Russian interference in the United States (US) Presidential election in 2016

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Abstract

There is significant evidence that the Russian government interfered in the 2016 United States (US) Presidential election, including through direct attacks against US election infrastructure and internet-based disinformation. Interference in the US election in 2016 represented a particularly sophisticated intrusion due partly to the use of cyber operations as an interference tool. Open-source information provides insight into Russia's interference methods; however, the precise motivation for pursuing interference remains unknown. Russian incentives to interfere in the US Presidential elections in 2016 remain a topic of debate in academia, politics, media and popular culture. Experts in the field of International Relations (IR) and other academic disciplines have offered nuanced and critical perspectives on the matter. However, in the absence of high-level Russian intelligence reports and confidential information sources, it is difficult to gauge the precise reasons why Russia resorted to such actions. Considering this, understanding Russia's foreign policy interests may offer possible explanations as to why interference was pursued. This thesis will seek to understand how states use electoral interference to achieve foreign policy goals. Thereafter, Russia's interference activities concerning the 2016 US Presidential elections will be examined as a case study which can aid in understanding what macro level foreign policy outcomes Russia wanted to achieve by interfering. Structural realism will be employed as the primary theoretical framework to address these questions.

Abbreviations

BBC - British Broadcasting Company

BMD - Ballistic missile defence

BND - German Federal Intelligence Service

BSC - British Security Coordination

CPRP - Computational Propaganda Research Project

DNC - Democratic National Committee

EAEU - Eurasian Economic Union

EC - European Commission

EU - European Union

FBI - Federal Bureau of Investigation

FPO - Austria's Freedom Party

FRCB - First Czech Russian Bank

FSU - Former Soviet Union

GDP - Gross Domestic Product

GNP - Gross National Product

GRU - The Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation

ICA- Intelligence Community Assessment

IO -Information Operation

IRA - Internet Research Agency

IW - Information warfare

LNG - Liquefied natural gas

NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

NGO - Non-governmental organisation

OHCHR - The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

RNC - Republican National Committee

RND - Research and development

SSCI - US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence
UK - United Kingdom

UN - United Nations

UNSC - United Nations Security Council

USSR - The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

WB - World Bank

Declaration

I declare that Russian interference in the United States (US) Presidential election in 2016, is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

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Signed: Jodie Bougaard

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Chapter one: Introduction

1.1 Introduction and research problem

In 2018, the United States (US) Justice Department Special Counsel indicted thirteen individuals and several companies associated with the Russian-based Internet Research Agency (IRA) (Farwell, 2018, p.37). The IRA, under the direction of the Russian government, is believed to have interfered in the US political process, most notably the Presidential election in 2016, using computational propaganda to misinform and polarise US voters (Howard et al., 2019). Furthermore, in 2017 the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) released a report which revealed that the Russian government directed extensive activity, beginning as early as 2014 and carrying into at least 2017, against US election infrastructure at the state and local level (SSCI, 2017-a). Russia has a history of intervention in foreign elections (SSCI, 2018); however, interference in the US election in 2016 represented a particularly sophisticated intrusion due partly to the use of cyber operations as an interference tool.

This thesis will offer insight into Russia's interference in the US Presidential election in 2016 and how this practice can be understood as a foreign policy strategy to achieve macro level outcomes. Russian interference in the 2016 US elections represents the most publicised and extensive incident of meddling in recent years. Due to its contemporary nature and ongoing relevance, Russian meddling in the 2016 US Presidential election presents a valuable case study to evaluate to understand more generally why interference is applied as a strategy. Defining what interference means in the context of its utility as a coercive measure is essential to classify electoral interference as a foreign policy strategy. As a key concept, power can connect a state's foreign policy strategy and its intended objective.

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1.2. Research question

The main research question will encompass two sub-questions.

The research question that will be pursued in this study is: How does Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential elections illustrate interference as a foreign policy strategy?

There are two sub-questions:

1. How was interference undertaken by Russia?
2. What macro-level foreign policy outcomes (if any) did Russia want to achieve by meddling in the 2016 US election?

1.3 Research framework

The research question will attempt to understand how electoral interference can be understood as a foreign policy strategy aimed at achieving macro-level outcomes. As a case study, the inquiry will focus on the motivation behind Russia's actions toward the US within the international sphere, specifically 2016's electoral interference. Structural realism, one of the principal theories in the discipline of International Relations (IR), will form the foundation of the study. In general, when analysed within a theoretical framework, research findings cannot, in absolute terms, discern the precise reason(s) why Russia meddled in the US election. However, structural realism has explanatory power and can propose causal deductions between the significant factors contributing to Russia's actions for further investigation.

The methodological choices included in this study will be based on the positivist paradigm. Paradigm refers to the worldview that provides the overarching framework for the research design (Aliyu et al., 2014). The positivist approach, based on empiricism, develops from a theoretical perspective, and the hypothesis is often established before the research begins (Aliyu et al., 2014). Within the positivist paradigm, theory informs the hypotheses, also known as the key assumptions and claim(s), noted below.

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Key claims

1. States use interference as a foreign policy strategy.
2. Electoral interference is a common form of foreign interference to achieve macro (or system) level outcomes that benefit the state perpetrating such action.
3. Russian interference in the 2016 US election is part of a more extensive Russian campaign to create macro-level outcomes that favour Russia's geopolitical position.

This thesis will adopt the deductive analytical method. However, for objective or measurable facts to be used to provide causal explanations of events, the core concepts of the study need to be operationalised to qualify as empirical. Operationalising the concepts involves translating abstract concepts into (qualitatively) researchable variables (Harvey, 2012). Within this study, at least two concepts will be operationalised: interference in another country's elections as a foreign policy strategy; and system-level outcomes. A typology of such activities needs to be established to operationalise Russian interference. Interference methods also need to be categorised to determine if and how they constitute an exercise of geopolitical power.

Structural realists claim that states' behaviour is dictated by the international system and driven by self-interest as it relates to security (Lobell et al., 2009, p.4). Russia's motivation for interfering in the US election in 2016 can be assessed through the lens of its core stated foreign policy objective: shifting the global balance of power toward a multipolar system by weakening the liberal international order (Pavlova and Romanova, 2012, p.244). Two indicators will be used to test structural realism's assertions as it relates to Russia's motives for interfering in the US elections. The first indicator will revolve around the liberal-led international order and its core components: liberal democracy and global institutions (Mearsheimer, 2019, p.9). The second indicator will focus on Russia's actions toward the West and within its immediate geographical sphere of influence.

This thesis is based on qualitative research, which enables causal relationships between independent and dependent variables to be explained. The qualitative approach is suitable considering the research question, which seeks to understand (through explanation) how electoral interference is used as a foreign policy tool to achieve system-level outcomes. The research question encompasses two variables. The independent variable is Russian interference

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in the election, and the dependent variable is the macro (or system) level outcomes pursued by Russia. In the social sciences, a dependent variable is thought to be the effect or outcome, while the independent variable constitutes the cause of the dependent variable (Vosloo, 2014).

This study is a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that can be used widely across a range of epistemologies and research questions and is typically used to identify, analyse, organise, describe, and report themes found within a data set (Nowell et al., 2017). The thematic approach applied in this study has allowed for a level of flexibility regarding collecting data procured from an array of primary and secondary sources. Material obtained from primary sources includes but is not limited to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the United States Congress.

This study has also utilised secondary data; information was sourced from peer-reviewed journals, academic reports, reputable media outlets, and non-government organisations (NGOs). Secondary source information in this thesis includes data from The Computational Propaganda Research Project (CPRP), the World Bank (WB), the United Nations (UN), the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) and the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR).

1.3 Ethics

As this is a desktop study, the primary ethical considerations when undertaking the research are related to veracity and credibility. Primary sources, such as the NATO-Russia council meeting declarations, are useful as they are non-partisan, which lends credibility to the content contained within and limits the prospect of subjectivity. Furthermore, information sourced through the Congressional Research Service (CRS) is relatively reliable as the organisation works closely with the US government and collaborates with international agencies such as the OECD.

Reports such as those produced by the CPRP encompass participation and input from various stakeholders, including governments, universities and the private sector. These stakeholders likely have varying interests and different contributions, which adds credibility to the report

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findings and diminishes the potential for subjective bias, which may have occurred if only one perspective was represented.

Data on Russia's relationship with NATO and its neighbouring countries have been gathered from global institutes, independent think tanks and universities. Using multiple data sources and researcher points of view is a practice toward qualitative credibility. The integrity of the findings contained within this thesis is supported by triangulating data gathered from all these different sources.

1.4 Limitations and delimitations

Given the scope of this study, an extensive account of Russia's electoral interference in other states will not be included, nor will attempts or accounts of interference in ongoing, preceding, or subsequent elections. This study's primary goal is to understand how system structure, characterised by the poles of power, has influenced Russia's decision to intervene in the election of the US in 2016. This study will collect and analyse data between 2013 and 2020 to do so.

The year 2013 marks the second year of Russian President Vladimir Putin's third term in office; it is the year in which increased interference activities related to the US election in 2016 were reported and is also the year in which key Russian foreign policy legislation was ratified and enacted (Howard et al., 2019, n.p.). Analysis related to Russia's interference will include information that extends beyond the electoral period but does not exceed the US executive administration's first term, ending in late 2020/early 2021. Gathering data on Russia's relations with NATO and its foreign policy foundations will encompass an analysis of concepts, doctrines and documents that precede the timeframe. Furthermore, this thesis encompasses sections that reference Russia's relationship with Ukraine, specifically the implications of this relationship when situated within a more comprehensive analysis of Russia's relationship with NATO and the West. On 24 February 2022, Russian forces advanced into Ukraine; active conflict remains ongoing as of October 2022 (Reuters, 2022). The analysis of Russia-Ukraine relations contained in this thesis only includes information and data that pre-dates 2020 and does not take into account any ongoing hostilities or developments related to the conflict, which would have made the analysis overly broad in scope for a Master's mini thesis.

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Moreover, this study is not a foreign policy analysis in the conventional sense. Therefore, obtaining, translating, and analysing specific Kremlin policy documents was not a necessary procedural element in the research process. Instead, this thesis attempts to identify the drivers of foreign policy action, specifically electoral interference abroad, and how this relates to Russia's general posture in the international sphere. The foreign policy information referenced in this study has been obtained through reliable secondary sources, utilising English as a primary language through which data and analysis are communicated. The exclusion of Russian material is a limitation, which is mitigated by using accessible material written by Russian scholars in English.

1.5 Situating the thesis in the literature

This thesis aims to produce a narrative capable of accounting for the use of foreign electoral interference as a strategy aimed at affecting the global distribution of power. As a core case study, examining Russia's meddling in the 2016 US Presidential elections can offer valuable insight in this regard.

The prevailing system of international relations, and associated global security dynamics, is based on the actual distribution of power between major powers (Mearsheimer, 2019, p.7). "Since 1880, in a comparative ranking of world powers, the top five slots at sequential 20-year intervals have been shared by only seven states: the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Russia, Japan, and China" (Ding, 2011, p.256). The distribution of power remains in flux due to significant global developments that have aided and curtailed the shifting of power between these major powers and competing interests in the 21st century.

This perpetual state of power shifting continues to occur between competing states, coalitions and interests. The Western-led liberal order, which includes the US, United Kingdom (UK), France, Germany and Japan, stands in contrast to China and Russia, two countries that do not form part of the Western community and express differing values and interests (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010, p.63). The liberal order, dominated by the US, "is giving way to one increasingly shared with non-Western rising states" (Ikenberry, 2011, p.56). Power shifts are reflected in the increasing fragility of the prevailing liberal-led international order and the rise of competing states, China and Russia.

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The liberal world order is predicated upon the spread of liberal democracy, global trade, and an integrated world economy (Mearsheimer, 2019, p.9). At present, the liberal world order reflects an unstable global financial system, characterised by recurring financial crises, declining wages, and increased global income inequality; associated challenges have increasingly manifested in domestic political issues and unrest in affected countries (Mearsheimer, 2019, p.8). Most notably, the 2007-2008 global financial crisis "called into question the competence of the elites who manage the liberal international order" (Lanchester, 2018 cited in Mearsheimer, 2019, p.9). Economic challenges of this nature serve to expose the vulnerability of the liberal international order.

Furthermore, the spread of democracy has, at times, perpetuated global insecurity. The US military forces, with the intention of promoting liberal democracy, invaded Afghanistan in 2011 and Iraq in 2003 (Mearsheimer, 2019, p.33). However, US objectives in this regard were not met; instead, the US "ended up precipitating wars that did enormous damage to political and social life in those two countries" (Mearsheimer, 2019, p.33).

Gideon Rachman has expressed that US foreign policy is "indifferent to the rule of law, too quick to respond with force, contemptuous of international institutions and norms" (Rachman, 2012 cited in McCormick, 2012, p.62). Rachman's sentiments expose the contradiction between US foreign policy and the hallmarks of liberal internationalism, which include "openness and rule-based relations enshrined in institutions norms such as multilateralism" (Ikenberry, 2011, p.56). The Iraq war has served to fuel scepticism around the efficacy of the liberal world order "as an important force for promoting peace and prosperity around the globe" (Mearsheimer, 2019, p.8).

Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon (2020, p.14) argue that the world is "experiencing a steady but unmistakable transformation of the ecology of international order", the root cause of which is the presence of great power challengers. China's ascension in the international system, and rising power status, can be attributed to its significant economic growth and increasingly modernised military (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010, p.64). Ikenberry (2011, p.57) claims that due to its growing power status rooted in increased wealth, China has the greatest potential to reconfigure the international order in a way that pushes world politics in an illiberal direction. However, Russia also remains a formidable rising power that has the potential to shape the global power landscape. Russia's power stems from its status as a nuclear-armed power and the

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"second-largest oil exporter and the holder of the world's largest gas reserves" (Larson and Shevchenko, 2010, p.63).

Examining how the rise of China will transform the international system remains the subject of discussion in the IR field. Equally as topical, Russia's status as a rising power remains the subject of debate and can also offer explanations as to how the underlying global power composition will be shaped. This thesis will examine Russia as one of two rising powers and how its foreign policy actions, specifically electoral interference, impact the ever-shifting balance of power.

Further exploration into how meddling is employed as a foreign policy strategy can provide a more nuanced understanding of the broad range of activities states engage in when attempting to affect the global balance of power.

In addition, this thesis will rely on the use of "sharp power" as a core concept that will be employed to explain how meddling is an exercise of power. Sharp power, as a reconceptualised power variant, continues to be subject to rigorous debate due to its relatively recent emergence, specificity and distinction from traditional understandings of power. As such, sharp power presents an opportunity to contribute to the emerging academic discourse surrounding its explanatory value within the context of electoral interference.

1.6 Structure of the thesis

Chapter two will outline the theoretical framework used in this thesis. This section will explore Realism, various sub-variants, and key concepts related to structural realism, including powerbalancing and polarity. Moreover, this chapter will detail how power can be classified and operationalised. Chapter two will also describe how power can be used as a foreign policy tool that can be used to understand Russia's foreign actions when employed as a conceptual framework in the context of structural realism.

Chapter three, a literature review, will follow. Several perspectives regarding what constitutes foreign interference and how it can be classified as a foreign policy tool are presented in the

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literature review. Additionally, this chapter provides a typology of interference, its historical context and details the evolution of the practice, most notably the cyber element.

Chapter four will detail the case study, Russian meddling in the 2016 US Presidential elections, before assessing Russia's power capabilities and possible motivation for undertaking the interference. Chapter four also broadly addresses Russia's foreign policy posture, examining its relationship with Europe and NATO. Characterising Russia's behaviour toward Europe and NATO provides a framework for understanding how Russia exercises power and which strategies have thus far been pursued. The last sub-section in chapter four provides an analysis of macro objectives Russia may have sought to achieve using interference in the context of the 2016 US Presidential elections.

Chapter five of this thesis is the conclusion. The key claims are evaluated in this chapter, and the sub-questions are answered to address the main research question.

1.7 Conclusion

This study, a thematic analysis based on the positivist paradigm, uses qualitative research and adopts a deductive analytical method to produce a narrative capable of accounting for the use of foreign electoral interference as a strategy aimed at affecting the global distribution of power. The following chapter provides insight into the theoretical framework and related concepts underpinning this thesis. The research question focuses on Russia's meddling or interference in the US Presidential election in 2016 and how it can be understood as a strategy aimed at achieving macro level outcomes. Structural realism, related concepts and information related to sharp power will be detailed in chapter two.

Chapter two: Theoretical framework

2.1 Introduction

Structural realism, one of the principal theories in IR, forms the theoretical foundation of the study. The first sub-question in the study is focused on understanding how states (generally) use election interference to achieve macro objectives. These macro objectives will be classified in terms of the balance of power between states at the systemic level. The first section of this chapter will provide an overview of realism as a theoretical tradition, including its main variants. How power, power-balancing and polarity, as key concepts in structural realism, are defined, observed, and measured will then be explored. This study will follow an integrated approach to power and polarity, considering a host of characteristics and conceptions. Structural realism's sub-branches, offensive and defensive realism, will be examined. These sub-variants have common core assumptions yet distinct perspectives on how states engage with power. Offensive realism will be used in the context of this study. The final section will analyse how power can be classified in relation to how it is operationalised. Sharp power will be employed as a conceptual framework in the context of structural realism to analyse Russia's election interference.

2.2 Realism

Realism is a mainstream IR theory that offers insight into the causes of war and the pursuit of power in an anarchic international system (Slaughter, 2011, n.p.). Realism asserts that power is the currency of international politics (Mearsheimer, 2007, p.73). As such, "great powers, the main actors in the realists' account, pay careful attention to how much economic and military power they have relative to each other" (Mearsheimer, 2007, p.73). Realism claims that it is essential for a state to have enough power to achieve its security interests and ensure that no other state "sharply shifts the balance of power in its favour" (Mearsheimer, 2007, p.73). According to realist thought, "states, at minimum, seek self-preservation, and at maximum, universal domination" (Waltz, 1979, p.118). Realist thought can be divided into three branches: human nature realism, system-centric realism and state-centric realism (Feng and Ruizhuang, 2006, p.113). Each branch represents distinct theoretical variants, all of which can be classified according to the unit of analysis that they focus on.

Human nature realism encompasses classical or traditional realism as a theory. "Human nature realism explains international phenomena and state behaviour from the point of view that human nature is intrinsically evil" (Feng and Ruizhuang, 2006, p.113). Classical realism asserts that the reason states pursue power is related to human nature. As a key proponent of classical realism, Hans Morgenthau outlined the basic principles of realism in *Politics Among Nations* in 1948 (Morgenthau,1948 cited in Feng and Ruizhuang, 2006, p.114). Morgenthau (1948) argues that politics is governed by objective laws that have their root in human nature. Morgenthau elaborates, indicating that the "political man is a selfish animal, and all human behaviour tends towards the control of others" (Morgenthau,1948 cited in Feng and Ruizhuang, 2006, p.114). In the classical realist account, great powers are led by individuals bent on having their state dominate its rivals; therefore, any conflict between states can be attributed to human cause (Williams, 2012, p.17). Ultimately states are continuously engaged in a struggle to increase their capabilities because "the desire for more power is rooted in the flawed nature of humanity" (Williams, 2012, p.17).

System-centric realism analyses international phenomena based on the objective nature of the international structure (Feng and Ruizhuang, 2006, p.114). The system structure is the principal determinant of outcomes at the system level, and therefore structure encourages specific actions and discourages others. It is the international system's structure that compels states to pursue power (Slaughter, 2011, n.p.). System structure, characterised by anarchy, will be explored in sub-section 2.7, titled: offensive and defensive structural realism. Structural realism (also referred to as neorealism) is a systemic theory of realism that will be employed in this thesis.

State-centric realism attempts to analyse international relations phenomena and state behaviour from the vantage point of individual states (Feng and Ruizhuang,2006, p.114). State-centric realism seeks to establish a connection between the state and system levels of analysis by emphasising the role of domestic factors in explaining how state behaviour leads to outcomes at the system level (Feng and Ruizhuang,2006, p.114). Neoclassical realism, a theory developed by Gideon Rose, attempts to provide a more robust explanatory framework capable of accounting for why states pursue power by synthesising the analytical strengths of both classical and structural realism to provide a template for understanding the foreign policy of states in the context of the international system (Schweller, 2003, p.318). Neoclassical realism focuses on different levels of analysis: individual or unit-level analysis, systems-level analysis,

and the state and domestic levels of analysis. The theory is concerned with the complex interactions between the structure of the international system and domestic factors (Ashkezari and Firoozabadi, 2016, p.95). From this perspective, the system structure acts as a stimulus; however, the response to the stimulus occurs at the state level.

The main research question seeks to examine how a specific foreign policy action, namely electoral interference, can be understood as a strategy aimed at achieving macro-level outcomes. The macro-level refers to the power composition at the systemic-level; thus, structural realism will be used as the main theoretical framework, and other levels of analysis are not necessary in seeking to answer the main research question. Similarly, structural realism indicates that all states behave alike; therefore, no other units would affect actions. Russia is the unit of analysis in this study. Domestic or individual-level factors remain irrelevant in the context of this study.

2.3 Structural realism: core assumptions

Structural realism is based on several core assumptions. Firstly, states interact in an anarchic environment; anarchy can be defined as the absence of an overarching central government (Slaughter, 2011, n.p.). The anarchical world order produces challenges related to "economic rivalry, security dilemmas, arms races, hyper-nationalism, balancing alliances, and ultimately the threat of war", all of which create a sense of insecurity among states (Deudney and Ikenberry, 1999, p.180). Structural realist models assume that states are self-regarding and that, consequently, self-help is the system-mandated behavioural rule or principle (Elman, 1996, p.18). The self-help principle is predicated on the belief that states cannot rely on other states to secure their interests, nor are they likely to equate their security and well-being with others (Wendt,1992 cited in Elman, 1996, p.19). As such, the state must assume the position as the sole guarantor of its security; survival is the principal goal of every state (Slaughter, 2011, n.p.). Survival can be interpreted as states' need to maintain their territorial integrity and the autonomy of their domestic political order (Slaughter, 2011, n.p.). A fourth assumption made by structural realism is that states are rational actors. As a rational actor, the state would seek sound strategies that maximise its prospects for survival (Slaughter, 2011, n.p.)."States select those strategies in which the expected gain is likely to exceed the expected loss after weighing options and make decisions based primarily on their strategic situation and an assessment of

the external environment" (Waltz, 1959 cited in Elman, 1996, p.20). If anarchy is the permissive cause of war, structural realists argue that elements of anarchy can be overcome by strategically structuring the balance of power (Waltz, 1959 cited in Elman, 1996, p.20). Through the act of balancing power, the prospects of war diminish; the international power composition is the determining factor as it relates to states' security (Waltz, 1959 cited in Elman, 1996, p.20). As such, power, the international power composition (or polarity), as well as the process of balancing power to achieve security objectives need to be explained.

2.4 Power

While power is a key concept in realist theories of international politics, it remains a contested concept with multiple definitions. There is consensus among many IR scholars that Robert A. Dahl's broad interpretation of power is the most acceptable characterisation of this concept. Dahl suggested that what underlies power is the basic intuitive notion of "A causing (or having the ability to cause) B to do something that B otherwise would not do" (Dahl, 1957 cited in Baldwin, 2013, p.273). "A" refers to the actor having or exercising influence, while "B" refers to the actor being, or potentially being, influenced (Baldwin, 2013, p.273). Bertrand Russell defined power as "the production of intended effects", while Max Weber defined it as "the probability that an actor in a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests" (Hart, 2012, p.204). Unlike Russell, Weber and Dahl emphasise that exercising power can only be achieved in the presence of resistance and that power is associated with both potential and actual control over others (Hart, 2012, p.204).

Jack Nagel defines power as a relationship in which actor A can get actor B to do something initially against B's preferences (Nagel,1975, n.p.). This definition incorporates the idea that B may initially resist A's efforts, which supports Weber and Dahl's assertion that power can only be exercised in the presence of resistance, but goes one step further, indicating that actor B might change his mind about a preferred outcome (Hart, 2012, p.205). Nagel's perspective can be interpreted to mean that there should be an initial conflict of interests between actors A and B, but resistance need not characterise the entire process of exercising power. Considering these definitions of power and how it is exercised, there are two ways for actor A to get B to do what A prefers; through coercion or persuasion (Baldwin, 2013, p.273). Coercion involves the threat

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or actual use of force, while persuasion involves no coercive methods (Baldwin, 2013, p.273). Coercion has come to be characterised as "hard power", while persuasion has been a defining feature of what is termed "soft power" (Baldwin, 2013, p.273).

2.4.1 Measuring and observing power

As this thesis will take an integrated approach to power, it should be noted that power can be measured tangibly, intangibly or in a relational capacity. There are three approaches to the observation and measurement of power empirically. There is "power as a resource or capability", "power as control over actors", and "power as control over events and outcomes" (Hart, 1976, p.289).

In the power as capabilities approach, power is measured in terms of control over a resource (potential power) which can be converted in some manner into control over others or outcomes (actual power) (Hart, 2012, p.204). These resources, also called capabilities, may be connected with measurable phenomena such as economic wealth or population (Hart, 1976, p.3). The first approach frames power in a state's control over its tangible and intangible resources. National power comprises tangible sources that can be determined using indicators such as military expenditures, the size of the armed forces, Gross National Product (GNP), and population (Hart, 1976, p.289). Indicators of economic strength are essential when assessing a state's capability, as shifts in military-power balances tend to be followed by alterations in the productive balances (Farmer, 1992, p.21). GNP per capita and GDP remain the most frequently used aggregate indicators used to assess a state's economic condition (Farmer, 1992, p.21).

Furthermore, population size contributes to power as a larger populace contributes to building a stronger army (latent power) both physically through an increased workforce and a larger taxation source (Farmer, 1992, p.21). Intangible sources of power relate to the structure of the military forces, leadership skills, and the will to use force when necessary (Hart, 1976, p.289). This approach is predicated on the belief that control over resources can be converted into control over actors.

The observation and measurement of power can also be approached as having control over actors or relationships. This approach has been advocated for by Dahl (1957), who suggested that power is defined by actor A having the ability to cause actor B to do something that

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otherwise would not do. Dahl elaborated on this perspective by indicating that power may be more or less limited in scope, meaning that power may be limited to a specific activity or domain but not apply to others (Dahl, 1957, p.202). If desired outcomes for the stronger actor characterise power, it is possible for the weaker actor, even in a highly asymmetrical power relationship, to exploit its weakness to gain power over the stronger actor (Dahl, 1957, p.202). An example of this would be when the weaker actor threatens or perpetrates noncompliance in a situation that disadvantages the stronger actor.

James S. Coleman proposed power as control over events and outcomes in *The Mathematics of Collective Action* (1973). Coleman asserts that the reasons for controlling resources or other actors arise out of a desire to achieve specific outcomes, defined as social states that are the results of individual or collective action (Coleman,1973 cited in Hart, 1976, p.296). Desired goals are defined as outcomes that produce a net increase in the actor's utility, where utility is simply a function of the actor's preferences over a set of outcomes (Hart, 1976, p.296). Coleman (1973) does not directly correlate between actions and outcomes but instead provides intermediate links between actions and events and events and outcomes. Each event is associated with at least one outcome for each actor, and each outcome is associated with a net impact on utility. Events associated with more than one outcome in a probabilistic manner will be associated with an expected utility equal to the sum of expected net impacts on the utility of each outcome (Hart, 1976, p.296). Events are more salient to the actors than outcomes, as power-wielders may not necessarily think of the consequences of their actions. Moreover, this approach highlights that there is no reason to believe the degree of control over events is directly proportional to the degree of control over resources. If one actor maintains control over all events, there is no need to control other actors through coercion or persuasion; unless the actors regard the control over other actors or resources as valuable in and of themselves, then the ability to control actors and resources will be considered secondary to the ability to control events (Hart, 1976, p.297).

Using this approach when measuring power has one important caveat. An actor does not need total control over all events but rather those directly consequential to him/her, i.e., which produce net gains or losses in utility (Hart, 1976, p.296). In this instance, that actor does not need to control other actors. In many instances, actors tend to maintain only partial control over events that are consequential to them. An example of such an incident involves the world economy, where during periods of global recession, industrialised nations maintain only partial

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control over the recovery of the economy, yet such recessions are consequential for all states. This model is only useful when one actor controls an event that has consequences for another actor and not themselves.

Peter Morris argues that "power is neither a thing (property, or a resource), nor an event (which shows itself only if realised in an outcome), but an ability: a capacity to effect certain action" (Guzzini, 2009, p.7). Dispositions translate into effects only under specific conditions. Moreover, Morris suggests that "such a disposition can be understood in a relational way as the condition under which disposition can be translated into effects [which] are dependent on social relations; on the particular identities and interests of the actors in the interaction, as well as on the context in which the interaction takes place" (Guzzini, 2009, p.7). Morris's assertion is compatible with Weber's perspective that power is framed in terms of capacity. Power cannot be determined according to capabilities alone and is more accurately determined by particular relations in which actors' abilities are realised. This perspective suggests that power is contextspecific and not determined by the distribution of resources between actors. Christian ReusSmit supports this view, stating that "power is relational, not possessive, primarily ideational, not material, intersubjective, not subjective" (Guzzini, 2009, p.7).

The power as capabilities approach is concerned with tangible (actual power) and intangible (potential power) elements to measure or observe power. The control over actors or relationships encompasses intangible sources of power and illustrates that power can be measured relative to other states. Similarly, power as control over events and outcomes illustrates how power is relational by asserting that controlling resources or other actors arise out of a desire to achieve specific outcomes. In seeking a specific outcome, it is not always necessary for one state to control more tangible or intangible sources of power. Structural realism, typically concerned with geopolitics, often uses the power as resources approach, where power is measured in terms of a state's capabilities that control specific types of resources (Hart, 2012, p.208). However, latent power supports material capabilities (tangible military assets a state possesses) and is based on non-tangible sources, including technology and revenue, that a state can draw upon when competing with a rival state. While capabilities have traditionally been characterised by objectively measurable phenomena such as economic wealth and population, scholars have expanded this definition to include potential power resources. Potential power resources tend to include research and development (R&D) as well as information and communication technology (ICT). (Hart, 2012, p.208). Ultimately all three

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perspectives will be used when offering an assessment of a state's power in the context of one case study involving two states.

2.5 Polarity

Embedded in the structural realist paradigm is the concept of polarity. In his *Theory of International Politics* (1979), Kenneth Waltz outlines that polarity is the distribution of power among the great powers during a given period (Mearsheimer, 2007, p.78). Waltz paid careful attention to the relationship between polarity and the risk of war or the prospects for stability, both from the point of an individual state and within the system at large (Pavlova and Romanova, 2012, p.244). From the point of the individual state, stability refers to the probability of their continued political independence and territorial integrity (Kratochwil, 2002, n.p.). The international system is configured according to the poles of power. The system may be one of multipolarity, consisting of several great powers; bipolarity, which encompasses two great powers or alliance blocs; or unipolarity, with only one great power (Nielsen, 2017, p.14).

If the international system is characterised by anarchy, changes in the system only occur with shifts in power among actors in this system. If the distribution of capabilities between actors reflects the power structure, changes within this international system only occur through the changes in the distribution of capabilities among states (Waltz, 1979, p.101). The distribution of capabilities among states must be measured considering tangible, intangible and relative capabilities. Fatos Tarifa states that "a polar actor is considered one state or coalition of states, which is so important that his leaving or entering into the system will change the architectural structure of the international system itself" (Tomia, 2014, p.57).

Measuring and determining power and polarity can be summed up in the following way: The sum of capabilities will determine state power; the distribution of state power determines polarity, and changes in the distribution of state power will result in changes in polarity.

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2.6 Balancing power

Within IR, "the balance of power" is a distinct concept, which can be theorised, and is based on the core assumptions of structural realism, namely that states operate in a self-help system, and their survival is contingent on power.

> A generally accepted version of balance-of-power theory "posits that because units in anarchic systems have an interest in maximising their long-term odds-on survival (security), they will check dangerous concentrations of power (hegemony) by building up their capabilities (internal balancing), aggregating their capabilities with those of other units in alliances (external balancing), and/or adopting the successful power-generating practices of the prospective hegemon (emulation)" (Brenner et al., 2007, p.157).

Hegemony is defined as "a state that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the system" (Mearsheimer, 1995, p.86). The more powerful a state is relative to its competitors, the less likely it is that it will be attacked; therefore, great powers seek opportunities to shift the balance of power in their favour or ensure that no other state acquires power at its expense (Mearsheimer, 2006, p.7). Polarity has a direct effect on which states balance against one another.

Structural realists debate which system is more or less war-prone. Realists who argue bipolarity is less war-prone assert that powerful states have more opportunities to fight each other in multipolar systems, unlike bipolar systems where there are only two great powers (Mearsheimer, 2006, p.78). Furthermore, "there tends to be greater equality between the great powers in bipolarity because the more great powers there are in the system, the more likely it is that wealth and population, the principal building blocks of military power, will be distributed unevenly among the great powers" (Mearsheimer, 2006, p.79). In such a case, where there are power imbalances, there is an increased risk that stronger powers will take advantage of weaker ones. In addition, when there are multiple powers in a system, two or more great powers may align to take advantage of a third (Mearsheimer, 2006, p.79). When there are only two great powers in a system, each is more likely to pay attention to the other. In a bipolar system, the likelihood of miscalculation, which is interpreted as the misgauge of each other's capabilities or intentions, is lowered (Mearsheimer, 2006, p.80).

Conversely, in a multipolar system, there are increased chances for miscalculation, which can lead to war. However, realists who favour multipolarity suggest that greater hostility results when two powers spend an inordinate amount of time in a rivalry. In a multipolar system, great powers spend relatively less time engaged with each other and instead extend their attention to multiple countries, which "creates numerous cross-cutting cleavages that mitigate conflict" (Mearsheimer, 2006, p.81).

Realists who favour multipolarity claim that deterrence is easier when there are several great powers, as states can join together to confront an especially aggressive state with overwhelming force (Mearsheimer, 2006, p.79). In bipolarity, there is only one balancing partner (Mearsheimer, 2006, p.79). Many realists favour bipolarity as there are only two great powers in such a system, which means there is only one great power versus another great power (Mearsheimer, 2006, p.79). Bipolarity lowers the prospects for confrontation when compared to multipolarity, where there are several potential rivals, as opposed to bipolarity, where only one other potential rival exist.

Other structural realists posit that unipolar systems are less war-prone as there can be neither security competition nor a war between great powers in unipolarity because it includes just one great power (Mearsheimer, 2006, p.78). Some realists have countered this claim, asserting that unipolar systems are still war-prone. In cases where the hegemonic states power is so superior that it withdraws its military forces from other regions, security competition and war are likely to result from the preponderant power's failure to maintain order (Mearsheimer, 2006, p.78).

2.7 Offensive and defensive structural realism

All structural realists agree that the system is anarchic, great powers possess some offensive capabilities, no state can be certain of others' intentions, survival is the primary goal, and actors are rational (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.30). However, there are differences between structural realists, which are reflected in the question about how much power states pursue to maximise their security. Security can be defined as "the probability that one's core interests will not be challenged or violated over some reasonable time span" (Snyder, 2001, p.153).

Defensive realists, most notably Waltz, emphasise the stability of balance-of-power systems, where roughly equal distribution of power among states ensures that none will risk attacking another (Slaughter, 2011, n.p.). Waltz elaborates further, asserting that balancing will occur in instances where any one state becomes too powerful and "other great powers will build up their militaries and form a balancing coalition that will leave the aspiring hegemon at least less secure, and maybe even destroy it" (Mearsheimer, 2006, p.74). According to Waltz, "states balance power rather than maximise it, and after balancing against a dangerous opponent and thereby achieving a satisfactory degree of security, there is no further need for power accumulation" (Waltz, 1979, p.127). For Waltz, states are *status quo* powers and seek only to maintain their power.

In contrast, offensive realism, as described by John J. Mearsheimer, suggests that the primary way states maximise security is to acquire as much power as possible, which lowers the prospect of conflict as other states may be discouraged from challenging a state that holds a monopoly on power (Slaughter, 2011, n.p.). Offensive realists such as Mearsheimer argue that "states are disposed to think offensively toward other states even though their ultimate motive is simply to survive; in short, great powers have aggressive intentions" (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.34). States cannot be sure about each other's intentions, mainly future intentions (Mearsheimer, 2007, p.73). As such, states that want to survive have little choice but to assume the worst about the intentions of others and even in instances of relative global security; these states should think and act when appropriate like a revisionist state (Mearsheimer, 2006, p.74). Thus, states seek as much power as possible is a necessary endeavour in the pursuit of security.

Defining a state's orientation as either revisionist or *status quo*, more precisely, is essentially due to the competing claims structural realists hold about how much power is necessary for security. A revisionist state would seek to challenge the existing balance of power in the system, while a *status quo* power would seek to conserve the existing international order (Sakwa, 2019, n.p.).

Defensive realists assume that the dominant power upholds the *status quo* as those that have participated in designing the "rules of the game" stand to benefit from those rules, while in this account, revisionist dispositions are associated with rising powers (Sakwa, 2019, n.p.). In contrast, offensive realists assert that all states, including hegemons, are revisionist in nature. States may also seek to revise some elements of order and maintain others or "vary in terms of

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its preferences concerning the international order and the current balance of power (distribution of capabilities), ranging from completely satisfied to completely dissatisfied" (Cooley, Nexon and Ward, 2019, p.8).

Anarchy within the system merely relates to the fact that there is no overarching governing authority at the system level. Despite this, the system is still characterised by existing structures that have been moulded and maintained by hegemonic states. Countries with superior economic and military capabilities order the international system. These states "establish the rules of the game; provide public and private goods such as security and trading systems; allocate status and prestige; and even shape 'domestic politics' in subordinate polities" (Neumann and Nexon, 2018, p.3). Robert Gilpin elaborates by identifying the three elements of the governance of an international system: "the distribution of power, the hierarchy of prestige, and a set of rights and rules" (Gilpin, 1981 cited in Cooley, Nexon and Ward, 2019, p.3). Gilpin asserts that great powers establish and enforce the rights and rules at the international level, and the hierarchy of prestige, which refers to how much economic and military power a state has relative to other states, will determine the capacity and extent to which that state can influence this process (Cooley, Nexon and Ward, 2019, p.3).

According to Mearsheimer, the principal goal of every state is to maximise its relative power to the point of hegemony (Mearsheimer, 1995, p.86). In this case, the system is defined as the entire world. Mearsheimer concedes that no state can dominate the entire system, at least militarily, the way power is defined in his account, due to the constraints imposed by oceans and physical land barriers (Mearsheimer,1995, p.86). Mearsheimer argues that a state that attains a "clear-cut nuclear monopoly" can be considered a global hegemon to compensate for physical restrictions. Clear-cut nuclear superiority is defined as "a capability to devastate its rivals without fear of retaliation" (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.145). Moreover, even if a state does manage to attain this nuclear superiority, rival states will continue to develop nuclear retaliatory forces of their own. As such, the hegemon will need to maximise its relative power on a continual basis (Mearsheimer 2001, p.146). This perpetual condition results in a "security dilemma". The security dilemma posits that a great power will undertake actions to enhance its security and decrease other states' security (Mearsheimer, 2006, p.74). As a result, it is difficult for a state to improve its prospects for survival without threatening the survival of other states; this is referred to as a zero-sum condition. Within this zero-sum condition, states acting to

secure their interests at the expense of others prompts the threatened states to counter such action leading to perpetual security competition (Mearsheimer, 2006, p.74).

For Mearsheimer, the regional hegemon still seeks to maximise power. States that do achieve hegemony are still not satisfied; they will seek to prevent the rise of "peer competitors"- other hegemons - in nearby regions that are accessible by land (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.41). There are two strategies for achieving this within offensive realism: gaining relative power over rival states and preventing rival states from gaining power (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.41).

When assessing how much power is necessary, both scholars examine the cost-benefit ratio of acquiring increments of power. Mearsheimer continues by stating that great powers expand only when opportunities arise; the benefits exceed the risks and costs, which may account for why hegemony is rare; the "costs of expansion, increased power through increased control of territory, usually outrun the benefits before domination is achieved" (Snyder, 2001, p.37). However, Waltz disagrees with Mearsheimer, proposing that survival or sufficient security can be assured with a power short of that which a state would need to be considered a hegemon (Snyder, 2001, p.7).

According to Mearsheimer, the amount of security actually "purchased" by an increment of power would then translate into an increase in that probability, but increments would be purchased only "so long as their marginal security value exceeded their opportunity costs" (Snyder, 2001, p.154). Defensive realists such as Waltz assert that at some point well short of hegemony, power/security accumulation runs into diminishing marginal returns until costs begin to exceed benefits and security purchases decrease in value (Snyder, 2001, p.154). Mearsheimer denies that increments of security diminish in value at the margin; in fact, he asserts the opposite: a state with a marked power advantage over its rivals will behave more aggressively than one facing powerful opponents "because it has the capability as well as the incentive to do so" (Mearsheimer, 2001, p.37). Through this perspective, as a state accumulates power, its marginal costs of further accumulation decline and marginal benefits increase so that future increments are subject to increasing returns. Through this logic, it is natural for a rational state to continue accumulating power since, in doing so, increments of power increase in value while the cost of pursuing it decreases.

These differing perspectives are rooted in a lack of agreement about how levels of security or security requirements are estimated or quantified. For Waltz, a great power might feel secure with only an "appropriate" amount of power, short of dominating the system; however, Mearsheimer asserts that the level of appropriateness's increasingly challenging to gauge because what is satisfactory in the present is likely to change in the future (Snyder, 2001, p.152). To avoid the potential issue of evaluating the state's security needs constantly or to quantify what is "appropriate", states will pursue hegemony at all times to mitigate the risk of a future deficit of power. To Mearsheimer, "great powers require a surplus of power over "appropriateness" to cover uncertainties, possible miscalculations, and future surprises" (Snyder, 2001, p.152).

Considering Mearsheimer's assertion that appropriateness is difficult to assess, it is relatively more accurate to operate on the assumption that states are aggressive and revisionist in nature, driven to always pursue the maximum amount of power. Offensive realism will encompass the lens through which Russia's actions can be measured to determine how electoral interference was a strategy aimed at achieving these ends.

2.7.1 Revisionist states

Considering that offensive realism will be used as the theoretical foundation within this study, revisionism, as a concept, can be further elaborated upon to explain how states seek to affect the balance of power relative to their objective.

Broadly, revisionism encompasses two dimensions: distributive dissatisfaction and normative dissatisfaction. Distributive dissatisfaction can be understood as "a state's desire to acquire more of some resource, such as military power or economic influence, while normative dissatisfaction means a state is not content with the rules, norms, and institutions that legitimise the existing distribution of resources" (Cooley, Nexon and Ward, 2019, p.3). Revisionist states could be dissatisfied with a range of specific things, including, but not limited to, prevailing norms, rules, institutions, allocations of territory and prestige, and distributions of capabilities (Davidson, 2011, p.14). Drawing this distinction allows for a more nuanced analysis of any foreign policy action a state undertakes, as well as a greater understanding of why some states pursue strategies to improve their positions in the world, while "others mount more radical and overt challenges to the international order" or shift from one dimension to another (Davidson,

2011, p.14). The distinction also allows for more specificity as to what particular grievance(s) a state holds, which will assist with answering the main research question related to Russia's motives.

In *People, States and Fear* (1991), Barry Buzan differentiated between three revisionist states: revolutionary, orthodox, and reformist. A revolutionary revisionist state "rejects the primary institutions of the international society on ideational grounds, contests the main normative content of international society and seeks to overthrow both the status order and the form of international society" (Buzan, 2010, p.17). An orthodox revisionist state is generally content with the institutional structure and ideational content of international society but is dissatisfied with its status within this system (Buzan, 2010, p.18). A reformist revisionist "accepts some of the institutions of the international society for a mixture of calculated and instrumental reasons, but it resists and wants to reform others and possibly wants to change its status" (Buzan, 2010, p.18). Ideal-typical *status quo* actors are satisfied with both the current distribution of capabilities and the nature of the international order. It appears that Buzan's definition of the orthodox revisionist state aligns with Waltz's definition of a *status quo* state. In both accounts, the state is largely satisfied with the institutional structure at the international level but remains concerned about its position therein. The reformist and revolutionary variants constitute a more accurate description of revisionism.

2.8 Foreign policy tools: hard and soft power

How states attempt revisionism leads to a discussion of foreign policy tools. Hard power is defined materially as the "size of population and territory; resource endowment; economic capability; military strength; political stability and competence" (Gilpin,1981, p.13). Hard power is exemplified by coercive diplomacy, military intervention and economic sanction (Nye,1990, p.32). "Tangible power resources can be employed manifestly or symbolically to deter and compel other actors into submission or compliance; they are therefore more certain to provide protection (whether defensive or offensive in nature)" (Gallarotti, 2015, p.4). Hard power may also include inducements, which "involve an implicit threat to end the rewards than the desired behaviour changes" (Hart, 2012, p.208). This theoretical interpretation of power, oriented around the idea of nations using material resources to achieve more significant influence, has prevailed among Realist scholars (Barnett and Duvall, 2007, p.40).

Joseph S. Nye (2004, p.9) defines soft power as "the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion". Soft power is typically wielded through attraction (but not exclusively) instead of payments or coercion; the primary currencies of soft power are an actor's values, culture, policies and institutions (Nye, 2004, p.9). Soft power depends upon the extent to which these currencies can attract or repel other actors to make them "want what you want" (Nye, 1994, n.p.). Considering the primary currencies of soft power, it is only available to those countries that act according to universal principles promoted by the hegemon (Brady, Carter and Pavlov, 2016, p.261). These principles include demonstrating respect for and adherence to international law, norms, and institutions and favouring multilateral over unilateral postures in the promotion of their foreign policies (Gallarotti, 2015, p.13). Therefore, authoritarian states would need to adhere to the aforementioned prescriptions to be considered soft power wielders.

Unlike democracies, authoritarian states typically restrict the ability of citizens to engage in free and fair elections, place restrictions on the free press, infringe on the judiciary's independence and lack checks and balances on executive power, which already discounts them from acting according to the universal principles centred on adherence to international laws and norms (LibertiesEU, 2021). According to Blanchard and Lu (2012), soft power is measured not by which instruments are used or who performs the task of spreading culture but by whether the target group considers the state attractive (Brady, Carter and Pavlov, 2016, p.261). This assessment diverges from Nye's interpretation of soft power, which is predicated upon a state's ability to shape the preferences of another, a process that is not necessarily confined to compelling through attraction. Ultimately, any policy aimed at changing the preferences of a foreign audience, including by promoting an alternative worldview, can be considered an instrument of soft power (Brady, Carter and Pavlov, 2016, p.261).

It should be noted that the principal distinction between hard and soft power is not dependent upon tangibility, as issuing a threat or using inducements is a coercive act that is intangible. Similarly, tangible resources, such as aid, may be necessary to institute the policies and actions that deliver soft power (Gallarotti, 2015, p.13). The difference between hard and soft power is rooted in its use and application.

2.9 Sharp power as a framework for foreign policy analysis

Electoral interference has traditionally been framed using either hard or soft power. However, a more nuanced conceptualisation of power related to electoral interference was proposed by a think tank, the International Forum for Democratic Studies, in 2017. The think tank put forward the notion of "sharp power", which refers to the ability to influence audiences through efforts that "pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries" (Ludwig and Walker, 2017, p.8). This study will apply sharp power as a conceptual framework in the context of structural realism to analyse Russia's actions.

The concept of sharp power emerged as a means of characterising electoral interference, which according to Ludwig and Walker (2017), is neither a use of soft nor hard power. Sharp and soft power share many characteristics and aims, which include influencing and changing public opinion to enact a favourable outcome; leveraging culture, values, and policies to do so; and using similar platforms to perform these tasks, such as mass media, cultural markets, education system and public diplomacy (Ludwig and Walker, 2017, p.6). However, Ludwig and Walker conceptualise soft power similarly to scholars who assert that it is not coercive and only democratic countries may wield it. Soft power emphasises "attraction" as a means of persuasion, while sharp power, on the contrary, centres on "distraction and manipulation" (Ludwig and Walker, 2017, p.6).

Sharp and hard power are both characterised by coerciveness. Ludwig and Walker (2017, p.13) assert that hard power relies on tangible power resources, while sharp power is intangible. However, IR scholars had previously proposed that power and hard power were not defined by tangibility. Ludwig and Walker (2017) acknowledged that sharp power has common features with both soft and hard power, but it is also distinguished from soft power due to its coerciveness and hard power for its intangibility.

According to Ludwig and Walker (2017, p.13), sharp power applies exclusively to authoritarian states which seek to undermine democracy by sowing doubt and disorder among their rivals. Authoritarian states exercising sharp power do not seek to attract or persuade; instead, distraction and manipulation are employed (Walker and Ludwig, 2017, p.10). Furthermore, authoritarian regimes wielding sharp power have demonstrated the desire to "confuse, divide,

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repress and poison the information that reaches their target audiences with the aim of polluting [their] audiences' understanding of the world" (Orttung and Walker, 2014).

Walker (2018, p.12) further elaborated on the concept of sharp power by claiming that its use is a means through which the integrity of independent institutions can be compromised using manipulation. Authoritarian states exploit open electoral processes and the free media sectors by using censorship to exacerbate pre-existing tensions and rifts within democracies (Walker, 2018, p. 12).

However, Nye (2019-a, p.4) contests this claim citing US involvement in covert support for publications and political parties in foreign counties as an example of sharp power wielded by a democratic state. Nye's assertion indicates that sharp power is not only employed by authoritarian states seeking to undermine democracies but can be used by any state wishing to produce outcomes in a rival state using deceptive information aimed at reframing their target audiences' understanding of a particular issue (Nye, 2019-a, p.4). Several scholars have supported Nye's claim by indicating that "while sharp power does not exclusively relate to authoritarianisms, its greatest exponents today remain authoritarian" (Cristóbal, 2021, p.6). As previously mentioned, Nye (2004, n.p.) has claimed that soft power can also be used by a state for offensive purposes and is not restricted to compelling through attraction; manipulating how information is framed may also constitute a use of soft power.

In contrast, Walker (2018, p.12) argues that any initiative undertaken by an authoritarian state in a sphere that significantly impacts how constituents within democracies understand current events and the world at large constitutes an exercise of sharp power. These spheres extend to sectors such as academia and media. Walker's understanding of sharp power is predicated solely on the wielders of such power, exclusively authoritarian states, while there is arguably less specificity related to the necessary conditions under which sharp power can be wielded.

Walker's assessment does not exempt any foreign state-backed media companies, even under legal and transparent circumstances, operating within a democratic country from being classified as mechanisms through which sharp power is exercised. This conception neglects to consider that companies are commercial entities, may be financially driven to expand internationally. Furthermore, foreign companies would have to receive legal clearance, and be subject to local regulatory rules to operate within a democratic country (Rutenberg, 2017).

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Ultimately, sharp power, as conceptualised by Walker (2018, p.12), is too narrowly defined and does not present a useful framework to understand how states employ foreign policy tools to affect the balance of power at the systems (macro) level. Nye's conception of sharp power presents a useful analytical tool to understand how influence campaigns are used as foreign policy tools to affect the balance of power at the systemic level. According to Nye (2019-b), the core distinguishing feature of sharp power is the degree to which information is manipulated. "Transparency and proper disclosure are necessary to preserve the principle of voluntarism that is essential to soft power" (Nye, 2019-b, p.4). If the degree of information manipulation is so deceptive that it destroys voluntarism and limits the subject's voluntary choices, the act becomes coercive and is no longer soft but sharp power (Nye, 2019-b, p.4). Therefore, not all misleading or reframed information constitutes the use of sharp power. Sharp power is only applicable in instances where manipulation does not preserve the principle of voluntarism. Russia's actions related to the 2016 election interference campaign will be analysed through the lens of Nye's conception of sharp power.

2.10 Conclusion

Structural realism makes several claims that can be used to understand Russia's foreign policy actions and macro-level objectives. If system structure is the principal determinant of outcomes at the system level, the current power configuration, or polarity, needs to be determined. This determination is important because the system structure encourages specific actions and discourages others. In addition, structural realism asserts that survival, defined as the ability to maintain territorial integrity and political autonomy, is the principal goal of every state. The state is rational, meaning it seeks sound strategies that maximise its prospects for survival. Through this perspective, all activities undertaken by Russia are motivated by this objective, survival. Russia's actions will need to be understood as an attempt to secure its territorial integrity and/or political autonomy.

If Russia's goal is survival, its foreign policy actions, intended effects and related macro-level objectives will be analysed through the lens of offensive realism. From an offensive realist perspective, Russia's ultimate goal is to gain regional hegemony and dominate its geographical area. Offensive realists assert that states may either attempt to gain relative power or aim to prevent rivals from making gains. Through the offensive realist account, Russia's foreign policy

actions aim to increase its power relative to the US or prevent the US from making gains. The international system creates strong incentives for Russia to look for opportunities to shift the balance of power in its favour to attain additional increments of power. Shifting the balance of power in its favour can be achieved by checking the preponderant power's power. Through this lens, Russia's foreign policy actions aim to affect the balance of power.

Russia's revisionist orientation will need to be examined by assessing which grievances have been expressed. These grievances can be understood as either distributive dissatisfaction, normative dissatisfaction, or a combination. States that express normative dissatisfaction to any degree can be classified as revisionist. As such, foreign policy actions undertaken would need to stem from normative dissatisfaction.

A typology of the electoral interference methods used in the 2016 US Presidential election can determine how power was leveraged to secure Russia's foreign policy objectives. This categorisation of the types of interference methods undertaken will aid in understanding how power was exercised, including its associated intended effects. Sharp power encompasses soft power elements; however, the distinguishing feature relates to whether or not it is so deceptive that it destroys voluntarism. If sharp power was used and voluntarism was affected, Russia's actions would be an infringement on the autonomy of a rival state's domestic political order. Russia's use of sharp power would support the view that Russia is inherently revisionist. Even if Russia's methods were coercive but did not destroy voluntarism, they may be classified as using soft power. If the electoral methods can be classified as a use of soft power, there remain different implications for what outcomes Russia sought to produce.

Chapter three constitutes a literature review that will examine what electoral interference is, provide a typology of its practices and introduce associated concepts, all of which will aid in understanding how Russia perpetrated acts of meddling. Chapter three will aid in understanding how interference can be classified as an application of sharp power.

Chapter three: Foreign election interference: Literature review

3.1 Introduction

This section will encompass a literature review aimed at characterising foreign electoral interference as a foreign policy tool that can be applied to achieve specific outcomes. Several scholars have contributed to the debate regarding the classification and definition of election interference. As such, varying perspectives on which actions constitute an act of foreign meddling will be discussed. Thereafter, a characterisation related to what democratic elections are, their significance and their procedural elements will be explored. This sub-section has implications in the context of this study, as liberal democracy needs to be defined in order to discern if sharp power was exercised and the degree to which voluntarism was affected. In addition, a typology of the methods used to perpetrate acts of interference, which have been classified into six categories, will be provided. Notable examples of past interference incidents have been detailed according to these six categories. Thereafter, a general classification of electoral interference as an information operation undertaken by the state will be explored. The literature related to information operations offers insight into why and how a state pursues interference. The last sub-section provides a second typology related specifically to cyber interference methods.

3.2 Foreign electoral interference

Vasu Mohan and Alan Wall (2019, p.110) define foreign electoral interference as "intentional covert or overt attempts by state or non-state actors to influence electoral processes or public perceptions in order to advantage or disadvantage election contestants in another sovereign country." Sovereign states are typically considered the main actors in partisan foreign electoral interventions; however, intervention can also be undertaken by foreign non-state actors, foreign corporate interests, inter-governmental institutions, civil society organisations and terroristassociated organisations (Mohan and Wall, 2019, p.110).

According to Dov H. Levin (2021, p.21), electoral interference can also be defined as:

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A situation in which one or more sovereign states intentionally undertakes specific actions to influence an upcoming election in another sovereign state in an overt or covert manner that they believe will favour or hurt one of the sides contesting that election and which incurs or may incur significant costs to the intervening state or the intervened state.

Levin elaborates on this definition by indicating that acts perpetrated by private citizens of their own volition, which may include campaign consultants as well as non-state actors, are not included unless an intervening state directly controls them or there is evidence to suggest that their intervention was done at the request of or due to pressures from the intervening state (Levin, 2021, p.21). As per Levin's definition, only acts directly controlled by an intervening state can be considered forms of electoral meddling. However, this is contested by other scholars that suggest actions need not be directly controlled by the intervening state but rather encompass only some degree of involvement from the meddling country.

According to Laura Galante and Shaun Ee (2018, p.6), state involvement, in the context of election meddling, is a broad term that encompasses three processes: state-directed actions, state-encouraged or state-aligned. State-directed actions are those in which state officials, in their official capacity as representatives of the government, "sanction or signal their desire to achieve in some expressed manner" (Galante and Ee, 2018, p.6). State-encouraged actions are those which government officials have not directly sanctioned or signalled, but "ones in which an individual or entity with good knowledge (usually ascertained from close contact with current or former state officials) of the state's objectives can partake with reasonable assurance that these efforts will be viewed favourably" (Galante and Ee, 2018, p.6). State-aligned actions are those which "individuals or entities conduct intending to support specific or general state objectives" (Galante and Ee, 2018, p.6). State-involved action is a more helpful term to use in the context of Levin's definition of electoral interference, as it accounts for a broader range of actors.

Furthermore, both definitions of electoral interference imply that any intervention undertaken is done intentionally, not due to coercion. Coercive, in this case, can be interpreted as a situation in which the assisted side in the target state solicits assistance from the intervening state through, for example, threats to withhold financial aid unless the foreign power does not intervene (Hollis and Ohlin, 2021, p.21). Levin's definition also references significant costs to the intervening or intervened state, which refers to direct reputational or economic harms. The

high costs can also be derivative of the potential damage to the relationship between the intervening and target state, including the imposition of economic sanctions or withdrawal from mutual security agreements (Hollis and Ohlin, 2021, p.21). As this thesis will attempt to answer questions related to Russia's interference in the US elections and focus on election meddling between rival states specifically, Levin's definition is more closely aligned with the objectives of this study.

There are two primary forms of foreign electoral interference. Overt interference includes methods aimed at influencing target voters in a way that is apparent or where some of the tactics are known; covert interference includes methods in which intervention details are not known to the target electorate (Lassila, 2019, p.30).

Levin identified two conditions that have to exist for electoral meddling to occur. Firstly, the intervening party needs to have a motivation for the intervention; elections have the capacity to shape domestic and international politics; therefore, incentives exist implicitly (Levin, 2016, p.190). Secondly, a domestic actor in the target state must consent to and be willing to cooperate with the agents of the intervening nation (Levin, 2016, p.191). Levin justified the second condition by indicating that absent the information provided by the co-conspirator in the target state, "the chances of electoral intervention succeeding may be seen as too low to justify intervention" (Levin, 2016, p.191). While the first condition is broad and can offer a baseline threshold for what constitutes an act of meddling, the specificity related to the second condition would disqualify many acts of purported interference from being classified as such. Indeed, several notable incidents of interference, some of which will be detailed in the following sub-sections of this chapter, meet the first condition and not the second.

Additionally, due to the covert nature of some forms of meddling, it is not always possible to draw a definitive conclusion that some level of collusion occurred between a person within the target state and the intervening foreign state; often, only the overt meddling tactics are known. Through Levin's second condition, soft power overt acts of meddling would not be characterised as such, which is too limiting in scope. As such, this thesis will not rely on the second condition to classify which activities constitute an act of meddling.

In later work, Levin makes a different claim relating to the primary conditions that need to exist for electoral interference to occur. The act must have been perpetrated intentionally to assist or

harm one of the sides contesting the election (Levin, 2019, p.90). Secondly, the act needs to have carried significant costs that were immediate, long-term or potential to the intervening or intervened side (Levin, 2019, p.90).

Structural realism is based on the assertion that survival is the principal goal of every state, and power needs to be maintained or acquired to achieve this objective (Slaughter, 2011, n.p.). It is the international system's structure that compels states to pursue power. Through this theoretical lens, Levin's "motivation" and "intent" qualifiers are already met when a foreign power intervenes in the domestic affairs of a rival state in any capacity. Furthermore, structural realism indicates that, as a rational actor, the state would seek sound strategies that maximise its prospects for survival. These strategies are selected according to how likely they are to yield successful returns or the expected gain is likely to exceed the expected loss. Ultimately, the state always undertakes a risk-reward assessment prior to undertaking a foreign policy action. Therefore, Levin's qualifying claim relating to the action (electoral interference) carrying high costs, including potential costs, is met.

Furthermore, electoral interference may occur in democratic, partially democratic, or competitive authoritarian countries (Lassila, 2019, p.30). In the context of rival countries undertaking such activities, the practice has occurred for centuries; only the methods and means have evolved.

3.3 Elections

In order to understand whether election meddling occurs, it is essential to characterise and define precisely what elections are, their significance and their procedural elements. Broadly, elections are the legitimate and formal process of selecting persons or parties for public office or a means of rejecting a political proposition by voting (Webb, 2020). National-level elections are significant as they usually involve the maintenance of or change in the country's political landscape; this process has a direct effect on the domestic and international policies pursued and enacted by the state in question (Webb, 2020). Elections affect the course of international and domestic politics within democracies. As such, there remain many motives for great powers to intervene in the elections of foreign countries to produce outcomes that favour the intervening party.

The rules governing elections, including but not limited to the aggregation systems, districting processes and candidate eligibility criteria, differ from country to country (Ghandi and Okar, 2009, p.404). Elections do take place in undemocratic or authoritarian countries. However, there tend to be restrictions on the freedom of the media to report on these events, civic associations, political parties, candidates and voter eligibility (Ghandi and Okar, 2009, p.404). The degree to which these controls are imposed differs between authoritarian states. To answer the main research questions in this thesis, the scope of the next discussion is limited to democratic elections.

3.2.1 Democratic elections

Several scholars have provided definitions of what constitutes a system of democracy and the key characteristics of an associated democratic election. Terry Lynne Karl and Philippe C. Schmitter (1991, p.76) define democracy as follows:

Modern political democracy is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives; representatives are chosen with regularly held and fairly and honestly conducted elections.

Andreas Schedler (2002, p.39) asserts that:

Democratic elections are mechanisms of social choice that must operate under conditions of freedom and equality by offering a choice of political authorities to free and equal citizens who are free to formulate their own political beliefs, signify them and have them weighed equally; democratic elections also have to be irreversible.

Robert Dahl (1971, p.2) states that the democratic ideal "requires that all citizens enjoy unimpaired opportunities to formulate their political preferences, signify them to one another, and have them weighed equally in public decision-making". Building on these principles expressed by Dahl, Schedler (2002, pp.40-41) outlines seven procedural conditions that must be met for an election to qualify as democratic. Firstly, political elections are characterised by citizens wielding power and must exist to accomplish the binding selection of the polity's

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collective decision-makers. Secondly, active citizens should have access to a free supply of choices; the government should not intervene in the range of potential options and alternatives available to the electorate (Schedler, 2002, p.40). Thirdly, voters need to have access to plural sources of information about their available choices. As such, parties and candidates should be granted free and fair access to the public space. Fourth, democracy demands universal suffrage. Universal suffrage is interpreted as the right of all adults, excluding those prohibited by law due to exceptional circumstances, to participate in the electoral process (Schedler, 2002, p.40). Fifth, once citizens have formed their preferences, this should be expressed using a secret ballot. The use of the secret ballot shields the voter from external social pressures, coercion and bribery when expressing their preference (Schedler, 2002, p.41). Sixth, after citizens have cast their ballot, competent and neutral election management must exercise bureaucratic integrity and professionalism by counting the votes honestly and weighing them equally (Schedler, 2002, p.41). Lastly, elections must be decisive and irreversible in that the winners must be able to assume office, exercise power, and conclude their terms in accordance with constitutional rules (Schedler, 2002, p.41).

3.4 Electoral interference: Typology and cases

As previously stated, there are both overt and covert methods of interference. The methods employed by the intervening state range and are typically context-specific. This section will detail conventional methods of interference which have been grouped into six categories. These methods do not include cyber interference, a relatively new phenomenon with a distinct typology detailed in later sub-sections. The distinction has been drawn between cyber and noncyber interference methods as the latter category illustrates more clearly the historical precedent of the practice and its modern-day application. Known methods of electoral interference can be grouped into six categories: campaign funding, dirty tricks, campaigning assistance, threats or promises, taking or giving aid and other concessions (Hollis and Ohlin, 2021, p.21). It should be noted that acts of interference, as grouped according to these six categories, have occurred through the application of both hard and/or soft power, covertly and/or overtly, depending on the incident. The cases cited under each category include historical and modern examples, which clearly illustrate how the method in question has been used in a targeted manner to affect the foreign electoral process.

"Campaign funding" refers to providing financial support to the intervening states' preferred side or candidate in the run-up to the election (Hollis and Ohlin, 2021, p.22). Campaign funding interference can be done overtly or covertly and includes the provision of cash and in-kind material aid such as office equipment. Campaign funding can also be given indirectly through donations to independent organisations that may convince likely voters to support the preferred side (Hollis and Ohlin, 2021, p.22). In many countries, foreign funding of elections is partially restricted or entirely prohibited; this includes financing by multinational companies and the activities of political parties' international foundations (Speck, 2004, p.33).

In October 2020, media sources reported that French prosecutors had launched a formal investigation into claims that President Nicolas Sarkozy had covertly accepted campaign funding of at least 50 million euros from then-Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2007 (France24, 2020). Ziad Takieddine, a Franco-Lebanese businessman, claimed that three suitcases of cash totalling at least 5 million euros had been delivered to Sarkozy's campaign director between 2006 and 2007 (France24, 2020). It should be noted that Sarkozy was already under investigation for a separate allegation relating to the breach of campaign financing law, which was reported to have taken place amid his re-election campaign in 2012 (France24, 2020). This incident highlights how an intervening state can attempt to affect election outcomes in foreign states using illicit campaign funding.

The *"dirty tricks"* category refers to interventions designed to directly harm one of the sides or candidates competing against the preferred side or candidate (Hollis and Ohlin, 2021, p.22). These methods include: disseminating scandalous exposes and disinformation on the rival side; damaging or destroying a rival's offices or campaign material; spying on a rivals campaign activities or plans; physically harming or disabling rival candidates; disrupting a rival's fundraising efforts by threatening potential donors; encouraging or aiding the breakup of the rival sides political coalition or party through bribery; assistance to the preferred side in conducting voter fraud and a host of cyber activities such as hacking (Hollis and Ohlin, 2021, p.22). Cyber interference activities will be detailed in greater depth in a later sub-section of this thesis.

In August 2017, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan voiced public support for parties challenging incumbent German Chancellor Angela Merkel in the run-up to the election set the following month (Usta, 2017). President Erdogan accused Germany of anti-Turkish and

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antiMuslim sentiment before making the following statement: "I am calling on all my countrymen in Germany: The Christian Democrats, SDP, the Green Party are all enemies of Turkey. Support those political parties who are not enemies of Turkey" (Usta, 2017). German foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel subsequently labelled Erdogan's remarks as an "unprecedented interference with Germany's sovereignty" (Usta, 2017). This incident is an example of an overt and intentional act designed to directly harm the unpreferred candidate in a foreign election.

During World War 2, Britain intervened in the US Presidential election in 1940 in an attempt to secure the re-election of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Carney, 2021, p.26). Former Prime Minister Winston Churchill's government was prompted to intervene to ensure that prointerventionist President, Roosevelt, remained in office and engaged in war efforts as a British ally by that isolationist opposition candidates did not take power (Carney, 2021, p.26). Britain's intelligence agency, known as British Security Coordination (BSC), was tasked with influencing the US public in favour of President Roosevelt. The BSC is alleged to have "planted false news stories, bribed journalists to publish stories in support of the incumbent, illegally tapped phones, broke into embassies, engaged in other forms of espionage to obtain classified information and then release it to the press" (Carney, 2021, p.26). This incident highlights how covert dirty tricks can be employed by an intervening state.

The *"campaign assistance"* category refers to "increasing the capabilities or effectiveness of the assisted side's election campaign through the provision of nonmonetary or non-material assistance to the election campaign" (Hollis and Ohlin, 2021, p.22). Examples of non-material campaign assistance include, but are not limited to, training the preferred side in advance campaigning methods, designing campaign materials, and sending experts to do polling analysis for the preferred side. In the run-up to the 2004 Ukrainian elections, the US and a coalition of European counties are believed to have donated money to various NGOs specialised in democracy promotion (Carney, 2021, p.34). The US state department confirmed that at least 65 million dollars were donated to NGOs of this nature two years before the election (Carney, 2021, p.34). The International Centre for Policy Studies was one of several NGOs tasked with commissioning polls and training election workers; other NGOs helped organise campaigns for opposing parties, most notably opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko (Carney, 2021, p.34). The assistance Yushchenko received constitutes an example of nonmaterial campaign assistance conducted through a third party.

The *"threats or promises"* category refers to public or private threats or promises by an official representative of an intervening state to "provide or retract a thing of value to the target state or otherwise significantly harm it in the future" (Hollis and Ohlin, 2021, p.22).

The *"giving and taking aid"* category encompasses the act of the intervening state providing or reducing aid to the target state to either incentivise or threaten (Hollis and Ohlin, 2021, p.22). The intervening state may offer a new provision of foreign aid or increase an existing one. Aid can encompass loans, improved loan conditions, loan guarantees, trade treaties or preferred trade conditions. The aid can also be administered indirectly via multilateral international organisations funded by the intervening state (Hollis and Ohlin, 2021, p.22). Conversely, the intervening state may reduce or retract any existing or potential provisions.

Several days before the 2011 Nicaraguan general election, the Venezuelan energy minister publically warned that the continuation of Venezuela's foreign aid payments to Nicaragua was contingent upon the re-election of President Daniel Ortega to a third term (Hollis and Ohlin, 2021, p.26). Foreign aid from Venezuela to Nicaragua accounted for at least 8 per cent of the country's GDP at the time (Rogers, 2011). Former Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, an ally of Ortega, is believed to have delivered 1.6 billion dollars in aid to Nicaragua between 2007 and 2011; President Ortega is reported to have funded his political campaign using some of the aid payments (Rogers, 2011). This case highlights instances of meddling that fall into two of the six broad categories of interference: "giving or taking aid" and "threats".

Lastly, the *"other concessions"* category encompasses interventions that include the provision of a costly benefit by the intervening state to the target state that is noneconomic or material in its nature or principal value (Hollis and Ohlin, 2021, p.23). Examples of other concessions include, but are not limited to, the provision of disputed territory, releasing prisoners of war or signing an alliance treaty with the target state.

The following sub-section will examine other forms of electoral interference that rely specifically on the use of information to affect a target state. This process can be characterised in a distinct manner and encompasses non-traditional variants of meddling, namely cyber interference.

3.5 Information Operations (IO)s and election meddling

This sub-section will encompass a review of the literature related to activities in which information is leveraged or manipulated by the meddling party to affect a foreign election; this process can be categorised as an information operation (IO). Developing an understanding of what IO is, how it is undertaken and to what end it is essential in the context of this study, as the Russian meddling campaign "relied almost entirely on the weaponisation of information" (Sander, 2019, p.3).

IO was a term developed by the US military while developing various tactics that could be used to exploit information in diplomatic and military contexts. The definition, objectives and associated tools remain rooted within the military context and have been sourced from the US Joint Publication (JP) 3-13, the Joint Doctrine for Information Operations. The JP 3-13 "provides the doctrinal foundation for the conduct of IO in joint operations across a range of military operations in the US". Moreover, IO is a broad term under which actions, such as election meddling, which are not exclusively undertaken by the military but remain in line with national strategy, can be understood.

Information is defined as "facts, data, or instructions in any medium or form; it is the meaning that a human assigns to data through the known conventions used in their representation" (JP 3-13, 1998, 11). This section is most relevant in the context of cyber interference, which constituted a significant proportion of the meddling activities undertaken by Russia in the 2016 US Presidential election.

Other scholars have classified electoral interference differently, claiming it constitutes a form of asymmetric warfare, hybrid warfare or information warfare (IW). However, Leigh Armistead (2004) argues that the difference between IW, under which the terms asymmetric warfare and hybrid warfare fall, and IO is that IW is conducted during wartime. In contrast, IO is a strategic campaign that transcends periods of conflict (Armistead, 2004 cited in Lassila, 2019, p.9). IW is a subset of IO, which can be employed both during wartimes to affect the rival state's information infrastructure or during periods of stability and peace to reduce the risk of conflict and the need for full-scale IW (Lassila, 2019, p.10). While election meddling can form part of a strategy employed by one state against a rival state during wartime, it would still

be classified as IW, a sub-category of IO. Therefore, IO will be used to understand electoral meddling as a broad and encompassing term.

3.5.1 Definitions of IO

Varying definitions of IO exist in the literature and have been noted in this sub-section. The definitions represent divergent perspectives, but also some common features. As the term IO was developed within the military context, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) 's definition should be noted. NATO's Allied Joint Doctrine for Information Operations (AJP-3.10, 2009) defines IO as:

Coordinated military operations designed to affect adversaries' will, understanding, and capabilities or potential adversaries. Information operations consist of activities that aim to modify information or information systems. Information activities are actions which can be performed by any actor and include protective measures.

Kate Starbird, Ahmer Arif and Tom Wilson (2019, p.172) characterise IO in the following way:

Strategic information operations encompass efforts by individuals and groups, including state and non-state actors, to manipulate public opinion and change how people perceive events in the world by intentionally altering the information environment. These operations are a global phenomenon with political, social, psychological, educational, and cybersecurity dimensions.

Jen Weedon, William Nuland and Alex Stamos (2017, p.4) posit that IO is defined as:

Actions taken by organised actors (governments or non-state actors) to distort domestic or foreign political sentiment, most frequently to achieve a strategic and/or geopolitical outcome… these operations can use a combination of methods aimed at manipulating public opinion.

Christopher S. Chivvis (2017, p.3) claims that IOs are "the use of strategic communications to shape political narratives in many countries… to muddy the waters and cast doubt upon objective truths". Chivvis' definition is broad and could encompass a range of actions that leverage information in various forms to affect public perception in a foreign country. What emerges from the literature is that the definitions of IO range from very broad to more nuanced

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and specified classifications. The definitions include some description of an IO's intent and how it is perpetrated using a range of methods. However, all the sources and authors referenced in this sub-section delineate IO according to at least one common feature: an IO is the use of information to distort public perception. NATO references "the modification of information" to affect an adversary's understanding; Chivvis claims that IOs are activities which use information to cast doubt on objective truths. Starbird, Arif and Wilson (2019, p.172) state that an IO is defined by efforts to manipulate public opinion by intentionally altering information, while Weedon, Nuland and Stamos (2017, p.4) make the same claim indicating that an IO is a combination of methods aimed at manipulating public opinion. Similarly, all the definitions indicate that organised actors undertake IOs (whether state, non-state or military) in an intentional manner.

In the case of NATO's definition of IO, it was developed and applied more specifically to the US military as well as NATO member states and partners. Nevertheless, the framework underpinning this definition can be used beyond these parameters. Similarly, the principles used to inform these assessments of what IO is, its intent and its application also apply to citizens within states. Ultimately, IO is a range of actions undertaken intentionally by an organised actor to shape public perception through manipulating or distortion of information.

3.6 IO objectives in the context of electoral interference

In the context of electoral interference, the IO seeks not only to affect an adversary's understanding but to do so in a way that affects the target's will and capabilities. A decisionmaker's effectiveness is a function of will, understanding and capability (AJP-3.10, 2009). Decision-makers can range from members of an electorate that participate freely in democratic processes to those in positions of political power. A decision-maker in any capacity should maintain their will to act, an understanding of the circumstances in which they act, and the capability to do so. If the will, understanding, or capability is affected to any degree, the decision-maker no longer maintains the ability to act freely.

Several activities can be employed to achieve IO objectives. These activities, tools, and techniques can form part of a cohesive strategy in which multiple methods are utilised or used in isolation to achieve specific ends. Electoral interference IO activities that form part of a

cohesive strategy have often been termed "active measures", which is characterised, most notably, by the use of disinformation (Arif, Starbird and Wilson, 2019, p.109). However, disinformation need not form part of an active measures campaign to constitute an IO activity. Even a single activity that amounts to an act of foreign election meddling constitutes an IO as it aims to affect adversaries will, understanding or capability.

Active measures not only aim to affect specific targets but often had "wider-reaching geopolitical implications such as: undermining political, military or economic strength; creating or exacerbating existing rifts within societies; discrediting policies or representatives domestically and/or internationally; and influencing policy decisions" (Arif, Starbird and Wilson, 2019, p.109). As a result of the complexity associated with active measures, including varying or multiple objectives, and a broad range of tools utilised in this regard, it is considered a long-term strategy. Active measures are generally a collection of information actions - or a campaign designed to produce significant and long-lasting effects (Arif, Starbird and Wilson, 2019, p.109). Furthermore, a "disinformation campaign must be based around a rational core of plausible, verifiable information or common understanding that can be reshaped with disinformation, for example, half-truths, exaggerations, or lies" (Arif, Starbird and Wilson, 2019, p.109).

Disinformation is defined as "false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by planting of rumours) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth" (Dvilyanski and Mahairas, 2018, p.21). Disinformation "has a more specific meaning, stemming from the etymologically related *dezinformatsiya*, a term with roots in Soviet intelligence operations" (Arif, Starbird and Wilson, 2019, p.109). Russia considered disinformation a strategic weapon or IO activity to be employed in its overall active measures campaign. The term active measures is a direct translation of the Russian *aktivnyye meropriatia*, a Soviet term for active intelligence operations to influence world events to achieve its geopolitical goals (Dvilyanski and Mahairas, 2018, p. 21).

Christopher J. Lamb and Fletcher Schoen (2012, p.8) claim that various non-Russian sources have referred to active measures as "covert Soviet techniques to influence the views and behaviours of the general public and key decision-makers by creating a positive perception of the Soviets and a negative perception of opponents (that is, perception management)". However, other scholars define active measures more broadly as "offensive instruments of

foreign policy that seek to extend influence and advance geopolitical goals by distorting the information environment and changing how people perceive the world" (Arif, Starbird and Wilson, 2019, p. 109).

The key distinction would be that active measures, which scholars agree are rooted in perception management, "seek to undermine, delegitimise, and denigrate a public image rather than working to improve it" (Arif, Starbird and Wilson, 2019, p.109). Disinformation, as an IO tool, creates distraction through misdirection in a way that "kills the possibility of debate and a reality-based politics" (Arif, Starbird and Wilson, 2019, p.109).

As noted above, Levin (2019, p.90) indicates that electoral interference could only be classified as such in cases where the acts are perpetrated intentionally to assist or harm one of the sides contesting the election. However, literature on disinformation and active measures contradicts Levin's assertion that electoral interference occurs only in instances where the intention is to assist or harm one of the sides contesting the election. Disinformation or active measures are a form of IO that may be employed to affect an election, not necessarily to support or harm a political side, but often to distract or misdirect the electorate in such a way that political participation in any form is constricted. Therefore, a more encompassing and broader prerequisite for acts that constitute election meddling would be those undertaken intentionally, which seek to affect an adversary decision-maker by manipulating the information environment.

3.7 Cyber IOs and election meddling

Due to significant technological advancements, IO activities targeting elections have increasingly taken place online or within the cyber sphere. Due to the growing prevalence of cyber-IO in elections, numerous online methods of meddling have emerged and should be clearly defined to address the main research question. Online meddling campaigns generally rely on multiple techniques as actors attempting to interfere in the elections of a foreign state

can utilise a range of digital resources at a relatively low cost, which presents a relatively conducive environment (Sander, 2019, p.7). Furthermore, information can be transmitted instantly, anonymously and across borders using multiple distribution points (Sander, 2019, p.7).

For explanatory purposes, definitions for key online terminology related to computational activities, social media and its applicability in the context of foreign electoral meddling will be provided. Thereafter, the practice of doxing and cyber-attacks will be explored.

3.7.1 Computational activities

Computational activities can be used to spread propaganda or disinformation. Computational activities are complex processes that can also take place through the analysis and usage of large data sets of information about citizens held by corporations and governments, as well as algorithmic manipulation (Arnaudo, 2017, p.3). Those seeking to influence elections through online platforms have used a range of advanced computational tools and techniques, including trolls or through the creation of bots, sockpuppets and cyborgs.

Bots are algorithmic programs designed to conduct tasks online, including scraping data, mimicking human users online, and producing consistent streams of information (Howard and Woolley, 2016, n.p.). *Trolls* are humans acting online, spreading disinformation, or deliberately inducing visceral responses from their targeted population (Schnaufer II, 2017, p.27). *Sockpuppets* are human-operated fake accounts, while *cyborgs* are human-bot combinations (Howard and Woolley, 2016, n.p.).

Meddling actors can exploit data that has been deposited unwittingly due to an individual's online and offline activities and access personal information stored online. Accessing this information and data is critical when seeking to perpetrate acts of cyber influence through disinformation or propaganda. Websites that promote false or misleading information, commonly referred to as "fake news" sites, do not maintain adequate safeguards to protect the user's data; as such, these sites are susceptible to hacking, which could facilitate the capture and sale of individuals' information (Albright, 2016). Big data analysis, a form of targeted behavioural analytics, can be undertaken by a host of organisations without hacking. Many websites are subject to behavioural tracking algorithms; this is particularly common on social

media sites where there are like and share functions (Albright, 2016). While much of the information gathered through this process is used to create targeted advertisements for the user in question, the data can also provide organisations with the capability to process deep insights into individual belief systems and preferences (Tuttle, 2019, p.8).

Furthermore, the mass collection of individual data enables organisations or malicious actors to construct algorithms which may assist with identifying where bots, sockpuppets, cyborgs or trolls would have the most significant effect on manipulating individuals (DiResta, 2018 cited in Tuttle, 2019, p.10). Ultimately data collection is the foundation of any coordinated effort to deploy online resources to affect a foreign election.

As data collection increases, meddling actors gain increased opportunities to assess individual behaviour, particularly as it relates to what psychological factors or triggers may capture the attention of their targeted user base. For example, the insights that can be gleaned through the data assessment can then be used to potentially influence undecided voters or further entrench pre-held political biases (Tuttle, 2019, p.8). Social media presents one of the most notable ways to perform computational activities aimed at proliferating propaganda or disinformation.

3.7.2 Social media

Through substantial technological advancements, online social media platforms have become crucial for spreading disinformation or promoting propaganda. According to Howard and Woolley (2016, n.p.):

> Social media consists of (a) the information infrastructure and tools used to produce and distribute content that has individual value but reflects shared values; (b) the content that takes the digital form of personal messages, news, and ideas that become cultural products; and (c) the people, organisations, and industries that produce and consume both the tools and the content.

While many online platforms exist and have been leveraged to spread disinformation, advance false narratives and promote agendas, the primary social media applications referred to in this thesis are *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Both social media platforms allow individuals to connect and engage with a network of other online users. Facebook is generally used to connect users within

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their networks of friends, family and associates, while Twitter tends to be used to share ideas, real-time information, and trending news (Howard and Woolley, 2016, n.p.).

Social media platforms serve as the delivery system of *memes*, defined as common internettraded media or cultural units of information that can transfer from one individual to another (Warren, 2019, p.7). The weaponisation of social media, which includes the spread of memes, has become a helpful way of planting doubt and creating confusion about various social and political topics (Warren, 2019, p.7). Bots and trolls have often undertaken these processes. Bots, posing as credible information sources, are particularly prevalent on social media, where increased network connectivity has been leveraged to spread propaganda and disinformation (Tuttin, 2019, p.10). "Bots cloud the user's objectivity and facilitate the exploitation of preexisting societal biases" (Warren, 2019, p.7) and may also create confusion and discord between internet users by provoking arguments or amplifying divisive online content (Boyer and Polyakova, 2018, p.4).

3.7.3 Doxing

Doxing is the practice of "gaining unauthorised access to a computer system or digital service such as a social media or email account, exfiltrating non-public data, and subsequently leaking the data to the public" (Sanders, 2019, p.9). There are several types of doxing operations. A *public interest hack* constitutes releasing hacked material as a means of whistleblowing to expose injustice or wrongdoing in the interest of the public good; a *strategic hack* encompasses leaked material that may be of interest to the public but is ultimately pursued to serve the interests of the hacker not that of the public (Sanders, 2019, p.9). In contrast, a *tainted leak* entails "the deliberate inclusion of false information within a larger set of genuine confidential data that is leaked to the public" (Sanders, 2019, p.9). Doxing, in this context constitutes an act of meddling as the release of private information of any sort without the consent of the affected individual(s) is an attempt to shape public opinion through the deceptive dissemination of information.

3.7.4 Cyber attacks

Cyber-attacks are "deliberate actions to alter, disrupt, deceive, degrade, or destroy computer systems or networks or the information and/or programs resident in or transiting these systems

or networks" (Dam, Lin and Owens, 2009, p.19). Cyber-attacks can be perpetrated many ways, including through Spearphishing (DDoS) attacks or tampering operations. *A denial-of-service attack (DDoS)* is an electronic attack that blocks users from accessing particular services by overwhelming the server with false requests (Lassilla, 2019, p.22). *Spearphishing* is an electronic attack that usually uses fraudulent emails from seemingly trustworthy sources to steal sensitive information like account credentials or financial information from the target of the attack (Lassilla, 2019, p.22).

Cyber tampering operations involve tampering with a state's election infrastructure and may involve tampering with voting machines, for example, to alter vote tallies; or through tampering with voter registration databases, for example, to block voters from casting their votes (Sanders, 2019, p.6). Tampering with voter registration databases threatens the integrity of an election; for instance, if a distributed DDoS attack were to cause computer systems to crash in the run-up to an election or information on a database were to be altered to facilitate fraudulent voting (Sanders, 2019, p.6).

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter surveyed the literature on foreign election interference as a practice in general, and information operations, which includes cyber meddling, more specifically. As elections represent part of the command-and-control system for a nation's decision-making, influencing an election can alter decision-making to align with a foreign power's interest (Baines and Jones, 2018, p.5). Two pre-conditions need to be met for an act to constitute a form of foreign electoral meddling: the act must be perpetrated intentionally, and the action should seek to affect an adversary's decision-makers' will, understanding and/or capability by manipulating the information environment.

Electoral interference can generally be classified as an IO, a broad term that denotes activities undertaken intentionally by an organised actor to shape public perception through manipulating or distortion of information. IO's are typically coercive. Coercion tends to be offensive in nature as it involves "the integrated use of assigned and supporting capabilities and activities, mutually supported by intelligence, to affect adversary decision-makers and achieve or promote specific objectives" (Whitley, 2000, p.3). The objectives related to electoral interference as an IO and

its application (intended to affect the will, understanding or capabilities of decision-makers) have remained the same since the practice's inception; only the methods have evolved. A range of methods can be undertaken to interfere in a foreign election, including non-cyber interventions such as funding the campaign of a preferred candidate overtly or covertly using soft power to covert cyber-methods such as doxing that are coercive and rely on the application of sharp power.

The growth of social media users globally, in conjunction with technological advancements in analytics or computational processes, has made election interference using social media increasingly attractive to actors seeking to reach large target audiences by using large data sets which can accurately model individual interactions. Despite this, the goals underpinning the practice of cyber interference remain the same as any other form of non-cyber interference. Decision-makers (the electorate) could be influenced directly in the case of cyber-meddling or indirectly in cases where the intervening state manipulates a political candidate or party.

Levin's six categories remain applicable; cyber and disinformation activities can be classified under the "dirty tricks" category, while active measures, which are offensive instruments of foreign policy that seek to extend influence and advance geopolitical goals by distorting the information environment, can encompass a range of methods and tools specified across these categories. Ultimately the primary objective of IO, and election interference as an IO activity, is to leverage the information environment in such a way that it will affect the target or adversary decision-makers' understanding, will and capabilities.

The following chapter will detail the main case study in this thesis: Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential elections. Thereafter, connections can be drawn between Russia's interference activities or IOs and its macro objectives by using offensive realism as the central theoretical framework and sharp power as a related concept in this study.

Chapter four: Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential election

4.1. Introduction

The US Presidential election of 2016 arguably presents the most high-profile case of Russian meddling in elections. The principal efforts pursued involve the theft of information through hacking, the selective dissemination of information (which also includes doxing), and an active measures campaign largely conducted online through social media. Furthermore, there were efforts to hack into voting systems and perpetrate other cyber tampering activities.

The information related to Russia's involvement in the election is based on two 2017 reports issued by the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI): *Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 US election Volume 1: Russian Efforts Against Election Infrastructure and Volume 2: Russia's use of Social Media With Additional Views.* Additional information on Russia's interference has also been sourced through a report released by the *Computational Propaganda Research Project* (CPRP) in 2018, as well as the 2018 SSCI review of the initial findings of the 2017 Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA).

This chapter will begin by presenting information related to Russia's interference in the 2016 Presidential election. It should be noted that the information detailed in this sub-section represents a general assessment of the interference activities undertaken by Russia and is by no means an extensive account. While a substantial amount of information related to the nature of Russia's interference campaign is publicly accessible, investigations into the scale and scope of interference remain ongoing. Moreover, this section illustrates how meddling was undertaken broadly and does not reflect an analysis of the efficacy and effects of the interference.

Russia's position relative to the global balance of power will be explored. Thereafter, Russia's foreign posture, stated foreign policy objectives, and power capabilities will be assessed. This portion of the chapter will serve as a framework through which to understand which macro objectives Russia sought to pursue. The following section of the chapter will focus on how Russia exercises power, particularly in its area of influence and in Europe. Several examples of Russia's intervention in European domestic affairs, as an expression of its power, will be explored. An analysis of this nature holds explanatory value in attempting to understand how Russia pursued its objectives in the US context. Sharp power, as the core concept in this study, will then be employed to understand how Russia exercised power with regard to its interference in the 2016 US Presidential election.

4.2 The US Presidential elections in 2016

Due to its contextual value, the US electoral process has been detailed in this sub-section. The US electoral system is a Presidential plurality system, with a two-chamber congress that consists of the Senate and the House of Representatives (Lassila, 2019, p.27). The President is elected through the electoral college system, where each party selects a list of potential electors who vow to vote for the party's Presidential candidate (Gueorguieva and Simon, 2009, p.12). The state's electoral votes equal the number of the state's congressional representatives. The candidate who wins the plurality of the votes in each state is awarded the electoral votes from that state; the candidate that wins the majority of the votes in the electoral college wins the Presidential election (Gueorguieva and Simon, 2009, p.11).

While the US is a multi-party system, the Democratic Party, liberal in orientation, and the Republican Party, conservative in orientation, remain the most dominant parties (The Washington Post, 2016). Hillary Clinton officially received the nomination of the Democratic Party on 26 July 2016 (NPR, 2016-a), while Donald Trump received the nomination from the Republican Party on 19 July 2016 (NPR, 2016-b). In the 2016 Presidential election on 8 November, Hillary Clinton won 227 electoral college votes, while Donald Trump won 304 votes becoming the President-elect (New York Times, 2016). On 20 January 2017, Donald Trump was inaugurated and became the 45th President of the US.

4.3 Russian election interference

On 14 June 2016, the Democratic National Committee (DNC) reported a breach of its computer network (Lam, 2018, p.2168). The breach resulted in numerous confidential campaign information being hacked and leaked in the run-up to the 7 November 2016 election day (Lam, 2018, p.2168). On 6 January 2017, the US Director of National Intelligence concluded that the

Russian government was responsible for the cyber intrusion; Russia denied the hacks (Lam, 2018, p.2168). The US ICA, which includes representatives from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), concluded that "the Kremlin sought to advance its longstanding desire to undermine the US-led liberal democratic order, the promotion of which Putin and other senior Russian leaders view as a threat to Russia and Putin's regime" (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017, p. 1). In May 2018, representatives of the US House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence published its findings on Russian interference activities, supporting and reaffirming the conclusions drawn by the ICA report.

Russia's intelligence services conducted cyber operations against election infrastructure and against targets associated with the election, including individuals belonging to both major political parties (SCCI, 2018). The ICA concluded that "Russia's goals were to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency…We further assess Putin, and the Russian government developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump" (SCCI, 2018).

Outside of the US government, numerous accounts of Russian online interference are available through public and open-source databases, including one maintained by Thinktank, the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab). DFRLab monitors and publishes data on the spread of online disinformation around global elections (Galante and EE, 2018, p.2). Furthermore, numerous NGOs, universities, foreign governments and other independent institutions have provided additional insight into Russia's interference in the 2016 US election. Some examples include the global policy non-profit thinktank, the Rand Corporation, and Stanford University's Internet Observatory cyber policy centre, both of which have released information that corroborates US government reports of Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential election (Warren, 2019). Moreover, evidence of Russian cyber interference in the 2016 Presidential election can be extracted from publicly available datasets that have captured actions taken by actors of the IRA and forensic analytic reports sourced directly from Facebook and Twitter (Boyd et al., 2018, p.1).

In combination, investigations conducted by the US government, the information contained in declassified intelligence reports, inter-governmental corroboration, accessible analytic data, input from private and public organisations, and research undertaken by universities and

independent organisations provide overwhelming evidence for Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential election.

The key interference activities perpetrated by Russia are detailed in the following section and include active measures, activities undertaken through the media, hacking, doxing, and cyber tampering.

4.4 Interference activities

4.4.1 Active measures

The Russian state-sponsored St Petersburg- based Internet Research Agency (IRA) is believed to have employed an active measures campaign using social media platforms in the run-up to and during the 2016 US electoral period (CPRP, 2018, p.3). The IRA computational active measures data are detailed in volume one of the 2017 SSCI report. The information contained therein is based on an analysis of data obtained directly from social media companies. According to the SSCI report (2017-b), the IRA relied on "computational propaganda to misinform and polarise US voters".

The US Department of Justice alleges that the IRA had a strategic goal to propagate friction in the US political system (Howard et al., 2019, p.5). Between 2015 and 2017, at least 30 million Facebook users engaged with content shared by the IRA (CPRP, 2018, p.5). The IRA created multiple Facebook pages through which divisive content related to ongoing socio-political issues in the US could be spread. According to the SSCI report (2017-b), particular emphasis was placed on exacerbating racial tensions, religion, political affiliation, and class to exploit and entrench existing social divisions (Howard et al., 2019, p.5). The IRA utilised Facebook's advertising algorithms to generate content that could be spread in a targeted manner, whereby propaganda and disinformation were directed to audiences that were perceived as most receptive to the intended message (Howard et al., 2019, p.5). A post-analysis of IRA activities during the electoral period concluded that at least 50 258 Russian bot accounts had posted information related to the US election; in 2015 and 2016, IRA-linked Twitter posts averaged 57 000 and 59 000 per month (Howard et al., 2019, p.5). The IRA accounts actively engaged in trolling on Twitter, which involved flooding online conversations with strategically targeted

posts and comments, some of which were purposefully inflammatory, and others aimed to bolster a specific narrative.

While Russian efforts related to the active measures campaign leveraged a wide array of social issues to perpetuate divisions among multiple audiences, particular emphasis was placed on advancing conservative narratives and targeting those with sensitivities to race and immigration (Van Kuiken, 2020, p.6). In more extreme cases, the information shared was characterised as overtly racist, fascist and xenophobic; for example, immigrants were depicted as parasites in some posts (Van Kuiken, 2020, p.6). In another example, a Facebook page called "Being Patriotic" actively encouraged citizens to push a political agenda that would deny refugees the opportunity to seek asylum in the US (SSCI, 2017-b, p.37). The "Being Patriotic" page also pushed completely fabricated content, such as a fake news post that claimed federal employees were seizing land from private property owners, in an attempt to create further divisions not only within society but between the electorate against the government (Van Kuiken, 2020, p.6). Those receptive to such messages tended to self-identify as Donald Trump supporters or hold conservative views (Van Kuiken, 2020, p.6). It should be noted that offensive content of this nature is not representative of conservative ideology in and of itself and does not represent the views held by the entire Republican electorate.

Similarly, extreme liberal content was also proliferated through posts generated by the IRA. Russian-linked accounts created a "Blacktivist" page, which represented an extreme version of the "Black Lives Matter" (BLM) socio-political movement (Van Kuiken, 2020, p.6). The Blacktivist page aimed to fragment the liberal political sphere by inciting "violence and encouraged voters to resort to whatever means necessary to defend themselves against the corrupt criminal justice system" (Van Kuiken, 2020, p.6). According to the SSCI report (2017-b), Facebook accounts responsible for creating extreme left, and right-wing content and groups were frequently operated from the same computers (Van Kuiken, 2020, p.6). A more detailed post-analysis of the IRA's Facebook activities concluded that the most shared and liked Facebook posts focused on "pro-gun ownership content, anti-immigration content pitting immigrants against veterans, content decrying police violence against African Americans, and content that was anti-Muslim, anti-refugee, anti-Obama, and pro-Trump" (Van Kuiken, 2020, p.6).

In other cases, IRA content targeted minorities directly as it relates to the election itself. Volume two of the SSCI report (2017-b, p.37) noted that the IRA perpetrated voter suppression campaigns on Facebook. African American voters were encouraged to boycott the elections or to follow incorrect voting procedures; in contrast, Hispanic voters were encouraged to distrust the government to drive them to abstain from political processes (Davis, 2018).

Conservative extremists and some Trump supporters were encouraged to be more confrontational and to spread conspiratorial content online (Davis, 2018). It is unclear how successful these IRA campaigns were; however, the SCCI report suggests a bias toward conservatives who were more likely to vote for Donald Trump and active targeting of those more likely to vote for Hillary Clinton. The SSCI report (2017-b, p.34) concluded that there was evidence of an "overarching pro-Trump and anti-Clinton bias leading up to the election day in 2016; IRA employees were directed to use any opportunity to criticise Hillary Clinton".

Furthermore, the IRA purchased political advertisements through fake accounts established in the name of US citizens and entities and organised political rallies while posing as US grassroots organisations. The SSCI report (2017-b) recounts attempts to organise at least 129 real-world political events using online posts viewed by as many as 338 300 US citizens (Ingram and Volz, 2018). It remains unclear what the proportion of events that occurred was and the participation levels.

Ultimately the IRA used major social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, to target US voters and polarise the electorate. The effort illustrates Russia's intent and capabilities as it relates to leveraging social media using computational methods to exacerbate pre-existing socio-political tensions, sow discord and disrupt the political process of free and fair elections through disinformation.

4.4.2 Media

US government reports also indicate that Russian officials relied upon large state-funded English-language media outlets such as RT and Sputnik to propagate disinformation and propaganda. RT, formerly known as Russia Today, is an international cable and satellite

television network, while Sputnik is a government-run news commentary website and radio broadcast service. Western media organisations have critiqued both outlets for "serving as vehicles of Russian propaganda and amplifying extreme voices in their host countries" (Rutenberg, 2017). The US Department of Justice required RT America to register under the Foreign Agent Registration Act (Rutenberg, 2017).

4.4.3 Hacking and doxing

Military units of Russia's intelligence agency (GRU) are believed to have perpetrated cyber intrusions into the Clinton campaign and the DNC, using malicious software or malware and conducting spearphishing campaigns (Mueller, 2019, pp.36-37). Hacked emails were not limited to those of a professional nature and also included personal information. Emails belonging to John Podesta, campaign chairman for the Democratic Presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton, were hacked after he inadvertently clicked on a spearphishing email (Osnos, Remnick, and Yaffa, 2017). In addition, the then-director of the FBI, James Comey, testified before the US SSCI that Russian intelligence targeted and gained limited access to the Republican National Committee (RNC) by compromising old email accounts; however, none of the hacked information was leaked (Gaouette, 2017). Russian officials are believed to have disseminated this unlawfully obtained information through state-funded media organisations such as RT and trolls, such as those mobilised by the IRA, on social media.

Furthermore, the stolen information was leaked to journalists affiliated with established news outlets such as *The New York Times* (Watts and Rothschild, 2017). The Russian intelligence directorate allegedly created and controlled Guccifer 2.0, a hacker who had illicitly obtained DNC information after determining that Guccifer used a Russian server (BBC, 2017). Guccifer 2.0 leaked information to websites Wikileaks and DCLeaks, both of which were also traced back to Russian intelligence (De La Garza, 2018). Journalists also published emails, private phone numbers, campaign documents and other documents through these platforms (De La Garza, 2018). During the election, information disclosures were used to bolster various narratives, some of which related to the failure of Western liberal democracy.

4.4.4 Cyber tampering

Volume one of the SSCI report (2017-a) on the Russian active measures campaign concluded that "the Russian government directed extensive activity, beginning in at least 2014 and carrying into at least 2017, against US election infrastructure at the state and local level" (SSCI report, 2017-a, p.4). GRU personnel are also believed to have "hacked computers belonging to state boards of elections, secretaries of state, and US companies that supplied software and other technology related to the administration of US elections" (Mueller, 2019, pp.36-37). On 22 September 2017, the US Department of Homeland Security informed 21 states that Russia had attempted to access state voter databases (Borchers, 2017). These databases contain information related to the usernames and passwords of election officials or the names, dates of birth, gender, driver's licenses, and partial Social Security numbers of voters. The SSCI claimed that "in a small number of states, these cyber actors were in a position to, at a minimum, alter or delete voter registration data; however, they did not appear to be in a position to manipulate individual votes or aggregate vote totals" (Burr et al., 2018, n.p.). Despite the potential security threat associated with hacking into these databases, it remains unclear what the hackers planned to do with this information. Indeed, volume one of the 2017 SSCI report conceded that the "committee does not know with confidence what Moscow's intentions were; Russia may have been probing vulnerabilities in voting systems to exploit later" (SSCI report, 2017-a, p.4). Nevertheless, Russia displayed the intent and capability as it relates to cyber tampering, particularly with election infrastructure.

Russia's meddling in the 2016 US Presidential elections can be classified as interference as the measures undertaken were perpetrated intentionally and sought to affect an adversary decisionmakers' will, understanding and/or capability by manipulating the information environment. Interference in the US elections depended on the application of a comprehensive and flexible array of hostile measures aimed at undermining the democratic process and US power rather than a distinct IO dedicated to bringing about a specific electoral outcome.

Russia's meddling reflects a comprehensive effort that ranged from state-directed actions to state-encouraged and state-aligned activities. GRU involvement in cyber tampering and IRA activities reflect state-directed interference. Individuals and state-funded media sources responsible for leaking and disseminating hacked material or broadcasting propaganda represent, to varying degrees, state-encouraged and state-aligned actors.

Prior to attempting to answer the main research question, which relates to the macro outcomes that Russia sought to achieve through electoral meddling in the US Presidential elections, it is essential to characterise the global balance of power; Russia's position therein; the nature of Russia's power capabilities and how it is exercised. Understanding the global distribution of power and how Russia has operated within this system will provide insight into why foreign electoral meddling was pursued.

4.5 Russia's power

The following sub-section will attempt to outline Russia's position within the global distribution of power, Russia's foreign policy posture and stated objectives abroad. Russia's power capabilities and the exercise of this power in its geopolitical area of influence and Europe at large will then be detailed. Russia's conduct in Europe, specifically how power has been exercised, will aid in understanding why specific strategies are pursued and how they have been undertaken to achieve various foreign objectives.

4.6 The global balance of power

Following World War 2 until 1989, the global distribution of power was bipolar. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the US emerged as the two poles of power (Mearsheimer, 2019, p.18). Because there were two poles of power with differing political ideologies, there was no overarching world order, as there was no universalistic ideology. Instead, a dual system emerged with the US, a liberal democracy, leading the Western order and its ideological adversary, the USSR, dominating the Communist order (Mearsheimer, 2019, p.22). A split characterised the system as each state embraced a different ideology that governed their respective socio-economic and political behaviour.

The bipolar system was characterised by the Cold War, a period of intense security competition between the poles of power (Krauthammer, 1990). As such, there was no need to develop global institutions, particularly as they pertain to economics, which would be unable to serve their mutual interests (Krauthammer, 1990). The Western order, led by the US, created and managed institutions to suit its interests, while the Soviet-dominated order functioned similarly

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(Mearsheimer, 2019, p.22). The Warsaw Pact was a military alliance founded in 1955 to counter NATO, an intergovernmental military alliance between the US and its allies in Europe (Mearsheimer, 2019, p.22). By 1989 the Soviet Union had collapsed, and the US ascended to the sole pole of power (Krauthammer, 1990). Soviet institutions such as the Warsaw Pact dissolved by 1991, and the US-led liberal democracy dominated globally, including many areas previously influenced by the USSR (Krauthammer, 1990).

Western states represent the rule makers and enforcers globally; the US ranks highest on the hierarchy of prestige even within that structure due to its commanding pre-eminence in both military and economic power (Layne, 2006, p.13). The US can be characterised as a hegemonic or "preponderant" power. US unipolarity and the associated liberal international order have been built and sustained through three primary tasks: expanding membership in the Western order through institutions like NATO, creating an inclusive world economy that fosters free trade, and spreading liberal democracy globally (Mearsheimer, 2019, p.22).

While the US remains the global hegemonic or preponderant power, Russia still maintains great power status due in part to its geopolitical position, energy resources, intellectual potential, membership in international organisations and nuclear power (Karaganov, 2005, p.174). Since Russia's membership in international organisations is a critical factor in maintaining its great power status, there remains an incentive to actively engage in such institutions. Russia is one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC). The UNSC is a UN organ responsible for maintaining international peace and security (UN, n.d). All 15 members are required to comply with collective decisions pertaining to security-related matters; five permanent member states maintain veto authority over such decisions (Niktin, 2012, p.1). Russia has demonstrated its ability to shape council policy in several active conflicts, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria (Niktin, 2012, p.1). Russia's position within the organisation indicates that it is indeed a power pole with global responsibilities, able to affect international security events. Furthermore, Russia's territorial size, economy, energy reserves, and exports of vital natural resources also illustrate its power status (Niktin, 2012, p.1). Russia's status as a permanent member is a characteristic of its great power status (Niktin, 2012, p.8).

Furthermore, Russia's power status is also contingent on its geopolitical position and energy reserves. Maintaining influence in the post-Soviet space is of critical value to Russia when

seeking to maintain its great power status. As such, the post-Soviet space is Russia's primary physical security concern.

4.7 Russia's foreign posture

As articulated in various foreign policy doctrines, Russia's foreign posture can be understood by examining its stated goals. Much of the public political rhetoric articulated by President Putin and the available foreign policy doctrines underscore that unipolarity is an unfavourable model as there is no capacity to balance power if one state has a monopoly (Mearsheimer, 2007, p.73). It is from this perspective that Russia's actions can be understood.

The first notable foreign policy concept that should be considered is the *Primakov Doctrine*. The Primakov doctrine, named after former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, posits that a unipolar world organised by a single global centre of power (the US) goes against Russian interests (Cohen, 2014). The doctrine states that Russian foreign policy should "strive toward a multipolar world managed by a concert of major powers - Russia, China, and India, as well as the United States" (Rumer, 2019, n.p.). The Primakov doctrine utilised Waltz's logic to justify why multipolarity was favourable, noting that such a system would "provide checks and balances on unilateral and arbitrary uses of power by the hegemon" (Rumer, 2019). Closely related to this objective, the doctrine advocates for a weakening of transatlantic institutions as a means to degrade the US-led international order.

A second goal articulated in the Primakov doctrine revolves around the post-Soviet space, more specifically, the pursuit of closer integration among former Soviet republics with Russia in the lead (Rumer, 2019). Russia's opposition to NATO expansion is referenced throughout the doctrine. It serves to accomplish two of the main objectives: weakening the transatlantic alliance and strengthening Russia's influence in the post-Soviet states.

Russian policy doctrines, such as the *National Security Concept of the Russian Federation* (2009), reference multipolarity as a strategic interest to Russia and identify balancing against US power as a critical objective (Pavlova and Romanova, 2012, p.244).

Russia views itself as an equal participant in international relations and no longer seeks to be recognised as a part of the West (Pavlova and Romanova, 2012, p.246). These sentiments were referenced in a public statement released by the Kremlin on 18 March 2014, in which President Putin claimed that the dissolution of bipolarity has resulted in global instability (Putin, 2014). Putin casts doubt upon the role of institutions as mechanisms to facilitate multilateralism and guarantee security in the international system. Putin's sentiment about the function of institutions suggests that there are both distributive and normative dissatisfactions, which justifies why Russia can be viewed as a revisionist power and offensive realism is an appropriate lens through which to characterise Russia's actions abroad.

It should be noted that domestically formulated foreign policies do not drive Russia's action abroad; the system structure and international distribution of power do. However, foreign policy concepts, such as the Primakov doctrine serve to provide insight into some of the stated goals or macro objectives of Russia's actions abroad.

Furthermore, foreign policy doctrines may not represent an exhaustive account of Russian objectives, nor does it reveal the extent of the approaches undertaken by the state regarding foreign policy. Nevertheless, in the absence of classified intelligence related to Russia's foreign objectives, the doctrine provides a reasonable perspective through which an analysis can be conducted. Russia's stated objectives can be assessed within two areas. The first relates to Russia's actions within the post-Soviet space and its relations within the Western-led international order.

4.8 Russia's macro objectives

Broadly, Russia's objectives relate to security which includes maintaining its sovereignty and domestic political order and ending unipolarity in favour of multipolarity. Ending unipolarity

would depend upon reconfiguring the international world order and the associated institutions that manage and govern it. Mearsheimer (2019, p.16) defines international order as "an organised group of international institutions that help govern the interactions among the member states and can comprise institutions that have a regional or a global scope". Great powers create and manage orders; the political ideology of the sole power, in this case, the US, will characterise the global order.

Spreading liberal democracy globally and expanding membership in the Western order through institutions such as NATO and the European Union (EU) have enabled the liberal order to sustain itself. As such, Russia's intent to undermine the liberal order would be contingent upon its ability to disrupt these processes. Russia seeks to stem EU integration and NATO enlargement in its perceived sphere of influence, which may account for Russia's desire to undermine the prevailing political ideology, as such an act may produce effects on the global order or reconfigure the underlying distribution of power. This reconfiguration can result in a shift from unipolarity to multipolarity or vice versa.

Russia seeks exclusive influence and control within its region, regarded as the entire Former Soviet Union (FSU). The FSU states consist of four major blocks: The Slavic states, which comprise Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova; the Baltic states, which comprise Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia; the Central Asian states, which comprise Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan; the Caucasus states, which consists of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan (Kundu, 2007, p.49).

The underlying assertions of offensive realism will continue characterising the system, namely that states will still compete for power regardless of any new configuration. This perspective can offer insight into Russia's behaviour within the European context and towards the US. The following sections will outline how Russia exercises its power in the FSU states and the wider European region.

4.9 Russia's exercise of power

Russia seeks to bring about multipolarity by weakening the transatlantic alliance, including Central and Western Europe, and by strengthening its influence in the FSU states. A distinction

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can be made between how Russia engages with broader Europe as opposed to the FSU. Most notably, Russia wields power through strategic economic policy, particularly regarding its energy reserves, and through military posturing.

4.9.1 Energy and trade

European countries bordering Russia depend on Russian goods and resources, particularly energy. Europe's energy dependence has granted Russia some coercive capacity (Cohen and Radin, 2019, p.123). This dynamic can be characterised as "power as a resource", in which (potential power), i.e. energy resources, which can be converted in some manner into control over others or outcomes (actual power).

In 2013 Russia represented 20 per cent of goods exported from Lithuania; however, only 4.8 per cent of exports to Russia were from Lithuania (Cohen and Radin, 2019, p.39). Similarly, Latvia ranks relatively low on Russia's list of trading partners. In 2016, only 1.75 per cent of Russia's exports were directed to Latvia. (Cohen and Radin, 2019, p.39). This trade imbalance heavily favours Russia, meaning Russia holds coercive power over economically dependent states in its sphere of influence.

According to the European Commission (2015), several Eastern European countries, including Estonia, Bulgaria, Latvia and Lithuania, dependent on Russia's energy resources, were "punished with an unfair pricing policy" by Russian gas company Gazprom in 2015 (Ratsiborynska, 2018, p.4). Furthermore, Belarus is highly dependent on Russia's oil and gas and relies on preferential energy prices to sustain its economy (Ratsiborynska, 2018, p.4). Between 2013 and 2016, 100 per cent of natural gas and 90 per cent of crude oil imports to Belarus were from Russia (Leukavets, 2017, p.14). Since 2014, Russia made its gas and oil discounts conditional on "Belarus's participation in the integration project headed by Russia, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the sale of several companies to Russia and its support for Russia's policy in Ukraine" (Leukavets, 2017, p.14). In 2016 Russia was believed to have pressured Belarus to accept its role as a military outpost, demanding a military base on Belarusian territory (an air base in Bobrujsk) or risk inflated gas prices in 2017 (Leukavets, 2017, p.6). The relationship between Belarus and Russia illustrates how energy dependency can enable Russia to exploit countries and directly affect their political and military decisionmaking, infringing on their autonomy.

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Russia leverages its energy resources differently in the wider European region. Countries such as Finland, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia remain dependent on the Russian gas supply. In 2012 "Hungary and Slovakia got more than 80 per cent of their natural gas from Russia; the Czech Republic, Turkey, Austria, Poland, and Slovenia also imported more than half of their natural gas from Russia" (The Economist, 2014). Russia accounted for 30 per cent of the EU's total gas imports (Ovozi,2015). Russia's economic survival depends on trade with EU countries, and there are relatively fewer opportunities for exploitation and coercion using its energy resources. Nevertheless, Russia has used other methods to leverage its energy to balance power against EU states in this regard. For example, Russian energy companies have invested in European energy companies and, in some cases, maintain controlling stakes (Cohen and Radin, 2019, p.123).

Russian investment in European companies has enabled it to maintain some coercive control as it relates to the energy provision in Europe. In conjunction with European oil companies, a Gazprom-led consortium pushed for building Nord Stream 2, a pipeline under the Baltic Sea that runs from Russia to Germany, designed to increase Russian gas exports to Europe (Marinas, 2016). US energy envoy, Amos Hochstein, cautioned against the pipeline's construction, stating that it was politically motivated more so than economically (Marinas, 2016). Indeed, The *Energy Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2020* states that "Russia possesses huge energy and fuel resources, which is the base for the development of its economy and also, an instrument of foreign and domestic policy implementation" (Energy Strategy of the Russian Federation until 2020, 2003 cited in Ratsiborynska, 2018, p.3). This position supports the view that Russia's power and capacity to balance power are rooted in how it leverages its resources. In the FSU, energy is leveraged more coercively due to the trade imbalance that favours Russia. However, Russia's economy is dependent on a good trade relationship with Central and Western Europe; the EU is Russia's most important trading partner (Lynch,2004, p.99). As such, there is less opportunity to behave coercively as Russia's economic survival depends on trade with EU countries.

4.9.2 Military posturing

Russia leverages its military as an expression of power differently in the FSU and wider Europe. The military dimension of Russia's exercise of power in its geopolitical area of influence is evident in the Ukrainian context.

Russia has adamantly opposed NATO enlargement in recent years, most notably in its strategically crucial neighbouring state, Ukraine. Until 2013, Viktor Yanukovych, Ukraine's democratically elected and pro-Russian President, had blocked Ukrainian movement towards NATO accession and came out in support of Ukrainian entry into the Russia-led customs union (Allison,2014, p.1256). However, by February 2014, Yanukovych was overthrown by Ukrainian populists who maintained a pro-European political orientation (Allison, 2014, p.1256). The overthrow of Yanukovych is said to have prompted Russia to respond by taking Crimea, a peninsula which remained vulnerable to NATO incursion (Mearsheimer, 2014, p.7). Annexation is inherently offensive and constitutes the process of "acquiring territory by force and is a violation of international law" (OHCHR, 2019). The presence of Russian troops in Crimea not only represents a violation of another country's sovereignty but constitutes an act of aggression. Russia committed an act of aggression (within the meaning of Article 3 (e) of the 1974 UN General Assembly Resolution 3314, 'Definition of aggression') in an attempt to expand its territory and acquire more power (Sari, 2014).

Putin claimed that Yanukovych remained Ukraine's legitimate President and that the US played a role in facilitating the ousting, which violated the sovereignty of Ukraine (Allison, 2014, p.1256). In another incident, Russia sought to keep Georgia from joining NATO in 2008 (Mearsheimer, 2014, p.8). Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili attempted to reincorporate two separatist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in 2008 before joining NATO (Mearsheimer,2014, p.8). After the active conflict between the Georgian government and South Ossetian separatists, Russian forces entered the region and took control of both separatist enclaves (Mearsheimer, 2014, p.8).

These claims underpin Russia's stated motivation for intervening and countering US involvement in the crisis. As such, the act is a clear attempt to gain power and pursue regional hegemony in its area of influence while simultaneously countering US and EU interests, effectively balancing against the West.

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Russia has demonstrated its intent to balance against the West through its military posture. Russia has attempted to use military exercises and the strategic positioning of military assets to counter Western interests in Europe. Russia continues to conduct large-scale military exercises in Europe without warning; between 2013 and 2015, 18 operations involving at least 100,000 soldiers, were conducted across Europe (Goldman, 2015). According to a 2015 NATO estimate, "Russian air activity near (and in some cases, in) NATO allies' air space had increased by 70 per cent since 2013; NATO intercepted Russian aircraft 400 times in 2015" (Stoltenberg, 2016, p.56). Swedish authorities claimed that Russian forces simulated a nuclear attack on the Swedish island of Gotland in 2013, approximately 160 km south of Stockholm (Oliphant, 2016).

In 2016 the US Missile Defense Agency indicated that its ballistic missile defence (BMD) assets in Romania had become operational (LaGrone, 2016). Russia subsequently asserted that the BMD assets posed a threat to its security and interests; however, the US asserted that the BMD assets posed no credible threat to Russia (LaGrone, 2016). Russia remained sceptical about the intent of NATO concerning its actions in Romania. The Russian Foreign Ministry warned that Romania was "being gradually turned into yet another US and NATO base near Russian borders" (DeGhett, 2015). Russia's continued concerns about the placement of BMD assets in Romania are legitimised when viewed from the offensive realist perspective, as states can never be sure about the intents of other states; as such, states that want to survive have little choice but to assume the worst about the intentions of others even in instances of relative global security. Despite the US's guarantees that BMD assets in Romania do not threaten Russia's security, Russia has to assume that the US has aggressive intentions, if not in the near term, possibly in the future. The situation in Romania reflects Russia's intent to balance against the West.

Russia's capacity to balance power against the West and acquire power in the FSU is rooted in how it leverages its resources. Russia's posture seems offensive considering its military incursions in Western Europe; however, it is a response to NATO expansion. In Ukraine, Russia's conduct is inherently aggressive and represents an attempt to gain power at the expense of a weaker state through territorial control, which justifies assertions made by offensive realists.

Beyond military posturing and leveraging its energy policy, Russia's attempts to balance power against the West are also evident in its interference in the domestic affairs of European states. Considering the structure of the EU and NATO, intergovernmental organisations that rely on cooperation between member states, Russia balances against the West by creating schisms between known allies within these associations.

The following section will examine Russia's interference in the political affairs of Western Europe as a means of understanding which outcomes Russia sought to achieve by interfering in the 2016 US elections. The US ranks highest on the hierarchy of prestige within the transatlantic alliance and NATO (Layne, 2006, p.13). Examining Russia's conduct and the associated objectives in relatively lower-ranked members within the Western structure can provide insight into its objectives in the context of the highest-ranked state, the US.

4.10 Russia's interference in European politics

Russia's attempt to strengthen its security by undermining EU solidarity and weakening NATO is evident in its interference activities in Europe, which range from electoral meddling to exacerbating socio-economic, cultural, and political tensions among the electorate.

The Russian government has sought to develop relationships with parties, politicians and political groups across Europe, often backing these entities through funding and other means (Radin, Demus and Marcinek, 2020, p.10). In general, Russia has demonstrated strong ties with conservative or far-right parties, although there have been significantly fewer instances in which Russia has supported far-left political organisations too. Russia's support has primarily been directed at Euro-sceptic groups (Cohen and Radin, 2019, pp. 84-87).

Left-wing generally describes those groups with a liberal political ideology centred on progressive reforms and greater social and economic equality (Forson, 2022). The term *far-left* is attributed to a more extreme left-wing variant, often associated with "a desire for greater systemic change in the political system" (March, 2009, p.126). *Right-wing* is a term associated with a conservative political ideology centred on promoting the free market, fewer taxes and the extension of civil liberties (Todosijević, 2016, p.164). *Far-right* is a term attributed to right-

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wing politics that is more extreme than mainstream conservatism and "adopts an ultranationalist, anti-immigration and authoritarian stance" (Clinton, 2022).

Euro-scepticism refers to the rejection of EU institutions and integration; for the far-right Euroscepticism is driven by concerns related to a specific loss of national sovereignty and cultural "dilution" that integration processes, as well as increased migration, represent (Polyakova, 2015, pp. 2-5). For the far-left, Euro-scepticism could be interpreted from an economic angle in which issues such as the debt crisis, increased austerity and privatisation result from an elitist EU that serves the interests of the business class at the expense of the working class (ECPS, n.d). Euro-scepticism is closely aligned with Russia's anti-Western positions, which reject the liberal world order as rules created and upheld by the West. There are several notable examples of Russian intervention in the domestic affairs of European countries.

In 2014, Marine Le Pen, leader of the French right-wing Front National Party who has publically voiced support for President Putin, is reported to have received a loan totalling 9 million euros from the Moscow-based First Czech Russian Bank (FRCB) meant to fund her campaign in the run-up to the 2017 elections (Mezzofiore, 2014).

In the run-up to the French Presidential election in 2019, Russia is alleged to have launched a disinformation campaign against Le Pen's opposition, presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron (Reuters, 2017). In May 2017, Facebook confirmed the presence of numerous accounts spreading disinformation about the French election before deactivating them (Reuters, 2017).

The far-right party, Austria's Freedom Party (FPO), has issued public statements of support for President Putin, many of which have portrayed Russia as "a bastion of sovereignty, identity, and cultural conservatism against the forces of liberalism destroying Europe" (Weiss, 2020). The FPO is reported to have accepted Russian funds in 2015, though the leader of the FPO, Heinz-Christian Strache, denies this allegation (Mezzofiore, 2015).

In 2014 German left-wing socialist party, *Die Linke*, voiced support for Russia by expressing support for the illegal referendum in annexed Crimea (Gyori and Kreko, 2016). *Die Linke* also proposed dissolving NATO and replacing it with a collective security system, which would include Russia (DW, 2021).

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Considering that Euro-scepticism manifests due to concerns around immigration, economics, terrorism, and cultural integration issues, it is in Russia's interest to leverage these issues in its interference operations. In one example, Russian state television and news sites reported a fake story involving the kidnap and rape of a 13-year-old German-Russian girl by migrants of Middle Eastern or North African origin in 2016 (Warren, 2019, p.6). The fake report served to stir up anti-immigrant sentiment in communities with far-right political affiliations before authorities concluded that no kidnapping or rape had occurred (CNN, 2016). The fake news story ran in the run-up to the 2017 German elections and aimed to polarise the electorate around issues such as immigration, crime, and race.

In some cases, Russia directs its subversive efforts to perpetuate discord within a foreign country to weaken the government. An example of this is Russia's support for separatists in Catalonia. The authorities of the government of Catalonia tried to hold a referendum on the self-determination of the region from Spain in October 2017 (Cristóbal, 2021, pp.13-14). The Spanish government claimed that there was evidence that Russian groups had used "Twitter, Facebook and other social media to massively disseminate propaganda in favour of the separatist cause" (Cristóbal, 2021, pp.13-14). It is plausible that Russia attempted to perpetuate tension in Spain, offering support to a coalition that was not inherently pro-Russia or in alignment with Russian interests but would further fragment the relationship between the opposing parties, weakening the Spanish government and, by extension, the EU.

Opposition to EU integration favours Russia's foreign policy interests. Far-right and left-wing parties are generally anti-interventionist, albeit for different reasons, which aligns with Russia's interest: weakening NATO. Russia's actions in Europe "do not seem to be driven by ideology or a desire to support like-minded authoritarian regimes and promote conservative values" (Gotz and Merlin, 2019). Russia has aligned with far-left groups and intervened in post-Soviet countries, most notably in Georgia in 2003, by assisting in brokering a peaceful transition of power (Gotz and Merlin, 2019) and condemning the authoritarian regime in Kyrgyzstan in 2009 (Blank, 2010, p.14). Russia draws upon its authoritarian tendencies to affect change internationally; however, it does not necessarily seek to promote those authoritarian ideals as an end goal. As such, electoral interference activities appear to be opportunistic in nature and highly adaptable. Electoral interference is intended to obstruct the will, understanding and

capability of the electorate to varying degrees as an outcome in and of itself, not necessarily to achieve specific political objectives.

Intervention need not result in the election of a pro-Russia party for Russia's objectives to be met. The intervention "merely needs to divide Western European countries as anti-US or even neutral, pacifist governments in Western Europe might be sufficient to help advance Russian interests by dividing some of the most powerful and influential countries within NATO and curbing global US influence" (Cohen and Radin, 2019, p.117). This division could, hypothetically, deny the US or NATO military, political or economic support from certain Western European countries, which would counter US interests (Cohen and Radin, 2019, p.117). This perspective highlights how Russian interference aims to weaken the EU and, by extension, the US.

The *National Security Strategy* issued by the White House in 2017 reinforces the perspective that Russia seeks to weaken European institutions and governments, undermine the liberal order and foster disunity between the US and Europe.

> A strong and free Europe is of vital importance to the United States. We are bound together by our shared commitment to the principles of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law…. Russia is using subversive measures to weaken the credibility of America's commitment to Europe, undermine transatlantic unity, and weaken European institutions and governments (White House, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2017, p.47).

Russia's opportunistic approach to interference can be understood as a strategy in which a state's overall objectives can be pursued "by applying a wide and flexible array of hostile measures across instruments of national power to generate possibilities and shape conditions" (Cohen and Radin, 2019, p.146). This statement implies no linear or causal logic about specific operations and immediate outcomes. Instead, Russia pursues actions that "exploit the West's openness and vulnerabilities, information systems, political pluralism, and socio-economic fault lines to create divisions within the Euro-Atlantic community" (Dibb, 2016, p.8). Russia's conduct in Europe, as it relates to electoral interference, can be understood as an application of sharp power. Sharp power is characterised by any initiative undertaken by a foreign state in a sphere that significantly impacts how constituents within democracies understand current

events and the world at large. This deceptive manipulation of information does indeed limit the subject's voluntary choices.

When assessing Russia's interference methods in Europe and the associated objectives, similarities can be drawn in the case of the 2016 US Presidential elections. The following section will evaluate Russia's intervention in the 2016 US Presidential elections and how it can be understood as a use of sharp power, meant to sow discord with the ultimate goal of weakening the US-led international order.

4.11 Russia's interference strategy in the 2016 US Presidential election

Certain parallels can be drawn between Russia's interference in the European context and the 2016 US Presidential elections. The objectives related to Russia's interference were not to promote specific candidates or ideologies as an end within itself but rather to polarise the electorate, create confusion and cast doubt upon the legitimacy of liberal democracy.

As in Europe, Russian active measures activities generally focussed on promoting right-wing political sentiments; however, left-wing political discourse was also leveraged to create schisms in the electorate. Special counsel Robert Mueller indicated that IRA operatives were instructed not only to promote then-Republican primary candidate Donald Trump but to support self-described democratic socialist, Senator Bernie Sanders, in his bid to win the Democratic nomination in the run-up to the election (Barrett, 2020). On the opposite ends of the political spectrum, both primary candidates had expressed anti-establishment positions on several key political issues around US foreign policy. Much like the German Left-wing socialist party, *Die Linke*, Senator Sanders delivered a campaign speech in February 2016 indicating that there should be a collective global effort to confront security challenges through the use of multi-national organisations, which should be expanded to include Russia (Wright, 2016).

It appears that Russia's objectives regarding multipolarity do not align with left-wing sentiments regarding integrating Russia as an oppositional great power into the Western-led institutional structure. Through this perspective, Senator Sanders and *Die Linke's* sentiments, which advocate greater institutional expansion to include Russia, do not align with Russia's stated objectives and goals of balancing against the West. As such, shared ideology is unlikely

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to have motivated Russia's support for the left-wing actors. It is more plausible that Russia lent support to actors deemed to deviate from mainstream foreign policy positions to further perpetuate political divisions. Russia views itself as a pole of power seeking to bring about a system of multipolarity, not as a state intent on integrating with the West.

Furthermore, Senator Sanders and Donald Trump maintained anti-interventionist foreign policy postures in the run-up to the 2016 elections (Wright, 2016). Anti-establishment and antiinterventionist rhetoric are also critical features of Euro-scepticism, the ideology Russia had seemingly leveraged in the context of its European election interference efforts. Leveraging pre-existing anti-establishment sentiments in affected countries to perpetuate discord within the electorate appears to be ideologically motivated. However, in line with Russia's opportunistic approach, tactics depend largely upon the vulnerability of the specific target state and the resources it can leverage. In the case of Western Europe and the US, what can be leveraged by Russia is increased polarisation related to opposing political ideologies. Antiestablishment sentiments may be easier to leverage than the *status quo* consensus, which is presumably more challenging to use due to its entrenched nature. Furthermore, the *status quo* political establishment is indicative of the prevailing norms or liberal world order, which Russia seeks to unsettle.

Russia's meddling does not appear to have centred on an objective that sought to harm one candidate while promoting another as an objective in and of itself. Russia did not specifically seek an electoral outcome but instead sought to undermine the democratic process and legitimacy of the election. While it would appear that one candidate was promoted over the other, the SSCI report (2017-b) noted that the email accounts of both Democratic and Republican party officials were hacked. James Comey testified before the US SSCI that Russian intelligence gained limited access to RNC information; however, none of the hacked information was leaked. Russia's activities are more likely to have relied on prevailing circumstances conducive to spreading disinformation that harmed one candidate over the other, as opposed to reshaping the conditions to promote a specific candidate and achieve a desired political outcome. The ICA assessment appears to have correctly noted that Russia's goals were to undermine public faith in the US democratic process. Russia's cyber tampering activities illustrate its ability to access voter registration databases and potentially alter voter information. However, it is unclear whether such actions were perpetrated. The SSCI claimed it was unclear what Russia's intentions were in this regard. Cyber tampering of this nature illustrates a

situation in which Russia probes vulnerabilities in the voting system at a minimal cost, which can later be exploited or leveraged for some gain. It represents an opportunistic approach where no known immediate objectives were overtly expressed.

As part of a cyber interference IO, an active measures campaign which relied heavily on the spread of disinformation constituted the most considerable portion of the interference efforts undertaken by Russia in the 2016 US Presidential election. In general, the interference aimed to misinform and polarise US voters, effectively infringing upon their will, understanding and capability. Active measures tend to undermine, delegitimise, and denigrate a public image rather than working to improve it (Arif, Starbird and Wilson, 2019, p.109). This process of denigration and delegitimisation may account for the higher proportion of disinformation employed in interference strategies rather than propaganda activities. The process of delegitimisation inherent in the active measures campaign expresses an intent to undermine liberal democracy as an objective, not to promote a specific agenda.

In conclusion, rising anti-establishment sentiments on both the left and right wing of the political spectrum presented an opportunity to exacerbate tensions around the most divisive issues, including race, immigration, and socio-economic conditions. Russia sought to perpetuate schisms where they already existed in the political landscape; as such, the meddling activities aimed to capitalise on prevailing fragmentation, not advance a singular or specific political objective. Russia's meddling relied on the application of sharp power. The following section will detail how sharp power was applied as a foreign policy tool to undermine the liberal democratic system.

4.12 Russia's use of sharp power in the 2016 US Presidential election

Russia's interference activities in the 2016 US Presidential Election constitute a use of sharp power. Sharp power was expressed through the active measures campaign on social media, the leaking of hacked and doxed information through the media and cyber tampering. The exercise of sharp power served to sow doubt and confusion in the electorate, create mistrust between citizens and the government, undermine public trust in the political system and expose the limitations and weaknesses of liberal democracy.

Sharp power is a means through which the integrity of independent institutions can be compromised using manipulation. Authoritarian states exploit open electoral processes and the free media sectors by using censorship to exacerbate pre-existing tensions and rifts within democracies (Walker, 2018, p.12). In the context of the US Presidential elections, using social media to spread disinformation served two functions. Firstly, Russia undermined the integrity of free media companies, casting doubt upon the credibility of social media platforms to contribute meaningfully to the information sphere and deliver accurate news. Using legitimate sources of news and social media, to spread illegitimate information only serves to fuel scepticism within the population about the function and role of social media platforms in facilitating free and fair elections in which the principle of voluntarism is preserved among its users.

Secondly, the use of social media to spread false information exposes the diminishing value of the free speech principle. Free speech, classified under the First Amendment in the US, is a crucial tenant of liberal democracy, and more generally, it is an expression of liberal democratic faith (Massaro and Stryker, 2012, p.398). "All speech receives First Amendment protection unless it falls with[in] certain narrow categories of expression . . . such as incitement of imminent illegal conduct, intentional libel, obscenity, fighting words, and true threats" (Weinstein, 2011, p.492). However, the First Amendment provides protection against state action, not the actions of private companies, under which social media entities would be classified (Weinstein, 2011, p.492). Private companies such as Twitter and Facebook have more flexibility regarding what content can be disseminated. Following Russia's use of social media sites to spread disinformation, the US Congressional Research Service expressed concern that social media companies have not done enough to counter violent or false speech (Brannon, 2019). The counterargument is that if social media companies did regulate more

stringently what information their users were permitted to share and which opinions were allowed to remain on the forum, it might result in the inadvertent censoring or unfair prohibition of potentially valuable speech. "Social media platforms' standards for what constitutes impermissible interference are vague, enforcement is seemingly ad hoc and inconsistent, and the role governments play in deciding what speech should be taken down is unclear" (Douek, 2020). Overt or extended state intervention in regulating how social media companies operate may be perceived or interpreted as an infringement of the First Amendment and sow discord in the electorate and the public trust placed in the government.

This creates a conundrum in which regulation of speech is legally challenging, with its users who presumably vest some faith in these companies to allow fair and equal participation in the marketplace of ideas. Russia has leveraged these blurred boundaries or opacity to expose the free speech principle's weaknesses, highlighting the inherent imperfection of liberal democracy. Russia's conduct exposes the irony of a value meant to strengthen faith in democracy being used to destroy the voluntary choice of social media users. Leveraging social media in this manner is a direct expression of an action that "pierces, penetrates, or perforates the political and information environments in the targeted countries" (Ludwig and Walker, 2017, p.8).

Russia sought to exacerbate public distrust in the established governing systems and the electoral process. The nature of the electoral college and the majoritarian system means that the candidate that wins the popular vote does not necessarily win the election (Norris, 1997, p. 301). This dynamic has contributed to increased tensions during past elections, particularly in the 2000 US Presidential elections in which the Republican candidate George W. Bush narrowly beat Democratic candidate Al Gore amid accusations that electoral outcomes do not represent the will of the national vote (Katz, 2020). Since US elections have previously been closely contested and remain the subject of scrutiny due to the system itself, it presents a favourable opportunity for a foreign country to further compound pre-existing issues related to the legitimacy of the process. The US election presented favourable conditions for Russian meddling as pre-existing scepticism related to the fairness of the electoral process already existed.

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Electoral interference undermines the liberal international order by casting doubt on the legitimacy of democratic processes. Seven procedural conditions must be present for an election to be considered democratic; foreign interference affects these conditions to varying degrees. In the case of the US elections in 2016, the third condition outlined by Andreas Schedler (2002), which relates to voters having access to plural sources of information about their available choices, appears to have been most adversely affected. Democratic elections are also contingent upon parties and candidates being granted free and fair access to the public space. Proof of any cyber disinformation activities undertaken inadvertently or directly by Russia constitutes a contravention of this fundamental condition. An infringement on any of the procedural conditions serves to undermine the legitimacy of the election, even in cases where there is no evidence that meddling produced specific outcomes.

Transparency and proper disclosure are necessary to preserve the principle of voluntarism. In instances where Russia doxed candidates and hacked and leaked information on legitimate news sites and established outlets like *The New York Times,* it also constituted an exercise of sharp power as the process was not transparent. Russian officials disseminated unlawfully obtained information through state-funded media organisations such as RT. However, RT was considered a legitimate news source that had registered under the US Department of Justice's Foreign Agent Registration Act (Rutenberg, 2017). Similarly, publications like *The New York Times* represent established and credible news sources. Using reputable media sources to disseminate hacked or doxed information gives the process the veneer of legitimacy, as these broadcasting platforms are credible. However, it is the intention behind leaking hacked and doxed information that denotes sharp power, not necessarily the means through which the information is released.

Unlawfully obtaining information, like cyber tampering, is overtly illegal and a hostile measure. However, disseminating this information using reputable sources undermines liberal democracy as the system's strength depends on independent media that "vigorously covers all information regarding political candidates" (Hennessey, 2016). Furthermore, there is no "exclusionary rule regarding media coverage of leaked or stolen information" (Hennessey, 2016). This situation presents an opportunity for "whistleblowing", which is intended to aid in the subject's voluntarism, not degrade it. Russia's leaking serves to impair voluntarism, as it is difficult to discern between credible and fake leaked news in the absence of proper disclosure.

When assessing how doxing constitutes an expression of sharp power, the intention and details related to the leak of information are critical. Russia's release of doxed information was largely perceived as a public interest hack, one which is intended to expose injustice; however, the nature of the disseminated confidential material suggests it was a tainted leak in which false information was deliberately spread to the public to limit voluntarism.

While the hack was directed at both political parties, the subsequent leaking of information was targeted at the Democratic Party; some of the hacked information was sent directly to the Republican Party (Greenberg,2017). The targeting of one side over the other suggests the Russians wanted to perpetuate rifts between opposing entities and further polarise the voting base in the event that the Republicans published the information. The targeting of one party over the other already suggests that the intention behind the lack was not in the public interest but to foster further divisions.

In addition, active measures are "offensive instruments of foreign policy that seek to extend influence and advance geopolitical goals by distorting the information environment and changing how people perceive the world" (Arif, Starbird and Wilson, 2019, p. 109). Active measures can be understood as an exercise of sharp power. Moreover, disinformation is used in an active measures campaign and typically to distract or misdirect the electorate so that political participation in any form is constricted. Essentially, the dissemination of disinformation destroys voluntarism, a key characteristic of sharp power.

4.13 Conclusion

Fairness, transparency, and free speech are fundamental principles which uphold liberal democracies. Russia managed to weaponise these principles upheld by its adversary to obstruct their targets' capability, will and understanding. Russia's actions expose the limitations and flaws of liberal democracies, one of its macro objectives aimed at balancing against the West. The manipulation of credible sources to pollute the information environment with false information, a core element of sharp power, perpetuated discord in the electorate. Liberal democracies are upheld by the electorate, which places some faith in democratic institutions to represent their interests and facilitate participation in the democratic process. Sharp power was employed as a foreign policy tool that aided Russia's macro objective centred on balancing against the West, specifically the hegemonic centre of this global power structure, the US.

Chapter five: Conclusion

The main research question in this thesis sought to understand how Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential elections illustrate election interference as a foreign policy strategy used to pursue macro-level outcomes. In line with structural realist thought, Russia's main objectives are securing its sovereignty and territorial integrity. The system creates conditions that encourage Russia to pursue these goals. Russia appears to be seeking two macro outcomes simultaneously. The first relates to balancing power, and the second represents an attempt to gain power at the expense of some other sovereign states.

The distribution of capabilities between actors can approximate the power structure. As such, changes within this international system only occur through the changes in the distribution of capabilities among states. Russia sought to reduce the capabilities of states in its area of influence and the West. Russia sought to reduce the capabilities of the West by challenging existing structures to balance power. In contrast, in the FSU, Russia sought to reduce the capabilities of affected states to gain power.

According to the offensive realist perspective, the principal goal of every state is to maximise its relative power to the point of hegemony. Two strategies are used to achieve this goal: gaining relative power over rival states and preventing rival states from gaining power. Within its regional domain, Russia seeks to ensure its survival and sovereignty by pursuing power. Power can be increased through controlling a resource (potential power), in this case, Russia's energy policy and trade relations with the post-Soviet states, into (actual power), which can be characterised as control over others or outcomes, illustrated in the case of the Russia-Belarus and Russia-Ukrainian relations.

With regard to power as control over events and outcomes, the actor (Russia) does not need total control over all events but rather those directly consequential to him, i.e., which produce net gains or losses in utility. In line with this assessment, Russia's attempts to gain increments of power only relate to instances where it is possible and where it is consequential such as its territorial security in Ukraine or politically in Belarus. Actual power can also be attained, for example, through annexation or territorial expansion, as in the case of Russia's actions in Ukraine. Annexation and tactics of this manner cannot be leveraged outside of Russia's immediate area of influence.

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Russia's conduct in its area of influence translates to actions that balance against, not seek to gain power at the expense of the West. Offensive realists assert that hegemony can also be achieved by preventing rival states from gaining power. In instances where Russia seeks to prevent smaller states from integrating with the EU or joining NATO, this serves as a counterbalance to the West. Russia does not perceive that preventing a smaller state from joining NATO would significantly increase its relative power over the US; however, such an action would serve to curtail the power of the West.

Russia pursues regional dominance for its security; however, regional hegemony still equates to an overall system of multipolarity where the US, the preponderant power, remains dominant. Even if Russia ascends to regional hegemon, it still has other centres of power to contend with, which accounts for why weakening the West remains a priority. As such, Russia continues to challenge existing structures moulded and maintained by Western states, most notably the US, to balance or redistribute power across poles. Liberal democracy and the expansion of international institutions underpin and sustain the liberal world order. As such, weakening the liberal-led order relies on undermining democracy and the role of institutions or exposing inefficacy in the current system.

Russia can be characterised as a reformist revisionist state that expresses both normative and distributive dissatisfaction. Reformist revisionist states accept some of the institutions of the international society for a mixture of calculated and instrumental reasons. In Russia's case, this would encompass the acceptance of its place as one of the five permanent members of the UNSC. Russia's involvement in the UNSC indicates a willingness to embrace at least one multinational organisation related to global governance and work to reform this organisation in a way that favours its foreign objectives, not dismantle it.

However, reformist revisionist states resist and want to reform other international institutions, in this case, Russia's opposition to EU integration and NATO. The rational state takes calculated risks. Russia's status as a reformist revisionist state would mean it does not seek to overturn the foundations of the liberal world order, as such a pursuit is risky, costly, has no guaranteed outcomes and would work against Russian interests related to the preservation of some institutions which do work in its favour. Russia makes calculated decisions, weighing the cost-benefit ratio to seek to increase its power. If weakening the Liberal-led order is one of

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Russia's main strategic objectives, it stands to reason that creating schisms within the transAtlantic alliance and associated organisations would all form part of Russia's agenda.

Attempts to weaken the liberal order have also been approached from a socio-political angle, most notably through political and electoral interference. As evidenced by Russian interference in the European context, a wide array of tools can be weaponised to achieve its foreign policy goals. These include but are not limited to economic pressure, information operations, political corruption or influence, support for political minorities, far left or right movements, and "more limited and deniable uses of military force" (Cohen and Radin, 2019, p.13).

As part of an IO, Russia's active measures in the 2016 US presidential elections were offensive foreign policy instruments which relied on the application of sharp power. These foreign policy instruments were designed to distort the information environment as it relates to the credibility of free and fair democratic elections and how consensus democracy functions. Russia's active measures were aimed at diminishing the principle of voluntarism, a function of sharp power. Democratic elections must operate under conditions of freedom and equality, free to formulate their own political beliefs. Russia sought to affect those processes which would delegitimise a democratic election and undermine liberal values, rules and conventions espoused by the hegemonic state.

Russia's interference, as a foreign policy tool that relies on sharp power, reflects a long-term objective centred on shifting the balance of power. The perpetual nature of Russia's interference activities also supports the offensive realist assertion that even during periods of relative stability, states will continue accumulating power to prevent a future deficit and cover uncertainties, possible miscalculations, and future surprises. The zero-sum conditions under which Russia operate has driven it to pursue a surplus of power by maintaining the will and capacity to leverage its resources in multiple situations, adaptively and opportunistically across states. Russia needs to maximise its relative power in its area of influence and weaken the power of rival states, the US, on a continual basis, a process which can be aided using foreign policy tools such as interference.

Through this perspective, the main research question in this thesis can be addressed. Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential elections represents one of the multiple activities undertaken within the parameters of an overarching strategy. This perpetual strategy relies on

multiple foreign policy tools, such as electoral interference, which, when applied to the West, represents an overt use of sharp power. Russia's long-term macro objectives relate to shifting the balance of power in Russia's favour by weakening the Western-led liberal order and aiding the accrual of power in pursuit of regional hegemony.

This study's findings illustrate the complexity related to the wider-reaching geopolitical implications of electoral interference and the use of sharp power as a foreign policy tool. Furthermore, this thesis has demonstrated the utility of offensive realism as a theoretical framework capable of accounting for the behaviour of states, particularly Russia's use of sharp power, which reflects its revisionist disposition.

Further engagement with an emerging concept, such as sharp power, can offer perspectives that may aid in deterring and responding to not only Russian but all foreign interference attempts in future, with the overall goal of securing liberal democratic processes. Furthermore, building upon this study presents an opportunity for further inquiry into which Russian foreign policy interests motivate its varying subversive activities and IOs, which, as illustrated in this thesis, differ across countries and contexts.
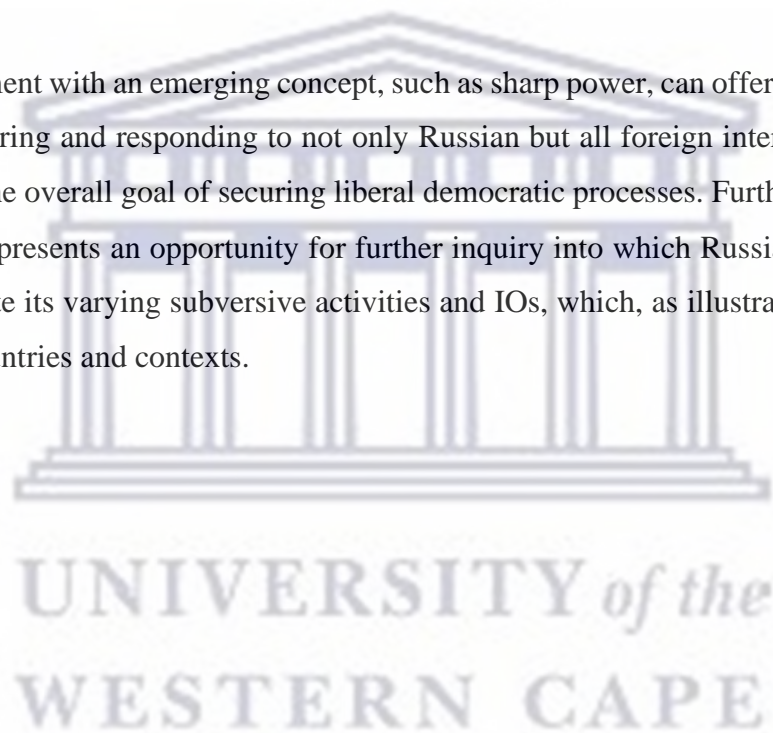
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