Russian Securitisation Framing of Ukraine
between February 2019 – February 2023

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ABSTRACT

The Russian-Ukrainian relationship is inherently complex. Since the end of the Cold War, there have been several defining moments in this relationship, which have contributed to how Russia perceives any potential challenges to its security. Securitising discourse from Russian political leadership, namely the President, offers an insight into what aspects of this relationship are escalated so extensively that extreme courses of action may be deemed necessary (i.e., a full-scale invasion of Ukraine). Drawing on Buzan et al. (1998), this project identifies the key sectors that Russia politicises, and those that it securitises vis-à-vis Ukraine. In addition, this study highlights the key sub-themes within politicisation and securitisation that were found within these sectors. This is all within a timeframe where relations have moved from comparatively stable to a time of war (February 2019 – February 2023). There is some degree of overlap between the themes politicised and securitised, especially across the military, political, societal, and economic sectors of security. There were no cases of securitisation within the environmental sector. Overall, this study found a significant shift in Russia’s securitisation framing of Ukraine from mid-2021 onwards.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine Relationship, Securitisation Theory, Politicisation, Securitisation, Escalation, Vladimir Putin, Leadership Discourse

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1. INTRODUCTION

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, causing a major shift in the European security order, as well as that of the wider international community (Nicolosi, 2022). As of April 2023, there have been an estimated 354,000 casualties from Russian and Ukrainian soldiers combined (Faulconbridge, 2023), with approximately 9,400 Ukrainian civilians killed since the beginning of Russia’s war (Ukraine Civilian War Casualties, 2023). This is a conflict with no clear or simple end in sight (Gressel, 2023). Many scholars, policymakers, security experts, and civilians have asked: How did we get here? What led Russia to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine?

Since assuming the role of President in late 1999, Vladimir Putin has moulded Russia’s political system into a highly centralised political order that largely begins and ends with his interests and world views (Sakwa, 2008). With Putin’s return as President in 2012, Russian politics has taken on more of an ideational character, rigorously emphasising Russian language, culture, history, and leadership (Tsygankov, 2015). A unique role is reserved for Ukraine in this equation, tying in closely with many of Russia’s threat conceptions. The discourse among Russia’s political elite describes Ukraine as a victim of Western influence and interference, and as a country that has increasingly been overrun by neo-Nazis, and whose existence is a result of what Russia has allowed it to be (Fedor, 2015). Additionally, Western promises of NATO expansion and build-up in-and-around Ukraine have led Russia to perceive that there is an ever-growing number of encroaching security challenges that are coming its way (Marten, 2017). There is a long and complex history surrounding Russia’s relationship with Ukraine, which has been heavily influenced by world events and select external actors (i.e., the West). Altogether, this has often contributed to the Kremlin’s unease regarding its next-door neighbour.

Russia’s political communication vis-à-vis Ukraine is a reflection of the state of relations between the two actors. The use of securitising discourse has highlighted Russia’s growing anxiety regarding Ukraine, as well as offering Russia’s political leaders an avenue to frame their distress and express their concerns. As such, securitisation theory offers a framework for analysing such discourse, within the scope of five key themes: military, political, societal, economic, and environmental (Buzan et al., 1998). There have been other cases of securitisation in Russia that are often focused on preserving Russian identity, order, and
security (Wilhelmsen, 2016, 2017). The focus on Ukraine has been fairly limited despite Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, with an exception of Pearce and Yuchshenko (2018) who noted a shift in Russia’s securitising discourse, where attention was increasingly directed towards Russian nationhood, historical trauma, and the connection between these factors. Therefore, there is a gap in the research on securitisation surrounding the case of Ukraine that then needs to be addressed. Ultimately, the aim of this study is to explore what securitisation frames have been employed by Russian leadership, specifically the President, when addressing Russia’s relationship with Ukraine.

This thesis intends to answer the following research questions:

‘What was the framing of Russia’s relationship with Ukraine, by Russian leadership, between February 2019 and February 2023?

and

‘What securitisation sectors and sub-themes are therein emphasised most strongly throughout this period?’

In order to answer these questions, online public statements made by the President of Russia, between February 2019 to February 2023, have been studied. English versions of these statements were offered at the time of their publication and have been analysed as a part of this study. This work strives to provide some insight into Russia’s securitisation framing of Ukraine over a longer period leading up to the full-scale invasion. Ultimately, this study attempts to offer a more detailed perspective into what frames, if securitised, have been used by Russia vis-à-vis Ukraine, starting from when relations were comparatively stable and continuing through to the first year of the war.

The main contributions of this study may be noted in three parts. This is a first in terms of systematic studies of Russian discourse over an extended period of time up until the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This contrasts with most cases concerning Russian political discourse, which concentrates exclusively on the period around a major event. The second contribution is that this study offers an in-depth examination of Vladimir Putin’s discourse on the issue of
Ukraine. This provides insight into the escalation of Putin’s framing of Ukraine over a period of time, from politicisation to full-blown securitisation. Third, this study takes securitisation theory out of its democratic homeland in the West, where it has traditionally been applied. In doing so, this adds to a small but growing number of studies that apply securitisation to non-western, and non-liberal contexts.

This paper first proceeds with setting the stage for Russia’s contemporary relationship with Ukraine, by highlighting a series of defining moments since the end of the Cold War that have resulted in increasing tension and concern for Russia. Next, a select number of prior cases of securitisation in Russia are discussed, in order to offer insight into some of the themes and behaviours associated with Russia’s securitisation processes. The core components of securitisation theory are then touched upon as a way of establishing a thematic base for the researcher to then observe key frames inductively within the selected data set. A qualitative thematic study, with elements of quantitative analysis, was carried out and is further elaborated on in the methodology. Next, the results and analysis of this thematic study are presented and then discussed more extensively. Lastly, a number of observations have been made that align with previous research but also offer new insights into Russia’s process of securitisation vis-a-vis Ukraine, which carry implications for Russia’s relationship with other countries in the post-Soviet Eurasian space.
2. BACKGROUND
This chapter breaks down the key events shaping Russia’s relationship with Ukraine since the end of the Cold War. It aims to pinpoint what areas and issues are of concern for Russia regarding Ukraine, what actors may play a role in this, and what may be considered necessary action in a time of ‘crisis’.

2.1. Collapse of the Soviet Union
In relation to this study, it is important to take stock of this particular point in Russian-Ukrainian relations. A new world order was established, which created separations between Russia and the territories that previously contributed to its sense of great power status. The collapse of the USSR also meant a new beginning for Russia’s relationship with the West, which has strongly influenced and determined Russia’s state relations with Ukraine, and the many policies directed towards it.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, a gross restructuring of the international world order took place. Led by the United States, a unipolar system replaced the bipolar world order of the Cold War era (Hall, 1999). The dissolution of the Soviet Union resulted in a significant downsizing of Russia’s economic resources, reduced their military reach, and led to a significant loss of territory that was previously under its control (Marten, 2020). The former global power found itself in a precarious position, which would later influence Russia’s behaviour at the international level.

A large part of Russia’s relationship with Ukraine has been determined by Russia’s more general perceptions and reactions to Western ‘influence’ in its surrounding regions, i.e., the post-Soviet space. Russia has always vehemently opposed the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), given that the alliance is a historical representation of a hostile presence on its borders (Shleifer & Treisman, 2011). Throughout the 1990s, much of the former Eastern Bloc and select former Soviet states, including Ukraine, sought NATO membership as a way to distance themselves from Russia’s shadow of influence (Marten, 2017; Tsygankov, 2018b). Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has maintained a rather unique but assertive relationship with Ukraine. While there are a number of cultural and historical ties between the two states, Ukrainian territory is considered strategically significant for Russia and its great power interests as a potential buffer zone that provides protection from NATO expansion.
Sauer (2017) also reaffirms that Ukraine offers Russia a physical barrier between itself and the West. NATO’s expansion and Ukraine’s geographic position within this developing situation have contributed to some of the existential fears that drive some of the securitisation discourse analysed in this study.

2.2. Colour Revolutions

The colour revolutions were a series of anti-regime protests that broke out across the post-Soviet space in the early 2000s, with the intention of effecting (or attempting to effect) successful regime change. Ukraine’s ‘Orange Revolution’ was a result of a run-off presidential election in November 2004, heavily criticised because of Russian interference, corruption, and voter fraud; the Ukrainian Supreme Court ordered a revote, where Viktor Yushchenko won over the Kremlin-backed Viktor Yanukovych (Wilson, 2014). In Ukraine and Georgia, the revolutions were deemed a success because of the “Pro-Western orientation of the political elite that emerged in leadership positions” (Wilson, 2014, p. 21). These progressing attempts to closer align Ukraine with the West, were not received so graciously by Russia’s political leadership. Wilson (2014) and Bouchet (2016) both shine a light on Russia’s apprehension towards the West’s ability (particularly the US) to incite regime change, which Russia feared could spread to its own political institutions.

Following these events, Putin’s government vowed to further crack down on the spread of colour revolutions and Western influence associated therewith in the former Soviet bloc, in an attempt to preserve their partnerships with other countries in the region (Wilson, 2010, 2014). When comparing the outcome of colour revolutions in Ukraine to Georgia, and their relationships with Russia, in the case of Ukraine “the stakes were infinitely higher… [as] Russian leadership considered Ukraine the most strategically important of the Soviet successor states, as well as the birthplace of the Russian polity” (Wilson, 2014, p. 29). Russia’s fear of the West ‘taking’ its power was reaffirmed and redefined following the colour revolutions, influencing its ‘next steps’ in its relationship with the former Soviet bloc nations, as well as the wider international community.

2.3. Euromaidan, the Russian Annexation of Crimea, and Civil War

Euromaidan was a turning point in Russia’s relationship with Ukraine. Between November 2013 and February 2014, a series of demonstrations erupted in Kyiv and spread across various
cities in Ukraine, in response to the pro-Russian President, Viktor Yanukovych, backing out from an EU-Ukraine Association Agreement in favour of closer ties with Russia (Tsygankov, 2015). A notable division has existed within Ukraine’s political elite since 1991, and by extension Ukrainian society; Russia has capitalised on a supposed “absence of a cohesive narrative and practice of nation building” (Dunford, 2023, p. 28) to further its goals in Ukraine. Not all of Ukraine’s political elite supported Yanukovych’s actions, especially those who sought to lessen the country’s alignment with Russia and break a tradition of corruption (Tsygankov, 2015). There was a push for Ukraine to strengthen its relationship with the European Union, which founded the basis of the Euromaidan movement (Zelinska, 2017). After a period of extreme instability, civil unrest, and a violent crackdown on demonstrators in Kyiv, Yanukovych fled to Russia in February 2014 (Pifer, 2020). This was a critical moment in Russia’s overall relationship with Ukraine, and important to note in respect to this study, as it kickstarted a series of events that have, to a large extent, led to Russia’s current war in Ukraine.

The Russian side of the story painted these events quite differently. Yanukovych’s ‘removal’ was portrayed as either a result of a coup led by rising neo-Nazi forces across Ukraine, or as a direct result of Western involvement in the region’s affairs and by extension, in Russia’s regional affairs (Marples, 2016). The latter became a common and recurring theme in Russia’s position towards Western involvement in the post-Soviet space. According to the Russian narrative, Euromaidan began as a peaceful movement that was quickly taken over by right-wing extremists and neo-Nazis, who were cooperating with the West, which resulted in extreme violence (Marples, 2016; Tsygankov, 2015). Russia’s political elite expressed serious concern over a potential spill-over of said violence, given Ukraine’s proximity; in addition, Kordan (2022) details how Russia has honed in on its historical, cultural, and spiritual ties to Ukraine. In doing so, Russia paints Ukraine as a country that has fallen into the hands of fascists and right-wing extremists, whose authorities have failed to gain control over the situation (Tsygankov, 2015). Given these supposed historical similarities between Russia and Ukraine, and the current political situation, Russia has utilised this to perpetuate a narrative that it should protect Ukraine from bad influence and interference from the West.

Since Putin’s return as president in 2012, following a four-year hiatus in which he served as Prime Minister, Russia’s Ukraine policy took on a new ideological dimension. The need to protect Russians ‘neglected’ in Ukraine became a way to defend Russia’s broader cultural
interests, history, and Orthodox identity, which increasingly underpinned a regional security agenda closely associated with Ukraine (Tsygankov, 2015). The events of Euromaidan not only symbolised a greater encroachment from the West (Pifer, 2020), but posed a much more ingrained political challenge to Russia, based on the narrative that Ukraine was overrun by neo-Nazis and right-wing extremists, which were promoted by Western interference (Hahn, 2014; Marples, 2016). Altogether, this propelled Russia towards its eventual annexation of the mostly Russian-speaking Crimea between February and March 2014 (Pifer, 2020). Suslov (2014, p. 592) argues that Russia’s decision was an effort to “cure the historical trauma of exile and dismembering of the country”, while Marples (2016, p. 428) emphasises that it was because “Crimeans required protection from the American-inspired civil war in Ukraine”. The annexation of Crimea was a first step, and a preview, of the extent to which Russia would push to ensure its security interests in regard to Ukraine.

During the process of annexation, a litter of so called ‘little green men’ emerged from Russian military installations in Crimea and quickly took over a number of crucial points across the Peninsula, leading to a referendum regarding accession into Russia that took place soon after on March 16, 2014 (Pifer, 2020). Despite questions regarding its credibility, approximately 96.7% of Crimeans voted for ‘re-unification’ with Russia, which then came into force on March 18. The case of Crimea will be prominent in this study as it has been utilised as an argument for further interventions into Ukrainian territory. Robinson (2016) argues that Russia’s interference was more than a grab for territory that would later destabilise Ukraine. Rather, it was a response to events that they perceived to have spiralled out of their control (i.e. Euromaidan and the removal of Yanukovych). This reaction to perceived threats ultimately contributed to Russia’s financial and material backing of the separatist movement and resulting armed conflict in the Donbass region, which started in 2014, and continued up until Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Katchanovski, 2016; Marples, 2022).

Ultimately, the events of 2014, and those that followed, reflected a “fundamental change… in the Kremlin’s foreign policy” (Tsygankov, 2015, p. 279). However, following the annexation of Crimea, tensions only grew between Russia and the West (and NATO as an institution). A greater number of military exercises, from both sides, have been conducted in close proximity to border regions, and has been interpreted by Russia as a direct and unrelenting security challenge (Slobodchikoff et al., 2021). NATO build-up in these border regions has also been
noted as a cause for concern by Russia; Marten (2017) and Priego (2019) reaffirm that Russia’s aggression in Ukraine is a tell-tale reflection of its fear towards the West, especially as Ukraine has continued to express interest in NATO membership. Altogether, this has reinforced Russia’s fears of the West’s encroachment, heightening its perception that greater defensive actions were needed, and ever more so in regard to Ukraine. In respect to this study, one ought to make note of these events because many of the more contemporary developments in Russia’s relationship with Ukraine are the result of the continuous escalation of tensions from this point.

2.4. Russia’s War in Ukraine

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Although Russia was quick in their assault towards Kyiv at the beginning of the war, they fell short of capturing the capital; as a result, their attention and offensive were then directed towards capturing the entirety of the Donbass region (Pifer, 2022). This was an area with which Russia was more familiar with, tactically speaking, due to their previous involvement in that region starting in 2014. On September 30, 2022, Russia announced its annexation of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhnia and Kherson Oblasts (Madison Watt & Mann, 2022). However, as noted by the Warsaw Institute (2023), Russian forces have struggled to consistently hold onto territory that they captured in Ukraine, indicating some success in Ukraine’s counteroffensive. On top of this, military and financial aid to Ukraine, from its Western (NATO) allies, has significantly assisted in its efforts against Russia. The US remains the largest individual military contributor, while the European Union and European Peace Facility lead as the most prominent providers of financial aid (Kiel Institute, 2023; The Economist, 2023).

Furthermore, this war has resulted in a large number of long-term military and economic consequences for Russia, as well as having drastically “altered the geopolitical picture” between Russia, Ukraine, and the West (Pifer, 2022, para. 2). As of February 2023, the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine estimated that Russia had sustained approximately 146,850 losses in military personnel (Pohorilov, 2023). Moreover, also according to the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, over 3000 Russian tanks, 6000 armoured combat vehicles, and 2000 artillery systems were reported destroyed by Ukrainian forces by December 2022 (Pohorilov, 2023). Russia’s economy has also taken a substantial hit since the beginning of this war, having contracted approximately 3.9% in 2022 (OECD, 2022), adding to losses already incurred due to the COVID-19 global pandemic (Pifer, 2022). Europe’s ban
on Russian crude oil and gas imports in December 2022 (Myllyvirta, 2022), and subsequent price caps, have had serious isolating consequences for the Russian economy (Westgaard, 2023), and the Russian government’s ability to finance the war by extension. The consequences of Russia’s war, for Russia, only continue to grow as there is no obvious end in sight for this conflict.

While much of Russia’s justification for invading Ukraine centres around its fear of NATO expansion, it is also accompanied by arguments that Russia is acting in the name of its broader societal interests – to protect Russian identity and the Russian people supposedly suffering in Ukraine (Marples, 2022; Masters, 2023). This alludes to the multi-faceted nature of Russia’s relationship with Ukraine, and its justification for ‘necessary’ action when a greater threat is perceived. Despite Russia’s long-standing efforts to “keep Ukraine bound in a Russian sphere of influence” since the Cold War (Pifer, 2022, para. 28), this war is a defining moment in Russian-Ukrainian relations as it signifies a complete collapse of a once comparatively stable relationship.

To conclude this chapter, a number of defining moments in Russia’s relationship with Ukraine, since the end of the Cold War, have been highlighted in an attempt to paint a continuous picture of what issues are recurring and have contributed to the current escalated state of relations. This history between Russia and Ukraine is necessary to consider for the purposes of this study, as it contributes to the themes raised by Russian leaders in official discourse, as will be demonstrated shortly in this paper.
3. PRIOR RESEARCH: SECURITISATION IN RUSSIAN AND THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

The following chapter identifies a series of studies that have applied securitisation theory to Russia and the post-Soviet space. Although these studies are not all focused on Russia’s relationship with Ukraine, they highlight underlying themes that are repetitive in Russia’s securitisation process.

Russia’s securitisation of Chechnya is one of the most prominent cases of securitisation in the post-Soviet space. In late 1999, a number of residential buildings in Moscow, Buynaksk, and Volgodonsk, were hit by a series of bomb blasts, triggering the Second Chechen War (1999-2001) (Wilhelmsen, 2016). Building up a sense of fear amongst Russia’s population, since the end of the First Chechen War (1994-1996), Russian authorities painted Chechnya as a centre of international terrorism, with the Kremlin’s widespread discourse strongly conflating Chechnya with the threat of terrorism (Wilhelmsen, 2016). At the same time, using language that framed Russia and its citizens as victims faced with the challenge of internal terrorism (Wilhelmsen, 2017). The Chechen threat was defined by the Kremlin as “inhumane”, “irrational”, and extremely “erratic” in nature, daring to destabilise the Russian identity and statehood at any given moment (Wilhelmsen, 2016). In turn, extreme actions were deemed essential in order to combat this dire threat that was backing Russia into a supposed corner. Kremlin discourse stressed that the time for dialogue and negotiations had passed, and the threat was so extreme it was to be dealt with by any means necessary, i.e. the Second Chechen War (Wilhelmsen, 2017).

Wilhelmsen (2016; 2017) further draws attention to the theme of identity, which strongly underpinned Russia’s securitising narrative regarding Chechnya. More specifically, how this securitisation process presented an opportunity for Russia to reshape its identity – both domestically and in a regional context. Russia moved away from the more placated character it presented during the interwar periods, re-building and reinforcing an image that it is strong and will bring order and discipline when faced with extreme and unprecedented internal threats (Wilhelmsen, 2017). This is an important case to consider when regarding Russia’s process of securitising an issue to ensure that no challenge to Russian identity, people, and power is posed. It was the first major instance where modern-day Russia escalated a security challenge so
extensively that extra-ordinary action was deemed the only possible course of action. It set a foundation, and to some extent, a precedent regarding securitisation in Russia.

Other cases where the Kremlin has securitised issues have involved HIV/AIDS and LGBTQ+ rights. By 2006, Russia was experiencing one of the fastest growing rates of HIV/AIDS, which was eventually declared a national security issue (Sjöstedt, 2008). The concept of identity formation and perception plays a crucial role in Russia’s securitisation game. How it is perceived in the international sphere, when dealing with an international security issue, influences how it internalises and deals with those challenges domestically (Sjöstedt, 2008). The Kremlin’s discourse escalated the problem of HIV/AIDS in a way that blurred the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ division, framing this global issue as one threatening all Russians and their common identity. Moreover, the issue of LGBTQ+ rights has mainly been securitised by the Russian Orthodox Church. While presenting itself as the “soul of the Russian nation” (Nuñez-Mietz, 2019, 551), the church maintains that “to be properly Russian is to be Orthodox Christian and against homosexuality” (Wilkinson, 2014, p. 368). As a close and long-standing ally of Putin and the Kremlin, the church frames homosexuality as a ‘Western disease’ and blames that it will result in a moral identity crisis throughout traditional Russian society (Nuñez-Mietz, 2019). Subsequently, the Kremlin has been able to justify the pursuit of more conservative policies restricting and silencing the LGBTQ+ community. These cases are more within a domestic context; however, they highlight that Russia’s securitising arguments consistently centre around the prospect of threats to Russian identity.

Turning to Russia’s relationship with Ukraine, barring the current crisis, the most recent case of securitisation was centred around the issue of Crimea. Once again relating to Russia’s conception of identity, Crimea was first annexed by Russia (1783) at the height of Russian imperialism, and during the reign of Catherine the Great. It became “a place of reconnection with Russia’s “true” cultural roots” (Suslov, 2014, p. 591), while St Petersburg represented a turn to Western European ways. The Kremlin places significant emphasis on the territory’s historical, religious, and spiritual value (Pearce & Yuchshenko, 2018). Crimea is painted as inseparable from Russian statehood, with the Kremlin drawing on historical trauma to reiterate so. Teper (2016, p. 379) also suggests that Russia’s annexation of Crimea was an initial “test case for classifying and characterizing… Russian official identity discourse”, which has played an increasingly more important role in Russia’s security conceptions and communication. The events of Euromaidan exacerbated Russia’s concern of encroaching Western influence, which
through Kremlin discourse, was framed as a greater challenge to Russia’s regional power claims, which was closely tied to its regional identity and the one also presented within a domestic context (Pearce & Yuchshenko, 2018; Suslov, 2014).

Rotaru (2019) proposes that the Kremlin’s narrative vis-à-vis Ukraine perpetuates a new Cold War narrative, focusing heavily on military/great-power concerns, while drawing attention away from domestic concerns. In doing so, rallying support at the domestic level for Russia’s external engagement. Additionally, Rotaru (2019) notes that the Kremlin’s direct framing of the issues in Ukraine allow it to extend its influence over other related matters involving the neighbouring country, i.e. trade, energy, etc. This example has been used to emphasise the importance of considering the character that Russian political communication takes on, especially in relation to Ukraine, as the direction of Russia’s supposed need to act becomes a bit clearer. Fast-forward to 2022, Fusiek (2022) notes that there is a gap in securitisation research concerning Russia’s relationship with Ukraine, in the lead-up to the current crisis. However, Fusiek (2022) does also pinpoint that the Kremlin consistently represents Russia as a victim, the West as an oppressor, and a key reason why Russian society is unprecedentedly challenged.

From the cases of securitisation in Russia and the post-Soviet space, presented in this chapter, one can observe that the themes of identity and threat to society are recurring elements. Altogether, this is presented as a challenge to Russian power. In the case of Russia’s securitisation of Ukraine, certain frames have consistently appeared. These include concerns over Western influence and interference, Russian history, trauma, religion, and culture. There has been significant focus on the Kremlin’s securitising discourse around Euromaidan and the annexation of Crimea, and immediately before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. However, there is somewhat of a gap in exploring Russia’s securitisation prior to this conflict period. Additionally, the thematic focus has centred extensively around Russia’s military and political relationship with the West, regarding Ukraine, as well as more societal themes (religion, history, etc.). Current research does not so much provide a broader picture around Russia’s securitisation of Ukraine, and other thematic areas that they may have been escalated leading up to the current conflict. Thus, securitisation theory provides a lens in which the researcher can begin to identify and explore a wider range of themes that leaders may draw on, when escalating the challenges and threats posed by another actor. The next section will zoom in on
securitisation theory and the key components that are relevant in the context of this study. In turn, creating a foundation from which this study has been developed.
4. SECURITISATION THEORY

Much of Russia’s relationship with Ukraine centres around the concept of security. Therefore, applying a theory of security to study said relationship offers the researcher a framework in which they may conduct a more concrete and directed analysis.

4.1. The Security Concept

Security is an ever-changing and fluid concept. An individual’s understanding of it will depend on the theoretical perspective they choose to adopt. Like many phenomena in the social sciences, there is no exact definition. Nonetheless, there are some common features consistently found in both traditional and non-traditional international security theories. The non-traditional perspectives have been developed from the traditional concept of security, which experienced major developments during the Cold War (Buzan et al., 1998). As a result, its foundations are rooted in the “traditions of power politics,” which are built on a “traditional military-political understanding of security” (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 21). Security is about the survival of the state. Krause and Williams (2018, p. 22) articulate a similar perspective that traditional security focuses on “existential fear, extreme situations, and the potential for violence”. In a more general sense, the traditionalist perspective maintains the sort of mentality that State A considers State B a threat, therefore, it must take extreme action to protect itself. Buzan et al. (1998) emphasise that attaching the ‘security’ label to a state’s concerns is a fast and efficient way to legitimise the use of force where it would not normally be applied.

4.2. Securitisation and Securitisation Theory

Forming a part of the Copenhagen School, Securitisation Theory (ST) is an attempt at widening the scope of the security field – offering a framework to analyse its issues, challenges, and solutions, in a global security order that has changed significantly since the end of the Cold War (Buzan et al., 1998). A security issue can be placed on a securitisation spectrum at one of three points: non-politicised, politicised, and securitised (Buzan et al., 1998). If that issue is placed at the ‘securitised’ end of this spectrum, it is deemed an existential threat. Such threats require emergency action – extra-ordinary measures – outside of normal political procedures, which often “implies taking up arms” (Sheikh, 2014, p. 256). This spectrum is a relevant point to consider in regard to this study because it allows one to better ascertain what escalatory language is used in order to move an issue from politicised to securitised. Thus, providing more insight into the intricate nature of the securitisation process.
Traditionally, the state is considered the primary referent object. As defined by Buzan et al. (1998, p. 36), referent objects are “things that are seen to be existentially threatened and that have a legitimate claim to survival”. Securitisation theory adds that other actors (e.g. non-state actors) or areas (e.g. the economy or environment) may be considered as the referent object (Krause & Williams, 2018). Furthermore, the state is not the only threatening force. Other actors or issues within and/or external to the state may represent a threat. These can range from climate change to pandemics and the economy (Krause & Williams, 2018). It is then the securitising actor that is responsible for “declaring something – a referent object – existentially threatened” (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 36).

Buzan et al. (1998, p. 10) emphasise that “security regions stem from the fact that international security is a relational matter”. State relationships have traditionally been about competition, the distribution of power, military-political security interests, and characterised by their ability to ensure their own survival. This falls in line with classical regional security complex theory (Buzan et al., 1998). When considering the great powers, it is useful to examine their interaction in the wider global context. However, for many (smaller) states, their security interests are often isolated to a regional cluster of actors (Buzan et al., 1998; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). While a security region is often determined by geography, there are other factors adding to its role in influencing a security issue. In the case of the post-Soviet space, history, culture, memory, and even language all add unique layers to an already unique regional security dynamic (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). This can strongly influence an actor’s reasoning and justification to securitise. Lastly, by widening the avenues in which security issues can be considered from, securitisation theory helps remove the traditional security assumptions associated with regional security (Buzan et al., 1998).

4.3. The Role of Discourse in Securitisation Theory

Discourse can be considered as a function of securitisation. There are many aspects influencing discourse, such as language, circumstance, audience, and the somewhat undefined relationship between them. Buzan et al. (1998, p. 25) contend that “the way to study securitisation is to study discourse and political constellations”. Certain policies gain greater support and/or traction because of the sense of “legitimacy created [by] the use of securitised discourse” (Nyman, 2014, p. 47). Therefore, it maintains a powerful role in the political-security sphere.
Wilson (2019, p. 114) states that if an issue is “framed [as] being a security threat by a government (or group of governments), it is considered ‘special’ and in need of state intervention to address”. Ultimately, it is the use of escalatory language in discourse that provides the frame within which an issue is securitised. These escalatory terms can include: “threat”, “challenge”, and “target”, which may all affect the “survival”, “security”, “safety”, or “existence” of a group or country (Buzan et al., 1998; Çilingir, 2020; Jahng & Doshi, 2021). An ‘us’ versus ‘them’ frame is established with the use of such escalatory language, where the securitising actor commonly draws on divisive social, political, and economic issues (Jahng & Doshi, 2021). In the case of Russia, threats to Russia’s survival are often perpetrated by “terrorists”, “extremists”, “criminals”, and/or “radicals” (Campana, 2013). Wilhelmsen (2016) also highlights that securitising actors often frame Russian society, culture, religion, and autonomy as the referent object. This type of escalatory language is closely examined in this study to determine what thematic fields Putin has securitised, with respect to Russia’s relationship with Ukraine.

4.4. Sectors of Security
Buzan et al. (1998) propose five sectors of security: Military, political, societal, economic, and environmental. These sectors offer five broad thematic avenues in which Russia’s relationship with Ukraine may be examined, offering a starting point from which further sub-themes may then be identified. The military, political, and societal sectors are of the most relevance to this thesis for a number of reasons.

Beginning with the military sector, it is traditionally labelled as the most important sector, especially as it aligns with more traditional security perspectives. The primary referent object and securitising actor are the state (Buzan et al., 1998). States may also perceive existential threats internally and externally. Following this logic, Buzan et al. (1998) highlight that securitisation can also occur at the subsystem level. Claims of an existential threat from states and/or larger-scale referent objects can overlap. Moreover, geography plays a fundamental role in this sector because it influences how an actor may perceive a referent object and the existential threat. Combined with history, past experiences influence present perceptions of existential threats (Buzan et al., 1998; Buzan & Wæver, 2003). In connection to this study, discourse concerning military sector security may touch on themes around Russia’s
relationship with Ukraine, such as Russia’s ‘stand-off’ with the West, regarding the issue of NATO expansion/arms build-up on its borders and potential Ukrainian membership.

Political security is about legitimacy. When a leader, system, or ideology are denied recognition and/or support, it is perceived that their legitimacy is threatened (Buzan et al., 1998). This trickles all the way down to their policy positions and actions. There is often a degree of overlap between the political and military sectors, as they are the most ‘traditional’. Similar to the military sector, Buzan et al. (1998) emphasise that there are internal and external threats to political security. If an external actor challenges the legitimacy of a state’s political position towards an issue, this can later become the referent object. The securitising actor is then most commonly a state, or a clearly defined political body within it, and the principle of state sovereignty is often the focus of the security argument (Buzan et al., 1998). With this in mind, discourse touching on political security issues may address Russia’s fears regarding Ukraine’s closeness to the West, and the degree of influence/involvement in its internal affairs, as well as the broader post-Soviet space.

From a bigger picture perspective, the societal sector deals with identity. It mainly deals with the factors that contribute to how identity is formed and maintained, i.e. history, self-conception, representation, politics, conflict, etc. (Buzan et al., 1998). Societal security is challenged when a particular community (and their identity) defines a threat/potential threat as a challenge to their survival as a community. Buzan et al. (1998) note that the societal security agenda is formed on the basis of three common threats: migration, horizontal competition, and vertical competition, which often act in combination with each other to varying degrees. Identity is vulnerable in different ways. Therefore, it is necessary to look at the key features of a state or nation’s identity, including religion, memory, or language (Buzan et al., 1998). Regional dynamics also maintain an important role in this sector because they often determine how nationhood has historically been experienced (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The societal sector fits with Russia’s ideological shift since Vladimir Putin’s return as president in 2012, where Russian identity and culture have been increasingly emphasised in political and security discourse.

Furthermore, Buzan et al. (1998) maintain that it is difficult to securitise economic issues in isolation. Many of these issues are tied to other sectors and appear more obviously there, especially if they are highly politicised. Referent objects may include the liberal international
economic order, the state’s economy, individuals, private firms, and/or the global market itself (Buzan et al., 1998). The common securitising actor is the state; however, private firms and their interests are often an influential factor. Economic security issues relating to Russia’s relationship with Ukraine are often presented in the form of economic pressure from the West, i.e., sanctions, which is a highly politicised matter. In addition, trade is a politicised issue with economic consequences, which effects the state and security of Russia’s economy.

There are a wide range of issues that may pose as a challenge to environmental security. The political and scientific agendas, which can experience a degree of overlap, address such challenges within the scope of the environmental sector (Buzan et al., 1998). While the scientific agenda deals with, as its name suggests, the science behind environmental issues, it is the political agenda that determines the extent of securitisation. Shaped by government interests and dynamics, the media, and the public, the political agenda determines the ‘presumed urgency’ of an environmental issue (Buzan et al., 1998). The environmental sector is inherently complicated because of the number of issues that fall within this frame and can also be of an economic or societal nature. Lastly, this sector is not an obvious theme that characterises Russia’s securitised relationship with Ukraine but may still be politicised in certain circumstances. For this reason, it is not focused on so extensively in this study.

Altogether, this chapter has presented the core arguments and logics of securitisation theory. In doing so, identifying the most useful concepts and categories for exploring the securitisation of Russia’s relationship discourse vis-à-vis Ukraine. The following chapter proceeds to explain the method and analytical instruments applied in this study.
5. METHODOLOGY

In order to assess Russia’s securitisation of Ukraine, a two-step mixed-methods approach was utilised in this study. A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to first identify the themes and sub-themes in Russia’s references to Ukraine, at the stages of politicisation and then later securitisation. Following, a quantitative calculation of the frames was conducted to present a longitudinal image of the shifts in Russia’s securitisation of Ukraine, within the set period for analysis. The nature of this study is both deductive and inductive.

5.1. Selection of Materials

The purpose of this study was to identify and explore the changes in Russia’s securitisation framing of Ukraine, by Russian political leadership. Discourse within Russia’s political sphere frames the state’s direct position on an issue (Gaufman, 2017). Götz (2016) suggests that much of Russia’s mindset and approach to international affairs may be attributed to Vladimir Putin. Furthermore, Gaufman (2017) notes that Russia’s inner political elite are some of the primary decision-makers, often echoing similar viewpoints to that of the president. As mentioned in the previous chapter, state leaders are the primary actors responsible for securitisation of an issue, as they influence and/or lead the type of discourse surrounding it (Buzan et al., 1998). The ability to construct and frame a threat, is “…largely based on [political] power and capability…” (Taureck, 2006, p. 55). Russia’s political system has evolved in a way that has allowed Putin to widen his political reach and maintain an all-encompassing role in determining what and who is a threat to Russia (Pavlovsky, 2016). Thus, this study has drawn on Putin’s statements, articles, and transcripts, with the purpose of highlighting what thematic frames are escalated by a state leader, when, and how often.

Mölder and Berg (2023) note that because of the centrality of Russia’s presidential administration, the Kremlin has been able to maintain control over what information flows from the political sphere to the wider community. Direct political discourse, whether it be articles published by political leaders or an official presidential address, are all an important starting point for framing the narrative around an issue. For Russia, “‘selling’ its own story to the international audience” is a crucial step in justifying its foreign and/or security policy actions (Mölder & Berg, 2023, p. 568). Therefore, publications from the Office of the President of Russia’s (kremlin.ru) press page are the medium that have been analysed. The publications analysed are either direct statements made by the President of Russia, articles that he has
authored, or transcripts (excerpts included) from conferences or meetings where he has spoken. This media genre was selected because it is direct discourse from a state leader, the starting point of an official narrative, and aligned with the study’s purpose. These sources were selected because of their availability online. Although the President’s Office publishes all press in English and Russian, only the English-language sources were analysed.

5.2. Feasibility
Initially, press publications from the President’s Office and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), statements made by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, were to be analysed. The purpose behind this was to examine securitising discourse from different actors within Russia’s political elite. However, due to the number of publications produced by the President’s Office, and detail provided within them, it was not feasible to also include statements from the MFA. This would also not have been feasible within the time frame set to complete this study and would have likely detracted from the quality of the analysis. Additionally, only English-language sources were used in this study because the researcher did not possess such an advanced level of Russian, which would allow them to assess the press publications in their original language. Lastly, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has meant that access to certain materials published on the kremlin.ru press page are difficult to access or completely restricted. A VPN (Surf Shark1) through Vietnam or Kazakhstan was necessary to ensure complete access to press publications, as some would appear but not load in their entirety.

5.3. Qualitative Thematic Analysis
Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 79 - 80) describe thematic analysis as “…a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data,” rather than seeking to “…describe patterns across qualitative data”. This is a rather flexible research method, especially as it is not rooted in theory or requires specific technical knowledge. Such a method was adopted for this study because it allows the researcher to form a more detailed ‘snapshot’ image of what themes Putin has drawn upon in order to securitise Russia’s relationship with Ukraine, within a specific period of time. More specifically, which of these themes have emerged as more or less prominent, and at what points (i.e. fluctuations within the selected data set period).

1 https://surfshark.com/.
There are three different ways of developing a thematic code (Boyatzis, 1998). These coding schemes are either based on theory, prior research, or are data-driven, meaning that a thematic analysis can be both deductive and inductive in nature. Inductively identifying themes is “…a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame…”, however, “…researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical epistemological commitments…” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83 - 84). Therefore, theory can be utilised as a framework – a preliminary base – for the researcher to work from when identifying themes in a dataset. Inductive thematic coding naturally encompasses a wider set of themes as the researcher is working directly from raw data (Boyatzis, 1998). Theoretical thematic coding may direct the researcher’s attention to specific elements within the dataset, drawing away from the ‘bigger picture’ of patterns that may be identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Although Lowe and Page's (2019) work focuses on situations involving political communication, a data-driven coding scheme was first adopted and later complemented by theory and prior research, allowing this research team to establish a broader set of themes in the context of abortion debates. Drawing inspiration from Lowe and Page (2019), a deductive and inductive methodological approach was simultaneously employed in this study. However, this study differs in the sense that the five sectors outlined in securitisation theory (military, political, societal, economic, and environmental) were set as a starting point (parent code) for the coding process. This created five key parameters within which the inductive coding process could then take place. The use of theory and/or prior research can act as a guide for the researcher, assisting them in separating themselves from the study and reducing bias (Lowe & Page, 2019). With this in mind, starting from Buzan et al. (1998) five sectors of security, provided the researcher with a more organised sphere in which themes could be inductively identified.

The coding process in this study was extensive and repetitive. Upon a first inspection of the data, 281 themes were identified. Bryman (2012) notes that repetition is a key component of qualitative data analysis, meaning that thematic codes must be reviewed in order to identify connections and/or overlaps between the themes. During this process of recoding, the number of themes were narrowed down to 121, as there were instances of repetition and overlap. A separate category was created to note Russia’s references to Ukraine regarding COVID-19. However, this was not included in the final tallying of results, as it did not obviously align with the broader sectors of security. As reiterated by Lowe and Page (2019), this process is a vital
step because repetition encourages close comparison and reflection. A maximum limit of three rounds was set for the number of sub-themes that could be identified within the parent code (sector of security). This encouraged the researcher to place the (initial) large number of themes into more concrete broad categories, capturing a wider thematic essence in the selected data set. It is important to note that despite narrowing down the themes, the nature of the content in the data meant that there were a few instances of thematic overlap.

MAXQDA was used to complete the qualitative thematic coding, allowing for greater efficiency during this process. Following, a set of quantitative results were generated for the purpose of comparison. Firstly, the total number of references for each year vs. the number of publications was tallied. For each sector of securitisation theory (parent code), by year, the number of references per mention of Russia-Ukraine were then calculated to provide a longitudinal image of the relationship. Within the timeframe of this study, the leading sub-themes per sector were also tallied up to showcase what thematic frames were politicised by Russian leadership. In respect to Russia’s escalation of the Ukraine issue, the same tallying process was completed for each sector and year, in order to provide a longitudinal assessment of which themes/sub-themes were securitised more over the selected four-year period.

5.4. Time Frame
The timeframe for this study was initially set as February 2021 to February 2023. However, this would not have provided a wide-enough period for analysis, when observing Putin’s escalation of the Russia-Ukraine relationship. A wider ‘before’ period, beginning from February 2019, was necessary as relations between Russia and Ukraine were comparatively stable (Roth, 2019). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic was a disruptive factor in world politics and interstate relations, which was a key reason for setting the study period from February 2019 to February 2023.

5.5. Forming a Sample
A keyword search of “Ukraine” on the kremlin.ru press page, from Feb. 2019 – Feb. 2023, was first conducted and led to 294 results. There was a cull to eliminate a number of publications because, although the topic of Ukraine was touched upon extensively, many of these publications only included a description of an event, meeting, or phone call, where Russia’s relationship with Ukraine was mentioned. As no formal statement was provided by
the president, these sources were eliminated because they did not offer direct leadership discourse on Ukraine. Additionally, in certain transcripts where the president has made a statement, the mention of Russia’s relationship with Ukraine was only made by other parties, which then also resulted in their elimination. Altogether, 152 publications formed the sample that was analysed as a part of this study.

5.6. Selecting Frames
The use of ‘frames’ in this study is referring to the ‘spectrum of securitisation’ proposed by Buzan et al. (1998). More specifically, what themes are escalated (securitised) vs. politicised, and how often, which is how this research study aimed to identify the areas of Russia’s relationship with Ukraine that have in fact been securitised. Sheikh (2014) reaffirms that an issue (theme) must first be politicised before it can be escalated and considered securitised. Given that all the data analysed in this study was found in political discourse, it has been assumed that it has been politicised. Identifying various sub-themes at this politicised level was the first step in the thematic analysis.

From these identified themes and sub-themes, the next step was determining which ones Putin had escalated (i.e. securitised) within the selected timeframe of this study. The terms escalation and securitisation are used interchangeably. Nonetheless, escalatory language is bound to differ depending on the securitising actor and broader context of the issue. Based on more prior typologies from Buzan et al. (1998), Çilingir (2020), and Jahng and Doshi (2021), this study set about identifying more general escalatory terms within Putin’s public statements, such as ‘threat’, ‘challenge’, and ‘target’. These were found to effect Russia’s, or the Russian peoples, ‘security’ and ‘existence’. Drawing from Campana's (2013) work, which focused on how challenges to Russia’s survival are represented, this study identified that Putin labelled Ukrainian authorities/internal actors as ‘extremists’, ‘Neo-Nazis’, ‘nationalists’, and would often ‘blame’ them and hold them responsible for deteriorating relations with Russia. These actors were also often described as ‘terrorists’ or ‘criminals’, and the regime is labelled as ‘unlawful’ and responsible for ‘Russophobia’, an ‘Anti-Russian’ agenda, and ‘genocide’. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that Russia often escalated its relationship with ‘the West’, in respect to Ukraine, criticising their influence and interference in the region. This was often framed as a direct ‘challenge’ to Russia’s conception of security and survival.
To summarise this section, it has outlined the overall methodology employed to conduct this study, as well as the reasoning for why this is the most appropriate course of action to identify and analyse Russia’s securitisation framing of Ukraine. The following chapter offers a concise presentation and preliminary analysis of the results obtained from the selected data between February 2019 and February 2023.
6. RESULTS

The following chapter presents the data collected in this study, first breaking down the more general patterns observed. Following, it draws attention to the different sub-themes identified at the politicisation versus escalation levels.

6.1. Total Number of Publications (kremlin.ru) and Total Number of References

This section highlights the total number of references to Russia’s relationship with Ukraine by President Vladimir Putin, within the study period, in comparison to the number of publications where he has made statements or authored articles, published on the President’s Office press page. The findings here are a reflection of the themes at the politicisation level.

![Total Number of Publications (kremlin.ru) vs. Total Number of References (Feb. 2019 – Feb. 2023)](image)

*Figure 1. Total Number of Publications vs. Total Number of References (Feb. 2019 – Feb. 2023)*

Firstly, it is important to note that the steep dip between 2022 and 2023 is largely attributed to the fact that only 10 publications in 2023 were analysed in this study, as the cut-off period was February 2023. Given that Russia’s war in Ukraine is ongoing, it was expected that the number of publications and references to Ukraine would remain quite high. Likewise, the dip in 2020 is mostly attributed to the COVID-19 global pandemic, which was recognised as a disruptive factor. There were three references recorded of Russia’s mention of Ukraine in terms of COVID-19, however, this was not included in the final data count as it did not clearly align with the sub-themes identified in the sectors of security. The number of references to Russia’s
relationship with Ukraine were also found to be at their lowest point during this particular period.

Comparing the number of publications on the kremlin.ru press page in 2019 and 2021, there was one less recorded in 2021. However, the difference between the number of references was 227. As seen in Figure 1, the number of publications increased following a dip in 2020, reaching its highest point in 2022. The number of references also reached its highest point, totalling to 800. Figure 2 represents the total number of references per sector over the entire study period. The political sector retained the largest number of references (650), followed closely by the military sector (289). Between the societal and economic sectors, there was a difference of 38 references, and the environmental sector retained the lowest total number with only 7.

6.2. Politicisation of the Russia-Ukraine Relationship

In the following section, Figure 3 offers a longitudinal representation of the specific number of references per sector for each year within the timeframe of this study. At this point, the themes were considered politicised. Between 2019 and 2020, a general dip in the number of references was observed, except for the societal sector where there was the slightest increase. From 2020 to 2021, there was an increase in the number of references for all sectors, where the environmental sector recorded its highest point. Between 2021 and 2022, the military sector experienced the sharpest increase followed by the political sector. The societal sector
experienced the slightest dip, while the economic sector experienced a gradual increase, following on from the 2020 to 2021 period.

**Figure 3. Politicised Themes: Russia-Ukraine Relationship (Feb. 2019 – Feb. 2023)**

6.2.1. Military Sector

Thematic references to Russia’s relationship with Ukraine, within the scope of the military sector, remained quite low in 2019 and 2020. As demonstrated in Figure 3, the number of references recorded were six and one, in 2019 and 2020 respectively. Although it was not until 2021 when there was a notable increase, the military sector still remained the third most touched upon sector for that year. This sector was referred to 322 times in 2022, which was 247 more than the previous year. Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which somewhat paints the picture as to why there was a significant increase in the number of times that Putin made reference to Ukraine. Despite only having analysed ten publications for 2023 (until the end of February), the military sector recorded 85 references, retaining the highest position for that year.

Within the military theme, a total of 33 sub-themes were recorded. The most repeated themes included the ‘Protection of Russians and Territory’, ‘Criticism of Ukrainian Authorities’ and ‘NATO Expansion’. Appearing only throughout 2022 and 2023, the ‘Protection of Russians and Territory’ frame coincided with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On many
occasions, Putin has commemorated and praised the “determination, and heroism” of Russia’s military forces, having “averted a real danger posed to [the] Motherland” (kremlin.ru, 2022q). Furthermore, Russia’s ‘Criticism of Ukrainian Authorities’ frame was also only referenced between 2022 and 2023. Russia would often claim that the “plague of nationalism… [had become] linked to neo-Nazism” (kremlin.ru, 2022bb), spreading throughout the Ukrainian regime. As a result, Putin’s discourse would reiterate that the current “combat actions were started by nationalists in Ukraine” (kremlin.ru, 2023f). The threat of ‘NATO Expansion’ was a frame predominantly referenced in the latter half of 2021 and early half of 2022, leading up to the events of February 24. Dominating political discourse were Putin’s “concerns and warnings regarding NATO’s eastward expansion [that were] totally ignored” (kremlin.ru, 2021b), especially as Russia only sought to “ensure [their] security” (kremlin.ru, 2021ab).

6.2.2. Political Sector

In terms of political themes, as indicated in Figure 3, this was the most referenced sector between 2019 and 2021. Despite a significant dip in 2020, there was only a difference of 28 references to Russia’s relationship with Ukraine between 2019 and 2021. Growing to its highest point in 2022, 276 references were recorded for the political sector. This somewhat correlates with Russia launching its full-scale invasion in 2022. Similar to the military sector, there was a significant dip in the number of references between 2022 and 2023, however, a total of 42 references were still recorded, retaining the second highest position.

A total of 39 sub-themes were identified within the broader political theme. A ‘Criticism of Ukraine (Negotiations/Dialogue)’ was the most consistently referenced sub-theme throughout the timeframe of this study. Putin would often emphasise that “the future of Russian-Ukrainian relations… largely depend[ed] on the Ukrainian government” (kremlin.ru, 2020p). On several other occasions, Putin also stressed that “Russia is open to dialogue with Ukraine” but must know that their “partner is defending its national interests [and] not serving someone else’s” (kremlin.ru, 2021m) – a common frame in relation to the topic of Ukrainian authorities and their approach to dialogue. Closely associated with the previous theme, ‘Russian Crisis Resolution Efforts’ would often stress the importance of the Minsk Agreements, with Russia strictly “maintaining this format… reiterat[ing] that this is all we have” (kremlin.ru, 2021d). Lastly, dealing with sovereignty and policy, Putin would often stress the importance of
‘Russian Support’ for its annexed territories, detailing that Russia “will allocate appropriate resources to put everything in order” (kremlin.ru, 2022bi).

6.2.3. Societal Sector

Thematic references to Russia’s relationship with Ukraine, within the societal sphere, were relatively similar in 2019 (25 references) and 2020 (27 references). Although Figure 3 highlights a peak in 2021, with a total of 130 references, a slight dip was noticed in 2022, where the president made 127 references to the country’s relationship with Ukraine. Since 2020, the societal sector remained the third most referenced thematic sector until 2023.

Within this sector, a total of 32 sub-themes were identified. The most prominent of these included ‘One Nation’, ‘Stress on Russian Language’, and ‘Commemoration of History’. Referenced at all points throughout the timeframe of this study, Putin would often stress that “Ukrainians and Russians are… actually one people” with shared “cultural, linguistic and historical” values and experiences (kremlin.ru, 2019f). This theme was often referenced in conjunction with a ‘Stress on Russian Language’, as way of claiming that Russians and Ukrainians have historically, and still are, united by “a common language” (kremlin.ru, 2020i). Moreover, the ‘Commemoration of History’ frame was mostly employed by Putin in the latter half of 2021, and consistently since February 24, as a way for Russia to “pass on [the] nation’s moral and cultural code” and prevent any “distorted interpretation of history” regarding Russia’s connections to Ukraine (kremlin.ru, 2022au).

6.2.4. Economic Sector

In terms of economic themes, as shown in Figure 3, this was the second most referenced sector in 2019. From 2020 to 2022, the number of references to sub-themes within the economic sphere steadily increased and peaked in 2022, where it was mentioned a total of 84 times. The sharp dip in 2023 is largely explained by the fact that only 10 articles were analysed as a part of this study, which was substantially lower than the previous years.

A total of 11 sub-themes were identified within the economic sector, with the ‘Trade: Energy Sector’ theme most consistently referenced throughout the timeframe of this study. In relation to Russian gas trade with Ukraine, and Europe via Ukraine, Putin would stress the “importance of agreements” as they were “mutually advantageous” (kremlin.ru, 2020a). The theme of
‘Trade: Agriculture’ was primarily referenced during the 2022-2023 period of this study, coinciding with agricultural trade problems as a result of Russia’s war in Ukraine. In this case, Putin would stress that many “problem[s] lie with the structure of the economy in Ukraine” (kremlin.ru, 2022w). Much of Putin’s political discourse within this sector also highlighted the importance of ‘Investment/Infrastructure’ in Crimea and the Donbass region, as a way of bringing these territories closer to Russia. This involved offering “special support measure[s]” (kremlin.ru, 2020l), which often included “expanding urban infrastructure” (kremlin.ru, 2021ab).

6.2.5. Environmental Sector
The environmental sector is the least referenced sector within the timeframe of this study. Thematic references were only recorded between 2020 and 2022, with the most recurring theme concerning ‘Natural Resources’. In terms of production and export through Ukraine, Putin would often address “questions on the environment” and the quality of transport technology in Ukraine (kremlin.ru, 2021s). Putin would also often focus on ‘Crimea’ and the “fresh water” problems it faced, which were “neglected in Soviet times, [and when] Crimea was a part of Ukraine” (kremlin.ru, 2020p). Referenced an equal number of times was the theme of ‘Natural Disasters’, often drawn upon when discussing “support for people who [had] lost their homes”, including in Russian annexed territories of Ukraine (kremlin.ru, 2023d).

6.3. Securitisation of the Russia-Ukraine Relationship
Between February 2019 and February 2023, a total of 487 escalatory references were recorded. As highlighted in Figure 4, Putin’s escalation of the Ukraine issue was relatively low in 2019 and 2020, with quite an increase in 2021. These references reached a peak in 2022, which coincides with Russia’s launch of a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Although there was only a difference of 52 escalatory references between 2021 and 2023, the low in 2023 can largely be explained by the fact that only 10 publications were analysed. Given that Russia’s war is still ongoing, it would be anticipated that a higher number of escalatory references for 2023 would emerge if the timeframe of the dataset was widened.
6.3.1. Military Sector

As reflected in Figure 5, the military sector was the most securitised by Putin regarding Ukraine, having been referenced a total of 237 times. This was predominately between the period of 2021 and 2023, as there were no escalations recorded in 2020, and only twice in 2019. The most securitised themes included the ‘Protection of Russians and Territory’, ‘NATO Arms Build-Up’ and ‘Russia’s National Interests’. Putin continues to argue that the “decision to start...
a pre-emptive military operation was necessary and the only option” (kremlin.ru, 2022ao), to not only “ensure the security of Russia and its citizens [but also] protect the residents of Donbass from genocide” (kremlin.ru, 2022ag). Both the West and Ukraine were considered responsible for “threaten[ing] to split up and enslave our Motherland” (kremlin.ru, 2022ao). When stressing the need to defend Russia’s homeland and people, Putin would present this as “our” problem, where “we” must be taking action: “We are defending human lives and our common home, while the West seeks unlimited power.” (kremlin.ru, 2023h). This study has identified the use of inclusive language during the process of Russia’s escalation of select sub-themes.

Much of Putin’s escalation of ‘NATO Arms Build-Up’ included criticism of the West’s military build-up around Ukraine, and subsequent exercises that were conducted on Russia’s borders, as Russia “simply [had] nowhere further to retreat to” (kremlin.ru, 2021aa). Putin stressed it would be “absolutely irresponsible” for Russia to “stay idle and passively observe” (kremlin.ru, 2022i) the growing threat posed by NATO forces, as a way of justifying extraordinary action. Putin’s escalations of this theme were also tied closely with the ‘Russia’s National Interests’ frame. Ukraine’s threat to Russian security is often referenced in conjunction with Russia’s security concerns vis-à-vis the West. At a turning point in Russia’s escalations concerning Ukraine, Putin described that “those behind the provocations that threaten [Russia’s] core interests … will regret what they have done” (kremlin.ru, 2021e), alluding to action that may be taken in response to Western interference in Russia’s relations with Ukraine. In line with this argument, Putin also emphasises that the West’s “main goal is to contain Russia’s development… [and] Ukraine is simply a tool to reach this goal” (kremlin.ru, 2022a). In this case, “Russia has every right to respond in order to ensure its security” (kremlin.ru, 2022e), leading to the justification that extraordinary military action was the only appropriate response to such ever growing existential challenges.

From the key themes that were escalated within this sector, it was observed that the threats perceived by Russia vis-à-vis Ukraine, were closely tied with the threats Russia perceived vis-à-vis the West. Escalations of these frames are often simultaneous, highlighting how the issue of Ukraine is multifaceted and complex. While some frames are drawn on to pinpoint the threats posed, others are utilised to justify necessary action that will combat and ensure Russia’s security interests.
6.3.2. Political Sector

The political sector was the second most securitised. As indicated in Figure 5, it recorded a total of 133 escalations, which, similar to the military sector, was also largely between the 2021 and 2023 period. Russia’s ‘Criticism of Ukrainian Russophobia/Anti-Russian Agenda’ was the most escalated frame within the political thematic sphere. On this topic, a sharp shift in Putin’s discourse was most notable from mid-2021, where it was “bound to be a concern” that “an anti-Russian Agenda [was] being pursued” by Ukraine (kremlin.ru, 2021n). This included laws that declared “Russian people living on historical Russian territories to be aliens” and authorities that began to “expel them from this territory” (kremlin.ru, 2021n). By December 2021, Putin declared that Ukraine’s “Russophobia [was] the first step towards genocide” (kremlin.ru, 2021x). Through this thematic lens, Putin outlines the existential threats facing Russians in Ukraine, at the hands of Ukrainian authorities.

Russia’s ‘Criticism of Western Russophobia/Anti-Russian Agenda’ frame was also significantly escalated within the broader political frame. This theme was largely employed as a way to add criticism on top of that already pointed towards Ukrainian authorities. As Putin’s discourse regarding Ukraine shifted by mid-2021, strong arguments were made that “the Western authors of the anti-Russia project set up the Ukrainian political system” so that there would be change “but the attitude of separation from and enmity with Russia would remain” (kremlin.ru, 2021m). In doing so, painting a more defined picture that the West is responsible for the ideological divisions between Russia and Ukraine. Their use of “indiscriminate Russophobia as a weapon” nurtured a sense of “hatred of Russia for decades, primarily in Ukraine” (kremlin.ru, 2022ao), supporting Russia’s depiction as a victim of aggressive and discriminatory policies at the hands of a Western-influenced Ukrainian regime. Ultimately, Putin presents that this had amassed to “encouraging genocide and terror in Donbass” (kremlin.ru, 2022bl), challenging Russia’s political security by undermining its ideological standing and the legitimacy of its policy efforts.

Sub-themes that fall under the political sector are interesting to consider at the escalated level because there are many that have been referenced to a similar extent to those at the politicised level. ‘Russian Support (Annexed Territory)’ and ‘Re-unification (Annexed Territory)’ fall under a broader sub-theme dealing with sovereignty. Focusing heavily on re-unification in the years prior to February 24, Putin argued that the Kremlin “will do everything in [Russia’s] interests”, which “applies to Crimea returning to the Russian Federation” (kremlin.ru, 2020p).
Even so, Putin stressed that Russia “was forced to protect the residents of Crimea” (kremlin.ru, 2022b), framing extreme courses of action as necessary, given the extreme circumstances plaguing Russians on ‘their’ (historical) territory. Tying in with this theme of re-unification, Putin promises the security of Russian support. This frame is often used to reiterate that “Russia will do everything in [its] power to bring back the long-awaited peace to our land and ensure the safety of our people” (kremlin.ru, 2023h). On a slightly different note, Putin’s ‘Criticism of Ukrainian (neo-) Nazis/Nationalists’ once again positioned Ukrainian authorities as the reason for rising “aggressive rhetoric, indulging neo-Nazis and militarising the country” (kremlin.ru, 2021m) against Russians. The “rise of far-right nationalism… developed into aggressive Russophobia and neo-Nazism… [leading to] increasingly loud territorial claims to Russia” (kremlin.ru, 2022c). Putin consistently articulates that these are the dangers facing Russia, especially from 2021 onwards, which extended to territorial claims and alludes to some connection with other sectors. Nevertheless, many of the themes that Putin escalates overall, within the scope of the political sphere, are tied in with blaming the West but also notably Ukrainian authorities.

6.3.3. Societal Sector

The societal sector received the greatest number of escalatory references in 2019. However, it ranked third in the number of securitising references made by Putin between 2021 and 2022, where it reached its highest total of 60, as noted in Figure 5. No escalations were recorded in 2020. The most escalated sub-frame was ‘One Nation’. From the beginning of this study’s timeframe, Putin has emphasised that Russia and Ukraine are “two parts of the same nation…two brotherly nations” (kremlin.ru, 2019j). Putin’s stress on the idea that the Ukrainian nation is a product of a greater Russian nation – “for we are one people” (kremlin.ru, 2021m) - drastically developed from mid-2021 and reached a breaking point in February 2022. Ukraine is ultimately “not just a neighbouring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our history, culture, and spiritual space” (kremlin.ru, 2022e). Putin’s use of inclusive language is notably consistent when drawing on the ‘One Nation’ theme. It is presented that Ukraine is inexplicably tied to Russia, and that a challenge to this supposed fact is a challenge to Russia’s conception of nationhood. Ultimately, Russia is then fighting in Ukraine because it “need[s] a consolidated society”, so its “culture can[not] be erased from history” (kremlin.ru, 2022as).
Putin’s ‘Stress on Russian Language’ is often referenced alongside the other escalated themes covered in this section, and mostly within the 2021 and 2023 period. Blaming Ukrainian authorities for “pushing the Russian language out of everyday life” in Ukraine (kremlin.ru, 2021i), the “Russian speaking population are being forced from their historical lands” (kremlin.ru, 2021ab). Capitalising on fear, and simultaneously drawing on other themes, Putin exaggerates the challenges posed to Russians in Ukraine and their “right to speak their native language” (kremlin.ru, 2022b). In turn, recognising the independence of regions “fighting for their elementary right to live… [and] speak their own language” (kremlin.ru, 2022e). This theme has often been used as another way to articulate the existential threats posed to Russians in Ukraine. In this case involving language, Ukrainian authorities are considered responsible for this threat.

Similarly, the theme ‘Historical/Common Homeland’ is often used to emphasise how a more united Russian nation (Russians and Ukrainians) is threatened, by connecting said nation to a historical/common (Russian) land. Often blaming Ukrainian authorities, Putin has claimed that “a hostile “anti-Russia” [took] shape” on Russia’s “historical land”, making it a “matter of life and death” (kremlin.ru, 2022i), requiring extreme measures. This took form in Russia’s full-scale invasion. From the themes that were escalated within this sector, some overlap between what was used to frame a threat and a need for action was identified.

### 6.3.4. Economic Sector

Although the economic sector recorded one escalatory reference in 2020, as shown in Figure 5, it was most securitised in 2022, in conjunction with Russia’s war in Ukraine. The most common themes that were escalated were ‘Criticism of External Actors’, ‘Western Economic Pressure (Sanctions)’ and ‘Trade: Energy Sector’. The most common way in which these frames are drawn on to escalate the economic side of Russia’s relationship with Ukraine, was to play a ‘blame game’. Putin is exceptionally critical of the “host of mistakes” their Western partners have made, and when looking “for someone to blame…Russia is the most suitable candidate” (kremlin.ru, 2022v). Ukraine is caught in the middle. Additionally, sanctions against Russia have drastically increased following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In this case, Putin paints Russia as the ultimate victim, with the West responsible for “blackmailing”, “threatening”, and conspiring to “hold back the development of Russia” (kremlin.ru, 2022e). Lastly, Putin has drawn on energy sector trade as another way of escalating the economic
security challenges facing Russia. Often commenting on Europe’s “failed energy policy”, an ongoing issue “long before the operation in Donbass”, Putin emphasises that “they are once again looking for someone to blame” (kremlin.ru, 2022w). Russia’s direct relationship with Ukraine is not so much securitised via economic themes, rather, it presents as more of a situational tool for Russia to escalate related issues and relationships. This aligns with Buzan et al. (1998) conclusion that security issues within the economic sector are found to heavily intersect with the four other sectors within securitisation theory.

6.3.5. Environmental Sector
There were no escalations recorded from the environmental sector, with respect to Russia’s relationship with Ukraine during the timeframe set for this study.

6.4. Russia’s use of the Term ‘War’
An inductive finding deemed worthy of attention is Vladimir Putin’s strategic use of the term ‘Special Military Operation’ versus the term ‘War’. After Putin declared Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this has been labelled by the Kremlin as a “Special Military Operation” (kremlin.ru, 2022i). The use of this term compared to the term ‘war’ is a strategic choice when framing the actions of opposing sides in this conflict. When regarding the deteriorating state of relations with Ukraine, whether it be on a military, political, societal, or economic level, Putin has consistently stressed that Russia “was forced to go ahead with the special military operation” (kremlin.ru, 2022w). No other course of action was presented as being enough to ensure Russia’s security interests. Early on in this operation, Putin articulated that “the movement of Russian forces against Kiev and other Ukrainian cities is not connected with a desire to occupy that country” (kremlin.ru, 2022l). This is a position that has been maintained during the conflict period recorded within the timeframe of this study.

The use of the word ‘war’ was reserved for the framing of Russia’s opponents, be that Ukraine or supporters in the West. In December 2022, when asked about Russia’s role in light of the crisis in Ukraine, Putin stressed that Russia’s “goal [was] not to whip up the military conflict but to end this war. This is what we want, and this is what we will try to do” (kremlin.ru, 2022bo). In this case, Putin has used the term ‘war’ to frame it as if Ukrainian authorities are responsible for the current state of war Russia has been supposedly ‘forced’ to engage in. Furthermore, Putin has drawn on the term ‘war’ when directing blame at the West for the
current compromise to Russia’s sense of security, as well as the challenges facing the wider international security environment. When drawing on such terminology, Putin has stressed that the West is to blame for “the stoking of war in Ukraine, the provocations around Taiwan, and the destabilisation of the global food and energy markets” (kremlin.ru, 2022bb). Putin’s use of framing in this context corresponds with other cases where Ukrainian authorities or the West have been blamed for the current situation at hand, as noted within the broader sectors of security.

To conclude the results section, the sub-themes identified within the broader scope of securitisation framing, as prescribed by Buzan et al. (1998), have been provided in two parts. Firstly, the key sub-themes at the politicised level have been highlighted as a precursor to noting what was then securitised by Putin, within the timeframe of this study. While all five sectors were politicised, it was only then the military, political, societal, and economic sectors which recorded a number of escalatory references.
7. DISCUSSION

This chapter refocuses on the aim of this study, which was to note the changes in securitisation framing of Ukraine, by Russian President Vladimir Putin. It offers an in-depth discussion of where the findings of this study are situated in the larger field of research of Russian-Ukrainian relations, and the securitisation thereof. This discussion is broken down into two parts, first looking at patterns in the data produced and how this collectively altogether adds to the discussion surrounding Russian securitisation framing of Ukraine.

7.1. Similarities and Differences between Politicisation and Securitisation

Across all sectors, there were some overlaps in terms of the most politicised and most securitised themes. Beginning with the military sector, the ‘Protecting Russians and Territory’ theme, which referred to a duty to protect Russians in their historical motherland, was the most referenced at the politicised and securitised levels. This alludes to the importance of this theme when framing the alleged threat facing Russia. This threat was specified to either be directly from Ukrainian authorities or described as a product of Western influence and/or involvement in Ukraine, mainly the former. When it comes to the political sphere, the only cross-over between the main themes politicised and securitised was ‘Russian Support (Annexed Territory)’, which highlights a perceived need to support the populations of Crimea and the provinces of Ukraine annexed by Russia. At the politicised level, the most referenced themes were those dealing with negotiations and (Russian) crisis resolution efforts. When it came to an escalation of themes within this sector, there was greater emphasis on criticising Ukrainian authorities and the West, particularly in relation to Russophobia and an Anti-Russian Agenda (including alleged genocide).

Moreover, when it came to the societal sector, the largest similarities in themes referenced at both the politicised and securitised levels was observed. The most prominent themes included ‘One Nation’ and ‘Stress on Russian Language,’ which suggests that there was a consistent thematic focus from Vladimir Putin when addressing societal issues pertaining to Russia’s relationship with Ukraine. Although the frame ‘Commemoration of History’ was the third most referenced theme at the politicised level, ‘Historical/Common Homeland’ held third place among the securitised themes within the societal sector. Both of these themes still centred around history, however, were relating to different aspects of it. The ‘Commemoration of History’ frame refers to the value of historical memory, while ‘Historical/Common Homeland’
focuses on commonalities within the territories held by the former Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Despite these differences, the references to history still allude to how this multi-faceted theme has played a far-reaching role in Russia’s securitisation of issues pertaining to Ukraine.

In respect to the economic sector, the only similarity in themes carried over from politicised to securitised was focusing on ‘Trade: Energy Sector’, which concentrates on energy resource trade between Russia and Ukraine. The most escalated themes in this field were related to sanctions and the ‘Criticism of External Actors’, securitised mostly in line with the events of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and resulting economic penalties. This suggests that the economic sector was not escalated as extensively by Russia until the start of the war, which may have presented an opportunity for Russia to securitise its relationship with Ukraine in a much wider capacity. Lastly, the themes that fell within the scope of the environmental sector were not touched on to a great degree by Russian leadership and were not escalated in respect to Ukraine.

7.2. Old and New Themes

The role of securitisation theory in this study was to provide the researcher with a thematic framework that set the scope from which a number of frames could then be inductively identified. In conjunction with prior research, the patterns noted in previous cases of securitisation in Russia offered some insight into what themes could appear within the selected data. One can in fact ascertain that there are a number of repetitive themes that Russia draws upon during a process of securitisation. While there are certain themes aligning more closely with certain sectors, as prescribed by securitisation theory, there are underlying elements that are consistent across the board.

As such, prior research found that Russia’s securitising arguments tend to centre around threats to its identity, with the Russian people and nation as representative forces (Nuñez-Mietz, 2019; Pearce & Yuchshenko, 2018; Wilhelmsen, 2016). Threats posed by Western influence and/or involvement in regional affairs are framed as a challenge to that identity, especially in the case of Ukraine (Pearce & Yuchshenko, 2018; Suslov, 2014). Often framing itself as a victim in the face of a particular threat, Russia tends to justify extreme courses of action as the only legitimate and plausible response to maintain order and security (Wilhelmsen, 2016, 2017).
Correspondingly, this study found that Russia would often place blame on Western actors as a way of framing a threat to their existence. This was to varying degrees depending on the sector, and often accompanied by thematic frames painting Russia as a victim. Taking the military sector as an example, this study found that NATO expansion and arms build-up were two challenges to Russia’s national security interests, often put to the test by Western influence and its perceived adversity. Russia would often frame Ukraine as a sort of collateral in a grander securitisation game focused on presenting itself as a victim of the West’s actions. Interestingly, when justifying the need to ‘Protect Russians and Territory’ with military action, Putin points to Ukrainian authorities as the ones responsible for the ever-growing threat posed towards the Russian people, their historical homeland, and by genocide. These forces were described by Putin as being overrun by neo-Nazis or extreme nationalists, or as a victim themselves of corruption and/or Western interference. While securitisation of the economic sector has not been so focused on previously, this study noted a similar pattern of behaviour in placing blame on external actors, namely the West.

Secondly, the construction of Russian identity took centre stage in many of Russia’s securitising arguments. More specifically, the unprecedented challenges it faced from different actors and angles. This was specifically evident when Putin drew on frames within the societal sector. Escalatory claims that Russia and Ukraine are ‘One Nation’, meaning one people with one culture and identity, set a particular precedent. A challenge to ‘Ukrainian identity’ was presented as a challenge to Russian identity, especially as Putin considered them one in the same. Drawing on history to legitimate its territorial claims in the Donbass region, and Ukraine to a larger extent, reflect similar patterns of securitising behaviours as was observed in the case of Crimea in 2014.

Largely between 2021 and 2023, Putin placed significant emphasis on Ukraine’s spiritual value, a historical homeland. At this point, Ukrainian authorities were often blamed and considered responsible for the unprecedented challenge facing the Russian identity, nationhood and people’s sense of security. Maintaining Russian identity as the referent object appears consistent with framing patterns identified in previous cases of securitisation in Russia, in particular Suslov (2014), where history, spirituality and the Russian Orthodox religion have been emphasised.
Adding to the securitisation discussion, this study found that escalations across the political sphere were generally quite extensive. These frames often centred around ideology, policy, and sovereignty. Especially in relation to Euromaidan, Russia considered Western influence a challenge to its regional political influence (Marples, 2016; Suslov, 2014). This study found that Putin was indeed still critical of ‘Western Russophobia and Anti-Russian Agenda’, which contributed to an alleged genocide of Russians in Ukraine, carrying on similar and previously noted patterns of securitising behaviour. However, it was actually found that within the timeframe set for this study, Putin would actually position Ukrainian authorities as a greater existential threat than Western actors. This was also applied to the frame criticising the supposed rise of neo-Nazi/extreme nationalist ideology amongst the Ukrainian polity. Russians are ultimately painted as a victim of these political insecurities. When focusing on the theme of Russian annexed territory, Ukrainian authorities were also the actors largely criticised for neglecting the security of Russians in Ukraine. Vladimir Putin’s escalations within the political sphere moved away from blaming the West to focusing more on the actions of Ukrainian authorities and the perceived security challenges they posed to Russia. Therefore, this is a new observation to make note of in respect to securitisation in Russia and the post-Soviet space.

Moreover, this study identified a radical shift in Putin’s securitisation of Ukraine from June 2021. The frequency of escalatory references versus the number of publications in the latter half of 2021 saw a drastic increase, with a greater number of references continuing into 2022. This study was designed to look at what was said and how often, thus, it is not in its capacity to conclude why this point marked a significant shift in Russia’s securitising discourse. Nevertheless, it is interesting to make note of because this could be investigated further through a more explanatory study, which is perhaps focused on testing theory in order to explain this particular point. Widening the scope of publications analysed may also be beneficial. This is touched upon further in the conclusion section of this paper.

Lastly, Buzan et al. (1998) concluded that there is often a degree of overlap between the sectors of security, and the securitising arguments that fall within their scope, especially in respect to the military and political sectors. This study found that the themes escalated by Russian leadership are somewhat interconnected. Many of Putin’s justifications for extraordinary action designated that Ukrainian forces, sometimes influenced by the West, posed a great challenge not only to ideology, sovereignty, and Russia’s political stability, but to its territorial integrity – its historical motherland. In the case of societal versus political dimensions, societal threats
often also materialised as policy, which is tied closely to issues concerning ideology and Russia’s sense of legitimacy. To an extent, this draws attention to the intertwined thematic frames Russia employs when securitising its relationship with Ukraine, further alluding to the complex nature of this relationship.

As noted in the results section of this paper, when referring to the situation in Ukraine, at some points, Putin has made use of the term ‘war’ in select discourse to blame Ukrainian and external actors. However, when addressing the need for Russia’s actions, Putin then opts to use the phrase ‘special military operation’. This is an interesting point to make note of because despite securitising the issue of Ukraine, Putin has not escalated it to the extent that official Russian discourse addresses it as ‘war’. Indeed, the publications that were analysed were the English language versions. It is important to account for the fact that language may be a factor in how a frame is construed within a specific context. This could be better assessed by also considering the Russian language versions of publications via Kremlin.ru.

To close this chapter, this study has worked towards highlighting the many types of key themes securitised in Russia’s relationship with Ukraine, from the period where relations were comparatively stable to full-scale war. Altogether, this has been to paint a broader picture of what the underlying frames were that fall within the broader sectors of securitisation, and to highlight similarities and differences with previous cases of securitisation. While the results showed common themes with prior research, there was a marked escalation in Putin’s use of securitising language from mid-2021 that accelerated with the start of the 2022 war, as a means of justifying and sustaining the conflict.
8. CONCLUSION

The Russian 2022 invasion of Ukraine has added a greater degree of complexity to an already strained relationship between the two actors. While this relationship has not always been so unstable, there have been many points of tension that have arisen since the end of the Cold War. The purpose of this study was to first identify what frames Russian leadership, particularly the President of Russia, have employed in political discourse on Ukraine. Taking a step further, a number of securitising elements were then identified. The time frame set for this study was from February 2019 to February 2023, in order to track what escalatory frames appeared over a longer period of time than previously studied.

In the background section, there were a number of key events highlighted that have contributed to the current state of relations between Russia and Ukraine. This paper first set out to review these events in order to paint a picture of the main concerns that arose for Russia directly regarding Ukraine, as well as some external actors that were seen as influencing and/or interfering in their relationship. In doing so, the author also sought to build an understanding of some broad thematic areas that could appear during the course of this study. Additionally, drawing on a number of cases of securitisation in Russia, a series of frames were identified that underpin Russia’s process of securitisation. It is important to note that this study was not focused on why Russia securitised its relationship with Ukraine. Rather, it was focused on what thematic frames were drawn upon during this process, and how often they were referenced by Vladimir Putin during the period studied.

Securitisation is a process, carried out with the use of discourse, which moves an issue from politicised, to requiring extraordinary measures in order to combat a threat deemed so existential (Buzan et al., 1998; Sheikh, 2014). There are sectors of security that one can escalate an issue within, or across, including the military, political, societal, economic, and environmental sectors (Buzan et al., 1998). The role of securitisation theory in this study was to offer a broad thematic framework from which a number of sub-themes could be identified deductively and inductively, in Russian leadership discourse, namely that of Vladimir Putin.

A main takeaway from the results was that, despite some overlap, the main themes that were politicised were not always the main themes that were securitised. While there were a number of escalations recorded for the military, political, societal, and economic sectors, the
environmental sector was not securitised within the timeframe of this study. Nonetheless, looking at the broader military frame, Russia’s securitisation framing of Ukraine was often related to the threats it perceived from the West. When focusing on protecting Russians, their homeland, and the threats posed to it, Russia would often shift its blame to Ukrainian authorities that had supposedly fallen under the West’s sphere of influence.

Moving on to the societal sector, many of the politicised frames were also found to be securitised, focusing on the key elements of Russian culture and national identity (i.e., language and territory). Here, Ukrainian authorities were often deemed responsible for the existential threats posed towards Russia. The political sector saw the most difference in the themes politicised versus securitised, which often dealt with Russophobia and an anti-Russian agenda. Although Russia mainly considered the Ukrainian regime responsible for such ideological challenges, there was some criticism of Western influence and interference in this regard. Within the economic sector, Russia’s securitisation framing often blamed the West for the challenges it was facing.

More generally, it appears that some frames were used more to justify Russia’s actions in Ukraine, while others were drawn upon to present the existential threat that Russia allegedly faced. In previous cases of securitisation in Russia, authorities have often blamed other actors for challenging their sense of security, and that of the Russian people. It became clear that this pattern of framing was also used by Russia while securitising its relationship with Ukraine between February 2019 and February 2023. Furthermore, the concept of Russian identity also heavily underpinned many of the frames found to be securitised by Russia, which has been noted in previous securitisation cases.

Ultimately, it can be said that this study was successful, as it identified what themes Putin has generally drawn upon to frame Russia’s relationship with Ukraine. By breaking his arguments down into two levels - politicised and securitised - one can then better extract what sub-themes were escalated by Russian leadership, within the realm of five broader themes of security, and identify what frames better presented a case for extreme action that would counter a perceived extreme threat.

Based on this work, a number of recommendations for further research can be made. Firstly, focusing on what point Putin’s discourse regarding Ukraine shifted (i.e., mid-2021), it could
add greater depth to this field of securitisation to explore the ‘why’ element that follows on from this observation. Secondly, an interesting direction would be to extend the analysis to discourse produced by media outlets friendly to the Kremlin. These are often a mouthpiece for Russia’s political leadership; thus, one could benefit from observing how they could echo similar, or construct completely different, securitisation frames to the Kremlin.

The third point ties in with Putin’s use of the term ‘war’ in relation to the current situation in Ukraine. The sources studied were the official English language versions on the Kremlin website. Therefore, it may be worthwhile to do a deep dive into how securitisation framing of political discourse differs depending on the language that is used on the same resource, and, accordingly, how the intended audience may play a role in determining what frames are used by Russian leaders, not only in the context of Ukraine but other disputes across the post-Soviet space.

Taking a step in a slightly different direction, it may be interesting to also expand the data set to include discourse from other actors or ministries within Russia’s political elite. These are actors that would maintain specific roles that are closely associated with the Russian-Ukrainian relationship. This could offer a more comprehensive insight into the complex nature of Russian securitisation of Ukraine, and how thematical frames may differ depending on the actor, ministry, and overall interaction with Ukraine. Additionally, given that much of Russia’s initial securitisation of Ukraine centred around the events of Crimea and Donbass in 2014, it may be beneficial to expand the timeframe of this study to assess leadership discourse from this point to the present. This could offer a more longitudinal understanding of Russian securitisation of Ukraine and add greater depth to the data already collected.

Furthermore, it is worthwhile reiterating that Russia is a highly centralised state. Political control rests in the hands of the president and select political elite, which breeds the question as to why this state institution finds it necessary to securitise its relationship with Ukraine. Are there potentially elements of domestic instability that play a role in influencing the Kremlin’s decision to employ securitising discourse and engage in such a process?

Lastly, there are many players involved in Russia’s war in Ukraine, including non-state and para-state actors. One of the most prominent para-state actors includes the Wagner Group, which has been closely associated with Vladimir Putin and serves as the Kremlin’s right-hand
para-military force (International Crisis Group, 2023). Their involvement in Russia’s war in Ukraine would require some justification, and so, it would then be interesting to observe how they justify said engagement, and/or recruit participants via a securitisation lens. Here, one can observe that there are a number of avenues for further research regarding Russia’s securitisation framing vis-à-vis Ukraine.

In conclusion, this study is one of many first steps towards analysing Russia’s securitisation process vis-à-vis Ukraine. More generally, securitisation theory is traditionally applied in cases within the Western liberal context. There are limited instances where this theory has been used as a framework for analysing the themes and sub-themes that characterise Russia’s securitisation process to date, a research problem that extends to other non-liberal actors as well. Overall, this study has contributed to developing a better understanding of Russia’s escalatory framing of Ukraine, which can perhaps be extended to analysing other cases of securitisation in the post-Soviet space.
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**Materials Analysed**


Meeting with the heads of security agencies and intelligence services of the CIS countries. President of Russia. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69458


Meeting with the winners and finalists of the Teacher of the Year contest. President of Russia. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69519


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