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**20 Years of LIO Contestation(s). A Computational Text
Analysis of Russia's Foreign Policy Discourse
(2003–2023)**

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20 Years of LIO Contestation(s)

A Computational Text Analysis of Russia's Foreign Policy Discourse (2003–2023)

Adriana Cuppuleri

ABSTRACT

How has Russia's contestation of the Liberal International Order (LIO) shifted over time? To answer this question, one must first gain an understanding of how the architecture of the concept of „world order“ has changed over time, according to Russian policymakers. With this aim, I refer to a matrix combining two dimensions: posture (revisionist vs traditionalist) and source (ideas vs interests) of LIO contestations. This framework identifies four ideal-type categories of LIO contestations pursued by Russia: Eurasianism, Westphalianism, Security Concerns, and Multipolarity. I employ computational text-as-data methods in an original corpus (6'649 documents including speeches, addresses, interviews, and statements) from the President of Russia (2003–2023) and the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs (2004–2023). Preliminary results reveal that Russian political discourse has been accompanied by increasing intensity in the expression of ideological positions (Eurasianism and Westphalianism) over interest-driven strategies (Security Concerns and Multipolarity).

1 INTRODUCTION

Russia has been working for years to mark itself as a political and cultural beacon in contesting and challenging the LIO. While Russia is not actively promoting an alternative to the LIO, it clearly supports a strictly “Westphalian” order that removes the “liberal” from the existing international order (Adler-Nissen/Zarakol 2021). At the same time, Russia has been conducting an ambivalent relationship with and against the LIO that has gone through several phases that can be defined as more or less assertive. The early 2000s were characterised by promoting a pragmatic relationship with the West on specific issues. Later, Moscow, especially since it annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, has been promoting significant changes

in the rules, norms, and arrangements of the architecture of international order. Most recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 represents the final stage of a long-desired transformation of the global order into a multiorder world¹, where the LIO will continue to exist, albeit no longer with expectations of universality and probably in an adapted form.

The question nevertheless remains – could we have seen this dramatic turn coming? If we focus on LIO contestation “as *discursive* and behavioural practices that challenge the authority of international institutions, their liberal intrusiveness, or the LIO as a whole” (Börzel/Zürn 2021: 288, emphasis added), I argue that looking at language – or social practices of speaking and writing in a certain political arena – is a useful way to investigate a state's foreign policy (Ostermann/Sjöstedt 2022) and the evolution of its posture towards the LIO. This method is not a novelty in studying Russian foreign policy as, in most cases, scholars have analysed several types of texts through qualitative methods such as discourse and narrative analysis (Galkina/Popov 2016; Tsygankov 2014). First, these approaches strongly value how the individual scholar interprets the text and its nuances. In turn, they require careful and thoughtful reading of all the textual material considered useful for the research. However, this endeavour becomes increasingly challenging as the amount

¹ For more information on the concept of a multiorder world, see Trine Flockhart (2020).

of text to read increases. Second, especially when researching how foreign policy has changed over time by looking at its constitutive practices of speaking and writing, our contemporary vantage point tends to flatten or intensify our view of the past, making it hard to read the potential meanings of political concepts.

In contrast to traditional approaches, computational methods allow us to step outside of our moment, enabling us to understand the meanings of concepts in the divergent political contexts of the past. Regarding this study, I argue that understanding contemporary Russian contestation(s) of the LIO requires examining how the architecture of the compound word “world order” has changed over time.² The topic of world order is central in both international and Russian political discourse. Rather than projecting contemporary meanings of the term backwards onto the past, defining it requires a genealogy of the semantics of the Russian understanding of world order, excavating what it meant to the Kremlin when it was used in the last two decades. As explained further in the study, the prevalent world order evolution narrative in Russia envisioned a gradual transition from bipolarity (the Cold War period) to a “unipolar moment” (the mid-1990s) and further towards a multipolar or polycentric world with a pragmatic and, lately, a confrontational stance (Kortunov 2019).

As part of this analysis, I apply computational text-as-data methods to help make sense of uses of world order in a novel corpus of speeches, addresses, interviews, and statements of Russian Presidents Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev of Russia (2003–2023) as well as the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs (RMFA), Sergey Lavrov (2004–2023), in the Russian language. Because the goal

is to track the semantics of a word, word vectorisation models (also called word embeddings) appear promising as a method to track states’ foreign policy by studying concept-changing historical meanings.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I begin by discussing the general debate on LIO contestation and which role Russia plays when we talk about illiberal order contestation. Throughout this section, I introduce the dimensions of LIO contestation according to a matrix that combines sources (interest vs values) and the posture of a state’s foreign policy (revisionist vs traditionalist). Second, I introduce the method of computational text analysis and its application to foreign policy analysis. In this section, I present the corpus of data and outline the approach to measuring the matrix concepts. The third section discusses the results of the model relative to the two-dimension matrix and its evolution. In conclusion, I summarise the findings and limitations of the study while reflecting upon future pathways of illiberal discourse by means of computation text analysis.

2 LIO CONTESTATION(S) AND RUSSIA

Current challenges to LIO come from several directions – internal and external – which interact in a dynamic manner (Chrissyogelos 2010; Heinkelmann-Wild et al. 2021; Wajner 2022; Wojczewski 2023). Nevertheless, these challenges do not necessarily present a unified front with a coherent doctrine in competition with LIO. Different groups and actors often disagree over important aspects of such contestations and have produced a heterogeneity of contesting “positions” toward the LIO; neither contestants necessarily reject LIO in all its versions: they may repudiate certain aspects while embracing others (Laruelle 2022). In light of this complexity, predominant explanations in International Relations (IR) have recently moved from exclusively material and ideational

² Several ways in the Russian language to express the concept of “world order” have been considered for this study: миропорядок, *miroroguyadok*, мировой порядок, *mirovoj porjadok*, мироустройство, *miroustrojstvo*.

changes, which are usually related to the rise of new powers (Mearsheimer 2019; Porter 2020) or from the failure of rule-based multilateralism of addressing new challenges (Mansfield/Rudra 2021) to a more comprehensive approach able to account for both internal and external challenges as well as the variety of contestations (Börzel/Zürn 2021).

Within this context, Russia can be considered a unique actor in relation to the LIO contestation since it plays the dual role of a traditional great power and a rising power in the international system (Parlar Dal/Erşen 2020). Russia is traditionally regarded as a *great power* in IR literature due to its large geographical size, rich energy resources, advanced nuclear capabilities and a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Yet, Russia has been struggling with major economic and social problems: a declining population and deteriorating economic indicators due to fluctuating energy prices as well as ongoing Western economic sanctions (Pestova et al. 2022). At the same time, Russia can be viewed as a rising power since it has significant similarities with other *rising powers* in terms of its positional, behavioural and functional power. Specifically, it shares a strong ideological affinity with other LIO contestants in terms of challenging Western supremacy in international relations, and it uses its strategic realignment with these rising powers to advance its influence in global and regional politics (Cooley/Nexon 2020).

It is well known that Russia has engaged in efforts to connect illiberal movements in Europe and the Global South – far-right populist parties, regional security and economic institutions, and global advocacy networks – in order to increase its bargaining power when opposing the LIO (Casiar 2022; Gaweda 2022). However, the promotion of illiberalism should not be dismissed as a mere political manoeuvre by the Putin regime. It is important to recognise that for Russian elites and

a significant portion of the population, illiberalism is fundamental to Russia's perception of the liberal world order and the country's place within that order (Laruelle 2020).

In this study, I argue that, because of this duality as well as Russia's worldview, Moscow has pursued different contestation strategies depending on its *posture* toward the LIO and *sources* of foreign policy (Cuppuleri/Veliu Ashiku 2023). The first dimension, "posture towards the liberal international order", separates the revisionist posture from the traditionalist posture. The revisionist posture, which is "understood as an effort to undermine a 'rules-based' international order" (Allison 2020: 976), argues that Russia constantly demands the revision of the international order with the aim of shaping a conservative interstate order united by a common civilisation (Kanet 2018). Accordingly, Russia seeks substantial changes to prevailing hierarchies of power and status as well as to the rules, norms, and institutions that govern the international order.

In contrast, the *traditionalist* posture states that Russia's challenge to the LIO is a reactionary, rather than revolutionary, form of contestation. From such a perspective, Russia is an anti-reformist force seeking to *restore* order. Russia's objective is not to replace the United States as the global hegemon, nor does it seek to overhaul the existing international order entirely and replace it with its own framework. Instead, Russia advocates for a return to a Great Power Concert system, where major powers would maintain their sovereignty, have the freedom to pursue their respective spheres of influence and play a significant role in deciding key global governance issues (Radchenko 2020b). This posture would explain why Russia is interested in preserving some of the traditional principles of the existing order outside the post-Soviet space (e.g. balance of power, sovereignty, principle of non-intervention) (Sakwa 2017: 131), while, at the same time, trying to reintroduce

the idea of spheres of influence and have other (post-Soviet) states accept the legitimacy of Russia as a regional great power exercising authority within such a sphere of influence (Kustermans et al. 2023).

The second dimension of the typology, “source”, separates the ideological motive, namely values, from the instrumental motive, namely interests. Regarding values, several scholars have attempted to link Russia’s foreign policy to a particular ideology that would rediscover endogenous norms manifested through the “Russian World” doctrine (Suslov 2018), moral or religious conservatism (Bluhm 2019), and even illiberalism (Laruelle 2020), and *de facto* rehabilitation of the Soviet project (except for the Bolshevik Revolution) in popular and media discourse (Makarychev 2020). While values are about morality and identity, interests are about material or physical desires. Accordingly, on the one hand, Russia is concerned with fundamental problems of European and global security given by a combination of the geopolitical challenge of defending permeable borders of such a vast territory, historical experiences of invasion, and a long-lasting perception of encirclement by Western powers (Götz/Staun 2022). On the other hand, Russia aims to act as a “normal power”, advancing its national interests through practical cooperation with willing and friendly states (Trenin 2009).

These two dimensions lead to four ideal-type categories of LIO contestations pursued by Russia – Eurasianism, Westphalianism, Security Concerns, and Multipolarity (see Figure 1). The concept of *Eurasianism* – which combines revisionist posture and values – is based on the idea that Russia is not a common state but a civilisation in its own right, opposed to that of the West and “the Western system of values, insisting on the cultural superiority of Russia” (Tsygankov 2007: 7). Boosted by conservative scholars and intellectuals such as Aleksander Lukin and Aleksander Dugin, the

rhetoric of Eurasianism has been applied by the Kremlin on the international arena through numerous instruments, such as the building up of the Russian World (*Ruskyj Mir*) community (Laruelle 2015); the call for an alliance of faiths between Orthodox Christianity and Islam in opposition to the liberal West. Interestingly, although Eurasianism could appear as a concept with a geographically limited scope, its appeal as an “alternative Europe” to liberal Europe (White/Feklyunina 2014: 123) has been included in the broader set of Western realist conservatism, which appears to be a revisionist (anti-status quo), anti-liberal, anti-universalist, and reactive type of thinking (Flockhart/Korosteleva 2022). In this sense, the concept of Eurasianism becomes closely bound to what can be defined as an illiberalism *à la russe*. The emphasis on cultural distinctiveness and civilisational dialogue among world communities leads to the further development of the notion of civilisation as the *real subject* of international politics. Hence, those countries that are able to influence interactive discourse within the society of supposedly sovereign states would have a privileged position in drafting rules of conduct for others and consequently changing the norms and practices of LIO. Once we accept the civilisational interpretation of international reality, the Euro-Atlantic civilisation (and consequently the LIO) loses its claim to universality and obtains a regional character (Chebankova 2017).

Figure 1: Two-dimensional matrix of LIO contestation

		Posture toward the liberal international order	
		<i>Revisionist</i>	<i>Traditionalist</i>
Source of Contestation	Values	Eurasianism	Westphalianism
	Interests	Security Concerns	Multipolarity

In contrast, *Westphalianism* combines traditionalist posture and values. It refers to Russia's attempt to challenge the assumption that the post-Westphalian liberal world order is synonymous with order itself. This concept differs from Eurasianism regarding intentions, as the stated goal is to *restore* balance in world affairs where great powers control the sphere of influence and engage in a mix of situational cooperation and conflict. The contestation strategy of Westphalianism is strictly connected with the quest for great power status. Ever since the Soviet collapse, Russia has struggled with the spectre of decline and the prospects of losing its status as one of the world's great powers. The pursuit of status has been the central preoccupation of post-Soviet Russia's foreign policy, and Russia's approach to alignment and regional integration has largely followed its status concerns (Krickovic/Pellicciari 2021). As for the Russian elite, it is an existential matter where Russia has to be a great power, or it will cease to exist (Reshetnikov 2011). It is no surprise to find this theme in many speeches of the President of Russia and the RMFA. As Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov argued in a 2007 speech, "Russia can (...) only exist within its present borders if it is one of the world's leading states" (Tsyganov 2008: 46, citing Lavrov 2007). In turn, what is especially significant is that Russia's status ambitions are deeply intertwined with spheres-of-influence thinking (Poulsen/Staun 2023). Accordingly, the "transformed" global order after the end of the Cold War should be actually a traditionalist global order in the sense that it encourages a concert-of-Europe type of relationship with a mutual recognition of spheres of influence (Radchenko 2020a).

In the bottom-left corner, *Security Concerns* combines revisionist posture with instrumental goals, namely interests. It holds that Moscow adopts a combative, revisionist stance not because it is ideologically driven but in response to external threats such as NATO's eastward enlargement and

US-promoted regime changes on a global scale (German 2017; Mearsheimer 2014; Shleifer/Treisman 2011). Within this argument, Russia does not have a real grand plan, yet it aims to exercise greater political and military control over neighbouring states to counterbalance and, if possible, roll back the growing influence of foreign powers on what Russia considers its doorstep. Recently, Russia's foreign policy has been oriented towards reconfiguring its identity in the international system through the disintegration of Ukraine, and at the same time serves as a benchmark in defining Russia's survival (Niño et al. 2023).

Finally, *Multipolarity*, which combines interests with traditionalist posture toward the LIO, advocates multiple centres of political and economic influence on an equal basis among states. However, it differs from Westphalianism as the latter is guided by the re-establishment of the glorious past related to great power status, while Multipolarity is driven by pragmatic considerations, aiming to reorganise the platform of authority to obtain its seat at the table of global decisions. Accordingly, Multipolarity may now be understood as a way of structuring the global international system where conglomerations of economic interests unite around the most powerful centres of attraction and economic growth (Lukyanov 2010). With this aim, Russia has instrumentally supported several normative frameworks of the LIO, such as the importance of free economic markets and multilateral organisations, especially the United Nations (UN). Under the flag of international institutions (notably the UN Security Council, Council of Europe, and World Trade Organization), Russia found itself among the countries consistently advocating reform of the LIO and becoming "an ardent defender of the multipolar world order, both in the global and domestic public spheres" (Chebankova 2017: 217).

Importantly, the proposed four categories are ideal types that are not necessarily exclusionary and

can reinforce each other when looking at the empirical case. In this study, I argue that several semantic relationships of world order can be associated with each of these typologies through computational text analysis.

3 DATA AND METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGIES

The potentiality of computational text analysis in the study of foreign policy relies mainly on the possibility of developing innovative measures to capture relevant concepts from suitable and appropriate corpora in terms of the quantity and quality of the documents (Vignoli 2022). For this project, I constructed an original corpus of 6'779 documents, including speeches, addresses, interviews and statements from the President of Russia (1'442) and the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs (5'207) between 2003 and 2023.³ All documents contain the following metadata: date, URL, speaker, title, and text.

I decided to focus on the President of Russia and the RMFA as they are fundamental (although not exhaustively) institutional figures in Russia's foreign policy. However, a further methodological justification is necessary. While it is common for politicians, including Kremlin officials, to tailor their short-term messaging to suit internal or international audiences, it is challenging to maintain two distinctly different conversations – one for public consumption and another that remains secretive – over an extended period of time without eventually encountering inconsistencies and ambiguities in their arguments. Despite efforts to carefully manage narratives, maintaining a

consistent and coherent dual discourse becomes increasingly difficult as time passes. Therefore, I challenge the notion that the consistent discursive patterns observed among Kremlin officials over a long period of time are merely superficial tactics employed to disguise their true motives in policymaking. My argument posits that these enduring discursive patterns genuinely embody and mirror Russia's prevailing intentions in the realm of foreign policy.

Conducting a word vectorisation analysis over time involves slicing a single corpus into time intervals in order to model each semantic universe separately, producing word vector relationships for each universe, and then tracing the changes in those semantic relationships across time. This is called a naïve time series model (Rodman 2020). Therefore, the corpus was divided into four time slices according to presidential terms: 2004–2008 (Vladimir Putin's second term); 2008–2012 (Dmitry Medvedev's term); 2012–2018 (Putin's third term), 2018–2023 (Putin's fourth term). Due to the expansion of the presidential term from four to six years following the 2012 election, there is significant variation in document counts between the third slice and the others. In chronological order by slice, there are 1'038, 1'133, 2'482, and 1'996 documents respectively. An important exception regards the temporal analysis of Putin's corpus, which was divided into four equal parts in relation to the quantity of documents instead of aligning them with the four presidential terms (see Figure 6b). If the corpus had been divided strictly according to the four presidential terms, the first era would have had no occurrences of the target word – words or phrases relating to 'world order' concept – in its corpus, introducing bias because it could potentially skew the results of the analysis. To maintain a balanced representation across all eras, dividing the corpus into equal slices seemed like a reasonable approach.

3 Data of the President of Russia, including "Addresses to the Federal Assembly", "Statements over Major Issues", and "Interviews", have been scraped mainly from the official website of the President of Russia (<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>); "News" from President of Russia and data regarding the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were courteously provided by Nathalia Levshina in 2022 and Mehmet Yavuz in 2023 respectively.

Before proceeding to the implementation of the model, the following pre-processing steps were applied to all text material: removal of “noisy speakers”; conversion to lower case; removal of punctuation and everything non-alpha-numerical; lemmatisation and removal of stop words; finally, creation of bigrams and selective stemming. These steps detect word ending change due to declension in the Russian language and the fact that, over time, synonymous words are used with different frequencies. For instance, synonyms of world order, such as *mirovoj porjadok* and *miroustrojstvo*, have all been replaced with *miroporyadok*. I performed all these steps using the SpaCy package in Python (Hannibal 2017). The final dataset includes 6’649 documents containing 3’637’525 words.

Because the goal is to track the semantics of a word, word embedding has been chosen as the main computational method for this project. Although computational text analysis is a relatively recent methodological innovation, especially in IR, word embedding is an implementation of the much older distributional hypothesis – a theory according to which the meaning of a word can be extracted by looking over many texts at the words that occur around it (Baden et al. 2022). For this purpose, word embedding transforms words and phrases into vectors, where similar words tend to co-locate, and directions in the space (dimensions) correspond to semantically meaningful concepts.

Word embedding algorithms use a sliding window over the text, defined by a target word w_t and the size of the context window c . In Figure 2 (Albrecht et al. 2020: 271), $c = 2$; thus, the training samples consist of the five words w_{t-2}, \dots, w_{t+2} . One such training sample is printed in bold: **... is trying things to see ...** There are two main word embedding models: continuous-bag-of-words and skip-gram. While continuous-bag-of-words (on the left) is modelled to predict the target word

based on context words, skip-gram (on the right) is used to predict the context word for a given target word: in the latter, the target word is input while context words are output. Both embedding algorithms use a simple single-layer neural network and tricks for fast and scalable training. The input and output words are represented by one-hot vectors. For this project, I rely on skip-gram as one of the unsupervised learning techniques used to find the most related words for a given word. The dimensionality of the embeddings and size of the context window c are hyperparameters in all of the embedding methods presented here.

Given a corpus of training text, the objective is to learn the embeddings that maximise the probability of observing the context words within a specified window size around the target word. The skip-gram model assumes that the probability of observing a context word given a target word is independent of other context words and can be calculated using a softmax function. The objective of the skip-gram model is to maximise the average log probability of the observed context words given the target words over the entire training corpus.

$$P(c | w_t) = \text{softmax}(V'Uw_t)$$

Here, $\text{softmax}(V'Uw_t)$ returns a probability distribution over the vocabulary, where each element represents the probability of a context word occurring given the target word. The elements of the output vector will sum up to 1, and each element represents the likelihood of a particular context word being associated with the given target word.

The algorithm word2vec relies on the semantic information intrinsic to the collocation of words in the text and has been used to encode a large, sparse matrix of values into dense low-dimensional vectors that represent each word (Řehůřek/Sojka 2010). Once a corpus has been vectorised, each word essentially has an address or assigned

Figure 2: Continuous bag of words (left) versus skip-gram model (right)

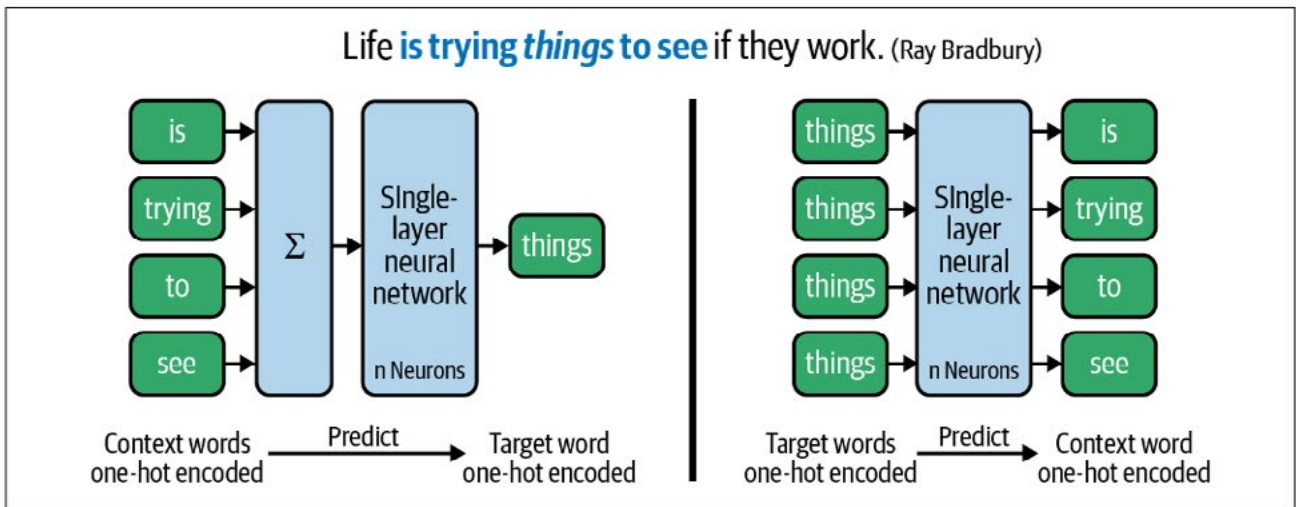


Table 1: Codebook of context words and phrases by contestation typology

EURASIANISM	WESTPHALIANISM	SECURITY CONCERNS	MULTIPOLARITY
'евразия', <i>evrazija</i> , eurasia; 'русский_мир', <i>russkij_mir</i> , russian_world; 'цивилизация', <i>tsivilizatsija</i> , civilisation; 'доминирование_запад', <i>dominirovanie_zapad</i> , dom- ination of the west; 'правило_запад', <i>pravila_</i> <i>zapad</i> , right of the west; 'запад', <i>zapad</i> , west; 'гегемония', <i>gegemonija</i> , hegemony; 'исторический_	'великодержавность', <i>velikoderzhavnost</i> , great power 'статус', <i>status</i> , status 'принцип_суверенный', <i>printsip_suverennyj</i> , princi- ple sovereign/of sovereignty 'международное_право', <i>mezhdunarodnaja_prava</i> , international_law 'демократический_	'национальная_	'многополярный', <i>monopoljarnyj</i> , multipolar 'партнёрство', <i>partiorstvo</i> , partnership 'сотрудничество', <i>sotrud-</i> <i>nichestvo</i> , partnership 'полицентричный', <i>politsentrichnyj</i> , polycentric 'формирование_
'ревиизионизм', <i>istoricheskij_</i> <i>revizionism</i> , historical revi- sionism	'справедливый', <i>demokra-</i> <i>ticheskij_pravedlivyj</i> , demo- cratic and fair 'международное_право_	'безопасность', <i>natsion-</i> <i>al'naya_bezopasnost</i> , na- tional_security 'противовес', <i>protivoves</i> , counterbalance 'дестабилизация', <i>destabili-</i> <i>zatsja</i> , destabilisation 'нато', <i>nato</i> , NATO 'угроза', <i>ugroza</i> , threat 'подменить_	'формиование_
	норма', <i>mezhdunarodnoje_</i> <i>pravo_norma</i> , norm of inter- national law 'суверенность', <i>suveren-</i> <i>nost</i> , sovereignty 'великодержав', <i>velikoder-</i> <i>zhav</i> , great power	'подменить_	'формиование_
		международное_право', <i>podmenit'_mezhdunarod-</i> <i>noe_pravo</i> , substitute_inter- national_law 'порядок_основать', <i>por-</i> <i>jadok_osnovat'</i> , recognise_ order 'однополярная', <i>odnopoly-</i> <i>arnaya</i> , unipolar 'новый_мироустройство', <i>novyj_miroustrojstvo</i> , new_ world_order 'расширяться_восток', <i>rasshirjat'_tsja_vostok</i> , east_ enlargement 'однополярный_модель', <i>odnopoljarnyj_model'</i> , uni- polar_model 'однополярный', <i>odnopol-</i> <i>jarnyj</i> , unipolar 'военный_	'формиование_
		инфраструктура', <i>voennyj_</i> <i>infrastruktura</i> , war_infra- structure 'стабильность', <i>stabil'nost</i> , stability'	'формиование_
			полицентричного', <i>formiro-</i> <i>vanie_politsentrichnogo</i> , forming of policentric 'демократический_
			полицентричного', <i>demokraticeskij_politsent-</i> <i>sentrichnogo</i> , democratic and polycentric, 'ооноцентричной', <i>oont-</i> <i>sentrichnoj</i> , ONU-centred, 'оон', <i>oon</i> , ONU

location in n-dimensional space and can be added or subtracted to move around the space. The changing proximity of words to one another in these model spaces captures semantic relationships and, eventually, cultural or temporal shifts in the architecture of words (Hamilton et al. 2018). For instance, the proximity of “west” and “partnership” in a given time will reveal important semantic information about the cultural meaning of the word “west” in Russia. Similarly, when the Kremlin or the RMFA speak about world order in any selected time frame, how close is cooperation or competition in their discourse?

Cosine similarity scores (either for pairs of words or lists of closest words) can allow analysts to track these changing semantic relationships, which, in turn, reflect a picture of the thick, cultural meaning of a word as it changes over time. In this study, I semantically map the compound word “world order” by looking at its cosine similarity scores with other sets of words deriving from the contestation typologies defined in Figure 1. The words or phrases included in each typology have been collected in a semi-inductive way derived from literature or the text (see Table 1).

Finally, small corpora produce vectors that are highly sensitive to single documents, corpus size, and document length, generating divergent model outputs based on small changes to these corpus characteristics (Howard/Ruder 2018).⁴ Thus, I adopted averaging over the model outputs from multiple bootstrap samples of documents, which has been shown to produce stable, reliable results from small corpora (Rodman 2020).

4 EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

This section reports the results of the descriptive analysis of “world order” in the Kremlin and the RMFA. I first introduce some exploratory data analysis of the corpus by showing the most associated words of the entire corpus with the target word “world order” and how its association with matrix concepts are distributed across speakers. Second, I explore how the association of world order with concepts varies over time.

Figure 3 shows the 20 closest semantic associations to the target word “world order” in the entire corpus. For the sake of brevity, we will concentrate only on the five most similar words (in red).⁵ Other than “international system” that has a neutral tone, the semantic associations reflect Russia’s idea of a “polycentric” world order. This concept has played a pivotal role in Russia’s vision of global politics and its place in the world for years. The desired goal for developing international relations after the end of the Cold War consists of several centres of power that accumulate several types of poles (Leonova 2010). While Russia initially intended to integrate into the Western liberal world order in the early 1990s (unipolar moment), with Yevgeny Maksimovich Primakov in the Russian Foreign Ministry, it eventually moved further towards a multipolar (or polycentric) world (Primakov 2017). The idea of a multipolar world has become a leitmotiv of Russia’s foreign policy and, from 1998 to 2013, was officially fixed in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016). The basis of this conception of the world order is the point of redistributing the balance of power and the balance of interests

⁴ In the context of big data analysis, larger corpora in the order of millions or tens of millions of documents are ideally preferred for improved performance in natural language processing tasks.

⁵ The chosen words are: демократический_справедливый (*demokraticeskij_spravedlivyj*) “democratic and fair”, справедливый_демократический (*spravedlivyj_demokraticeskij*) “fair and democratic”, полицентричный (*polichentrichnyj*) “polycentric”, формирование_полицентричного (*formirovanie_polichentrichnogo*) “formation of the polycentric”, and международный система (*mezhdunorodnyj_sistema*) “international system”.

Figure 3: t-SNE Visualisation of Similar Words to world order

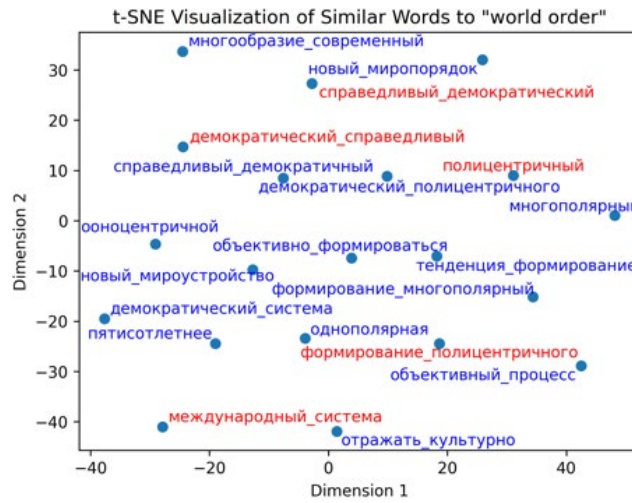
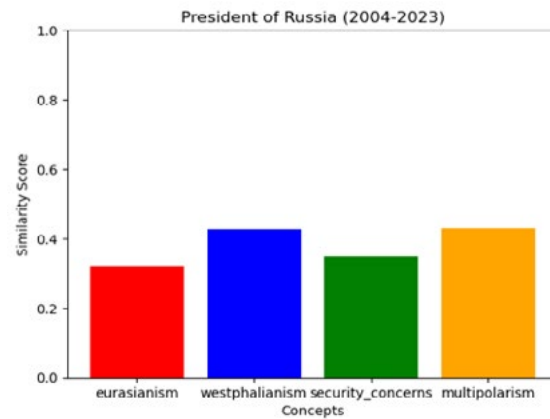
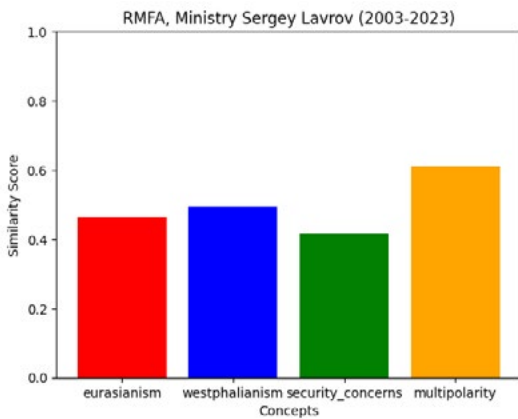


Figure 4: Matrix concepts distribution across speakers:

(a) RMFA, Ministry Sergey Lavrov;

(b) President of Russia



between the great powers and alliances (“fair and democratic”).

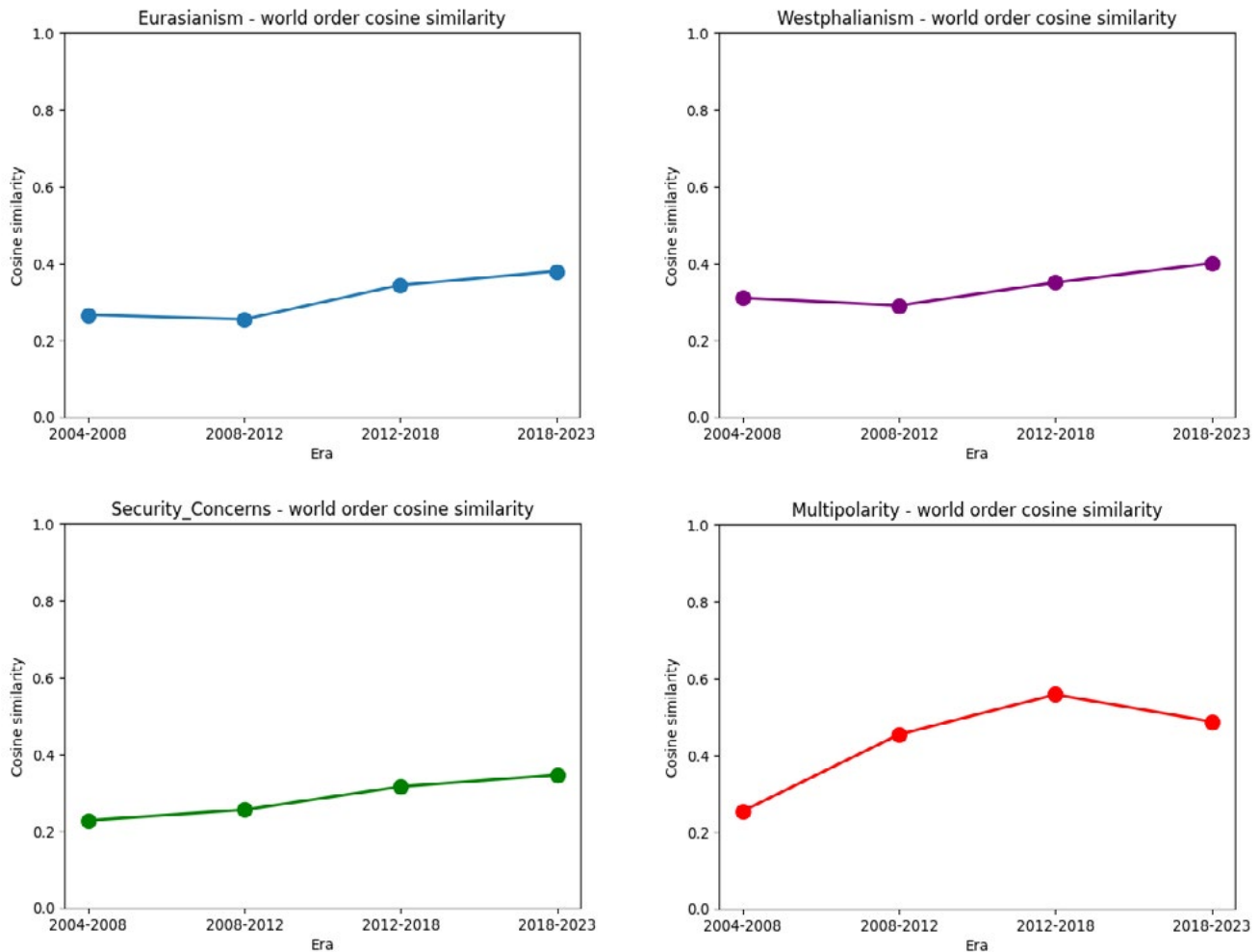
A similar picture emerges from the distribution of concepts between the two main roles represented in the corpus – the Presidents of Russia (Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Sergey Lavrov). Figure 4 shows that the association of world order with Multipolarity emerges as the most striking contestation typology for the RMFA while staying relevant together with Westphalianism in the presidential discourse. Since Russia does not have a coherent ideology that could be exported, advancing Multipolarity has become expedient for its desire to

maintain a significant voice in the international arena. With this purpose, forming alliances with those critical of the unipolar world order is a powerful instrument for Russia to assert global influence. However, the analysis reveals that this mode of interaction has a high conflict potential in the 21st century, primarily due to serious disagreements among the great powers that affect the foundations of the world order and the basic principles of international law.

4.1 WORLD ORDER BY TIME

A further descriptive question is how the relative use of world order has shifted over time. I

Figure 5: World Order Concepts 2003–2023: a) Eurasianism – world order cosine similarity; b) Westphalianism – world order cosine similarity; c) Security Concerns – world order cosine similarity; d) Multipolarity – world order cosine similarity



use the long temporal range of the data to show the evolution of political and cultural language since the start of data in 2003. These results add to other recent work looking at the conceptualisation and evolution of Russia’s perspective of a new world order (Antonova/Lagutina 2023; Mölder/Berg 2023). The main descriptive results for world order association over time are reported in Figure 5. The four time series show the average concept score of speeches by era from the President of Russia and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs combined. Overall, we observe a generally increasing trend for each concept in the Russian political language in the latest presidential term, except for Multipolarity. Let us analyse each concept in detail.

4.1.1 EURASIANISM

After an initial slight decrease between the first and second eras, Eurasianism shows an upward trend until reaching a cosine similarity of 0.37% in the latest presidential term. The concept of Eurasianism as a LIO contestation strategy is deeply connected with the Russian understanding of civilisation – represented “as a vast space inhabited by different peoples and different cultures that have some similar features in mentality, culture, and legal awareness” (Eremina 2023: 94) – which should slowly overcome the state-centred system. These references to civilisation are quite crucial to understanding the discourse of the Russian state since 2004.

Post-Soviet Russia was initially disinterested in Eurasian integration, neglecting its relationships with the former Soviet States in favour of integration into “Greater Europe” and a return to the “common European home”. However, already in 2005, Putin emphasised this “civilising mission” in Eurasia, where “Russia should continue its civilising mission on the Eurasian continent” (Putin 2005). Nevertheless, this mission has not been affiliated with any ethnic groups in the country but with Russia itself.

From (roughly) 2008 to 2014, Russia set upon vigorous efforts to reintegrate the post-Soviet space under its leadership, hoping this would allow Russia to become the pole of Greater Eurasia. Indeed, practical decisions in foreign policy (e.g. NATO enlargement, colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space and the Russo-Georgian war) have significantly strengthened the idea of Russia as a Eurasian civilisation rather than a normal state in which Russia plays a pivotal role, the role of a magnet around which other lands, peoples, and cultures gather. According to Russian national imperialists, a dire conflict would emerge between “the Russian world” and global liberal capitalism, spearheaded by the United States, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. They presented a strong worldview emphasising Russians who found themselves separated from the Russian Federation after the dissolution of the Soviet empire, particularly those residing in the Baltic States and Ukraine. Their perspective revolved around notions of living space, racial survival, and the absence of any room for compromise or peaceful coexistence.

Since Putin’s third mandate in 2012, the discourse of Russian civilisation and the myth of greatness have been embodied in various foreign policy decisions. Indeed, the Eurasian direction has received concrete political confirmation in the face of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Russian World. On the one hand, the EAEU has

been already formed since 2015 as a kind of synergistic project in which the participating states strive for partnership and equality with recognition of the leading role of Moscow, taking into account its economic, cultural, and military-political potential (Bassin/Pozo 2017). On the other hand, the concept of the “Russian World” is an integrated part of the Eurasian approach and Eurasian integration, thanks to the support of the EAEU states in the Russian language and culture (Kazharski 2017). When Putin annexed Crimea in March 2014, he became a de facto leader of the nationalist ideology of “the Russian world”. The annexation of Crimea and the initial meddling in eastern Ukraine eventually boosted the discourse on the myth of the civilisational and greatness of Russia to include explicitly defending the rights of “*Russkii*” (ethnic Russians) abroad and referring to Ukrainians as Russia’s “little brother” (Aridici 2019).

Finally, the conservative turn in the official Russian ideology, coupled with the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, gave the “Russian World” concept and the idea of a Eurasian civilisation a new twist. This shift of meaning was put into practice in several interconnected ways. First, “Russianness” is being imagined not as many shades of hybridity but as a single chain of sameness: the “Russian World” is now defined as a monolithic body of the Russian people, the Russian state, Russian lands, Russian culture, and Russian values that extend beyond Russia’s state borders. Consequently, the notion of the “Russian World” is at the same time instrumental in shaping the strategy of Russian foreign policy activities, primarily in the post-Soviet space, as well as civilisation-historical, as it indicates the global mission and dynamic development of Russian civilisation, which represents itself as the heiress of the Byzantine civilisation. The Kremlin’s rhetoric exponentially incorporated ethno-political and historical arguments, with one prominent example being Putin’s article titled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”

in June 2021 (Putin 2021). In this essay, Putin (2021) emphasised the significance of Kyiv as the “mother of all Russian cities”. The boosting of the idea of Russia as a civilisation and not anymore as a normal state is symptomatic of the fact that the Kremlin is no longer able to strike a balance between Russia’s pragmatic strategic interests and its more ideologically loaded constructs inspired by different brands of conservative or nationalist thinking (Bluhm/Varga 2018).

4.1.2 WESTPHALIANISM

The strategy of Westphalianism presents a gradual but constant rise of semantic connection with the target word “world order” until reaching a cosine similarity of 0.40% in the last era. As Westphalianism is strictly connected to Russia’s quest for status, the narrative revolving around Russia’s great power status can give a sense of how this concept has evolved over two decades.

What is especially significant for this study is that Russia’s status ambitions are deeply intertwined with spheres-of-influence thinking that should be *guaranteed* within the current international order. In Russian eyes, international politics is a system dominated by a small number of great powers, each having its own sphere of influence. In the early 1990s, Russia chose not to pursue regional integration and instead focused on the potential status benefits offered by Western integration (Larson/Shevchenko 2014). However, as Russia realised it could not achieve its desired status within the Western order, it redirected its efforts towards regional integration among post-Soviet states. The goal was to establish economic and political dominance to secure its position as a regional leader in a world characterised by multiple power centres.

During the initial period from 2004 to 2008, instead of attempting to gain acceptance from the West through shared norms and values, Russia

shifted its attention towards enhancing its power and capabilities. As the aim was to make the West realise the advantages of establishing a practical partnership with Russia, we see an increase in status ambition discourse but with a new twist. Russia sought to attain the status of an autonomous great power by focusing inward and bolstering its own strength. To achieve this goal, Putin prioritised exploring avenues for closer relations with the United States and Europe, such as partnering in counterterrorism efforts and becoming a reliable energy supplier for the United States (Tsygankov 2013). Amidst this political environment, Moscow exhibited a notable level of self-control following the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, which resulted in the rise of a potentially antagonistic and pro-Western government in the country. Unlike the circumstances observed a decade later, Moscow refrained from intervening to overturn the election outcome. Simultaneously, Russia sought to propagate alternative narratives to challenge the West’s imposition of norms. One notable example was the concept of “sovereign democracy”, which emerged as a dominant theme in Russia’s political discourse from 2006 to 2008 (Kortukov 2020). This concept can be seen as a response from Russian authorities to the perceived threats of democratisation, particularly in the aftermath of the Eurasian colour revolutions. It aimed to establish a framework emphasising the importance of national sovereignty and self-determination while questioning the suitability of Western-style democracy in the Russian context. However, in retrospect, it became evident that the strategy of enhancing Russia’s status through “internal concertation” and “pragmatic partnerships” with the West was not sustainable in the long run. First, the United States was unwilling to regard Russia as an equal partner. Second, Russia’s attempts to deepen economic interdependence with the European Union were hindered by European politicians and regulators concerned that Russia might exploit this interdependence for geopolitical leverage against

the EU (Delcour 2021). Despite neglecting the region, Russia still considered its dominance in the post-Soviet space crucial for its global standing. This stance became evident during Russia's invasion of Georgia in the summer of 2008, when Moscow demonstrated its willingness to sacrifice its relations with the West in order to assert its interests in the former Soviet Union.

During Putin's third term as president (2012–2018), integrating the post-Soviet space under Russian leadership proved to be a challenging and unappreciated endeavour, as evidenced by the difficulties encountered in Ukraine. The competition between the European Union and Russia for influence in Ukraine set off a chain of events that resulted in a hostile, anti-Russian government coming to power in Kyiv, Russia's annexation of Crimea, and support for ethnic separatists in Eastern Ukraine. These developments were deemed unacceptable by Russian policymakers due to Ukraine's significant role in Russia's geopolitical outlook and status. They repeatedly emphasised their belief that the West's increased cooperation with Ukraine was just the latest indication of its refusal to treat Russia as a fully recognised great power. For instance, Foreign Minister Lavrov (2016) argued that the world is most secure when major powers agree on spheres of influence, drawing a parallel to the post-Vienna Congress era of 1815.

In the current phase, we are witnessing Russia's faltering (although increasing) attempt to pursue great power status. The attainment of such status relies on the recognition and acceptance by other states. However, Russia's policies have ultimately fallen short of delivering the gains in status envisioned by its leaders. None of the other major powers acknowledge Russia's aspirations in Ukraine and the post-Soviet space as legitimate or worthwhile endeavours. Instead, the United States and Western states have interpreted them as manifestations of Russia's unhealthy "imperial nostalgia" (Kuzio 2023). Outside powers

no longer recognised Russia as the undisputed regional leader and sole conduit for establishing relationships with the region's smaller states (Busygina/Filippov 2023). Interestingly, Russia's invasion of Ukraine had different effects on its status: in the UN Security Council, Russia's status remained unaltered due to a combination of longstanding legal privileges and shared interests among council members to cooperate on various matters. Conversely, in 2014, Russia was expelled from the G8 by its members due to its violation of the club's shared rules, values, and order. This expulsion reflected a departure from the inclusive norms of the G8 and highlighted the divergence between Russia and other member countries (Røren 2023).

4.1.3 SECURITY CONCERNS

The cosine similarity of Security Concerns increases through the four eras, demonstrating a further securitisation of Russia's foreign policy, yet the concept reaches the lowest score of 0.34% for the last era in comparison with other concepts. The core strand of this strategy of contestation is rooted in a profound sense of vulnerability, particularly concerning "the West". One of the aspects of the perceived vulnerability to external attack revolves around Russia's territorial grandness and long borders, which makes it difficult to defend the entire country everywhere at the same time (Rytövuori-Apunen 2019).

Throughout the extended Cold War period with the United States and NATO, the perceived threat from the West held a prominent position. Considering this perspective, it is not unexpected that Russian decision-makers and strategic thinkers have embraced a compelling narrative portraying NATO as a potential threat. In response to this perceived threat, Russia's national security establishment has consistently emphasised the significance of having strategic depth and buffer zones to provide a protective barrier against potential

encroachments or security risks, offering Russia a sense of security and stability in the face of external pressures. Nevertheless, Russia's "feeling of insecurity" towards NATO, and consequently its strategic culture, has undergone changes over time rather than remaining constant.

The shift in Russian attitudes and policies towards the West began to take shape in the mid-1990s, particularly influenced by NATO's intervention in former Yugoslavia. However, it was during Vladimir Putin's presidency that a significant change in Moscow's strategic culture occurred. The Russian government under Putin came to the conclusion that cooperation with the West would not lead to achieving its security and foreign policy objectives (Berryman 2017). Putin continued to feel terribly threatened by US and Western efforts to foster democratisation in Russia, foreseeing that his own regime might fall victim to the street protests and demands for democratisation that swept through Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004. Indeed, it may have been events in Georgia and Ukraine at that time, much more than NATO enlargement per se, that turned Putin so strongly against the West. The revolutions, in particular, the "orange revolution" in Ukraine, were a "personal slap" and "shock" for Putin and re-awoke the foreign threat perception to the regime as a major political and ideological issue in Moscow. In general, the outcome of the colour revolutions forced the Russian leaders not only to change their tactics when dealing with the European members of the Commonwealth of Independent states but also to take a more defensive stance toward any EU initiatives directed to the post-Soviet area (Gretskiy et al. 2014).

The first major confrontation between Russia and the European Union (EU) revolved around the "gas wars" in 2006 and 2009. These conflicts emerged between Russia and Ukraine, leading to natural gas cut-offs to EU member countries during the winter season. In between these gas disputes,

Russia also engaged in a military intervention in Georgia in August 2008. Additionally, Moscow imposed economic boycotts and conducted cyber-attacks against new EU member states like Estonia and Lithuania as political disagreements with Russia grew. Again, these conflicts were rooted in Russia's determination to prevent and, if possible, reverse what it perceived as further Western encroachment into its recognised sphere of influence (Polese/Beacháin 2011). At the same time, Russia's response to NATO enlargement was relatively restrained, with little military action taken to bolster the defence of its regions facing NATO. On the one hand, Russian specialists knew that NATO enlargement posed challenges for forced integration, internal communication, and effectiveness as its membership expanded. On the other hand, bolstered by oil profits after 2000s, Putin and its entourage preferred to play the role of regional hegemony in the post-Soviet space in both financial and cultural sphere rather than in the military one (Zubok 2023). The exception was a delayed build-up of air defence systems in the heavily militarised Kaliningrad exclave on the Baltic Sea. The Kremlin's only notable reaction to a geographical change occurred in 2006 when an agreement, known as the East European Task Force, involved upgrading military facilities in Romania and Bulgaria with support from the United States. It is possible that the proximity of these two new NATO states along the Black Sea region served as a justification in Putin's perspective for the conflicts he initiated in Georgia and Ukraine, even though the actual NATO military activities in those areas posed no direct threat to Russia (Marten 2023).

Around 2005, Moscow leadership started perceiving the ongoing integration of post-communist states into Western political, economic, and security institutions as a lasting threat to Russia's goal of re-establishing its dominant position in Eurasia. This perception also posed a challenge to the Putin government's grip on power. During

this period, Putin made public statements asserting that the collapse of the USSR was the most catastrophic geopolitical event of the twentieth century (Putin 2005). He began to assert that NATO and the United States posed significant threats to Russia and international security in general. These developments marked a shift in Russia's perception of NATO and the United States as potential adversaries rather than partners (Kanet 2019). Later, Putin's dissatisfaction with NATO's enlargement was revealed at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007. After criticising US unipolarity and world domination, the breakdown of international law, NATO's turning away from UNSC authority, and the deployment of ballistic missile defences as creating a new arms race, Putin called NATO enlargement "a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust" (Putin 2007).

When Putin returned to the presidency in 2012 after Medvedev's four-year term, the rhetoric of security concerns became even more prominent. In a series of articles published before the 2012 Russian presidential elections, then Prime Minister and presidential candidate Putin made it clear that the growing special relationship between the European Union and post-Soviet states like Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, and Georgia was a direct challenge to Russia's long-term interests in the region (Putin 2011, 2012). The Maidan Revolution of 2013–2014 was a game changer. Putin viewed Ukraine's rush "to join Europe" not as a legitimate search for a separate identity from Russia but as a US geopolitical operation to expand NATO and its hegemony in Eastern Europe, all the way to Russia's borders. As widely known, these protests ultimately led to the departure of Yanukovich, the former president of Ukraine, establishing a new government with Western orientations, which triggered a military intervention by Russia involving the annexation of Crimea and support for Russian-speaking secessionist groups in southeastern Ukraine. After the EU and the US

imposed sanctions against Russia, Moscow adopted an increasingly tough rhetoric vis-à-vis the West, highlighting the US and NATO as potential enemies at a time of "increased global competition" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016).

By February 2022, the rhetoric of security concerns from Russia had taken hold in Putin's perception through two intertwined myths, which contributed to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The first myth revolved around the notion of Ukrainian "Nazis", who purportedly took control of the country with assistance from the West and oppressed ethnic Russians in Donbas. The second myth centred on the concept of US global hegemony, with Putin viewing Ukraine as a willing collaborator under a "Nazified" regime and NATO as the primary tool employed by the United States against Russia (Zubok 2023). On 21 February 2022, just prior to the invasion, Putin criticised the United States and NATO for their sales of weapons and provision of military advisory assistance to Ukraine since 2014 and expressed concern over the expansion of NATO's military infrastructure near Russia's borders. Finally, he lamented Russia's unsuccessful attempts to convince NATO to revert its borders to their pre-expansion state in 1997. Three days later, he added that leading NATO countries were supporting far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine and warned of potential warfare in Crimea and other Russian regions, accusing NATO of gaining a military foothold of the Ukrainian territory (Putin 2022). Given Russia's experience of repeated invasions over the centuries (Lo 2015), attacking Ukraine became an escamotage to control the immediate geographical vicinity and prevent great-power rivals from establishing a foothold there.

4.1.4 MULTIPOLARITY

The last contestation typology presents an interesting trend. First, Multipolarity has the highest cosine similarity score compared to other typologies of the matrix across almost all four eras despite the fact that it includes the lowest number of connected words (see Figure 6a). Second, we can observe a noteworthy decrease between era 3 (0.55) and era 4 (0.48). Given that Multipolarity contains terms related to international cooperation and stability (see Table 1), the increasing trend relates to the positively engaged perspective on international affairs in Russia's foreign policy discourse until Putin's third term in 2012. In contrast, post-2012 results show a negative trend of Multipolarity and, consequently, reflect a less positive and hospitable outlook towards international affairs, especially in the discourse of the RMFA (Figure 6c). Thus, Multipolarity rises as a central term in Russian counter-hegemonic discourse. Russian leadership is unhappy with the hegemonic position of the West in international affairs and builds its defence around the notion of the emerging multipolar world. In this context, establishing partnerships with individuals critical of the unipolar world order serves as a powerful instrument employed by Russia in its claims to assert global influence. The task of the multipolar world ideology is to reconstruct the extant discourse on international affairs among contestants of the unipolar order in a way that could incorporate the ideas of particularity, cultural and historical context, the multiplicity of political forms, and unimpeded independent development.

Russian leadership, especially the President of Russia, publicly upholds the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-intervention, although its actions do not always align with these claims. While Russia adamantly rejects external interference in its own internal affairs, it is less concerned with domestic political order, ideological perspectives, or the foreign policy

orientations of its international partners. Unlike the United States, certain Western European countries, and its predecessor, the Soviet Union, Russia has not actively sought to promote its political values or domestic system abroad. However, there is one notable exception – the countries of the Former Soviet Union. Russia exhibits a strong focus on both the internal and international developments of its neighbouring countries, where Russia intervened militarily in the internal affairs of other countries, also for reasons of regime change or to defend a pro-Russia political order (Gerrits 2020).

One of the aspects where promoting multipolarity translates into advocacy of epistemological self-sufficiency in the current Russian debate about the relative primacy of supranational and national law in a multipolar world order has been the UN Security Council. In numerous speeches, both Putin and Lavrov have consistently emphasised the significance of upholding international law. Lavrov frequently juxtaposes this framework with an alternative narrative that he argues the West is advocating to advance Western interests and values. Therefore, Russia found itself among the loose grouping of BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) defending convenient aspects of international law (international law based on the UN Charter, sovereign equality, dispute settlement through agreed mechanisms, and collective action against terrorism) while opposing others (unilateral military interventions, intervention in the affairs of other states, and unilateral sanctions) (Remler 2020).

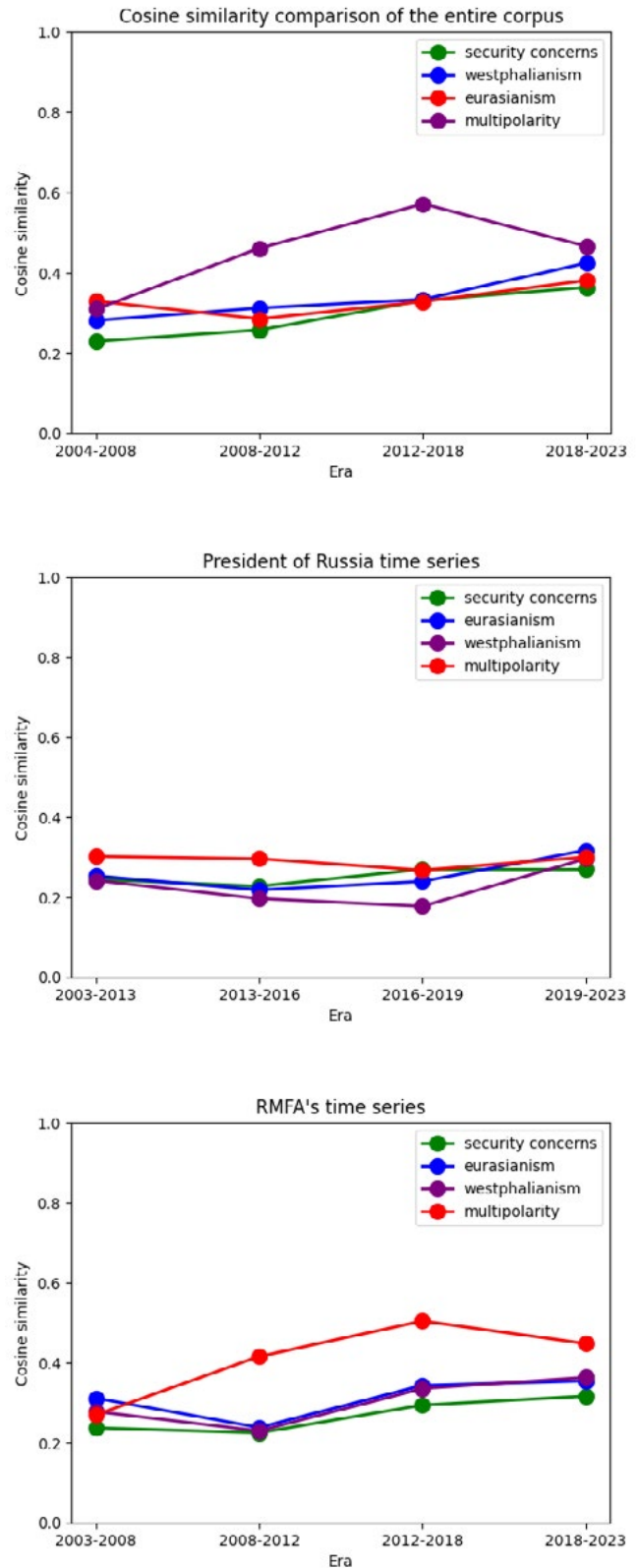
Russian discourse on multipolarity has changed over time. The idea of multipolarity was established already in the late 1990s as an image of the ideal future world order and as a practical policy goal. It gained legitimacy after the campaign against Kosovo's recognition and was backed by huge financial resources with the improvement of Russia's economy during Putin's presidency. At

the same time, until 2008, Russia’s foreign policy was characterised by a desire to integrate into existing international institutions. Throughout those years, Russia’s priorities included membership in the Council of Europe, the Group of Seven, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); the reformation of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) with a view of making it more effective under the new conditions; and the establishment of institutional, and increasingly closer, ties with the European Union. Generally, Russian scholars, along with political leaders, often referred to multipolarity as the emerging new pattern of IR, hailing its alleged arrival as a welcome alternative to (but necessarily in contrast with) Western dominance (Makarychev/Morozov 2011).

The dramatic events of 2008 officially solidified Russia’s shift towards a multipolar stance. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (2009) declared that the era of a unipolar world had ended following Russia’s military victory over Georgia. This shift in perspective was further emphasised in the foreign policy decree signed by Vladimir Putin after his third presidential inauguration, which instructed the Foreign Ministry to adapt to the changing landscape of an emerging polycentric international system (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2013).

Over time, the idea of multipolarity evolved from being a statement based on cooperation and, if necessary, competition between “poles” to a perceived geopolitical reality. During the 2010s, particularly in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, Russia increasingly embraced the concept of multipolarity, attributing the blame for the crisis to what it perceived as aggressive policies by the United States and the European Union. In Russia’s 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, multipolarity is portrayed as an established geopolitical fact, with Russia positioned as one of the distinct

Figure 6:
 a) Cosine similarity comparison of the entire corpus;
 b) President of Russia time series;
 c) RMFA’s time series



“civilisation poles. This emphasis on civilisational diversity may explain the decrease of the association of world order with Multipolarity and introduces another dimension to Russia’s understanding of multipolarity, shifting Moscow’s position to a less positive and hospitable outlook towards international affairs and highlighting its resistance to key ideological aspects of Western-led globalisation. This result is in line with recent literature where it has been observed how recent Kremlin discourse has increasingly emphasised the role of the United States and a unipolar world, using terms referring to sanctions, violence, and uncertainty after 2008 rather than pragmatism and selective cooperation (Mölder/Berg 2023: 578).

5 CONCLUSION

This paper has provided an analysis of LIO contestation strategies in the language of the Kremlin and the RMFA. I first referred to a new classification of LIO contestation strategies, which combines the posture toward the LIO with the source of the contestation. Second, to measure these strategies, I combined the methods of word embedding with a naïve time series model to look at the relative changing meaning of a compound word like “world order” in a modest corpus of political speeches. Specifically, I cut the corpus into chronological time slices and modeled each slice separately. Finally, I analysed how these strategies have evolved over time and vary across individuals.

This paper’s substantive contribution is, first, showing that the post-Cold War trend in increasing contestations toward the LIO in Russian discourse has been accompanied by increasing intensity in the expression of ideological positions. This new rhetoric about Russia and the world order is more negative toward Western countries. In line with this key idea, I find that revisionist strategies – Eurasianism and Security Concerns – as

well as the traditionalist strategy of Westphalianism, have been increasing over time in general, while Multipolarity – which initially stemmed from a more pragmatic attitude toward global affairs – has been decreasing in the last presidential term of Vladimir Putin. The steep increase in the other three positions appears to be related to the 2012 re-election of Putin and the related introduction of a conservative and civilisationalist narrative in the Kremlin. When it became clear that integrating into the Atlantic block as an equal partner and a great European power would be impossible, Russia switched to another mode of multipolarity or polycentricity by emphasising Russia as a Eurasian power and an influential centre of the world (a civilisation extending beyond its borders) and following plans of cooperation in the frameworks of the BRICS countries. At the same time, though Russia’s outlook became more negative towards Western domination of the world order, the Kremlin did not abandon its expressed positive engagement with the rest of the world by raising the voice for a multipolar (still reactionary) world order. Finally, although we cannot speak about the diffusion of a coherent conservative ideology but rather of diffuse conservative ideas, these trends show that the balance between Russia’s pragmatic strategic interests and its more ideologically loaded constructs now seems to have been lost: a sign of the ascent of an increasingly rigid ideology in the Kremlin (Laruelle/Grek 2022).

Second, based on previous studies regarding the attractiveness of illiberal state soft power, I applied a matrix that combines posture (revisionist vs traditionalist) and source (ideas vs interests) of LIO contestants to visualise several types of contestation strategies. As previous works have shown (Börzel/Zürn 2021; Varga/Buzogány 2021), this matrix encourages an engagement with the multilayered nature of the concept of LIO contestation in general and of illiberalism in particular. Moreover, the initial descriptive results set the stage for further empirical studies. Notably,

Russia continues to identify itself as a cultural beacon for contesting and challenging LIO. Due to this greater confluence with conservative attitudes on the rise in the West and the Global South, Russia takes advantage of these new voices, consorts with them, and often tries to amplify them. This work could go beyond the case of Russia by applying this two-dimensional matrix to conceptualise LIO contestation strategies of other illiberal actors and their discourse. This study aims to further expand this methodology to other cases that could respond to two questions: 1) to what extent does rhetoric of different illiberal actors diverge or intersect? and 2) which, if any, rhetorical patterns help constitute an illiberal discourse? Such comparison would be helpful to understand whether there is a central core in illiberal discourse and, therefore, whether we can talk about an “illiberal international” world order.

Finally, word vectorisation is an increasingly promising computational approach that enables tracking word evolution over time by measuring the cosine similarities between word pairs. This project has demonstrated the effectiveness of word vector methods in tackling complex semantic tasks during periods when the cultural significance of words undergoes transformation. By paying attention to implementation details such as bootstrapping, language stabilisation, and chronological training, analysts can confidently identify semantic trends in large text collections (Rodman 2020). This advancement holds broad appeal for scholars studying the evolution and history of ideas and concepts in foreign policy discourse. Word vectorisation methods provide political scientists with a valuable tool for treating textual data, enabling the exploration of shifts in the meanings of concepts and ideas across different time periods.

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