

**Mariya Erkan** 

Sakarya University, Turkey, Sakarya

\*e-mail: mariya.erkana@outlook.com

## A NEOCLASSICAL REALIST PERSPECTIVE ON RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN IN THE PUTIN ERA

Russian regional activity in the Eastern Mediterranean represent a significant part of its global positioning. Reassuring itself as a great power capable of bringing loud voice into international affairs, Russia secures its national interests by building up its power capabilities in the Eastern Mediterranean, which consequently influence the geopolitical balance of power in the region. However, against the background of Russia's economic weakness and political isolation, expressed in a decrease in its relative material capabilities, why does it continue to expand its participation in remote regions like the Eastern Mediterranean? What systemic and domestic factors are driving its foreign policy towards this region? How Moscow perceive the Eastern Mediterranean? Which strategy does Russia apply in maintaining its position in the region, and how it behaves vis-à-vis key regional actors? Taking neoclassical realism as a theoretical basis, this article aims to answer the above questions providing an analysis of systemic incentives and domestic (unit) level variables, which are instrumental in understanding Russian foreign policy behavior in the region (dependent variable), as well as globally. Focusing on the geographical area of Eastern Mediterranean, this article offers insights into Russia's interaction with this region and within it, its behavior pursuing its interests exposing areas of potential conflict and cooperation with relevant actors, and the patterns of Russia's interaction in regional balance of power. The significance of this study lies in the applying of a relatively new theoretical approach (neoclassical realism) to a specific geographical case (Eastern Mediterranean) in a certain time frame (Putin era) in the study of Russian foreign policy.

**Key words:** Russia, Eastern Mediterranean, neoclassical realism

Мария Эрман

Сакарія университеті, Түркия, Сакарія қ.

\*e-mail: mariya.erkana@outlook.com

### Путин дәуіріндегі Шығыс Жерорта Теңізіндегі Ресейдің сыртқы саясатына неоклассикалық реалистік көзқарас

Өзін халықаралық істерге дауыс көтере алатын ұлы держава ретінде сендіре отырып, Ресей Шығыс Жерорта теңізіндегі қуат мүмкіндіктерін арттыру арқылы өзінің ұлттық мүдделерін қамтамасыз етеді, бұл аймақтағы күштердің геосаяси тепе-теңдігіне әсер етеді. Алайда, Ресейдің салыстырмалы материалдық мүмкіндіктерінің төмендеуімен көрінетін экономикалық әлсіздігі мен саяси оқшаулануы аясында ол Шығыс Жерорта теңізі сияқты шалғай аймақтарға қатысуын кеңейтуді неліктен жалғастыруда? Оның осы аймаққа қатысты сыртқы саясатын қандай жүйелі және ішкі факторлар итермелеп отыр? Мәскеу Шығыс Жерорта теңізін қалай қабылдайды? Ресей аймақтағы позициясын сақтау үшін қандай стратегияны қолданады және ол негізгі аймақтық субъектілерге қалай қарайды? Неоклассикалық реализмді теориялық негіз ретінде ала отырып, бұл мақала Ресейдің аймақтағы сыртқы саясатының мінез-құлқын (тәуелді айнымалы) түсінуге көмектесетін жүйелі ынталандырулар мен ішкі (бірлік) деңгейдегі айнымалыларды талдауды қамтамасыз ететін жоғарыда аталған сұрақтарға жауап беруге бағытталған. Шығыс Жерорта теңізінің географиялық аймағына назар аудара отырып, бұл мақала Ресейдің осы аймақпен және оның шеңберіндегі өзара әрекеттесуіне, оның мүдделерін көздейтін мінез-құлқына, ықтимал қақтығыстар мен тиісті субъектілермен ынтымақтастық аймақтарын әшкерелеуге және Ресейдің аймақтық күштер теңгеріміндегі өзара әрекеттесу үлгілеріне түсінік береді. . Бұл зерттеудің маңыздылығы Ресейдің сыртқы саясатын зерттеуде белгілі бір уақыт шеңберінде (Путин дәуірі) нақты географиялық жағдайға (Шығыс Жерорта теңізі) салыстырмалы түрде жаңа теориялық көзқарасты (неоклассикалық реализм) қолдануда жатыр.

**Түйін сөздер:** Ресей, Шығыс Жерорта теңізі, неоклассикалық реализм

Мария Эрман

Университет Сакаръя, Турция, г. Сакаръя

\*e-mail: mariya.erkan@outlook.com

### **Российская внешняя политика в Восточном Средиземноморье в эпоху Путина с перспективы неоклассического реализма**

Утверждая себя в качестве великой державы, способной громко заявить о себе в международных делах, Россия защищает свои национальные интересы, наращивая свой силовой потенциал в Восточном Средиземноморье, что, следовательно, влияет на геополитический баланс сил в регионе. Однако на фоне экономической слабости и политической изоляции России, выражающейся в снижении ее относительных материальных возможностей, почему она продолжает расширять свое участие в отдаленных регионах, таких как Восточное Средиземноморье? Какие системные и внутренние факторы определяют ее внешнюю политику в отношении этого региона? Как Москва воспринимает Восточное Средиземноморье? Какую стратегию применяет Россия для сохранения своих позиций в регионе, и как она ведет себя по отношению к ключевым региональным акторам? Взяв за теоретическую основу неоклассический реализм, данная статья призвана ответить на вышеуказанные вопросы, предоставив анализ системных стимулов и переменных внутреннего (единичного) уровня, которые играют важную роль в понимании внешнеполитического поведения России в регионе (зависимая переменная), а также в глобальном масштабе. Сосредоточив внимание на географической зоне Восточного Средиземноморья, эта статья дает представление о взаимодействии России с этим регионом и внутри него, ее поведении, преследующем свои интересы, и выявляя области потенциального конфликта и сотрудничества с соответствующими акторами, а также о моделях взаимодействия России в региональном балансе сил. Значимость данного исследования заключается в применении относительно нового теоретического подхода (неоклассического реализма) к конкретному географическому случаю (Восточное Средиземноморье) в определенный период времени (эпоха Путина) в изучении внешней политики России.

**Ключевые слова:** Россия, Восточное Средиземноморье, неоклассический реализм

#### **Introduction**

The global and comprehensive activity (diplomatic, military, and economic) of Russia is conditioned by a number of factors at the international and domestic levels. In modern conditions of transformation of the global international system, regional subsystems play an important role. Changes taking place at the regional level affect the dynamics of the global international system. Asserting itself as a great power, which is considered as such by other global actors, Russia seeks to project its power in different regions, from the Middle East to Latin America, in order to establish the world order according to its own vision.

With the coming to power of Vladimir Putin in 2000, there has been a gradual strengthening of Russia's position in the international arena, its greater engagement in the different regions and larger involvement in resolving of global issues. A window of opportunity opened at the regional level (events in the MENA region and the adjacent Mediterranean) and a favorable domestic environment led Moscow to seek to expand its interests abroad. One of the regions of such interest became the Eastern Mediterranean.

Back in 1999, Vladimir Putin, being the Prime Minister of Russia, declared the need to restore Russian military presence in the Mediterranean Sea (Lutterbeck, 2009: 393). This idea was reflected in the Russia's Maritime Doctrine of 2001 (*Morskaya doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii na period do 2020 goda*<sup>2001</sup>), thereby designating the Mediterranean as a strategically important region for ensuring national interests. Since then, the Mediterranean has taken a firm place in Russia's foreign policy confirmed by the new edition of the 2015 Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation, which sets the task of ensuring a sufficient naval presence of Russia in the region on a permanent basis (*Morskaya doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, 2015). Drawing a historical parallel, it should be noted that in imperial times Russia maintained its permanent fleet in the Mediterranean Sea until 1917 (Zonova, 2015: 522).

Thus, since 2008, a major turning point in Russia's foreign policy after its involvement in Georgia, Moscow has become increasingly assertive gradually increasing its naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. This becomes especially noticeable in the contrast to Russia's withdrawal from the region in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Russia has its stake in the Eastern Mediterranean that has significant implications for regional balance of power and policies of regional actors. The underlying causes of Russian policy in the Eastern Mediterranean are considered from neoclassical realist theory, taking in consideration systemic and domestic levels. The Type III neoclassical realism is chosen as the theoretical framework of this paper seeking to resolve the research puzzle of consistent Russia's assertiveness to exert its influence in remote regions as Eastern Mediterranean in spite of ambiguous international and domestic situation. This article argues that Russia's foreign policy behavior is mainly determined by the international system. But the way Moscow responds to the Eastern Mediterranean challenges is filtered through Russia's domestic elements. Neoclassical realist theory appears to be useful for understanding Russia's approach towards Eastern Mediterranean, as it examines both the international and domestic levels, as well as their interaction with each other.

### Material and Methods

The materials used for this study were obtained exclusively from open sources. Both primary (official documents) and secondary sources (scientific articles, monographs, books, research papers, reports) were used in the course of the research. As noted previously, the theoretical basis of this article is the neoclassical realist theory, which is used to analyze Russia's foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. The article follows the logic of developing a theoretical approach, analyzing the international environment (independent variable) and the impact of systemic stimuli on Russian policy responses (dependent variable), as well as the domestic environment (intervening variables), namely the leader image and the strategic culture of Russia, which have strong influence on the shaping of foreign policy decisions.

### Literature Review

Within the framework of this research, the literature review covers two areas, theoretical and empirical.

The theoretical underpinnings offered by Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro and Steven E. Lobell in their common work *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* purports to explain phenomena ranging from short-term crisis decision-making by individual states up to and including

broader patterns of international outcomes and structural change (Ripsman, 2016). This book was used as a main theoretical guideline in developing the question under investigation.

An addition to the book mentioned above was the article *Contemporary Realism and the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* written by Jacek Wicelawski, who analyzes Russian foreign policy from the perspective of the theory of contemporary realism. He observes the complex nature of the foreign activity of the Russian Federation using the framework of classical realism, neorealism and neoclassical realism. This article defines a broad range of international (systemic) and internal political variables of the foreign policy of Russia. The article notes the evolution of Russia's foreign activity after the end of the Cold War, as well as the growing importance of neoclassical realism as an explanatory tool in this regard (Wicelawski, 2011).

Moreover, by studying many sources on the issue under study, it is useful to read the works of junior scholars who can not only provide information, but also help to look at the situation from a different angle or give a new understanding of the phenomena. Thus, Julian Mark Reder's dissertation *The Medvedev Years: An Examination of the External Forces & Internal Dynamics Affecting the Kremlin's Foreign Policy Decisions*, although focusing on the period of the presidency of Dmitry Medvedev, provides a reference to previous periods, including the presidency of Vladimir Putin. In the framework of this study, such points as the nature of forces and personal dynamics are of interest, since they ultimately determine the Kremlin's reaction to foreign policy issues. The author analyzes the key players involved in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy decisions (Reder, 2013). Another thesis written by James Adam Oswell is of interest for this research as an example of theoretical application to the particular case. Referring to structural realism and neoclassical realism, the author addressed to the case of the British strategy of appeasement in the 1930s to show how these theories explain the British strategy. Turning to the theory of neoclassical realism, he identified "particular ways in which domestic politics played an intervening role in impacting British power," (Oswell, 2013: abstract) revealing the gap of structural realist analysis.

Mark R. Brawley's *Political Economy and Grand Strategy: A Neoclassical Realist View* gives theoretical overview of the concept of grand strategy. Although the focus is made on the political-

economic perspective, it completes the theoretical basis for this research. Author explores a theory of balance of power applying it to the historical examples, including the Soviet grand strategy in the 1980s that gives an important impetus for the further research of modern Russian grand strategy (Brawley, 2010).

In search of answers to questions how contemporary international system looks like, who are the modern great powers, and what role Russia plays in the international system, a number of articles by foreign and Russian researchers were studied. Thus, Richard Sakwa wrote about the international system and models of global order from the positions of liberal and conservative internationalism (Sakwa, 2019). Richard Haass analyzed possible responses to a disordered world (Haass, 2014). Among Russian researchers, the article of Igor Istomin is of interest, in which he compared the Russian official and expert foreign policy discourse on the example of the ratio of centers of power and principles of building relations between them (Istomin, 2016).

Another layer of sources is empirical, aimed at studying Russian foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. Among the huge variety of works devoted to Russian foreign policy and its relations with different regions (see, for example, Degtrev, 2019; Gubaidullina, 2011), a rather modest number of works, relative to the total number, concerns the Eastern Mediterranean. As a rule, this region is considered either as part of the greater Mediterranean, or together with Europe or the Middle East, which has attracted the attention of scholars in the last decade. Among the available works, one can single out Marc Pierini's article about the actors involved in the region and their struggle for power (Pierini, 2020). Furthermore, he separately studied the issue of Russia's positioning in the region and the consequences it brings to NATO and Europe (Pierini, 2021).

Another article *Russia's Eastern Mediterranean Policy* written by Agnieszka Legucka gives a short but insightful review of Moscow's activity in the region, defining its goals and motives, as well as the areas of Russian national interests (Legucka, 2020).

Taylor Craig Cayce's master's thesis *Russian Military Basing in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean: The Central Component to the Regional Foreign Policy* describes Russian foreign policy toward Georgia, Ukraine and Syria and explains how regional military bases fit into it (Cayce, 2016). The important aspect that author reviewed in his work was the presence of military bases in

each of these regions, which, in their turn, were at stake during the conflicts with Russian engagement. The researcher maintained that one of the causes of Russia's activities was the threat of losing its power that was projected by the means of relevant military bases (Gudauta in Georgia, Sevastopol in Ukraine, and Tartus in Syria). As he observes, military bases represents a tool of spreading Russian influence in the Black Sea and Middle East (via the Eastern Mediterranean). Further, the thesis holds that these regions have strategic and geographic importance for Russia. Thus, this thesis gives another aspect of Russia's power projection in the Eastern Mediterranean that is of interest for current research.

The book *Russia: Re-Emerging Great Power* edited by Roger E. Kanet examines the increasing role of Russia in the world affairs (Kanet, 2007). Although this book is not new, it gives a deep insight into the concept of great power and Russia's self-perception of greatness. As such, it can be beneficial for the analysis of systemic level of Russian foreign policy. Another book of interest is *Russia in the Changing International System* edited by Emel Parlar Dal and Emre Erşen. This work is valuable in terms of studying Russia's perception of a changing international system in the twenty-first century. The studies done by the authors allow the reader to evaluate motives and strategies of Russia in relation to a number of contemporary problems (Parlar Dal, 2020).

An additional source that broaden an understanding of Russian foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean is Igor Delanoë's article devoted to the return of Russia to the Mediterranean region. The author analyzes the contemporary policy of Russia in the region, but also presents a historical retrospective in his research. In particular, he gives an idea of the traditional historical view about Russian defensive position (Delanoë, 2014).

As such, it is apparent that Russia's foreign policy has come under scrutiny from different aspects of many researchers. However, the Eastern Mediterranean seems understudied and deserves special attention, which this study is aimed to.

## Results and Discussion

### *The International Level: Power Distribution and Foreign Policy Behavior*

Considering Eastern Mediterranean as a regional subsystem, one can see that it reflects the global arena presenting its mini projection but adding some regional actors. This is explained

by the interdependence of global and regional fluctuations as mutually influencing components of one whole, that is, the regional subsystem is a part of the global international system. Indeed, the Eastern Mediterranean is part of the Mediterranean region, which is adjacent to Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, which can be considered as separate subsystems, and which also provides the opportunity to enter the World Ocean.

Russia's presence in the Eastern Mediterranean is opposed to the active actions of the United States and its Western allies in the face of the European Union in the region. Moreover, the last decade has been marked by the increasing activity of both regional (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey) and global actors (China). The discovered reserves of energy resources in recent years are of strategic importance and can affect the distribution of power both in the region and undermine Russia's position in the international arena. Therefore, controlling its extraction and transportation in the region allows Moscow to keep dominant position in the supply of energy resources to Europe. Another important aspect of Russian interest in the region is security. Before considering these factors, it is worth paying special attention to the structural modifiers that play a role in shaping Russian foreign policy towards Eastern Mediterranean.

Russia's geographic location relative to the Eastern Mediterranean region has predetermined its policy for centuries. The vast territory of Russia has no access to warm seas, which naturally impeded its trade and economic development, as a result of which Russia has historically sought to find a way to the shores of warm seas expanding its defensive territory to the south. The events of the Arab Spring provided an opportunity to strengthen Russian position in the region, which culminated in Russia's engagement into the Syrian Civil War. Providing significant military and diplomatic support to the Assad regime, Russia got under its control the naval base in Tartus, the strategic port of Latakia and the Khmeimim air base in Syria, which allow Moscow to project its influence and power not only in the Middle East, but also in the Eastern Mediterranean and beyond. Two of these military bases, namely a naval base in Tartus and an air base in Khmeimim ensure Russia's presence in the region in the extended time frame for 49 years (long-term) starting from 2017 (Legucka, 2020: 2). This region is a "south key" to open the "door" to the World Ocean and project Russian power globally. Thus, the Eastern Mediterranean, which is located at the intersection

of the Middle East, Europe and North Africa and provides access to the World Ocean, is an important communications and transmission route, thereby, representing a strategically significant region for Russia in terms of projecting its influence and power.

Another structural modifier that affects the way actors interact and behave towards each other is the offense-defense balance in military technologies, which intensifies the security dilemma in the relevant region. Russia got access to naval and air facilities in Syria that has expanded its operational capabilities throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as beyond. Thus, for example, a naval base in Tartus has the potential to accommodate eleven warships.

As Russia's case shows, its activities in the Eastern Mediterranean are largely built on the perception of the ongoing enlargement of the European Union and NATO, and their immediate proximity to the borders of Russia, thereby exacerbating the feeling of a "besieged fortress" (Delanoë, 2014:24). Thus, Russia's presence in the Eastern Mediterranean is primarily conditioned by its national security requirements. Nevertheless, the consistent development of the European Union in the process of enlargement has institutionally complicated its foreign policy decision making, which impeded the European Council "to reach a clear consensus on the EU's policy in Syria, Libya, or Turkey" (Pierini, 2020: 104). Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 has created uncertainty and further distracted the European Union from the Eastern Mediterranean affairs (Pierini, 2020: 104). Furthermore, there has been a relative weakening of the US role in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East, which led to a power vacuum (Dalay, 2021: I). This, in its turn, contributed to the opening of a window of opportunity for other actors, and, as a consequence, led to Moscow's decisive actions in this region. As noted by Dario Cristiani, Russia's approach is "exploiting strategic vacuums," (Cristiani, 2020: 2) which is recently being traced in its foreign policy. Nevertheless, it would be imprudent to claim that Washington is completely leaving the Eastern Mediterranean, reorienting itself to the Asia-Pacific region. As the former US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta noted, the ratio of American naval power between the Pacific and the Atlantic would change by 60/40, in contrast to the previous 50/50 (Perlez, 2012). Despite this shift, the Eastern Mediterranean remains a strategically important region for the United States, allowing it to project its power. This

region is a kind of ‘springboard’ for exerting US influence in a number of directions, mainly in Africa and deep into Eurasia, reaching Central Asia, which is of interest to Washington in the geo-political confrontation with China above all (Nopens, 2013: 3-4). These were external systemic incentives, which influenced Russia to tailor its foreign policy in accordance with the circumstances designed by the international system.

Russian foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean is also closely linked to its Middle Eastern policy, as its posture in the Eastern Mediterranean is intended to preserve its gains in Syria. Thus, Russia’s policy in the region is dictated by a defensive position and a simultaneous desire to assert itself as a great power within the international system, a power, which is capable to transform the existing rules of the world order. However, there is another point of view. Some researchers believe that the main driver for Russia’s activity in the region is not its desire to establish itself as a great power due to the lack of the necessary means for this, but the pragmatic task of ensuring the security of its southern flank in the event of a possible conflict with NATO (Rumer, 2021: 1).

As it was mentioned above, the Arab Spring and subsequent events in Libya and Syria provided Russia with opportunities to expand its participation in the region. Representing itself as a great power and being at the same time an external actor in the Eastern Mediterranean, Russia took its place in the complex equilibrium of interests of external and regional actors. It has managed to forge relations with all the key regional powers.

The power structure of the Eastern Mediterranean is characterized by the involvement of major powers (China, European Union, Russia and the United States), regional powers with direct access to the Mediterranean (Israel and Turkey), and Middle Eastern regional powers (Iran, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia). In addition, there is a de facto divided Cyprus that is facing off against Turkish pressure. In their dispute over energy resources, Russia also plays an important role, influencing the balance of power. Kremlin seizes every opportunity to exert its influence on any crisis situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, which would make it possible to freeze competitive projects for the extraction of energy resources and their transportation to Europe continuing to keep a dominant position in the supply of energy resources. Indeed, the destabilized situation in the Eastern Mediterranean causes concern in the ranks of the EU and NATO,

thereby distracting them directly from Russia itself. For example, Russia has offered its mediation services between Cyprus and Greece with Turkey on the maritime delimitation and division of Eastern Mediterranean energy resources accordingly, which could potentially expand its influence on the southern borders of the EU and NATO taking in consideration their indispensable geopolitical significance for Western allies’ positioning in the region. In addition, by doing so, it would displace Germany, which is the preferred intermediary in this dispute (Madeira, 2020). Another leverage of Russia’s influence on the extraction and supply of energy resources is its striving to participate in regional energy projects. For example, in 2017, a 30% stake in the Egyptian Zohr gas field, which is the largest gas field in the Mediterranean Sea, was acquired by the Russian state-owned company Rosneft (Rosneft Information Division, 2017). Besides that, other Russian companies got energy contracts in Libya and Syria (Legucka, 2020: 2).

Russia used its military position in the Eastern Mediterranean to strike at ISIS positions in Syria, thereby demonstrating its power and establishing itself once again as a great power in the transforming international system. The United States acted similarly during the Gulf Wars, striking Iraq with long-range missiles deployed in the Eastern Mediterranean. Thus, Russia is leaning more towards internal balancing, rearming its forces and emulating the successful security behavior and the military practice of its rival. Vladimir Putin, expressing his sympathy to the foreign policy of Imperial Russia, is guided by Alexander III principle that “Russia has only two allies - its army and its navy.”

#### *The Domestic Level: Variables Constraining Foreign Policy*

The difference between neoclassical realism and earlier versions of realism is its taking into account a number of domestic factors that affect the likelihood and form of the state’s response to certain international systemic imperatives. Type III neoclassical realist theory considers four categories of intervening variables, namely leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations and domestic institutions (Ripsman, 2016: 58-59).

It is apparent that the figure of Vladimir Putin in power plays an important role in the activation of Moscow on its southern flank. This is especially true in contrast to the foreign policy course pursued by the previous President of Russia Boris Yeltsin, when Russia withdrew from a number of regions, including

the Eastern Mediterranean, and focused its attention mainly on the western direction. Russian foreign policy under Vladimir Putin stepped up its efforts to return from abandoned regions and develop new ties and directions. As mentioned earlier, from the very beginning of his tenure in power, he declared the need to strengthen Russia's military presence in the Mediterranean. His assertive foreign policy in the region serves as a justification of its imperial nature for the Russian society, as well as provides access to profitable agreements, including energy and military sectors, for his close teammates (i.e. Gennady Timchenko and Yevgeny Prigozhin) (Legucka, 2020: 1). As is known, one of the continuities of the Soviet period in the shaping of modern Russian foreign policy is its 'over-centralization' and the role of personal ties within the circle of political elites (Chernyshev, 2014: 19).

The place of the Eastern Mediterranean in Russian strategic culture is mainly seen as a part of the larger Mediterranean region, which is adjacent to Europe. Therefore, Russian Eastern Mediterranean policy is inextricably linked with Moscow's foreign policy towards Europe. However, the events taking place in the Middle East over the past decade have given even more weight to the Eastern Mediterranean in the foreign policy of many states, including Russia. Back in 1996, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, the famous Arabist Yevgeny Primakov, noted the importance of this region for Russia as providing direct access to the strategically important region of the Middle East (Delanoë, 2014: 28). At that time, the degree of significance was determined by the instability of the southern borders of Russia itself. Today, the threat comes directly from the Middle East region and threatens to revive the separatist and extremist sentiments of the so-called "soft underbelly" of Russia. This term was used by Primakov to designate Russian southern flank (Kreutz, 2007: 11). What is more, the so-called concept of the "Greater Mediterranean" in Russia's strategy towards the region, reflected in the Memorandum on Russian Policy in the Mediterranean of 1995 (Memorandum o politike Rossii v Sredizemnomor'ye , 1995), implies partnership relations between the countries of the Black Sea, the Mediterranean and the Middle East, which shows its strategic importance as one of the parts (subsystem) of a single whole (international system).

As for the perception of the need for Russia's presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, this is due to the fact that Russian elites, like Russian society as a whole, perceive the idea of Russia's greatness and do not agree only on defining its role as a regional power (Lukyanov, 2016: 34). Thus, Russia's presence in the Eastern Mediterranean meets its national interests in ensuring economic interests, primarily in the energy sector, and security. The weak economic and political situation is certainly a limiting factor. The budget allocated for the military maintenance of Russian troops and foreign military bases could be distributed to solve domestic socio-economic problems, and this causes discontent in society. However, the perception of systemic incentives through the prism of the leader, as well as the established strategic culture, make their own adjustments to Moscow's foreign policy decisions.

### Conclusion

Russian foreign policy in the Eastern Mediterranean has become assertive in the Putin era. This is due to Russia's geopolitical, economic and military interests both in the region itself and in other regions adjacent to it. A number of systemic factors, such as American declining role in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, regional rivalries, disputes over maritime delimitation and energy resources, inconsistent Western policy, and the outbreak of military conflicts open up opportunities for Russia to strengthen its position in the region and exercise its influence. Together with systemic factors (independent variable), domestic factors (intervening variables) such as leader image and strategic culture play an important role in how the Kremlin processes and responds to systemic pressures. For more than two decades, Vladimir Putin has been consistently expanding the scope of cooperation with remote regions and deepening it in various areas, from trade and economic to military issues.

Moscow perceives the Eastern Mediterranean as its southern flank and strategically important region located at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and providing access to the open ocean. Russia's strategy in the region is aimed at ensuring security and preventing the spread of influence of other actors in the international system. It maintains the balance of power in the region.

## References

- Brawley, M. R. (2010) *Political Economy and Grand Strategy: A Neoclassical Realist View*. Routledge.
- Cayce, T. C. (2016) *Russian Military Basing in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean: The Central Component to the Regional Foreign Policy* [Master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill].
- Chernyshev, N. (2014) *The Influence of Institutional Decision Making Mechanism in Russia on the Relations with the European Union*. *International Organisations Research Journal*, 9(3), 19-27.
- Cristiani, D. (2020) *Framing Russia's Mediterranean Return: Stages, Roots, and Logics*. IAI Commentaries, 20|59. Retrieved from <https://www.iai.it/en/publicazioni/framing-russias-mediterranean-return-stages-roots-and-logics>.
- Dalay, G. (2021) *Turkey, Europe, and the Eastern Mediterranean: Charting a Way Out of the Current Deadlock*. Policy Briefing. Brookings Doha Center.
- Degtarev, D., Kurylev, K. (Eds.) (2019) *Foreign Policies of the CIS States: A Comprehensive Reference*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Delanoë, I. (2014) *Le retour de la Russie en Méditerranée [Russia's return to the Mediterranean]*. *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, 89, 23-35.
- Gubaidullina, M. (2011) *Bilateral Military-Political Relations between Kazakhstan and Russia: Evolution and Prospects*. In A. Patnaik & A. M. Chenoy (Eds.), *Tradition and Non-traditional Treats to Central Asian Security* (pp. 55-77) KW Publishers Pvt Ltd.
- Haass, R. N. (2014) *The Unraveling: How to Respond to a Disordered World?* *Foreign Affairs*, 93(6), 70-79.
- Istomin, I. A. (2016) *Refleksiya mezhdunarodnoy sistemy v ofitsial'nom diskurse i nauchnom osmyslenii [Evaluation of the International System in Russian Official Discourse and Academic Analysis]*. *MGIMO Review of International Relations*, 5(50), 20-33. (In Russian)
- Kanet, R. E. (Ed.) (2007) *Russia: Re-Emerging Great Power*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kreutz, A. (2007) *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* *Praeger Security International*.
- Legucka, A. (2020) *Russia's Eastern Mediterranean Policy*. *PISM Bulletin*, 111(1541)
- Lukyanov, F. (2016) *Putin's Foreign Policy: The Quest to Restore Russia's Rightful Place*. *Foreign Affairs*, 93(3), 30-37.
- Lutterbeck, D., Engelbrecht, G. (2009) *The West and Russia in the Mediterranean: Towards a Renewed Rivalry?* *Mediterranean Politics* 14(3), 385-406. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13629390903346905>.
- Madeira, V. (2020) *Gas, Influence Spur Russia's Eastern Mediterranean Mediation Move*. The Cambridge Security Initiative. Retrieved from <https://thecsi.org.uk>.
- Memorandum o politike Rossii v Sredizemnomor'ye [Memorandum on Russian Policy in the Mediterranean]. (1995, November 27) Retrieved from <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/902056512>.
- Morskaya doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii [Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation]. (2015, June 26) Retrieved from <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/555631869>. (In Russian)
- Morskaya doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii na period do 2020 goda [Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2020]. (2001) Retrieved from <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/902010411>. (In Russian)
- Nopens, P. (2013) *Geopolitical Shifts in the Eastern Mediterranean*. *Security Policy Brief*, 43, 1-9.
- Oswell, J. A. (2013) *Opening the Black Box: An Examination of Structural Realist and Neoclassical Realist Explanations of Foreign Policy* [Master's thesis, University of Alberta]. Retrieved from [https://era.library.ualberta.ca/items/9da9956c-6f48-4872-b98c-a4b3589c45e9/view/116a1c01-e618-4582-81ba-8f56db0ddb04/Oswell\\_James\\_Fall-202013.pdf](https://era.library.ualberta.ca/items/9da9956c-6f48-4872-b98c-a4b3589c45e9/view/116a1c01-e618-4582-81ba-8f56db0ddb04/Oswell_James_Fall-202013.pdf).
- Parlar Dal, E., Erşen E. (Eds.) (2020) *Russia in the Changing International System*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Perlez, J. (2012) *Panetta Outlines New Weaponry for Pacific*. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/02/world/asia/leon-panetta-outlines-new-weaponry-for-pacific.html>.
- Pierini, M. (2020) *New Power Struggles in the Mediterranean*. In *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2020*. European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed)
- Pierini, M. (2021) *Russia's Posture in the Mediterranean: Implications for NATO and Europe*. Carnegie Europe. Retrieved from <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/06/08/russia-s-posture-in-mediterranean-implications-for-nato-and-europe-pub-84670>.
- Reder, J. M. (2013) *The Medvedev Years: An Examination of the External Forces & Internal Dynamics Affecting the Kremlin's Foreign Policy Decisions* [PhD dissertation, University of Hull]. Retrieved from <https://hydra.hull.ac.uk/assets/hull:7197a/content>.
- Ripsman, N. M., Taliaferro, J. W., Lobell, S. E. (2016) *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Rosneft Information Division. (2017) *Rosneft Closes the Deal to Acquire a 30% Stake in Zohr Gas Field*. Rosneft. Retrieved from <https://www.rosneft.com/press/releases/item/188045/>.
- Rumer, E., Sokolsky R. (2021) *Russia in the Mediterranean: Here to Stay*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Sakwa, R. (2019) *The International System and Models of Global Order: Liberal Internationalism vs Conservative Internationalism*. *Russia in Global Affairs*, 17(3), 8-31.
- Wiclawski, J. (2011) *Contemporary Realism and the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 2(1), 170-179.
- Zonova, T. (2015) *Mediterranean Trend in the Russia's Foreign Policy*. *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali*, 82(4), 521-530. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43785687>.