

# HOW ARE “BAD GUYS” POSSIBLE? THE AGENCY-STRUCTURE GAP IN RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY ANALYSIS

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*This paper would be far from possible without the academic mentorship of Linus Hagström, to whom I am ever grateful for his insightful feedback on the earlier drafts of this essay, as well as his constant reassurance and receptive guidance throughout the writing process.*

**In the light of the ongoing geopolitical tensions and the situation in Ukraine specifically, Russian foreign policy constitutes a puzzling area of social science research, particularly central to international relations (IR) scholarship. However, the academic discourse within the IR field often focuses too much on the rather visible layers of Russian politics, at times reducing Russian studies to solely “Putin studies.” Overlooking the structural factors that have made it possible for Vladimir Putin to come to power predominantly invites a channeled agency-led perspective into Russian foreign policy. This review essay sheds light on the gap between agency and structure within Russian foreign policy analysis. Building on a focused review of three recent scholarly contributions on Russian political leadership, foreign policy, and national identity, it suggests that Russia can barely be understood unless looked upon through the intertwined lenses of agency and structure.**

**Keywords:** Russian Foreign Policy; Politics of Emotions; Agency and Structure; National Identity; Ontological Security

Answering the question of how “bad guys”<sup>1</sup> are possible first and foremost requires a contextualization. The question should be understood in the setting of how researchers view phenomena of social significance. Social scientists almost always, whether directly or indirectly, adopt a scientific perspective that largely represents either the macro or micro level of analysis. In other words, to answer a specific research question in regard to the foreign policy of a given country, scholars can choose to explore the systemic, structural aspects of that country’s political preferences, investigating

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<sup>1</sup> The expression “bad guys” refers to the frame that scholars at times directly or indirectly attach to certain political figures to construct their causal argument. Throughout this essay, the expression is utilized solely as a metaphor and by no means signifies a moral category or a normative stance of the author.

such broad phenomena as national identity, ideologies, and institutions. They can also decide to adopt a narrower perspective and examine the strategies of particular politically relevant individuals, their styles of leadership, or subjective societal interpretations thereof.

In the study of contemporary Russian foreign policy, there exists some tendency of putting Russia's President Vladimir Putin at the core of the analyses. We are not lacking works that discuss Putin's constructed persona (Popkova 2017), his traits (Eltchaninoff 2018), his political worldview (Richard 2020), and even Putin as a fictional character (Rogatchevski 2008). Nor is there a deficiency of works about "Putin's Russia" (Rosefelde 2021), "the Putin system" (Javlinskij 2019), "Putin's foreign policy" (Nalbandov 2016), "Putin's doctrine" (Hill and Ottorino 2010), "Putin's world" (Stent 2019), and "Putin's people" (Belton 2020). Making it all about Putin leads us to circle the argument that his leadership is the core decisive factor for Russian foreign policy and thus, in some way, the causal variable—the "bad guy"—that can be conveniently employed to explain complex political situations formed in and around Russia. Although such an individualistic approach can make a lot of sense depending on empirical evidence, it also brings up a puzzle of the general possibility of a "bad guy" such as Putin coming and staying in power, with all the peculiarities of his leadership style. Although some scholarly contributions, among others, draw on the role of nationalism in shaping political identity (Casula et al. 2009) and some others discuss the practices of propaganda in sustaining the regime (Van Herpen 2015), Russian foreign policy analysis generally seems to neglect the structural factors that created space for Putin's policy in the first place.

Would a different Russian leader have performed otherwise? Would Russia have fit in the Western model of democracy without Putin at the helm? Is current Russia Putin's product, or is Putin the outcome of Russia in lieu? Are Russian foreign policy preferences forged from the top down, or are they fed by bottom-up notions?

In recent years, a large body of work has contributed to the investigation of these questions (see, for example, Chulos and Piirainen 2020; Franklin and Widdis 2010; Neumann 1996; Tadashi 2019; Taras 2012; White and Feklyunina 2014). Similar studies, however, propose rather isolated standpoints at either macro or micro levels. Rarely do they provide explanations of the interlinkages between agency and structure or tell us how the two play out in the making of Russian foreign policy. Springing from the need to pinpoint the knowledge gap between agency and structure, this essay reviews three significant books on Russia, all published during the past three years, and each conveying insightful perspectives and scopes on the case. Gulnaz Sharafutdinova (2021) looks into how President Putin's leadership has been based on turning collective emotions of past shame and humiliation into pride and patriotism. Alicja Curanović (2021) is interested in the role that the sense of mission plays in shaping collective honor in the context of Russia's foreign policy narratives. Marlene Laruelle (2019) focuses on depicting the multiple dimensions of Russian nationalism and the role thereof in the context of internal and external politics.

Multiple factors make the joint review of these books worthwhile. First, two of them (Curanović 2021; Sharafutdinova 2021) bring in rather non-Western understandings of foreign policy inquiry, ones that argue for altering conventional approaches with more context-sensitive methodologies and analyses tailored specifically for capturing Russian politics. This, coupled with the diversity of study scopes of these three books, makes the conversation between them even more substantial. Second, more sophisticated and multifaceted angles for understanding Russia may also provide useful hints about the foreign policies of former member states of the Soviet Union that have been under Russian political influence (Cameron and Orenstein 2012), as well as countries whose political leadership is similarly viewed as autocratic (Letsa and Wilfahrt 2018). Third, delving into the level of analysis, these books hinge on the ongoing debate between agency and structure proponents in international relations (IR) scholarship, providing promising grounds for theoretical and methodological progress.

Following the summaries of the books under review, the essay has two main sections. The first one draws on the role of emotions in Russian “great power” narratives, which is the central common thread across the books reviewed. I place this discussion within the wider context of ontological security studies (OSS), arguing that IR scholarship should ideally take into account the matters of moral ideologies and emotions, for a better case-sensitive understanding of both structural and agential aspects of foreign policy in Russia, and arguably that of other similar post-Soviet states. Building on the discussion of contextual specificities, the second section discusses the main arguments and levels of analysis in all three books. I push that distinction into the spectrum of debate between agency and structure in IR scholarship. For illustrative purposes, I utilize James Coleman’s explanatory diagram, known as “Coleman’s boat” to demonstrate the interplay between macro-meso-micro levels of theorizing in the reviewed books. In the concluding section, I argue for the amalgamation of both systems and actions when studying Russian foreign policy, proposing this as one of the possible ways of elucidating the “bad guy” puzzle and addressing the agency-structure gap in IR.

## REVIEWED BOOKS IN BRIEF

Stemming from social identity theory, Sharafutdinova’s book discusses how Putin’s success and popularity as a leader were made possible. The author suggests that the successful promotion of Putin’s image “as an embodiment of the shared national identity of Russian citizens” was possible through “tapping into powerful group emotions of shame and humiliation, derived from the painful experience of the transition in the 1990s” (Sharafutdinova 2021:18). As a result, the two central pillars of Soviet collective identity—Soviet exceptionalism and a sense of extreme foreign threat to the state and its people—were activated to serve contemporary Russian politics. Utilizing a mixed-method study, the author combines focus group discussions, a nationwide survey, and an analysis of primary political and cultural sources to explore the content and effects of social and political construction in Russia. The

book, although at times ideologically loaded with the author's normative position, delivers an insightful and in-depth analysis of Russian identity and its insecure aspects throughout the Putin era.

Curanović's book performs a content analysis of Russian foreign policy narratives between 2000 and 2018, attempting to identify mission-based motifs. The author suggests that the sense of mission is one of the elements of Russia's identity as a great power, highlighting three significant characteristics of mission. Firstly, a community endowed with a sense of mission is convinced of its exceptional destiny (exceptionalism). This conviction leads to a sense of moral superiority (also a component of exceptionalism), as the second characteristic of the mission. The last characteristic designates that the community is realizing a mission not driven solely by its interest, but also for the universal good (universalism). "To ask about mission is to ask about a state's identity since mission is the projection of a state's identity on the global stage" (Curanović 2021:3). Although it has a rather narrow aim, the book offers an excellent analysis of Russia's self-perceived mission in the context of foreign policy.

Laruelle's (2019) book explores the complex nature of Russian nationalism, trying to depict it comprehensively. Seeing nationalism as a multidimensional and complex repertoire, Laruelle examines Russian nationalism in three particular ways. They include viewing nationalism as (1) a way of imagining the nation and constructing an "imaginary realm" of a nationalist state; (2) the set of ideologies and doctrines, elaborating a set of principles organized into a more or less coherent whole; and (3) a political movement in the internal political landscape represented by far-right groups, populist ethnonationalists, and the resurgent militia groups. Although mainly limited to studying nationalism as a doctrine and as a political movement, this book provides a rich and valuable perspective into the ideological layers of Russian foreign policy.

## **EMOTIONS MEET POLITICS: "BAD GUYS" FRAMING PRIDE AND MORALITY**

While academics and policymakers are debating the "causes and implications of Russia's increasingly assertive foreign policy" (Narozhna 2021:56), the debate on ontological security offers an outlook on this question, giving attention to Russian autobiographical narratives of itself as a great power. Within IR, the scholarship on ontological security has been rapidly developing, its primary argument being that "states care as much about their ontological security, the security of a consistent self, as about material, physical security" (Subotić 2016:613). Henceforth, states construct "autobiographical identity narratives" to give meaning to their actions within the international system (Innes and Steele 2014:17). Ontological security, in the words of IR scholar Tanya Narozhna, ensures a "coherent sense of self in sustaining cognitive and emotional orientation in the world" (2021:61), supposedly becoming especially significant when a state is in a critical situation. Meanwhile, Linus Hagström (2021) argues that the quest for ontological security goes hand in hand

with the construction of ontological insecurities. This means that identities do not become secure and fixed and that narratives expressing shame about weakness constantly intertwine with narratives expressing pride about greatness.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has been argued that “Russia has aimed to redefine its identity in international politics and regain its great power status” (Nitoiu 2017:40). The Soviet Union’s breakdown is considered significant in terms of leaving Russia in a wide-ranging identity crisis (Bagger 2007), while at the same time being in an “ontologically insecure relationship with the West” (Narozhna 2021:71). And although in the 1990s several contradicting autobiographical narratives were in place, assuming diverse foreign policy preferences, “all narratives shared one particular point of consensus, i.e., a belief that Russia is a great power” (71).

Following the wish to successfully reinstate Russia as a great power, Putin adopted a strategy of a centralized foreign policy (Nitoiu 2017). The attempt to be viewed as a great power was also exemplified, *inter alia*, in the Russia-Ukraine relationship underlining that “Russian foreign policy has adopted a deeply assertive and conflictual stance, which is the mark of its aspirations to be a great power” (Freedman 2014, as quoted in Nitoiu 2017:40; see also Sakwa 2014). This factor played a salient role in terms of “allowing Putin to take the country on a path towards assertiveness in the international arena” (Nitoiu 2017:41), which ended up strengthening his regime.

In this context, it is notable that emotions, in this case the feelings of shame and pride, have played a crucial role in Russian foreign policy (cf. Hagström 2021). This notion is directly or indirectly attested to in all three books under review, although through somewhat different angles.

Sharafutdinova’s (2021) core argument, as discussed earlier, is that Vladimir Putin has proceeded to convert former feelings of suffering and shame into collective pride and honor. In his 2018 inauguration speech, Putin presented this as a widely shared notion in Russian society.

We all know that in the 1990s and early 2000, along with long-needed historical changes, our fatherland and the people confronted hard challenges.... But we also remember well that in its millennial history Russia faced the hardships and the “times of trouble” quite a few times and she always rose up as a Phoenix, getting to unimaginable heights. (Kremlin 2018, as quoted in Sharafutdinova 2021:115–116)

Sharafutdinova argues that the shame about the 1990s, disseminated via stories “that resonate with the public and stir emotions in the public space, matters especially deeply because it creates an opportunity for emotional connection between Russia’s current political leader and his followers, who credit him with overcoming the 1990s” (2021:131). Arguably, the capacity to make a connection with the supporters at a deeper, emotional level can assist leaders in being viewed as “legitimate and trusted representatives of the political community they are part of. Such ability also helps in gaining support for specific actions and policies, when policy justification is built on emotional resonance” (131).

The notion of Russia being presented as proud can also be found in Curanović's research, where the author writes that Putin chose to avoid the language of mission per se in his speeches, instead talking of "historical responsibility," a "historical task," or a "special role" (2021:130). Similar to Sharafutdinova, Curanović highlights the emotional aspect of the mission narrative, viewing the latter as a "narrative habit" which, as adopted from Ted Hopf, refers to the "unreflective reactions we have to the world around us: our perceptions, attitudes, emotions and practices. They simplify the world, short-circuiting rational reflection" (2010:544). In this context, the study by Curanović argues that the sense of mission presented in Russian narratives is an important element of Russia's great power identity. Furthermore, "mission as a role-identity is a component of Russian exceptionalism. Mission is part of Russia's self-image and as such may be a harbinger of Russian activity" (2021:7–8). Important to consider is that a country is comprised of individuals who act emotionally. In this, Curanović relies on the understanding of a country presented by Jacques Hymans, who has proposed that "states are not gigantic calculating machines; they are hierarchically organized groups of emotional people" (2010:462), which is why, according to Alexander Wendt, a state finds it vital to "feel good about itself" (2003:236–237, as quoted in Curanović 2021:58). This appeared to be the case with Putin, as mission motifs did appear in his texts that referred to the past (i.e., the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union) and the "historical responsibility," "historical task," or a "special role" that come with it (Curanović 2021:130).

Within the same lines of emotional politics, yet at a different level of analysis, is the book by Laruelle (2019), where the author analyzes Putin's approach to foreign policy and national identity. Laruelle argues that Putin is the mirror of the Izborskii Club's ideology,<sup>2</sup> indicating several ways Putin and the club intersect ideologically and politically. This is an indirect yet valuable approach to understanding Putin's policy, looking into its doctrinal roots. It is noteworthy that the club's nationalistic notions of conceiving Russia as bearing specific civilizational values are in direct opposition to those of "the West." Hence, the Center for Dynamic Conservatism—the club's predecessor—called on the country to fight for its spiritual sovereignty and to recover its strictly Russian (*russkii*)—and not just Russian (*rossiiskii*)<sup>3</sup>—historical traditions: autocracy, empire, and unity. The center does not regard its insistence on Christian Orthodox traditions as incompatible with the Soviet heritage since, as it claims, "we consider the borders of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union as holy" (Laruelle 2019:138). The author impressively captures how this moral ideology feeds the club's twofold political stance, entailing the historical continuity of Russia and its central mission to be a stronghold against possible impact from "the West" (141). Laruelle also notes that among the contexts in which the club arose is Putin's third

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<sup>2</sup> A large group of self-identified nationalists or anti-liberals founded in 2012 who (1) claim that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a result of Russian authorities refusing to recognize a state ideology and being unable to turn doctrinal fragments into a logical whole, and (2) have a mission to reopen the nationalist "front" in Russia and to turn it into an ideological weapon.

<sup>3</sup> *Rossian* refers to the country, the citizenship, while *Russian* refers to ethnicity, i.e., Russianness.

term and the “conservative turn” with which the club is associated. To oppose the liberal protests of the winter of 2011–2012, the Kremlin situated itself as a protector of the so-called traditional values and won the support of the club and conservatives on the whole.

As all three books showcased, the Russian political landscape is heavily based on group emotions and a notion of morality. Although from different standpoints, these works share a common strand in that they conceive of ontological insecurities that drive a quest for ontological security and, in turn, policy preferences. The aforementioned aspect of all three books also represents a domain where agency meets structure, indicating the significance of both bottom-up and top-down processes. “Bad guys” are certainly part of the process, yet not necessarily its only driving force. What is the driving force then, and what is the relationship between the “bad guys” and the process? The following section of this essay is dedicated to the exploration of these questions.

### **“BAD GUYS” EXPLAINED: AGENCY MEETS STRUCTURE (OR DOES IT?)**

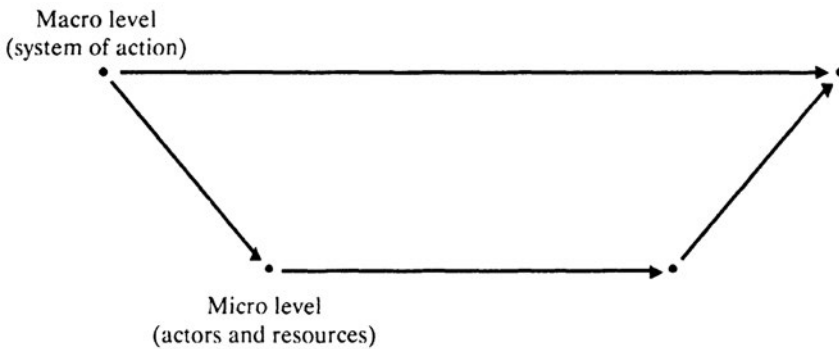
Ontological and epistemological concerns arise when scholars try to differentiate between the individual and the state, between agential factors and structural ones. The agency-structure *problématique* concerns not just the Russian foreign policy studies. Researchers from several social science disciplines, including IR, have been discussing and trying to uncover interlinkages between agency and structure.

There is no single answer to the question of whether agency defines the structure or the other way around. There was a revealing debate through a series of exchanges between IR scholars Roxanne Lynn Doty (1997, 1999) and Colin Wight (1999, 2000), leading to no agreement on the question whatsoever. Meanwhile, other scholars have argued for a more synthesized approach to the agency-structure dichotomy. Walter Carlsnaes (1992), for instance, underlined the dynamic nature of both agency and structure, thus proposing a contextually bound approach to political analysis. David Dessler (1989), on the other hand, adopted a principle of scientific realism, proposing that state action can be conceivable only through the presence of instruments that make it possible to carry out that action. Alexander Wendt (2003) adopted a more constructivist perspective, arguing for process-oriented (interaction and learning) international relations theory. I propose that all of these approaches, whether directly or indirectly, have a similar take, arguing, in other words, that we cannot understand political phenomena if we isolate agency and structure.

Still, this notion has not played a central role in contemporary political analysis by and large. This might be the result of the fact that incorporation of both agential and structural factors in a research endeavor inherently presumes more flexible scopes for empirical inquiry. Moreover, it may at times require significant efforts and time to investigate political matters so comprehensively. Notwith-

standing the scope limitations that any research initiative comes with, what I put forward and what this essay inevitably enacts is rather the persevering reflexivity of a researcher, especially in the formidable attempt of making sense of Russian foreign policy.

The reviewed books are excellent examples of doing justice to the reflective conceptualization of multifaceted Russian politics. To depict exactly how these books set about this, and for the sake of realizing the overall purpose of this essay, I backtrack even further into the *Foundations of Social Theory*, the work of the American sociologist James Coleman (1990). Specifically, I invite attention to the diagram known as “Coleman’s boat” or “Coleman’s bathtub” (see figure 1), an explanatory technique that demonstrates the linkages between macro-micro-macro processes in society.



**Figure 1.** Causal diagram for relating micro and macro levels (adapted from Coleman 1990:702)

The original model is set to explain how structural factors create micro conditions that lead to agential actions, in turn feeding back macro outcomes again. I take this as solely an illustrative tool to theoretically model the multilevel issues that each of the reviewed books argues for. Given this, I do not account for the theoretical scopes of Coleman’s original work, and I additionally introduce the meso level into the discussion, to portray how multilevel analysis allows a more comprehensive understanding of the possibility of “bad guys.”

Although this approach may fairly come across as an oversimplification of or slender speculation about the reviewed books, this endeavor is purely expository and in no respect undermines the value of the rich and comprehensive descriptions that the authors have produced. The portrayal of the models presented in figures 2, 3, and 4 are my own interpretations of the macro-micro linkages in the main arguments of each book under review.

Sharafutdinova draws (see figure 2) on how the history of past traumas (A1), as in the collapse of the USSR and the feelings of suffering and shame associated with it, is converted into collective pride and honor (A2). This way, resonating with emotions in the public space, Putin has gained the support of many groups in the Russian society, creating grounds for trust for and legitimization of later policies.



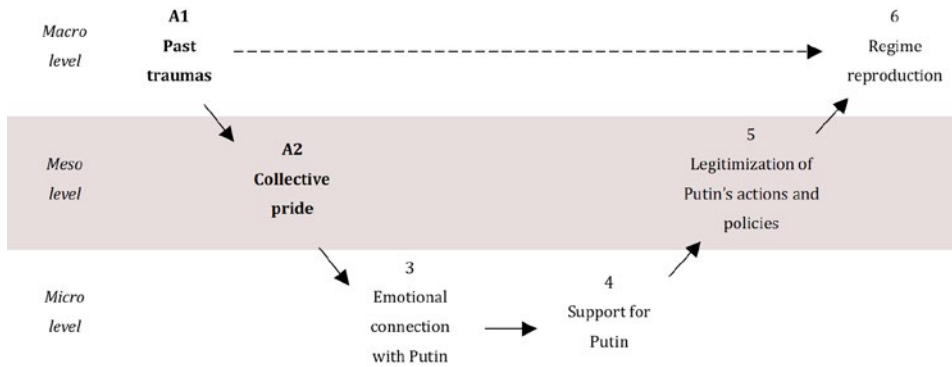


Figure 2. Macro-micro linkages in Sharafutdinova’s work

A similar mechanism is showcased (see figure 3) by Curanović suggesting that Russia’s great past, as in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union assuming historical responsibility (B1) or a special role, creates a sense of mission and pride (B2) at group level. This leads Putin to be seen as a powerful leader who can vouch for Russia’s strength and uniqueness, making the emotional resonance work at the individual level.

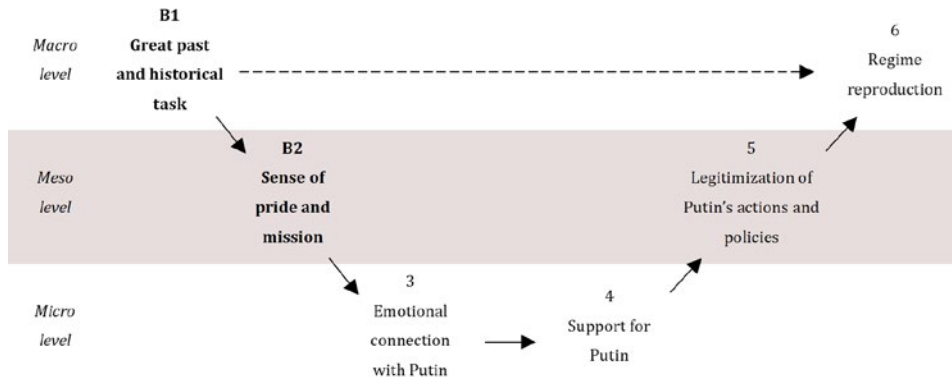


Figure 3. Macro-micro linkages in Curanović’s work

Lastly, Laruelle’s work demonstrates (see figure 4) how a nationalistic approach to Russia’s civilizational heritage (C1) creates direct opposition or aversion to the West (C2), shaping Putin as the protector of traditional values and thus gaining emotional ties with the conservatives in Russia.

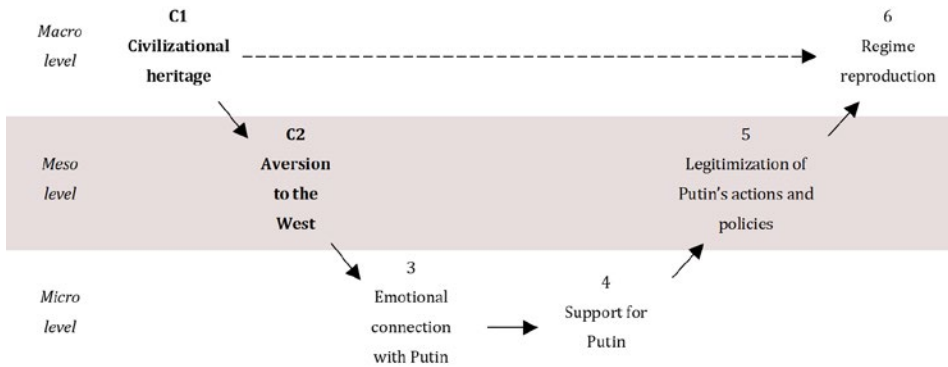


Figure 4. Macro-micro linkages in Laruelle's work

All three works, although from different perspectives, tackle similar processes, using a similar multilevel approach. It is apparent that the politics of emotions is central to these books, as exemplified by processes A1→A2, B1→B2, and C1→C2. It is also arguably apparent that all three authors pay a sufficient amount of attention to the multilevel theorization, avoiding narrowing down the discussion of regime reproduction into solely “Putin studies.”

I argue that these contributions are excellent demonstrations of potential pathways toward resolving the “bad guys” puzzle in IR scholarship, by displaying where macro factors meet micro processes, effectively addressing the “need for a dynamic synthesis of structural and agential factors in the explanation of change” (Carlsnaes 1992:247).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Accounting for the properties of both agents and social structures is relevant and necessary for a proper understanding of complex political phenomena. Building on the focused review of three academic works, as well as putting relevant lenses on the agency-structure debate, I argue that “bad guys” are neither the cause nor the effect. The phenomenon is observable where agency and structure meet, where structure creates agency and the latter feeds back into the structure. Provided that scholars shift their focus from explaining political processes through “bad guys” to analyzing how they have become the “bad guys” in the first place (i.e., accounting for moral and emotional factors) and exploring the social contexts that have ensured the reproduction of the system that made them the “bad guys,” we might move a step forward in the IR scholarship of foreign policy.

Taking into account the matters of moral ideologies and emotions has the potential for a better case-sensitive explanation of both structural and agential aspects of foreign policy in Russia, and arguably that of other similar post-Soviet states. The conflict in Ukraine once again underscored the necessity of a more context-bound and in-depth exploration of Russian foreign policy, given that Russian influence has been inevitably expanding in the Eurasian region and the world as a whole. Hence,

filling the gap between macro- and microanalyses, we, as scholars, essentially commit to exploring Russian politics and international foreign policy in the main, beyond the surface, equipping the academic discourse with more competitive approaches and toolkits for apprehending the “bad guys” who are yet to come.

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# ОТКУДА БЕРУТСЯ «ПЛОХИЕ ПАРНИ»? РАЗРЫВ МЕЖДУ СОЦИАЛЬНЫМ АГЕНТСТВОМ И СТРУКТУРОЙ В АНАЛИЗЕ ВНЕШНЕЙ ПОЛИТИКИ РОССИИ

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В свете текущей геополитической напряженности вообще и ситуации в Украине в частности внешняя политика России является областью социальных исследований, не поддающейся однозначным объяснениям. В настоящее время она занимает центральное место в исследованиях в области международных отношений, однако академический дискурс обычно сосредоточен на довольно очевидных уровнях российской политики, иногда сводя изучение России исключительно к «путиноведению». Игнорирование структурных факторов, которые сделали возможным приход Владимира Путина к власти, в основном предполагает взгляд на внешнюю политику России сквозь призму социальной агентности. Представленная здесь статья проливает свет на разрыв между агентностью и структурой в рамках анализа внешней политики России. Основываясь на обзоре трех недавних научных публикаций о политическом лидерстве в России, ее внешней политике и национальной идентичности, автор статьи показывает, что Россию едва ли можно понять, если не рассматривать ее сквозь призму переплетения субъектности и структуры.

**Ключевые слова:** внешняя политика России; политика эмоций; агентство и структура; национальная идентичность; онтологическая безопасность