of (inter)action (Bucher & Jasper, 2017, p. 394).

Constructivism emerged as a critique of this inability and unwillingness to engage with identity dynamics in IR. Constructivist research emphasizes the social nature of international interactions and is concerned with "intersubjective understandings of identities, interests, international norms or rules as they develop and change in particular cultural and historical contexts" (Feklyunina, 2018, p. 6). As Feklyunina (2018) notes, "constructivists generally agree that our understandings of who we shape our interpretations of our interests and thus inform our behaviour" (p. 7). Identity is constitutive of interests that are dependent on particular conceptions of identity; in other words, it provides the basis for interests (Berenskoetter, 2010, p. 3597). Specifically in the case of Russian foreign policy, constructivist approaches would see Russia's interests as "historically contingent" and would challenge rationalist explanations of Russia's foreign policy behavior that "deduce Moscow's interests from the country's geopolitical position, its political system … or its material needs" (Feklyunina, 2018, p. 7).

However, the constructivist conceptualization of state identity is problematic. Constructivism tends to treat identities as just another property of the state, thereby merely integrating identity "into a neorealist ontology" (Berenskoetter, 2010, p. 3603). If identity is the basis for interests, which subsequently informs behavior, then there is a causal mechanism underlying this conceptualization. It is treated as an independent variable that gives rise to action, as "some *thing* that precedes (and explains) action at a basic ontological level" (Bucher & Jasper, 2017, p. 394). Zehfuss (2001) illustrates this by arguing that "if identity is to 'cause' anything, however, it must be an antecedent condition for a subsequent effect and as such distinguishable from that which it is causing" (p. 338). Yet this is an impossibility given that "identities are continuously articulated, rearticulated and contested, which makes them hard to pin down as explanatory categories" (Zehfuss, 2016, p. 338). As Epstein (2010, p. 337) notes, "there is no such thing as a fully formed, cogent self to which the term 'identity' refers." Identities need constant reaffirmation and can only be "temporarily stabilized" (Berenskoetter, 2010, p. 3601). Constructivism's "substantialist" reading of identity, therefore, makes it impossible to examine processes of identity formation and the interplay between the Self and Other(s) (Berenskoetter, 2010, p. 3603), and instead "reifies articulations of a core identity" and leads to research questions that aim to uncover the true or essential identity of something (Bucher & Jasper, 2017, p. 392).

Tsygankov's (2012) approach is explicitly based on constructivism. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is plagued by the same shortcomings and even sometimes slips into rationalist explanations. First, he strives to identify seemingly intrinsic properties of Russian identity, ignoring the way Russian identity is continuously discursively (re)constructed. Tsygankov (2012) sees Orthodox Christianity as a "critically important part of [Russian] identity" (Tsygankov, 2012, p. 29) in that it informs it through "an authentic concept of spiritual freedom [and] beliefs about traditional family values" (Tsygankov & Tsygankov, 2021, p. 5). Moreover, inherent in Russian identity is "the idea of a strong, socially protective state capable of defending its own subjects from abuses at home and threats from abroad, and the notion of Russia as a sovereign great power" (ibid.). Tsygankov (2012) seems to suggest that throughout history, the Russian state either lived up to this identity or fell short. Thus, he argues that the price of Peter the Great's military reforms "was the degradation of important aspects of Russia's honour" (Tsygankov, 2012, p. 33). Similarly, he suggests that the Soviet regime produced a "disfigured" vision of Russia's identity, which was "an aberration, rather than a natural phase of Russia's historic statehood" (Tsygankov, 2012, p. 36).

Second, in addition to falling into essentialist language, he also posits a causal mechanism between identity and

foreign policy, claiming that "a national self then has relative autonomy in influencing foreign policy" (Tsygankov, 2012, p. 22) and that "nationally specific values […] act as lenses through which local communities such as Russia […] assess interests" (Tsygankov & Tsygankov, 2021, pp. 4–5). He thus ignores the performative effects of (Russia's) foreign policy practices in (re)producing identity. Finally, to the extent that identity change is possible in Tsygankov's (2012) conceptualization, it seems to come from a passive interpretation of outside events or as a reaction to them. Thus, he claims that "a historically distinct set of values is mobilized […] if the West's actions are widely perceived as disrespectful of Russia's values" and that "Western actions serve to push" domestic groups into a consensus on Russian identity (Tsygankov & Tsygankov, 2021, p. 10). In his account of how the value of independence and the idea of a strong state became part of Russian identity, Tsygankov (2012, pp. 31–32) claims that this was a response to "the grim reality of insecurity" in its neighborhood and "to the new strategic situation" in Europe which necessitated state centralization and therefore degradation of the value of spiritual freedom. With this, his account even falls into the rationalist approach to identity as epiphenomenal to structural conditions and starts to resemble Waltz's functionally undifferentiated units that fall by the wayside if they do not emulate successful actors or the neoclassical realist claim that structure determines identity, which he otherwise criticizes.

To move beyond these identified gaps in Tsygankov's constructivist approach, instead of taking identity as a substance, this essay follows the approach of identity as a process or as "acts of identification," drawing on post-structuralist insights. This approach lets us analyze articulations that make references to identities by avoiding the reproduction of "the substantialist view that social entities *have* identities that precede and explain action" (Bucher & Jasper, 2017, pp. 392–393) and especially avoiding having to identify some supposed "intrinsic" properties of Russian identity/values. Post-structuralism posits that identity practices are understood "as ways to see an always precarious identification (de)stabilized" (Guzzini, 2022, p. 41). The concept of a unified identity is, in fact, underpinned by "a dynamic process of identification" through which states make up for this lack of a unified identity (Epstein, 2010, p. 335). Identity is therefore replaced with discursive practices that tie together "bundles of identifications" and temporarily privilege or marginalize certain identifications in decision-making (Bucher & Jasper, 2017, p. 396). These discursive acts of identification are "irreducibly relational" since they are always done in an altercation with other actors who are also "continually re-imagined in narratives of the 'self'" (ibid.). Rather than a fully formed Self encountering the Other, its relationship to the Other "is the very site where its original identity takes shape" (Epstein, 2010, p. 337). The foreign policy then is "the decisive theoretical entry point to understanding identification politics" (Bucher & Jasper, 2017, p. 397), and the point is to trace how certain identifications are given priority in specific foreign policy decisions. Therefore, including foreign policy practices in the analysis means going beyond just discursive constructions of identity to examine the performativity of material practices. Foreign policy practices do not merely express a certain identity but, in fact, "intervene in its very constitution and (de)stabilization" (Guzzini, 2022, p. 43). Therefore, foreign policy actions temporarily fix an always precarious identity (Guzzini, 2022, pp. 44–45), given that, as Berenskoetter (2010, p. 3601) notes, "what one 'is' (or wants to be) is sustained by what one 'does.'"

The next two sections of the essay are structured following Bucher and Jasper's (2017) proposal to disaggregate the analysis of identification. The next section first centers on "identifications that express 'self-understandings' (narratives of the 'self')," with the aim of uncovering how a contemporary narrative of the Self "is situated in relation to the past and the future," meaning that past imaginations of the Self are not objective foundations but are "themselves subject to continuous interpretation and discursive contestation" and construction of continuity (Bucher & Jasper, 2017, p. 399). Thus, rather than positing that a distinct Russian identity was "established over the course of millennia" (Tsygankov, 2012, p. 28), this approach looks at how that claim is productive of a diachronic identity. The second dimension of analysis looks at the construction and othering of the "near abroad" to demonstrate how narratives of the Self are situated within a figuration of actors (Bucher & Jasper, 2017, p. 399). This includes specific discursive depictions of relations and actual foreign policy practices (Bucher & Jasper, 2017, pp. 399–400). While discourses and foreign policy practices are here divided for analytical purposes, they should be considered co-constitutive and contemporaneous.

### Narratives of Russia's Self: Messianic Russia and Putin's Pastorate

This section takes each of the supposedly intrinsic properties of Russia's identity identified by Tsygankov (2012) in

turn to demonstrate how political and religious actors discursively produce them. I first look at the claim that Russia's values are grounded in Orthodox Christianity and then move on to the claim that Russia's identity includes the idea of a strong and protective state.

The belief that Russian identity is based on Orthodox Christianity testifies to the potent discursive agency of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as an identity/norm entrepreneur "capable of influencing the public discourse on foreign policy and Russian identity" (Curanović, 2019, p. 253). Orthodox Christianity serves as a repository of symbols that the ROC draws on to construct a certain Russian identity discursively rather than being an objective foundation of Russian identity. Curanović (2019) explores the idea of "mission" or messianism, which the ROC promotes as a narrative that "Providence has a plan along which History unfolds, and in this plan the chosen one (individual or collective) has a special role to play (mission)" (p. 254). It is a narrative of Russian exceptionality with three distinctive features: the sense of having a unique destiny, the sense of moral superiority, and the conviction that the state's activities are motivated by a higher cause that is important for a broader community (Curanović, 2019, p. 254). For example, Metropolitan Hilarion claimed that certain nations are entrusted with a mission of preserving peace and spreading God's Truth, and they were considered "*narod-bogonosets*" (God-bearing people), which testifies to their moral superiority (Curanović, 2019, p. 256). Similarly, Patriarch Kirill argued that Russia owed its major power status "to the fact that it always strived for higher goals" and praised it as one of the few countries that base their foreign policy on moral (Orthodox) values (Curanović, 2019, p. 257–258). In ROC's discourse on Russian mission, Russia has moral obligations toward the world and, therefore, "Russia ought to act as a teacher" (Curanović, 2019, p. 258). Political actors echo the ROC's discourse as well. President Medvedev said in 2011 that "striving for justice and the urge to understand the Truth had always differentiated Russians from other peoples," while President Putin said that the Russian people "always ponder about the higher moral predestination of the human being" (Curanović, 2019, p. 257).

Engström (2014) identifies a similar messianic discourse in right-wing intellectual circles organized around the idea of "Russia as Katechon," or "the world's 'shield' against the apocalyptic forces of chaos" (p. 357). The narrative goes that due to the Russian people being "the chosen nation," their "burden is to fight against the Antichrist" (Engström, 2014, p. 363). She argues that the rhetoric of "Russian traditional values," the concept of a "Russian approach to human rights," and the hunt for "foreign agents" all must be understood "in light of the 'Katechonic' ideology" (Engström, 2014, p. 357). It is worth noting that this messianic discourse is also used to construct the continuity of identity. Thus, Russian right-wing intellectuals interpret the Soviet "mission" of protecting the working class from capitalism and humankind from Nazism as exclusively Katechonic (Engström, 2014, p. 366).

Another concept diachronically constructing the continuity of Russian identity, which also draws on Orthodox Christianity, is the narrative of the "Holy Rus" or the "Russian World," in which the ROC again occupies the central discursive role. In the narratives of Patriarch Kirill, the "Russian nation is understood as a multi-cultural entity built on the historic continuity between Kievan Rus and today's Russia with Moscow representing the centre of Holy Rus constituted by Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova" (Naydenova, 2016, p. 38). Russia is increasingly seen in metaphysical terms as the Holy Rus, transcending geographical boundaries (ibid.). At the inaugural session of the World Russian Council, Patriarch Kirill said that "Russia means a multinational cultural formation […] connected with Ancient Rus", that "Russia is the synonym of Rus," and that when he speaks of Russia, he always means "a great civilizational space" (Naydenova, 2016, p. 39). Vsevolod Chaplin, a high-ranking official of the ROC, even claimed that the Soviet Union, despite being an atheist state, was a successor of the Holy Rus as true Orthodox values were preserved from Westernization (Curanović, 2019, p. 257). Moreover, the idea of a "Russian World" is closely related to the Holy Rus, and both are championed by Patriarch Kirill, with the former being a "particular interpretation of the idea of a distinct Russian civilization" (Kazharski, 2020, p. 27). Thus, the perceived loss of the territory that is encompassed by the Holy Rus/Russian World is narrated into a collective experience of trauma, and consequently, it becomes a "securitized" identity that needs stabilization "if necessary, also by military means" (Kazharski, 2020, p. 34).

Turning to the discursive construction of the "idea of a strong, socially protective state capable of defending its own subjects […] and the notion of Russia as a sovereign great power" (Tsygankov & Tsygankov, 2021, p. 5), Gaufman (2017) uses the Foucauldian concept of pastorate or pastoral power—which Foucault developed from an

understanding of religious power in Christianity—to demonstrate how the idea of a socially protective state is reproduced. Gaufman (2017) argues that pastoral power "is inherently productive, working through discourse" (p. 76) and identifies four characteristics that define it. Namely, it is exercised over a flock rather than land/territory, so references to transborder sovereignty abound "in discursive struggles that shape a pastoral political system" (p. 76); it is a beneficent power, and the pastorate system presents itself as "protecting the flock from danger and leading it to salvation" (p. 76); it is an individualizing power in that it emphasizes "the importance of personal involvement, personal knowledge of the pastor [and] direct involvement of pastor in the lives of sheep" (p. 77); and it is a dutiful and devotional power which is "manifested primarily through the body of the pastor" (p. 77). First, the references to transborder sovereignty have already been explored in the form of the narratives of the Holy Rus and the Russian World. Second, the pastorate presents itself as beneficent by framing domestic issues as security concerns that originate from abroad, and therefore "it is the duty of the pastor to make sure that his flock is protected" (Gaufman, 2017, p. 79). Third, the pastor's personal involvement is manifested in the figure of President Putin. For example, through media rituals of "direct lines" with Putin, the personal involvement of the pastor in the lives of the flock is constructed in instances "where Putin persuades a husband to buy a dog for his wife, provides rehabilitation treatment, orders the rebuilding of a burnt down village, or finances a medical trip abroad" (Gaufman, 2017, p. 83). Finally, the devotional and dutiful aspects of pastoral power are manifested in the sexualization of Putin and the remasculinization of Russia through his image, "which corresponds to the othering process in need of other's humiliation or feminization" (Gaufman, 2017, p. 84).

As regards the notion of Russia as a great power, Narozhna (2022, p. 86) claims that the "only persistent trope in Russia's biographical narrative over the last three centuries has been the claim that Russia is a 'natural' great power." The persistence of this trope was confirmed when Putin claimed that "either Russia will be great or it will not be at all" (Petersson, 2013, p. 11). Petersson (2013) argues that this identity was discursively reproduced even during the Yeltsin years when the pro-Western foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev said that "Russia was 'doomed' to be a great power" (p. 11). It is, therefore, not the case that Russia either lives up to or falls short of some ideal of a great power, either its own or the Western one, based on "objective" criteria of material capabilities. Rather, the very notion of a great power can be "bent" to always construct Russia as a great power. This can be done through the continuous articulation of a "*smuta*" (Time of Troubles) — either internal or external — that is temporarily ended through interventions befitting of a great power (Petersson, 2013, p. 12). The two narratives, therefore, "stand in a dialectical relationship to each other" (ibid.).

**The "Near Abroad": Constructing the Other through Foreign Policy Practices**

The narratives of Russian identity presented in the previous section are not created in isolation, either from other actors in international politics or from the actual material practices of foreign policy. The narratives of Russia being a messianic power, of being a teacher, of being a masculine pastor, and of being a strong state and a great power, all presuppose a disciple, a student, a feminized follower that can be violated at will, and a weak and meek state as its Other. The Other that is constructed and assigned to the other side of each binary is the so-called near abroad. And while many scholars, most famously Neumann (2008), posit the West as the "significant Other" against which Russia's identity is constructed, it is often underestimated how many narratives of Russian identity hinge on the existence of a "near abroad."

Needless to say, the "near abroad" is a discursive construction as well, rather than being an objective geographic/geopolitical space. It is a geopolitical notion within a particular spatial imaginary that Russian politicians discursively attach to the former Soviet republics (Toal, 2017, p. 3). Its first use is attributed to Russia's first foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev (Ortmann, 2008, p. 365). Yet the extent — or the "borders"— of the "near abroad," and exactly who belongs in that category, are as much constructed discursively as they are through Russian foreign policy practices.

It is telling that the narrative of "Russia's mission" peaked in the period between 2013 and 2015 and "seems to have been accelerated" by — and complemented — the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine (Curanović, 2019, p. 258). Engström's (2014, p. 365) "metaphysical enemy" of the Antichrist took the shape of "Ukrainian fascists, and the Kiev junta." In his Crimea speech of March 2014, Putin emphasized "Russia's role as

defender of the Russian population of Ukraine against the forces of evil" (Engström, 2014, p. 374). In discursively representing the act of the annexation, Putin claimed that the "Russian-speaking Crimea had asked Russia for protection from the new Kiev regime" and that "Russia will always protect […] the *Russkiy* people […] and the Russian-speaking citizens" (Teper, 2016, p. 385). Thus, acting upon its messianic image in annexing Crimea, Russia presented its actions as defensive, yet the invocation of its "mission" as being the integration of others to preserve their civilizational identity also legitimized "Russia's claim for regional dominance" (Curanović, 2019, p. 259).

Similarly, in the 2008 invasion of Georgia, then President Medvedev "insisted that the war in Georgia was 'an absolutely necessary action of our army to save large numbers of our citizens' from the threat emanating from Georgia" (Gaufman, 2017, p. 78). Čanji and Kazharski (2022, p. 18) argue that the act of war was couched in "humanitarianist discourse of protecting Russians." This practice "is conducive to the emergence of a specific Russian identity largely based not only on the logic of […] territorial acquisition but also on the idea of defending the lives of people allegedly seeking protection" (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2018, p. 4). At the same time, the invasion represented a "propensity to intensely intrude onto the quotidian" (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2018, p. 9). Simultaneously, there was a discursive invocation of a "Russian world" which was substantialized "through utilizing the mechanism of passportization in the breakaway territories" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Makarychev & Yatsyk, 2018, p. 10), and it was repeated later in Donetsk and Luhansk (Ortmann, 2022, pp. 1–2). The representation of the 2008 invasion and the 2014 war in Ukraine as saving lives and the demonstration of the power to intrude into the everyday echoes the narrative of Russian identity as a pastoral power that protects and guides its flock, and that is personally involved in its life. This dynamic is also visible in the narrative that Russia knows and "acts in the interests of these countries" (Curanović, 2019, p. 259), which was repeated during the run-up to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, as demonstrated in Putin's statement from the introduction to this essay.

As for its great power self-image, "the increasingly spectacular actions of Russia as a Great Power in the 2010s" should be seen as a performative act, "performing the Russian myth of the strong state abroad to legitimate the rule of Russia's state elites domestically" (Ortmann, 2017, p. 138). The performance of the Russian state's strength "in its international interaction produces Russia as a Great Power on the basis of particular normative claims, especially claims to sovereign independence of action" (ibid.). As Ortmann (2017, p. 138) notes, it is the bending of the very concept of "great power" that is at work, as state strength becomes sovereign autonomy of action, and state weakness is reinterpreted as openness to foreign influence. This "*derzhavnost'*" (great powerness) was performed both in the 2008 invasion of Georgia and the annexation of Crimea — seeing that "annexing Crimea was about performing *derzhavnost'* more than about any concrete geopolitical aims" (Ortmann, 2017, p. 150) — even when the result undermines Russia's international standing (Ortmann, 2017, p. 147), meaning that Western notions of great powerness cannot account for these actions. As argued by Oskanian (2018), the establishment of the Eurasian Union was also an act of asserting an "exclusive claim over the former Soviet space" (p. 39), and it was accompanied by "justifications of hierarchy through claims of Russian superiority in a specific civilisational sphere with a perceived shared history — the near abroad" (p. 27), while Ortmann (2017) claims that it was also a performance of *derzhavnost'* "with Russia positioning itself as a leader in contesting the universality of liberal norms" (p. 149). Ortmann (2017, p. 151) notes that materialist interpretations of Russia's actions in Ukraine in 2014 that see them as either demonstration of strength or signs of Russia's decline, "miss the centrality of *derzhavnost'*" in performing the myth of the state and producing Russian great powerness in performances. The same could be said of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine as well (see also Ortmann, 2022, p. 2).

Finally, Russia's claim to sovereign independence of action also contains gendered dynamics, with independence having "a clear gender association" of masculinity (Riabov & Riabova, 2014, p. 27). The "remasculinization" of Russia, however, is closely connected to the "demasculinization" of Others (Riabov & Riabova, 2014, p. 28). Thus, during the 2006 and 2009 gas supply disputes with Russia, Ukraine was represented on Russian TV as a "flighty Ukrainian mistress" and "an overly picky girl" — with Putin himself commenting that "the girls should have no illusions: the groom has other choices" (Riabov & Riabova, 2014, p. 28) — while during the 2014 conflict in Ukraine, Ukrainian politicians were portrayed as "confused, passive and dependent, very different from how the Russian political actors […] appear in the same news" (Voronova, 2017, p. 227). This reflects the dynamics of the masculine pastor, where Putin "represents a literal embodiment of Russia's masculinity that is supposed to be juxtaposed with the perceived femininity of Ukraine" (Gaufman, 2017, p. 85). During the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine, the Kremlin-

controlled TV channel NTV ran a prime-time program titled "The Furies of Maidan: Sex, Psychosis and Politics", which depicted female activists and leaders of the protests as "sexually depraved and psychologically unstable" and featured "psychiatrists" analyzing "women's extremism" (Vikhrest, 2014). Indeed, this dynamic resurfaced in February 2022, when Putin demanded Ukraine implement the terms of the Minsk agreements by quoting the obscene and misogynistic lyrics of a Soviet-era punk-rock song that implied rape: "Like it or don't like it, it's your duty, my beauty" (Hodge, 2022). In the last instance, such a masculinization necessitates militaristic and aggressive behavior toward other states (Gaufman, 2017, p. 86), which unfortunately bared out when Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine just two weeks later.

## Conclusion

This essay has discussed the discursive construction of Russian identity and its connection to Russian foreign policy in the "near abroad". It has problematized the statement that Russian identity or values have intrinsic and essential qualities that can be discerned by looking at its history. Rather, the essay has argued that Russian identity is continuously discursively (re)produced and that statements of historical continuity are themselves productive of identity. It has demonstrated the discursive agency of the ROC and political actors in constructing narratives of "mission," of the continuity of the Russian state since the Holy Rus, of Russia as a socially protective state and Putin as the benevolent pastor, and of the "great powerness" of Russia. The essay has also problematized the idea that a "near abroad" can be discerned outside of its discursive use, and it has posited that a "near abroad" is constructed as a necessary Other and a foil for the identified narratives of Russian identity. By looking at examples, such as the 2008 invasion of Georgia, the gas wars with Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, the establishment of the Eurasian Union, and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, it tried to demonstrate that the performative discursive and material practices of Russian foreign policy serve both to call into being a "near abroad" with a certain identity and to instantiate a particular construction of Russian identity itself.

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