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Master's thesis

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**RUSSIA'S QUEST FOR INTERNATIONAL STATUS DURING
VLADIMIR PUTIN'S THIRD PRESIDENTIAL TERM**

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I have written the Master's thesis independently.

All works and major viewpoints of the other authors, data from other sources of literature and elsewhere used for writing this paper have been referenced.

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Abstract

The following thesis aims to research Russia's status-seeking strategy after Putin's return to power in 2012, which marked the emergence of state's aggressive foreign policy. Shortly after the annexation of Crimea, Russia made an extraordinary move and first time after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow projected its military power outside of post-Soviet region – in Syria. In addition to this, during Putin's third term as president, discourses about Russia's unique civilizational identity and state's commitment to defend traditional values worldwide appeared in the Russian politics and public space. Drawing upon the social identity theory, this thesis seeks to examine whether Russia's recent military campaigns coupled with resurgence of civilizational and conservative discourses can be considered as the main constituencies of its desire to enhance state's international status and standing. The following work pays a particular attention to socio-psychological factors, such as need for positive social identity and national self-esteem, subjective perceptions, status-related emotions, while analyzing Russia's status-seeking behavior. It also tries to address the current debates about the status markers in a contemporary international system and the concluding part of thesis sets out to review the specific markers of Russia's international status from the point of view of its ruling elite. The overall implication of this work is to research and unpack the foundations of Russia current assertiveness that can contribute to a better understanding of its goals and future activities.

Keywords: *Russia, international status, status-seeking, great power, independent centre of global power, social identity theory, identity management strategies, subjective perceptions*

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List of abbreviations

SIT – Social Identity Theory

SIT/IR – Social Identity Theory applied in International Relations

G8 – Group of Eight

UNSC – United Nation's Security Council

CDA – Critical Discourse Analysis

FPC – Foreign Policy Concept

ROC – Russian Orthodox Church

Introduction

Russia's assertive foreign policy during Putin's third presidential tenure sparked fierce debates about the sources of its bellicose actions. Along with an overt rivalry with the West, exemplified by its annexation of Crimea and military support to Assad's regime in Syria, Moscow has made a civilization turn and consequently, discourse about Russia's unique civilization identity has re-emerged in the mainstream political debates. Furthermore, Putin's third term marked the resurgence of traditional values. These developments resulted in ostensible antagonism between Russia's traditional values and Western liberal values, while mounting great power sentiments in Russia exacerbated the level of confrontation with the Western major powers. It leads to the heightened need for exploring the origins of Russia's activities from the different theoretical perspectives. Hence, the thesis examines the socio-psychological foundations of Russia's belligerent foreign policy conduct, along with its new ideological course. Consistent with this task, this study investigates how Russia's political elite perceives and interprets the behavior of the Western countries and then how it constructs state's policy based on these perceptions. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to analyze the role of factors, such as subjective perceptions, status concern and related emotions affect in Moscow's foreign policy conduct and domestic developments during Putin's third term. The main assumptions of this work are the following. Firstly, the two episodes of Russia's aggressive foreign policy mentioned above are largely driven by the Kremlin's longing to tackle with its great power status inconsistency problem and its current assertiveness aims at external validation of its image as a great power.¹ Secondly, recurrence of civilizational discourse and conservative turn might serve for the purpose of enhancing the status of Russia as an independent pole in a multipolar world. The theoretical framework based on the social identity theory (SIT) seems quite pertinent to research social-psychological aspects of Russia's status-related assertive gestures. What is more, this particular theory will be used in conjunction with constructivism, given that this work mainly focuses on Russia's subjective perceptions of its status, treatment from the Western countries etc. According to social constructivism,

¹ Status inconsistency denotes the situation, when actor believes that its status deserves a greater recognition by other actors than they respect and recognize it at the present.

social actions take place in a particular social context and social actors attach subjective meaning to it (Priya 2016).

The social identity theory in international relations is applied to research states' effort to create a positive social identity and improve their status and relative standing. As the traditional social identity theory (SIT) posits, individuals have an intrinsic need to enhance their self-esteem and maintain positive social identity that can be gained by membership in a positively evaluated social group/category. Positive evaluation is attained through favorable social comparison to the relevant reference group. However, if the social comparison is unfavorable, groups strive to improve it and obtain the positive social identity. By doing so, they have to adopt the behavioral strategies—identity management strategies, such as social mobility, social competition or social creativity (Tajfel & Turner 1979, p. 43-45).

Likewise, according to SIT/IR framework, the political leadership of a country is motivated by the psychological need to improve nation self-esteem and maintain positive social identity and this motivation incites them to pursue the different identity management strategies (Clunan 2009, 2012,). For this reason, they develop national self-images, based on which, the ruling elite identifies certain countries and regions as would-be in-groups and out-groups. Construction of in-groups and out-groups is made based on perceived “similarity and dissimilarity along with value dimensions as well as material and status dimensions.” Perception of shared commonalities encourages states to consider themselves as members of one social category - in-group, whereas out-groups are formed on the basis of the lack of shared ties. These social categories can be *inter alia* “great power”, “the West”, “nuclear power” etc. (Clunan 2009, p. 48). Consequently, in order to maintain a positive social identity, political elite pursues identity management strategies toward those in-groups and out-groups. This thesis describes Russia's current leadership as proponents of the Statist national self-image. For this particular self-image, the great power club represents the in-group and Russia considers that it has a legitimate place in this group. However, Moscow claims that other group members, mainly Western established great powers do not respect its status and privileges that undermines Russia's relative standing in the great power rankings. On these grounds, it develops a competitive strategy towards these countries with an aim to improve its relative standing in the great power in-group.

On the other hand, the West represents the partial out-group, from which Moscow seeks to maintain a positive distinctiveness and by so doing to improve its status as an independent center in a multipolar world. Significantly, great power group and the West are two overlapping social categories that make the latter not fully out-group, but just partial out-group. In other words, the West is an out-group for Russia, because the current regime claims that Russia is impossible to become the Western country (lack of shared ties), however, it is partially out-group, because the Western countries, which are members of Russia's great power are also members of "the West" social category. Anne Clunan dubs it as cross-cutting group membership in a sense that similar to individuals, states also have multiple identities (2009, p. 49). This thesis also argues that subjective perceptions, beliefs and emotions have a significant influence on Moscow's decision while choosing the specific identity management strategy towards in-group and out-group.

Research problem. This thesis assumes that the annexation of Crimea and Russia's intervention in Syria, its civilizational turn and resurgence of traditional values represent the essential elements of its status-seeking strategy. Much of the intellectual debates have been focused on the domestic factors, such as regime stability, fear of the "colour revolution", attempt to distract people's attention from the mounting economic problems, as the main determinants of the Kremlin's policy (see Liik 2015, Gorenburg 2014, The Economist 2016). Undeniably, these aspects have played an important role in Russia's strategic calculation, however, these approaches tend to overlook the psychological, social and emotional motives behind Russia's foreign policy behavior and the new ideological course. Hence, those authors, who focus on the instrumental rationality of Russia's behavior, do not pay sufficient attention to factors, such as need for positive social identity and national self-esteem, status concern and related emotions. Furthermore, traditional theoretical accounts do not provide a sufficient analysis of the behavioral consequences of states' perceived role in international relations and historically determined aspirations of its foreign policy. Finally yet importantly, through the prism of traditional theories, above-mentioned four cases might seem disconnected from each other. However, this thesis seeks to provide a comprehensive and monolithic theoretical framework, which will enable us to find the commonalities and bind them together, as the main cornerstones of Russia's status-seeking strategy after 2012.

Apparently, the dominant theoretical approaches put forward different perspectives on state's concerns about its relative status. Proponents of realism focus on material components of the status and argue that state can significantly enhance it by means of power maximization. More on that, this school suggests that positive status represents a national interest for countries and dissatisfaction with the status or attempts to undermine it can lead to the great power wars (Mearsheimer 2006; Wohlforth 2009, as cited in Clunan 2014, p. 283). However, this line of reasoning no longer seems viable, given that the increasing material capabilities solely cannot enhance state's status. In this vein, this thesis argues that status issue is not reducible to the material capabilities and it has acquired the normative dimensions as well. In contrast to realism, liberalism focuses on norm adoption and membership in the major institutions as an opportunity for states to improve their relative status (Newmann 2008; Suzuki 2008). Nevertheless, Russia seems subdued to subscribe to the Western liberal norms and relentlessly contests the prevalence of this value system in international relations. What is more, it seeks to achieve higher status by means of maintaining a distinctive identity from the West. Likewise, the second promise of liberalism also seems unfeasible, given that although Russia is a member of the major international organizations that is considered as the significant status marker in the West, Moscow still expresses its dissatisfaction with its existing status recognition. It generates the need for further research to find out how Russia understands its status recognition, why the current relative status is insufficient for it etc. As long as Russia's foreign policy is getting more and more unpredictable and aggressive, we need a better understanding of its status-related concerns, since there is a growing support to the claim that it represents one of the main pillars of its assertiveness.

This study covers the period from 2012 to 2016 and suggests that Russia's political leadership pursues a mixture of identity management strategies to enhance its international status. *The main purpose of this study is* to research the existing links between subjective perceptions, psychological needs (positive and distinctive social identity, higher-status) and related emotions (ressentiment, vengeance) caused by its status dissatisfaction that might contribute to the development of Russia's foreign policy course and the main ideological changes – civilisational and conservative turns. This study also seeks to find out sources of Russia's status-related concerns and explains Moscow's modus operandi in the discursive

construction of its current resurgence using its humiliation narrative. Given this background, this thesis sets out to answer the following **research questions**:

1. *How Russia's quest for great power status is exemplified in its foreign policy conduct during Putin's third presidential term?*
2. *How Russia seeks to reinforce the normative aspects of its desired status as a sovereign pole in a multipolar world?*

This work also seeks to address three additional questions:

3. *How subjective perceptions and emotional factors instigate Russia's status-seeking behavior?*
4. *Which behavioral strategies Russia is using to enhance its international status and relative standing?*
5. *What are the markers of Russia's status recognition from the perspective of its ruling elite?*

As it will be explained in the methodology part, I am using the interpretive method of social science research. In contrast to positivist approach, interpretive approach does not intend to research causality and for this method, a researcher does not predefine the independent and dependent variables, therefore it is not a common practice to have the clearly articulated hypotheses in the beginning of the study. Based on it, the ensuing section does not present hypotheses, but only basic assumptions and here is the brief summary of the main arguments:

- 1) *Consistent with the social competition strategy, Russia intervened in Ukraine and provided support to Assad's regime with an intention to overhaul its great power status inconsistency problem. Russia needs to obtain the social recognition from other great powers as a fully-fledged member of this social category to heal its status inconsistency problem. Recognition of its status from other great powers would enhance Russia's positive social identity that derives from group membership and would fix its status inconsistency problem.*
- 2) *Consistent with the social creativity, strategy, political establishment revived discourse about Russia, as a unique state-civilization and exalted conservative values with an intention to enhance normative aspects of its desired status as an independent center in a*

multipolar world. Russia believes that it must become an independent civilizational pole in a multipolar world. This aspiration lends credence to Moscow's endeavors to develop a distinctive civilization identity, underpinning to this status. The unique civilizational identity is a recently re-emerged dimension, on which Russia wants to be compared with the West out-group to gain its respectful place by dint of proving its moral and civilizational superiority vis-à-vis the West out-group.

- 3) *Russia's subjective perception of impermeability of great power in-group borders, coupled with viewing status hierarchy between Russia and the 'established great powers', between Russia and the West as illegitimate and unstable, pushed Russia to adopt social competition and social creativity strategies towards this in-group and out-group.* In addition, perceived humiliation and consequent emotions played a significant role in Russia's decision to pursue specific identity management strategies. Tajfel notes that the selection of specific identity management strategy largely depends on the perception of higher group status as legitimate or illegitimate, stable or instable (Tajfel 1978, as it is cited in Hinkle et al. 2011, p. 167). According to traditional SIT, individual adopts social mobility strategy, only if s/he perceives boundaries of the higher status group as permeable. However, if higher-status group borders are perceived as impermeable and status hierarchy as illegitimate/unstable, then social creativity or social competition strategies seem to be the viable strategies. Relationship and status hierarchy between lower-status group and higher-status group can be perceived as legitimate and stable, if lower-status group thinks that the existing status quo is justified and impossible to change. If status hierarchy and existing status allocation are seen as legitimate and stable, social competition or creativity strategies are less likely to be adopted by this group, because lower-status groups are aware of the fact that it can hardly undermine the status quo. (Brown & Ross 1982, as it is cited in Hinke et al. p. 170; Klippenberg 1989, as it is cited in Clunan 2009, p. 35; Larson & Shecvhenko 2010, 2014; Ward 2014).

Against this backdrop, this thesis introduces a ***number of novel departures***: 1. This thesis investigates how Russia carries out different identity management strategies to achieve its status-related aspirations during Putin's third term. The only author so far, who has written about Russia's conduct of identity management strategies during Putin's third term, is Alfred Evans (2015). However, he focuses on social creativity strategy and

conservative values only, while my thesis introduces three additional cases for analysis, plus it incorporates the new identity management strategy - social competition. 2. This thesis examines Russia's recent military actions as part of its social competition strategy for status, while the previous works about Russia and social identity theory have never done it. In this vein, this work provides an updated knowledge about the different facets of identity management strategies within Russia's context 3. This work brings together two ideational partners - social constructivism and social identity theory from two different disciplines in an effort to build the bridge between them and seeks to give a consistent account of the role of subjective perceptions, psychological needs and emotional factors in the creation of states' status-related aspirations. 4. Russia's case is also different in a sense that in contrast to other rising or status dissatisfied powers after the end of the bipolar system, Russia is ready to use its hard power to attain respect and status recognition from the 'legitimate great powers'. Given this background, this thesis also seeks to examine the existing links between status inconsistency and interstate conflict/violence.

As for the main limitations of this study, this work does not argue that status aspiration is the only driving factor of Russia's assertive foreign policy and the ideological developments, but it assumes that it can be deemed as one of the main motivations of the Kremlin, exemplified in the particular foreign policy behavior. Second, I lack space here to analyze as to whether and to what extent these identity management strategies have already assisted Russia to enhance its status, therefore it is not the aim of this study. Finally, this work does not claim that Russia's assertiveness was objectively instigated by the West's actions (disrespect of its status). Rather, it seeks to analyze how Russia's current assertiveness was constructed based on Moscow's subjective perceptions related to its status respect and recognition. Therefore, the West's particular behaviors will be analyzed as seen from the Russian perspective and this thesis does not seek to investigate, whether Russia's perceptions are real or unreal, are in accord with the West's actual recognition of Russia's status or not. Likewise, the thesis does not intend to investigate whether Russia's humiliation is real or not, rather it should be viewed as the specific social construct, not necessarily the objective one.

Methodology of study

As mentioned earlier, I am using an interpretive approach of social science research. According to this approach, social reality is different from natural reality and what is more, it does not recognize the existence of objective reality in contrast to the positivist science (Gray 2009). Interpretive social science views facts as embedded within a meaning system and they are not impartial, objective, or neutral (Newmann 1997, as it is cited in Stuart et al, p. 33). In contrast to positivists approach, interpretive approach does not rely on causal laws and in an interpretive case study, the researcher analyses, interprets and theorizes about the phenomenon against the backdrop of a theoretical framework (Antwi & Hamza 2015, p. 219). The positivist researchers begin process with introduction of cause-effect relationship and causal laws, because they do not trust to subjective perceptions. By contrast, interpretive approach aims to explain the subjective reasons and meanings that lie behind the certain social actions (Blanche et al 2006). Interpretive researcher seeks to learn more about actor's views and seeks to find out how these views might instigate particular behavior. Furthermore, as long as the interpretive approach does not intend to explain causalities, we do not have the predefined dependent and independent variables and social process is not encapsulated in hypothetical deductions (Kaplan and Maxwell 1994, p. 35). It also does not aim to produce a new theory, rather, it seeks to evaluate and refine the pre-existing theories (Antwi & Hamza 2015, p. 219). Interpretive approach and social constructivism seek to comprehend the particular phenomena by means of evaluating the meanings actors assign to them, therefore looking at their subjective experiences is important to grasp how they construct meaning.

This thesis mainly relies on the qualitative research methods in a sense that it represents the best way of researching complex social group behavior. Qualitative methods help me to analyze what meanings do Russia's political elite give to the different events, how do they evaluate the West's respect of Russia's status, what experiences do they have from this situation and how subjective perceptions might influence Russia's actions. I mainly relied on the discourse analysis and in particular, the Critical Discourse Analysis, which sees discursive practices as an important form of social practice in shaping the social world. From this perspective, discourse reproduces and changes the system of meanings, contributes to the construction of social identities and social relations (Jorgensen & Phillips

2002, p. 70). The main aim of CDA is to explore the links between language use and social practice and intends to shed light on the linguistic discursive dimension of social phenomena. According to the CDA, language-as-discourse is a form of action through which people can change the world and objects acquire meaning only through discourse (Ibidem).

The first part of the study mainly reviews the secondary sources, different theoretical literature on status and status inconsistency problem, state's humiliation and identity management strategies. Subsequently, while analyzing the humiliation motif, I look at the official speeches of Russia's political leadership as well as the articles written by different Russian and Western scholars. The matter is that Russia's humiliation narrative is interpreted by different actors, such as the political leaders, scholars, public figures for the sake of instilling this feeling into the society. The next part about subjective perceptions and emotions also consists of the analysis of different speeches and academic writings on these issues. When it comes to the empirical part, I mainly rely on different reports, analysis, studies in order to gather the information about Russia's behavior on the ground in Ukraine and Syria and by doing so, I examine the presence of indicators of social competition strategy in its foreign policy conduct. As for the final part, it mainly relied on the discourse analysis the speeches, interviews, and articles by President Vladimir Putin, foreign affairs minister Sergey Lavrov. In addition to this, Russia's state official documents and different academic writings were used for the sake of the better analysis of new discourses.

Theoretical background

This thesis seeks to contribute to building bridges between two theories – social constructivism and social psychology. Allegedly, these two ideational partners have a potential to strengthen each other in the analysis of state's foreign policy, since they seem viable to address those issues, which rationalist/materialist approaches fail to cover (Vaughn et al 2011). This thesis employs the social identity theory from the social psychology to examine Russia's craving for positive and distinctive social identity, whereas social constructivism is used to examine the role of agents' subjective perceptions of the world, its status, how other states treat them etc. Russia's subjective perceptions

sustain its psychological needs, such as positive social identity and national self-esteem that shape its behavior. Thus, what connect these two is believe in the centrality of human subjectivity and social identity to our understanding of the political world and their focus on ideational factors (ibidem). Subjective perceptions and social-psychological motivations drive social actions.

According to the social identity theory, social groups/social categories are positioned in a vertical status hierarchy and lower-status groups have a psychological need to improve their relative position. On these grounds, groups adopt identity management strategies, which help them to establish a positive comparison with higher-status groups. Consistent with this logic, aspiration to become a member of a higher-status social category plays an important role in shaping state's social identity and this is where social constructivism and social psychology overlap. Status is a social phenomenon, which denotes individuals' membership into the particular social category and along similar lines, individual's social identity stems from membership in various social groups (Tajfel 1978).

According to Tajfel and Turner, "social identity consists of those aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself as belonging" (1979, p. 101). Similarly, nation's positive social identity derives from the state's identification with a high status group. Social identity is relative, comparative and has certain behavioral consequences (Ibidem). For this reason, groups always seek to identify themselves with a high status group, however, when the latter derogates their aspiration to join this group and therefore comparison with this group is unfavorable, SIT argues that lower-status group can adopt identity management strategies. Hence, the state becomes status-seeker, because it represents the group consisting of people/nation, who have the inherited psychological need for favorable comparison to the higher status group and to the significant 'Other'.

This thesis also argues that along with an unfavorable comparison with the 'legitimate great powers' and the West, Russia's existing self-comparison with its past Self, with its relevant past, is also unfavorable that augments Moscow's status-seeking behavior. In other words, Moscow aspires to gain recognition from the 'established great powers' to maintain a favorable *social comparison* with them and in the meantime, it wants to regain back its great power status to maintain a favorable *temporal comparison* with its own past Self. As

Waever puts it, “state identities can coalesce around both social and temporal forms of differentiation” (1996, as it is cited in Freedman 2016, p. 807). Secondly, Moscow seeks to improve its unfavorable comparison with the West by means of maintaining the positive and distinctive identity from this out-group, the significant ‘Other’. For this reason, it pursues the different identity management strategies. Recognition and social affirmation by other group members increases the national self-esteem, which together with belonging to some groups is fundamental, psychological need of people (Hogg/Abrams 2003; De Cremer/Mulder 2007, as it is cited in Wolf 2011). By contrast, devaluation of state’s relative standing and status or attempts to lower the state’s rank on which it grounds its status, is a humiliating experience. Humiliation triggers an instinctive response pattern, such as resentment, anger and vengefulness, an essential part of the human psyche (Wolf 2011).

Many of the theoretical debates have converged around the statement that the status has material, normative and psychological dimensions. Allegedly, inherited psychological desire for collective self-esteem incites individuals to identify themselves with those social groups, which can enhance their positive social identity. Similarly, states and their political leaders are motivated to augment national, collective self-esteem by country’s membership into the privileged group/social category, which increases state’s relative status. Given that great powerness remains an indispensable element of Russia’s national identity and represents its intrinsic historical aspiration, Russia’s great power status inconsistency and the U.S. dominance in the international system contain a danger of reducing people’s national self-esteem. As Russia’s political elite claims, the perceived reluctance of the ‘established great powers’ to acknowledge Russia’s status turns into its humiliation that instigates the different emotions, such as resentment and feeling of vengefulness. Therefore, political leadership employs different identity management strategies to overhaul its status-related concerns and escape from alleged humiliation, which is discursively constructed by different mobilizing actors. Humiliation is also about perceptions, since it is difficult to measure, whether people really feel humiliated and whether this humiliation is “real” or not. Therefore, we look at subjective-psychological definition of humiliation as it is articulated in Russia’s official and public discourses.

From traditional SIT to SIT/IR framework and level of analysis

When we use the social identity theory to research the status phenomenon in international relations, we should refer to it as SIT/IR framework, in accordance with Ward's suggestion (Ward 2015, p. 2). It could be argued that competition between individuals as well as between states for higher status has a long historical pedigree. As long as a psychological need for self-esteem is inherent to human preferences, status aspirations play a crucial role in this process, given that high status creates individuals' positive self-esteem. Similarly, state's positive international status represents a necessary component for collective self-esteem of people. (Paez et al. 1998, p. 220; Clunan 2009, p. 24). As Richard Ned Lebow puts it, preserving "self-esteem is a universal drive...state's may risk much more for status and esteem than for security or wealth (2008, as it is cited in Liu 2015). The most prominent scholars of SIT, Tajfel and Turner employed this theory to explain the effects of comparison between high and low status groups and they viewed the collective social status i.e. status of the group as a consequence of intergroup comparison. As they argued, group's low subjective status position vis-à-vis the reference groups can hardly create a positive social identity for members of this group, whereas membership into the group with high subjective status position enhances positive social identity of group's member individuals. (Tajfel & Turner 1979; Clunan 2009; Larson & Shevchenko 2010; 2014). Group can be conceptualized "as a collection of individuals, who perceive themselves to be members of the same social category, share some emotional involvement in this common definition of themselves, and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group and of their membership of it" (Tajfel & Turner 1979, p. 40). According to the traditional SIT, social competition and social creativity are collective strategies of social identity management and the entire group (not particular individuals) pursues it to enhance group status (Ward 2015, p.12). Against this backdrop, SIT/IR framework posits that state/nation (as a group) can pursue social competition or creativity strategies vis-à-vis higher-status group in order to improve national/collective self-esteem, i.e. self-esteem of its own people. A nation can be understood as a social category, which needs to be positively evaluated among other nations. Therefore, Russia's recognition as a fully-fledged great power and as an independent center is supposed to lead into state's

positive social comparison and social identity, respectively that is allegedly can have a positive effect on its national self-esteem.

As you can see, the main difference between SIT and SIT/IR is the level of analysis, namely it is elevated from individual to state level. Since this theory is designed to explain the human behavior, critics might argue that the state cannot become the subject of this theory, because the psychological need for positive self-esteem of individuals is inappropriate to be considered as a foundation of state behavior. Nevertheless, Wight argues that group intentions are those intentions of collective, which include collective agency. People pursue their common goals as part of the group that is the state/nation (1999, cited in Wendt 2004, p. 279 – 298). Significantly, SIT also studies the relations among groups. McSweeney's argument also lends credence to the assumption that individual needs can be attributed to collectives, such as state, given that "the starting-point to understanding the collective phenomenon primarily rests at the individual level". (McSweeney 1999, cited in Salkute 2016, p. 13). Along these lines, the individuals' need for positive social identity is possible to be achieved by identifying with the group (nation), and the latter has to achieve positive social identity by membership into higher-status group/social category (for instance, great power ranks). According to the SIT, "when individuals identify with a group, they experience actions toward the group as if aimed at them personally...members react emotionally to events that thwart of further group goals" (Sasley 2011, cited in Larson & Shevchenko 2014). Therefore, elevating the level of analysis from individual level to the interstate level seems to be justified. Finally yet importantly, when people have a strong feeling of attachment to their nation and leaders, they pay a great deal of attention to state's external image and status. For SIT, group is more than just the sum of individuals (Wolf 2011, p. 118). Having discussed the key postulates of social identity theory, the ensuing section is devoted to the conceptualization of status phenomenon and status-seeking behavior in international relations.

State's international status and status-seeking behavior

According to Joshua Freedman's definition, "status is a social phenomenon that represents an individual's recognized position within an established hierarchy" (2016, p. 803). Anne Clunan additionally argues that "status is contingent on socially constructed

standards of belonging that are normative, not just material.... status is a key source of authority in world politics, and as such is a resource to be competed over and sought after” (2014, p. 274). Welch and colleagues define status as “collective beliefs about a given state’s ranking on valued attributes (wealth, coercive capabilities, culture)...in international politics, status manifests itself in two distinct, but related ways: as membership in a defined club of actors, and as relative standing within such a club” (2014, p. 7). The last point is of particular importance for our study, because Russia considers itself to be a member of the great power club, however, political leadership claims that other members challenge to its relative standing within this club. Status has *collective*, *subjective*, and *relative* nature and is recognized by means of voluntary deference by other countries with the same status. To begin with, status is *collective*, inasmuch as it rests on collective judgment and consensus within a group. In other words, only states, which already hold a certain social position, must bestow this social status to another status seekers and no single state is entitled to unilaterally confer status (Marshall 1990, cited in Welch et al 2014, p. 8). Second, status is *subjective*, since it acquires meaning through other actors’ perceptions and therefore it is hard to measure. What is more, status has material and non-material dimensions and whereas tangible features of status (military size, economic capabilities) are relatively easy to measure, intangible features (cultural achievements, soft power, moral authority) are harder to be measured. Third, status is *relative*, described as a “positional good” and socially scarce resource, because not everyone can enjoy it. Elite groups limit membership into their clubs, because if everyone can become a member and enjoy the status as a member of it, then membership value is diminishing for everyone (Welch et al 2014; Lake 2014). Intriguingly, SIT/IR has challenged to the widespread zero-sum understanding of status as a “positional good”. The traditional theories deem status comparison as a zero-sum concept in a sense that when one state improves its status, another state’s status automatically declines. Contrary to this accepted wisdom, SIT theorists pointed out that the state possesses multiple attributes (military strength, economic capacity, cultural achievements, soft power), therefore status comparison does not need to be winner-take all competition inevitably, but it can be multidimensional (Welch et al 2014; Clunan 2014).

As for the concept of status-seeking phenomenon, states signal about their status aspirations by means of verbal statements and status-seeking behavior. In the case of

Russia, political leadership signals about the desired higher verbally in their statements as well as its foreign policy conduct clearly indicate to this aspiration. Just as status consists of material and non-material aspects, indicators of status-seeking behavior can likewise be divided into two categories – material and symbolic. Activities, such as acquisition of high-technology weapons, rapid increase of military capabilities, intervention in external conflicts can be deemed as material indicators of status-seeking. As for symbolic indicators, it includes promotion of a state's culture and achievements, alternative normative value system, hosting mega events and other activities, thereby state aims to affect the perceptions of a wider audience (Welch et al 2014, p.12)

States and in particular, major powers strive to enhance their status for the political and psychological purposes. To begin with, when major power gains the social recognition of its status from the community of states, this state receives legitimacy to pursue a more vigorous foreign policy, exercise leadership on a wide range of issues, reduce costs of acting as a major power and play an important role in international affairs and conflict resolutions (Volgy & Corbetta 2014, p. 60). When it comes to status-seeking behavior for psychological purposes, obtaining higher status creates positive social identity for the nation concerned and enhances its national self-esteem, since this state is recognized as privileged and significant player on the international arena. Along similar lines, there is a consensus among scholars that “the great power status provides its citizens with positive individual and collective self-esteem and, therefore, is an important factor in shaping and affecting national identity” (Crocker and Luhtanen, 1990; Mercer, 1995, Westle, 2011, cited in Urnov 2013). Hence, this thesis argues that Russia seeks to revamp its unfavorable *social comparison* with established great powers by obtaining social recognition of its great powerness. Secondly, Russia seeks to revamp its unfavorable *temporal comparison* with its past Self by regaining its great power status. Thirdly, it strives to overhaul an unfavorable *social comparison* with the West and tries to maintain a distinctive identity from it that would enhance its positions as an independent pole of global power. Given this background, the ensuing section sets out to review the great power status and status inconsistency problem.

Great power status, status inconsistency and recognition

Great power is just one type of major powers and therefore, we should unpack the major power concept first. Volgy and colleagues argue that state can be deemed as a major power, if it has an *opportunity* to uphold its interest in international relations using “unusual capabilities” that primarily entails military might and economic strength. Secondly, major power is required to demonstrate the *willingness* to act and pursue “unusually broad and expansive foreign policies beyond its own region or immediate neighborhood.” Thirdly, major power must enjoy the *status attribution*, which entails self-reference and in-group attributions. Self-reference means that the political elite and people should view their own country as a major power. Likewise, as Weber puts it, “in order to be a great power, a power has to think of itself in terms of being great” (1991, cited in Newmann 2008, p. 130). In-group attribution means that other major powers acknowledge the state’s unusual capabilities and willingness to play an important role in international affairs and on these grounds, they recognize this state as a major power. If state meets minimal empirical thresholds related to these conditions, then it can be considered as a major power (Volgy et al 2014; Corbeta et al 2011). Thus, according to this line of reasoning, Russia needs to obtain social recognition of its great power status from other established, ‘legitimate great powers’ and also, Russian people and political elite should conceive this country as a great power.

Major Powers can be categorized into three different groups - superpower, great power and regional power. In Barry Buzan’s account, superpower is a country, which extends political, military, cultural and economic reach across the entire international system, holds enough capabilities to project its power globally and its superpower status is recognized by other states as well. Great powers lack the capabilities of superpowers, but their reach goes beyond more than one region. In the meantime, they must be “recognized by other states in the international system to be salient at the systemic level in the present or near future.” Finally, Buzan notes that regional power doesn’t possess capabilities of superpowers and “others do not ascribe them any salience at the system level and see them as relevant only in their regional contexts” (2004, cited in Shankar & Mahesh 2014, p. 165). Significantly, it is insufficient for great power to assert its status unilaterally, but other states must also “accord the right to play a part in determining issues that affect the peace and security of

the international system” (Bull 1995, p. 196). Interestingly, Russia recognizes the United States as the sole superpower (Yuhas 2016), however, the U.S. is reluctant to recognize Russia as a great power and Obama even described it as just a regional power, which is “acting out of weaknesses” (Wilson 2016).

Having regarded the three above-mentioned criteria, Volgy et al discern two different types of major power status. Major power can be viewed as status consistent, when status attribution of major power (recognition of its status by other major powers and self-reference) is consistent with its capabilities and foreign policy behavior (2014, p. 63). As Suzuki argues, status consistent great powers can be dubbed as the ‘legitimate great powers’ (2008). These states share a number of commonalities, namely “they have certain special rights and duties to play a part in determining issues that affect the peace and security of the international system...these states are expected to uphold the core norms of international society and play an active part in reinforcing them” (Bull 1995, p. 196). Furthermore, status consistent, ‘legitimate great powers’ “enjoy mutual recognition as equals with one another” (Suzuki 2008, p. 50). By contrast, status inconsistency takes place either “when major power status attribution is not in sync with the capabilities and/or foreign policy pursuits of the state in question, or when states are inconsistent in awarding status to a major power” (Volgy et al 2014, p. 63). Freedman dubs this phenomenon as status insecurity (2016, p. 797) and Suzuki calls such state as the ‘frustrated great power’ (2008, p.51). Among status inconsistent powers, the authors also single out two sub-categories: status underachiever is a major power, which is unable to enjoy status recognition corresponding to its capabilities and foreign policy behavior. When it comes to the status overachiever great power, it denotes the major power, status recognition of which is higher than its capabilities and opportunity to play the role of major power (Ibidem). With an aim to overhaul their status inconsistency problem, such major powers tend to engage in status competition and it might entail belligerent actions as well. Status underachiever major power is more prone to tackle with its status inconsistency problem by means of aggressive actions than the overachiever major power. The former has capabilities and willingness to act like a major power, therefore it is less risk-averse than overachievers, which has recognition, but lacks great power opportunity/capabilities. Judging by Russia’s actions in post-Soviet space and its incessant demand from the

Western countries to respect its interests, Russia can be deemed as a status inconsistent, underachiever major power, which claims to lack the recognition of its great power privileges from other great powers. Significantly, Russia as an independent pole of a multipolar world is also a specific status, which requires the social recognition from other dominant players and in particular, the United States as a leading state within “the West” social category.

Nevertheless, this thesis argues that the available evidences seem to suggest that categorization of status inconsistent powers as underachievers and overachievers can be excessively dichotomous and unsuitable categorization to classify all major powers. For instance, many commentators argue that Russia lacks the necessary capabilities to be a great power and in the meantime, it obtains the limited status recognition from the established great powers. In spite of these significant deficiencies, its leadership still claims that Russia is a great power! Therefore, this thesis suggests that reliance on two factors only – capabilities and status attributes reduces the validity of indicators for measuring Russia’s status inconsistency problem. Moreover, formal markers of great power status, such as the membership in the UNSC and G8 also seem to be insufficient to measure the degree of social recognition of country’s great power status. The point being that, notwithstanding its membership in both these clubs, Russia still considers that other great powers do not treat this country as an equal great power and ignore Moscow’s interest. It lends credence to the main argument of this thesis, according to which status recognition and equal treatment depends on subjective, psychological perceptions of the state’s leadership.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia’s status has reasonably diminished in the eyes of other great powers, whereas Russia is not going to accept this and Moscow’s foreign policy behavior manifests the willingness to prove country’s great powerness. Hence, this thesis assumes that discrepancy between country’s self-perception, status-related expectations and how this country perceives other great powers cherish its status can trigger the feeling of status inconsistency and instigate status-seeking behavior and conflict. As Hanna Smith puts it, “when the self-perception of a state is in discord with how the state is perceived by others, the potential for conflict grows” (2014, p. 357). Thus, “perceptions conflict” is underlying to the status conflict between Russia and the Western

great powers. In Freedman's words "We cannot separate an actor's status from their recognition, we can also not separate an actor's status recognition from their subjective perception of what such recognition ought to look like" (2016, p. 816). The 'frustrated great powers' seek to convince 'legitimate great powers' that they also deserve to be recognized and in an effort to do so, they engage in 'recognition games' and seek to obtain the social recognition (Ringmar 2002, Suzuki 2008).

Nevertheless, why status recognition is so important for countries? From constructivism perspective, status recognition is an essential social act for stabilizing the country's status in the social order. As Ringmar underlines, "the desire for recognition is the core human desire, central to our sense of who and what we are" (2002, p. 119). In Wolf's account, recognition of state's status represents "a dutiful social affirmation of one's subjective sense of importance," whereas non-recognition "is always seen as an unjustifiable denial of social rank" (2011). Recognition can be successful, only if both sides - lower and higher status states agree on what constitutes status recognition and what does granting desired status entail (Freedman 2016, p. 798). Suzuki argues that country is accepted into higher-status group, "firstly, when this country is treated as a socially equal by the existing members of higher-status group and second, the new member needs to be accorded the same constitutional privileges of other 'legitimate great powers'" (2008, p. 48).

Lindemann singles out four types of recognition and one of them is of particular importance for our study – recognition of state's particular dignity, which implies acknowledgement of its special status, qualities, values, hard historical experiences and a right to obtain particular attention from other members of international society (2010, p. 40). Significantly, non-recognition of state's 'particular' dignity might turn into violence. Vladimir Putin views the collapse of the Soviet Union as a geopolitical catastrophe, which instigated a historical trauma for Russia, since its status and influence evaporated overnight. What is more, the West underestimated this trauma and immediately started disregarding Russia's interests and historical role as a key player in the international system. Recognition of Russia's great power status has the significant importance for its national identity as well. As Wolf highlights, "the more prominently a particular feature (e.g. some value, achievement, point of view, faculty) figures in a state's identity, the more emphasis its leadership will put on its proper consideration...playing down some of its

historic achievements or denigrating one of its essential cultural values can put the very foundation of the group's self-esteem into question" (2011). There is a consensus about the central importance of this particular feature in Russia's state identity and therefore, its external validation is of paramount importance. Furthermore, social recognition of Russia's status is a confirmation of its social standing and positive self-evaluation, while denial of recognition is a frustrating experience, which tends to undermine peoples' sense of self-worth.

Nowadays, Russia can be deemed as a status dissatisfied country, which experiences "status déficit" i.e. political leadership believes that it deserves to be ranked more favorably than it is actually evaluated. Such states are prone to undertake war with an aim to change the beliefs of reference status community (Renshon 2016, p. 513). Renshon employed network-based measures of international status and the main finding of her comprehensive research project is following: conflict can be a feasible strategy for countries to enhance their status and what's more, not only victory, but initiation of the war can lead to status enhancement (Ibidem). Status dissatisfied state selects a smaller target and other major states rarely become the direct targets of it, because in order to gain status recognition, it needs a victory and manifestation of its strong military capabilities. This suggestion is particularly important when it comes to Russia's campaigns in Ukraine. Such status deficit represents the humiliating experience for a state and motivates the political elite to take certain measures to get away from it.

Humiliation and identity management strategies

Judging by the public speeches of Russia's leadership, unequal treatment and disrespect to Russia's interests by the Western powers is viewed in Moscow as a humiliating experience. Etymologically and semantically, humiliation is directly connected to status – "rooted in the Latin humus (earth), as revealed by humilis (low) and humiliare (to make low)" (Lindner 2006, as it is cited in Liu 2015). Likewise, Wolf argues that "humiliation is an extreme form of status denigration" and the larger is the gap between desired image (self-perception) and projected image by others (how other states perceive this state), the greater is "the frustration, humiliation and the loss of self-esteem." If the state does not try to break out of this humiliation, it might significantly affect its national self-esteem. (Wolf

2008, 2011; Lindemann 2010). In Wolf's account, humiliation can be provoked by "the denial of the social value of some specific feature which is of central importance to a group's identity... by the refusal to recognize a group's possession of a feature whose value is commonly accepted" (2011). In addition, humiliation as a degrading experience provokes certain emotions, such as resentment, anger, vengefulness that might have certain repercussions for state's foreign policy choices and behavior. Humiliation confronts country's specific rights, merits and undermines an actor's dignity and moral qualities, therefore it represents the most barefaced assault on an actor's self-respect (Margalit 1999; Lindner 2006 as it cited in Wolf 2011). Nevertheless, humiliation is also a subjective-psychological matter and political leaders interpret, depict and verbally frame the specific situation and action as humiliation, thereafter they act upon those interpretations. By doing so, they might intend to mobilize people against an actor, which shows disrespect to this state and prepare the ground for the subsequent action.

According to the social identity theory, humiliation caused by unfavorable social comparison translates into low self-esteem that can be understood as the positive assessment of one's social self (Clunan 2009). Consistent with SIT/IR framework, national self-esteem can be enhanced by obtaining higher status or maintaining the positive distinctiveness from the significant 'Other'. In an effort to do away with perceived humiliation and boost national self-esteem, political elites develop the national self-images and employ different identity management strategies (ibidem). Self-images are formed on the basis of two factors - political purpose and international status. As Clunan puts it, "political purpose includes ideas about what values, principles, traits and symbols characterize the country and what values and principles should govern relations between countries. It also conveys an idea about states mission, if there is one....international status includes questions of ranks, of the positioning of one's country in an imagined international hierarchy of political military, social and economic power" (2009, p. 31). Based on it, this thesis argues that the current ruling elite of Russia promotes *Statist self-image*, which also encompasses ideas, borrowed from Eurasianism and Civilizationist self-images. The Key components of dominants statist self-image are *inter alia*: Russia as a great power, referring its international status; Russia as a unique state-civilization and defender of

civilizational diversity, denoting state's mission; Russia as a guardian of traditional values and spiritualism, underlining values and principles of the state.

Self-images also constitute certain countries and regions as desired in-groups and out-groups (Ibidem). For instance, as long as proponents of *Statist self-image* argue that Russia is a great power and have all necessary qualities, it is a part of great power in-group. However, markers and criteria of great power group membership are changing over time. From Russia's perspective, members of the great power group are the U.S., China, India, Brazil and major European players. However, although Russia sees itself as part of this group, its relative standing within this group is undermined by the Western great powers. In other words, with their behavior, they unduly refuse to recognize Russia as an equal great power and full-fledged member of this group. Its fragile relative standing in great power in-group is embodied with the fact that the Western great powers are reluctant to grant equality to Russia and secondly, Russia feels deprived the right to enjoy privileges associated with the 'legitimate great powers' (Suzuki 2008, p. 49). Therefore, political leadership adopts different behavioral strategies to obtain higher recognition of its status.

According to traditional SIT, unfavorable social comparison and the psychological need for positive self-esteem motivates political elites employ identity management strategies, such as social mobility, social competition or social creativity. There is a growing body of literature, where identity management strategies are applied to the international relations for the sake of analyzing states' foreign policy behavior. Political leaders employ these strategies to achieve higher relative status for the state and to ensure positive view of national self (Clunan 2009, p. 75). These strategies aim to overcome group's perceived negative social status, relative position on the status hierarchy and to achieve a positive identity by means of establishing a favorable comparison with the reference in-group and out-group. What is more, by pursuing these identity management strategies, political leadership seeks to infuse certain distinctive attributes of this country in the national Self and along with external recognition, they expect an approval of these attributes from their own people as well (ibidem).

The state employs social mobility strategy, if it seeks admission into the higher-status group by dint of becoming more similar to the desired group members and for this reason, this state embraces higher-status group's values and normative standards. Consistent with

the traditional SIT framework, the individual sticks to the social mobility strategy, when s/he is dissatisfied with membership into the existing social group and therefore seeks to join the high-status group. In case of SIT/IR framework, the state uses social mobility strategy, when it is dissatisfied with its existing status and wants to join the high-status group or institutions through normative rapprochement. Significantly, state opts for social mobility strategy, only when it perceives the boundaries of higher-status group as permeable and flexible. Indicators of social mobility strategy can be, *inter alia*, emulation of higher status group values, attempts to join political institutions dominated by members of the higher-status group etc (Clunan 2009; Larson & Schevchenko 2010). Hypothetically speaking, if Russia suddenly decides to subscribe to the Western norms, it can be seen as a pattern of social mobility strategy. Significantly, Suzuki argues that in order to gain a recognition, great power “needs to identify with the collective social norms and rules, which govern ‘legitimate great power’ identity” (2008, p. 50). However, for Russia’s current leadership, this option is unacceptable and rejects an idea of embracing the Western liberal values. Larson and Shevchenko argue that Gorbachev’s “common European home” can be deemed as an example of social mobility strategy, given that he tried to assimilate the USSR into the community composed by the Western countries (2003 p. 15).

However, if state perceives higher-status group boundaries as impermeable, it might apply social competition strategy, in order to defeat and outdo its members “in the area on which their superior status rests” (Turner 1975). For instance, if an ability of effective power projection, military strength or control of the spheres of influence can be deemed as the significant determinants of great power status, a state will seek to compete with other members of great power status community on these ranking criteria in an effort to receive a positive evaluation from them. Therefore, social competition over status can also entail the conflict and violence. Significantly, conflict for material resources cannot be understood as a social competition and the latter denotes the competition over status only. The object of social competition is to improve the group’s relative position rather than to maximize wealth, power (Larson 2012, p. 66). Consistent with this logic, Larson and Shevchenko argue that arms race, competition over spheres of influence, military attack against a smaller state, acting as a spoiler to obstruct other’s collective efforts can serve as the best observable indicators of social competition for status (2010, 2014). This thesis assumes that

Moscow's activities in Ukraine and Syria serve to the purpose of enhancing Russia's great power status. The available evidences listed below seem to suggest that Russia's intervention in Ukraine is widely seen through the prism of the rivalry over the sphere of influence. As for Russia's campaign in Syria, it can be understood as an attempt to obstruct the activities of the United States, demonstrate an ability to project its military power beyond its immediate region and force Washington to admit Russia's role in settlement of this international crisis.

Finally, in the classical writings about SIT, lower-status group of individuals employ social creativity strategy in order to maintain positive distinctiveness vis-à-vis higher status group on a different ranking system or dimension. Along these lines, SIT/IR authors posit that lower-status state seeks to change the dimension of comparison with members of higher-status group, given that this state considers the existing status quo as illegitimate and unstable. By creating an alternative dimension, it places an emphasis on its own unique values and contributions with an aim to make a distinction from the reference out-group more discernible. Indicators of social creativity can be, *inter alia*, promotion of new norms, institutions and developmental model, state's specific mission and unique values (Larson & Shevchenko 2010, p. 74-75). As for the examples of social creativity strategy, these authors single out Gorbachev's "moral visionary leadership" and "new thinking" (2003, as it is cited in Evans 2015). The social creativity strategy will succeed, if reference out-group admits a new value dimension and acknowledges that lower-status group really stands out on it (Tajfel 1978, cited in Larson & Shevchenko 2014).

Social creativity might take three forms. *Firstly*, the group might try to "redefine the attractiveness of group attributes" (Clunan 2009, p. 35). On the state level, political elite "revise their interpretation of the dimension on which nations are ranked, so that characteristics that were seen as inferior are now presented as positive, since they acquire a positively valued distinctiveness" (Larson & Shevchenko 2010, p. 67). *Secondly*, consistent with social creativity strategy, political leaders might try to alter the dimensions, the basic attributes for of comparison that would enable this state to claim its superiority to higher-status group on these new dimensions. An example of it can be the claim, such as for example "state A has a stronger economy than B, but state B has more fascinating culture". Subsequently, political leaders try to convince and gain recognition from the

reference group to recognize state's superiority on this new dimension of comparison. When the significant 'Other' acknowledges the state's achievements and positive distinctiveness on the new dimension, this state actually obtains the social recognition (Larson & Shevchenko 2010, 74). In addition, acceptance of superiority on this new dimension by higher-status group can make the comparison relevant and only in this way it can lead to status enhancement. (Tajfel 1978, cited in Worcel et al, 2011). In the meantime, the reference group is expected to recognize the state's outstanding position on the new dimension, if the former is convinced that this recognition will not undermine its own positions (Larson & Shevchenko 2014, p. 271). However, if reference group is unenthusiastic to recognize accomplishment on this new dimension, it can exacerbate a conflict. *The third type* of social creativity strategy involves changing of the focus of comparison, i.e. change the reference group. In this case, political leaders tend to compare their country to the group with lower-status countries, instead of comparing with higher-status group (Evans 2015, p. 404). The analysis in the last part of thesis explains that Russia is pursuing the second type of social creativity strategy. As this section underlines, certain perceptions affect to the decision of the political elite while choosing specific identity management strategies, therefore next section sets out to review these factors.

Border impermeability, status hierarchy illegitimacy/instability and related emotions

According to the traditional SIT, individuals adopt social mobility strategy, only if boundaries of higher-status group are perceived as permeable and status hierarchy as legitimate and stable. In addition, Tajfel notes that selection of specific identity management strategy largely depends on the perception of status hierarchy as legitimate or illegitimate, stable or instable (1978, cited in Hinkle et al. 2011, p. 167). Status hierarchy between lower-status group and higher-status group can be perceived as legitimate and stable, if lower-status group believes that the existing status quo is justified and impossible to be changed. In other words, lower-status state recognizes the superiority of members of the higher-status group and they deserve to have the higher status. In the meantime, status hierarchy is seen as stable, when representatives of the lower-status country believe that they cannot alter it. If lower-status group views the status of higher-status group as legitimate and stable, social competition or creativity strategies are less likely to be adopted

by this group, because they are aware of the fact that it can hardly undermine the existing status quo. By contrast, when inferior groups perceive the existing status hierarchy as illegitimate and unstable, they tend to espouse social competition or social creativity strategies (Brown & Ross 1982, cited in Hinke et al. p. 170; Klippenberg 1989, cited in Clunan 2009, p. 35; Larson & Shecvhenko 2010, 2014; Ward 2015).

According to SIT/IR framework, there are three conditions, under which borders of the higher status group are perceived as impenetrable. Firstly, when a state is unable to leave the low-status group and join the higher-status group. Secondly, when higher-status group members are unenthusiastic to accept the low-status actor as an equal player and part of their group. Thirdly, when lower-status state is unable to psychologically identify with higher-status group (Ward 2015, p. 20). From the West's perspective, Russia's perception of impermeability of great power club borders stems from its own inability to prove its great powerness and it is also unable to become an independent "pole". On the other hand, Russia asserts that Western 'established great powers' deliberately limit the membership into this group and on this ground, they do not confer this status to Russia, while the West incessantly seeks to retain its dominance. As for the status quo illegitimacy and instability, public statements of Russia's political elite clearly convey the view that Russia is a member of great power group and deserves to be recognized as a great power. In this light, the current status quo is illegitimate.

Olga Malinova introduces one additional factor - resentment, which induces political leaders to adopt social competition or creativity strategies. In her account, asymmetric relationship with the significant "other" and unsatisfactory recognition of its status leads to humiliation and the consequent emotional reaction, that is resentment. As she puts it, "Resentment (not resentment) refers to a psychological state resulting from suppressed feelings of envy and hatred (existential envy) and the impossibility of satisfying these feelings" (Malinova 2014, p. 292). According to Meltzer and Musolf, the main features of resentment complex are "protracted (chronic) character of the emotional experience, powerlessness to take retaliatory action against its sources, and also a sense of being denied what we believe to be entitled to" (Meltzer and Musolf, 2002, as it is cited in Malinova 2014, p. 294). Thus, resentment is a long-term emotional reaction, generated by the lack of appreciation Russia's great power status by the 'legitimate great powers'.

However, unfavorable social comparison and accompanied humiliation might also instigate another emotion, such as - shame. In this case, people and political establishment tend to think that this is their own fault and do not seek to find the scapegoat for this problem. However, when it triggers resentment, political leaders always claim that others should be blamed for downgrading state's status. On this ground, when they experience shame, it is more likely that the political elite will adopt social mobility strategy, however, if the unfavorable comparison triggers resentment, they tend to employ social competition of creativity strategies towards the above-mentioned in-group and out-group.

Unpacking Russia's status inconsistency, humiliation and subjective perceptions

This part starts with explaining the gap between Russia's self-perception and perceptions of other great powers with regard to Russia. Judging by the official statements of Russia's leadership, these two are not in accord with each other that generates the state's status inconsistency problem. As it was discussed in theoretical part, the latter represents the humiliating experience for a state and provokes certain emotions. The following part also examines the presence of humiliation narrative in Russia's political discourse. Finally, theoretical part also reviewed perceptions of border permeability and status quo illegitimacy/instability and the ensuing section seeks to analyze Russia's subjective perceptions in line of these factors.

Russia's self-perception as a great power and sources of its status inconsistency

Undeniably, great power status represents an indispensable element of Russia's national identity, around which the entire political specter converges and the vast majority of population have faith in country's great power destiny. Allegedly, its self-perception as a great power has been playing a crucial role in shaping of Russia's national identity. In Clunan's account, every nation has commonly held memories of the past self and people and political elites are keen to regain positive attributes they possessed in the past and it affects to the shaping the current aspirations, identity and interests. She dubs this phenomenon as a historical aspiration. Consistent with this logic, one of the central historical aspirations of Russia remains the retrieval of greatness it held during the tsarist

and Soviet eras. (Clunan 2009, 2014). Along similar lines, SIT argues that individuals might experience unfavorable comparison between one's own past status and expectations and the present status or expectations (Tajfel 1978, p. 70). As, Freedman puts it, "while individuals derive self-esteem through social comparisons with their peers, they also engage in self-evaluation and derive self-esteem through temporal comparisons with their past [self]" (2016, p. 798). Thus, states use both social and temporal forms of comparison when it comes to self-evaluation. Zell and Alicke argue that "an unfavorable temporal comparison is just as detrimental to the self as unfavorable social comparison...both of them are the most fundamental information sources upon which the self-concept is constructed" (2009, cited in Freedman 2016, p. 803).

Russia's self-perception as a great power mainly relies on the following pillars: it holds veto power in the UNSC and retains the significant military might; Russia was a great power during the two previous centuries; it remains to be (or seeks to remain) the regional hegemony and leads the post-Soviet region. On these grounds, Moscow claims to have a legitimate right to participate in international governance on a par with the Western 'legitimate great powers'. This strong sense of great power entitlement lends support to Moscow's assertion that Russia should be treated by other countries as a permanent great power, while its great power destiny provides Russia with "right of involvement" in any international developments or regions (Lo 2002, cited in Smith 2016).

Nevertheless, Russia's political leaders incessantly express their annoyance with regard to the fact the Western powers do not respect Russia's great power interests. As they argue, one of the explicit indicators of this disrespect is the reluctance of Western great powers to acknowledge Russia's historical role in European affairs, therefore Moscow remains excluded from the European decision-making. In other words, Russia as a great power has played a crucial role in ensuring the security of Europe, therefore the existing primacy of the main institutional arrangements in European security – NATO and the EU clearly exemplifies the non-recognition of its great power status. Intriguingly, participation in the European affairs is vital for Russia to claim that it represents a great power and not just a regional power. As Pynnoniemi suggests, Russia's self-understanding of its historical role in Europe has two pillars: "Russia is nothing unless a great power, coupled with the persistent but often unrewarding quest to be recognized by others as a great power" (2014,

p. 5). Russia justifies its claims regarding its indispensable role in European security by historical arguments. More specifically, Russia saved Europe from autocracy by defeating Napoleon in the 19th century. Subsequently, Russia played a key role in defeating Hitler in WWII, thereby it saved Europe from Fascism. Thirdly, Russia asserts that throughout centuries, it has been a “civilizational and physical barrier protecting Europe against the barbarian hordes of the East” (Lo 2015, p. 49). In addition, Andrey Kortunov suggests that even though Russia is a member of many international organizations, it remains outside of the main linchpin organizations of post-Cold War European order. In his account, only NATO and the EU can be deemed as “two central institutional pillars” of this new order. Thus, erstwhile great power Russia “remained a peripheral power in a NATO/EU dominated Europe” (2016).

Second, the failure of “reset” policy has further exacerbated Moscow’s doubts regarding the U.S. willingness to respect Russia’s interests. With its “reset” policy, the United States decided to reduce the scale of confrontation and engage with Russia on the basis of the interests-based pragmatism (Stent 2014). It can be argued that this policy was designed in a way to demonstrate more respect to Russia’s interests and obviously, it sought to address Moscow’s great power concerns. In this vein, Washington diminished its attention towards the post-Soviet states; Obama decided to keep silence with regard to NATO’s further eastward enlargement; the U.S. temporarily set aside its plan to deploy missile defense system in Eastern Europe and criticism towards Russia’s political system was significantly reduced. However, this policy turned out to be short-lived and failed to address the grounding status-related concerns of Russia, namely, “reset” policy could not solve problems related to security in Europe and Moscow’s marginal role in that. The U.S. subsequent actions, such as the renewal of working on the deployment of anti-ballistic system in Eastern Europe, support to the Arab spring revolutions and abuse of Russia’s abstention from vetoing the intervention in Libya have once again heightened Russia’s worries about U.S.-led unilateralism inclinations and lack of respect to Russia’s interests.

Finally, prior to Russia’s intervention, Moscow offered Washington to cooperate and solve the civil war problem in Syria. As Trenin argues, Russia proposed its own terms of engagement, namely “Moscow and Washington act jointly and as equals; they bring the Syrian government and the opposition groups to the peace conference and keep them there;

they let the Syrians decide the future of their country and the composition of its transitional government” (2013). Nevertheless, the United States appeared unenthusiastic to accept these terms and cooperation did not come to fruition. It has reinforced the current political regime’s perceptions that Russia’s diminished status is caused by the unwillingness of the Western great powers to cooperate with Moscow on an equal basis and it is embodied with their “anti-Russian” behavior. Consequently, these thwarted moments of cooperation were perceived in Moscow as the acts of disrespect to Russia’s interests and an overt example of the U.S. unilateralism in international affairs. Judging by the statements of the representatives of Russia’s political elite and writings of many pro-Kremlin authors, such treatment exacerbated Moscow’s humiliation and it triggered emotions, such as resentment and vengefulness that resulted in specific responsive act from Moscow, aim of which was to reclaim its craved status and ensure respect to its interests.

Multipolarity and Russia as an independent pole of global power

This thesis also assumes that Russia seeks to enhance the normative aspects of its status. However, promoting of civilizational identity and conservative values is not directly linked to its great powerness. Rather, these two help Russia to enhance its status as a sovereign pole of great power and analysis in the last part clearly shows it. Multipolarity can be understood in a different ways, but from Moscow’s perspective, multipolar order consists of the different powerful poles, which interact to each other and solve the major international issues in concert. After the collapse of the USSR, the Cold War bipolar system has turned into unipolar order, dominated by the United States. Nevertheless, there is a growing support to the claim that new emerging powers challenge to the U.S. dominance and the multipolar order is taking shape. Significantly, Russia is one of those states, which tirelessly challenges to the U.S. dominance and asserts that U.S.-led unipolar system is extremely unstable and conflict-prone. Therefore, the world must become multipolar, where Russia will be one of the independent centers.

In Russia’s understanding, “multipolarity is based on a “global oligarchy,” whereby a few major powers collectively manage world affairs, with smaller states playing only bit parts (Trenin 2011, as it is cited in Lo 2015, p. 76). Interestingly, Moscow does not intend to invent a new order, but instead it prefers to restore the old one, similar to the Concert of

Europe (Ibidem). In the Kremlin's account, that system had certain advantages, such as major powers were unwilling to dominate over each other not to undermine the status quo; none of the major powers wanted to intervene in the domestic or regional affairs of another power and Russia's concerns related to its independence were not as acute as it is today. The current U.S. unilateralism has heightened Moscow's worries related to interference into Russia's domestic affairs. As Moscow argues, the United States moral authority and liberal values challenge to the stability of many societies around the world. Based on it, the best way to guarantee Russia's sovereignty is to limit America's unilateralism by means of enhancing Russia's own international stature. As for the independence, as Bobo Lo puts it, it "can denote self-reliance, as in reduced dependence on Western governments and organizations, which are consequently unable to exercise significant leverage on Moscow.... independence is about preserving national sovereignty against those who would seek to deny or limit it... It also propagates Russia's "unique" persona as an autonomous international actor" (2015, p. 48-49).

Based on her the comprehensive analysis of up to 90 Russian texts about Russian identity, Marina Pukeliene concludes that Russia's unique civilizational discourse does not correlate with its great power identity discourse. Rather, advocates of civilizational discourse propound the view that Russia should regain its special status and return its respectful place in the international system (Pukeliene 2014, p. 54). Therefore, we should start the empirical analysis in the last part based on the premise that civilizational and conservative discourses are supposed to reinforce Russia's status as independent centre in a multipolar world. In order to clarify the differences between these two, I should argue the following: acceptance of Russia as an independent center in a polycentric world would mean recognition of its great power status as well, however, not all recognized, 'legitimate great powers' can become the independent poles. To be more precise, in Russia's view, the Western great powers jointly compose one, the Western pole dominated by the U.S. Intriguingly, The West's unwillingness to grant Moscow its "proper place" in international arena also represents the main cornerstone of its humiliation narrative, which will be discussed in details in the next section (Shevtsova 2015).

There are certain indicators demonstrating Russia's aspiration to become a sovereign pole. As its 2013 foreign policy concept argues, "International relations are in the process

of transition, the essence of which is the creation of a polycentric system of international relations... The ability of the West to dominate world economy and politics continues to diminish....the global power and development potential is now more dispersed” (Ministry of foreign affairs of Russian federation 2013). This statement indicates to Russia’s intention to take a new role in the new international system that would enhance its international standing. Moreover, based on his analysis, Urnov found out that “the number of negative characteristics of the world political system mentioned in FPC 2013 reached 30 in comparison to 14 in FPC 2000” that clearly indicates to Russia’s dissatisfaction with the current international order and willingness to change its positions therein (2014, p. 311). FPC also expresses Russia’s desire to maintain independence in a multipolar world and stipulates that Russia foreign policy is based on “developing mutually beneficial and equal bilateral and multilateral partnership relations with foreign states, interstate associations, international organizations and forums on the basis of respect for independence and sovereignty.”

Thus, Russia’s status inconsistency problem stems from two major factors –other ‘legitimate great powers’ refuse to recognize its great power status and the West sticks to its unilateralism and Russia is not entitled to act on an equal footing and independently in international affairs. As theoretical part argued, such unfair treatment instigates the humiliation syndrome of the country and the subsequent section investigates, whether it is present in Russia’s public discourse.

Humiliation narrative in Russia’s official and public discourses

According to social constructivism, truth and meanings are constructed by different actors and meanings do not exist in a real world, rather, actors create them based on their social interactions with the outer world (Gray 2014). As this theory posits, “the reality consists of people’s subjective experiences of the external world and is constructed through social constructions such as language, consciousness and shared meanings” (Myers 2009, cited in Antwi & Hamza 2015 p. 218). Consistent with social constructivism, researcher prefers to comprehend the world by means of examining the subjective experiences and subjective feelings of different actors, because reality is constructed based on these two. Political actors develop meanings and promote them in a public discourse in order to instill

these social creations into people as being real, thereafter they have certain policy consequences.

Russia's humiliation narrative and 'Weimar Syndrome', allegedly triggered by the West's disrespect of Russia's interests and status, represent the patterns of the social constructs. Multiple actors, such as politicians and scholars put forward the humiliation narrative in the public discourse by consistent and widespread framing to make it central in the public discourse. Russia's ruling elite believes that the Western great powers remain reluctant to acknowledge Russia's great power interests and after the demise of the USSR, the West incessantly disparages its status. Such treatment is viewed in the Kremlin as a humiliating experience and intriguingly, Russia's humiliation narrative has become the central motif in its foreign policy since 2012 (House of Lords 2015, p. 20). As the analysis below shows, different authors construct the meaning of the current situation as Russia's humiliation and what's more, this subjective meaning is negotiated socially and historically. This section examines the presence of humiliation narrative in Russia's foreign policy discourse and demonstrates how different actors put forward it.

In the eve of Russia's incursion into Georgia in 2008, former president of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev publicly underlined that "We will not tolerate any more humiliation, and we are not joking" (Uhler 2014). This statement indicates that its humiliation narrative is not novel and after the annexation of Crimea, Putin's speeches exposed the view that Russia's humiliation syndrome remains present. One of the staunchest supporters of Russia's humiliation narrative is Sergey Karaganov, who asserts that in the post-Cold war period, Russia was incessantly treated like a defeated power, the West cornered Moscow and continued its containment policy instead of acknowledging Russia's interests. However, Russians do not see themselves as losers and such treatment was perceived as the West's firm position that "Russia should know its restricted and reduced place in world politics" and eventually, such attitude turned into Moscow's "Weimar syndrome" (2014). After the annexation of Crimea, Karaganov claimed, "Russia set a limit of creeping military, economic and political expansion in the space of its privileged interests, in fact, the Versailles policy of "velvet gloves", which provoked a feeling of humiliation and the desire for *revanche* within a large part of the elite and the people" (Karaganov 2014). Along similar lines, Alexei Arbatov notes, "Russia was being treated as a losing power [by

the West], although it actually dealt the final blow to the Soviet empire and the Cold War” (Arbatov 2014, cited in Shevtsova 2015). Dmitri Trenin likewise claims, “to Putin, the West has historically been trying to hold Russia down for fear of competition” (2014, p. 6). The Russian economist, Igor Yurgens also mentioned in 2014, “Both Putin and his closest circle are overcome with feelings of humiliation and betrayal” (2014). Finally, as Putin pronounced with irritation in 2014, “it looks like the so-called ‘winners’ of the Cold War are determined to have it all and reshape the world into a place that could better serve their interests alone” (Kotkin 2016). These pronouncements make it clear that Russia’s alleged humiliation was triggered by the disrespect of the Western great powers towards its interests and ambitions.

As these commentators argue, unfair treatment and consequent frustrating social comparison was seen by the political elite as a humiliating experience, which provokes certain emotions, such as resentment and vengefulness. Political leadership tries to solve this problem and they engage in upward status competition in order to secure the desired social recognition of their status. Social identity theory also outlines a number of factors, which influence political leader’s decision to adopt a particular strategy and the ensuing section analyzes how Russia arrived at the decision to adopt specifically social competition and social creativity strategies.

Impermeability of higher-status group boundaries , status quo illegitimacy and instability

Russia’s current ruling elite perceives the boundaries of the great power group as impermeable, because the Western great powers remain unwilling to acknowledge Russia’s aspirations and interests. In addition, from Moscow’s standpoint, the West is unwilling to accept Russia as an independent center of a global power, since the United States reinforces its unilateralism. However, why Russia thinks that the Western powers deliberately limit membership in this club? In order to answer this question, we need to discuss the specific normative criterion, which hindered the recognition of Russia’s great power status by the Western great powers in the past and still remains relevant to a significant degree.

As it was already mentioned, status consists of material and normative components, meaning that when the state wants to be recognized as a great power based on its material capabilities, its claim need to be backed up by certain normative credentials. In the

meantime, it is hard to define, which of them is more significant to obtain the status recognition, thus they should be viewed as inter-complementary. Iver Newmann chose the particular regime type as a key criterion, which caused Russia's exclusion from the great power ranks during the 18th century. More specifically, this regime type is an indirect rule of governance, which replaced the pre-existing forms of governance and laid the foundation to the relatively liberal forms of governance. Consequently, it was recognized as a stable social practice and became a common standard of Western civilization. On the other hand, it widened the gap between the Western countries and Russia, since the latter did not embrace this novelty, the reason of which was a lack of liberal traditions and unsuccessful reforms. Since Russia failed to implement this civilized form of governance, its standing as a great power has been significantly undermined in the eyes of the Western great powers (Newmann 2008).

Nevertheless, Newmann's line of reasoning, in particular the indirect rule criterion can be considered as explicitly Eurocentric and the author himself admits that this logic was relevant in the context of a specific time in the past. However, other passages from his works are still pertinent for this thesis. Firstly, material and normative aspects are the significant constituencies of status, whereas they separately do not represent the sufficient attributes for status recognition. In other words, material capabilities can no longer be deemed as a sufficient condition for the state to be recognized as a great power and normative aspects have also become crucial in this regard. Second, the Western major powers expect from Russia to ensure a certain degree of social compatibility with the West, if it wants to be conferred an equal great power status. In this vein, if Russia continues to reject prevalence of liberal order in the international system, the Western great powers will become more prone to keep Moscow's outside of the great power ranks. Furthermore, promotion of 'good domestic governance' is seen by the Western great powers as one of the great power duties (Suzuki 2008, p. 51). Obama's recent comment gives credence to this argument - he has warned U.S. President-elect Donald Trump "to stand up to Russia if the country does not follow American "values and international norms"" (Moore 2016). Newmann concludes that if the Western civilizational standards and liberalism will be strengthened in future, Russia will face more difficulties to gain the social recognition of its status (2014, p. 111). Russia's ruling elite claims that the West must respect its values,

inasmuch as they are not inferior to that of Western values. However, the Western major powers' insistence that liberal credentials are essential for country's great power status recognition is perceived in Russia as impermeability of this group. Nowadays, Russia finds itself in fundamental opposition to the norms and values, which constitute the legitimate membership in the great power group, given that 'legitimate great powers' are engaged in the promotion of democratic governance, human rights etc. (Suzuki 2008, p. 52). As we will see in the last part of this thesis, Russia rejects an idea to attain the higher status and independence in the existing dominant normative structures.

Secondly, when state is incapable to join the higher-status group because of its own internal shortcomings, it can be also viewed as border impermeability. Westernizers in Russia assert that the main reasons of its exclusion are "Russia's lack of Western political and economic credentials and the destructive legacy of the Soviet militarized economy and its Messianic mission" (Clunan 2012, p. 7). Kotkin suggests that Moscow's inability to join the West was caused with the fact that Russia could not relinquish "country's abiding great-power pride and a sense of special mission". Its sense of exceptionalism and inability to adapt to the new reality and changed position did not allow Russia to join smaller countries in Europe on an equal basis (2016, p. 6). Significantly, joining the European institutions on an equal basis with other European countries is perceived in Russia as relinquishing Russia's great power mantle, a rejection of its intrinsic historical aspiration and distinctiveness from other European countries. As long as great powerness represents the significant component of its identity, political elites are reluctant to make any concessions in this regard. Thus, even if the Kremlin is well aware of the main internal obstacles, it still has the only one option – to blame the Western great powers for its exclusion.

Russia's perception of border impermeability has been further exacerbated by the West's determination to rule out Russia's equal participation in the European decision-making structures. Considering Russia's historical role in the security of Europe, leaving it outside of these arrangements is viewed in Moscow as illegitimate and the source of its humiliation. Furthermore, Moscow has tried many times to do away with its marginal status and regain its say over European affairs. In doing so, Russian leaders initiated a number of proposals, such as the New European Security Treaty, institutional cooperation

between NATO and the CSTO as well as between the Eurasian Economic Union and the European Union. However, Moscow's these endeavors appeared to be fruitless, because as its leadership argues, the West turned down these proposals and keeps reinforcing NATO and the EU, as the dominant institutional arrangements in Europe (Kortunov 2016). In this vein, Putin claimed in 2014, "Russia strived to engage in dialogue with our colleagues in the West. We are constantly proposing cooperation on all key issues; we want to strengthen our level of trust and for our relations to be equal, open and fair. But we saw no reciprocal steps" (2014a). Failure of "reset" policy and the U.S. reluctance to cooperate with Russia over Syria have further aggravated Russia's perception of border impermeability. Thus, according to Russia's subjective perception, the Western major powers deliberately neglect its interests and refuse to recognize its great power status.

The unequal treatment from the West is completely unjustified and illegitimate for Russia, which aspires to regain the centrality in the world order and perceives itself as a great power with legitimate interests in European and other international affairs. Moscow's inferiority is considered as highly illegitimate, as it is the result of the U.S. endeavor to keep Russia subordinate and disallow it to reclaim the status it deserves (Lukyanov 2016). As Putin said during his Crimea speech, "they [Western powers] have lied to us many times, made decisions behind our backs, placed us before an accomplished fact" (2014a). Furthermore, for the Kremlin, Russia's humiliation is an explicit evidence of status quo illegitimacy. As Cohen claims, "A softer version of the Treaty of Versailles was imposed on the country....Russia was told in no uncertain terms that it would play a modest role in the world....great nation's dignity and interests had been trampled" (2014).

Russia also aspires to become the sovereign and central actor in the international system, however, Putin claims, "They [the West] are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position, because we maintain it and because we call things like they are and do not engage in hypocrisy" (2014a). The Kremlin also challenges the validity and prevalence of liberal norms in international relations and Russia portrays the U. S. -led promotion of these norms as a source of instability in many countries in the world. Therefore, the West's endeavor to introduce these values as a foundation for the status allocation in the international system is completely illegitimate and unacceptable for Moscow. As for the instability of status hierarchy, the following

statement from FPC 2013 demonstrates that Russia's sees the current hierarchy as unstable and changeable: "International relations are in the process of transition, the essence of which is the creation of a polycentric system of international relations... The ability of the West to dominate world economy and politics continues to diminish...the global power and development potential is now more dispersed" (Ministry of foreign affairs of Russian federation 2013). Given these circumstances, Russia believes that this is the right moment to enhance its international standing.

Finally, above-mentioned comments of Russian political leaders expose the presence of emotional reaction – resentment that in Malinova's account also plays an important role in selecting the specific identity management strategy (2014). According to Taylors definition, "French term *ressentiment* is a feeling experienced when one group takes another group as an example or model but then feels angry and frustrated when it is unable to meet the standards, whether objectively or subjectively, of the exemplary unit" (2015, p. 5). Sergey Medvedev draws the direct links between *ressentiment* and status aspirations, arguing that "resentment is considered to be a feeling of hostility to the fact that the subject considers the cause of the failures (to the "enemy"), impotent envy, mind the futility of trying to improve its status" (2014). Along similar lines, as Mikhail Yampolskii puts it, "for Putin, the source of its resentment is non-recognition of Russia as an equal and respected player on the world stage" (2014). Indeed, Putin commented on the Ukraine crisis and argued that "if you compress the spring to its limits, it will snap back hard. You must always remember this". (Pynnoniemi 2014, p. 6).

To recap the last part briefly, it showed that three factors – border impermeability, status quo illegitimacy/instability and resentment are present in the mindset of Russia's political leadership that are the plausible preconditions to assume that in order to improve its status, the Kremlin tends to adopt the social competition and creativity strategies. Based on it, the subsequent section seeks to explore the indicators of social competition strategy in Russia's foreign policy conduct followed by examining the indicators of social creativity strategy in its civilizational and conservative turns. If these indicators are present, we can argue that these events served to the purpose of reinforcing Russia's international status.

Russia engages in social competition strategy

This part provides an analysis of Russia's intervention in Ukraine and Syria and examines as to whether these campaigns can be deemed as part of Russia's social competition strategy towards the Western great powers, driven by Moscow's higher status aspirations. With this aim, it intends to investigate, whether indicators of social competition strategy are explicitly present in Russia's campaign in Crimea followed by its intervention in Syria. As SIT/IR posits, by employing *social competition strategy*, state acknowledges superiority of higher-status group on a certain criteria and seeks to change its negative ranking by dint of competing with the representatives of this group on these dimensions (Clunan 2012, p. 11). Undeniably, the behavior of the Western 'legitimate great powers' reveals the fact that their great power status still heavily relies on traditional, material components, such as control of spheres of influence, holding extensive military capabilities and the ability to project their hard power in a far away regions, unilateral decisions related to international crises etc. (Larson and Shevchenko 2010, p. 71). Thus, the analysis below seeks to examine, if campaigns in Ukraine and Syria expose Moscow's intention to compete with the Western great power on these traditional criteria of great power status with an aim to revamp its unfavorable standing in the great power group.

Annexation of Crimea by Russian Federation

Evidently, Russia's foreign policy conduct sticks to the traditional great power school of international relations - it uses hard power and does not shy away from generating conflict to securitize its sphere of influence. The analysis below suggests that Russia social competition strategy in case of Ukraine crisis has three main tenets, such as competition over spheres of influence with the Western great powers, showing off its improved art of war by waging a new generation of warfare and legal competition in interpreting the international law.

Geopolitical competition over sphere of influence with the Western great powers

The available evidences seem to suggest that Moscow's engagement in Ukraine can be viewed as a traditional rivalry with other great powers over the sphere of influence. The point at issue is that the conventional understanding of great power status always entails

dominance in one's neighborhood/region (Aron 1998, cited in Lo 2015, p. 48). As Hast notes, throughout the history, great powers have sought to "promote stability and order in the international system by means of tacit understandings, which underpinned the management of regional spheres of influence". (2014, cited in Berryman 2014). Similarly, the dominant definitions mark out the great power as a state, which is able to maintain its own sphere of influence using economic and military capabilities and is granted *droit de regard* (right to access) by other great power in this area (Ranke 1989, cited in Newmann 2014, p. 89). Hurray also highlights that "regional preponderance should represent an important element of any claim to major power status...a state may see the region as a means of aggregating power and fostering a regional coalition in support of its external negotiations" (2006, p. 8). Remarkably, not only Russia seeks to delineate its sphere of influence, but also all major powers apparently want to ensure that neighboring countries will not align with their rivals. Correspondingly, Russian political elite believes that by orchestrating the 'Maidan revolution', the U.S. and the EU disregarded Russia's special interests in the post-Soviet space. Furthermore, Ward notes that encroachment to the sphere of Russia's "privileged interests" by the West was "the most important manifestation of Russian demotion from the ranks of the major powers" (2014). It is worth underlining that regional dominance is also the main cornerstone of the appreciation of Russia as a one of the dominant cores of global power. As Lo asserts, "just as the United States leads the West, and China "heads" Asia, so Russia's credibility is seen to be contingent on dominating its part of the world" (2015, p. 48). As long as post-Soviet area represents the domain of Russia's Great Power interests, it can even employ military power to uphold these interests. Russia's political establishment strongly believes that without sphere of influence, it would cease to exist as a great power. Intriguingly, Nitoiu defines the EU's growing presence in the post-Soviet space as an endeavor to enhance its status (2016, p. 146). In this vein, Russia also views the EU as a geopolitical project, which seeks to broaden its sphere of influence to the East. In short, any attempt of other external powers to obstruct Russia's dominance is immediately understood as an attack to its great power identity that translates into resentment and 'narcissistic' injury.

Non-interference into its backyard and recognition of its privileged interests in this domain represents the main cornerstone of Russia's effort to secure equal treatment and

respect from the Western great powers. What is more, Russian-led integration projects in post-Soviet area can be viewed as an institutional reinforcement of its dominance. Whereas 12 percent of text in Russia's Foreign Policy Concept 2000 is devoted to CIS countries, this number has increased up to 22 percent in FPC 2013. Similarly, integration in the CIS space was mentioned twice in FPC 2000 and this number has increased up to eight in FPC 2013 (Urnov 2014, p. 313). In Allison's account, by snatching Ukraine out of Russia's influence, the latter would be deprived an opportunity to assert itself as the European great power (2014, p. 3). After all, Putin's one specific statement after Crimea's annexation has confirmed that this campaign was mainly about regaining respect and recognition for Russia: "Today, it is imperative to end this hysteria, to refute the rhetoric of the cold war and to accept the obvious fact: Russia is an independent, active participant in international affairs; it has its own national interests that need to be taken into account and respected" (2014a). Thus, as long as competition over sphere of influence is one of the indicators of social competition strategy, Moscow's Crimea campaign can be deemed as part of this strategy, thereby Russia pushed the West to respect its great power interests in its neighborhood.

Demonstrating Russia's ability to conduct a new generation of warfare

As it was mentioned in the theoretical part, social competition is always about status and status-seeking behavior, which might also turn into an overt conflict. As Vlahos argues, "throughout history, people have tended to ascribe "great power" to states that stage successful operatic military productions — full of action and drama — for a world audience" (2015). He goes so far to suggest that aggressive behavior increases chances of a state to get its great power status recognized by others. Great powerness is a fading status, especially if it is challenged by other powers and the war is a possibility to renew it (Ibidem). Victorious wars must be displayed to the international audience through Grand National ceremony, with the "investiture of great power" (Ibidem). Remarkably, WWII victory parade in the Crimean port of Sevastopol in 2014 can serve as the best example of great power investiture by Russia.

In Renshon's account, violence is one of the available options for attaining a higher status by dint of altering beliefs and perceptions of other states. (2016, p. 527). As long as

these beliefs are rigid and do not change overnight, unexpected and resonant events, such as war can speed up this process. In order to successfully influence on community's beliefs, violence should be "highly public (visible to all actors in the community), dramatic or salient (to capture the attention of potential observers), and convey unambiguous information". Secondly, the target country does not need to be equally powerful, but waging war against smaller and weaker state can also work as a status-altering event. Finally, the status - seeker state needs to demonstrate that it has new capabilities (military and other) to impress the reference community (Ibidem). The ensuing section sets out to investigate whether Crimean crisis meets all these three conditions that lend credence to the claim that this event can be conceived as a status-seeking behavior and part of social competition.

Judging by far-reaching international responses, the annexation of Crimea can be apparently deemed as *highly public*. To begin with, the UN General Assembly passed a non-binding resolution, thereby Crimea's Moscow-backed referendum was declared as invalid (Reuters 2016). Second, NATO condemned Russia's incursion into Ukraine and assessed it as a violation of international law (Williams 2014). Congress of the Council of Europe also denounced the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol (Consulate general of Ukraine in Shanghai). Finally, the United States and the European Union imposed extensive sanction regime on Russia. Allegedly, this event was also *dramatic* for the following reasons. Firstly, the annexation of Crimea was a blatant breach of the Helsinki final act, affirming states' respect for territorial integrity, national sovereignty, peaceful settlement of conflicts and non-intervention in internal affairs. In fact, with its action, Russia infringed all these principles (Foreign policy news 2014). Second, Russia violated article 2 §4 of the UN Charter, which obliges states to uphold principles of inviolability of state borders, territorial integrity and non-use of force (Robert Schuman Foundation 2015). Thirdly, Russia abandoned its commitment to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity and violated Budapest memorandum. Additionally, annexation of Crimea has emerged as a dangerous precedent. Using the protection of Russian-speakers' rights as a pretext for justifying its intervention, Russia has heightened worries of the EU member countries with extensive Russian minorities. Violation of Ukrainian borders has also significantly shaken the foundations of European security and post-Cold War European order. Finally,

annexation of Crimea by Russia is completely *unambiguous* fact and in addition, political leaders alluded many times that the annexation of Crimea is the result of the West's bad behavior. In addition, Putin admitted the presence of Russian military servicemen in Ukraine (Walker 2015). However, even without Putin's admission, there are abundant evidences that prove Russia's presence in Ukraine (see Čech & Janda 2015). Consistent with Renshon's a second point, Russia chose a smaller state as its target, given that status enhancement does not necessarily requires waging a major war against other great power. Russia took an advantage of the growing domestic turmoil and vulnerabilities of Ukraine and Crimea turned out to be an easy target because of a sizeable number of ethnic Russians living there. Thus, Moscow used this opportunity to signal about its status ambitions.

Finally, consistent with the social competition strategy, Russia demonstrated that it was able to conduct the new type of warfare and exposed certain novelties in this regard. As a consequence, NATO has come to realize that its conventional superiority might seem inadequate to withstand Russian-led "hybrid war". In addition, the Crimean annexation aimed at demonstrating that Russia has significantly upgraded its warfare strategy after 2008. The real innovation was the way Russia combined its military tools with non-military coercive means to psychologically demoralize the enemy. Bruusgaard's report enumerates the main military novelties in Russia's grand strategy in Ukraine (2014). To start with, Moscow has effectively used its covert special operation forces in conjunction with civilian self-defense forces with an aim to prepare the ground for "plausible deniability". Secondly, Moscow has successfully transferred its overt high readiness forced into covert in order to maintain control on the entire peninsula without triggering a dramatic escalation. Thirdly, by dint of non-contact warfare and managed violence, Moscow was able to control the level of escalation and leave opportunity for Ukraine to escalate. Last but not least, in this asymmetric warfare, Russia has successfully employed all available political, economic and informational means against the enemy. As a consequence, the Crimean operation displayed a remarkably improved strategic coordination among Russia's different bureaucratic divisions comparing to the 2008 Russo-Georgian war (Ibidem). Thus, Russia's campaign in Ukraine was consistent with the social competition strategy, given that Russia's actions meet all above mentioned indicators for status-seeking behavior. What is more, its political leadership highly appreciates the effective use of its power in

maintaining Russia's international status and as Lo claims, modern great power must be able to use different forms of power capabilities in an impressive manner (2015, p. 47).

Legal competition and interpretation of international law

It is a well-known fact that Russia always tries rhetorically to stay as a “law abiding actor”, which respects the international law. This “feeling of responsibility” forced it to use a legal rhetoric to manifest that its actions in Eastern Ukraine had the legal basis. It comes as no surprise that due to its non-binding nature, not all countries are equal in front of international law and above all, great powers breach it with their actions. As Krisch notes, great powers feel tempted to interpret the international norms about the use of force in international relations to vindicate their bellicose actions (2014). Remarkably, when one great power interprets the international law and uses it as a legal camouflage for its activities, other great powers feel resentment with that, therefore, when particular great power uses certain vagueness in international law at its advantage, other great powers consider that undermined balance can be restored with the same action. As Lo puts it, “The Kremlin interprets international law as, essentially, the body of rules and conventions that govern relations between the major powers and, through them, smaller states as well...geopolitically, international law *à la Russe* serves to restrain the exercise of American power” (2015, p. 95). Although Ukraine is a sovereign state and entitled to choose its foreign policy vector independently, its freedom of choice is limited, when it runs against the interests of a great power. In fact, Moscow one more time deprived the right of unilateral interpretation of norms to other ‘legitimate great powers’. As Putin stated, “Our western partners, led by the United States of America, prefer not to be guided by international law in their practical policies, but by the rule of the gun. They have come to believe in their exclusivity and exceptionalism” (2014a).

Roy Allison gathers a number of legal justifications, uttered by Russia during and after its intervention in Ukraine. To begin with, Russian Duma authorized the use of force in Ukraine upon extraordinary situation, which entailed protection of endangered Russian citizens, compatriots and military personnel, stationed in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. On this ground, it invoked the right of self-defense under the Article of the 51 UN charter. Although there were no sufficient evidences to invoke this article, Russia followed the suit

of the Western countries, which had carried out rescue operations without approval from the government of the second state. The second legal claim was intervention upon invitation of Ukrainian authorities, but as international lawyers argue, Yanukovich could not invite Russia to intervene, inasmuch as he had been already deposed from his position (Wisehart 2014). As Allison puts it, Russia also interpreted the law and relied on previous cases of intervention, especially in western Africa, which were based on the consent of dismissed governments. Thirdly, Russia referred to the human protection claim, which became the basis for Kosovo's secession from Serbia. (2014, p. 1259) Thus, if the West recognized Kosovo's self-determination on the basis of human protection claim, Crimea secession from Ukraine was also legal. In his speech, Putin argued, "We keep hearing from the United States and Western Europe that Kosovo is some special case. What makes it so special in the eyes of our colleagues? This is not even double standards; this is amazing, primitive, blunt cynicism. One should not try so crudely to make everything suit their interests" (2014a). Thus, this legal rhetoric demonstrates that Russia competed with the West and other European countries in interpreting the international norms. In Moscow's view, unilateral interpretation of international law by the Western powers undermines Russia's positions as an upholder of these norms and makes it inferior to the West, thus its use of legal camouflage for Crimea's annexation intended to settle a score (Ibidem).

Finally yet importantly, status-related emotional factors also played a significant role in Russia's decision to annex Crimea. These emotions were instigated by the West's disrespect to Russia's great power interests in its zone of influence. The annexation of Crimea by Russia was largely "driven by psychological impulses and highly emotional responses to a situation", given that the Kremlin saw the need to somehow respond to Yanukovich's overthrow (Mendelson & Harvey 2014). Along similar lines, Richard Sakwa underlines that it was "an angry and ad hoc response to the events in Kiev" (2014). The political commentator Stanislav Belkovsky argued that the annexation of Crimea was "a redemption of its own humiliation by the West and not something like pragmatism based defense related decision" (2015). Finally, Triesman argued that "annexation of Crimea was an impulsive decision that Putin stumbles into" and a response to the unexpected fall of Yanukovych (2016).

To summarize this part about Ukraine, intervention in Ukraine served to the purpose of strengthening Russia's sphere of influence and signaling to the Western countries that Russia's privileged interests therein should not be neglected. In Moscow's view, each great power exerts influence on its own sphere of influence and other big countries should abstain from meddling into each other's neighborhood. Besides, Russia demands an equal footing and sharing of responsibilities over security in Europe with other great powers and this crisis was a manifestation of Russia's uneasiness caused by the encroachment of the Western institutions to its "zone of interests". Annexation of Crimea was a clear signal of Moscow's willingness to return to the stage as a great power. Second, annexation of Crimea enabled the Kremlin to show off its ability to wage a new type of warfare and even more, NATO's conventional superiority vis-à-vis Russia has been exposed as unable to placate the heightened worries of Eastern European countries with regard to Russian-led "hybrid warfare".

Alternative explanation –annexation of Crimea as a security-seeking act

One might legitimately ask – why Russia's campaign in Ukraine should be seen as a status-enhancing behavior and not as a security-seeking act? It is worth to explicitly underline that status-seeking and security-seeking are not mutually exclusive and "when describing the state's motivation, in which the co-varying among psychological regulators such as humiliation, fears and misperception are very probable (Liu 2015). However, I will introduce a number of arguments to prove that, when it comes to Russia's campaign in Ukraine, status-seeking motivation outweighed security-seeking. To start with, Russia's resentment complex related to Ukraine was triggered by the EU's decision to sign the Association Agreement with Ukraine and it was not connected to NATO-Ukraine relations. What is more, although other countries in the post-Soviet region have also signed AA with the EU, there are no available evidences to argue that it has significantly improved their prospect for NATO membership. Russia's political leadership clearly understands that the EU cannot threaten its security, but Russia's regional influence can be spoiled by the EU's penetration into the post-Soviet space. Secondly, widespread false allegations as if NATO was planning to base its ships and missiles in Crimea were merely part of Russia's propaganda - this idea has never been proposed, suggested or discussed within NATO and

the Kremlin was well-aware of it (NATO 2016). Furthermore, before the ‘Maidan Revolution’, this country had the non-block status and Russian troops had appeared in Ukraine even before Ukrainian politicians started making the public statements about revocation of this status (Triesman 2016). Thirdly, with its annexation of Crimea and subsequent assertiveness, Russia helped NATO to invigorate its function and the alliance has reinforced its Eastern flank, that is the most significant boost to its collective defense in decades (Ibidem). NATO’s leaders agreed on a Readiness Action Plan (or RAP) during the Summit in Wales, based on which, NATO increases the number, size and complexity of its exercises. On logical grounds, if NATO is really perceived by Moscow as a danger, Russia’s security situation has been further deteriorated with its annexation of Crimea, because its actions put alliance on alert and pushed to redirect its attention towards Russia. Thus, these points and an analysis of Russia’s social competition strategy seem to suggest that annexation of Crimea was a status-seeking behavior rather than security-seeking.

Russia’s intervention in Syria

On the eve of the Ukraine crisis, certain commentators argued that Russia was just strengthening its positions in the immediate neighborhood and it was not intended to expand its influence outside of post-Soviet region. Furthermore, Mark Urnov jumped to the conclusion that Russia’s self-assessment as a great power has lost its salience across the political establishment and Moscow decided to concentrate on regional interests only, thus having abandoned its great power aspirations, Russia was trying to become a firmly established regional power (2014, p. 305). Nevertheless, shortly after the Ukraine crisis, Moscow made an unprecedented move and first time in the history of post-Soviet Russia, it sent troops outside of post-Soviet region. It could be argued that Syrian campaign is a rational continuation of Crimean crisis, inasmuch as with an aim of preserving its accomplishments in Ukraine, Russia saw the need to broaden the scope of its assertiveness beyond its zone of privileged interests that would enhance Moscow’s global role (Bishara 2015, p.2). As Lukyanov puts it, “having drawn a line in Ukraine, Russia decided that the next place to put down the iron fist would be Syria” (2016).

Similar to the Crimean case, the Kremlin validates its intervention in Syria based on the traditional principles prevalent in the great power politics. That is to say, major powers

ought to solve international conflicts by means of multilateral diplomacy, state sovereignty is paramount and inviolable from an act of aggression by powerful players and major powers share responsibility and need to find common ground in the fighting against the global threats. Although it is a great hypocrisy that Russia depicts itself as an honest upholder of these principles, Moscow's criticism of the U.S. activities in the Middle East revolves around the allegation related to infringement of these principles that triggered the need of Moscow's interference in Syria. The succeeding chapter outlines three main tenets of this intervention and seeks to examine, as to whether Russia's actions are consistent with pursuing of the social competition strategy aimed at enhancing its great power status. To start with, Moscow intended to challenge the U.S. dominance in the Middle East and to coerce Washington to work with Russia on an equal basis with regard to Syrian conflict settlement. Second, Russia sought to enhance its presence and relevance in the Middle East. Thirdly, Russia was intending to demonstrate its readiness and ability to project hard power beyond the post-Soviet space.

Seeking Russia's role in the international crisis settlement

Russian political establishment is extremely irked by the U.S. unilateralism in the international affairs and Washington's intention to topple down the Assad's regime was perceived in the Kremlin as an explicit pattern of its unilateralism. Against this backdrop, the ongoing developments in Syria seem to suggest that Russia is challenging to America's unilateralism that embodies the first pillar of its social competition strategy. Two days before Russia started a military campaign in Syria, President Putin declared in front of the UN General Assembly that, "it is not about Russia's ambitions, but about the recognition of the fact that we can no longer tolerate the current state of affairs in the world. What we actually propose is to be guided by common values and common interests rather than by ambitions" (2015). Russia's great power aspirations incites this country to signal that it has legitimate interests outside of its immediate region and on this ground, Moscow sought to coerce the United States to recognize it as an indispensable player in international conflict settlements. As Putin wrote, "The United States has developed a peculiar understanding of security that is fundamentally different from ours. The Americans are obsessed with the idea to secure the absolute vulnerability for themselves..... However, absolute

invulnerability for one country would mean absolute vulnerability for all the others. From this perspective, it is impossible to be accepted” (Putin 2012a). Moreover, when other major powers pay no heed to Moscow’s interests, the Syrian case has clearly demonstrated that Russia is ready to obstruct their effort in international conflict resolution on their own terms. In Putin’s words, “Russia has practically always enjoyed the privilege of carrying out an independent foreign policy and it will continue to do so. Moreover, I am convinced that world’s security can only be achieved together with Russia, rather than by endeavor to “push” it, weaken its geopolitical positions or cause damage of its defense capabilities” (Ibidem). Thus, Moscow has demonstrated its ability to drastically alter the strategic balance in Syria and complicate the United States’ policy to achieve its goals. At one point, Russia has managed to improve its positions in Syria so that the United States came to acknowledge that it could no longer disparage the Moscow’s role in the settlement of the Syrian crisis. As Richard Pipes argued back in 2009, “When the Kremlin says ‘no’ to Western initiatives, Russians feel that they are indeed a world power” (2009).

In addition to this, the Kremlin argues that the Arab revolutions in the Middle East were instigated by Washington and not by poor governance in these countries. Thus, the recent turmoil in the Middle East is the West’s fault and the U.S. has failed to eliminate chaos it created in the region. In this light, Russia seeks to portray itself as a better alternative reinstating the regional stability, thereby it tries to undermine the picture of the U.S. as a reliable partner in the eyes of regional political elites. Given that the majority of them are autocratic regimes, Moscow’s support to Assad is a clear message that if America decides to poison these societies with ‘colour revolution’, Russia will stand by them to lambast the chances of such revolutions to succeed (Stent 2016). In the meantime, Syrian campaign has helped Russia to do away with its post-Crimea isolation. To put it bluntly, Russia was isolated, because nobody wanted to talk and do business with its leadership. However, by intervening in Syria, Moscow compelled the United States to get back to the negotiating table and talk with Russia. Thus, Russia’s campaign in Syria can be deemed as part of its social competition strategy, aimed at outdoing the U.S. unilateralism in international crisis management.

Russia’s increased military presence in the Middle East

The second pillar of Russia's social competition strategy entails offsetting the U.S. extensive presence by Russia's military build-up in the Middle East. Following its intervention in Iraq in 2003, America has substantially enhanced its positions in the Middle East and finally, it emerged out as the dominant external power in the region. However, the available evidences seem to suggest that Russia's great power ambitions is somewhat incompatible with the U.S. extensive dominance in the Middle East as well. More specifically, Russia's naval doctrine, released in 2015, gives a growing importance to the Mediterranean Sea basin and views it as part of the Atlantic vector, thereby Russian navy intends to balance NATO (Adamsky 2015). Moreover, the doctrine stipulates that Russian armed forces must turn the Mediterranean region "into the zone of military-political stability," by means of maintaining "sufficient permanent military-naval presence" there (Ibidem). Russia's decision to maintain a major forward operating base in the Middle East will enable Moscow to influence on the subsequent developments not only in Syria, but also in the entire region (Stacey 2015). In August 2015, Russia signed a deal with Syria, which allowed Moscow to open the Khmeimin air base close to the Latakia city. In addition, Moscow signed a deal with Syria, according to which it obtains the right to keep forces in this country "indefinitely" (Presstv 2016). At present, Russia possesses four naval and air bases in Syria, while the exact number of ground forces operating there is unknown. Finally yet importantly, Moscow has also announced about its intention to get permission from Syria to deploy its naval-facilities on a permanent basis. Thus, as Stephen Blank suggests, "Russia has constructed the foundation—if not something more—for a long-term presence of combined-arms forces" (Blank 2016). With its extensive military build-up in the Middle East that is not the traditional region of its dominance, Russia explicitly signals about its status aspirations.

Demonstrating Russia's improved military capabilities and ability of power projection

The third pillar of Russia's social competition strategy in Syria entails demonstrating Russia's readiness and ability to project its power outside of the post-Soviet region. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western great powers have used their military capabilities on a multiple occasions all around the world. As Dmitri Trenin puts it, "by intervening in Syria, Russia undermined the de facto monopoly of the global use of force that the United

States has held since the collapse of the Soviet Union” (2016). Military power projection has assisted Russia to reveal that, notwithstanding the Western sanctions and economic difficulties, it can still effectively uphold its interests using hard power capabilities outside of “zone of interests.” It comes as no surprise that Russia’s political elite believes that its military reach needs to be bigger than just the protection of Russia’s national borders, therefore Syrian conflict enabled them to show off strong military capabilities as one of the central factors to prove its great powerness. After successful “hybrid war” in Ukraine, Syrian campaign enables Russia to demonstrate its missile capabilities including cruise missiles and strategic forces. In the aftermaths of establishing an army base in Latakia, Russia undertook air operations against Syrian opposition groups using a series of near missiles. Moreover, Russian missiles were launched against targets in Syria from the Black Sea. As Sumantra Maitra argues, only several great powers are capable of doing so and what’s more, Moscow’s ability to launch strikes from such a distanced location is particularly indicative, given the chronically poor condition of its navy after the collapse of the USSR (2016). He adds that the Syrian crisis has definitely proved Moscow’s ability to successfully project its hard power “in a small and rapid capacity” beyond the post-Soviet space (*Ibidem*).

Russia’s military build-up in Syria and the worsened situation on the ground, infused Washington to negotiate with Moscow. During mid-2016, Secretary of State John Kerry met Vladimir Putin to discuss military cooperation agreement, outlining the framework for coordination of American and Russian air attacks against ISIS. This plan entailed the creation of a joint military command center for information sharing, coordination of bombing campaigns and the minimization of accidental conflicts danger between Russian and U.S. aircrafts (Harris & Barnard 2016). Significantly, this plan has not fulfilled yet, however, Washington’s decision to cooperate with Russia can be conceived as recognition of Russia’s legitimate role in Syrian conflict and acknowledgment of the significance of coordination with Moscow to defeat ISIS.

In September, Russia and the United States announced the subsequent ceasefire agreement in Syria. As Lavrov stated, this agreement “is not the end of the road and the way; that is just the beginning of our new relations” (U.S. department of State 2016). In Hiro’s account, this was the first time after the demise of the Soviet Union that “Russia

managed to put itself on the same diplomatic footing as the U.S.” (Hiro 2016). Nevertheless, this truce turned out to be short-lived and it was thwarted in the aftermath of Aleppo bombing by Russian forces. However, it has not been the first unsuccessful peace deal this year and both parties might get back to the negotiation table again, since other alternatives to ensure long-lasting stability do not seem to be viable. Given this background, the United States can no longer exclude Russia from the final conflict settlement processes, simply because it seems unattainable without Moscow’s participation. After these developments, Obama claimed that “the bottom line is that we think that Russia is a large, important country with a military that is second only to ours, and has to be a part of the solution on the world stage rather than part of the problem” (The White House 2016).

Finally yet importantly, similar to the crisis in Ukraine, particular emotions have also played their role in Russia’s decision to intervene in Syria. The U.S. decision to overthrow Assad’s regime irrespective of Russia’s firm opposition generated the latter’s fear of “symbolic vulnerability” and provoked resentment. According to Lindemann, the state might engage in the international crisis out of fear for the survival of its identity and not for the sake of material or political incentives (2010, p. 86). To be more precise, its involvements conveyed an idea that Russia’s great power status constitutes certain interests in global affairs that require recognition from other major powers. Being an obstinate upholder of the principle of non-interference into state’s domestic affairs and sovereignty, Russia reacted in order to save its face as a defender (at least rhetorically) of this principle when Yanukovich’s regime was overthrown and Assad’s regime appeared on the verge to follow the suit. As a matter of fact, Russia’s intervention in Syria was an attempt to dissuade America to keep undermining Assad’s positions. What is more, Major General Igor Konashenkov sent a warning signal to the United States, bluntly informing that if the latter attacks territories held by Assad’s regime, it will be deemed by Moscow as an immediate threat posed to its military servicemen and as a response Moscow can launch its S-300 and S-400 anti aircraft missile systems (Oliphant 2016). This statement clearly expresses Russia’s resentment complex.

To recap, Russia’s social competition strategy is manifested in its Syrian campaign in the following ways: Moscow intended to save its great power’s face and gain recognition

from the United States as a central and equal player in the settlement of this crisis. For this purpose, Russia sought to obstruct the U.S. policy in Syria and attacked Assad's opposition forces. With its increased military presence, the Kremlin signaled about its status ambitions and sought to outweigh the United States, restore power balance in the region and show off its improved military capabilities as a sign of great powerness. Putin has also managed to survive its client Assad's regime and shifted the balance of power to Russia's advantage in the region.

Alternative explanation – Russia's campaign in Syria was a security-seeking act

Similar to the Ukraine case, there are certain arguments to prove that security concerns were not the primary determinants of Russia's invasion into Syria. To start with, there are plenty of evidence confirming that Russia's primary targets in Syria were America-backed Assad's opposition and not ISIS. Indeed, Assad's regime benefited the most from Russia's intervention, because thanks to Moscow's assistance, it restored control of the significant part of the country's territory, while moderate opposition has been significantly weakened (Czuperski et al 2016). This fact clearly indicates that the main aim Russia's incursion was survival of the Syrian regime and not defeat of ISIS.

Last year, a group of countries, such as France, Germany, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States issued a joint statement on the Russian intervention in Syria. With this declaration, these states "express our deep concern with regard to the Russian military build-up in Syria and especially the attacks by the Russian Air Force on Hama, Homs and Idlib, which led to civilian casualties and did not target Da'esh. These military actions constitute a further escalation and will only fuel more extremism and radicalization" (Turkey's Ministry of foreign Affairs 2015). Shortly after this declaration, the U.S. spokesman, John Kirby announced that "Greater than 90% of the strikes that we've seen them [Russia] take to date have not been against ISIL or al-Qaida-affiliated terrorists" (The Guardian 2016). Based on it, one might ask – if Russia intention was to eliminate the terrorism danger, why it targets Assad's opposition and not ISIS? This behavior reconfirms that Moscow's main goal in Syria is to survive Assad's regime and signal that Russia aspires to play the leading role in world affairs and is no longer willing to play the secondary role.

Secondly, there is a growing support to the claim that Russia's campaigns in Ukraine and Syria aimed to gather support to Putin's regime and distracting people's attention from the mounting economic problems. In my view, this factor is also directly connected to its international status. As it was mentioned in theoretical part, status consists of two aspects – self-reference and in-group recognition. Self-reference implies that people should perceive this country as a great power and their perceptions largely depend on state's external behavior. In this regard, these two campaigns have significantly helped Russia to enhance the self-reference part of its status and the following figures can work as a proof of it. To start with, the number of people, who considered Russia as a great power, has increased from being 48% in 2012 up to an unprecedented number – 68% in 2014. Second, in 2012, 9% of Russian's were very proud of Russia's political influence in the world, while 37 percent were somewhat proud. These numbers in 2015 have increased up to 22 % and 46 % respectively. In 2012, 22% of the population was very proud of the Russian armed forces, whereas this number in 2015 reached to 40% (Levada 2014). Hence, these figures show that Russia enhanced its self-reference as a great power and in the meantime, regime obtained an increased degree of loyalty.

Russia engages in social creativity strategy

As we already know from theoretical part, political leaders can adopt a mixture of the different identity management strategies, because they are not structurally determined (Clunan 2009, p. 35). In addition, dominant self-image in the country constructs different regions and countries as in-groups and out-groups, thereafter political elite pursues different identity management strategies towards them. The previous part argued that Russia's campaigns in Ukraine and Syria were consistent with social competition strategy. This part analyzes Russia's conduct of social creativity strategy towards the partial out-group - the West and investigates how Russia reinforces the normative aspects of its status. Consistent with Pukeliene's study, Russian official discourse about its civilizational identity and value distinctiveness does not intend to reinforce normative dimensions of its great power identity as such. Rather, it seeks to enhance Russia's status as an independent centre in a multipolar world (2014).

Nowadays, Russia considers the United States as its main opponent in establishing the multipolar order that makes the interests of these two countries incompatible, because U.S. unipolarism erodes Russia's international status. It is worth to note that the from Russia's perspective, the United States represents the leading force within the Western civilization and other Western great powers align to this country. Based on it, the West represents a higher-status group for Russia and it can be defined as its out-group, from which it strives to maintain a positive distinctiveness. In what follows, we will examine, how political leadership uses discourse about Russia's civilizational uniqueness and value distinctiveness in order to enhance its international standing. Thus, Russia's status seeking behavior in Putin's third term can be described as an amalgamation of social competition (Ukraine and Syria) and social creativity (civilizational and conservative turns) strategies.

According to the traditional SIT theorists, members of a group with a lower self-esteem pursue social creativity strategy, thereby they "seek positive distinctiveness for this group by redefining or altering the elements of the comparative situation" (Tajfel & Turner 1986, cited in Evans 2015, p. 404). Likewise, political leaders pursue social creativity strategy, when they shift to a new dimension of comparison with the reference out-group that would enable them to present their country as distinctive and superior from the significant 'Other'. Remarkably, normative and cultural inferiority to the West turns into the deficit of respect towards Russia as an equal and independent player that also triggers humiliation and exacerbates resentment (Morozov 2015). Hence, this chapter suggests that after Putin's return to power, Russia introduces a new dimension of comparison with the West, that is the civilisational uniqueness. In the meantime, Russian Orthodox Church, closely connected to Russia's leadership, sets up a new mission for Russia - defender of the traditional values worldwide. The political elite wants the West to acknowledge Russia's distinctiveness on this scale of comparison (civilizational and value differences) that would enhance its international standing. However, if the West refuses to appreciate Moscow's distinctiveness based on these features, it might trigger a new wave of resentment in Russia.

Status consists of tangible and intangible components and there is a growing body of literature, which argues that along with conventional/material attributes of status (military, economy, demography etc), country also needs to encompass outstanding normative

features, for example, cultural achievements, civilizational attributes, norm entrepreneurship etc. Iver Newmann's study concludes that during the previous centuries, Russia's non-recognition problem was caused by the lack of Western norms, while its military strength turned out to be insufficient for recognition (2008). Curanović also considers that "in attributing status, countries take into consideration not only the material potential of an aspiring country, but also its commitment to the values and principles shared by the dominating actors" (2015, Suzuki 2008). However, Russia is reluctant to embrace Western values and prefers to prove its value distinctiveness. Russia's social creativity strategy rests on two pillars mainly: firstly, Russia is a unique state-civilization and guarantor of civilizational diversity; Russia's conservative values are superior to the Western values and this country is the last bulwark of traditional values. Russia still argues that its conservative values are truly European, but drastically different and superior to that of the Western values.

For Russia, the West represents the most important significant 'Other'. As Stepanova suggests, "In Russia for centuries, the role of the 'Other' as something different from 'us' thus making 'us' ourselves, was assigned to 'the West' (2015, p. 128). However, the recent Statist discourse in Russia shows that the West is not only the 'other', but also the 'enemy', which causes bad things and threatens Russia's identity, integrity etc. As Vilho Harle puts it, "The Enemy emerges if and only if "we" and "they" are thought to be fundamentally different, that is, when the distinction is understood to reflect the struggle between good and evil, and when good is associated with "us" but evil with "them"" (2000, as it is cited in Stepanova 2015). As long as the terms such as "the West" and "Europe" are sometimes misleadingly used as interchangeable, Malinova singles out the main distinction between these two - "Russia is usually seen as a part of Europe (though in varying senses), but it hardly could be considered an actual part of "the West"" (2014, p. 292). Along similar lines, Russia asserts that its values are different and superior to that of Western values, but Western values are not synonym with European values. The matter is that Russia portrays itself as a true defender of European values, while the Western countries have abandoned them (Morozov 2015; Curanović 2015). In this light, "the West" denotes the liberal and materialistic part of Europe, plus the United States, which can be dubbed as "false" Europe. As for Russia, it is a part of *other*, true Europe or anti-liberal Europe, which defends the

true and authentic European values and sticks to the different path of development. The West and Russia as *other* Europe represent two different “civilizational grammars” (Laruelle 2016).

As it was mentioned in theoretical part, the dominant statist self-image borrows narratives from other self-images (Civilizationism, Eurasianism) that are quite salient, when we analyze Russia’s social creativity strategy. As Laruelle argues, main features of Eurasianism are narratives about Russia’s irreducible national specificity, cultural autarky, a religious and political messianism. (2008, as it is cited in Smith, 2015). Civilizationists argue that Russia is a unique civilization, which has its “mission” (Ibidem). Exactly these elements are incorporated in today’s Statist self-image and political elite extensively uses them to lay the solid foundation to its social creativity strategy. This part of the thesis assumes that re-emergence of discourse on Russia’s identity, as a distinct state-civilization serves to the purpose of drawing the clear lines between its unique and the Western civilizations with an aim to enhance its independent standing in a multipolar world.

Russia as a unique state-civilization and defender of civilizational diversity

Discourse about civilizational uniqueness re-emerged in political elite’s vocabulary already in 2012, when in his speech, Putin explicitly underlined that preservation of state’s civilisational identity is an important task for the state. (2012b). As Linde puts it, “the state makes up the historical basis of, and is inseparable from, the civilisation in question. The civilisation and the state are envisioned as being so intimately connected as to be practically indistinguishable” (2016, p. 24). This claim lends credence to Putin’s statist view, according to which strong state is vital to reinforce civilization and vice versa, strong civilizational identity underpins state’s strength. Tsygankov defines civilization as “historically (re)produced and relatively stable structure of national meaning, [which] represents a set of culturally distinct values that are reproduced across time and space.” (2016, p. 147)

After 2012, Russia’s political leadership increasingly underlines the civilizational identity and traditional values, while speaking about the current world order. In his address to the Federal assembly in 2012, Putin argued, “In the 21st century, against the background of a new alignment of economic, civilisational and military forces, Russia must be

a sovereign and influential country. We should not just develop with confidence, but also preserve our national and spiritual identity, not lose ourselves as a nation” (Putin 2012c). With this statement, president exposed its view, according to which, along with military and economic capabilities, civilizational attributes has evolved as signifiers of international competition. Similar line of reasoning can be traced in the following sentence from Russia foreign policy concept, released in 2013: “For the first time in modern history, global competition takes place on a civilizational level, whereby various values and models of development start to clash and compete against each other” (The Ministry of Foreign affairs of the Russian federation 2013). Unlike the pre-existing bipolar system, current competition takes place between states, which belong to different civilizations and given this background, Curanović notes that “a state’s self-identification in terms of civilization is thus an attribute of its power status” (2015, p. 12). Furthermore, during the meeting of the Council for interethnic relations in 2012, Putin underlined that Russia’s a unique world civilization nature represents country’s “great competitive advantage” (Putin 2012d).

As Russia’s political leadership believes, multipolarity must be based on the existence of several independent “poles”, composed by the major powers and such system can effectively constrain the U.S. unrelenting aspirations towards global hegemony. As long as the true multipolar system has not come into existence yet, the West is inclined to administer international affairs on the basis of its liberal norms. As Putin underlined, “This period of unipolar domination has convincingly demonstrated that having only one power centre does not make global processes more manageable. On the contrary, this kind of unstable construction has shown its inability to fight the real threats such as regional conflicts, terrorism, drug trafficking, religious fanaticism, chauvinism and neo-Nazism” (Putin 2014). Given this background, Putin asserts, “under these conditions, Russia can and should play an outstanding role, dictated by its civilizational model, a great history geography and culture of its genome” (Putin 2016e). Therefore, Russia understands that if it wants to establish an effective multipolarity, where Russia will play a key role as an independent “pole”, it needs to boost the alternative normative attributes, which in the meantime will distinguish it from the dominant Western civilization. In Linde’s words, “the framework emphasizing civilizational diversity can be regarded as the cultural equivalent

of multipolarism, which was otherwise concerned with hard-power capabilities” (2016b, p. 611).

During Medvedev’s presidency, discourse about Russia’s belonging to European civilization has gained momentum. As he announced, “I am certain that we cannot resolve Europe’s problems until we achieve a sense of identity and an organic unity between all of its integral components, including the Russian Federation. Having cast aside the Soviet system and any idea of its restoration, Russia has laid the foundations of a state that is completely compatible with the rest of Europe.... The end of the Cold War made it possible to build up genuinely equal cooperation between Russia, the European Union and North America as three branches of European civilization” (2008). Along similar lines, Foreign Policy Concept of 2008 stipulates that “Russia stands ready to play a constructive role in ensuring the civilizational compatibility of Europe” (The President of Russia 2008). It is easy to notice that by placing emphasis on civilizational compatibility, Russian leadership aimed at obtaining an equal status from the United States and European powers by pursuing the social mobility strategy. However, after the failure of its rapprochement with the West, Russia opted for social creativity strategy and after Putin’s return to power, Russia is experiencing “civilizational nationalism”, which denotes the situation, when national identity is framed in civilizational terms for poorly political purposes. (Pain, as it is cited in Linde 2016b) As Linde suggests, placing an emphasis on cultural and civilizational distinctiveness from the West can serve as the best illustration of state-sponsored “civilizational nationalism” (Ibidem).

As we already know, state pursues social creativity strategy, when state highlights its own superiority in cultural, civilizational, moral terms and its political leaders argue that these criteria are becoming more important for evaluation than other, conventional criteria for higher status allocation. Russia’s unique civilizational discourse has particular traits, which are used by different commentators to underline its superiority comparing to the Western civilization. To start with, as it is mentioned in the 2013 foreign policy doctrine, Russia is “a multiethnic and multi-religious state, with historic experience of the harmonious coexistence of different nations, ethnic groups, and faiths, which is well equipped for dialogue and inter-civilizational partnership” (The ministry of foreign affairs 2013). An unmatched scale of ethnic and linguistic diversity coupled with affluence of

different confessions render Russia a state-civilization and furthermore, it is unique inasmuch as no single country or civilization can enjoy the same degree of diversity. Given this background, Russian civilization is more coherent and therefore superior to the Western civilization, because despite such diversity and multiculturalism, it is a harmonious civilization, whereas the West encounters difficulties with regard to ethnic minorities (Kosachev 2012, cited in Pukeliene 2014, p. 38). Thus, its superiority lies in its outstanding tradition of harmonizing a variety of ethnic and religious groups. As Putin alluded, unlike Europe, Russia has never experienced religious wars or crusades (Curanovic 2015, p. 13). Secondly, Russia's civilization is better than Western civilization, since it respects other traditional civilizations, whereas Western civilization seeks to prevail internationally and disrespect other civilizations (Ibidem). Significantly, the last claim is used by Russia to speak with other traditional civilizations and build a real multipolarity. Thirdly, it could be argued that respect to other traditional civilizations renders Russia a defender of civilizational diversity that also embodies the social creativity strategy in a sense that it highlights a completely new role for Russia in a multipolar world. Finally yet importantly, Russian unique civilization has features, such as collectivism, communality, collegiality, patriotism, whereas the West is associated with notions such as exploitation, manipulation, egocentrism, and focus only on material goods and all these values are destructive (Mikhailov 2013, Bogachev 2013, cited in Pukeliene 2014). As it was stated above, social creativity might entail acts, such as turning positive characters of the significant "other" into negative. As long as Russia is unable to catch up with the West in terms of economic development, Moscow vilifies its advantage, saying that such capitalist system is immoral and excessively focused on obtaining economic incentives. In addition, Western secular civilization adheres to liberalism, secularism and individualism, while Russia sticks to traditionalism, moral and religious principles. Putin also claimed that "It seems to me that the Russian people, or, to speak more widely, people of the "Russian world" civilization, the first thing he thinks of is that there is some higher moral principle. As for the Western values, they say that a person is himself, focused on personal success only. We think differently...[Russian person] can die for his friends, for his people, in contemporary language, for their country" (2014b). Finally, as it becomes clear from Pukeliene's analysis on different identity discourses in Russia, "constructing Russian

identity as of separate civilization gives it certainly a special status... and unique position in international arena” (2014, p. 46). Thus, re-emerged civilizational discourse serves to the purpose of inverting the U.S. dominated unipolar system into the truly multipolar world by virtue of introducing Russia as a superior and real upholder of civilizational diversity and constraining other major powers to abuse this system.

Russia as the last bulwark of traditional values

As Hurrell claims “states can improve their social status by articulating alternative sets of values which other states can rally round, thus creating an anti-hegemonic coalition in which to claim leadership status”. (2006, cited in Suzuki 2008, p. 60). As Russian commentators argue, Christian traditional values ensure coherence and unity of Russia’s unique civilization, these values lie at the heart of Russia’s civilizational identity, therefore ruling elite and ROC promote traditional Christian values and portray Russia, as defender of the traditional values worldwide. In Laruelle’s account, this messianic narrative has universal significance and represents a transcendent idea of Russian civilization, which bears a portion of divine truth and disappearance of which will leave all mankind impoverished (2014, p.1). These values are listed in the 2015 state educational strategy - humanity, justice, honor, conscience, personal dignity, faith in the goodness and willingness to assume moral duty towards themselves, their family and Fatherland. (2015, p.3). Russia criticizes the West, because it abandoned moral values and derailed from its Christian roots. As Putin claimed, “We see a lot of Euro-Atlantic countries chose the path, which leads them to the rejection of their roots, including Christian values that form the basis of Western civilization. [We see] the denial of any moral principles and traditional identity: national, cultural, religious or sexual” and losing spiritual principles leads to its moral degradation (Putin 2013). The West aggressively tries to impose its wicked model to the entire world (Ibidem).

Intriguingly, Putin conceives high morality and spirituality of society as the main determinant of state’s strength, arguing that “we must be strong militarily, technologically, economically, but still the main thing that will determine the success - it is the quality of people, intellectual, spiritual, moral quality of society. After all, economic growth and prosperity and geopolitical influence - is derived from the state of society itself” (Ibidem).

In addition, based on the analysis of Putin's pre-election articles published in 2012, Hanna Smith concludes that the common denominator in these seven articles was Putin's intention to remind the society that "Russia's international status comes from national unity and pride" (2015). Significantly, advocating the traditional values by the government also enhances the national unity, while positive distinctiveness from the West on the basis of different value system is supposed to enhance the national pride, i.e. self-esteem.

There is a growing support to the claim that Russia's conservative turn has quite significant foreign policy dimension. As Laruelle underlines, Russian conservatism "is a tool for international consumption: for the first time since the collapse of Marxism, Russia is offering the world a narrative that goes beyond its national specificities, has universal value, and thus can be accepted, integrated, and reinterpreted in other contexts" (2014, p 6). Moscow seeks to use its traditional value discourse in order to undermine the neo-liberal hegemony in the international system. In this vein, Russian political elite advocates the view that interstate relations should be conducted on the basis of traditional values. As Sergey Lavrov stated in 2012, "I am convinced that the moral values that are common to all world religions, should remain the basis of purely human relations, and at the heart of world politics" (Ria Novosti 2012). Subsequently, he asserted that "advocates of ultra liberalism require revision of moral and ethical values that undermines effort to establish a stable system of global governance" (Interfax 2014). Finally, the closest supporter of the Kremlin in defending moral values is patriarch Kirill, who also expressed his opinion with regard to Russia's sovereignty and argued that Russia's spiritual sovereignty is "the highest degree of asserting the sovereignty of Russia as a unique country-civilization" (Sharafutdinova 2014, p. 618). Similarly, Trenin argues, "the centerpiece of Russia's new foreign policy is winning full sovereignty and fundamental to this vision are conservative values, rooted in the Orthodox Christian tradition" (2014, p. 1).

Russia's introduction of conservative values into the international politics can be understood as an attempt to create a doctrine and to give a meaning to "voice of Russia" internationally and primarily, against the U.S. unilateralism. In addition, it enables the Kremlin to communicate with non-Western emerging powers, which also feel irked by the Western imposition of its model (Laruelle 2014 p. 2). As Vladimir Putin once argued, unipolar world system threatens the "God-given diversity of the world" (2013).

Significantly, Russia's agenda on strengthening multipolarity by forging ties with non-Western great powers is fully in sync with its traditional discourse, which also entails maintaining tight ties with other "traditional" civilizations. (Curanović 2015, p. 7). As Anderson suggests, "the common feature of conservative Christian movement is their patriotic commitment – a belief that their nation is special and perhaps has a mission to spread their values to a wider world" (2014, cited in Stepanova 2015, p. 132). Russia's political leadership introduces its conservative ethical values as the better alternative of liberalism in international politics and by doing so, they seek to introduce the new criterion for status allocation that would enable Russia to enhance the positive ranking in the international arena (because Russia portrays itself as being more ethical actor). However, as we will see in last part, Russian-led traditional ethical values are only instrumental and have quite slim chances to prevail.

Russia's traditional value discourse is fully consistent with social creativity strategy. To start with, as SIT/IR argues, by adopting this strategy, state "aims to redefine the attractiveness of existing group attributes or create new ones...it involves contesting the validity and legitimacy of existing criteria for status allocations" (Clunan 2009, p. 35). It also entails shifting the social comparison with higher-status group on a new dimension. Russia's social creativity strategy is exemplified with statements of its political leaders, according to which, the West and its liberal values are becoming dangerous for other societies (because they spark unrests) and they are losing their moral superiority. Hence, these values should no longer be considered as valid criterion for status allocation and need to be replaced. In the meantime, Russia creates the new status attributes for itself, claims to find a new role – the last bastion for protection of traditional values, and seeks recognition of this new role from the Western societies first. As Putin claimed in 2013, "we know that in a world, more and more people support our position on defending traditional values, which for millennia were the spiritual and moral basis of civilisation in every nation" (2013b). Russia cooperates with conservative forces in the West, given that their recognition is of significant importance for Russia (Morozov 2015). Significantly, Russia protects not only conservatism internationally, but also it portrays itself as a savior of Europe. As Kosachev puts it, Russia "understands itself in a role of equally competent savior of common European spiritual heritage. If we use technical parallel, then our state

offers itself as a kind of ‘backup server’, ‘boot CD’ with all the main programmes (values) in case, when main server or computer is attacked by ‘virus’ and it will be needed to restore it in its initial form” (2013, as it is cited in Pukeliene 2014).

To summarize this part, Russia’s civilizational turn and conservative surge exemplify the social creativity strategy in a sense that Russia seeks to assert its superiority based on the civilizational uniqueness and value distinctiveness from the West. With these actions, Russia seeks to reject claims about the universality of the Western civilizational standards and highlights its distinctive civilizational identity from the West. As Linde puts it, “in regard to the values dimension, the civilisational approach essentializes differences, and represents in this sense an ideology of separateness that can be used as a means of self-distinguishing and, concurrently, of Othering” (2016b, p. 27). He adds that Russia’s new morality and emphasis on its cultural values is an attempt of cultural self-determination to achieve self-sufficiency. Just as Putin has been trying to "de-offshorize" the Russian elite, he is now launching what could be called a "moral de-offshorization" (Galleoti and Bowen 2016). If Ukrainian and Syrian cases showed that Russia competed with other great powers, its social creativity strategy - highlighting civilizational uniqueness and conservative values serve to the purpose of self-improvement to establish itself as an independent centre in a multipolar order. Furthermore, Russia considers that superior moral values and civilizational uniqueness are more important criteria to be compared with the West, rather than economic standards or democratic norms (Evans 2015, p. 28). If integration into the Western economy was viewed as a viable option to retain its great power status during Putin’s first term in 2000s, the current government no longer expresses enthusiasm to enhance its status through this way. Russia questions the existing criteria for status allocation on which it is inferior to the higher-status group and seeks to invent the new criteria for comparison that is one of the most important indicators of social creativity strategy.

The main weaknesses of Russia’s social creativity strategy

Although Russia might want to achieve the cultural self-sufficiency and total independence from the West by virtue of promoting traditional values and civilizational distinctiveness, this strategy still suffers from the structural shortcomings. Morozov

develops several arguments to claim that conservative turn and definition of idea of civilization have clearly exposed Russia's normative dependence on the West and intriguingly, it can significantly curtail Moscow's effort to become a completely independent actor in a multipolar world. As he argues, Russia seems unable to portray itself as "a substantial alternative to Western neoliberal hegemony... the rejection of hegemonic values are not matched by any positive agenda" (2015, p. 121). Promotion of traditional family values is characterized by aggressive anti-Westernism and in the meantime, they do not reveal any specific vision of good or positive policy goals (ibidem). Likewise, Taylor underlines that "Russian conservatism is more properly seen as just anti-liberalism" (2015). Thus, discourses about Russia's civilizational identity and conservative values have just instrumental significance and it will be hard for Russia to convince other countries to support in its social creativity strategy.

Secondly, government's conservative agenda does not seem to have a sufficient domestic support as well. In 2014, Russian respondents were asked to answer the following question: "in what kind of country you prefer to live: in a country, which (1) provides its people with material needs at the first rank, or (2) spiritual and cultural needs?". As a result, 19 percent of them replied that they would choose "definitely first option", whereas 39 percent would "mostly prefer" the first variant. By contrast, only 6% would choose "definitely second option" and only 24% would "mostly prefer" it (Levada 2014). However, in 2014, 77 percent of Russian people believed that Russia can become prosperous only by its own identity, by moving on his special path, different from the West (ibidem). Thus, although Russia's conservative agenda does not have an extensive support from Russian people, they still believe that this country should follow its own unique path.

CONCLUSION

Russia's ruling elite strongly believes that after the demise of the Soviet Union, the Western powers have been deliberately downgrading Russia's role in global affairs, therefore this country is not accepted as an equal player in international politics. As SIT suggests, states have a psychological need for national self-esteem and positive social identity and they engage in self-evaluation through social comparison with the significant 'Other'. Russia's perceived unfair treatment from the West turned into an unfavorable

social comparison with Western powers and it is conceived by its leadership as a humiliating experience. Therefore, Russia had to adopt the different identity management strategies, thereby it seeks to achieve a positive social comparison and social identity by dint of attaining the higher international status.

This study has shown that Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in Syria bear palpable hallmarks of social competition strategy that served to the purpose of defending Russia's great power status and interests through assertive gestures. With its annexation of Crimea, Moscow sought to tighten its positions in the post-Soviet space that directly underpins its great power status. Moscow also demonstrated its ability to wage a new generation of warfare and once again deprived the right to the Western great powers to unilaterally interpret the international law. Second, Russia's military campaign in Syria can be understood as an attempt to obstruct the West's endeavor to topple down Assad's regime that would run against Moscow's interests. The latter showed to Washington that without considering Russia's interests and role, solution of this international crisis can become a painstaking task for the United States. Syrian campaign was also particularly significant in a sense that after the collapse of USSR, Russia first time projected its hard power outside the post-Soviet space and it can undeniably be perceived as a status signaling behavior. As this thesis also has demonstrated, these military campaigns were driven by status-seeking rather than seeking security or material gains. Significantly, Russia's assertive reaction to the perceived status humiliation was instigated by certain emotional factors, such as resentment and desire for retaliation. More specifically, Yanukovich's overthrow and an attempt to topple down Assad's regime in Syria were seen in Moscow as the severe forms of disrespect to Russia's great power interests and these campaigns were responses to the perceived disrespect from the Western powers.

Secondly, Russia's conduct of social creativity strategy entails the revival of discourse about its unique civilizational identity and adherence to conservative values and political elite seeks to enhance the normative components of country's international status. These two discourses aim to emphasize the moral and civilization superiority and positive distinctiveness of Russia from the West. In the meantime, its civilizational uniqueness and value distinctiveness serve to the purpose of maintaining self-sufficiency and independence from the West. From political elite's point of view, in a multipolar world, the key players

must have the explicit civilizational credentials and Russia's unique civilizational identity and its particular features are used instrumentally to claim its civilizational superiority over the Western civilization. On the other hand, with its promotion of traditional values, Russia claims to be morally superior to the West and judging by Lavrov's comments, traditional, ethical values should substitute liberal values as a basis of interstate relations. This suggestion also implies that traditional values should substitute liberal values as the main criterion of status allocation, as the West maintains it. Consistent with social creativity strategy, Russia's emphasize on civilizational and moral superiority indicates that this country acknowledges its inferiority to the West on the traditional status components (economy, demography, technological advancement etc) and brings into play the new normative criteria to assert its status and advantage. As Russian commentators argued, the unique civilizational identity and value distinctiveness are supposed to reinforce Russia independent stance as a sovereign pole in a multipolar world. However, due to the poorly instrumental nature of these discourses, it seems hard for Russia to attain this goal and maintain independence from the West.

Finally, we should summarize all above-discussed points and clarify, what are the real status markers for Russia from the perspective of its ruling elite. Recognition of its great power status and centrality in the international system entails a number of provision, status markers. To start with, the West must acknowledge Russia's special role in the post-Soviet space and limit the engagement of Western-dominated institutions in this region. Second, the Western powers should not disregard Russia's role and an equal footing in the international decision-making related to the key conflicts and crises in the world, because as a major power, Russia has right to enjoy this privilege. Thirdly, the Western powers must ensure that Russia will get an opportunity to have its say over security in Europe and it entails reducing the centrality of NATO and the EU in European affairs. Fourth, the West should not depict liberal values as universal and it should stop the democracy promotion. Liberal normative standards should not be seen by the West as the essential criterion for granting the higher status to the states. Thus, social recognition of Russia's status would be a confirmation of its international standing and it is necessary for the positive self-evaluation, while denial of recognition is conceived a frustrating and humiliating experience for Russia.

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