Sovereignty, Democracy and the Emergence of a Polycentric World Order

Abstract
Sovereignty, democracy and a polycentric world order is a triad of conceptual pillars on which Russia bases its discourse in challenging the global dominance of the US. The three concepts have been included in the analysis, because they relate directly to the idea of US global leadership based on the universal appeal of its model of democracy. The issues of sovereignty and democracy are closely related to the post-Cold War interventionism of the West, but a polycentric world implies the existence of alternative power centres. The idea of a US dominated international system was relevant after the breakdown of the USSR and the dissolution of the bipolar world order, however, Russia started to oppose it soon afterwards. What is Russia’s view on the formation of the post-Cold War world order in relation to sovereignty, democracy and the balance of power? The article aims to answer this research question by qualitative discourse analysis from rhetoric used by Russia’s top officials and from strategic documents. An analysis of the discourse reveals that ideas about reverting to Westphalian sovereignty, rejection of Western liberal democracy as a universal value and the emergence of a polycentric world order, form a coherent vision of global development which conflicts with the view of the US and its allies.

KEYWORDS: Russia, sovereignty, democracy, polycentric world order

Introduction: national sovereignty vs. universal values
The sovereignty and democracy debate within the rhetoric of Russian officials, which Morozov (2008) considers to be indicative for Russia’s political development, cannot be
fully understood without greater insight into the contradictions between the concepts of “national sovereignty” and “universal values”. Russian official discourse on sovereignty, democracy and a polycentric world order, is very much rooted in a centuries old philosophical debate about moral universalism as opposed to anarchy in international relations. There is a dilemma here between the security of states and the security of people, because they are simultaneously “members of universal humanity” and “citizens of particular states” (Walker, 1990: 10). The problem is – which of these concepts is a priority? This issue was important at the time when the concept of “sovereignty” was established and is still at the heart of political debate in the circumstances of global turmoil in the 21st century.

The concept of “national sovereignty” emerged in the process of transition from the Middle Ages to modern society where the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 was seen by many scholars as an important point of reference, albeit not the ultimate “birthplace of the idea of sovereignty” (Fassbender, 2011). During this process, a system of sovereign states was established and Church authority which had embodied the principle of moral universalism was replaced with the power of secular states (Philpott, 2016). As a result, the international system fell into anarchy, because it was formed by equal, unregulated and competitive political entities. In other words, the principle of state sovereignty simultaneously led to a fragmentation in international relations, and centralization of power within the states (Walker, 1990: 9).

The idea of state sovereignty is closely linked with the norm of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states (Preece, 2003: 229; Krasner, 1995: 122; Ayoob, 2002: 83). The principles of state sovereignty and non-intervention on a global scale are embodied in Article 2 of the Charter of the United Nations (UN, 1945) and in the Declaration of Friendly Relations (UN, 1970). Non-intervention in internal affairs was also formulated as one of the basic principles of relations among the states in the Helsinki Final Act (OSCE, 1975) that was aimed at the reduction of Cold War tensions. The norm of non-intervention that arose from the idea of state sovereignty in its Westphalian sense, has two important consequences – on the one hand, it assures the independence of states, but on the other hand it also implies a standing by in cases where a state authority becomes violent against its own citizens or is unable to prevent mass violence among different groups of its population. Thus, sovereignty and non-intervention as norms of international relations may have disastrous consequences for the well-being of ordinary people. This led to a search for legitimate ways to impose restrictions on state
sovereignty when it came into conflict with human rights. The Holocaust is one of the events that prompted such debate (Philpott, 2016).

However, the most significant limitation on the principles of state sovereignty and non-intervention took place in the post-Cold War period. During the Cold War, both superpowers – the US and the Soviet Union – counterbalanced each other in terms of global influence and ideology, which ensured a certain degree of stability in world order, based on a mutual respect for each other’s spheres of influence. The end of the Cold War opened the door for a review of the principles of conduct in the international system as they had been established after World War II. The leading role in this revision was taken by the US as the winning side in the Cold War, and therefore, post-Cold War interventionism is largely rooted in the US’s grand strategy of global hegemony based on liberal ideology (Layne, 2006: 118-133; Ikenberry, 2008: 45-59; Posen, 2014: 24-68). At the core of this strategy is the idea that “the US is a model for the world and thus its values and institutions are superior to everyone else’s” (Layne 2006: 122). In this way the world returned to the dominance of moral universalism based on liberal ideology. As was stated by Fukuyama at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union (1989: 4), the end of the Cold War brought “the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government”. Consequently, this ideology provided the moral grounds and justification for intervention in other states’ domestic policies if they failed to conform to the role model defined and supported by the US and its allies (Layne, 2006: 124).

Table 1. Competing visions of the post-Cold War world order

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<th>The balance of powers</th>
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<th>Polycentric world with several power centres (US, China, Russia, etc)</th>
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Russia as the legal successor to the Soviet Union in the international system did not accept US global leadership and countered its attempts for global dominance.
Already in 1997, Russia and China signed the Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order (UN, 1997), which aims at establishing a multipolar world order based on mutual respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-aggression and non-interference in each other's internal affairs and non-acceptance of hegemony and power politics. Thus, international developments in the post-Cold War period have largely been determined by the competition of two future visions – one being the unipolar world order based on the principles of liberal democracy and US global dominance, and the other being multi-polarity with several power centres representing different models of political and economic development (Table 1). As was stated by S. Lavrov, Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation: “The competition on the shaping of the world order in the 21st century has toughened. The transition from the Cold War to a new international system proved to be much longer and more painful than it seemed 20-25 years ago” (Lavrov, 2016). Russia’s discourse on sovereignty, democracy and a polycentric world order forms a coherent vision of world development which is being used for the achievement of its long-term national interest “to strengthen the status of the Russian Federation as one of the leading world powers which aims for the maintenance of strategic stability and mutually beneficial partnership in the circumstances of a polycentric world order” (Kremlin, 2015b: 8).

**Method**

Discourse analysis has become a widely used research method in the study of international relations (Milleken, 1999; Holzscheiter, 2014). This is due to the fact that the political process, to a large extent, is constituted by acts of communication, and discourse analysis is a useful tool for understanding the relationships between the use of specific language and wider social and cultural structures (Tirscher, Meyer, Wodak & Vetter, 2007, p. 149). Political text and talk have political functions and implications (Van Dijk, 1997, p. 14), which is why discourse analysis makes it possible to clarify the strategy behind political communication. The aim of the paper is to identify Russia’s official vision of the development of the world order as it is being stated through its strategic documents and the rhetoric of its top officials. The analytical approach in this paper is based on the three stage discourse analysis process as defined by N. Fairclough (1996, p. 26). The first step is the selection of the text units to be used in the analysis. The next steps are their interpretation and explanation by putting the text into a wider political context.
The aim of the article is to get an idea of Russia’s current vision of the development of the international system, leaving its historical development outside the focus. The ideas determined were then compared with the Western perspective on post-Cold War world development, to demonstrate the competition between the two. The analysis is based on strategic documents such as the *Concept of the Foreign Policy 2013*, the *Military Doctrine 2014*, and the *National Security Strategy 2015*. The principles defined in the strategic documents are supplemented by statements from Russia’s top officials, mainly President V. Putin. His vision was extracted from his appearances at various events: an address to the Federal Assembly 2005, the Munich Security Conference 2007, the Valdai Discussion Club 2013 – 2015, the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum 2014 and 2016, the Meeting with Russia’s ambassadors and permanent envoys 2014 and 2016, and a large press conference in 2014. The 2016 article by Russia’s Foreign Minister S. Lavrov *Russia’s Foreign Policy: Historical Background* was a very useful addition for clarifying Russia’s position. Viewpoints from Russia’s former presidents B. Yeltsin and D. Medvedev were also used.

**The revival of Westphalian sovereignty**

The concept of sovereignty has evolved over time and can be used with different meanings. This section addresses the question about the sense in which Russian officials are using the concept in their public discourse. Krasner (1999: 9-25) outlines four meanings of sovereignty – domestic, interdependence, international legal and the Westphalian. According to Krasner’s classification, **domestic** sovereignty refers to issues of organizing public authority within the state, **interdependence** sovereignty results from increasing globalization and its impact on the ability of public authorities to control trans-border movements, **international legal** sovereignty concerns the status of the political entity in the international system, and **Westphalian** sovereignty is based on the principles of territoriality and non-intervention (Krasner, 1999: 9-20). The perspective on state sovereignty as an autonomous authority in a certain territory eroded significantly during the post-Cold War period. Although Fukuyama’s (1989) extreme concept “of the universal homogenous state” based on the principles of liberal democracy in the political sphere turned out to be utopian, nevertheless the processes of globalization have determined that sovereignty today is divided between actors at national, regional and international levels (Held, 2006: 303).

*Sovereignty and responsibility*
The most significant restriction on the understanding of sovereignty as “the exclusion of external actors from domestic authority structures” (Krasner, 1999: 20) took place in the form of the concept “responsibility to protect” (UN, 2014). At the heart of this doctrine is a changed understanding of sovereignty, as first and foremost, a responsibility for the welfare of the people, and not so much as protection from foreign interference (UN, 2014). The principle of the responsibility to protect is based on the idea that the international community has rights and duties to intervene in the domestic affairs of sovereign states if they fail to protect their people from “genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity” (UN, 2009: 8). The Outcome Document of the 2005 United Nations World Summit (UN, 2005: 30) can be mentioned as one of the documents that gives evidence of global agreement on it.

The idea of the “responsibility to protect” was advocated and promoted by T. Blair, then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, which is why this concept is also referred to as the “Blair doctrine” (Sloboda&Abbott, 2004). His 1999 Chicago speech (Blair, 1999) articulates the ideological background of the “responsibility to protect” principle. Blair argued that, in the current circumstances, internationalism is a better strategy than isolationism, which is determined by such factors as the end of the Cold War, changing technology, the spread of democracy and most notably – globalization as an economic, political and security phenomenon. Further on, he stated that the most important problem for foreign policy a decade after the end of the Cold War “is to identify the circumstances in which we should get actively involved in other people’s conflicts”. In his view, the decision of intervention can be positive if it meets five criteria: 1) we are sure of our case; 2) all diplomatic options are exhausted; 3) we can sensibly and prudently undertake military operations; 4) we are prepared for the long term; and 5) we have national interests involved (Blair, 1999). It is important to note that Blair’s intervention criteria do not include consensus at the UN Security Council, which according to the UN Charter’s Article 42 (UN, 1945) can legitimately authorise use of military force to ensure international peace and security.

Blair’s rationale for intervention was made in the context of the Kosovo conflict which highlighted differences in the views of Russia and the West. In response to the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia which took place without the approval of the UN Security Council, B. Yeltsin, at that time the President of the Russian Federation, made a statement that “Russia is deeply outraged by NATO’s military action against sovereign Yugoslavia” and Russia will never agree that “NATO enters the 21st century in the
uniform of world policeman” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation, 1999). Thus, the problem that Blair’s doctrine attempted to solve was how to justify “humanitarian intervention” in the circumstances when the international community “was not synonymous with great power unanimity at the Security Council” (Ralph, 2005: 4). Among the tasks for the development of “the doctrine of international community and on the institutions that deliver them” Blair mentions “a reconsideration of the role, workings and decision-making process of the UN, and in particular the UN Security Council” (Blair, 1999).

Considering Russia’s opposition to the West, it is clear that one of the goals of such an initiative was to diminish Russia’s role in the legitimization process of interventions being carried out on behalf of the so called “international community”. The moral grounds for this is well illustrated by Tesón’s (2009) point: “NATO has, in my view, a stronger claim to legitimacy in authorising humanitarian intervention in Kosovo than the Security Council, because it comes closest to representing the liberal alliance, the community of nations committed to the values of human rights and democracy”. He goes on by stating that the UN Security Council cannot be considered legitimate, because one oppressive regime (Russia, in the case of Kosovo) has veto power (Tesón, 2009). Russia strictly resists such an approach, and the following was formulated by V. Putin during the Munich Security Conference 2007: “The use of force can only be considered legitimate if the decision is sanctioned by the UN. And we do not need to substitute NATO or the EU for the UN” (Kremlin, 2007). Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept is also clear-cut in this regard: “It is unacceptable that military interventions and other forms of interference from without which undermine the foundations of international law based on the principle of sovereign equality of states, be carried out on the pretext of implementing the concept of "responsibility to protect" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013).

Return to the traditional principle of non-intervention

Russia’s sovereignty discourse is being used for countering the post-Cold War interventionism of the West, which is based on the belief of its moral superiority and universalism. In this regard, the first and most important point in the rhetoric of Russia’s officials is the emphasis on the need to return to Westphalian sovereignty, which emerged historically as a counterweight to moral universalism and established the principle cuius regio, eius religio. S. Lavrov, Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation put it straight: “[..] the Westphalian system of international relations, whose principles,
primarily respect for state sovereignty, are of importance even today” (Lavrov, 2016). V. Putin also expresses the view that the post-Cold War redefinition of the understanding of sovereignty is actually a rejection of it, and as a result a unipolar world order is being strengthened: “The very notion of “national sovereignty” became a relative value for most countries. In essence, what was being proposed was the formula: the greater the loyalty towards the world’s sole power centre, the greater the ruling regime’s legitimacy” (Kremlin, 2014c).

Russia’s understanding of sovereignty is closely related to the principle of non-intervention. “The inadmissibility of any attempts to influence internal political processes from the outside” was set as one of Russia’s foreign policy goals by V. Putin in 2014 (Kremlin, 2014b). The emphasis on the principle of non-interference is also seen in Russia’s position in the Helsinki +40 Project (OSCEPA, 2014), where Russia “opposes the revision of the basic principles of the Helsinki Final Act and insists only on their actualization” (Filimonova, 2014). In the words of V. Putin, the 40th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act is a good reason to turn to the basic principles of cooperation and to make them work in the current circumstances (Kremlin, 2014b). The necessity to return to the “traditional principle of non-interference” (Kremlin, 2014b) is justified by the negative consequences of the post-Cold War interventions. V. Putin refers to many cases in his rhetoric. During the Valdai Discussion Club 2013, he mentioned Egypt as an example that cannot function according to the universal template of American and European democracy, military actions in Libya that were inspired by noble motives, but led to disastrous consequences, and the Iraq operations as well, as a mistake that is now also acknowledged by US society (Kremlin, 2013). Likewise, Russia’s National Security Strategy states that the Ukrainian crisis was caused by the US and EU support for an unconstitutional coup, but the emergence of “Islamic State” is the result of the “double standards” policies of “certain states” (Kremlin, 2015b: 5-6).

Sovereignty of the states within Russia’s sphere of interests

However, to fully understand Russia’s perspective on sovereignty as a norm in international relations, it is important to take a look at its attitude towards the sovereignty of its neighbouring and weaker countries. After a thorough analysis of the works of Russia’s international law scholars, Mälkso (2015: 102) comes to the conclusion that in the Russian debates on sovereignty, the concept is not always used in its abstract sense, but as Russia’s sovereignty, which is the sovereignty of a great power. As such it
“ideologically questions the sovereignty of smaller neighbouring states” (Mälkso, 2015: 102). V. Putin’s rhetoric in relation to the sovereignty of Ukraine is indeed equivocal:

“I have never disputed that Ukraine is a modern, full-fledged, sovereign, European country. But it is another matter that the historical process that saw Ukraine take shape in its present borders was quite a complex one. Perhaps you are not aware that in 1922, part of the land that you just named, land that historically always bore the name of Novorossiya…[.] Ukraine is complex, multi-component state formation. [...] However, this does not in any way mean that we do not respect Ukraine’s sovereignty” (Kremlin, 2014c).

On the one hand, Putin expresses respect to Ukraine’s sovereignty, but on the other hand he points to the history of Ukraine as the basis for irredentist claims to territories of Ukraine, including the already annexed Crimea. In fact, Putin contradicted his own proclaimed principles of sovereignty and non-interference when he argued why Russia violated Ukraine’s territorial integrity: “For me, it is not borders and state territories that matter, but people’s fortunes” (Blome, Diekmann&Biskup, 2016). In this case he referred to human rights as being superior to state sovereignty. From these contradictions in the sovereignty discourse, it follows that sovereignty and non-interference are important norms in Russia’s relations with powerful states, but in relation to weaker states Russia can use the reasoning that human rights violations give legitimate basis for one-sided violation of the sovereignty of other states. It is also important to note that Russia’s understanding of “human rights” apart from universal principles, puts a particular emphasis on the protection of the rights and interests of its compatriots living abroad (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013).

Thus, the spread of the people that can be considered as being Russia’s compatriots abroad, is one of the indicators that marks Russia’s sphere of interests outside its borders. The issue of the violation of the human rights of Russia’s compatriots abroad may be used as a justification for sovereignty violation, as was the case during the Ukrainian crisis.

In general, Putin’s vision of the emergence of a polycentric world order has a rather gloomy future outlook for Russia’s neighbouring states, because according to his view, the likelihood of violent conflicts will increase in the countries that are located at the junction of the interests of great powers (Kremlin, 2014c). Thus, in Russia’s understanding, something that goes without saying is, that powerful states may disregard the sovereignty of weaker states if it is in their interests. However, Russia’s position in
relation to the sovereignty of its neighbouring countries is rather ambiguous. On the one hand Putin assures us that Russia has “…no desire or aspiration to revive the Soviet empire with respect to politics or [infringements of] sovereignty. This is obvious, do you understand? It’s not advantageous for us, and it is also both impossible and unnecessary” (Kremlin, 2013). But on the other hand it is admitted that “Russia has regions where it has privileged interests” (Kremlin, 2008). From this, it follows that most likely the emergence of a polycentric world order does not mean a rebirth of Russia’s imperial ambitions, but it certainly means that Russia will attempt to exercise influence in its sphere of interests with all possible measures.

Subverting the unity of Western countries

Sovereignty discourse is also aimed at undermining the unity of Western countries. A unipolar world order is seen as one that is, per se, unfavourable to the sovereignty of states. “Vassals” is the word that Putin uses widely to stress the point that the US is not respecting the sovereignty of other states, including its European allies: “A unipolar, standardized world does not require sovereign states; it requires vassals” (Kremlin, 2013); “Our partners decided that they were the winners, that they are now an empire, and all the rest - the vassals that need to be squeezed (Kremlin, 2014d); “Is that the way one treats allies? No, this is how one treats vassals who dare act as they wish – they are punished for misbehaving” (Kremlin, 2015a). In this aspect, sovereignty is being used in the sense of independence of foreign policy decision making. Such rhetoric is directed against the so-called “block approach” which, from Russia’s perspective, is ineffective in the context of the security challenges of the 21st century. Russia’s National Security Strategy mentions the refugee crisis as an example of the inability of NATO and EU to solve global security problems (Kremlin, 2015: 5). From this, it follows that Russia sees that its strategic goals can be achieved more effectively by strengthening bilateral relations with different NATO and EU countries. This is why Russia’s leaders try to remind them about their seemingly lost sovereignty.

This is an indicative example of the contradictions between two different understandings of sovereignty. From the perspective of the European integration project, sovereignty can be voluntarily circumscribed for the purpose of diminishing the negative consequences of a lack of accountability of sovereign states (Philpott, 2016). European integration and NATO enlargement takes place through the free will of their member states, whereas Russia attributes the same traits to these processes as when the Soviet Union built its relations with its satellite states. For example, Lavrov (2016) points out
that former Warsaw Treaty countries that are now members of the EU and NATO cannot make any decision without “the green light from Washington and Brussels” and the end of the Cold War just brought them a change of leadership instead of freedom. However, it would be wrong to assume that Russia genuinely cares about the independence of the European states. What Russia actually aims for is a fragmentation of the Western alliance that would allow it to strengthen its position as a power centre.

Variations of the Russian democracy discourse
One of the challenges that Russia faces in the post-Cold War period is how to adjust its growing domestic authoritarianism (Freedom House, 2016), to democracy as a universal value. In this regard Russia’s discourse consists of three interrelated narratives that reject the moral supremacy of Western liberal democracy.

Russia’s model of democracy
Western pundits have used a variety of concepts and ideas for describing the political regime in Russia while it was on its way to a “consolidated authoritarian regime” according to the classification of Freedom House (for example, see Levitsky&Way, 2002; Balzer, 2003; Wilson, 2005; Krastev, 2005; Bunce&Wolchik, 2010). One of the widely used labels is “managed democracy” (for example, see Colton&McFaul, 2003; Mandel, 2005; Krastev&Holmes, 2012). N. Petrov from the Carnegie Moscow Centre defines “managed democracy” as a system that provides the appearance of democracy, but controls society with a strong presidency and weak institutions, state control of the media, control over elections and a focus on short-term effectiveness (Petrov&McFaul, 2005).

Discussion about Russia’s specific model of democracy was initiated at a governmental level within Russia, in response to Western criticism that it was drifting away from democratic principles of governance. It started in 2005, with the concept of “sovereign democracy” which was proposed by V. Surkov, then Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration of the Russian Federation (Plyais, 2008: 25). The idea of Russia’s “sovereign democracy” can be viewed as being in opposition to the Western concept of “managed democracy” being attributed to Russia. According to V. Surkov, “managed democracy” is the template model which influence centres from abroad impose by force and cunning on other states (Izvestiya, 2006). This definition of “managed democracy” has two interrelated meanings – international democratization initiatives are interference in the domestic affairs of other states that will not be accepted
by Russia. By offering the concept of “sovereign democracy”, Kremlin’s strategists stress the idea that Russia’s progress in democracy should not be measured against Western standards.

The definition of Russia’s “sovereign democracy” appears to be rather broad and not in sharp contradiction to the way that democracy is being understood in the West. According to the Surkov (2006), it is:

“a way of political life of society, in which governmental bodies, their powers and actions are selected, formed and directed exclusively by the Russian nation in all its diversity and integrity in the pursuit of material well-being, freedom and justice by all citizens, social groups and peoples.”

From the outline of Surkov’s (2006) concept, it is possible to formulate three important elements, specifying the details of this definition. First, the concept of “sovereign democracy” was intended as counterbalance to the idea of the global hegemony that was made possible after the dissolution of the Soviet bloc. In Surkov’s (2006) words “rule from abroad is unimaginable in Russia”. V. Putin’s reaction to the US Ukraine Freedom Support Act of 2014 (USC, 2014), which includes a section “Support for Russian democracy and civil society organizations”, is a visible example of this position. During the Valdai Discussion Club 2015, he made a rhetorical remark: “Just imagine if we were to write into Russian law that our goal is to democratise the United States…” (Kremlin, 2015a). Second, democracy is being understood as a peaceful, evolutionary and people saving (narodosberegayuschij) way of development. Taking into consideration that Russian society, according to the World Values Survey classification, tends to represent “survival values” that emphasize economic and physical security (WVS, n.d.), Surkov’s approach to democracy can be considered as rather appropriate. Third, the subject of sovereign democracy is the Russian nation, as the whole body of citizens in their ethnic and religious diversity, showing efforts to stabilize Russia’s internal tensions, among which the Chechen war can be mentioned as the most dramatic. Although, in 2015 an initiative was commenced to rethink the concept of “sovereign democracy” in the context of the changes in the Russian political system and the electoral cycle of 2016-2018 (Lenta, 2015), the core idea still remains the same – Russia has its own unique path of democracy.

Attempts to define a “Russian democracy model” indeed has some rational grounds, because there are different models of democracy and most of them have been developed in the West (Held, 2006: 4-5). It has also been admitted at the UN level, that
albeit democracy is a universal value, there is no single model of democracy (UN, 2005: 30). Another argument is related to cultural differences in different societies, which really raises the question of whether one model is appropriate in all cases? The World Values Survey of 2010-2014 provides data showing significant differences in the political views of Russian and US societies. For example, 67 % of respondents in Russia were positive (very good and fairly good) about the idea of having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections, whereas only 34 % of respondents in the US would agree with the statement (WVS, 2010-2014). This study also provides other data that show differences in political views and attitudes. The peculiarities of Russian society were used as an important point in V. Putin’s address to the Federal Assembly in 2005 where he described the idea of Russia’s way to democracy. In his words: “The democratic road we have chosen is independent in nature, a road along which we move ahead, all the while taking into account our own specific internal circumstances” (Kremlin, 2005).

The debate about democracy within Russia is initiated and being led by the elite in power. However, it would be wrong to assume that there is a gap between the state and society in this regard. In fact, the views of Russian society very much echo the ideas of the concept of “sovereign democracy”. According to the Levada Centre (Volkov&Goncharov, 2015: 3-4) study, the opinion that Russia needs democracy was supported by 62 % of respondents in 2014 and 55 % of respondents in the same survey agreed that Russia needs a specific form of democracy that corresponds to the national traditions and peculiarities of Russia. The respondents also expressed their understanding of what democracy is. The top three answers in 2015 were: freedom of speech, press and religion (39 %), the economic prosperity of the country (27 %), and order and stability (25 %) (Volkov&Goncharov, 2015: 5). This is evidence of support for an emphasis on material well-being as a primary goal of democracy in Surkov’s definition of “sovereign democracy”. Other studies also show the long-term trend that around 80 % of Russian society prefers a strong economy instead of good democracy (The Economist, 2014). Russian society is also sceptical about the US as the role model of democracy, because 49 % of respondents in 2014 considered Russia to be a democracy, but only 43 % thought that the US was a democracy (Volkov&Goncharov, 2015: 6). Thus, in the view of about half of Russian society, Russia is even more democratic than the US, which brings us to Russia’s second democracy narrative.

The dysfunction of Western democracy
The first significant step taken by pro-Kremlin experts in the process of redefining Russian “sovereign democracy” was a re-evaluation of the role of democracy in the modern world (Lenta, 2015). In 2015, the Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Research published the *Democracies XXI: a Paradigm Shift* Report (ISEPR, 2015). The report contains a number of articles outlining the crisis in Western democracy by pointing out such issues as decreasing trust in governments, the quality of governance and the effectiveness of democracy, while increasing political alienation, populism and economic inequality, failures of democracy export and successful development of non-democratic countries (ISEPR, 2015: 5-19). The problems of democracy are also widely acknowledged in the West. For example, *The Economist’s* (2014) essay “What’s gone wrong with democracy” sums up the main problems of Western democracy on a global scale and within Western societies. The issue of the decline in democracy was the main theme of Volume 26, Issue 1 of the *Journal of Democracy* (2015). Plattner (2015: 8) sums up that democracy as a global standard is being called into question due to the declining economic and political performance of advanced democracies, the growing vitality of authoritarian regimes and a consequent shift in the global balance between democratic and authoritarian countries.

Thus V. Putin’s position, that the Western model of democracy should not be a global benchmark, has fertile ground. He places particular emphasis on US democracy, due to its claim to the role of world leader. One way to challenge this claim is to point out the shortcomings of US democracy in order to reject the moral basis for its global dominance. V. Putin uses the argument that US democracy is not representative, because of the growing expenses of election campaigns and a system of electoral delegates allowing precedents where presidents are elected with a minority of votes (Kremlin, 2014). V. Putin summed up the particular problem with the words: “It [democracy] is power of the people. Where is people’s power here? There is none. Meanwhile, you are trying to convince us that we don’t have it” (Kremlin, 2014). Putin’s criticism of US democracy also has some objective basis, because in a comparative perspective, US elections are rated by international experts as being the worst among the Western democracies (Norris, 2016). In the global rank of the Electoral Integrity Index (2016) the US is 47th, which is still high. Nevertheless, the problems identified in the US elections such as gerrymandering, unfavourable legislation for smaller parties, campaign finance and voter registration (Norris, 2016) can be effectively used by adversaries of the US to challenge the legitimacy of its worldwide support initiatives for democracy.
Democracy promotion as an influence tool

Democracy promotion as interference in the domestic affairs of other states is the third narrative that makes up Russia’s perspective on democracy. To understand Russia’s reaction to US democracy promotion, it is important to outline three important steps in the development of this idea as an element of US foreign policy. Although a focus on values has been inherent to US behaviour in the international system since the beginning of the 20th century (Carothers, 1999: 19-28), it was not until the presidency of Jimmy Carter when human rights and democracy became a systematic component of foreign policy (Huber, 2015: 51). The second important development took place under the presidency of Ronald Reagan when the promotion of democracy as an ideology was used in the “war of ideas” with the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the Soviet Union (Carothers, 1999: 30). During the Reagan administration, the protection of human rights was subordinated to the promotion of an electoral model of democracy, because it was believed that democracy was a precondition for the respect of human rights (Huber, 2015: 52-53). The collapse of the Soviet Union can be considered as the greatest achievement of this policy. During the post-Cold War period democracy promotion was continued with the wave of “colour revolutions” in the post-Soviet space and following the Arab Spring movements in the Middle East and North Africa. The most dramatic consequences in this period were from the so-called “Bush doctrine” that was used for the justification of the US invasion in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. According to Monten (2005: 112), the essence of this approach is “the direct application of U.S. military and political power to promote democracy in strategic areas”.

The evaluation of democracy promotion as a US foreign policy tool is largely based on a dichotomy of interests and values. On the one extreme there is the idealist belief that the US role is to protect and facilitate aspirations for democracy and human rights all over the world. On the other extreme is the view that values are being used as a cover for implementation of US interests on a global scale. Rice (2000: 49) argues that such a polarization of views “…may be just fine in academic debate, but it is a disaster for American foreign policy”, and develops the idea that national interests and values have to be balanced. So from a pragmatic point of view, there is always a trade-off between interests and values. As was stated by Blair (1999):

“In the end values and interests merge. If we can establish and spread the values of liberty, the rule of law, human rights and an open society then that is in our national interests too. The spread of our values makes us safer.”
However, a widely held belief in Russia’s political, and also military thought, is that democracy promotion is a tool of influence being used solely for the achievement of the interests of the US and its allies. During the Munich Security Conference 2007, V. Putin clearly formulated Russia’s position in regard to foreign funded non-governmental organisations which are used for democracy promotion (Carothers, 1999: 48-53; Dakowska, 2005):

“…when these non-governmental organisations are financed by foreign governments, we see them as an instrument that foreign states use to carry out their Russian policies. […] In every country there are certain rules for financing, shall we say, election campaigns. Financing from foreign governments, including within governmental campaigns, proceeds through non-governmental organisations. […] It is secret financing. Hidden from society. Where is the democracy here? […] …there is no democracy here, there is simply one state exerting influence on another” (Kremlin, 2007).

Similarly, Russia’s military theorists Chekinov and Bogdanov (2013: 19) consider that information operations lead the public to accept the need to “fight tyranny and restore democracy”, but the “principal aim of the invasion is for the aggressor states to resolve their political, military, and economic problems”. How can democracy promotion be used as a tool of influence? From the Russian perspective, the main goal of democracy promotion is to establish political elites in foreign countries that pursue the interests of global leaders. This is achieved through involvement in electoral processes or regime change. As Minasjan and Voskanjan (2013) see it, Western governments have created tools that form a network that can be activated to destabilize a domestic policy situation if the local political elite do not act in their interests.

The idea of democracy promotion as an influence tool is taken to the extreme in the concept of “colour revolution warfare” being related to the non-violent change of governments in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine from 2000 to 2004, Arab Spring movements, as well as military conflicts in Syria and Ukraine and other cases. According to General V. Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, a “colour revolution” is a specific approach for the achievement of political and military goals in foreign states in a “form of non-violent change of power by outside manipulation of the protest potential of the population in conjunction with political, economic, humanitarian and other non-military means” (Cordesman, 2014). Indirectly, “colour revolutions” are being mentioned as one of the main external military dangers in the Russian military
doctrines. The danger is seen in “an attempt to destabilize the situation in various states and regions and undermine strategic stability” (Kremlin, 2014c). By framing pro-democracy initiatives as a foreign destabilisation strategy, authoritarian regimes like Russia can legitimately suppress them as being a threat to national security. This was articulated by Putin during the Valdai Discussion Club 2013: “Too often in our nation’s history, instead of opposition to the government we have been faced with opponents of Russia itself” (Kremlin, 2013). This way the security of Russia is closely linked to the stability of the regime in power.

**Russia in the international system**

The final section of this paper deals with the question of how Russia sees the development of, and its place in, polycentric world order. This question is very closely related to the US’s actual ability to exercise global leadership, because it determines the extent to which Russia’s vision must be taken seriously. It can be seen that aspirations for a US-built world order have decreased over time among prominent US strategists. For example, in 1997, Z. Brzezinsky wrote that American supremacy has produced a new international order and “American global hegemony has no rival” (Brzezinsky, 1997: 28-29), but two decades later he came to the conclusion that the global dominance of the US is ending and there is an “urgent need for a new geopolitical framework” (Brzezinsky, 2016). Although, from Brzezinsky’s (2016) point of view, the US must take the lead in the development of a new global power architecture, he admits that it must take such powers as Russia and China into consideration. H. Kissinger is also of the opinion that “in the emerging multipolar order, Russia should be perceived as an essential element of any new global equilibrium, not primarily as a threat to the United States” (Kissinger, 2016). J. Nye argues that China, as the most important rival power for the US, “will come close, but not overtake the U.S.” and both powers may look for ways for cooperation (Nye, 2014: 8). The fact that the US still is the strongest power and “perhaps the only superpower” is also admitted by Putin (Kremlin, 2016a), however, the emergence of new power centres changes the global landscape and leads to the need to review the principles of conduct in the international system.

**Democratic world order**

Russia’s foreign policy concept sets “to establish a just and democratic system of international relations” as one of Russia’s foreign policy goals (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). The new concept for Russia’s foreign policy which is being developed in
2016 also “sets the direction of active work to promote international peace and stability and uphold a fair and democratic world order based on the United Nations Charter” (Kremlin, 2016). What is being meant by “democratic world order”? From the rhetoric of Putin, it is clear that it is a world order with many power centres in contrast to the unipolar world order which he considers to be undemocratic (Kremlin, 2007). One of the core principles of a “democratic world order” is equality in the sense that Russia must be treated as an equal partner by the US and its Western allies. The acquisition of equal partners in all regions of the world is being mentioned as one of the strategic goals of Russia in its National Security Strategy (Kremlin, 2015b: 7). That Russia is ready to build a relationship with NATO on the basis of equality is also being stressed (Kremlin, 2015b: 38), as well as for equality in dialogue with NATO and EU in the context of European security (Kremlin, 2014e: 10). Russia’s idea of tripartite talks between Ukraine, EU and Russia before the Ukrainian crisis can be mentioned as one of the failed examples of such equal dialogue, as Ukraine’s Association Agreement with the EU would affect Russia’s economic interests (Kremlin, 2014a).

The idea of a democratic world order is indicative of a fundamental difference in the world views advocated by Russia and the US. In the US approach, the primary area for the application of democracy principles is domestic affairs. By claiming Western liberal democracy as a universal value, the US and its Western allies gain moral rights to intervene if a country fails to meet their standards of democracy domestically. This point of view is based on a belief that the Western model is superior, because it is the only one that guarantees human rights and freedoms for ordinary people. As is formulated in the US National Security Strategy “Defending democracy and human rights […] aligns us with the aspirations of ordinary people throughout the world” (The White House, 2015: 19). It was also used as one of the arguments for justifying the invasion of Iraq in Blair’s (2004) Sedgefield speech: “[..] we should do all we can to spread the values of freedom, democracy, the rule of law, religious tolerance and justice for the oppressed, however painful for some nations that may be[..]”. From Russia’s perspective the democratic agenda set up by the Western countries turns out to be non-democratic on a global scale in a sense that it is intolerant towards other models of development. Russia strongly advocates diversity of political and economic models and calls for democracy as a principle in international relations. What it means in fact, is global acceptance of authoritarian and even totalitarian regimes, which may be labelled as “specific models of democracy”.

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Putin also points out the problem of global inequality which in his view arises from the dominance of the West, as a shortcoming of the unipolar world order. According to Putin, the Western programmes for the struggle against global poverty are double-dealing, because the financial resources being allocated to these programmes are linked with the development of the donor countries’ companies, which lead to the preservation of economic backwardness of the world’s poorest countries. As a result, “the increasing social tension in depressed regions inevitably results in the growth of radicalism and extremism, feeding terrorism and local conflicts” (Kremlin, 2007). Russia’s president rather correctly indicates the problem of global inequality, because a study of the United Nations Development Programme has also found out that in 2013 the world reached the highest point of inequality since the end of World War II, and between 1990 and 2010 income inequality has increased by 11 % in developing countries (UNDP, 2013: 3). Global inequality has a clear regional distribution with the West being able to concentrate the largest share of the world’s wealth, because “North America and Europe together account for 67 % of total household wealth, but contain only 18 % of the adult population” (Credit Suisse, 2015: 6). These negative trends indeed lead to the question – is such a system sustainable? Thus, the negative consequences of globalization in the economic sphere are another argument used by Putin to show that the unipolar world order has failed to improve the living conditions of ordinary people around the world.

The role of the UN Security Council

There are significant differences in the perspectives of Russia and the West in relation to the rules in the international system. Russia is conservative in this regard, because it aims at preserving the international cooperation format as established after World War II with the UN as the main platform for international dialogue and decision making. The rules of the game as they were established during the Cold War period gives Russia an ability to enjoy the privileges of the Soviet Union, although it has lost its superpower status. This explain why Russia insists that “the status of the five permanent members of the Security Council should be preserved” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013).

Whereas, for the Western states, the decision making process in the US Security Council turned out to be a considerable obstacle in the legitimation of their post-Cold War interventions, so they aimed for a revision of the established principles. In the words of Blair (2004), the UN must be reformed so that the “Security Council represents
21st century reality”. This leads to ambiguity that fuels two conflicting narratives in relation to the respect of international law. From Russia’s perspective, the West is disregarding international law by executing military interventions without UN approval, whereas from the Western perspective, Russia is disrespecting international law by violating the territorial integrity of Ukraine and Georgia. Lavrov’s (2016) formulation illustrates Russia’s perspective on these disagreements:

“Western propaganda habitually accuses Russia of “revisionism,” and the alleged desire to destroy the established international system, as if it was us who bombed Yugoslavia in 1999 in violation of the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act, as if it was Russia that ignored international law by invading Iraq in 2003 and distorted UN Security Council resolutions by overthrowing Muammar Gaddafi’s regime by force in Libya in 2011. There are many examples.”

These disputes are indicative of the fact that there is no single and universal approach to international law (Mälkso, 2015: 12-21). From the perspective of Russia, violation of international law takes place due to the flaws of a unipolar world order. As was stated by Putin: “International law, not the right of the strong, must apply” (Kremlin, 2013). From Putin’s rhetoric, it also follows that if the UN Security Council had not been bypassed and the Western partners had respected Russia, the world would not have had to face the disastrous consequences of the Iraq invasion: “We said this would be the case, but no one wanted to listen. I remember my discussions with the former President, and with the former British prime minister. [...] And yet no one wanted to listen” (Kremlin, 2013).

Russia as peacemaker

In relation to the establishment of a new framework for international cooperation, Russia stresses the need for cooperation, dialogue and involvement of all parties as opposed to the dominance of the West. Lavrov (2016) mentions “the agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme, the elimination of Syrian chemical weapons, the agreement on stopping hostilities in Syria, and the development of the basic parameters of the global climate agreement” as positive examples of cooperation where Russia has taken an active role. He has also stressed Russia’s peacebuilding role in Europe by referring to the role of Emperor Alexander I in the 1815 Vienna Congress that ensured peace for the next 40 years, and also gave historical examples that Russia’s marginalization led to destabilization (Lavrov, 2016). Russia’s National Security Strategy defines that its foreign policy is aimed at establishing a stable and durable system of
international relations, based on international law and the principles of equality, mutual respect, non-intervention, mutually beneficial cooperation, and political regulation of global and regional crises. The central element of such an international system must be the UN and its Security Council (Kremlin, 2015b: 33). To strengthen and provide alternatives to the West in the setting of the global agenda, Russia is increasing cooperation with BRICS countries, trilateral cooperation with China and India, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, G20, Commonwealth of Independent States, Eurasian Economic Union and others (Kremlin, 2015b: 33-34). According to Lavrov (2016) Russia is aiming “to restore a culture of compromise, the reliance on diplomatic work, which can be difficult, even exhausting, but which remains, in essence, the only way to ensure a mutually acceptable solution to problems by peaceful means”.

Of course, this sharply contradicts Russia’s military involvement in the Ukrainian crisis, which is a visible example of Putin’s mentioned conflict “at the junction of the interests of great powers” (Kremlin, 2014c). Ukraine is of high geopolitical significance for Russia, which is also recognized by the US strategists. For example, Brzezinsky (1997: 46) has stated that “without Ukraine Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire”, likewise Friedman (2009: 70) wrote: “If the West had succeeded in dominating Ukraine, Russia would have become indefensible”. Thus, Ukraine’s geopolitical shift to the West significantly affects Russia’s strategic interests, but from Russia’s perspective, it has the same moral right to use the same influence instruments as the West if its strategic interests are being endangered. According to Lavrov (2016), the US implements its interest through “diverse ways of pressure like economic sanctions, direct armed intervention, large-scale information war, technology of unconstitutional change of governments by launching “colour revolutions” (Lavrov, 2016). From Russia’s perspective “it is a primitive logic that only Washington can set the tune in world affairs” (Lavrov, 2016). Thus, the formation of a polycentric world order is indeed a painful and tense process, until new rules of the game are agreed, because the West bases its strategy in a belief in the supremacy of its power and values, but Russia disrespects and challenge it.

Conclusions

There is identifiable competition between the visions of Russia and the West in relation to the development of world order (Table 2). The perspective on whether the world is
unipolar or polycentric is at the heart of these two perspectives. During the post-Cold War period the US and its Western allies have acted from the position of a sole power centre. From Russia’s point of view, the world is on its way to a polycentric world order which means that the West will have to respect the interests of other power centres, including Russia’s. The Ukraine crisis can be viewed as a clash between these two competing visions, because Ukraine’s geopolitical shift to the West is its further expansion, but Russia opposes it on the grounds that its interests are being endangered. The very fact of Russia’s reaction in the form of the annexation of Crimea and the establishment of a frozen conflict in south-eastern Ukraine is an indicator that there are limits to the influence of the West. The Ukraine conflict may be regarded as an indicator of the emergence of a polycentric world order.

However, the competition between Russia and the West is not a competition between two equal players, because the West is still the leading power in the world. Therefore, Russia’s discourse is the discourse of the challenger which is aiming at equality. This leads to ambiguity as a characteristic feature of Russia’s discourse, because Russia is simultaneously attempting to reject the global dominance of the West and to preserve its own influence in its spheres of interests. The sovereignty discourse is an evident example of it, because, on the one hand, Russia praises sovereignty and non-intervention as important norms in international relations, but in the case of Ukraine, territorial inviolability was subordinated to the protection of human rights. Likewise, Russia’s peace builder image can be contrasted with its military presence in the Ukraine crisis, although Russia would argue that the crisis was caused by the West.

Russia’s democracy discourse is a very important element for the rejection of the supremacy and moral universalism of the US and its allies. No doubt, Russia is becoming more authoritarian and repressive; still it would be an oversimplification to assume that its society expects to be liberated from dictators to build a Western type of democracy model. Western democracies indeed face certain dysfunctions that can also be used effectively by authoritarian adversaries to discredit their moral supremacy. A “democratic world order” is another concept that Russia uses against the global dominance of the West. If the Western states see democracy as a principle in domestic affairs, then Russia’s vision is that the international system must be democratic, but that each state has its own “sovereign democracy” domestically. In this way, Russia defends authoritarian rule in circumstances where democracy is a universal value.
Table 2. Russian and Western divergence of views on global development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements of the system of views</th>
<th>Russia</th>
<th>The West</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sovereignty</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The principle of non-intervention</td>
<td>Must not be violated, but in certain cases Russia may use the rhetoric of the supremacy of universal values in its interests</td>
<td>May be violated to protect human rights and promote democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The unity of the Western states</td>
<td>The US allies have no sovereignty, they are “vassals”</td>
<td>European integration and NATO enlargement is a free will of member states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Democracy</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political regime in Russia</td>
<td>Specific model of democracy that must not be measured according to the Western standards</td>
<td>Consolidated authoritarian regime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy as universal value</td>
<td>Democracy is a universal value, but there are different models of democracy corresponding to different development stages of different societies</td>
<td>Supremacy of the Western liberal democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy promotion</td>
<td>Instrument of foreign intervention, may lead to hostilities if meets resistance. The Western model of democracy has its own shortages; therefore it is not a global benchmark.</td>
<td>Element of foreign policy, because national interests are being achieved by promotion of values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Polycentric world order</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The area of democracy principles application</td>
<td>International relations – the world order must be democratic, which means several equal power centres</td>
<td>Domestic affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International law</td>
<td>Must be observed, the West violates international law</td>
<td>Must be observed, Russia violates international law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The UN Security Council</td>
<td>Must be preserved</td>
<td>Must be reformed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International peace and security</td>
<td>Russia aims for peace, the post-Cold War interventions of the West has led to disastrous consequences</td>
<td>Russia is an aggressor state due to its role in Ukraine crisis and five day war in Georgia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, when it comes to international law, Russia is conservative, because it wants to preserve the framework of international cooperation as was established after World War II. This preserves the privileges of the Soviet Union for it to use as its successor state. This can be seen in Russia’s position on the reform of the UN Security
Council, the Helsinki +40 project, and generally in its claim for a return to traditional principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. To sum it up, Russia’s vision is that international peace and stability can be achieved if major power centres agree on their global spheres of interest and on non-interference in each other’s internal matters.

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