THE RETURN OF THE OCTOPUS

The new geopolitical strategy of Russia

LUUK WINKELMOLEN

"Who sows fear, will reap power!" (De Zwarte Kat, 2011).

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A thesis

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Luuk Winkelmolen

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Under the supervision of Prof. dr. Henk van Houtum

Second reader: Msc. Rodrigo Bueno Lacy

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P r e f a c e

It is almost impossible to foresee in advance what a thesis will ultimately look like. This has been often said to me and now I have experienced it myself. Whilst designing and carrying out this research, which started with a fascination for cartographic metaphors and the geopolitics of (invisible) borders, I have adjusted the topic several times. But despite the fact that it was tough at times, and that for a long time I could not oversee the whole, I have come to appreciate this research and writing process very much. It has been a great learning experience which brought me to Finland, Russia and Estonia, and gave me an interesting and fun look behind the scenes of academia. Although I conducted this research independently, it would not have been possible without the support and guidance from several people along the way.

First and foremost, to Henk van Houtum, for his support, encouraging co-thinking, critical feedback on my writings, and for taking me to Joensuu. I enjoyed the many brainstorming sessions we had on geopolitics, borders and political cartoon maps very much. To Lore Pilzecker, who illustrated the cover of this thesis and supported me during this research project. To Rodrigo Bueno Lacy, for dedicating some of his time to read and assess this thesis. To the people from the Karelian Institute, the CISR and the NCBR, and most of all, to all the respondents for their valuable contribution to this research. Lastly, to my family and friends, who supported me and with whom it was nice to discuss and think about this topic, and in particular to those who took the effort to read my work and provided me with feedback and suggestions (David Bogaers, Esra Hageman and Ramon Wensink).

And for now, I hope you will enjoy reading this thesis.

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Nijmegen, November 2019

S u m m a r y

The purpose of this study is to improve understanding of the turmoil caused by Russia's current geopolitical behaviour in Europe, and how this behaviour differs from the period of the Cold War. In this theoretically explorative research, I conceptually dwell on the notion of borderscapes, which I applied to the case of Russia's geopolitical behaviour, by drawing a connection between the debate around the politicisation of borderscapes and the debate around the omnipresence of the borders. Through this theoretical lens, Russia's current geopolitical behaviour can be viewed as borderscapes – created or shaped ('scaped') spaces – through which strategic injections into foreign societies can be done. The resulted in the following conclusions.

First, the character of Russia's geopolitical behaviour has changed in contrast to the Cold War and earlier times. Previously, expanding or preserving a sphere of influence comprised the totalitarian act of invading a territory or spreading propaganda in order to impose the own ideology on a foreign state. Today, it rather concerns doing strategic interventions, or little injections into foreign societies, consciously creating fuzziness. This fuzziness often causes anxiety, eventually leading to states overthrow themselves. This is a shattering not as a result of force majeure, but as a result of self-doubt: people do not know when or where the next injection will be. Whereas it used to be about state territory, Russia currently seems to carry out a form of state terrorism. This state terrorism is about the fear for the continuous presence of the possibility that something can happen. Here, the story of fear is no longer imposed ('we are powerful, and you will fear us'), but made and spread by the other himself ('we have to fear them'). This fuzziness can cause destabilisation: it can cause anxiety, potentially creating a call for stronger borders and fuelling populism.

Second, this changed character of Russia's geopolitical behaviour works in conjunction with changed circumstances. As a consequence of digitalisation and the related rise of social media, the medium has become radically dispersed and ownership has become radically distributed among everyone. This allows people to spread and easily make such small doses of fear (injections) bigger than they are, making Russia's political borderscapes seemingly omnipresent. And this fear is what creates the unease, the anxiety, because people do not know when or where Russia's next injection will be. This can paralyse or freeze the other, in the sense that Russia's political borderscapes seem to be able to suddenly pop up anywhere, alike a terrorist act, showing that borderscapes – reconceived as strategic spatial injections –potentially bear a danger in themselves. When deployed politically, they can be used to sow fear and reap power. Notably, under these new circumstances, this destabilising effect only requires very little agency from Russia. It requires less a military force and more a force of internet trolls.

Third, I concluded that, due to the changed character of Russia´s geopolitical behaviour, in tandem with the changed circumstances, the octopus as spatial metaphor to cartographically represent the geopolitics of Russia is more relevant than ever.

Chapter 1 : O P E N I N G

"The possibility of hackers to influence the outcomes of the elections should be excluded".

These are the words Dutch Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations Plasterk (2017) wrote, to the House of the Representatives in the run up to the parliamentary elections in the Netherlands of March 2017. Indeed, during these elections the voting, the counting of the votes, and the calculation of the results happened manually, instead of using computer systems. Fearing attacks of Russian hackers, the electoral council decided to no longer use the software that has been used during the past eight years. This very explicit consideration, as one could qualify the re-introduction of paper ballot voting, immediately raises the question why a country with a comfortable three countries in-between itself and Russia, is taking measures of this calibre as a result of fear for Russian interference.

Today, Russia's geopolitical behaviour seems to cause turmoil and concern and has been placed under a magnifying glass. In the media, (academic) reports and other sources of information, we have extensively been informed about, among other events, the annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea by Russia, the outbreak and continuation of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, and more recently, Russian interference in the American and French presidential elections, a nexus between Russia and the rising far-right in the European Union, the poisoning of a former Russian spy and his daughter, attacks of Russian hackers in several countries, and Russian mobilisation and manipulation through social media, spreading fake news. A small number of incidents could be given the benefit of the doubt, but in the above-mentioned events, the finger was pointed at Russia every time. Is there perhaps a pattern to be seen in this series of events of the Kremlin, acting beyond its state borders? Or is there no discernible pattern at all, leaving everything fuzzy? Or is perhaps this fuzziness the pattern?

Exercising political power in foreign territories is not a new phenomenon. In the twentieth century, among other periods, ideology and territory were closely related. During this period a state literally had to push its frontiers in order to transfer its ideology to foreign territory and to ultimately control it (Kristof, 1959; Longley, 2019). Thus, to extend their control to foreign territories, states brought these territories within their own borders – literally by seizing land –, often by the use of military force (Longley, 2019). For example, Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan in 1979 to spread the communist ideology (Gibbs, 1987). For similar reasons, Nazi-Germany invaded territories in Europe to spread its fascist beliefs (Longley, 2019). However, is the behaviour that Russia is currently exhibiting beyond borders similar to the geopolitics that it was carrying out in the twentieth century?

Russia is one of the major geopolitical powers in the world and recently, as previously mentioned, its political agency appeared remarkably often beyond the Russian state borders. A whole peninsula has been annexed, a war is still ongoing, people die or get poisoned and presidents come to power due to this behaviour. It has even been stated that due to this behaviour, among other factors, the NATO-Russia relations would be in a state of crisis (O'Hanlon, 2017). What is going on? These

appearances of Russia's political agency beyond borders are too drastic to just be brushed aside. In other words: a critical analysis and interpretation is required.

Perhaps, twenty-seven years after the end of the Cold War, the octopus from the past has returned. As early as 1877, this *metaphor* of an enormous, voracious animal, moving beyond its state borders and stretching out its tentacles to keep the rest of the European continent in a stranglehold, symbolized Russia's foreign agency and the fear this brought about in Europe (**figure 1**).

Figure 1: **Rose, F. W. (1877).** *Serio-Comic War Map For The Year 1877. Revised Edition.*

The metaphor reappeared during just before the start of World War II, when Allied forces spread propaganda, depicting the head of Stalin on an enormous red octopus, engulfing the rest of the world, to warn of the spread of communism (**figure 2**). In these two examples, this figure of speech symbolized imperialism, a frontier that shifted. Arguably, the current metaphorical octopus goes beyond the meaning of imperialism as a nation acquiring territory in order to extend its power. It is my thesis that today, this imagery symbolizes the potential of Russia's agency to suddenly pop up and disappear anywhere. Furthermore, Russia's agency today can show itself under many more different guises than imperialism only. In the aftermath of the recent annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the subsequent outbreak of war in Eastern Ukraine, the international relationships have become strained. Some scholars even put in question whether the temperature of the diplomatic relations is indeed again at the level of what

George Orwell (1945) once famously described as "a permanent state of cold war" (Kandiyoti, 2015; Kroenig, 2015; Monaghan, 2015). Yet, is this a 'new' Cold War? Perhaps, we are witnessing a truly new type of geopolitical behaviour, that is reminding us of the metaphor of the Russian octopus. However, to what extent is this the same octopus? To what extent are the current conditions the same as back then?
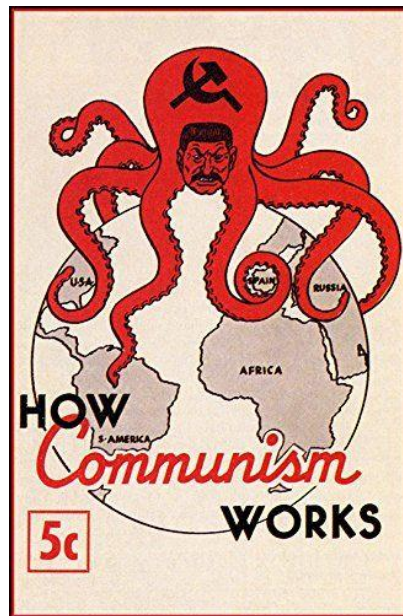

Figure 2: **Catholic Library Services (1938).** *How Communism Works.*

In the following research project within the field of Border Studies, Political Geography and Geopolitics – in these fields scholars study the interrelationship between borders, territories and politics, as well as the spatial distribution of political processes – I seek for a deeper understanding of Russia's agency beyond borders. Central to this study will be the question:

How should we interpret Russia's current geopolitical behaviour in Europe?

The postmodern perspective on borders – seeing borders as social, ongoing constructs in a post-9/11 securitization and rebordering context – will form the basis of the empirical part of this research into Russia´s geopolitical behaviour. This perspective belongs to the field of Critical Border Studies, wherein scholars pay great attention to the multidimensional nature of borders (Rumford, 2010 & 2012), emphasizing that borders are not disappearing, but take on new forms (Paasi, 2005; Rumford, 2006) and can be distinguished everywhere (Balibar, 2002, 2004[a], 2004[b]). As I aim to investigate the geopolitical behaviour of Russia beyond borders, this research, therefore, requires bringing together the fields of Border Studies, Political Geography and Geopolitics.

It is *societally relevant* to analyse Russia's current geopolitical behaviour, as such an analysis contributes to interpreting the current state of affairs regarding geopolitics in the world. This is important for several reasons. For one, it provides insight into the geopolitics that a major power like Russia is

carrying out behind the scenes. This geopolitical behaviour is not always visible, but it does cause turmoil. Most European countries have taken precautionary measures including economic sanctions towards Russia, an increase of defence spending, and drawing up protocols for threat perception (Pezard, 2018). Second, this research is societally relevant as it adds nuance to the current polarised debate around Russia's geopolitical behaviour. By providing an interpretation of this geopolitical behaviour, I allow people to look beyond their first impressions. This point was emphasised by Mariëlle Wijermars – postdoctoral fellow from the Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki – during an interview I conducted with her. On the one hand, Wijermars argues, people who try to understand Russia's perspective, rationale and motives, are very easily labelled as 'Kremlin friend' or *Putinversteher* – someone who shows empathy to Putin (Umland, 2016). According to Wijermars, the other extreme consists of people, who ignore any form of critical analysis as well, spreading conspiracy theories. In between these two extremes, there is a large gap where actually should be a critical analysis (M. Wijermars, personal communication, October 24, 2018).

This research is *scientifically relevant* as it contributes to theory about borders and border landscapes, by connecting two theoretical debates. On the one hand, the theoretical debate about the *omnipresence of the border* – about which has extensively been written, among others, by political philosopher Étienne Balibar (2002, 2004[a], 2004[b]), political geographer Chris Rumford (2010 & 2012), and sociologist and philosopher Zygmunt Bauman (2004) –, and on the other hand, the debate around the *politicization of borderscapes*. Borderscapes is one of the newest paradigms in Border Studies, still emancipating and with room for reinterpretation (Brambilla, 2015). Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2007) define borderscapes as a manner to 'think through, about and of alternatives' to dominant landscapes of power. These landscapes are more than just a representation of sites where conflict and struggle take place; as a matter of fact, they are vital elements for an analysis of power and politics (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2007).

In the existing literature it has mainly been portrayed as a planning concept (Eker & Van Houtum, 2013; Pijnenburg, 2019), yet in this study, I will be investigating to what extent it is applicable to the seemingly everywhere emerging geopolitical agency of Russia. Using the room for re-interpretation, I want to frame the concept of borderscapes more politically, as what we are facing in the case of Russia's geopolitical behaviour seems to concern a *politicisation*. Perhaps, this therefore concerns a revival of the 'old' notion of *scapes*, as coined by Arjun Appadurai (1990).[1] The current conceptualisation of borderscapes is derived from this notion of scapes and reformed into an emancipatory reality in which the border landscape is viewed as a bottom-up and joint design (Van Houtum & Eker, 2015; Pijnenburg, 2019). However, this is conceptualisation is perhaps too romantic, because in this research I aim to show that it potentially bears a danger in itself.

To investigate Russia's current geopolitical behaviour, it is necessary to dive into this

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[1] Appadurai's notion of different scapes will be explained in more detail in chapter 4

multidimensional border landscape and scrutinise events or places, where tensions come to surface and eventually clash, as this may shed light on the characteristics of Russia's geopolitical behaviour – my main inquiry. In other words, research must be done on a number of (border) disputes where Russia's sphere of influence recently emerged, putting the diplomatic relations in Europe and the West under pressure, with all associated consequences. The question is not where the geographical borders of Russia lie, but rather where its geopolitical sphere of influence emerges, and what the meaning of these moving spheres of influence is. Needless to say, the geopolitics of Russia covers a topic that is so broad, you could write multiple books about, I will not be able to oversee and explain all of its facets. Therefore, I aim to provide a conceptual interpretation of Russia's geopolitical behaviour, using theoretical insights from the field of Border Studies, Political Geography and Geopolitics as my instruments to do so.

The underlying objectives of this research are twofold. For one, I will investigate how Russia is currently carrying out its geopolitics beyond (in)visible borders and border landscapes, in order to specify the characteristics of its geopolitical behaviour. Secondly, I will investigate how its current geopolitical behaviour differs from the period of the Cold War, to point out whether this approach contains any novelty, compared to the 'comfortable predictability' of that time (Charap & Shapiro, 2015).

Outline of this thesis

In the following chapter, I will extensively outline the methodological framework of my thesis – including how I arrived at this thesis, a route of the fieldwork trip that I took, and how the respondents, relevant literature and ideas have fuelled my theoretical exploration. Besides, I will explain which events I decided to analyse and why I have selected those events. In chapter 3, I describe and analyse these six events where the Kremlin´s geopolitical agency recently emerged beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. Chapter 4 builds on the events as described and analysed in chapter 3 and comprises a conceptual interpretation of Russia's current geopolitical behaviour, mainly dwelling on theoretical insights from the fields of Border Studies, Political Geography and Geopolitics. Finally, in chapter 5, I will answer the central question of this research and I will point out the theoretical and societal implications of this study.

Chapter 2 : M E T H O D O L O G Y

Of course, a one-off incident of agency beyond borders does not necessarily constitute a sophisticated geopolitical plan, but there has been a series of events in which every time the finger is pointed to Russia. In my view, this chain of events seems to contain a pattern, and it is this pattern that I am trying to describe and analyse. Russia's agency beyond borders can show itself under a variety of guises, and most importantly, it seems to co-constitute the dying of people, the overthrow of regimes and bringing presidents to power. In short, these events are too drastic not to be researched.

In the following sections, I will describe the research strategy that I used. First, I will elaborate on how I collected my data, and I will explain how I selected and approached the persons I interviewed. Secondly, I will outline the structure of my analysis, how I presented my results, and how this ultimately has led to my conclusions.

2.1   A qualitative inductive approach

Since it was my inquiry to gain insight into Russia's agency beyond its borders, and to conceptually interpret this geopolitical behaviour, a qualitative approach seemed the most suitable for this research. As Verschuren and Doorewaard argue: "in qualitative research there is often a preference for global and broad concepts, (…) that are complex and open to all kinds of qualifications" (2010, p. 139), such as Russia´s geopolitical behaviour. This approach is usually of an interpretative and descriptive nature. Not so much aiming at testing theories, it rather contributes to gathering valuable insights, capturing different interpretations and opinions that people have, and the meaning they attribute to certain events or phenomena, since this approach allows to "far richer (fuller, multi-faceted) or deeper understanding of a phenomenon than using numbers" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 24). Qualitative research is putting more stress on "the reliability and validity of the research material, the arguments that are given for propositions, and the triangulation of methods and researchers" (Verschuren et al., 2010, p. 139). In this study, I used two methods: conducting interviews and desk research. This combination gives my research a good balance between breadth and depth, and it makes the empirical analysis 'rich' and 'thick'. Besides, a qualitative research approach allows a researcher to recognise biases and subjectivity and to incorporate those into the research. This approach will not result in one truth or definite answer, rather analysing the data will result in a variety of different 'stories' (Braun et al., 2013). Furthermore, it allows "to retain focus on people's own framing around issues, and their own terms of reference, rather than having it pre-framed by the researcher" (Braun et al., 2013, p. 24). Since qualitative research can be of an explorative, flexible and open-ended nature, it also can evolve during the research, leading to findings one would never have imagined on beforehand (Braun et al., 2013).

Importantly, I opted for an *inductive approach*, which involves discovering a pattern in the observations and gathered research material, to subsequently develop a conceptual interpretation or theorisation of a phenomenon, instead of testing a pre-existing theory based on the observations made

(Bernard, 2017). Typical for this approach is that the theory follows from the research (Bryman, 2012). By gathering material from a wide variety of sources – semi-structured interviews, literature, (media) reports, documentaries, and maps –, by attending two scientific conferences within Border Studies, and by working as a guest researcher at research institutes, I delved into this chain of events, and could gradually formulate a conceptual interpretation of it. This approach suits the interpretivist nature of this study, which aims to provide an interpretation of Russia's current geopolitical behaviour by gaining knowledge on how actors understand the world around them (Corley, 2015). Notably, when conducting qualitative research according to an inductive approach, the researcher is free to adjust the direction of the investigations even during the research process, which makes this research *theoretically explorative*. Accordingly, not only could I develop my knowledge of this subject, but I was also free to adjust the direction of my research occasionally.

2.2   Data collection and research internship

During a fieldwork trip to Joensuu (Finland), Saint Petersburg (Russia) and Tartu (Estonia), I conducted semi-structured interviews with experts on topics around Russia's agency beyond borders. Besides, this fieldwork trip, I ran a research internship. Later in this section, I will discuss both this fieldwork trip and the research internship in more detail. Altogether, this offered me a valuable look behind the scenes of academia. Due to the comprehensiveness and abstractness of this research topic, there is not a concrete 'field' that could be entered for doing research. Expert interviews prove to be a useful method for these kinds of topics (Bogner, Littig & Menz, 2009). In qualitative studies, the researcher often uses a series of open questions, without pre-structured possibilities to answer. Besides, the researcher also can use a list of topics that need to be included into the interviews (Verschuren et al., 2010). To capture the expert's visions on Russia's geopolitical behaviour in the present, I opted for semi-structured interviews, since this interview technique characterises little interference, which keeps the conversation going, stimulating the experts to speak freely without being obliged to answer within pre-structured categories. When conducting semi-structured interviews, the conversation is partly led by me and partly by the respondent. In this way, the respondents could provide me with illustrating examples or secondary literature – which I consider an advantage when trying to conceptually interpret a pattern in a chain of events. To each interviewee, I have put different questions – rendered applicable to their research expertise –, yet within the broader context of my research. In this way, the experts could give their thoughts and shed light on this chain of events from their area of expertise, allowing me to focus on *what they know* and to create more depth in the interlocution.

Within the interviews, I questioned Russia's recent agency beyond its borders and border landscapes. Instead of diving deep in every event where Russia currently is or recently was involved in, I investigated this series of events as far as necessary to formulate a theoretical interpretation of the geopolitical behaviour of the Kremlin. The interviews have been recorded, which made full transcription

and coding possible.[2] To structure the conversations, and to have a clear starting point – the annexation of Crimea –, I listed several topics to discuss during the interviews. I included these topics into the interviews, under the condition that they belong to the most recent (border) disputes where Russia was, or still is, involved in. However, as a result of the semi-structured interviews that I conducted, also other examples of cases and events could make their appearance in my analysis. I listed the following topics before I started to conduct the interviews:

- Annexation of Crimea
- Conflict in Eastern Ukraine
- Shoot down of airliner MH17
- Baltic States: the Estonian border(landscape)
- Salisbury poisoning
- Use of modern media and the spread of fake news
- Nexus between Russia and the rising far-right in the European Union
- Russian interference in the US presidential elections

This selection of topics resulted in twelve in-depth interviews with scholars from research institutes from various countries. Among them political scientists, border scholars, scholars from Russian studies, scholars from East European studies, sociologists, historians and international relations scholars (**table 1**).

	Respondents	University and Institute	Expertise	Date and Location
1.	**Olga Davydova-Minguet**	University of Eastern Finland, Karelian Institute	Media, memory and diaspora politics (*Postdoctoral Fellow, Associate Professor*)	October 15, Joensuu
2.	**Joni Virkkunen**	University of Eastern Finland, Karelian Institute	Border studies, cross-border cooperation (*Research manager in Border Studies*)	October 15, Joensuu
3.	**Anonymous researcher**	Finnish Institute of International Affairs		October 23, Helsinki
4.	**Mariëlle Wijermars**	Aleksanteri Institute - Finnish Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Helsinki	Media and communications, cyber-related issues (*Rubicon Postdoctoral Fellow*)	October 24, Helsinki
5.	**Mark Teramae**	Aleksanteri Institute - Finnish Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Helsinki	Comparative politics, post-Soviet studies, subnational governance, authoritarianism, national identity, Ukraine, Russia, Eurasia (*Doctoral candidate in Political Science*)	October 25, Joensuu*

[2] The transcribed interviews have been coded using AtlasTi, research software for qualitative data analysis.

6.	**Jussi Lassila**	Finnish Institute of International Affairs	Russian domestic politics, identity politics, nationalism, political movements, populism, (*Adjunct Professor, Senior Research Fellow*)	October 30, Saint Petersburg∗
7.	**Nikita Lomagin**	European University St. Petersburg	International politics, international relations theory (*Professor of Political Science and Sociology*)	October 31, Saint Petersburg
8.	**Anonymous researcher**	Johan Skytte Institute of Political Sciences, University of Tartu		November 5, Tartu
9.	**Andrey Makarychev**	Johan Skytte Institute of Political Sciences, University of Tartu	Russian foreign policy discourses, international security and regionalism in EU – Russia common neighbourhood (*Professor of Government and Politics*)	November 5, Tartu
10.	**Ilkka Liikanen**	University of Eastern Finland, Karelian Institute	EU-Russia Relations, Border Studies (*Professor of Political History*)	November 20, Nijmegen∗
11.	**Anonymous researcher**	Johan Skytte Institute of Political Sciences, University of Tartu		November 22, Nijmegen∗
12.	**Giampiero Giacomello**	Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Bologna	Cybersecurity and cyberterrorism, foreign policy analysis (*Associate Professor of Political Science*)	March 27, Bologna

∗ **These interviews were conducted via Skype.**

Table 1. **Respondents of this research, the organisations they represent and the date and location of the interview (own work, 2019).**

When it comes to the selection of interviewees for this research, this process mostly went according to *snowball sampling*, meaning that the researcher asks the already interviewed persons for referrals to other potential respondents within the field (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Consequently, the route of my fieldwork (**figure 3**) has been partly determined by my respondents, starting with my supervisor Henk van Houtum and professor Evert van der Zweerde at Radboud University in Nijmegen, through whom I was informed about the existence of specific research institutes and individuals in Finland, Russia and Estonia, that I could contact for an interview.

In the preliminary phase of this research, I approached professor Evert van der Zweerde – political philosopher at Radboud University Nijmegen and Russia expert. During a long informal conversation in which we discussed the subject of Russia's geopolitics and borders, he provided me with contacts, that were interesting to speak within the light of my investigations – Nikita Lomagin in Saint Petersburg and Andrey Makarychev in Tartu –, and gave me his take on Russia's actions in its borderlands. It was not an interview per se, but it was very important and essential to gather information,

and it proved very useful to explore my topic of research further in depth. Importantly, van der Zweerde pointed out the seemingly vague and calculative character of Russia's agency beyond its borderlands. In Eastern Ukraine, he argued, Russia consciously seems to create diffuse territories where borders are not clear. Interestingly, this vagueness or fuzziness has become a principal element in my analysis of Russia's geopolitical behaviour.

My fieldwork and associated internship for this research started in the small university town of Joensuu in Eastern Finland. On the 4th and 5th of October 2018, I attended the two-day seminar of the Borders, Mobilities and Cultural Encounters research area (BoMoCult) at the Joensuu campus of the University of Eastern Finland (UEF). I was informed about this institute and the conference by my thesis supervisor Henk van Houtum. Attending this academic conference proved to be a great opportunity to directly speak with scholars within the field of Border Studies and Russian studies, that could link me to potential respondents. During the last five years, BoMoCult has reflected a general interdisciplinary philosophy and several cross-cutting approaches to understanding the significance and impacts of borders in society.

Figure 3: **Map of the countries around the Gulf of Finland, illustrating the taken route of the fieldwork trip (own work, 2019).**

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This year, the focus was among other themes on bordering, Post-Soviet processes of border-making, and borderscapes – this will become one of the main concepts in my theorisation of Russia's current geopolitical behaviour (chapter 4). Attending this scientific conference gave me a glimpse of the contemporary debate in Border Studies, and it allowed me to interact with researchers in the field. Moreover, it showed me what an academic conference is like, the wide range of topics that can be investigated within this field of study, and how to keep a research manageable. Last but not least, this helped me to get in touch with new respondents, among whom several researchers from the Karelian Institute in Joensuu.

After the conference, I stayed in Joensuu and worked as a guest researcher at the Karelian Institute, a multi-disciplinary and international research unit focusing on regional development, cultural studies and borders.[3] Before I went to Finland, to arrange this, I approached Ilkka Liikanen – researcher from UEF and frequent contributor to BoMoCult. During this three-week stay as an intern (from the 4th of October till the 29th of October 2018), I was allowed to use an office, I got the opportunity to discuss my work with researchers from the institute on a daily basis, I could have preliminary talks with potential interviewees from the institute (and I could obtain contact details of potential respondents from research institutes in Helsinki), I could discuss the structure of the interviews to be conducted and gradually adjust the scope of my research. Altogether, this fed my research. Importantly, during my stay at the Karelian Institute, I conducted interviews with experts from the Karelian Institute in Joensuu, the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) in Helsinki, and the Aleksanteri Institute for Russian and Eastern European Studies in Helsinki. I selected these researchers for interviews as their research concerns very relevant topics to take into consideration when investigating Russia's geopolitical behaviour.

From the Karelian Institute, I successively interviewed Olga Davydova-Minguet, Joni Virkkunen and Ilkka Liikanen. In her research, Davydova-Minguet focusses on Russian media, memory and diaspora politics. Virkkunen's expertise lies within the topic of cross-border cooperation in the borderland of Russia and the EU. From a Political History and Border Studies perspective, Professor of Political History Liikanen mainly investigates the EU-Russia relations. Notably, Liikanen was so kind to think along with me on the subject of my research and the structure of my interviews. He advised me to try and look at the individual acts of Russia's agency, in the context the broader chain of recent re-securitisation of borders. Importantly, Liikanen emphasised that my approach of only interviewing academics for this research does not constitute a problem, but that I must remain aware of this choice. Finally, he provided me with contacts of research institutes in Helsinki and Saint Petersburg – Aleksanteri Institute and the Centre for Independent Social Research. Besides these interviews, I regularly spoke to Anna Casaglia – at that time border scholar at the Karelian Institute. She was kindly willing to dedicate some of her time to brainstorm together, and to help me structure my interviews.

While I stayed in Joensuu, I travelled for a three-day trip to Helsinki (from the 23rd of October

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[3] For more information about the Karelian Institute see: https://www.uef.fi/en/web/ktl

till the 25th of October). In Helsinki, I conducted interviews at the Aleksanteri Institute and the FIIA. From FIIA, I interviewed Jussi Lassila and a researcher who wants to remain anonymous. Lassila's research expertise lies, among other topics, within identity politics, nationalism and populism. During our conversation, he made an interesting remark regarding the apparent nexus between the Kremlin and European anti-establishment forces. According to Lassila, this nexus is not based on ideological grounds but pragmatism. The other researcher from FIIA pointed out to me that political instruments not always work as they intend to.

From the Aleksanteri Institute, I interviewed Mark Teramae and Mariëlle Wijermars. Teramae started his PhD research on domestic politics in Ukraine in 2014 when the Ukrainian crisis started. Most importantly, he emphasised the calculative way in which Russia is acting in the border region of Eastern Ukraine. Moreover, he uttered interesting critiques towards the way in which the situation in Eastern Ukraine has been characterised. Wijermars's research interests include contemporary Russian politics, in particular concerning internet governance and digitalisation, information warfare, and online and social media. Importantly, she made me realise that, due to digitalisation, we are all part of and at the same time makers of the public domain, which differs considerably from the Cold War where *one* ruler owned mass media. Furthermore, as I already addressed in the opening section of this research, she pointed out the polarization of the debate around Russia's geopolitical behaviour.

After my stay in Joensuu, I crossed the EU-Russian border by bus and travelled to Saint Petersburg, Russia. There, I stayed as a visiting researcher at the Centre for Independent Social Research (CISR) for one week (from the 29th of October till the 4th of November). CISR is a non-governmental research institute focusing, among other areas of research, on borders and border communities.[4] The staff of CISR kindly offered me to use their office for conducting interviews and for work, including a workplace, using the institute's library and the possibility to discuss my work with border scholars from the institute. During this period as a guest researcher at the CISR, I interviewed Nikita Lomagin, who is a Professor of Political science at the European University of Saint Petersburg. His research interests include Russian history, contemporary Russian foreign policy, international relations theory, international organisations. As a historian by background, he provided me with an in-depth approach to the issue of borders and frontiers as its field from the perspective of Russia. He underlined that Russia's foreign policy is subject to four persistent factors, to wit: security – stabilisation of frontiers –, economic development, to be hegemonic, and 'having a seat at the high table' (to be one of those who make decisions).

On the 4th of November, I crossed the Russian-Estonian border by bus and travelled to the Estonian university town of Tartu. During a short stay (from the 4th of November till the 6th of November), I visited the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Sciences to conduct interviews with Andrey Makarychev and a researcher who wants to remain anonymous. Makarychev is Visiting Professor at the

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[4] For more information about the Centre for Independent Social Research see: https://cisr.pro/en/

Johan Skytte Institute of Political Sciences at the University of Tartu. In his research, he focusses, among other themes, on Russian foreign policy discourses, international security and regionalism in the EU-Russia common neighbourhood. Makarychev could provide me with some very concrete examples of recent events of Russia's agency beyond borders in Estonia. He could provide me with an Estonian perspective on the way Russia is geopolitically behaving itself. The other researcher that I interviewed in Tartu could provide me with an Estonian perspective on the way Russia is geopolitically behaving itself. When I was back in Nijmegen, I conducted another interview with a researcher from Tartu University that wants to remain anonymous. This researcher was one of the persons I interviewed, that made me realise that Russia's geopolitical behaviour contains a considerable dimension of *fuzziness*.

On the 28th of January 2019, I attended the Nijmegen Centre for Border Research (NCBR) seminar on Border Studies, Looking back and forward. On that day, NCBR celebrated its 20th anniversary. This year's seminar was all about the development that the field of Border Studies has undergone in the past 20 years, including themes like the social constructs of borders, b/ordering, ordering and othering, national and regional identity, cross-border cooperation, postcolonial borders, border conflicts, border aesthetics, migration, border externalization and the cartography of borders. Borderscapes, one of the newest paradigms in Border Studies, was also reflected during the seminar. Among other presentations, I attended the presentation given by Chiara Brambilla – researcher from the University of Bergamo – on this specific paradigm, to hear more about and to further explore this conceptual framework of borderscapes.

Notably, I visited the University of Bologna during a short holiday in March 2019. There, I interviewed Giampiero Giacomello, who is an Associate Professor at the Department of Political and Social Sciences. His research includes, among other topics, cybersecurity, cyberterrorism and foreign policy analysis. Giacomello could reflect on the short-term consequences of cyber influencing, and Russia's capitalisation on already existing problems in the EU.

Lastly, because of my interest in geopolitics, political geography, and borders, I ran a two-month internship at the Nijmegen Centre for Border Research (NCBR) – an internationally recognised research centre, where experts focus on borders, migration, cross-border cooperation and post-colonialism[5]. The research internship consisted of finishing my thesis, and of writing an article on the same subject, with the goal of publishing it in a popular-science magazine. Here, the societal relevance of my research – to create a more versatile and nuanced understanding of Russia's geopolitical behaviour – comes into play. Addressing a certain subject in a popular-scientific magazine seems a better way to reduce misunderstanding among people about certain events that happen in reality, as the text is written in a more accessible form, and therefore, it can reach a wider audience.

Altogether, this fieldwork trip and research internship offered me a valuable look behind the

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[5] For more information about the Nijmegen Centre for Border Research see: https://www.ru.nl/nsm/imr/our-research/research-centres/nijmegen-centre-border-research/

scenes of academia and have provided me with a lot of material and insights. As I used an inductive approach, this research is theoretically explorative – empiricism and theory go hand in hand in this type of research, meaning that my empirical analysis is feeding the theoretical narrative that I formulate in the end. This inductive approach influenced the issue of *positionality* for this research in different ways. For one, a researcher takes a stance from which a subject will be investigated. You position yourself within the academic debate with regard to the central argument of your research. In the case of my investigation of Russia's geopolitical behaviour, I have taken a sceptical stance against the one-sided and at times superficial knowledge about this series of events of Russia´s agency – in my view, within this debate, conclusions are drawn rather easily and quickly. I want to express the uneasiness that I have with the way in which new events seem to be reduced to the familiar. In my view, it is not just a 'new' Cold War (Kandiyoti, 2015; Kroenig, 2015; Monaghan, 2015); there seems to be something else going on. What this is, is what I am going to explore in this research. Secondly, positionality also relates to the actual process of doing qualitative research, as addressed by Stubbs (1997). As a researcher, you should be aware of the fact that your history, previous experiences and expectations about the world, affect the interpretations of your research material. When a researcher enters a particular research field, he already has certain knowledge about the subject from particular sources and may have assumptions about certain issues. A researcher, Widdowson (2008) argues, may, therefore, read his own discourse in the speech or writing he is examining.

Thus, the positionality of me as a researcher has been a theoretical exploration, meaning that gradually I gained more knowledge and I could better interpret this phenomenon. This inductive approach ultimately changed the scope of my research from investigating Russia's influence outside its state borders to researching Russia's geopolitical behaviour beyond borders and border landscapes, emphasising the calculative and fuzzy nature of this geopolitical agency. Notably, this is my take on this phenomenon; someone else could have come to a different outcome with the same data and respondents. Because I selected my respondents according to snowball sampling, my insights, readings and overall scope are partly determined by the people I interviewed, but also by my background, the people with whom I discussed my work and the newspapers that I have read.

Finally, the presentation of my results will be in the style of a *narrative argument*. During my fieldwork trip and research internship, I interviewed scholars from different backgrounds, resulting in an assemblage of different stories. Notably, interviewing politicians, the media and the wider public would also have been very relevant in the light of this research, yet formulating a conceptual interpretation of Russia's geopolitical behaviour required an *academic exploration*. During the interviews, I asked scholars who specialise in topics around Russia, borders and geopolitics, to think along with me and to develop a conceptual interpretation. Precisely this reflection is the reason that I opted for interviewing academics. After transcribing and coding the interviews, I could draw a red line through these stories, ultimately creating a narrative. Besides semi-structured interviews with scholars, also literature, (media) reports, documentaries, and maps are part of this narrative argument. By writing

this narrative argument, I seized the opportunity to tell a different story than the established one (for example in the news and existing literature), as I think it is of importance for the reader to better understand what this geopolitical behaviour of Russia in the present includes. As I intended to bring forth a conceptual interpretation of this phenomenon instead of testing an already existing theory, the word *conclusion* is perhaps a little less appropriate here. After all, offering a conceptual interpretation is something else than drawing a firm conclusion. However, what remains is that this is my analysis and my interpretation. In other words, you have to make a judgment yourself.

2.3   Selection of events and focus of this research

For the investigation into Russia's current geopolitical behaviour, I selected several events to discuss with respondents to subsequently analyse them. I selected these events for three reasons. First, the case should include a recent event where Russia's agency (allegedly) emerged outside its state borders, as this may provide insight into Russia's current geopolitical approach in general. I have intended to include in my analysis cases that show in the variety of forms in which this geopolitical behaviour can manifest itself.

      Second, because of the comprehensiveness of a research topic like Russia's current geopolitical behaviour, the sources I had at my disposal in Dutch and English language, and the respondents with whom I could get into contact and through whom I could get into contact with other potential respondents, I have chosen to narrow down the scope of the research, focusing on events and dynamics
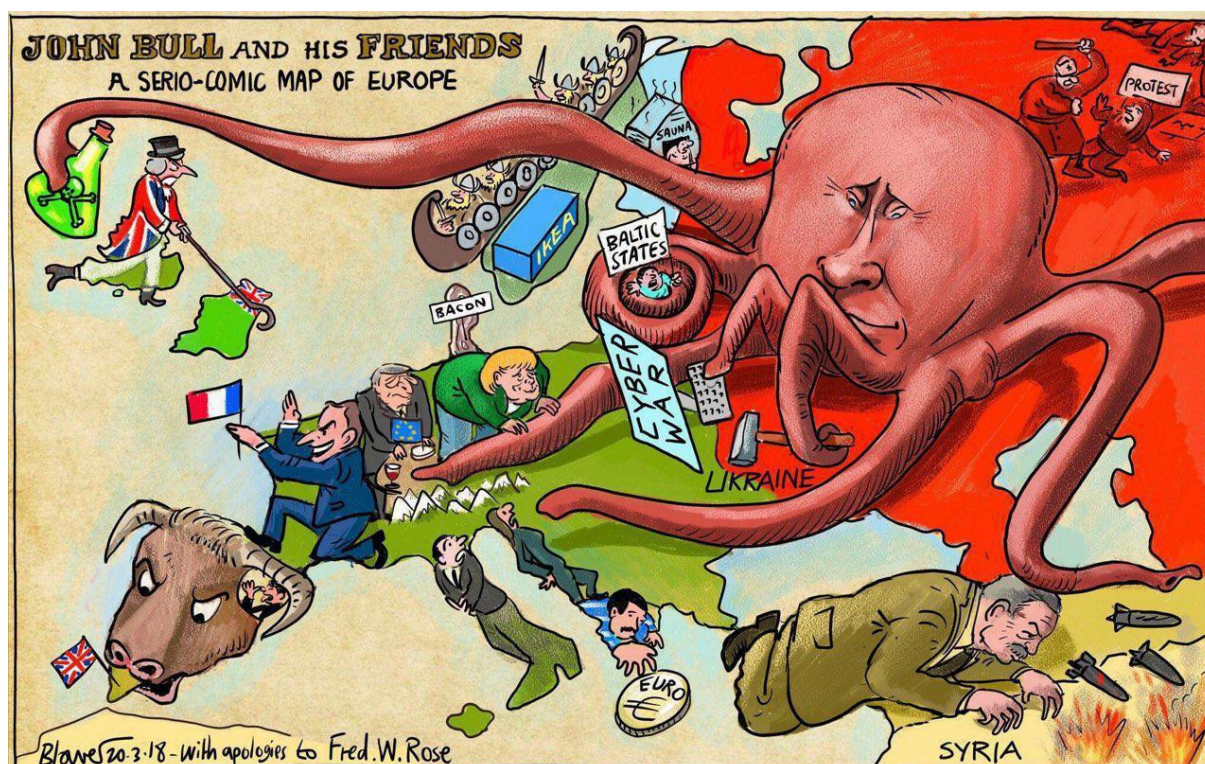

Figure 4: **Blower, P. (2018, March, 20).** *The new Europe.*

in Europe. Besides, an investigation into Russia's global geopolitical behaviour would require a multitude of other studies.

Before I started conducting the interviews and gathering material about other events where Russia's agency appeared outside its state borders, I selected the events as listed in § 2.2. For the topics that I listed before conducting the interviews for this research, I was inspired by the cartoon map (**figure 4**), drawn by Daily Telegraph cartoonist Patrick Blower (2018), on which he portrayed Russia's current long reach in Europe, including the Salisbury poisoning, Russia's minorities in the Baltic States, cyber warfare, the Kremlin's influence in Ukraine, and even Russia's involvement in the war in Syria. Blower also included the protests that are taking place inside the Russian Federation.

Third, as explained in chapter 2, I opted for an inductive approach, meaning that the events that I have decided to include into my analysis, could change during the research process, depending on the expertise of the persons with whom I could arrange an interview, their suggestions for potential respondents, literature, and cases to have a look at, and on the data about Russia's geopolitical behaviour that I could collect through literature study and from media reports.

Along these lines, I could specify the rather broad topic of 'the use of modern media and the spread of fake news', by capturing it in a specific event – the twitter storm that followed directly after the downing of flight MH-17. My inductive approach also allowed me to incorporate the hacking attack on TV5Monde in my analysis – I came across this case while watching the Dutch documentary *Schimmenspel – Poetin's onzichtbare oorlog* (Mulder & Versluis, 2018). In a similar vein, I could include another case in my analysis. The so-called Lisa case was recommended by two of my interlocutors, to with Olga Davydova-Minguet and Andrey Makarychev, because it is a good illustration of how Germany became a goal of Russian disinformation. Additionally, I could connect the topic of a possible nexus between the far-right and Russia, to Europe. While writing this thesis, a tape recording of a secret meeting of Lega Nord members and Russian men, allegedly connected to the Kremlin, was published. Finally, this led to a selection of six events, which I studied mainly by using literature, media and in-depth interviews.

Accordingly, in the following chapters, I will set out an empirical analysis and a conceptual interpretation of Russia's current geopolitical behaviour. This part is outlined as follows. In chapter 3, I will describe six events where Russia's agency recently appeared beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. Notably, since some of these events are related to each other, I decided to describe these six events in chronological order. As I used an inductive approach, the theory arises from the research (Bryman, 2012). For this reason, I will present my conceptual interpretation of Russia's current geopolitical behaviour in chapter 4, after the empirical analysis. In § 4.1, I will formulate what in my view are the main characteristics of Russia's current geopolitical behaviour, after which I will expound the theoretical debate around the concept of borderscapes, which I will use to explain my characterisation of Russia's agency. Here I will address the first objective of this research. Subsequently, in § 4.2, I will draw a connection between the theoretical debates around the notion of borderscapes and

the omnipresence of the border, and complement it with the notion of anxiety – which plays a fundamental role in my conceptualisation –, in order to explain the way in which Russia's current geopolitical behaviour fundamentally differs from the period of the Cold War. Here, I will address my second research objective.

Chapter 3: CHARTING RUSSIA'S AGENCY BEYOND BORDERS

In the following sections, I will dive into a series of events where Russia currently is or recently was acting beyond borders, starting with the conflict in Eastern Ukraine as I consider this an element of Russia's current geopolitical behaviour that cannot be ignored. Since its outbreak, this conflict has been always there, constantly smouldering in the background, and occasionally coming to the fore. Besides this ongoing, smouldering manifestation, there are more occasional appearances of Russia's agency beyond borders. In this chapter, to characterise Russia's geopolitical behaviour in the present, I will gradually discuss a chain of events where Russia's agency beyond borders comes to the surface,[6] and eventually I will describe the pattern that this chain of events seems to show.

3.1   Fragmentation as a political instrument in the smouldering war in Eastern Ukraine

In the winter of 2014, Ukraine stands at a historic junction. Thousands of protesters braved the freezing February cold on Kyiv's central square and banged drums while waving with EU flags. Sandwiched between Europe and Russia, Ukraine is eternally fated to be a prisoner of its geography. Less than forty years ago, it was the outskirt of the Soviet Union, but nowadays its people are increasingly looking Westwards. The so-called Maidan-protests have been going on since November 2013, involving young Ukrainians, angry that their president of that time – Viktor Yanukovych – is refusing to sign a treaty deepening the relations with the European Union. Instead, he has decided to forge stronger ties with Russia. The direction now being chosen will determine the future of another generation. Until then, the protests were relatively nonviolent. On February 18, protesters marched to the parliament, but the police blocked them. The following days, there was fierce fighting between the protesters and the, during which more than one thousand protesters were injured, and over 113 protesters have been killed (Shveda & Park, 2016). In this chaos, president Yanukovych flees to Moscow where he asks the Russian government for assistance. Effectively, with the president in hiding, there has been a revolution in Ukraine (Katchanovski, 2017). The orientation to the West did not appeal to everyone in the country. Towards the east of Ukraine, the density of Russian-speaking populations increases. Once in the borderlands, there is an area almost exclusively populated by ethnic Russians – the Donbas. These Russians feared being cut off from Russia and becoming a persecuted minority. It should, therefore, be no great surprise that vast counter-revolutionary processes broke out in the Donbas (Kostanyan & Remizov, 2017). Whether in Donbas, or Crimea, Putin strongly felt his *responsibility to protect* Russian speakers abroad (Pynnöniemi, & Rácz, 2016). Overnight, two breakaway ethnic Russian states arose in Eastern Ukraine – the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic (Katchanovski, 2016). Did they fight independently? Reports are stating that Russian soldiers without insignia – the so-

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6 For an explanation of the selected events see § 2.3

called 'little green men' –, turned up in Donbas to direct operations (Galeotti, 2015). By July 2014, the situation in Donbas had escalated into a full-blown war.

The spring of 2019 marked the fifth consecutive year that Donbas is in a state of conflict and chaos. When I questioned the ongoing border conflict between Russian-backed separatists and Ukraine, a researcher from the University of Tartu, Estonia characterised the Russian-Ukrainian border area as follows:

> *I think the predominant view of borders in Russia is [especially in the case of Ukraine, LW], in the Russian state apparatus and the leadership, is that the border should be guarded, that is not something that you use as interfaces that much. It is more about a sort of sealing the borders off and then opening the gates, which are tightly controlled* (Researcher from University of Tartu, personal communication, November 22, 2018)

According to this researcher (who prefers to remain anonymous), the border area between Russia and Ukraine is not considered to be a point or area where two or more systems meet and interact, it rather marks the end of a territory, and therefore an opening and a closure. Interestingly, how this scholar characterises the Russian-Ukrainian border area contains a paradox. 'Sealing the border off' as this interlocutor made clear to me, includes closing the border, allowing nobody to enter Russian territory without being strictly controlled. The area on the other side of the border has been afflicted by conflict for a long time. Russia-backed separatists have been fighting against Ukrainian government forces over the two Ukrainian oblasts of Donetsk and Luhansk, where after Crimea, the largest minority group of ethnic Russians in Ukraine lives (Toal, 2017). Up to now, the death toll of the war in the Donbas almost reaches 13,000 (Miller, 2019), and it is still ongoing. The paradox lies in the fact that as a result of this chaos, a fuzzy border area remains. What makes this situation so seemingly fuzzy and so seemingly chaotic? Is this just fuzziness, or is it perhaps deliberate fuzziness?

Since the outbreak in 2014, the war is still smouldering in the background, with regularly occurring shootings and fighting (RFE/RL, 2018[a]), and a new flare-up of violence in the spring of 2018 (Deutsche Welle, 2018). NATO and Ukraine accused Russia of being involved in this war (NATO, 2014). These accusations are strengthened by evidence of Russia indirectly supporting separatists in Donbas in several ways. For one, Russia granted volunteers and weapon equipment permission to cross the Russian border, to subsequently enter Ukrainian territory. Secondly, Russia provided the separatists with weaponry, shelter, and support with recruitment and training. Thirdly, Russia assembled a large military force along the border with the Donetsk and Luhansk regions (Katchanovski, 2016). However, the Kremlin denies any involvement in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine (Shinkman, 2017), and because it seems to be not directly involved in the conflict – it militarily supports separatists that fight without emblems (BBC, 2014; Tsvetkova & Baczynska, 2014) and it distributes Russian passports among the residents of the separatist regions in Eastern Ukraine (Vennink, 2019[a]) –, the responsibility for these actions remains obscure. This is something that I believe has remained underexposed in the analyses

that have been done so far. It is difficult to identify the Kremlin as a direct perpetrator, but as I will discuss subsequently, Russia certainly benefits from maintaining this state of conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

> *So, that's I think the strategy, that you keep Russia proper, Russia's border proper, under very tight control. But then yes, in the neighbouring states, you might want to create a little bit of chaos, because this is something that suits your geopolitical interests.* (Researcher from University of Tartu, personal communication, November 22, 2018)

But why did Russia's sphere of influence pop up in Eastern Ukraine? Here, NATO's *collective defence* enters my analysis. Article one of NATO's founding document stipulates that members, by signing the North Atlantic Treaty, will resolve any international dispute in a manner that international peace, security and justice are not being compromised (NATO, 2018). According to article five of NATO's founding document, all members agree that in the case of an armed attack against *one* of the members, this will be considered an attack against *all* members and the collective defence will be activated immediately (NATO, 2018). Starting from this precondition for NATO membership, a country with 'unfixed' borders cannot be granted accession to NATO. A potential member should have clear borders to not be a burden to NATO and to contribute to overall NATO security. Following this logic, Nikita Lomagin – professor of political science and sociology at the European University in St. Petersburg – rhetorically asked the question whether Germany or the Netherlands would like to fight with Russia for Donbas, because if NATO would accept a country with vague or unfixed borders, other member states (according to article five) have to fight for these borders.

Important to note, as a researcher from the University of Tartu points out, we should pay serious attention to the terminology – the words 'military attack' – used in article five: "It means that there is a kind of launched rocket attack, there are tanks moving over the border, there are shootings somewhere, there are planes flying over and bombing" (Researcher from University of Tartu, personal communication, November 5, 2018). The term military attack is problematic in this case. It does not seem to capture the very sophisticated way in which Russia is operating in Eastern Ukraine. During our conversation in Tartu, this researcher recalls how Russia annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea in 2014. The term military attack, as he put it, does not say anything about a situation: "(…) when there are like 20 well-armed, with non-identified uniforms, little green men, making a fuss somewhere, making things difficult, taking over administrative buildings, you know, and creating chaos, it doesn't say anything about that" (Researcher from University of Tartu, personal communication, November 5, 2018).

To ensure that Ukraine is not joining NATO, an ambiguous zone – the Donbas Basin – is created, where it has become unclear which part of the territory belongs to Ukraine, and which part does not. Russian-backed separatists control some cities or parts of Donbas, others are controlled by forces of the Ukrainian government (Bellingcat Investigation Team, 2019). "(…) It is about making the situation

chaotic enough to make sure that no one would want these countries" (Researcher from the University of Tartu, personal communication, November 22, 2018). The territory of Eastern Ukraine is divided into parts that are under Ukrainian control and parts that are under control of the Russian-backed separatists, leaving a large part of the Russian-Ukrainian border under the control of these separatists (Vennink, 2019[b]). As a result, Russia can determine the future of Ukraine when it comes to accession to NATO. Or as a researcher from the University of Tartu – who prefers to remain anonymous – put it: "Because they [Russia, LW] want to be involved. (…) I mean, it is in the Russian interest to have Ukraine on board, and to have it on board, Russia has to be involved in the conflict" (Researcher from University of Tartu, personal communication, November 5, 2018). As long as Russia has some involvement in this conflict, not explicitly, it will maintain a say in the future of Ukraine. With the deployment of military force – Russia's ultimate tool of influence (Karlsen, 2019), the desire to keep Ukraine as part of their sphere of influence has gone as far as conflict.

To explain why Russia can determine the future of Ukraine when it comes to accession to NATO, the concept of *deterritorialisation* seems to be relevant. According to Tuathail (1999), deterritorialisation comprises "the problematic of territory losing its significance and power in everyday life" (p. 139). Or put somewhat differently: "To speak of a generalised dismantling of the complex of geography, power and identity that supposedly defined and delimited everyday life in the developed world for most of the twentieth century" (Tuathail, 1999, p. 140). This notion can have different implications. In economics, for example, deterritorialisation refers to financial markets that, due to globalisation and digitalisation, are no longer tied to a specific territory, they have become borderless or deterritorialised (Tuathail, 1999). In politics, then US president Bill Clinton understood by the notion of deterritorialisation the absence of a separation between what is foreign and what is domestic (1993). In political geography, discourses of deterritorialisation are considered to be important indicators for geopolitical change (Tuathail, 1999). Deterritorialisation refers not only to "the process of leaving a territory – it is equally the movement and becoming *of* that territory, the means by which territories expand and mutate, divide and conquer" (Kilgore, 2014, p. 261).

In the case of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, deterritorialisation seems to have geopolitical implications. Because Ukraine does not have control over all its borders (Vennink, 2019[b]), the territory of the state cannot be clearly defined. Consequently, the whole country is rendered incapable, because it is no longer a by borders definable unity; it has become deterritorialised. Or put differently: as a result of this deterritorialisation, the territorial integrity of Ukraine is fragmented. The prolongation of the conflict thrives well in an uncertain and fuzzy climate like in Donbas. Moreover, Russia benefits from maintaining this status quo – a fragmented Ukraine –, because as a result of this fuzziness and uncertainty about who controls which territory, the sovereignty of Ukraine is shattered. And as this integrity is one of the pre-conditions for NATO membership (considering NATO's collective defence), Russia can determine the future of Ukraine by prolonging the conflict. One could, therefore, argue that the Donbas region is being instrumentalised to thwart the accession of Ukraine to NATO. Here,

fragmentation becomes a political strategy, that is reminiscent of the classical Roman tactic of divide and rule.

The remaining question for the future, pertaining to who will incorporate the destroyed Eastern-Ukraine, demonstrates Russia's intentions in this conflict, Mark Teramae – doctoral researcher from the Aleksanteri Institute, Finnish Centre for Russian and Eastern European Studies at the University of Helsinki – explains. He addresses the existence of the two separate entities in Eastern Ukraine – a Donetsk People's Republic and a Luhansk People's Republic –, separated by a border between them. Then, there is an official border between the Russian Federation and Donetsk, and between the Russian Federation and Luhansk. According to Teramae, looking at the situation in the Donbas region in this respect is much more accurate than viewing Russia´s agency as the desire to annex these territories. For one, Russia does recognise the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic (Socor, 2018). Secondly, Russia has not annexed these areas. This is important to note since exercising influence only makes sense when a particular state is *not* the ruler of a certain region. If a state uses annexation or military force as a tactic, it is not about a sphere of influence "(…) because you now control that part." Teramae argues. Lastly, the status quo – the existence of two separate entities in the Donbas region, controlled by pro-Russian separatists – continues to exist. "In five years, it is I think by February 2015, I think that was the highest point of the escalation, and since then it hasn't gone any further, and that's almost four years" (M. Teramae, personal communication, October 25, 2018).

The stand-off about which party will take the destroyed Eastern-Ukraine in the end, shows that for Russia the conflict is not about Donbas itself, but rather about Ukraine as a whole. A region, thus, is nothing but a tool for ultimately reaching a greater goal: "(…) making the situation chaotic enough to make sure that no one would want these countries (Researcher from the University of Tartu, personal communication, November 22, 2018). By fragmenting Ukraine, the whole border region of Eastern Ukraine is being instrumentalised to secure the Kremlin´s geopolitical goal – ensuring that Ukraine will not be brought under the Western sphere of influence. In this sense, Russia views Ukraine as a frontier, because in the case of Ukraine's accession to NATO, the borders of NATO move up to the border of the Russian Federation in that area. As a result, the United States would again – the Baltic countries are of course already members of NATO – bring a part of Russia's backyard under its sphere of influence. However, supporting the breakaway of Ukrainian regions to thwart the breakaway of a whole county from Russia's sphere of influence seems somewhat paradoxically.

However, fragmentation as a political instrument also seems to transcend the level of the national context in which the case of Ukraine takes place. "Well strategically", Andrey Makarychev – professor of Government and Politics at Tartu University – argues, "the major incentive [of Russia, LW] is to get rid of the European Union, to disintegrate the European Union, and to come back to a Europe of nation-states". This concerns the fragmentation of the European Union into a Europe of nation-states. In that way, instead of having to deal with an alliance of twenty-seven or twenty-eight countries – that might have a common policy when it comes to sanctions –, Russia would build relationships on a

bilateral basis. According to Makarychev, this is a rather nineteenth-century agenda. It is Russia's idea, he argues, to come back to the nineteenth-century concept of great powers or great power management in the categories of the English school of international relations – a nation state-based policy. Russia would do this, as Makarychev points out to me, because a weaker or even non-existent European Union – a fragmented Europe in fact – would be very beneficial to Russia. In this scenario, Russia would no longer be just a neighbour (that has to deal with an alliance of countries right next to it), but a major power, that other states should take into consideration. This brings to my mind one of the four so-called 'persistent factors' in Russian foreign policy – having a seat at the high table – that Nikita Lomagin referred to during the interview I conducted with him. According to Lomagin, to have a seat at the high table implies to be one of those who make decisions on a global level. Having a seat at the high table, also means that Russia wants to be taken seriously again. Russia wants to restore its status as a dominant political player and be a counterpart to the alliance of countries on both sides of the Atlantic (Bugajski, 2008, p. 2). Russia feels threatened and humiliated by the allegedly broken NATO promise not to expand eastwards (Bugasjki, 2010), and as stressed by Putin during his speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 (Putin, 2007), and emphasised again after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Putin, 2014). Russia uses this in its eyes breached promise, to legitimise its current geopolitical behaviour.

A cynical game?

When I raised the question 'how should we view the way in which Russia is carrying out geopolitics beyond its state borders?', during the interlocutions I had with scholars from Tartu University in Estonia, the utilisation of borders by Russia to secure geopolitical objectives dominated the conversation. In Andrey Makarychev's view, Russia's involvement in Eastern Ukraine is a 'cynical game'. According to him, arranging border conflicts, knowing that countries that have 'unfixed borders' cannot be eligible for NATO membership, attests to a high degree of rationality:

> *You don't accept countries with border conflicts. Now you have border conflicts, so you don't, I mean forget about Georgia, forget about Ukraine, forget about Moldova etc. So, to some extent it's artificial, but it is quite rational, I mean, cynically but rational.* (A. Makarychev, personal communication, November 5, 2018)

According to Makarychev, this cynicism is mainly reflected in the way Russia is thwarting Ukraine's accession to NATO. Russia uses NATO's own rules, he argues, by sparking a conflict at the borders of a state, that is longing to join a state association that cannot allow any members with border disputes. "You arrange border conflicts, to make these countries staying outside of NATO forever" Makarychev argues. Russia's agency is also cynical in a second manner, in Makarychev point of view. According to him, Putin does not have a grand design or master plan. He argues that Putin just plays the role of a hooligan, who tries to misbehave, and then would sell his comeback to proper, or more or less relaxed behaviour, for something: "only to just to again misbehave in a different situation I think, that is endless"

(A. Makarychev, personal communication, November 5, 2018).

However, when critically analysing Russia's actions in Eastern Ukraine, or Russia's geopolitical behaviour in general, and in an effort to put a characterisation of it into words, I would argue that 'calculation' is a more elegant and appropriate term than 'cynicism'. Cynicism implies that one is reasoning in a value-free way and that this behaviour does not contain any sense of morality. In the same vein, cynicism does not seem to contain an element of rationality or calculation. It gives the impression that there is nothing at stake, indicating a sense of indifference, while there most certainly are important issues at stake – diplomatic relations, economic relations and security. One can of course state that the politics carried out by the Kremlin are cynical, but in that way, someone like Putin is presented as illegitimate. When labelling Putin as cynical, one perhaps already implies that the Western leaders are by definition not cynical. In my eyes, the word calculative does not contain this degree of condemnation. As calculation can also indicate prudence or carefulness, it does not instantly contain the connotation of badness and is, therefore, more neutral.

Plausible deniability: a convenient excuse?

The general geopolitical approach of the Kremlin does not seem to have changed in comparison to the Soviet era. Interestingly, the current, calculative character of Russia's behaviour in Eastern Ukraine – little green men, infiltration, sowing fuzziness and fear, spreading Russian passports – shows great similarities with a strategic approach established in Soviet military doctrine (Lindley-French, 2015). This so-called approach of *maskirovka* (deception) is characterised by camouflage, denial and deception, through maintaining plausible deniability, disguising military forces, spreading disinformation and preventing opponents from predicting and responding to actions by deploying dummy or decoy structures (Vaux, Miller & Fitzpatrick, 2014). The maintenance of plausible deniability intersects with how Russia legitimises the right to have an 'exclusive sphere of influence' in the so-called near abroad (Ferguson & Hast, 2018).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many Russians lived outside the Russian borders. In 2007, during his second term in office, president of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin made a statement concerning these so-called *compatriots abroad*: "Use this word combination more often: *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World)", the Russian leader said (Smeets, 2018). This politico-cultural foundation is based on the Russian World concept, and according to Putin, it can and must unite all people – wherever they live, in Russia or beyond its borders –, for whom the Russian language and culture are precious (Smeets, 2018).

Originally, this concept was introduced by Russian methodologist Petr Shchedrovitskii. He theorised the worldwide community of Russian speakers, by calling them the Russian World. Interestingly, as Suslov (2018) remarks, the diaspora in the Russian World, as conceptualised by Shechodrovitskii, is a community based on a double difference, as this group is different from the local community they live in as well as from the Russian people living in Russia. Shchedrovitskii views the

Russian diaspora in the West as peripheral 'islands', or the *Russian Archipelago*. According to him, the double-difference of the diaspora would make these islands an important resource for Russia, providing access to the knowledge industries and capitals of other states. Compatriots abroad could then serve as 'agents of innovation'. Moreover, in this way, it could mediate Russianness to the international level (Shchedrovitskii, in Suslov, 2018).

Interesting to discuss here is *who* are compatriots and *what* is abroad. First of all, the definition of Russian compatriots abroad is debatable as this term may encompass Russian citizens, former Soviet citizens, ethnic Russians, Russian speakers or even descendants of Russian citizens (Suslov, 2017). One could therefore almost argue that pretty much any person with some affinity with Russia or the Russian language can be counted as part of this group. Secondly, the understanding of the concept of abroad needs some clarification. A distinction can be made between *near* and *far* abroad[7]. The first concept, originally called *blizneye zarubezhye* (literally: near beyond border) emerged in a doctrine in 1992 (Litera, 1994), and concerns the idea that Russia has neighbouring territories which the Kremlin considers as a part of its sphere of influence (Toal, 2017). The near abroad constitutes a belt of countries that were part of the former Soviet Union, the countries in what now is called the post-Soviet space (**figure 5**). The far abroad concerns the Russian communities living in Western Europe and the United States (Suslov, 2018). Russian compatriots are thus spread across the post-Soviet space and beyond, yet

Figure 5: **Hurt, A. (2014, March, 19).** *The countries of the post-Soviet space.*

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7 According to Rossotrudnichestvo, the government agency for promoting Russia in the world, about 30 million Russian compatriots live abroad (Rossotrudnichestvo, 2019). Retrieved from: http://rs.gov.ru/en/activities/5

Suslov rightly notes that the Russians in the near abroad have only very little in common with the Russian communities that reside in the far abroad. These people probably feel some connection with the Russian culture but might feel more connected to the liberties that exist in the West.

Accordingly, as a researcher from the Finnish Institute of International Affairs made clear to me, Russian World is a very flexible concept. It primarily refers to the people who live in the post-Soviet space, and less to the Russian diaspora in more distant foreign countries – Western countries or the United States. Viewing the near and far abroad in the light of the Russian sphere of influence, shows that these notions coincide with two kinds of spheres of influence. For one, scholars distinguish the *internal sphere of influence*. During an interview that I conducted in November 2018 in Estonia, a researcher from the University of Tartu remarks that the internal sphere of influence of Russia is interchangeable with the concept of the near abroad: "(…) it was the post-Soviet space, basically the neighbouring territories, neighbouring to the Russian Federation" (Researcher from University of Tartu, personal communication, November 5, 2018). Secondly, the external sphere of influence, as this researcher made clear to me, concerns the centre of European states that once belonged to the Warsaw Pact. However, as a researcher from the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) pointed out to me, Russian World is a very flexible concept. It primarily refers to the people who live in the post-Soviet space, and less to the Russian diaspora in more distant foreign countries – Western countries or the United States, '(…) but they can nevertheless be included in the Russkiy Mir concept, if that what is in a way wanted" (Researcher from FIIA, personal communication, October 23, 2018). Hence, if it serves the legitimisation of the politics that are being practised, the Kremlin uses the Russian World to create these ideas of 'us' and Russianness in the general discourse, to subsequently use this as an excuse (Zakem et al., 2015).

Correspondingly, over the years, the definition of compatriots abroad has been broadened to render it more applicable for using Russians abroad as a political instrument. According to Zakem et al. (2015), there are two explanations for this. For one, Russian compatriots in the near abroad can strengthen Russia's political influence in the post-Soviet space, by providing political, economic and military intelligence. Second, compatriots that feel dissatisfied with or alienated from the government of the country in which they live – the Kremlin can help to sustain this condition –, can be a source for potential unrest and influence. For the Russian authorities, protecting these compatriots is of value both domestically, to increase its popularity by presenting itself as someone who stands up for its people, and internationally, to foster its public diplomacy (Zakem et al., 2015). For these reasons, the Russian compatriots, as well as how the Kremlin instrumentalises this group, cause anxiety in the countries adjacent to Russia (Suslov, 2018).

The flexibility of the concept is also reflected in the article written by historian Mikhail Suslov in 2018. Based on comparative literature study, Suslov (2018) distinguishes three different stages that the theorisation of Russians abroad went through, and during which it was used to legitimise the right of Russia to have an 'exclusive sphere of influence' in the near abroad. For one, as already explained

above, the view of the Russian World as the de-territorialised and de-centred idea of the Russian archipelago in the 1990s. Notably, this theorisation of the Russian World considers the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the accompanying shrinkage of the Russian territory as necessary to let this group of 'islands' expand, and to let the Russian World spread (Gradirovskii, in Suslov, 2018). The understanding of the Russian World as an archipelago of islands, challenges the perception of a sphere of influence as a territorial matter, moreover, it turns around the idea of influence: the Russian archipelago is supposed to exert influence on continental Russia, instead of the reverse – the de-territorialization of the concept (Suslov, 2018).

The second stage started with the question of how to change Russia's *presence* beyond its borders into Russian *influence* beyond its borders (Suslov, 2018). The associated idea includes the deployment of so-called 'diasporal tentacles' that, to strengthen this influence and control the post-Soviet sphere, should be securely attached to the home country (Suslov, 2018). In 2007, to institutionalise the diaspora in the Russian world and to further develop this idea of gaining control over the post-Soviet sphere, the *Russian World Foundation* (Fond Russkiy Mir) was created (Mazur, in Suslov, 2018). The Russian World Foundation was created to enhance the cultural ties between Russians living abroad, people who are interested in Russia and the Russian language, and the motherland of Russia. The person I interviewed from FIIA pointed out to me that this foundation is, to some extent, similar to the services the Goethe Institut for German studies offers: "To some extent, their activities are very similar. So, they offer language courses, and they have like discussion clubs" (Researcher from FIIA, personal communication, October 23, 2018). Because these activities are usually seen as harmless and depending on attraction to the home country (Karlsen, 2019), it is rather difficult to label these kinds of activities as producing the Russian sphere of influence, as nearly every country in the world performs these kinds of activities. Endorsing this point, this researcher states: "it is very difficult to distinguish when is this sort of activity used instrumentally to gain something from it, for instance in politics".

Besides the second stage – diasporal tentacles securely attached to Russia –, Suslov (2018) distinguishes a third stage. During this stage, the Russian World was no longer seen as an octopus with diasporal tentacles, but as a geopolitical entity consisting of the Russian Federation and Russian-speaking regions in the countries adjacent to Russia – it became re-territorialised (Suslov, 2018). Moreover, the people in the Russian World were considered valuable for Russia, no longer because of their *difference* from the Russians in the Russian Federation (compatriots abroad as 'agents of innovation') – this was the viewpoint of the Russian World in the first stage –, but because of the *sameness* of the Russians abroad and the Russians living in Russia (Suslov, 2018). In this stage, compatriots abroad serve to legitimise the annexation of culturally homogenous zones (Suslov, 2018). Hence, theorising compatriots abroad in this way provides a convenient excuse for the annexation of Crimea or the interference in Eastern Ukraine. The conceptual change – from deterritorialisation to re-territorialisation – makes it difficult to understand *where* the Russian World is geographically situated, let alone where its borders lie. This broad interpretation and flexibility make the concept very suitable

to use as a convenient excuse for invading or annexing foreign territories.

Essential in the conflict in Ukraine, to return to the previously described principle of maskirovka, is the ability of the Kremlin to: "maintain plausible deniability in the face of overt aggression, interference and invasion" (Vaux, Miller & Fitzpatrick, 2014). Something that seems to play an important role in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine is the Kremlin's desire to defend its compatriots abroad (The Moscow Times, 2018). President Putin stated that the rights of all Russian citizens and Russian speakers abroad, including in Eastern Ukraine, should be protected (Percha, 2014). In comparison to how compatriots abroad have been utilised in the past, it no longer includes exerting influence over foreign territories only. Today, the group of ethnic Russians, Russian speakers, and whoever feels affiliated with Russia, is of vital importance for the Kremlin as the annexation of Crimea and the support of separatists in Eastern Ukraine could be legitimised as necessarily protecting these minorities (Zakem et al., 2015).

This plausible deniability in the shape of protecting your compatriots turned out to be a very 'convenient excuse' for interfering in a neighbouring territory. As Karlsen (2019) observes, concerning compatriots abroad, the Russian approach seems to be "(…) to mix their cultural activities with their intelligence activities to create an important foreign policy tool" (p. 7). The Russian government thus uses compatriots abroad to both support and implement Russian foreign policies abroad (Karlsen, 2019). For example, according to Makarychev, Russia is very consistently promoting the idea that governments in all Baltic States and Ukraine are discriminating the Russian minorities in these countries:

> *(…) so, this type of discourse is still there, and it is still as part of Russian mainstream. If you look at Russian first channel and many people in Russia tend to believe in that exactly. They tend to believe that Kyiv is ruled by the junta or by fascists. So, in this sense, Russia might go ahead with this argument endlessly. Just if it needs to protect, if it needs some justification* (A. Makarychev, personal communication, November 5, 2018)

The same justification has been used for the annexation of Crimea. Russia legitimised this embedment of the annexation in discourse as 'Crimea, back to the homeland' (Pynnöniemi & Rácz, 2017). This historic-cultural connection is embedded in the discourse of *family*: *"Russia or the elite in Russia views Ukraine as not a significant other or something distant"* (N. Lomagin, personal communication, October 31, 2018). Jussi Lassila – Senior Research Fellow at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs – confirms this:

> *(…) many Russians still think that it is like a, yeah small brother or small sister like, but anyway somewhere where there is a little bit different dialect and alike, so it is kind of this very imperial paternalistic relationship* (J. Lassila, personal communication, October 30, 2018).

In this way, the historical-cultural connection is exploited and used as a convenient excuse. Or as a researcher from the University of Tartu put it:

It is an identity thing, because Russian identity is, you know empire style, imperial type of identity. And without Ukraine, Russia cannot be in the shape of an empire. This is one thing. The other thing is that historically the roots go back to the Kievskaya Rus. So, that is the call of Russian, you know, Russian statehood. It is like the same thing as like the Serbs have in Kosovo now. That Kosovo has a kind of a, has a symbolic value for Serb nationalism, Serb statehood. (Researcher from University of Tartu, personal communication, November 5, 2018)

In my view, very typical for Russia's behaviour is that from the perspective of the European Union and the United States it is often seen as aggression, but from Russia's perspective, it is considered legitimate as protection, or *responsibility to protect* (Pynnöniemi, & Rácz, 2016). These two perspectives completely contradict each other. However, without legitimising its actions in this manner, the diplomatic and economic relationships that Russia has would come under pressure – this is true for countries that cannot risk putting their business with Russia and gas supplies at stake (Vaux, Miller & Fitzpatrick, 2014).

A testing game?

Another researcher from the University of Tartu – who prefers to remain anonymous – refers during our conversation to the violation of the Estonian border by Russia: "(…) planes, aeroplanes, unidentified, military planes, or transportation planes, violating the airspace the of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania" (Researcher from the University of Tartu, personal communication November 5, 2018). For example, on the 20th of June, near midday, a Russian aircraft allegedly spent about one minute in Estonian airspace without presenting a flight plan or identifying itself on the radio and was therefore illegal in Estonia's airspace (RFE/RL, 2018[b]). However, this was not the only report made about a violation of Estonia's airspace – and thus a violation of NATO airspace. Over three years, to wit in 2016 (Forsell & Rosendahl, 2016), in 2017 (Cavegn, 2017) and 2019 (Hankewitz, 2019), similar incidents have been reported. Estonian airspace is remarkably often violated in the vicinity of the island Vaindloo, in the Gulf of Finland.

Interestingly, referring to the violation of the airspace of the Baltic countries as an example of Russia's agency beyond borders, this researcher describes Russia's agency, using the term 'testing game':

Russia wants to see what the reaction will be. So, if there is no reaction, then they try to go even further, to use other methods as well. Let's put it in this way. Russia is not happy about NATO being here. (Researcher from University of Tartu, personal communication, November 5, 2018)

According to this researcher, Russia feels like being under siege, surrounded by unfriendly, Western countries[8]. And that, this researcher argues, is why Russia plays a testing game:

> *Then we [the West, LW] never know what the next trick would be, to check, you know, the kind of reaction from the Western side. A little game is actually global, because Russia is trying to resist the hegemonic power, which is basically the West, the US and allies. It is a big game. And now, we are just part of that game, so we don't have much to say here.* (A. Makarychev, personal communication, November 5, 2018)

However, testing does not seem to be the accurate term to use in the case of Russia's agency. Testing implies an exam test, an aptitude test, questioning a person's knowledge about something. Or testing can be a prelude to carrying out a larger-scale operation subsequently. Neither of these seems to be the case here. It is neither a prelude nor a check afterwards. The incidents with the aeroplanes go further than testing or teasing. This is not about entering a state with a large army to test the force of the other. In my view, Russia's current geopolitical behaviour is about doing small injections in geographical space. As a result of these small injections, fuzziness is created, as one does not exactly know where and when the next injection will take place. These small injections into space, therefore, have a suffocating effect as they cause anxiety. To take the violation of the border by Russian planes as an example: today it is a plane, but who knows what it will be tomorrow? In this sense, Russia's agency is everywhere and at the same time nowhere. It is not always visibly present, but because it emerges once in a while, it creates the seemingly real idea that it is always there, just outside one's field of vision. Although it is not permanently visible or constantly present, it poses a threat.

To recapitulate, overseeing all aspects of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine proves to be difficult, as there are a lot of different actors, interest and dynamics playing a role in this conflict. Moreover, there are circulating a lot of different stories about the origins of the war, and about the different stakes of the actors involved. However, the most important question is why Russia's sphere of influence emerges in Eastern Ukraine. After delving into this case, and making use of the interviews that I conducted, I contend that Russia's involvement in the east of Ukraine is strongly related to the flirting between Ukraine and NATO about Ukraine's potential accession. Russia strongly condemns this behaviour for at least two reasons. First, Ukraine is an old ally – Russia and Ukraine share a common culture and history. Second, Russia feels cornered by Western allies, and it does not want NATO to move any further towards Russia's borders, allowing the US – with 1.34 million troops in 2019, the US have the largest number of military personnel in NATO (Duffin, 2019) – to be in its 'backyard'.

Concerning how Russia behaves in the case of Eastern Ukraine, I would like to put forward for

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[8] Notably, on the website of NATO a 'top five of Russian myths debunked' has been published, among which 'NATO is encircling Russia'. NATO states that this myth is ignoring geography, as Russia has land borders with fourteen countries of which only five countries hold NATO membership (NATO, 2019ᵃ).

consideration the term *rational vagueness* to characterise Russia's agency in Donbas. Russia's behaviour seems to contain a considerable dimension of calculation. By backing up the separatists in Eastern Ukraine, Russia utilises this region to fragment the entire country of Ukraine. This approach is very rational, as Russia uses NATO's own rules to thwart Ukraine's accession. Yet at the same time, the Kremlin acts in such a vague way, that it is difficult to identify Russia as the perpetrator directly. It does not seem to be present with direct military force, but instead provides separatists with weaponry, support with recruiting and training of soldiers, and shelter. In this way, the responsibility for these actions is rendered obscure, meaning that Russia acts in such a calculative way that it is always involved, but easily can say 'we are not present'. These tactical approaches of maskirovka and infiltrating an area, under the guise of responsibility to protect, are in favour of Russia as they contribute to the maintenance of the situation of conflict in the Donbas. This, in turn, ensures that Ukraine has 'unfixed borders' – a requirement for joining NATO. On the other hand, Russia's behaviour in Ukraine is an element of the geopolitics that it is carrying out nowadays, but it also has adverse consequences. The war in Ukraine has put Russia's relations with both the European Union and the United States under tension. Moreover, it rendered the cooperation in other areas, like the international fight against terrorism, arms control and seeking a political solution in Syria, more complicated (Council of International Relations, 2019).

The war in Eastern Ukraine is smouldering on the background for five years now, yet this was not the only event where Russia's spheres of influence made its appearance. In the meantime, however, as mentioned before, Russia geopolitical behaviour also characterised by doing little injections into geographical space. In recent years, there have been several places and events where Russia's sphere of influence popped up. In the following sections, I will describe other suddenly emerging and disappearing spheres of influence (see the selection as explained in § 2.3).

3.2   The downing of flight MH-17 and the subsequent Twitterstorm

It was a clear and bright July afternoon in 2014 when the lives of 298 people were taken above a sunburned field of weed near the village of Hrabove, in the Donetsk Oblast of Eastern Ukraine. The now-famous MH-17 flight from Malaysia Airlines was on its way from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur but was shot from the sky above a region where Russian-backed separatist rebels and Ukrainian government forces for four months fought a war (Toal & O'Loughlin, 2018). The downing of this airliner effectively transformed the conflict in Eastern Ukraine into an international crisis, involving the EU and the US on the one hand, and Russia on the other hand (Pynnöniemi, & Rácz, 2016).

That July afternoon was five years ago. Since then, three investigation teams – the Dutch Safety Board (OVV), an international Joint Investigation Team (JIT), and open-source investigation team Bellingcat – worked on this tragic event. The results point in one direction: Russia. These three investigation teams all concluded that a so-called BUK missile system shot down the aeroplane, launched from an area that was under the control of Russian-directed militants (Ter Haar, 2017).

After the shootdown, an outraged world demanded answers. Only a missile could have caused

the damage done to this aircraft. The United States, The Netherlands and Australia accused Russia of being involved in the downing of MH-17. Nevertheless, the Kremlin denied and continues to deny any involvement. The Russian ministry of defence states "none of the Russian Army's air defence missile systems ever crossed the Russia-Ukraine border" (TASS, 2018). However, the investigation team of Bellingcat published evidence, based on geolocation and remote sensing analysis, that seems very conclusive.

Bellingcat discovered a convoy with BUK missile launchers, covered by multiple videos, and could localise the transport, that was travelling from the Russian city of Kursk to the Russian-Ukrainian border (Bellingcat, 2016[a]). Subsequently, Bellingcat discovered images of a BUK transport that was photographed in Donetsk and could establish a connection between the BUK that was transported from Kursk to the border, and the BUK that was signalled in Donetsk. Importantly, at the time of this transport, the missile system carried four rockets, as was visible on a video of what later has been proved to be the BUK convoy (Bellingcat, 2016[b]). In Kursk, there is only one anti-aircraft brigade – Russia's 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade – this BUK therefore logically belongs to this brigade (Bellingcat, 2016[b]). Additionally, on the 18th of July 2014, the day after the shootdown of airliner MH-17, the convoy was filmed in Luhansk – the capital of the by separatists controlled Luhansk People's Republic –, showing three instead of the original four missiles on top of the launch system (Bellingcat, 2019[a]). After that, the BUK was transported to the border with Russia (Bellingcat, 2019[a]). Hence, this BUK missile system was brought from Russia into Ukraine shortly before the shootdown of flight MH-17 and brought back to Russia afterwards. It is very unlikely that such an installation of this size and value could have been brought into Ukraine without the Russian government agreeing on this (Ter Haar, 2017).

Concerning the circumstances of the catastrophe, one might wonder why Ukraine did not close the airspace above the area of the conflict completely, instead of partially, or why commercial airlines fly over conflict areas in the first place. However, given that conflicts usually take place on the ground, and that civil aviation flies at an altitude of approximately 10 kilometres, flying with a plane over Eastern Ukraine should not immediately have fatal consequences. MH-17 was not the only flight that day. Many aircrafts took the same route. An Air India flight was just a few minutes ahead, a plane of Singapore Airlines cruised just behind flight MH-17 (Boffey, 2014). But many planes have been avoiding the airspace of Ukraine, already months before the downing of MH-17 (Neate & Glenza, 2014).

However, the key question of this tragic event is: why was a passenger plane shot down above Eastern Ukraine? The interlocutors with whom I discussed this case, shared the opinion that the shootdown of MH-17 was not a planned action: "(…) they were mistaken, they thought that this is a military plane, that's why they shot it down. So, the people who did it were not clever enough. So, they were not able to recognise it" (Researcher from University of Tartu, personal communication, November 5, 2018). The downing of MH-17 would not have anything to do with spheres of influence as such. It would just have happened at a very unfortunate moment:

(…) MH17 was a tragic mistake, despite the fact that of course, it is obvious that the people who sent this air defence unit to Ukraine, and the people who actually used it, are responsible for what happened. But no, I don't think anyone wanted anything like that. It is just the fact that, and it happened actually at the height of the conflict where everything was very messy, and it's a strange combination of an active and rather intensive military conflict, and normal operation of airlines above 30,000 feet. (Researcher from University of Tartu, personal communication, November 22, 2018)*

During a conference, on the 17th of July 2019, exactly five years after the catastrophe, the JIT presented the results of their investigation into those responsible for the downing of the aircraft. The JIT was able to bring down the number of suspects and charged four people, among three Russians – Igor Girkin, a former FSB man, Sergey Dubinsky and Oleg Pulatov, who used to operate in the GRU, the Russian general staff of the armed forces –, and one Ukrainian – Leonid Kharchenko –, who are all associated with the Donetsk People's Republic (JIT, 2019). According to the JIT, these people constitute a chain from Moscow to the conflict ground in Donbas (JIT, 2019). Additionally, the JIT requested Russia and Ukraine to cooperate in the investigations, as the extradition of prisoners is not permitted under Russian and Ukrainian legislation.

The JIT obtained recordings of phone calls between Igor Girkin, one of the four suspects in this case, and an 'assistant of Sergey Aksyonov – then head and Prime Minister of the disputed Republic of Crimea. In this conversation, Girkin expresses his concerns about the situation in the Donbas region:

We are outnumbered by the enemy (…). If the issue with the Russian support – air cover, or at least artillery support – is not dealt with, then we will not be able to hold ground here in the East. (…) We need anti-tank artillery, we need tanks, we need decent anti-aircraft defence. Because we can't last on Manpads [that are fired from the shoulder, LW] alone anymore. All manned with trained personnel, of course, as we have no time to train them. (JIT, 2019)

This conversation reveals that more radical measures were needed in the Donbas, as the situation for the separatists was deteriorating. But would the people that were in control of the BUK missile system were just awaiting a sign to shoot down the first object that they would pick up on their radar? Important to note, the BUK missile system is a so-called surface-to-air missile (SAM), and therefore this radar-guided missile could have been launched without seeing or aiming through a sight (Galeotti, 2014). Unfortunately, shooting down a passenger aircraft by accident seems therefore possible.

This tragic event not only resulted in the US and the EU to officially recognize that a war is raging in the Donbas (Pynnöniemi, & Rácz, 2016), it also marked the start of a disinformation campaign spreading a variety of stories about what really happened on that day in July (Van der Noordaa & Van de Ven, 2019[a]). However, before describing this disinformation campaign, I feel obliged to briefly explain the difference between *disinformation, misinformation* and *fake news,* because it is important to

distinguish true stories from false stories, or created to mislead people and do them harm – especially because certain presidents often incorrectly use these terms today. Disinformation concerns false information that is deliberately created and spread to deceive people (Wardle, 2017). Misinformation refers to the unintentional sharing of false information (Wardle, 2017). Fake news concerns information, intentionally and verifiably false, potentially misleading readers (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Especially after the 2016 US presidential elections – these elections were accompanied by a lot of misinformation and false information –, this term became a buzzword (Albright 2016). Spreading fake news concerns how individuals, institutions and society are vulnerable to be manipulated by malicious actors (Lazer et al., 2018).

The core of the disinformation campaign that started immediately after the downing of MH-17 was for Russian trolls to convince the rest of the world of Ukraine (and not Russia) to have shot down the airliner as a provocation (Van der Noordaa & Van de Ven, 2019[a]). Of great importance in this disinformation campaign is the Internet Research Agency (IRA), or so-called troll factory. In these office buildings in the outskirts of the Russian Saint Petersburg, people get paid to get involved in online discussions, sow discord, by spreading false truths and by capitalising on discontent, already existing in societies (Van der Noordaa & Van de Ven, 2019[a]). After analysing nine million troll-tweets – made available by Twitter in the fall of 2018 –, Dutch journalist concluded that the involvement of Russian trolls in the MH-17 debate appears to be greater than expected. Notably, the Russian troll factory already existed for a couple of years but flourished after the crash of MH-17. With a total number of 111,486 posted tweets, the day of the disaster and the two following days appeared to be the days that the IRA trolls were most active (Van der Noordaaa & Van de Ven, 2019[b]). This was the first time that internet trolls produced such a large number of tweets in such a short time.

However, the trolls do not directly seem to know which narratives to send into the world. At first, the trolls write about the crash of a Ukrainian plane and even accuse the rebels of the downing (Van der Noorda & Van de Ven, 2019[b]). This narrative changes the day after the crash. On July 18, the trolls send three hashtags in Russian – translated: # Kyiv-shot-Boeing, # Kyiv-provocation and # Kyiv-tell-the-truth–, into the world (Knight, 2019; Van der Noordaa & Van de Ven, 2019[b]). This action resulted in at least 65,000 sent tweets about the crash of MH-17. Two days after the shoot-down, on July 19, the hashtag operation ends. The trolls continue to post about MH-17, yet with a lower intensity and without using the three hashtags (Martin & Shapiro, 2019). Unique about this twitter storm, is the fact that, instead of retweeting or simply copying other posts, the trolls write the posts themselves, the vast majority of these posts is written in Russian, as Dutch journalists discovered (Van der Noordaa & Van de Ven, 2019[b]).

From then on, the Russian authorities spread several theories, either omitting critical information, or deliberately producing lies, denying the involvement of Russia (Pynnöniemi, & Rácz, 2016). The Boeing would have been shot down by the Ukrainian air defence, or a Sukhoi SU-2511 – a Ukrainian ground attack plane – would have hit the aircraft of Malaysian Airlines, or the presidential

plane of Putin would have been in danger (Pynnöniemi, & Rácz, 2016). The Russian government even put into question whether there was a BUK missile system involved at all (Van der Noordaa & Van de Ven, 2019[a]), and if there had been a BUK missile system, than it was not operated by Russian soldiers, but by the armed forces of Ukraine (Pynnöniemi, & Rácz, 2016). Notably, the Russian Attorney General of then already annexed Crimea, Natalia Poklonskaja, posted two weeks before the downing of MH-17, that the weapon is on its way: "The rebels now have a 'fine cookie' against the Ukrainian air force", to remove the tweet shortly after the crash of flight MH-17 (Van der Noordaa & Van de Ven, 2019[a]).

A disaster like MH-17 has all the required ingredients to shape a conspiracy theory around, as Jelle van Buuren – assistant professor at Leiden University and expert in conspiracy thinking – states in *De Groene Amsterdammer* (Van der Noordaa & Van de Ven, 2019[b]). "After a catastrophe, people are eagerly looking for explanations to alleviate their suffering. If an explanation remains absent, conspiracy theories will creep into that vacuum" (Van der Noordaa & Van de Ven, 2019[b]). For example, the story that MH-17 would have been shot down by Ukrainian fighter jets, to stop the Russia invasion – a theory endorsed, among other politicians, by the Dutch far-right politician Thierry Baudet (Hendrickx, 2019) (I will elaborate on the nexus between the European far-right and Russia in § 3.6) –, is one of the biggest existing conspiracy theories, yet an example like this shows exactly how a disinformation war works. Such theories, created by Russia shortly after the downing of MH-17, are five years after the crash still circulating (Golovchenko, Hartmann & Adker-Nissen, 2018). These theories appear to be spread by activist citizen journalists, sceptical bloggers and conspiracy thinkers – ordinary citizens (Van der Noordaa & van de Ven, 2019[b]). It has therefore been stated that citizen journalists and ordinary citizens are being more influential in the online landscape, than disinformation spread by a state (Golovchenko, Hartmann & Adker-Nissen, 2018).

Besides the spread of these contradicting and conspiring theories, the investigations into the MH-17 catastrophe have been obstructed in other ways. Wreckage from the crashed airliner is used to spin reality. Journalists from Russian state television network RT turn out to have moved wreckage of the crashed airliner, to film the new 'findings' subsequently. In this way, they sow the idea that the official investigation team has been neglectful in its investigations and careless about the site of the catastrophe (Van der Noordaa & Van de Ven, 2019[b]). Hence, all means are deployed in this 'twitter war'. In this way, different theories are rapidly spread by (social) media, creating a fuzzy landscape of false trails, wherein the truth is hard to find. This is why the tragedy of MH-17 is pre-eminently an example of "how conflicting parties and their state sponsors, with the television media under their control, produce self-protective bubbles of belief about shock events that reproduces geopolitical antagonism, regardless of forensic facts" (Toal & O 'Loughlin, 2018, p. 884).

However, besides the creation and spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories, other dynamics mingle with the earlier described approach of *maskirovka*, and contribute to the laying of false trails, eventually rendering everything even fuzzier. According to Mariëlle Wijermars – Postdoctoral Fellow from the Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki –, fake news can be used strategically, to

sow confusion deliberately or to slander people – disinformation. However, it can be used differently as well: "when you look at things from a broader perspective, and you do not look at Russia alone, you can see that it is also related to the revenue models of online media" (M. Wijermars, personal communication, October 24, 2018). Hence, money plays an important part in this process. Or as Wijermars put it: "(…) if you have a very exciting title, of course, people will click, and if you click, an advertisement pops up. In this way, those media services earn money" (M. Wijermars, personal communication, October 24, 2018). Accordingly, the Internet Research Agency in Saint Petersburg – the so-called troll factory – is not the only place where information is made up. There are examples of troll factories in Southeastern Europe, where entire villages run on the spread of fake news (Alexander & Silverman, 2016). These people do not have direct political objectives. They produce fake news because it constitutes an income structure. When people can earn money from something, they will exploit it, Wijermars explains. All this information spreads even faster than people can read it: "So if you post a tweet, then it is spread within an hour. You may want to get this of the air, but that is no longer possible" (M. Wijermars, personal communication, October 24, 2018). To illustrate, Wijermars refers to the statement Dutch Minister of Defense Ank Bijleveld made during the broadcast of a Dutch television program. To the question 'whether the Netherlands is embroiled in a cyber-war with Russia', Bijleveld answered: "Yes, that is what it is' (Van den Dool, 2018). However, shortly after the minister made this statement, a spokesperson nuanced the statement by saying that it was meant figuratively and that we are not genuinely in a cyber-war with Russia.

> *But in the meantime, I see it in the headlines of all Russian media: 'a Dutch minister says: "We are in a cyberwar"'. Whether that was done deliberately or not, I don't know. But there is a lot of impact, also because it spreads so rapidly* (M. Wijermars, personal communication, October 24, 2018)

According to Wijermars, the second step – the nuance – is missing, because the statement has already been made. One has to be careful, because information spreads rapidly, sorting very large effects. Additionally, the fuzziness that may arise as a result of the spread of fake news only exists by the grace of its consumers. After all, spreading fake news to deliberately mislead people only makes sense when the information is *consumed* by people. Fake news can be spread to reach a certain goal, but because this process involves people, that goal might not be reached in the end. On the other hand, the unintended spread of fake news – misinformation –, may result in a certain outcome that is considered suspicious in Western countries, without this being Russia's intention. This is what makes it so unpredictable and enormously dynamic.

In the following paragraph, using an event in Paris in the spring of 2015, I will illustrate how this dynamic of disinformation can be misused and how rapidly a certain story spreads.

3.3   Laying false trails in Paris

On Wednesday 8 April 2015, the French television network TV5Monde just launched a new channel for promoting the French lifestyle. In the evening, TV5Monde director Yves Bigot was having dinner in a restaurant near the Arc de Triomphe to celebrate the success of the day when suddenly his phones start to ring intensely. The television network broadcasting in 200 different countries, was struck by an unprecedented cyber-attack, taking all the twelve channels of the air, and turning the screens black. Subsequently, various threats appeared on the social media services and websites of the broadcasting company (Mulder & Versluis, 2018). The threats – directed to then French president François Hollande and the French troops – came from a so-called 'CyberCaliphate' that would act on behalf of the Islamic State.

What should have been a very special day, turned out to be a catastrophe and would have endangered the existence of the television network. However, the hackers made a mistake. They forgot that because of the launch of the new TV channel, video streaming specialists were still in the building at the time that the hacking attack was carried out. One of these specialists very rapidly discovered the source of the attack and plugged the relevant computer from the internet, immediately stopping the attack (Mulder & Versluis, 2018). Directly after the attacks, a thorough investigation was started that would take two years.

The investigation uncovered two important things. First, the attack was indeed carried out to destroy TV5Monde. The hackers did not just want to sabotage the social network services by publishing messages or cut the network from airing. It was their long-term goal to completely shut down the organisation (Mulder & Versluis, 2018). Second and most important, the investigation pointed out that the hacking attack could not be traced back to Islamic State, the traces led to Moscow. The cyber-attack appeared to be carried out by a group of Russian hackers called 'Pawn Storm', recently also known under the name 'Fancy Bear' (Mulder & Versluis, 2018). Pawn Storm is a group that has repeatedly been associated with the Russian military secret service (Mulder & Versluis, 2018; Wintour, 2018). It has been stated that the hacking group is funded by the Russian government (Team Crowdstrike, 2016).

Why did Russian hackers attack a cultural television network in Paris? According to Russian historian Valery Solovei, the EU had made Russia furious. In the Dutch documentary *Schimmenspel – Poetin's onzichtbare oorlog* (Mulder & Versluis, 2018)*,* he explains that Russia was particularly furious about the EU's attempt to bring Ukraine into the Western sphere of influence. In the eyes of the Kremlin, involving Ukraine in the Western sphere of influence does not only constitute a military threat, but it is also defying the geopolitical identity of Russia – Ukraine is considered as part of the Russian sphere of influence (Mulder & Versluis, 2018). However, the problem is that the means that the current Russian leadership can use to respond, are limited. Although it tried to do this in the shape of contra sanctions, it cannot exert economic pressure. Exerting direct military pressure is also impossible because that would bring about a direct war with the West (as far as the devious annexation of Crimea, the indirect military support of separatists in Eastern Ukraine and the downing of flight MH-17 seriously

deteriorated international relations). However, the means that the Kremlin can use, are blackmail, posing threats, information weapons, and cyber-attacks, and it tries all the means possible.

The above-described case shows how sophisticated Russian hackers carry out cyber-attacks. They conveniently respond to pre-existing unrest in a society, which proves to be very effective. Notably, France was still in shock after terrorists attacked satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo in Paris three months earlier when radical Muslims seem to have committed another attack with France as a target. It was therefore that the attack had a large impact and was taken very seriously by the French government (Mulder & Versluis, 2018). The Russian hackers successfully caused turmoil in French society: French ministers visited the head office to publicly show their support to the journalists of TV5, armed guards were stationed around the building (Mulder & Versluis, 2018), and French media groups organised an emergency meeting (Chrisafis & Gibbs, 2015).

Moreover, despite the investigation, a lot of people still believe that this attack is related to IS, because of the earlier attacks on Charlie Hebdo (Mulder & Versluis, 2018). Hence, many people in France still hold Muslims responsible for the attack on TV5, which was exactly the goal of these Russian hackers (Mulder & Versluis, 2018). According to Geers (2015), there are some motivations for Russian hackers to carry out this attack. For one, this may have been a retribution for the way in which TV5Monde has been reporting on the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Second, this 'false flag operation' would have been carried out to divert the attention of Western national security planners from Russia's actions in Ukraine, by making them focus on the actions of Islamic State. Third – and as I will explain in chapter 4, perhaps the most plausible scenario –, Russia would have deliberately chosen to be designated as perpetrator, to show that it is able to both lay and pull off again such a false trail, and to refine its ability to invade and shut down an entire broadcasting company. To conclude, an effective and disruptive attack was carried out on European soil by hackers, without the involvement of military forces.

How this event caused turmoil in French society, reminds me of a case, recalled by two of my interlocutors – Olga Davydova-Minguet and Andrey Makarychev (see the selection of events as explained in § 2.3). In the next section, I will explain how this so-called Lisa case caused turmoil in Germany.

3.4   Instrumentalising the migrant crisis in Europe

Berlin, January 2016. A 13-year old girl from a Russian-German family is on her way to school but disappears. When the girl reported missing by her parents shows up more than one day later, she states that she has been abducted and raped by men of Arab descent (Peters, 2016). The narrative turned out to be fake as the German police discovered that she had been with a friend that night. However, the case was not closed yet.

Despite the effort of the German authorities and media to rapidly debunk the 'rape' story, it was picked up by a journalist from the First Russian TV after which domestic media extensively reported

about it (Meister, 2016). Even Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov endorsed the news and spread it as being the truth. He politicised the case by publicly accusing the German authorities of misconduct in the investigations and stating that he hoped that the German authorities would not cover up reality to secure domestic interests (RFE/RL, 2016). In addition to the Russian domestic media, Russian foreign media like RT (formerly known as Russia Today), Sputnik and RT Deutsch, extensively covered the story (Meister, 2016). Subsequently, a social media storm was put in motion. The news about the alleged rape was spread by social media and right-wing groups (Meister, 2016). Through personal invitations on Facebook, demonstrations were organised in Berlin and many other cities in Germany. Notably, many people from the Russian diaspora all across Germany (Germany houses one of the largest Russian speaking communities in non-Russian speaking countries) took to the streets to participate in these demonstrations (Meister, 2016). Russian foreign media services in Germany covered the demonstrations, eventually bringing the news to mainstream media in Germany (Meister, 2016).

However, how could Russia mobilise the Russian speaking community in Germany so fast? According to Olga Davydova-Minguet – Postdoctoral Fellow at the Karelian Institute, University of Eastern Finland, and expert in Media, memory and diaspora politics – a connection between Russian disinformation campaigns and Russian diaspora in European states can be drawn:

> *This is how it works. And this is possible, of course, when this diaspora is well organised, when it is well mobilised, when it is connected with these Russian media. You can do whatever you want. You tell them that "well our girl was raped, or our boy was killed", and people go to the streets.* (O. Davydova-Minguet, personal communication, October 15, 2018).

Indeed, the size of the Russian disinformation campaign around the Lisa case shows the effort that has been done to discredit the authorities in Germany and how Russia capitalises on already existing tensions over the migrant crisis, not only in Germany but in the EU in general (Meister, 2016; Janda, 2016). In line with this, Professor Andrey Makarychev made clear to me that Russia is exploring its resources in mobilising Russian speakers. Or as he put it:

> *Russia is just trying to see whether Russian minorities can be mobilised, whether they are mobilisable in principle based on anything, a death, a rape, something which is considered to be unfair, something that might, you know, energise and become a trigger for people who might go to the streets.* (A. Makarychev, personal communication, November 5, 2018).

Vital in the Kremlin's rapid mobilization of Russian diaspora, is according to Giampiero Giacomello – Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Bologna –, the existence of cyberspace: "it allows them room for manoeuvre that they didn't have in the past" (G. Giacomello, personal communication, Mach 27, 2019). Another important ingredient that made the Lisa case so effective, was the recently raging media storm around a large number of sexual assaults in Cologne and other German cities, during the 2015-16 New Year's Eve presumably by migrants (Smale, 2016). However, ultimately,

the key question is: why did the hand of the Kremlin stretch out to Germany?

The annexation of Crimea, the support of separatists in the war in Donbas, and the downing of flight MH-17 have made Germany realise that Russia is capable of doing anything to preserve its sphere of influence, which strained the ties between Germany and Russia (RFL/RE, 2016). The Lisa case shows the mobilisation of the Russian speaking community in because of Germany's leading role in the Ukraine crisis, and chancellor Angela Merkel's stance and sanctions against Russia (RFL/RE, 2016). The above-condensed case illustrates that Russia has the means to constrain a foreign society by mobilising the Russian speaking community, and how a pro-Russian disinformation campaign works. Moreover, it shows that an already existing tension in the EU, as the migrant crisis, can be used as a political instrument by an outside actor.

However, France and Germany were not the only places where the agency of the Kremlin popped up.

3.5   A highly toxic appearance in the United Kingdom

In the fall of 2018, the United Kingdom and Europe got shocked by a sudden event. Twelve years after the poisoning of former FSB and KGB officer Alexander Litvinenko in London, former Russian spy who had defected to the British side, Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia, got into a critical state after they had come into contact with a police 'unknown substance' in the southern English city of Salisbury (De Volkskrant, 2018). They turned out to be poisoned by a so-called Novichok nerve agent, a furtive chemical weapon that was manufactured between 1971 and 1993, respectively by the Soviet Union and Russia (Knip, 2018). Although the culprit of this attack remains unknown, the finger is pointed to Russia. Two Russian agents of Russia's military intelligence agency are under suspicion of this attempted murder – which Russia denies (Brüggman, 2018). According to the Kremlin, the two men were just tourists who came to the United Kingdom to see the famous Salisbury Cathedral (Harding, 2018). However, why is a former Russian spy being attacked in the United Kingdom?

Whether this is the long reach of the Kremlin to gain influence in British society, remains debatable. Fact is, however, that this attack effectively sparked a geopolitical domino effect, which reminds us about the general geopolitical tensions between East and West – because of Russia's actions in the post-Soviet space. In response to this event, the United Kingdom expelled twenty-three Russian diplomats, which triggered other countries to do the same. In turn, Russia ordered Britain to reduce its diplomatic staff in Russia to the same level as Russian diplomats in the UK (Walker, 2018). Strikingly, after the expulsion of all these diplomats, some people are making excuses for Moscow, arguing that there is a lack of evidence that the Kremlin orchestrated the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter (Brüggman, 2018). The suspects in this attempted murder case are two agents of Russia's GRU military intelligence agency.

The peculiarities of the Salisbury poisoning are quite complicated in terms of history, and how Russia seems to deal in general with former spies, a deeper explanation for this action would, therefore,

require additional research. However, this is not the reason why I (though briefly) touch upon this case here. At the most basic level, this case is relevant and deeply disturbing, because it concerns the devious poisoning of a citizen on the territory of a European state. Thus, a Russian internal issue has been dealt with on the territory of a different state. "The logic of security services took the upper hand, over the logic of spheres of influence" (Researcher from University of Tartu, personal communication, November 22, 2018). It perhaps did not result into the infiltration of the British public opinion, but it certainly caused anti-reactions elsewhere – a geopolitical domino-effect. Fact is that this is an event where the long arm of the Kremlin – again – pops up outside the borders of the Russian Federation. And the most striking aspect of this case is that Moscow seems to get away with such behaviour.

The events I have described so far, show Russia's agency emerging – in a hidden way in Eastern Ukraine, by shooting down a plane above the same territory, but also by capitalising on already existing tensions in foreign societies. But besides these manifestations, there is one aspect of Russia's current geopolitical behaviour that I did not touch upon until now. However, this might be one of the latest developments in Russia's history of trying to interfere in foreign societies

3.6   The nexus between Russia and the European far-right

In the fall of 2018, the Metropol Hotel in Moscow is the venue for a business meeting. Involved are six men – three Russians, three Italians. During a one-hour and fifteen-minute negation, the six men allegedly discuss the details of an oil deal to be made. However, this appears not to be a typical oil deal between the two countries.

Among the attendees of the meeting is Gianluca Savoini, a member of Italian far-right party Lega Nord. Savoini is said to be the henchman of Lega Nord leader, Deputy Prime Minister of Italy and Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini (Nardelli, Kozyreva & Elder, 2019). The two have been working together for twenty years. As a member of Lega Nord since its foundation in 1991, Savoini used to be the spokesperson of the Lega leader. He is in Moscow on this October morning to covertly discuss the details of a deal – comprising the financial support for the Italian far-right party, under the guise of Russian oil money (Nardelli et al., 2019).

In recent years, the awareness of a stronger growing nexus between Russia and the far-right in European states has increased. The existing tensions around growing security threats and fears of the 'Islamization of Europe' and the difficulties encountered by the established parties to deal with these dynamics, result in growing support for nationalist and populist parties (Polyakova & Shekhovtsov, 2016). Regimes like Russia are welcoming this nationalist and anti-EU stance (Polyakova & Shekhovtsov, 2016), but for the time being, there has been no convincing evidence to prove a hidden political purpose of these so-called commercial transactions (Nardelli et al., 2019). However, some examples are showing the obviousness of these 'deals'.

Although I focus in this research on recent events in Europe (as explained in § 2.3), there is one case that cannot be left unmentioned when analysing Russia's geopolitical behaviour. Within the context

of Russia's strengthening ties with right-wing politicians, the case of Russia's alleged involvement in the 2016 US presidential elections – co-determining the victory of Donald Trump –, immediately crosses my mind. In short, in 2016, Russian hackers allegedly broke into the website of the Democratic National Committee, capturing incriminating information from personal emails of Hillary Clinton – Donald Trump's opponent in the presidential election campaign – and other democrats (Ziegler, 2018). Subsequently, the leaked information appeared in the mainstream media and catalysed the already in the US existing discord (Ziegler, 2018). An important motive, for carrying out this hacking attack was to reduce the chance that Clinton would win the elections, involving a continuation of the economic sanctions imposed on Russia, and to increase the chances of the victory of the Russian-friendly Trump (Ziegler, 2018). Because of his isolationist – 'America First' – approach, Trump is much less of a threat to Russia's identity as a major power than Clinton's global and engaged approach (Ziegler, 2018). On the longer term, by exposing the shortcomings of the US electoral and party systems, this hacking attack contributes to Russia's desire of restoring its position as a major political player, as it subverts in this way the legitimacy of the USA as a mature democracy (Ziegler, 2018). Admittedly, an entire analysis of this case would require a different study, yet this alleged Russian involvement in the US elections seems very similar to the events where Russia's agency recently emerged in European societies.

For one, in 2014, one year after Front National Leader Marin Le Pen publicly showed her support for the annexation of Crimea by Russia, she received 11 million euro through a loan arrangement with several Russian banks, including one that is close to the Russian government. According to Le Pen, the deal would have had no underlying political interest (Nardelli et al., 2019). Secondly, in the run-up to the Brexit referendum in 2016, Arron Banks – the most important financial supporter of Brexit – negotiated very lucrative gold and diamond investments that were, surprisingly enough, offered through the Russian embassy in London. Subsequently, Banks would have donated 8 million pounds to the Leave.EU campaign but denies ever closing the above-described investment deals (Nardelli et al., 2019). Besides these allegedly politically charged deals, there are other suspicions. Heinz-Christian Strache – leader of Austrian far-right party FPÖ – had to resign because he was caught while discussing contracts for Russian campaign support (Nardelli et al., 2019). And finally, there are also suspicions that The Kremlin provided financial support to Hungarian far-right party Jobbik (Polyakova & Shekhovtsov, 2016). In short, all these kinds of deals seem to indirectly support political campaigns of the far-right in Europe and the politicians involved deny any political implications of these transactions. In return, the European far-right leaders show their support to the Kremlin, varying from attending Putin's birthday and other celebrations, to contributing to the legitimisation of the false referendum that heralded the annexation of Crimea (Polyakova & Shekhovtsov, 2016). Far-right parties in The Netherlands exhibit similar behaviour. For example, FvD leader Thierry Baudet and PVV leader Geert Wilders take a friendly approach towards Russia and criticise other parties for what they call 'hysterical Russophobia' (Hendrickx, 2019). Moreover, Baudet is in favour of renewed investigations into the MH-17 disaster, as these would not be independent and convincing (Van der Noordaa & Van de Ven, 2019[b]).

Recently, however, evidence emerged, proving the underlying political interests of such deals between Russia and the European far-right. In July 2019, journalists from BuzzFeed News could obtain an audiotape with a recording of the conversations held during the meeting in Moscow, as mentioned above. The recording brings a couple of striking issues to light. One of the topics under discussion is the constitution of a 'great alliance' of pro-Russian nationalist parties across the continent – concerning Front National in France, Alternative Für Deutschland in Germany and the Austrian FPÖ (Nardelli et al., 2019). During the negotiations, Savoini proclaims that Lega Nord wants to change Europe. The by them envisioned Europe maintains much closer ties with Russia, to preserve its sovereignty. The Russians on the tape endorse this view. The recording shows that the Russians have faith in Salvini and consider him the 'head' of all European far-right movements (Nardelli et al., 2019). But most importantly, the recordings reveal the possible closing of a financial deal between Russia and the Lega Nord party of Salvini, by the Russians described as the 'European Trump'.

The recording shows that the deal – comprising the financial support from Russia to Lega Nord– is discussed down to the smallest details, to hide the real purpose of the transaction. First of all, the financial support will not directly be transferred to Lega Nord. It will take place under the guise of a discount on oil sales. Besides, the six men carefully discuss via which company the oil sales will take place, what banks will be involved and what type of fuel will be sold under the deal (Nardelli et al., 2019). According to calculations of BuzzFeed News, after one year, Lega would receive 65 million dollars out of the discount mechanism from this secret deal (Nardelli et al., 2019). Notably, the Italians had calculated how much they would need to sustain a campaign, declaring the political intentions of this agreement. All those present in the Metropol Hotel that morning seem to agree on this secret deal to financially support the Lega campaign for May's European elections, seriously bringing into question the integrity of the May 2019 European elections (Nardelli et al., 2019). Notably, Salvini – not taking part in the negotiations in the Metropol Hotel – was presumably aware of the meeting as he was in Moscow at that time (Nardelli et al., 2019). However, he strongly denies ever receiving any financial support from foreign governments (Nardelli et al., 2019). Finally, the tape also shows that the Russian authorities must have been aware of the negotiations, as the Russian attendees of the meeting several times indirectly referred to more senior figures – not present at the meeting in the Metropol Hotel (Nardelli et al., 2019).

To conclude, the above-described case provides a couple of striking insights. For one, it provides evidence for the existence of a relationship between Russia and far-right parties in the EU, to with Salvini's powerful Lega Nord party. Secondly, it reveals the political purposes of the relevant deal and the ambitions of both parties – empower nationalist movements and destabilise the EU. Moreover, it shows how far both parties are willing to go to conceal this deal. The reason for Russia to close a deal like this is to destabilise, if not, to get rid of the EU. Anti-EU politicians like Le Pen are committed to lifting the sanctions against Russia (BBC, 2017). Hence, by cleverly capitalising on already existing tendencies in the EU – in this case growing anti-EU and anti-migrant sentiments – Russia can reach out

and support anti-EU parties within Europe (Bellingcat, 2017). In this way, by interfering in elections, Russia can undermine the EU from the inside, as it can strengthen the position of extremist and far-right parties who are strongly against NATO membership, or at least believe that sanctions against Russia should be lifted (Ziegler, 2018). The same applies the other way around: anti-migration and anti-EU parties like Lega Nord – the EU has a weak migration policy and is too powerful according to Lega – are strengthening the ties with other anti-EU parties, including Russia. Hence, this case shows, although perhaps for pragmatic (seeking rapprochements in a common enemy) instead of ideological reasons, that anti-EU forces outside *and* within the EU are uniting to undermine the EU. Lastly and perhaps most worryingly, the fact that Russia capitalizes on already existing in the EU anti-migrant sentiments, that it wants the French society to believe that (shortly after the Charlie Hebdo attacks) Islamic State attacked French broadcasting company TV5Monde and that it used the migrant crisis to mobilize Russians all across Germany, to undermine the unity of the EU, may result into an increase of those anti-migrant sentiments, which in turn might create a call for stricter immigration policies and stronger borders.

Chapter 4: BORDERING THROUGH SEEMINGLY OMNISPRESENT BORDERSCAPES

In recent years, we have seen how Russia's behaviour outside its borders increasingly made the news, causing turmoil, anti-reactions and precautionary measures. Several scholars therefore referred back to the type of geopolitics that Russia was carrying out during the Cold War (Kandiyoti, 2015; Kroenig, 2015; Monaghan, 2015). In a sense, this is not astonishing, since people usually try to capture a new phenomenon in an existing frame. By doing so, one is continually trying to reduce the new to the familiar. Yet, I would argue, this is impossible, since history is unique – the present is always subject to new (combinations of) factors or new circumstances, inevitably creating a situation different from the previous one.

The turmoil caused by Russia's current agency beyond borders might be reminiscent of the foreign policies that it carried out during the period of the Cold War, but I contend that one cannot simply label this as 'the New Cold War'. I diagnose some radical changes in the geopolitical behaviour of the Kremlin, making it fundamentally different from the period of the Cold War.

After diving into a series of events where Russia's spheres of influence recently emerged, a combination of two theoretical perspectives within Border Studies – the academic debate around the politicisation of borderscapes and the debate around the omnipresence of the border – seems tailored to conceptually interpret Russia's current geopolitical behaviour. In this chapter, by connecting the aforementioned theoretical debates, and by applying them to Russia's current geopolitical behaviour, I aim to theorize the way in which Russia currently carries out its geopolitics beyond seemingly omnipresent (in)visible borders and border landscapes, by providing answers to the questions that correspond to my research objectives. In the first section (§ 4.1), I answer the question: 'how does Russia carry out its geopolitics beyond (in)visible borders and border landscapes?', after which I will formulate an answer to the question: 'how does Russia's current geopolitical behaviour differ from the period of the Cold War?' (§ 4.2).

4.1   Re-politicisation of borderscapes

The theoretical debates within Border Studies centre around the concepts of borders(capes), boundaries, frontiers, border regions and so on. This 'vast and thriving' field delves into the widely different, sometimes incompatible, and constantly shifting definitions of the border (Rosello & Wolfe, 2017). In contrast to the narrative that because of globalisation the nation-state is on its return, and the world is changing into a place without borders (Ohmae, 1995 in: Paasi, 2009), in the 1990s, the study of borders has undergone a 'renaissance' (Newman, 2006). Instead of the classical focus on borders as a demarcating line – seeing borders as a *fait accompli* (Anderson, O'Dowd, & Wilson, 2002) –, border scholars now focus on the border 'area', through which socio-spatial and cultural distinctions are made (Newman & Paasi, 1998; Brambilla, 2015). Furthermore, by now it has been recognised that the age of

globalisation has resulted not in a borderless world, but a world wherein discourses of rebordering, securitisation, and social closure and exclusion are rising (Rumford, 2010). The concept of the *border* does not refer to a natural nor a neutral line, it refers to an equally social, political and discursive construct (Paasi, 2005), always under the influence of change, and in fact to a 'temporary line' (Newman and Paasi, 1998), or no 'line' at all.

Accordingly, Van Houtum and Van Naerssen (2002) introduce an alternative approach to understanding the border as a natural line. They look at the border as an active verb; *bordering*. Their conceptualisation of the fluidness and ongoing nature of the border captures the social practice of spatial differentiation. Moreover, they contend that one should not only take the demarcation into consideration, but also look at the way people experience borders in their minds, the transformation process of the border (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002). This so-called bordering includes the ongoing process of legitimisation and justification of the location and demarcation of the border. Bordering is seen as an expression of people's own claimed distinct, and exclusive territory, identity and sovereignty (Van Houtum, 2010). Nevertheless, the question remains *who* is doing the bordering – is it an act, solely carried out by a state, or are there other groups in society that have the agency to do this? Political geographer Chris Rumford (2012) states for example, that a constant *borderwork* – the ability of ordinary people to construct borders – is taking place.

Russia's current geopolitical behaviour does not seem to be a matter of borders in the sense of *frontiers* – this imperialist term literally means 'what lies in front of us' (Kristof, 1959), and concerns the continuous expansion of one's empire, literally by shifting the borders of one's territory – nor a *border*, nor a *boundary*.[9] The concept at stake here does not seem to be *colonialism* either; Russia's geopolitical behaviour in the present is not about expanding or preserving authority over other people or territories to increase economic power. How the diplomatic relations between countries have developed nowadays, raised by some the question whether one can speak of ´The Return of Geopolitics´, suggesting the renaissance of power plays in international relations (Mead, 2014). Although Russia's geopolitical behaviour shows some similarities with this perspective – one could state that: "territory, space and geographies are being actively (re)formulated by those in power" (Svarin, 2016, p. 129) –, it cannot fully be captured within the paradigm of *classical geopolitics*, as the character of this geopolitical behaviour and the circumstances of today's world have changed. The notion of *sphere of influence* does not seem to be the most appropriate term either, as what we are facing in the case of Russia is not just about spheres of influence, it is about *emerging* spheres of influence, potentially popping up anywhere.

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[9] For some background on Soviet perceptions of borders, the article of Akihiro Iwashita (2016) 'Borders Inside and Outside Alliances: Russia's Eastern Frontiers During the Cold War and After' is useful. Additionally, the book 'Near abroad: Putin, the west, and the contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus' by political geographer Gerard Toal (2017), and the article 'Russia's Policy Toward Compatriots in the Former Soviet Union' by political scientist Igor Zevelev (2008), are both widely read works, focusing on the relations with former Soviet States and the Russian project that aims to protect Russians or Russian speakers living outside the borders of Russia.

But what theoretical insight is then a so-called 'fit' for the conceptual interpretation of this geopolitical behaviour beyond borders? My suggestion would be that the sensitive border landscape where Russia's spheres of influence currently seem to move through, is not a border, but a *borderscape*, in which there is constantly activity.

Rajaram & Grundy-Warr (2007), provide with their concept of *borderscapes* another alternative, if not a complement, to the notion of *bordering* and viewing borders as an ongoing process. This notion is based on the conception of different *scapes* as coined by Indian sociologist Arjun Appadurai in 1990.[10] Recalling the origin of the word 'landscape' by using the -scape suffix – this suffix is derived from the verb 'to scape' (Dutch: scheppen), literally 'to give shape' (Brambilla, 2015, p. 10) –, Appadurai defines five different, deeply disjunctive and unpredictable transnational and cultural *'scapes'*, dimensions or flows – (a) *ethnoscapes*, (b) *technoscapes*, (c) *financescapes,* (d) *ideoscapes* and (e) *mediascapes* respectively –, that are interrelated with each other, yet within every scape, multiple realities exist (Appadurai, 1990). Appadurai uses the –scape suffix far from its original meaning, to point to the fluidity, the irregular shape, the constantly shifting, the dependence and the perspective of these scapes – a landscape can look different, depending on how you look at it and who is looking at it. Appadurai's scapes are deeply perspectival constructs, subject to historical, linguistic and political contexts of various actors, like nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, sub-national groupings and movements, but also intimate face-to-face groups such as villages, neighbourhoods and families. Together, these scapes contribute to the global exchange and spreading of culture and ideas, but power and influence as well.

Borderscapes, according to Rajaram and Grundy-Warr, are a manner to 'think through, about and of alternatives' to dominant landscapes of power (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2007). These landscapes are more than just a representation of sites where conflict and struggle take place; as a matter of fact, they are vital elements for an analysis of power and politics (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2007), they can be used to describe the spaces through which borders run (Dell'Agnese & Szary, 2015), and in which borderwork can take place (Rumford, 2010). However, borderscapes do not necessarily indicate spaces where physical borders run, they are "(…) not contained in a specific space" and "(…) recognisable not in a physical location but tangentially in struggles to clarify inclusion from exclusion" (Dell'Agnese & Szary, 2015, p. 6).

In line with Russia's suddenly emerging spheres of influence, borderscapes do not necessarily represent visible spaces; moreover, they are constantly evolving (Brambilla, 2015), and contain a certain degree of temporality (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2007). Through the lens of the borderscapes concept, one can understand borders as the overlapping of socio-spatial and political practices that take place

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[10] For the full disquisition of these scapes, dimensions or flows, see: Appadurai, A. (1990). Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy. *Theory, culture & society, 7*(2-3), 295-310.

beyond the borderline (Brambilla, 2015). It has the critical potential to explain the complex and dynamic relationships of a landscape – like Russia´s border landscape – wherein old boundaries persist (perceived borders of the former Soviet Union) and increasing numbers of new forms, functions and practices of borders of the globalised world arise (Brambilla, 2015), since it resembles "(…) a fluid terrain of a multitude of political negotiations, claims, and counter-claims that are actualised at the level of everyday practice" (Brambilla, 2015, p. 139).

With the introduction of this concept, as Brambilla (2015) argues, border landscapes became depoliticised. The power to exercise the act of bordering is no longer just top-down determined (as was the case during imperialist times), it went from hegemonic to counter-hegemonic borderscapes (Brambilla, 2015). This means that, instead of only a few actors having the power to bring about change (hegemonic borderscapes), the border landscape became a bottom-up and joint design (Van Houtum & Eker, 2015; Pijnenburg, 2019) where everyone can help to (re)create or give shape to the borderland (counter-hegemonic borderscapes).

Borderscapes is one of the newest paradigms in Border Studies, but it has been framed somewhat phlegmatic in the existing literature. The notion is often understood as a positive site for opportunities, focusing on the attractiveness of differences and the possibilities of new connections at the border. As a planning concept, instead of seeing the border as a point where everything ends, this notion is seeing the border as a beginning (Eker & Van Houtum, 2013; Buoli, 2015), or even as a resource for the creation of cross-border metropolitan regions (Sohn, 2014). But it is also a still emancipating concept, offering room for re-interpretation. I want to use the room for re-interpretation to frame the concept of borderscapes more politically, as what we are facing in the case of Russia's geopolitical behaviour does not concern a bottom-up and joint design, the infiltration in Eastern Ukraine, the downing of flight MH-17, hacking a commercial broadcasting company in France (and sow the idea that the Islamic State was behind the attack), instrumentalising the migrant crisis in Europe, the poisoning of a former Russian spy, and the rise of a nexus between the Kremlin and the European far-right in order to undermine the EU, concerns a *politicisation*. Hence, in the case of Russia, borderscapes are being *re-politicised.*

Perhaps, this is therefore a revival of the notion of *scapes*, as coined by Arjun Appadurai (1990). By now it is recognised that borderlands are highly contentious zones (Brambilla, Laine & Bocchi, 2016), they have even been described as "an imagined geographical space where, in the eyes of metropolitan actors and agencies, the characteristics of brutality, excess and breakdown predominate" (Duffield, 2001, p. 309). In a similar vein, it has been recognised that borders – understood as borderscapes – intersect with violence and conflict (Brambilla & Jones, 2019). Accordingly, borderscapes in the case of Russia's agency can be linked to the notion of *political spaces* as described by Balibar (2009) in his paper called "Europe as borderland'. Political spaces, he argues, tend to explain the relationship between the constitution of political power and the control of space(s) (Balibar, 2009), and are therefore relevant when analysing the power of border landscapes. The notion of the landscape forms, according to Rajaram and Grundy-Warr (2007), an essential construct in understanding power

and politics. Jones, Jones and Woods (as cited in Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2007, p. xxvi) clearly explain this essentialism:

> *Landscapes are powerful because of the role they play in structuring everyday lives. (...) we refer to landscapes that work in this way as landscapes of power. A landscape of power operates as a political device because it reminds people of who is in charge, or what the dominant ideology or philosophy is, or it helps to engender a sense of place identity that can reinforce the position of a political leader.*

More specifically, this is about the power that can be carried out through borderlands – beyond the meaning of static lines in the sand – and the control of spaces that is associated with this. The notion of *ideological hegemony* relates to boundaries and border spaces, in the sense that they can be understood as dimensions of a specific form of hegemonic control and ideology (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, 2007). In this way, borders power and landscapes can be linked by the politicisation of the borderscapes notion.

Taking the notion of borderscapes as a theoretical point of departure to interpret Russia's current geopolitical behaviour, requires clarification of what borderscapes mean in the light of Russia's geopolitical behaviour, and why borderscapes become re-politicised in this case. In other words, how political power and the control of space(s) (Balibar, 2009) are linked. Importantly, because borderscapes are social constructs, they are shapeable, scapeable or malleable. Using this room for manoeuvre to render the concept applicable to the context of my research, I consider borderscapes as (temporary) openings or channels through which an actor can exert political practices. Hence, in the case of Russia's geopolitical behaviour, scapes do not concern transnational cultural flows, it involves the construction of channels or borderscapes – creating or 'scaping' space –, through which an actor can exercise political power on foreign territories and in foreign societies, and eventually can control space (Balibar, 2009).

Essential here is to determine *who* has the agency to create these borderscapes. In other words, who is the borderworker? In the case of Russia's geopolitical behaviour, borderscapes constitute a certain restricting or bordering social reality in the shape of the constant present possibility of a sphere of influence to emerge. This generates power for the borderworker and suppression for those who are subject to this borderwork. Accordingly, in this research, the concept of borderscapes serves the theorisation of a geopolitical reality in which power is exercised through borderscapes: bordering through borderscapes. Bordering, in this sense, includes controlling an area, not by means of invading or possessing it, but rather through suddenly emerging spheres of influence and the power that can be obtained in this way. However, this does not necessarily include new borderscapes. Power may also be exercised through pre-existing landscapes. In the case of Russia's political borderscapes, the landscapes of (social) media and internet are vital elements in the way in which the Kremlin can obtain power (Aro, 2016). Importantly, these suddenly emerging spheres of influences cause countries to take precautionary measures, based solely on alleged Russian actions. How power can be obtained through political borderscapes, how this results in bordering, and for who, will be the topic under discussion in § 4.2.

Borderscapes, I would argue, can be used to explain the general form or 'syntax' of a situation. In the case of Russia's geopolitical behaviour, borderscapes refer to spheres of influence, and how in general power can be exercised to reconfigure a particular territory. The concept of borderscapes is relevant because it can be used to explain the general form of Russia's geopolitical behaviour in the present. Hence, one could also argue that such a concept is not only applicable to Russia, as the United States and NATO seem to do something similar. This is about the syntax of a particular situation, but not about the specifics or 'semantics' – how something happens. Accordingly, I need to find a concept or theoretical insight, that deals more specifically with Russia's geopolitical behaviour, being able to explain something about what makes Russia's geopolitical behaviour so unique. What seem to be the specifics of these political borderscapes of Russia?

After analysing a series of events where Russia's geopolitical behaviour in the present came to the surface, I could distinguish a pattern. I contend that the most remarkable characteristic of Russia's geopolitical behaviour in the present is its ability to potentially pop up anywhere, creating fuzziness. Besides, it appears to be rather difficult to appoint Russia as the perpetrator of these acts, because in most of the events, there are no traces directly leading to Moscow. This makes Russia's geopolitical behaviour in the present very rational and calculative, but also rather vague. However, based on my empirical analysis, I contend that the fuzziness caused by these suddenly emerging spheres of influence is intended. Deliberately creating fuzziness seems to be the pattern. Russia's geopolitical behaviour contains a significant degree of *rational vagueness*, as the hand of the Kremlin seems to reach so many places, but Russian involvement is rendered obscure and is therefore difficult to substantiate. It acts in such a calculative way that it can always withdraw and deny any involvement. In the following section (§ 4.2), I will delve deeper into these seemingly omnipresent borderscapes of Russia and the fuzziness and anxiety that this development can bring about.

4.2   The seemingly omnipresence of political borderscapes and the creation of anxiety

Which theoretical approach applies to the story about the seeming omnipresence of Russia's geopolitical agency? In my view, connecting the omnipresence of the border – that there is actually a border, a borderwork, and bordering everywhere – to the politicisation of borderscapes, makes sense for theorizing Russia's agency in the present, as it captures the way in which Russia's current geopolitical behaviour differs from the period of the Cold War – the second objective of this research.

The conceptual shift in the field of Border Studies – from border to bordering –, together with post-9/11 securitisation and rebordering discourses, resulted in borders being understood in a different way. In addition to seeing borders no longer only seen as 'lines in the sand' (Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009), the awareness is created of the world consisting of *global borderlands* (Duffield, 2001; Rumford, 2010, 2012), and *global* or *planetary frontiers* (Bauman, 2002). However, introducing the perspective of global borders is not so much about positing the existence of a new kind of border, it rather is about exploring the impact of globalisation on all types of borders (Rumford, 2010).

Furthermore, by now it is recognised that borderlands are highly contentious zones (Brambilla, Laine & Bocchi, 2016), they have even been described as "an imagined geographical space where, in the eyes of metropolitan actors and agencies, the characteristics of brutality, excess and breakdown predominate" (Duffield, 2001, p. 309). Researching global borders is useful since it "(…) enables us to see the borders `buried' by nation-state borders" (Rumford, 2010, p. 953).

Associated with this, Political philosopher Étienne Balibar (2004ᵃ) introduced the understanding of borders to be '*vacillating*', pointing at the moving and multiplying nature of borders. Borders are vacillating at different points within society, "some of which are not located close to the official international boundary itself" (Brambilla et al., 2016, p. 3), and are in fact everywhere in society (Balibar, 2002, 2004ᵃ, 2004ᵇ; Paasi & Prokkola, 2008). These 'everywhere borders' can also be less visible, for example in the shape of body searching and asking for passports at airports, the paying of tolls and border surveillance (Lyon 2013; Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2009). In this way, borders become really 'dis-located' or even 'ubiquitous' (Balibar, 2004ᵇ). However, borders do not necessarily have to be visible to all to be effective (Rumford, 2012).

Accordingly, the definition of the border went beyond the state territory and has become ubiquitous. It no longer is a line in the sand, exertions of power take place, because of social constructs and social practices. We are continually making borders, in educational systems, hospitals, religious institutions, communication systems, cultural institutions, basically everywhere in society (Paasi, 2009). Hence, a constant bordering, or what Rumford (2012) is calling borderwork is taking place. However, in this research, I draw a connection between the omnipresence of the border and the politicisation of borderscapes, which is in the case of Russia's geopolitical behaviour both a *territorial* and – through Russia's political usage of social media (Aro, 2016) – a *nonterritorial* or digital fact.

Drawing this connection allows to theorise the unique character of Russia's current geopolitical agency – it seems to be potentially popping up everywhere. In this sense, political borderscapes seem to have become *omnipresent*. But besides this characteristic of Russia's agency, connecting the earlier mentioned debates also appears to be tailored to explain another characteristic of Russia's current geopolitical behaviour, involving the background of Russia's current leader. Because Putin is the current leader of the Russian Federation, he may be held responsible for the geopolitics currently carried out by the Kremlin. Since Putin is a former officer of the KGB – the main secret service of the Soviet Union – , his background may partly determine how he rules Russia. Although the related approach of *espionage* and *infiltration* seems to belong to a distant past, Russia's current geopolitical behaviour is also characterised by spreading lies, concealing the truth, sowing doubt and division among opponents, laying false trails, and infiltration in (distant) societies (Brüggmann, 2018). However, the novelty of the current approach, compared to the approach of the secret service back then, is the Kremlin's support for European far-right parties, with which it undermines and eventually tries to break up the European Union.

Interestingly, the fuzziness that originates from the omnipresence of these political borderscapes

– when and where a possible Russian action in the future will take place –, often results in *anxiety*. To theoretically embed this point, I would like to introduce the account of the distinction between fear and anxiety, as put forth by Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard in his book *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) [11]. According to Kierkegaard, anxiety (unlike fear – you are afraid of *something*)*, does not refer to anything specific. It refers to *nothing*. As a result, anxiety has an ambiguous relationship with the object to which it refers: it refers to something that is nothing; fear of nothing (Kierkegaard, Cruysberghs & Taels, 2009). 'Nothing' in this sense, refers to the unexpected, the unknown, the enigmatic, the future, the unsuspected, the fear of the possibility, or even the fear of the possibility of the possibility that something can happen. Here, Kierkegaard draws an interesting connection between anxiety and uncertainty, since anxiety in this sense, refers to something that lies (just) beyond the limits of one's field of vision and is therefore left to one's imagination.

Accordingly, following Kierkegaard's account, the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1977) adds that because anxiety (derived from the Latin word *angustia* – it grabs you by the throat) refers to something that is beyond one's field of vision, it is an oppressive feeling, a narrowing feeling. Lacan argues that anxiety implies a *lack* (in French: manque), as one cannot define this feeling the way one would like to define it. It suffocates you to such an extent that you are less able to define your own story. This approach is very powerful because controlling a foreign territory no longer requires undertaking a military invasion or to spread propaganda. Power is, therefore, not a totalitarian act; you do not torture the other with dominant instruments. Instead, you provide the story ´we might just be there´. And the uncertainty – whether an actor is exercising political power or not – arising as a result of this approach, causes anxiety. In my view, this is very similar to Russia's current geopolitical behaviour.

Nowadays, as described and analysed in chapter 3, Russia's political practices emerged in several places, and under various guises. By supporting separatists and shooting down flight MH-17, Russia's agency appeared and is still smouldering in Eastern Ukraine; by carrying out a hacking attack on TV5Monde, pretending to be Islamic State, the agency of the Kremlin suddenly appeared in Paris; by instrumentalising the migrant crisis in Europe, Russia's sphere of influence became visible in the shape of the mobilization of Russian compatriots all over Germany; by sending two secret agents with a license to kill to the English city of Salisbury, Russia's long arm reached to the United Kingdom; and by financially supporting far-right and anti-EU parties, the Kremlin also mingles in EU politics.

However, it is in these cases not always clear for what purpose Russia's agency emerged in those places. Therefore, at first glance, these events appear to have no connection. I contend, however, that in this series of events a pattern can be distinguished. As a result of the fact that Russia's political practices – political borderscapes – emerged in several places, the Kremlin seems to have created the impression that its agency is omnipresent, which makes the other – in the case of this research the people

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[11] Originally published in Danish as *Begrebet Angst* (1844).

in Europe – think 'the Russians can pop up anytime, anywhere', alike a terrorist act. Whereas it used to be about state territory, Russia currently seems to carry out a form of state terrorism, a significant nuance. This state terrorism is about the fear for the continuous presence of the possibility that something can happen. And this fear is what creates the unease, anxiety in fact. Interestingly, anxiety implies the lack of rationality, yet in this research, I try to rationalise it, as I aim to provide a conceptual interpretation. When the enemy strikes again, is unpredictable. However, I want to show that Russia's agency in the present contains a considerable dimension of calculation.

As previously described (chapter 3), Russia's political borderscapes usually do not include major military invasions; they rather suddenly emerge and disappear in different places. However, they are by no means always or permanently visible. With all those small and strategic appearances of Russia's agency in Europe, the Kremlin tells the story that it is always and everywhere present. This approach does not comprise invading a territory with a large army, it is about doing strategic but small 'injections' of fear to create the story of 'we might just be present'. Subsequently, the public will start spreading this story of fear, making these small injections bigger, eventually creating the story of 'we (Russia) are always there'. Important to note, Russia's agency might not be omnipresent. However, the idea that its agency is omnipresent is sufficient to control another society. As I will explain later, using 'the fear for the invisible' for political purposes, to get back to the accounts of Kierkegaard (1844) and Lacan (1977), is a powerful approach.

During the search for insights that could help to theorise this 'fear for the invisible' – again, my inductive and theoretical explorative approach allows me this –, I discovered the work of Indian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai. In *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (2006), he describes that this strategy of doing small injections is similar to how terrorism works. According to Appadurai, terrorists, or any group whatsoever, do not have the agency to overthrow a country with their small military force. Therefore, they let countries overthrow themselves, by internalising the fear of the other, causing the other to make this fear bigger himself. By doing small injections into societies, people start to create the story that a bomb attack can be committed at any time. And that is precisely what makes terrorism so frightening: the possibility of a terrorist attack seems constantly present. This causes people to take precautionary measures, and it affects their self-esteem, consequently constituting a kind of repressive regime, which was precisely the intention.

For example, in response to the terrorist attacks in Paris of November 2015, then-president Francois Hollande put France under an *état d'urgence* (state of emergency), including a temporary closure of the borders, and calling in 1,500 soldiers to support the police forces in Paris in maintaining order (Hopper, 2015). Only in 2017, after two years and five extensions, the state of emergency expired, after which a counter-terrorism law was approved (RFE/RL, 2017). Terrorism can never achieve this on its own – the fear for a possible terrorist attack to be constantly present –, it merely exists by the grace of people making this story of fear bigger. The fear is the fear itself. And the fear of fear is made bigger than necessary. Consequently, it will always be there, since avoiding specific thoughts make these

thoughts more persistent, or as famous Russian writer and philosopher Fyodor Dostoevsky (1863, p. 49) put it: "Try to pose for yourself this task: not to think of a polar bear, and you will see that the cursed thing will come to mind every minute."

A similar pattern, I would argue, can be distinguished in Russia's geopolitical behaviour. By occasionally appearing in various places, Russia's spheres of influence resemble in fact small injections in geographical space. As previously explained, this creates an oppressive and confusing feeling – anxiety –, because at that very moment you cannot define yourself and the reality in which you are, in the way you would like to define them, as what you are trying to define lies beyond your field of vision. Hence, through suddenly emerging spheres of influence, the anxiety that this brings about, and the power that can be obtained in this way, political power is exercised through political borderscapes. Ultimately, only by doing small strategic injections, small doses of fear, the perception of Russia's agency potentially popping up anytime and anywhere has arisen. I consider political practices that appear on foreign soil – either territorial or digital – as a form of bordering or rather borderscaping, as space is created, through which strategic injections of political power can be exercised beyond borders. The strategic interventions or injections into space, are in this case the borderscapes through which these political practices can be carried out. In this way, constituting power by doing strategic injections into geographical space can be viewed as bordering through political borderscapes, and because we make these injections bigger than they are, these political borderscapes are seemingly omnipresent, constituting the continuous question 'what if ...?' (Lacan, 1977). As you cannot foresee nor anticipate when the next dose or injection will be, it belongs to the imagination, and it becomes easy to fantasise about it. As a result of this, an *imaginative geography* is created (Said, 1979) that can frighten and paralyse people.

Imaginative geographies refer to the way in which images, texts or discourses create a perception of space (Al-Mahfedi, 2011). According to Said, 'imagined' implies 'perceived' and not 'false' or 'made-up'. At the same time, however, this imagination can easily turn into paranoia as well, constituting an ambiguity. Especially in Europe, a kind of anxiety has arisen about something that is invisible, and which appeals to the imagination: the possibility of Russian actions to happen, for example, in the shape of hacking attacks. It is anxiety about the continuous presence of the possibility that something can happen, but without being able to predict or foresee when and where something will happen. Eventually, an imagined geography of anxiety is created.

In the case of Russia's recent agency, it results in Western countries to take precautionary measures. For example, during elections in the Netherlands, it was decided not to use computer systems for the voting, the counting of the votes and the calculation of the results because of fear for Russian hackers (Plasterk, 2017). But precautionary measures have not only been taken at the national level. During the last couple of years, to test the military response in case of a threat, several operations have taken place. In 2016, during a big war game called *Operation Anaconda-2016*, NATO countries simulated a possible attack of Russia in Eastern Europe (Smith, 2016). This military exercise that was

announced as: "a test of cooperation between allied commands and troops in responding to military, chemical and cyber threats", lasted ten days, involved 31,000 troops and thousands of vehicles from twenty-four countries (Smith, 2016). In September 2017, Russia and Belarus carried out a seven-day military exercise – *Zapad (West) 2017* – in Belarus and the Kaliningrad region, involving 12,000 troops (Goncharenko, 2017). Notably, Russia and Belarus seem to have chosen this number of troops very carefully. According to the OSCE's (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) Vienna Document, in the case of a military exercise involving more than 13,000 troops, it is mandatory to admit OSCE observers (OSCE, 2011). Hence, this military test so close to the borders of the European Union could be carried out without being watched by observers from the OSCE. In 2018 *Operation Trident Juncture* took place. The operation simulated an opponent who is attacking NATO-member Norway, to test the rapid intervention force NRF (NATO Response Force), including the so-called flash power of around 5,000 troops (Koelé, 2018). Notably, they established the flash power in 2014, the year that Russia annexed Crimea and openly linked itself with Ukrainian separatists (Koelé, 2018). These troops have to be able to depart to by road, train or plane to a conflict area within forty-eight hours, awaiting reinforcements. Afterwards, in line with article 5 of the NATO Treaty, all allies react with one accord to the aggression against one of the member states. However, since 2014, NATO's collective defence also goes into effect in the case of a cyber-attack (NATO, 2019). Accordingly, a potential cyber-attack was simulated in a fictional African country – *Tytan*. The command centre for the operation was in Tartu (Estonia), as in cyberspace it does not matter where you physically are. This attack was simulated to learn who can do what within NATO (Van Hoorn, 2018). However, not only the geopolitical behaviour of Russia is different, but also the circumstances under which the agency of the Kremlin occurs have drastically changed, compared to the period of the Cold War.

Due to the highly digitalised world of today, it is much harder to turn this story around. In today's world, the public domain is no longer determined by one ruler only; it is co-determined by everyone. Mass media used to be the property of one ruler, but today we are all participants and creators of the public domain. These are the circumstances under which a factory of internet trolls arises, radically distributing ownership among everyone. And this is what makes the use of media for political purposes so fickle and enormously dynamic. During the Cold War, *they* (the rulers) had the agency to broadcast propaganda material – totalitarian movies and media –, which people could easier identify to be propaganda. However, with the rise of the internet and social media, the tools of media production are now in the hands of the people, formerly known as the audience. In addition to this, where there used to be the problem of censorship during the Soviet era, nowadays, people are deliberately flooded with information. According to British-Russian author and television producer Peter Pomerantsev, due to bots, trolls and fake news, producing this information overload, people can no longer distinguish fact from fiction (Heijne, 2019). Today, news spreads or goes *viral*, even faster than people can read it. As a result, the medium has become *radically dispersed.* Hence, not just one story, but a multiplicity of different 'truths' and false stories is being spread, rendering everything even fuzzier. As the cases of the

Twitter storm after MH-17 and of the Russian-German girl in Berlin show: "the influence of a small message can grow when it is repeated" (Aro, 2016, p. 125). But according to Aro (2016), also more tailor-made disinformation is being spread, to reach those people that favour in-depth analyses. These kinds of articles are usually provided with references to other sources of disinformation sites (Aro, 2016). Such disinformation campaigns seem very effective as "most civilians are not psychologically prepared to operate in an info-war climate" (Aro, 2016, p. 127).

On the other hand, this radically dispersed medium is also strongly determined by the revenue models of online media. This concerns *clickbait*, a phenomenon that receives only little attention in the way mainstream media report about cyber influence. The Internet Research Agency in Saint Petersburg – the so-called troll factory – is not the only place where information is made up. There are examples of troll factories in South-eastern Europe, where entire villages run on spreading fake news, without having direct political objectives, they produce fake news because it constitutes an income structure (Alexander & Silverman, 2016). If people can earn money from something, it will be exploited. An ordinary neutral headline will entice significantly fewer people to click, than when an 'exciting' title heads the link to an article.

In sum, because Russia's political borderscapes are seemingly omnipresent, fuzziness is created. Power, in this case, is not totalitarian and imposed on another regime – you do not oppress the other with dominant instruments –, but by occasionally doing strategic injections into geographical space, the Kremlin provides the story ´we might just be present, lurking beneath the surface, ready to strike at any place and any moment´. To illustrate: in Estonia people might think 'today it is a plane briefly entering our airspace, but who knows what will appear tomorrow?'. This works restricting and is in fact bordering, because you cannot define what you want to define, as it lies just outside your field of vision, but can pop up any time. Spreading this story of anxiety is therefore very powerful, resembling the mechanism of English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham's *panopticon*. This prison is designed in such a way, that all prisoners can be observed by just a single guard, without knowing whether they are being watched (Bentham, 1791). They guard is never able to observe all the prisoners at the same time, but because the prisoners cannot tell whether they are being watched, they behave, since they could just have been watched (Bentham, 1791).

The seeming omnipresence of Russia's political borderscapes, I would argue, create a similar situation. In this situation, Russia is the guard, and the inhabitants of countries in the European Union are the prisoners who do not know when Russian agency will pop up next, and because of that, they start telling themselves the story 'we have to fear them'. This anxiety about a possible future strike of Russia results in countries to take precautionary measures. In this sense, we – the citizens of the EU – play only a very small role in an enormous global power game in which anxiety is the insider perspective of an EU-citizen, and calculation the larger outsider perspective of the puppeteer – Russia. This means that as an EU-citizen, you can only understand little of this power game. This is very ambiguous – you realize that something exists, but at the same time, it lies beyond your field of vision.

Notably, when bringing the concept of anxiety into an analysis, it is important to take into consideration that one starts to psychologize in a sense. Anxiety is the most personal emotion one can have, because in the case of anxiety, something is really threating to you, something is threatening to your existence. In this sense, the dynamics of fuzziness and anxiety work in a circular motion. Fuzziness arises because Russia's agency is seemingly omnipresent. This causes the already extensively discussed oppressive feeling of anxiety, because what you are trying to define, lies beyond your field of vision. Hence you cannot define what you would like to define. This feeling of powerlessness and confusion are scary and in turn cause fuzziness again.

However, the peculiar thing is, that the created story of anxiety, is the 'story itself' – it is anxiety about having the feeling of anxiety –, ultimately forming a grand narrative of Russia's political borderscapes to be omnipresent. In this case, Russia is actually a borderworker, Russia has the agency, to create the fuzziness. It even has so much agency that alleged Russian actions are enough to put other countries in the highest state of alertness. In this case, only very little borderwork is needed to control an area. This approach – you let the other create and enlarge the story of anxiety about potentially emerging political agency – renders the responsibility for these acts obscure. But most importantly, it requires no military invasion or occupation of a territory.

Importantly, the success of this approach is co-determined by the *internalisation* of fear. By doing small injections into space, Russia makes sure that the public – mainly through social media – will make those stories of fear bigger than they really are. This can be very oppressive or suffocating, and as a result of this, measures are being taken, and protocols are drawn up (Pezard, 2018). One could argue that Russia externalises or outsources its exercises of political power, by internalising the story of fear, because it is not Russia that takes these measures or draws up these protocols; the *other* does this for Russia. Following this line of thought, I would like to pose the question: are we, the people in Europe, not also a kind of borderworkers because we (unknowingly) make those injections bigger? This situation would constitute a *Foucauldian panopticon,* as the belief that one is under constant scrutiny – the idea that Russia's political borderscapes are omnipresent – eventually leads to self-monitoring (Foucault, 2010): 'we *have* to fear them'. Hence, due to this internalisation of fear, very little is required to achieve the greater – bordering, turnovers, revolutions and moving spheres of influence.

Chapter 5 : C O N C L U S I O N

In this research, through an empirical analysis of six recent events of Russia's agency popping up outside its borders, followed by a theoretical exploration thereof, I intended to provide a conceptual interpretation of Russia's current geopolitical behaviour and explain how it is fundamentally different from the period of the Cold War. The results of my analysis have both theoretical and societal implications. First, I will elaborate on the theoretical implications of this research, after which I will try to render the societal implications of this study more tangible using a figure of speech. This chapter ends with a discussion of the limitations of this research and some suggestions concerning future research.

5.1   The potential danger of borderscapes

Based on my analysis into Russia's geopolitical behaviour – through the theoretical lens of borderscapes – it can be concluded that a borderscape is not solely a positive site or a joint design for cross-border cooperation, but that it can bear danger in itself as well. Given that borderscapes are social constructs, they are shapeable, and can therefore be deployed politically as well. The politicisation of borderscapes – strategically using borderscapes as a channel through which political practices can be carried out on foreign (online) territories – shows that borderscapes can represent a negative site of subversion and destabilisation as well. In this way, this research contributes to a more versatile understanding of the notion of borderscapes.

Accordingly, based on my analysis of Russia's current geopolitical behaviour, two types of political borderscapes can be distinguished. On the one hand, as the hacking attack on TV5Monde, the Lisa case and the Salisbury poisoning show, there is a type of political borderscape that briefly pops up (emerging). On the other hand, as the cases of the smouldering war in Eastern Ukraine and the nexus between Russia and the European far-right show, a political borderscape can be present for a longer period as well (infiltrating). Building on the work of Kierkegaard (1844), Lacan (1977) and Appadurai (2006), I consider these exercises of political power on foreign soil as strategic injections into space, consciously creating fuzziness. This fuzziness often creates anxiety, as 'what is going to happen next' lies beyond one's field of vision (Appadurai, 2006).

Subsequently, linking the politicisation of borderscapes to the extensively described omnipresence of the border makes it even more evident why a borderscape potentially bears a danger in itself. Based on my analysis of Russia's geopolitical behaviour, borderscapes can be viewed as strategic interventions or injections into space, through which political practices of the Kremlin can emerge beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. In the case of Russia's geopolitical behaviour, the construction of borderscapes includes exercising political power by doing small and strategic injections into European states. Hence, Putin creates or scapes space, to do political interventions. This agency to construct borders or borderscapes, as explained previously in this thesis, is what Rumford (2010) calls borderwork. It has become clear that Russia uses several political borderscapes through which those

strategic injections – bordering – can be made.

Today, the political practices of the Kremlin can potentially emerge and disappear everywhere like a terrorist act. In contrast to the earlier times, power is no longer exercised by invading other territories (imperialism) or by spreading the story 'you have to fear us' (propaganda). Nowadays, power is exercised by doing strategic injections into space. In this way, Russia shows that if it wants to, it can reach foreign territories and societies. Important to note, only very little borderwork is needed to cause turmoil, turnovers or even regime changes in foreign societies, and thus, obtain power and control them in this way.

However, the changed character of Russia's geopolitical behaviour works in conjunction with changed circumstances. The extent to which this approach is successful is partly dependent on the internalisation of fear. Due to digitalisation and the rise of social media – the medium has become radically dispersed, and ownership has become radically distributed among everyone – we make these injections bigger than they are. Moreover, it is much more difficult to turn the story of ´we might just be there´ around. These injections can cause fuzziness as it has become unpredictable when and where the next injection – emergence of Russia's political practices – will be, ultimately causing a feeling of anxiety. Peculiarly, this created story of anxiety is the 'story itself', it is anxiety about having the feeling of anxiety, ultimately forming a grand narrative of Russia's political borderscapes to be seemingly omnipresent. This feeling of anxiety renders the ability to define the world around you more difficult, as what you are trying to define largely takes place beyond your field of vision. It is therefore a suffocating feeling. Due to this internalisation or outsourcing of the story of fear, Russia only needs to do very little to create the idea that 'we *have* to fear them'.

Finally, based on my analysis of this chain of events, I argue that the pattern that this behaviour of Russia seems to contain is strongly reminiscent of a geopolitical strategy. However, this strategy is fundamentally different from Russia's geopolitical strategy during the Cold War. Today, by doing strategic interventions into space, Russia shows *that* it can reach foreign territories and influence their societies. There are several reasons why Russia would carry out geopolitics in this way. First, it requires only little agency from Russia. Only the idea that Russia can be anywhere seems to be enough to cause turmoil in other countries and control them in that way. The political use of social media makes Russia's geopolitical strategy so fickle and enormously dynamic. Based on these strategic injections, the other creates and spreads anxiety and fear that is not really there. When the Kremlin does a few strategic injections into space, the public, through social media, will transform the anxiety that these few injections cause, into a grand narrative of fear: 'Russia's political agency is omnipresent'. Second, by doing only small but strategic injections, there are hardly any direct traces that lead to Russia as the perpetrator. Moreover, direct military invasions would most likely unleash a war. This is a very calculative and sophisticated strategy. What happens under such circumstances is not a shattering as a result of force majeure, but as a result of self-doubt. This is a strategy of reaping power by sowing fear.

Altogether, in my view, the features of this geopolitical strategy can be perfectly captured in the

metaphor of a living organism. However, the metaphor that I use to visually buttress this claim is fairly squirming.

5.2   A fairly squirming strategy

Once there was a Russian octopus, occupying territory, and later, spreading propaganda to control foreign societies. This famous cartographic representation has made its reappearance several times during the past centuries, yet it seems outdated. However, I want to argue that this eight-armed metaphor is more relevant than ever before. I observed that Russia's agency includes other, less territorial, and rather invisible ways of exercising influence beyond its state borders. Moreover, it can suddenly emerge and reach further than ever before. The geopolitical strategy that seems to be unfolding here strongly reminds me of the straddling and squirming tentacles of the Russian octopus.

First of all, I want to clarify that I am aware of the fact that by using the metaphor of a living organism, I seem to forge a connection between bio organism and politics. However, by taking this naturalist stance – seeing states as animals – it is by no means my intention to consider Russia as a living organism that needs to expand at the expense of other states to survive, as the German geographer Friedrich Ratzel in his book 'Political Geography' in 1897 legitimised the urge for securing *Lebensraum* or living space for Nazi Germany. He argued that the German state was an organism that constantly needs to grow at the cost of 'inferior' states (organisms) in order to survive (Tuathail, 1998). I do not see the Russian state as an animal, I use this metaphor to provide an interpretation of the geopolitics that the Kremlin is currently carrying out. Russia's current geopolitical behaviour shows that the octopus has changed. The octopus is the concept, the strategy, the geopolitics that Russia is currently carrying out, consciously causing fuzziness which often causes anxiety.

Admittedly, I claimed that by capturing a new phenomenon in an existing frame, one simply reduces the new to the familiar. Why did I still use an already existing metaphor to explain Russia's geopolitical behaviour in the present? A dive in the anatomy and biology of the octopus shows that this animal is tailored for making Russia´s current geopolitical behaviour and the underlying geopolitical strategy more tangible in several ways. For one, Russia's political agency to potentially pop up anywhere is represented by the strong imagery of the everywhere straddling and winding tentacles of the metaphorical octopus. However, due to technological advancement and modern media of today´s globalised world, the tentacles of the octopus, similar to Russia's political agency, can reach further than ever before, making this metaphor more appropriate to interpret Russia's current geopolitical behaviour than during the Cold war era.

Second, Russia's current geopolitical behaviour – reconceived as strategic injections into space – is similar to the way in which the tentacles of the metaphorical octopus can occasionally emerge in any place to make a small ink stain in the water that spreads itself, which corresponds to the way in which Russia's emerging, suddenly disappearing or infiltrating political agency create fuzziness, and cause anxiety and turmoil in European democracies, as these strategic injections – catalysed through

social media – create the idea that Russia's political agency is seemingly omnipresent. Russia wants to protect its interests in the same way an octopus has a strategy to protect its living environment with its tentacles to survive. In addition, interpreting Russia's geopolitical behaviour as doing strategic injections into space, corresponds well with the octopus, an animal that can change the colour of its skin, resembling the different guises under which the strategic injections of the Russian geopolitical strategy can show themselves.

Third, the partly invisible nature of the octopus – this animal has no internal skeleton and can therefore squeeze through the smallest holes and caverns, it can stay under water, hiding in the shadows for a long time, but suddenly emerge and strategically spray ink in different places and thereafter disappear without leaving a trace, keeping the world in a stranglehold –, intersects with the seemingly omnipresence of Russia´s geopolitical agency. An octopus can hold its breath for a long time, lurking beneath the water surface, producing a frightening shadow. This is an essential difference compared to the 'old' Russian octopus. The current octopus is much less visible (shown under water) and only occasionally shows a tentacle, corresponding to the way in which Russia occasionally does injections into space. Then, you do not have the story of imposed fear ('you will fear us because we are powerful'), but due to these injections into space, people create their own story ('we have to fear them because they can pop up anywhere').

Paradoxically, the existing cartographic representations of Russia's geopolitical behaviour show an octopus, squirming across the land, although it is a water animal. However, what makes the octopus such a powerful metaphor for interpreting Russia's current geopolitical behaviour, is the fact that these animals live under water, meaning that they are not always or permanently visible. In my view, using the metaphor of an octopus to interpret Russia's current geopolitical behaviour, is much more powerful when depicted in its natural habitat, because an octopus lurking somewhere in deep dark waters, corresponds well with the anxiety that can arise when you try to define something that is not (always) visible and lies therefore beyond your field of vision. Because the octopus deliberately makes small ink stains, you know that the animal is there, but because it lives under water, you cannot see where it moves, and this can cause anxiety. This feature of the octopus resembles the way in which the seeming omnipresence of Russia's political agency can keep Western democracies in a stranglehold, similar to the way in which a Foucauldian panopticon requires little agency to ensure that prisoners behave themselves.

Fourth and perhaps most relevant, the metaphor of the octopus allows to explain Russia's current geopolitical behaviour not only from the perspective of the West – the long reach of the tentacles –, but also from the perspective of Russia itself – an octopus whose suckers are looking for rapprochement, but deeply disappointed by the break of the NATO promise not to expand to the East, also a cornered animal that has to defend itself. When an octopus is in danger, it creates a smokescreen by spraying ink. This is what happened in the case of Eastern Ukraine, where Russia (the octopus) created chaos and diffuse areas where borders are not very clear (a smokescreen) on the Ukrainian side of the border,

preventing Ukraine from joining NATO. Russia's main goal emerged from the main concern: not letting your former allies join the enemy.

To recapitulate, the nature of the Russian octopus has changed in comparison to the Cold War. It is no longer an ideology that is imposed, but strategic injections that are being made into space, consciously creating ink stains that produce fuzziness from which often anxiety arises. This can paralyse ore freeze the other. Furthermore, the circumstances in which the current Russian octopus operates have changed, which works in conjunction with the changed character of the octopus. The public domain has changed due to the rise of the digital world and social media. Information technology has been enormously accelerated due to globalisation. Consequently, the story of fear can be easily spread, potentially creating the idea that Russia's geopolitical agency is everywhere. Altogether, this makes the octopus as the metaphorical interpretation of Russia's current geopolitical behaviour more relevant than ever before.

5.3   Limitations of this study and recommendations for future research

Although the outcomes of this research are useful, I want to point out some shortcomings pertaining to (the conclusions drawn from) this research. Based on these limitations, I will formulate some recommendations for future research.

One of the limitations of this research concerns its focus. I chose to focus on events and dynamics in Europe. There are some reasons for this focus (mainly pragmatic ones) that I cannot ignore. For one, the availability of news and literature in the Dutch or English language discussing relevant events or theories respectively. I have not used any Russian-language sources. Including a full perspective of Russia on this matter or contrasting a Russian and a Western perspective would have create a deep understanding of this subject, but would require a different study.

Secondly, I investigated this geopolitical behaviour of Russia from the part of the world in which I live myself. I therefore have included neither Russia's interference in Syria nor a full analysis of Russia's mingle in the 2016 US presidential elections, although these cases certainly belong to Russia's recent geopolitical behaviour. As outlined in the societal and scientific relevance of this study, Russia's geopolitical behaviour is a very serious topic, which makes further research into this topic essential. It became clear that Russia's current geopolitical behaviour can be interpreted as strategic injections into space, producing anxiety. Although Russia's mingle in the 2016 US presidential elections and the interference in Syria suggest this, future research might discover whether Russia exhibits similar behaviour outside of Europe and therefore concerns the question: is the Russian octopus becoming a global phenomenon?

Besides, Russia is present in the Central African Republic, spreading propaganda. The local radio station broadcasts Russian music and Russian language classes are being offered. Moreover, new recruits in the army are taught Russian language and use Russian weaponry (Lister, Shukla & Ward,

2019). Besides, Putin recently organised a Russia-Africa summit in the Russian seaside resort of Sochi. During this two-day event, the Russian president received around forty African leaders (Schenkel & Vennink, 2019). Additionally, due to climate change, a new geopolitical playing field is literally emerging from under the melting snow of the Arctic (Donkers, Luken & Vaessen, 2018). How should we interpret these developments? Is it again spreading ideology, or is it different from the Cold War type of behaviour?

Thirdly, I only interviewed academics for this research, because I could get into contact with these scholars via my network, and because the purpose of this investigation was to theoretically explore Russia's geopolitical behaviour. Interviewing politicians, the media and the wider public, would also have been valuable. Additionally, as a result of who I could reach for an interview via my network, only four of my interlocutors were Russian. In future research, also a Russian perspective on the current geopolitical state of affairs should be included.

Besides the focus on Europe, I feel the need to address to focus on Russia. Given the history, Russia is rather easily assigned the role of the enemy. It used to be the enemy during the Soviet era – engraved in the collective memory of European citizens. However, rather few people seem to ask whether the US or NATO do not show similar behaviour. Is it not in every country's desire to have and preserve a sphere of influence to safeguard its interests in the current globalised world? In other words, further investigations could explore whether there are more countries geopolitically behaving like octopuses, as the danger can also arise from other parts of the world. Perhaps not all the eyes should be focussing on Russia.

Interestingly, in the current highly technological, globalised and digitised world, the meaning of the term geopolitics is changing. Today, borderscapes do not necessarily seem to refer to a geographical area, as geo has become *ubiquitous*. Moreover, as this study points out, political power is nowadays increasingly being carried out from a distance – remote politics. Hence, can we still consider these borderscapes to be *geo*-political? It seems very interesting and challenging to conduct further research into the understanding of the geo in geopolitics, under today's circumstances.

Finally, we should not only take a critical look at the past and the present. A critical look into the future is important as well. Since Putin is the current leader of Russia, he can be held responsible for the current geopolitical behaviour.[12] However, Putin will not remain in power forever. An interesting topic for further research would, therefore, comprise the future of Russia's geopolitical behaviour after Putin's presidency.

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12 Although the octopus depicted on the cover of this thesis has the head of an octopus, not the head of president Putin, I am aware of the fact that president Putin is the head of the Russian government and can therefore be held responsible for the turmoil caused by Russia's current geopolitical behavior.

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