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Foreign Agency in Russian Official Discourse

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Master in Sociology

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Abstract

Foreign agent legislation has become a significant and controversial phenomenon worldwide, formally justified as a mechanism for ensuring transparency and countering external interference. Yet, such laws carry substantial risks, as they can be instrumentalized to stigmatize and constrain civil society, suppress independent voices, and normalize repressive governance practices. Russia represents a striking example: its "foreign agent" framework, first introduced in 2012, gradually expanded into an extensive mechanism of control, increasingly used to marginalize and exclude dissent.

This study investigates the evolution of the "foreign agent" (FA) concept in Russian official discourse of parliamentary debates, tracing its institutionalization in the legal framework and its subsequent securitization. Using thematic discourse analysis grounded in post-structuralist securitization theory (Laclau & Mouffe), the research analyzes how representations of FA shifted from a formally neutral, technical category toward a signifier of disloyalty, betrayal, and treason. The findings show how discursive strategies enabled the normalization of restrictions and justified the gradual expansion of the law, embedding the FA construct within broader narratives of confrontation with the West.

Keywords: discourse, security, foreign agent

Resumo

A legislação sobre agentes estrangeiros tornou-se um fenómeno significativo e controverso a nível mundial, formalmente justificado como um mecanismo para garantir a transparência e combater a interferência externa. No entanto, tais leis comportam riscos substanciais, uma vez que podem ser instrumentalizadas para estigmatizar e restringir a sociedade civil, suprimir vozes independentes e normalizar práticas de governação repressivas. A Rússia representa um exemplo marcante: o seu quadro jurídico de "agente estrangeiro", introduzido pela primeira vez em 2012, expandiu-se gradualmente até se tornar num extenso mecanismo de controlo, cada vez mais utilizado para marginalizar e excluir a dissidência.

Este estudo investiga a evolução do conceito de "agente estrangeiro" (AE) no discurso oficial russo dos debates parlamentares, traçando a sua institucionalização no quadro jurídico e a sua subsequente securitização. Recorre à análise temática do discurso, fundamentada na teoria pós-estruturalista da securitização (Laclau & Mouffe), para examinar como as representações de AE passaram de uma categoria formalmente neutra e técnica para um significante de deslealdade, traição e perfídia. Os resultados mostram como as estratégias discursivas permitiram a normalização das restrições e justificaram a expansão gradual da lei, integrando a construção de AE em narrativas mais amplas de confronto com o Ocidente**.**

Palavras-chave: discurso, segurança, agente estrangeiro

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Introduction

Today, foreign agent legislation and its analogues exist in dozens of countries around the world, including the United States, Canada, India, China, Australia, UK, Israel, Uganda, Georgia and many others. Similar legislation called "The Directive on Transparency of Interest Representation on behalf of Third Countries" is currently being discussed in the European Union. The aim of these legislation is to enhance transparency by requiring entities - such as lobbyists, NGOs, and consultants - that engage in interest representation on behalf of 'foreign' governments to register and disclose pertinent information. This usually includes details about their activities, funding sources, and specific countries they represent. Although the legislation and the way it is implemented varies from country to country, the declared rationale behind it is usually the same - to counter negative foreign influence.

These concerns are not unfounded: research shows (V-Dem Institute. Democracy Report, 2024) that democracy is in decline globally. For the first time in decades the world is almost evenly divided between 91 democracies and 88 autocracies, with 71% of the world's population living under autocratic regimes. Autocratization remains the dominant trend today. This shift is, driven by a range of global and internal socio-political and economic factors, but also by external forces, including influence from non-democratic states. Such regimes often engage in propaganda, disinformation, political corruption, and support for radical movements seeking to erode democratic governance. It is therefore understandable that democracies are exploring ways to counter malign foreign influence. One such mechanism is the use of transparency legislation, particularly, 'foreign agents' laws.

However, such legislation stirs much controversy and debate[1] due to concerns over its potential unintended negative impacts on human rights organizations, social service providers, government watchdogs, and civil society at large. Notably, the EU Commission's directive has faced significant opposition from several Member States (General Affairs Council, 2024) and both European and international civil society organizations (Transparency International EU & Others, 2024). Critics warn that these measures may facilitate legislative abuse and impose disproportionate and discriminatory constraints on civil society actors. There are precedents that further demonstrate

1 Example discussions: (Court of Justice of the European Union, 2020); (Venice Commission, 2024); (European Court of Human Rights. (2022). Case 001-217751).

these risks - most notably, the case of Russia has become a widely cited example of how such frameworks in the hands of autocratic leaders can be weaponized against dissent.

Russia's 'foreign agent' law, introduced in 2012, empowered the Ministry of Justice to designate non-profit organizations as foreign agents if they received funding from abroad and engaged in broadly defined "political activity" (Federal Law No. 121-FZ, 2012). Despite officials' assurances that the law is aimed solely to increase transparency without restricting organizational operations, it has since evolved into a complex apparatus for suppressing independent media, NGOs, and dissenting voices. As of 2025, 1,214 entities are listed in the official registry as foreign agents (Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, 2025). The law has forced the closure or significant reduction in activities of numerous organizations, including prominent human rights groups, anti-corruption, environmental and polling bodies, healthcare service providers (e.g., those addressing HIV prevention and diabetes care), media outlets, and others. Many have ceased operations voluntarily, citing stigmatizing labels, insufficient resources to meet burdensome reporting obligations, and an inability to cover financial penalties.

Over the years, progressive amendments slowly but gradually have broadened the scope of the legislation, enabling its application to potentially any individual or organization, which no longer require to demonstrate any foreign funding, but must be perceived to be under vaguely defined "foreign influence" (Federal Law No. 255-FZ, 2022). This means that one can be labeled a 'foreign agent' without acting on behalf of any foreign entity. Moreover, to become a foreign agent, one does not have to engage in any political activity: it is sufficient to "publicly disseminate information" which includes posting any information on social media (Federal Law No. 255-FZ, 2022). In addition, the status of 'foreign agency' is transmissible, that is, one may become a FA, 'affiliated with FA' or 'assisting FA' (all legal statuses) by engaging in any activity with the FA. Thus, the criteria for being labeled a 'foreign agent' are so broad that enforcement has become entirely arbitrary, potentially applicable to any entity or individual.

Prominent Russian political scientist Ekaterina Shulman, herself designated a 'foreign agent', has described the status as a "form of civil death" (TBS, 2025, 0:59), - effectively excluding individuals and organizations from public life. The alleged FAs face exclusion from a range of public life sectors, such as prohibition from holding positions in government bodies, initiating referendums, participating in electoral and referendum campaigns, organizing any public events, engaging in educational and outreach activities, teaching in educational institutions, serving under contract in the Armed Forces, and participating in public procurement, among others. Moreover, the law aims at depriving individuals and organizations of financial resources by prohibiting to receive any financial or other material support from the state, placing advertisements on their

websites, blogs, social media, and other platforms, banning advertising the foreign agents themselves, making it impossible to receive royalties (the law requires that any income from their creative activities be transferred to a special bank account, created by the state), and receive income from bank deposits, dividends, or from renting out or selling real estate and vehicles (which will be accumulated in a special account, withdrawals from which will only be permitted in favor of the state, for instance, to collect fines). FAs also have to follow strict obligations, among others, to mark and disclose themselves with a special FA label (made up of 24 words typed in block capitals disclaimer). Any public information (even photos on personal Instagram page) has to be marked with a FA label. Failure to meet these obligations and abide restrictions may imply penalties ranging from substantial fines to up to seven years imprisonment (Federal Law No. 255-FZ, 2022).

However, beyond the formal restrictions and obligations associated with the legal status of a foreign agent, there exists a further dimension with potentially more enduring and damaging implications for civil society: the stigmatization of individuals and groups compelled to bear this designation. The inherent design of the 'foreign agents' law involves stigmatization, as the concept taken into juridical implementation is not neutral. In the case of post-soviet countries, especially in Russia, it has a social history and a background. There are studies dedicated to the semiosis of the term that suggest "ineradicability of Soviet ideological associations, as well as the historical memory «an agent is a spy, and therefore an enemy»" (Kupina N.A., 2012, p. 46) in the 'foreign agent' construct. For the Russian speaking audience thus, the term 'foreign agent' is already filled with «espionage», «betrayal», «alienity» and «hostility», and has a connotation of a widely used during the soviet repressions 'an enemy of the people' label (Donaj, L., & Shcheglov, M., 2021). Though at the time of adaptation of the first version of law, faced by a widespread criticism on the meaning of the term, officials denied any comparisons and semantic parallels ("*There is nothing inherently negative in the term 'foreign agent' - it is by no means a spy, as some might think. This is purely a matter of jurisprudence"* (Russian Government, 2012)) and even sought to ease public concerns explicitly emphasizing the neutral status of the term ("[…] *say, in the insurance industry, we have insurance agents - so what? In tax law, there's the concept of a 'tax agent.' So, what, are we supposed to cancel that term now?*" (Putin, 2012)) and repeatedly comparing it with the English version of the 'foreign agent' concept from FARA (the US transparency legislation), the official discourse around FAs and a common perception of such groups and individuals seems to have changed.

Since Russian's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, anti-Western rhetoric by leading politicians and mass media has intensified; consequently, foreign agents (perceived to be under the influence of particularly "western ideas") became often portrayed as anti-patriotic, hostile and threatening.

Official discourse surrounding legislative amendments has shifted from focusing on 'transparency' to 'treason' and 'punishment', framing foreign agents as an existential threat. A decade after the initial 2012 law and one year into the war, public opinion data reflects this transformation: according to a survey conducted by WCIOM in 2023, Russians perceive the term 'foreign agent' negatively; respondents associated the term with having a negative attitude (20% of respondents), being a traitor to the homeland (18%), being a spy (9%), being an enemy of the people (5%), being someone acting against Russia (5%), and someone serving the interests of another state (3%) (WCIOM, 2023). Over the past year, the share of respondents expressing such associations has increased, while only 2% of Russians reported having a positive view of 'foreign agents'. Notably, the abstract association with the word 'spy' has become less common, while the image of 'foreign agents' as traitors to the homeland has grown stronger (Levada Center, 2024). This trend may suggest a deliberate securitization of the FAs that allows officials to weaponize the legal framework extending it in scope and restrictive capabilities.

Thus, this study investigates the securitization of the 'foreign agent' status within Russian official discourse. While existing research on foreign agents has extensively addressed the legal dimensions of the issue, including comparative analyses of similar legislation in different countries, and explored the stigmatization of targeted NGOs and their coping strategies. The starting point of the present study is the post-structuralist premise that 'foreign agency' does not exist outside of discourse. Therefore, the main focus of this research is the process of construction of foreign agency within discourse, outside of the legislative framework. The primary research question is thus formulated as follows: how is 'foreign agency' represented within the official discourse in Russia? The main hypothesis of this study is that constructing foreign agency as an existential threat allowed Russia's authorities to justify and normalize enforcement of repressive and discriminatory legislation.

The study seeks to trace the representations of "foreign agency" within parliamentary debates and to examine how these representations have evolved over time. To test the hypothesis, the analysis will be grounded in the securitization theory, that also provides a framework for the study. Securitization theory helps explain how an issue articulated as a threat to the referent object may serve as justification to the use of extraordinary measures, that otherwise would not have been possible or accepted. Drawing on the contributions of post-structuralist discourse theory developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, this study will analyze the dominant themes surrounding foreign agency within the broader context of Russia's evolving hegemonic discourse.

The thesis is organized into five chapters. Following this introduction, chapter two outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on securitization theory developed by the second-generation

securitization scholars and post-structuralist discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe. Chapter three reviews methodological tools and explains the criteria for data selection. Chapter four provides a background to the 'foreign agency' institution evolution in Russia, mapping a context and a timeline of the main discursive events and presents the empirical analysis of the data. Finally, fifth chapter discusses the findings in relation to the research question and hypothesis, and concludes with reflections on the broader implications of the study, as well as suggestions for future research.

1. Theoretical framing

This study's theoretical framework is grounded in a critical securitization theory. Drawing on the contributions of second-generation securitization scholars, primarily Rothe Delf and Frank A. Stengel, combined with the post-structuralist discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, this chapter provides a theoretical structure for analyzing security narratives evolving around foreign agents in the socio-political landscape of Russia. The following sections briefly outline the foundational elements of classic securitization theory and its limitations, introduce a critical reading formulated by Rothe Delf and others, and elaborate on how the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe complements the theoretical and methodological toolbox of the analysis. The discussion concludes by addressing some weak spots in the application of the theory.

1.1. Securitization theory: a critical approach

The classic Copenhagen School constructivist-based approach to securitization theory introduced by Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998) defines security in terms of *existential threat* and *survival*: "It is when an issue is presented as posing an existential threat to a designated referent object" (Buzan, Wæver, & Wilde, 1998, p. 22) that we can point at the *securitizing move*. This distinct characteristic of security often serves as justification to the use of extraordinary measures to handle declared threats. A securitizing move thus, if successful, takes politics beyond the established rules and can be seen as a more extreme version of politicization (Buzan et al 1998). Though the mechanisms underlying this process and the theoretical framework applied to its analysis vary across different approaches developed within the theory, originally, the theory was built around speech act as the central mechanism of securitization.

Speech act model was developed by John L. Austin as a distinctive theory within the philosophy of language. According to it, there are some utterances that not only describe or point at the world, but also interfere with it, and therefore cannot be analyzed in terms of falsity or veracity. These utterances - *performatives* - within the *appropriate circumstances* are performing a specific action apart from that of issuing of an utterance itself. Austin calls it an *illocutionary act*: "Performance of an act *in* saying something as opposed to performance of an act *of* saying something" (Austin, 1975/2011, p. 99). Within the Copenhagen School framework, a securitizing move was conceptualized as an illocutionary act.

In speech act theory, an illocutionary act takes effect in certain ways, as distinguished from "producing consequences in the sense of bringing about states of affaires in the 'normal' way, i. e. changes in the natural course of events" (Sbisà, 2024, p. 117). Sbisà M. (2009: 45) commenting on Austin's ideas clarifies that the effect of an illocutionary act "consists of a change not in the natural course of events but in *norms*, that is, in something belonging to the realm of social conventions: a new norm is enacted, as it can be seen from the assessments of people's relevant behavior that may stem from the norm". Therefore, the primary illocutionary effect is the establishment of a new *norm*; however, this effect can be achieved only under certain conditions that are strictly adhered to. Such as "*I hereby name this ship the Queen Elizabeth*" in order to enact a new norm of the name, Austin claims that certain conditions, *felicity conditions*, must be secured. Such procedural conventionality, through which a new norm is established, was taken as the building block of securitization theory.

A generalized logic of securitization embodies this speech act formula: it presupposes "an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure includes the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances" (Austin, 1975/2011, p. 26). Within the classic securitization theory this formula translates into a conventional procedure of a performative of 'security' concept. The Copenhagen School theorists place this performative and a powerful speaker at the center of their research: an authorized speaker (the government) calling something a 'security threat' thus makes it so, enacting a new norm of the possibility of managing this 'threat' in a way that would not have been possible before. As Wæver puts it, 'by uttering "security", a state-representative moves a particular development into a specific area, and thereby claims a special right to use whatever means are necessary to block it' (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1998).

A securitization model thus contains three major components: a securitizing actor, a securitizing act (performative of 'security') and an audience, whose acceptance determines the act's success or failure. The power of securitization according to the classics is informed by the authority of the

speaker and a ‘grammar of security performative’, it’s special characteristics such as urgency, existential nature of threat, point of no return. Therefore, if the conditions of securitization are enabled, the authority of the speaker is recognized and the grammar of the security performative is observed, an audience is likely to accept it and the securitization is likely to be successful.

However, this framework’s reliance on a relatively self-contained and self-referential model of speech act theory has been widely criticized for insufficiently accounting for the contextual and structural conditions under which securitization succeeds or fails (Stritzel 2007; Balzacq 2010). It has been argued that outside of structuralist-based securitization theory, which conceives of discourses as fixed systems of meanings, this process is much more complex, contradictory and contested than the classic version of securitization theory would suggest.

The Copenhagen’s framework was critically analyzed and developed by the second-generation or post-Copenhagen theorists. One of the main points of critique concerned the self-referential power of securitization, the conditions of possibility of which are “internal to the act of ‘saying’ security” (Balzacq, 2010, p.1). Empirical research over time has demonstrated that not every issue, even when articulated under conventional conditions of a security performative, can be successfully securitized: authority of the speaker and an utterance of ‘security threat’ are not sufficient to produce/explain successful securitization act. In this sense, the Copenhagen School framework lacked explanatory depth regarding why certain issues become securitized while others fail.

Stritzel H. 2007, Balzaq 2010, Kirk 2022, Markiewicz 2024 and others have seen the overly textualized nature of securitization as a speech act as “ignoring structural and contextual factors that shape security threats” (Markiewicz, 2024, p. 202). Critiques have claimed that “any power of ‘non-decision’ […] as well as more structural notions of power are not captured” within the CS’s conceptualization of a securitization act (Stritzel, 2007, p. 365). As if an event of speech act had an “indeterminate force of its own that is not related to features of an existing context” (Stritzel, 2007, p. 362). Against this top-down, almost ‘mechanical’ ordering of speech act procedure, that places an actor in a very strong position, post-Copenhagen scholars have argued for the incorporation of context and power into research on securitization.

Some post-Copenhagen scholars advocated for turning away from excessive textual analysis of a speech act to a more ‘sociological’ inquiries into investigating material or extra-textual structures and practices that surround securitization act (such as Paris School). The effectiveness of a speech act is highly dependent on its specific context and cannot be solely attributed to the content of the statement itself (Balzacq, 2005). And since the context is not only the textual but also the material, such as speaker's position (Balzacq, 2005), which encompasses the speaker’s social and symbolic

capital as well as broader socio-economic and political power dynamics, the so-called Paris School scholars dismissed the category of discourse as "an ontological and epistemological category in its own right" (Rothe, D., 2015. p. 49) in order to focus on the interaction of institutions, practices and policies.

Other post-Copenhagen scholars like Rothe D., Stengel F. A. and Stritzel H., supported the critique, but argued for revision of the theory 'from within', grounding their review on more coherent foundations of post-structuralist discourse ontology. Rothe D. (2015) advocated that a more comprehensive understanding of discourse is able to address the theoretical gaps of self-referentiality and provide a coherent framework for unpacking the performative power of securitization act without being torn between textual and material forces that obscure and complicate grounding of the research within a solid theoretical foundation.

The analytical framework of this research is informed by the critical reinterpretation of securitization though post-structuralist discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe advanced by Matthias Stritzel, Rothe Delf and Frank A. Stengel. This perspective conceptualizes securitization as a "discourse theory of a special kind," in which securitizing acts are embedded in, enabled and constrained by, their discursive context. By situating securitization within specific socio-political settings, this approach understands the process of securitization as dynamic and contingent, with a continuum of success and failure, as opposed to a binary success/failure outcome. Securitization within this model refers to the processes of *discursive struggle* and not to a particular event or moment: "it is to be understood in gradual trends of either politicization or depoliticization" (Rothe, D., 2015. p. 40). The illocutionary effect of the securitization project then depends on the degree to which it establishes its demands and storylines as common sense (discourse structuration) and to which its claims become taken up by governmental institutions (discourse institutionalization) (Rothe, D., 2015).

In a broader sense, post-structuralist ontology introduces to the theory of securitization the dimension of time - whereby no meaning is fixed, but is always contingent and subject to interpretation and change - and space, the mapping of a broader context, from which the securitizing actor, the audience and the performative force of the articulation of security gain their power. This conceptualization of securitization challenges linear relationship between the three components and rethinks their role in the process of threat construction.

1.2. Threat construction as a discourse theory

Post-structuralist ontology

The starting point of this study is, thus, rooted in the post-structuralist ontological treatment of all meanings as being discursively constructed, where meanings - including all textual and 'extra-textual' phenomena, and everything meaningful (practices, objects, subjects and so on) - are seen as inherent to discourse. Discourse, within this approach, extends beyond the confines of language (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 107) referring to a system of elements, where each element derives its meaning through its relationship with other elements within the structure - such as the meaning of 'threat' within this paradigm presupposes a relation between a threatening subject and a threatened referent object. From this perspective, discourses are understood as "[…] relational configurations of elements that comprise agents (or subjects), words, actions, and things." (Howarth D., 2010, p. 312).

Unlike structuralist linguistics, which understands discourses as stable and closed systems of meanings, post-structuralist discourse theory highlights the inherent "impossibility of closure" in any discursive structure. This implies that meanings of discursive elements, as well as the meaning of an entire discursive formation, can never be fully fixed or finalized. Instead, discourse is characterized by an openness or by having an irreducible gap within itself. It is precisely this lack of fixity that allows for transformation and the possibility of change (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

A temporal fixation is possible only when discourse ties together those elements which are connectable to others in a specific situation and thereby transforms them into "moments". The process of transforming elements into moment (in a specific discourse) is what Laclau calls *articulation*. If discourses are relational structures, then articulation according to Laclau and Mouffe is seen as the practice that shapes these structures. The practice of articulation is not reduced to a speech act but refers to every practice that relates elements along the logics of difference and equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 105). From this broad understanding of discourse and practice of articulation, performativity is not restricted to linguistic practices. Rather, performativity refers to the ability to perform a certain phenomenon in a particular way (Rothe, D., 2015), where speech act is only one form of it.

Within the theory of securitization, performing a phenomenon as an existential threat can be seen as a form of articulation, where (at least) two discursive elements, the (soon to be) threatening subject and the referent object, are rearranged in such a way that one is articulated as an existential threat to the other. This rearrangement is accomplished not by simply invoking keywords such as

"threat" or "danger"; rather it occurs through the differential organization of discursive elements within a specific discourse. As these elements become moments of a common discourse, the identities or meanings of both the perceived threat and the referent object are also transformed. This means that any discursive moment "assumes a particular meaning within that context and all other possible meanings are excluded". Such as the "foreign" can be neutral in one context, meaning simply "belonging to the other country", while in the context of war with other country it can acquire a negative meaning of "belonging to the enemy", "dangerous", foreign as "not trustworthy", where the 'neutral' is rolled out within this discursive moment. A securitization act thus can be understood as an attempt at articulating threat, or establishing the relations between the threatening subject and a threatened referent object, where both identities are transformed, within a particular context.

Performativity of discourse

Context is a very important constituent in this model, as the effectiveness of the performativity of a securitizing act and the very success of securitization is informed by the context. 'Foreign' cannot be accepted as a threat unless there is a context that feeds into this discourse. Viewing securitization as a form of articulation, where elements are temporarily fixed as 'moments' within a specific discourse, the identities or meanings acquired by the 'threatening subject' and the 'referent object' cannot be considered as entirely new appearing in the void: "If articulation is a practice, and not the name of a *given* relational complex, it must imply some form of separate presence of the elements which that practice articulates or recomposes" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p.93). Therefore, moments as stabilized meanings can be characterized by the past articulations, in already existing elements, on the one hand, and the present discursive structure in which security is uttered, on the other (Stritzel, 2014). The compatibility of both within the moment provides a ground for successful securitization act.

Already Wæver (2011) points out that certain categories and arguments that are powerful in one period or at one place can sound non-sensible or absurd at others. But even within the same sociopolitical time and space the same arguments may operate with the opposite effect for different audiences. This was well illustrated by Frank A. Stengel (2019) with the example of the debates about potential collusion between the presidential campaign of Donald Trump and Russia: Trump's repeated claims that there was "no collusion" and that the whole Russia investigation was a "witch hunt" notwithstanding, public opinion was firmly split on the issue along party lines. According to the polls, eighty-seven percent of Democrats believed that the Trump campaign colluded with

Russia, eighty-eight percent of Republicans denied that, which demonstrates that claims become accepted not merely due to the 'grammar' of urgency or repetition but also, and more importantly, because they are convincing and relatable to a specific audience or within a specific discourse.

The conventionality of the securitization procedure within which a threat is recognized and accepted by the audience, formulated by CS through the illocutionary effect of the 'security' performative, presupposed a shared pattern which is linguistically encoded at least up to a certain point. However, from a post-structuralist perspective, what makes security arguments resonate with particular audiences is not some "essence" of security but the acquired special status of an issue in past discursive struggles. This may be true for any signifier that comes to represent a chain of equivalent demands for security within a particular discourse.

This relatability is predicated on the articulation's compatibility with past articulations, the elements on which articulation practices operate specified as fragments of a lost structural or organic totality (sedimented discursive practices), and a dominant security discourse (hegemonic order) (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p.94). Although elements exist before articulations, "the act of linking a particular discourse modifies their character such that they can be understood as being spoken anew" (DeLuca, 1999, as cited in Stritzel H., 2014, p.47). Therefore, articulation is not possible without drawing upon discursive structures and the history of articulations out of which this structure has arisen; yet, no practice is ever simply repeated, as there are no discursive contexts that would be identical across time and space (Stritzel H., 2014). Methodologically, this implies that analysis of articulated texts is an important but insufficient starting point of the securitization research, which should be supplemented by genealogical overview of some elements and its relations to the dominant security discourses within the moments (Stritzel H., 2014).

Drawing on Laclau's hegemonic discursive struggle theory, Stengel F. A. (2019) suggests that to understand the conditions of relative effectiveness of the securitizing moves an analytical distinction needs to be made between a securitization within an existing security discourse, and securitization as part of a larger hegemonic project to transform the wider security order. The most common example of large hegemonic discursive transformation is the "war on terror", where after terrorist attacks ("9/11") securitization discourse not only constructed terrorism as an existential threat to the United States but also formulated a new US grand strategy. At the same time, previously not securitized issues can become articulated as threats without a far-reaching overhaul of the existing security order - such as the construction of Iraq within the war on terror discourse did not involve the construction of a new security order but only a rearticulation of Iraq within that order as linked to (equivalent with) terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (Stengel F. A., 2019). Depending on the position of securitization in relation to the hegemonic

discursive order, a threat articulation can be analyzed along the logic of *equivalence* or *dislocation* with the dominant discursive order.

The core element of any hegemonic project is what Ernesto Laclau calls a "radical discontinuity with the dislocation of the dominant structural forms" (Laclau E., 1996, as cited in Stengel F.A., 2019, p.259). In other words, the emerging hegemonic discourse has to build on the failure of the previous discourses. A new project needs to hold within it "the (ultimately unavoidably empty) promise to (this time!) fully repair the dislocated structure (which however is ontologically impossible)" (Laclau E., 2000, as cited in Stengel F.A., 2019, p.259). At the same time, discursive orders are not built from scratch, but partially structured by "sedimented practices" - "discursive practices that have become institutionalized to such an extent that their origin in political struggles have been forgotten" (Laclau E., 2000, as cited in Stengel F.A., 2019, p.259). This is how hegemonic projects remain credible despite challenging the old orders.

The architecture of the hegemonic security project is composed of the construction of a broad range of *social demands* as equivalent, the articulation of an *antagonistic frontier* between the self and the radical threatening Other, and the representation of the totality of equivalent demands by one particular demand (an *empty signifier*). A successful securitization as a hegemonic project thus has to construct a chain of demands, previously disparate or even contradictory, into equivalence. Equivalence can also help understand how extraordinary measures become accepted within securitization process, as a demand for these measures has to be incorporated into the same chain. The construction of equivalence is closely linked to the articulation of social antagonism, which occurs through the exclusion of a *radical Other*. This Other is depicted as the force preventing the fulfillment of demands and the Self's attainment of a complete and stable identity. It is through the identification and articulation of this radical Other that previously distinct demands come to be perceived as equivalent. Lastly, for a hegemonic project to succeed, a specific demand must become emptied of its particular content so that it can serve as a *symbolic point* of identification capable of representing a broader range of demands and interests beyond its initial articulation. In this form, it becomes a unifying symbol with which diverse subjects can identify and through which they can channel their own demands. When a project effectively unifies diverse elements, it can foster identification among subjects and establish a hegemonic security discourse. This is reflected in its broader reproduction, structuration and institutionalization: such as all discourse participants that want to make a reasonable contribution will have to draw on it, it becomes institutionalized in new laws and policies. If discourses operate in a way of limiting what can legitimately be said and done, a successful securitization within this model does not directly trigger

extraordinary measures but frames certain actions as more legitimate or reasonable while marginalizing alternatives.

But securitization does not have to - and more often is not striving to - establish a hegemony that transforms the whole security order. Individual issues can be securitized within an existing security discourse aimed at preserving hegemonic structures (dominant knowledge systems, institutional arrangements, and power relation). In this case, argues Stengel F.A. (2019), compatibility among past articulations in the form of sedimented practices and present discursive structure is attained through rearticulation of an issue within the present hegemonic order as linked to the chain of equivalences, just like in the case of Iraq and terrorism (Stengel F.A., 2019). The demands are constructed in such a way as to be symbolically equal against the common radical Other within the dominant structure. At the same time, just like in evolving hegemonic order, securitizing moves have to maintain credibility in the light of sedimented discursive practices. If articulations clash with sedimented practices it can fail gaining credibility and acceptance by the audience; however, if they resonate and actively (or even intentionally) draw on those practices, they may gain legitimacy and consent among the referent audiences.

Subjectivity and power

The role of the audience, as well as the very idea behind it, is reconceptualized through the post-structuralist lens as diverse subject positions taken up within the discursive struggle (Rothe, D., 2015). In other words, individuals and collectives realize their subjectivity through identification with discursive positions in relation to, in case of securitization, the threatening subject and the valued referent object, such as a group may be identifying as "patriots" by taking up this subject position offered by the discourse of "*foreign as a threat to the national*" that further links various symbols, myths, and demands under that banner, for example, "*patriotic citizens have to realize that foreign agent is a threat and thus needs to be excluded*".

However, the audience should not be understood as a homogeneous entity but rather as a constellation of diverse groups, institutions, and individuals that may occupy divergent subject positions within the same discourse. These positions can involve re-articulating imposed identities, adopting alternative subjectivities, or embracing conflicting stances that are incompatible with the emerging hegemonic discourse. In doing so, actors may destabilize or resist dominant narratives. For instance, individuals designated as "foreign agents" in Russia have sought to contest the coercive subject position of this label in various ways, including through attempts to rearticulate it by drawing symbolic associations with the receipt of an honorable award. As Deputy Lugovoi

A.K. complained during a parliamentary session in July 2023: "*They openly ridicule the negligible fines. The registry of foreign agents is treated with derision: inclusion in it is perceived as a distinction or even an honor, with those affected congratulating one another on having been granted this status!*" (Lugovoi, 2023, July)

Therefore, the role of the audience cannot be reduced to that of a passive addressee of a securitizing speech act, whose function is limited to acceptance or rejection. Instead, audiences assume a contributory role in the co-production of shared security meanings. Their reactions do not merely authorize or deny securitizing moves but shape the substance of security discourse by influencing how threats are articulated, which meanings become stabilized, and which policy responses are rendered legitimate (Côté A., 2016). In this sense, audience engagement operates within the broader dynamics of discursive struggle, as conceptualized by Laclau E. and Mouffe C., where competing subject positions negotiate the right representation of an issue at stake, or the boundaries of the hegemonic order.

In this framework, power cannot be situated in a single actor, such as the securitizing authority, but is dispersed, although not evenly, across the discursive field. Following Laclau E. and Mouffe C, power manifests in the capacity to articulate elements into coherent discourses, to define the boundaries of what can be said and done, and to shape the subject positions. Stengel F. A. (2019) emphasizes that securitization, understood as a form of articulation, exemplifies the productive dimension of power: it does not merely constrain or repress alternatives but actively constitutes new meanings and subjectivities. Consequently, securitization within the presented framework is understood as a relational and dynamic process in which power is exercised through discourse, emerging not merely as a possession but as an effect of practices.

1.3. Critique

A common critique of securitization theory, that is particularly relevant for the present research, concerns its applicability to highly centralized or autocratic states. Critics argue that in such contexts, the focus on audience participation in discursive co-construction of meanings, or even any contestation or discursive struggle may underestimate the coercive capacities of state institutions, where securitizing moves are often imposed through top-down authority rather than negotiated with a broad political community (Balzacq 2010; Stritzel 2007). The emphasis on relational, productive power is less visible when dissent is heavily repressed, media are controlled, and alternative subject positions are marginalized.

However, the post-structuralist reconceptualization of securitization provides tools to account for these dynamics. By understanding power as dispersed, relational, and productive rather than merely possessed, this framework allows for the analysis of how even in authoritarian contexts, discursive struggles still occur, albeit in constrained forms. Even in the absence of open contestation, the audience - whether citizens, bureaucrats, or media professionals - remain a constitutive element of securitization, as their identification, compliance, or symbolic resistance contributes to the stabilization or destabilization of meanings (Vuori, J. A., 2008). This perspective thus extends the explanatory power of securitization theory to contexts where coercion and consent are deeply intertwined.

2. Methodology

The goal of this section is to translate assumptions of a poststructuralist theory of securitization introduced in the previous chapter into a methodological framework. Based on the study's research question, hypothesis and theoretical orientations, this chapter provides an overview of an overall research design, describes data source and data collection method, and presents methodological tools used for analyzing the data, additionally, it addresses the limitations inherent to the chosen approach and reflects on their implications for the interpretation of the findings.

2.1. Research design

The overall research method of the study is an interpretive discourse analysis inspired by the post-structuralist discourse theory of Laclau E. and Mouffe C. The research is divided in three stages: overview of the secondary literature on "foreign agency" genealogy; conducting thematic analysis of the data - transcripts of parliamentary discussions - and finally, contextualizing the findings and testing the hypothesis.

The first stage of the research presents an overview of the linguistic studies on the concept of "foreign agent" within the Russian speaking context. The main idea is to highlight past articulations of the concept, before its reincarnation within the legal framework in the Law No. 121-FZ on July 20, 2012, and review how it became sedimented and naturalized over time. Sedimented discursive practices according to Laclau E. and Mouffe C. (1998) are fragments of a "lost structural or organic totality" that comprise the elements on which present articulation practices operate. Analyzing the genealogy of "foreign agency" helps bring to the light the

discourse this concept was originally part of and see how it affects operation of the present articulation practices.

The next stage is conducting a thematic analysis of the main data set - transcripts of parliamentary discussions on foreign agents' laws, collected from the online archive of the official website of the Russian parliament for the period of 2012-2024, representing the official hearings and discussions on the first draft of the Law and its subsequent amendments. The goal of this analysis is to identify dominant themes and their evolution, that informed the 2012-2024 political debates associated with the establishment of the institution of "foreign agency".

In the final stage, the evolution of the identified themes is situated within the broader hegemonic discourse and discursive events context (see Figure 3.1.1). Its development is analyzed in relation to shifting discursive formations and emerging nodal points. This stage also tests the central hypothesis of the research on securitization of the "foreign agency" in Russia.

2.2. Data collection

Data choice was guided by the research question and theoretical orientations of the study. The speaker, within the securitization theory, must hold a powerful position, a power to speak publicly in order to satisfy the conditions discussed in the previous chapter. In the case of authoritarian regimes, public discourse is often organized top-down, where the government, state officials and state-controlled media formulate the agenda. The parliament (State Duma) is one of the most representative branches of the governmental body in Russian to speak about "foreign agents law", as it is a legislative authority that first discusses and approves all the bills. The parliament discussions thus represent an official discourse where the concept of "foreign agent" was first introduced, defined and debated.

The parliamentary discussions consist of parliamentarians' speeches, questions and answers about legislative initiatives. Each discussion was conducted within a meeting that is recorded, transcribed and is publicly available on the official website of the State Duma (http://transcript.duma.gov.ru/). The search on the website archive was conducted with the keyword of "foreign agent" within the time frame of 2012-2024. This way was collected 59 transcribed meetings. After close re-reading of the transcripts, some were excluded from the data set (some transcripts were irrelevant to the legislation; others were technical descriptions of the law, mentioning the keyword, for example) leaving 45 meetings within the data set. Each meeting transcript was cleaned from irrelevant agenda, leaving only discussions and voting results on the topic of the law. All transcripts were transformed into Word document format for the purposes of coding and translated into English (by

myself with the help of ChatGPT). All data was grouped into 5 phases, each phase included transcripts of the meetings held about a particular law or it's amendment.

2.3. Methodological tools

Thematic analysis was chosen for this study due to its flexibility and capacity to reveal patterns of meanings across large and diverse dataset such as parliamentary debates. Identifying recurring themes and their shifts helps process large qualitative data by making it comparable and easier to navigate. Moreover, thematic analysis is compatible with a post-structuralist discourse analysis framework, as it allows to trace how particular themes (nodal points) emerge within a discourse, how they are aligned in a chain of equivalence, and contribute to the stabilization of meaning within a hegemonic formation.

To conduct a thematic analysis, the study employed manual coding of the texts with semi-open coding strategy. As the research was testing a specific hypothesis, "foreign agency in Russian official discourse is being securitized", basic coding framework was pre-determined by the grand themes of 'securitization', 'de-securitization' and 'non-securitization'. However, qualitative discourse analysis is always likely to lead to unexpected findings, therefore, the grand themes were fleshed out into more specific sub-themes as coding progressed (see Annex A).

The coding was conducted through close reading of the transcripts and identifying recurring patterns, keywords, and thematic clusters. The keywords or phrases that led to assigning a code to a particular piece of the text are highlighted in yellow in the dataset. The amount of text to which codes were applied was not uniform, a coded text segment variously included a sentence, part of a sentence, a paragraph, or more than one paragraph, as applicable. The codes themselves were allowed to emerge from the text through multiple passes of reading. Although, pre-determined by the grand themes, some codes were deductively given more attention in the beginning, such as "*threat*", "*security*", "*enemy*", many other emerged from the text leading to a more concrete sub-themes such as "*Interference in elections*" or "*Foreign forces trying to destabilize the country and impose their political regime*". Special attention was given to the language, metaphors, and rhetorical strategies used by parliamentarians to describe and define foreign agents.

Codes, defined as concise labels assigned to meaningful units of text (Naeem, Van Niekerk, & Huma, 2023), intended to capture the core message or discrete discursive idea within the given unit and appear as key words or phrases of the text. The related codes were grouped into sub-themes - an assemblage of related codes that together expressed a more specific pattern of meaning

or a short narrative. Sub-themes presented as short narratives, were analyzed in their dynamic across the five phases underlined above. These sub-themes were divided into broader patterns of ‘securitization’, ‘de-securitization’ and ‘non-securitization’, ‘where non-securitization’ theme represented sub-themes that did not fall neither under securitization no in de-securitization pattern, but still presented a value for the analysis.

2.4. Limitations

This study recognizes several methodological limitations associated with the chosen approach. The interpretive nature of thematic discourse analysis, particularly when situated within a post-structuralist framework, entails a degree of subjectivity in the coding process, identification of themes and the analysis itself. While every effort was made to ensure consistency, the researcher's analytical lens inevitably shapes the interpretation of the material. The use of secondary transcripts also restricts the ability to capture non-verbal cues and contextual dynamics that may influence meaning. These limitations suggest that the findings should be understood as discursively situated interpretations that illuminate how certain meanings are produced and stabilized within a specific political and institutional context, rather than as exhaustive representations of the broader societal discourse.

3. Data Analysis

The present chapter constitutes the core of this dissertation - presenting the empirical analysis of the collected data. Before proceeding to the analysis itself, however, it is necessary to situate the discourse on foreign agents within the context. The first part thus provides a timeline and an overview of the major discursive events that accompanied the adoption of the relative laws. The second, as noted above, briefly reviews the literature on genealogy of the term “foreign agent,” tracing discursive framework of its emergence. The third part presents the empirical analysis, while the conclusion analyses the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and tests the hypothesis.

3.1. Background

The adoption of the foreign agent legislation at each phase was accompanied by a specific line of argumentation (theme) in the parliament, as well as its criticism and responses to the criticism. These themes emerged within the context of particular events and the perceived threats and risks associated with these events. While correlation does not necessarily imply direct causation between a given event and the passage of a specific law amendment - for example, the law on Media Foreign Agents was rejected in 2014 but later adopted in 2017 under a different thematic framework - these events nonetheless generated narratives that contributed to shaping the discourse on foreign agents and to directing the evolution of the FAs institution overall. Therefore, the trajectory of the FA legislation is closely tied to a series of political crises and episodes of civil unrest, each of which provided the discursive conditions for the expansion of the law.

The introduction of the concept of 'foreign agent' to the legal framework was precipitated by the largest mass protests in Russia since the 1990s. The demonstrations took place on May 6th, 2012 following the December 2011 parliamentary elections, widely perceived as fraudulent, and March 2012 presidential elections, where Vladimir Putin came back to the presidency for the 3rd term. The so-called "March of Millions," was held in Moscow on the eve of the presidential inauguration. As a result of the clashes between demonstrators and the police, dozens were injured on both sides and more than 400 protesters were detained, leading to Bolotnaya Square criminal case (OVD-Info, 2019).

From the very outset, the authorities linked the protests to "foreign influence". Against the backdrop of fears of a Western-instigated "color revolution," Vladimir Putin accused U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of fomenting unrest (Russian Government, 2012), framing domestic protest as externally orchestrated. A widely publicized documentary, *Anatomy of Protest*, was broadcast through official television channels, in which the authors claimed that the 2012 protest actions had been funded with foreign money. The first law on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) *performing the functions of a foreign agent*, was adopted shortly after, in July 2012.

The subsequent iteration of the law unfolded in the context of Russia's annexation of Crimea. In response to the decision to deploy military forces on the territory of Ukraine, a series of anti-war demonstrations took place in several major Russian cities. Protesters organized two rallies on 2 and 15 March 2014, the latter known as the "March for Peace", held in Moscow on the eve of the Crimean referendum. These protests were the largest since the opposition demonstrations of 2012

against the electoral fraud. Members of the Civic Chamber, prior to the demonstration, condemned its participants, stating that they "a*re carrying out a political order from the United States*" (RBC, 2014) as well as calling it a "*March of traitors*" (RBC, 2014).

During this period, the Ministry of Justice was delegated authority to unilaterally assign NGOs to the foreign agent registry, marking a significant shift from voluntary self-registration to coercive state designation. Within only a few weeks, five non-governmental organizations were designated as FAs, among them the Movement for Defense of Voters' Rights "Golos", Human Rights Organizations "Memorial Center", "Agora Association", and "Public Verdict Foundation".

The adoption of the new law - on Media Foreign Agents - coincided with the aftermath of the large-scale anti-corruption rallies of March 2017 and the run-up to the 2018 presidential election. On March 26, 2017, demonstrations took place across Russia in response to an anti-corruption investigation, with participation estimates ranging from 32,359 to 92,861 individuals nationwide and approximately 1,805 arrests (OVD-Info, 2017).

The president commenting on these events compared it with the Arab Spring: "*Personally, I advocate for issues of combating corruption to remain at the center of public attention. The only reservation I have is that I consider it wrong when certain political forces use this topic to promote themselves on the political stage on the eve of elections. This is a tool of the Arab Spring: we know very well what it led to. The same served as a pretext for a state coup in Ukraine and plunged the country into chaos*." (RIA Novosti, 2017)

Later that year, in November 2017, the scope of the foreign agent law was expanded to include media outlets. The draft legislation was prepared and approved within ten days and was framed as a direct response to the U.S. Department of Justice's requirement that RT America - a subsidiary of the Russian state broadcaster - register as a "foreign agent" in the United States. Within weeks, nine media outlets were designated as foreign agents in Russia, including Voice of America and several projects of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, thereby extending to the media the same obligations previously imposed on NGOs.

The further expansion of the foreign agents legislation - to individuals - unfolded in two stages. In late 2019, an amendment to the law on Media FA was adopted, stipulating that natural persons could also be designated as Media FAs. In such cases, the legislation required that an individual formally register as a legal entity, which would subsequently be designated as a Media Foreign Agent. This term was proposed to apply to individuals engaged in disseminating messages produced by Media FAs, participating in their creation, or receiving foreign funding. In effect, the law was targeting individual journalists and individuals actively using social media. The authors

of the amendment also introduced a requirement for mandatory labeling of all materials produced by Media FAs, stipulating that every publication must explicitly state that it was created by a "foreign agent." One year later, the Ministry of Justice added five individuals to the registry: human rights activist, journalists and artists.

The second stage followed a year later, in 2020, when further amendments allowed natural persons to be designated as foreign agents. These legal innovations unfolded against the backdrop of the 2020 constitutional amendments, lifting presidential term limits, and the subsequent wave of political discontent, as well as the mass protests in the neighboring Belarus in 2020-2021.

With the onset of the war with Ukraine in 2022, anti-Western rhetoric among leading politicians and the mass media intensified, fostering hostile attitudes toward a number of Western countries and creating a framework for identifying "enemies" and "traitors" within. The same year, on July 14, 2022, the new law on FA was adopted. It consolidated previous provisions from various legal acts on "foreign agents," establishing a unified FA registry and a unified framework, as well as introducing new restrictions, strengthening both criminal and administrative liability and reporting obligations. While the designation of FA was previously applied primarily to journalists, activists, and human rights defenders, in the latest iteration it has expanded across all sectors of society, encompassing writers, stand-up comedians, musicians, film directors, bloggers and others. The new law also established a registry of individuals "affiliated with FAs", which is non-public, and those entered into it are not notified of their inclusion.

The grounds for inclusion in the FA registry have also broadened: in addition to foreign funding, they now encompass "foreign influence", "criticism of the special military operation", "support for the Ukrainian regime", "discrediting government bodies", and "unconstructive criticism of public officials". Thus, marking its transition from a political instrument of discreditation primarily targeted dissent into the mechanism of suppression and exclusion of any counter-discourse.

The timeline outlined above (summarized in Figure 3.1.1) provides a brief overview of the major discursive events against which the laws expanding and tightening the provisions on foreign agents were adopted. As noted at the beginning of this section, a direct causal link between the passage of these laws and the societal upheavals described cannot be firmly established. However, the discourse surrounding these events - the official responses and public reactions - introduced discursive constructions that shaped official narratives of perceived threats and their sources. Some of these constructions, as will be seen from the data, directly informed conceptualization of the "foreign agent" in the legislation, others, on the other hand, employed and were drawing on the inherent ideologies of the term *foreign agent*.

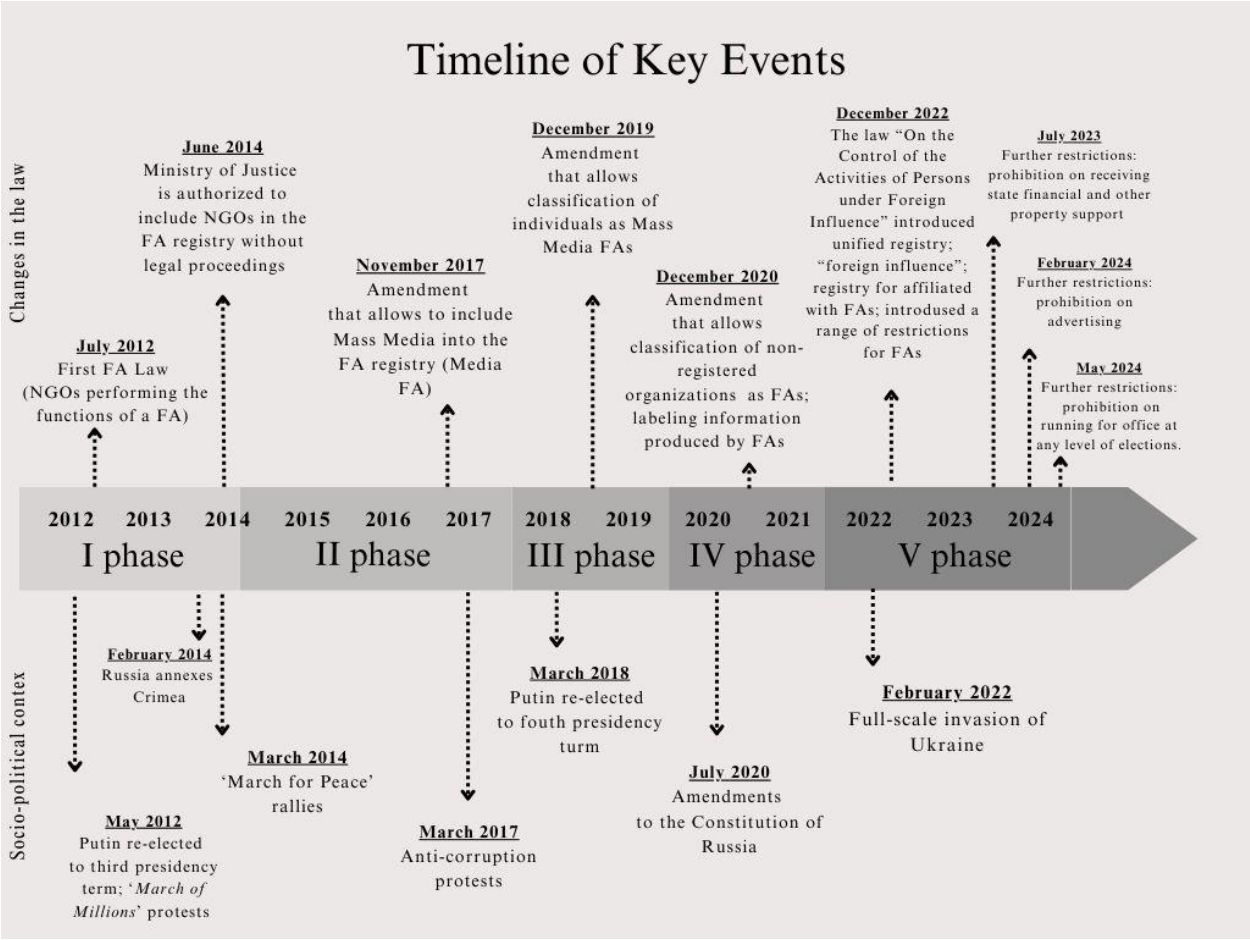


Figure 3.1.1: Timeline of Key Events

3.2. Genealogy of 'Foreign agent' in Russia

According to etymological dictionaries, the word *agent*, in the sense of "one acting on behalf of another," appeared in European Latin in the sixteenth century, alongside the emergence of European capitalism (Baunov A., 2021). Beyond its linguistic origin, however, the semantics of the term - its perceived meaning - is always shaped by the contexts in which it was employed. As Baunov A. (2021) observes, the divergence in the perception of "agency" in Russian language, can be traced to the distinct socio-economic environment in which language developed during the twentieth century.

In the Western world, capitalism dominated throughout the century, and the figure of the agent became associated with a wide range of legitimate and transparent activities - insurance, trade, law, or real estate. In this context, the word acquired a semantic balance: an agent could act either

in the interest of others (for example, a foreign power) or in one's own interest, as a professional intermediary. The very existence of the insurance or legal agent legitimized the broader "agentive" function within the language, normalizing its duality as both "ours" and "the other's."

In Soviet Russian, by contrast, no such legitimate forms of agency (insurance or commercial) existed. The term agent was predominantly associated with secrecy and subversion: a hidden representative of external forces, at best a "mole" or "our man among strangers," and therefore still illegal and illegitimate. The semantic balance of the Russian word "agent", notes Baunov A., thus was disrupted, shifting decisively toward the pole of negative connotations. In her research on the semantics of the concept of *agent* in soviet discourse, Kupina N. A. (2012), analyzing the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, Dictionary of the Russian Language and Legal Etymological Dictionary, identifies three principal meanings. The first, reflects a broad and neutral definition: "a person authorized by an institution or enterprise to carry out official or business assignments" (Kupina N. A., 2012, p.44). The second, a systemic-linguistic meaning - "a person acting as a representative of someone else's interests"- that acquired a distinct ideological charge, most visible in collocations such as *foreign agent*, *agent of the bourgeoisie*, or *agent of imperialism*. The third meaning, closely tied to the lexicon of security and intelligence, was defined through identifiers such as "spy" or "secret operative," typically specified as acting on behalf of "*a particular state*." (Kupina N. A., 2012).

Kupina N. A. (2012) emphasizes that the collocation *agent of the USSR* never appeared in usage, precisely because the implicit semantics of the term presupposed a "*hostile power or its intelligence services*". By contrast, ideologically legitimate and high-frequency expressions included *American agent*, *British agent*, and *German agent*. In this way, the ideological semantics formed around the dichotomy of "ours" versus "the other's/alien/foreign", where *agent* acquires a semantic imbalance of always belonging to the foreign, as illustrated in the example: "*There is no counterintelligence stronger or more active than ours, yet we know with certainty that agents infiltrate us and work for them*" (Kupina N. A., 2012, p. 43).

The study of the institutional roots and historical evolution of the concept of "foreign agent" in different periods of Soviet history, conducted by Korneychuk B. V., (2016), demonstrates that this dichotomy constituted an integral component of the soviet hegemonic project. It is derived from the ideological framework of Marxist-Leninist discourse, which was grounded in the thesis of irreconcilable class antagonism and the inevitability of the dictatorship of the proletariat, where any counter- (discourse) is an *agent of imperialism* or an *agent of antagonistic class*. Korneychuk B. V. (2016) demonstrates, how public campaigns to discredit and eliminate political opponents

by accusing them of ties with hostile imperialist forces played a crucial role in stabilizing the term and embedding its negative connotations.

Such that, already during the period of revolutionary upheaval and political struggle, observes Korneychuk, Lenin, as early as 1915, began to employ the concept of the *agent of imperialism* as a means of discrediting opponents. In his work The Collapse of the Second International, he described opportunists as a "political detachment of the bourgeoisie, a conduit of its influence, *agents* within the workers' movement." (Lenin V., as cited by Korneychuk B. V., 2016, p. 62). Similarly, in the article English Pacifism and English Dislike of Theory, Lenin wrote: "In reality, the leaders of the contemporary German Social-Democratic Party, including Kautsky, are just as much *agents of the bourgeoisie* as Engels long ago called the Fabians… they allegedly *represent* the revolutionary proletariat, but in fact they are *agents* introducing bourgeois, chauvinist ideas into the proletariat" (Lenin V., 1961, as cited by Korneychuk B. V., 2016, p. 62).

By the late 1920s, the primary source of threat to the Soviet regime, in the assessment of the authorities, was seen to emanate from the peasantry and intelligentsia, the latter regarded as a potential locus of opposition, against which discreditation emerged as a key instrument of repression. Thus, already in 1930, the prominent economists N. Kondratiev and A. Chayanov were denounced as "agents of world capitalism" and portrayed as provocateurs acting in the interests of external powers. During the Shakhty Trial and the proceedings against the Industrial Party, the prosecution sought to establish their alleged ties to international imperialism and domestic opposition groups, thereby reinforcing public perceptions of them as traitors and preparing the ground for repressive measures, including physical elimination (Korneychuk B. V., 2016).

The rhetoric of these trials was framed around the claim that the "wreckers" had received financial support from foreign capital and, acting on its directives, engaged in acts of sabotage: destroying equipment, disabling factories, and creating conditions for mass famine. In this narrative, the accused were constructed as "agents of world imperialism," preparing a military assault on the Soviet Union, while all forms of opposition were reclassified as the activity of "agents of the class enemy," positioned in direct antagonism to the Party's general line. Later, during the Stalinist period, one of the central tasks of ideological policy, as emphasized by Korneychuk B. V. was to consolidate in the public consciousness the image of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) as the sole political force capable of safeguarding the country from ever-present external threats. "Our Party will step over all the obstacles that the Trotskyist-Zinovievite and Bukharinite bandits, all the agents of fascism acting on the instructions of the Gestapo, have tried and will continue to try to place in our path." (Partizdat 1937, as cited by Korneychuk B. V., 2016, p. 63). The strategy of othering political opponents through their discreditation as "agents of imperialism" and as

bearers of alien class interests was actively employed during the Stalinist period of both pre-war and post-war repressions. Numerous political campaigns aimed at exposing “enemy agents” left a deep imprint on the collective memory. The agent consistently appeared as the embodiment of the “other,” disguised under the mask of the “one of us.” The central objective of the show trials was precisely to tear off this mask and reveal the agent’s “true” face.

Donaj L., Shcheglov M. (2021) also highlight the role of cultural and media environment of the Soviet period in entrenching the negative connotations associated with the figure of the foreign agent, especially during the Cold War era. With literature, cinema, and mass media fully under state control, cultural production inevitably carried ideological functions, shaping a citizenry loyal to the regime. Against the backdrop of Cold War tensions - marked by espionage scandals, covert operations, and narratives of subversive activities - propaganda campaigns actively cultivated the image of the enemy. Spy novels, films, and posters served as instruments of political pedagogy, reinforcing social vigilance and sustaining a climate of psychological tension.

The ideological markedness of the concept proves to be so potent that it overrides the functional-stylistic dimension - the very notion of agency as delegated subjectivity. In one of the examples provided by Korneychuk, in the late 1980s Molotov’s report on accusing Beria, Molotov does not consider him an agent in the legal sense, yet he was referred to using this term because his actions were supposedly serving the interests of imperialism: “One does not need to be an official agent, but if one acts in this manner, then one fulfills the role of an agent of imperialism. Many cannot understand this, but you must. I consider Beria an agent of imperialism.” Thus, an agent does not need to be delegated subjectivity to act on behalf of the Other within this paradigm.

As was demonstrated above, the contexts in which the concept of the “foreign agent” emerged and developed established stable semantic associations with notions of the “enemy,” “spy” and “outsider” within the Soviet hegemonic discourse. The absence of positive meanings and the distortion of the semantic balance facilitated the consolidation of negative connotations, particularly during periods of high-profile campaigns of denunciation and subsequent repressions. Further stabilization of the term occurred largely through Cold War plerion popular culture, where it was reproduced and integrated into everyday language. The studies cited suggest irreducibility of the Soviet ideological paradigms and highlight the potential for reactivating these paradigmatic connections in contemporary discourse.

3.3. Formation of 'foreign agent' in the official discourse 2012 – 2024

The first phase consists of transcripts from seven meetings held between July 2012 and May 2014. Meetings' discussions addressed adoption of the initial Law dated July 20, 2012, No. 121-FZ which introduced the term "foreign agent" ("*NGO performing the functions of a foreign agent"* (Federal Law No. 121-FZ 2012)) into the legal framework; as well as further amendment dated June 4, 2014, No. 147-FZ that allowed Ministry of Justice to assign the status without court order.

In the first two readings the initial law that took place in the summer of 2012 there are two dominant sub-themes that were reoccurring throughout the discussion: "The law is in line with international norms" and "Transparency and non-restrictive approach". Both sub-themes fall under the de-securitization pattern, as they intend to diffuse tension and mitigate criticism by appealing to international norms in an effort to legitimize the practice, while also emphasizing that the law is not intended to impose restrictions, but rather to ensure information disclosure.

Appeal to international practice is a significant sub-theme, as it persists throughout all phases of the debates and constitutes one of the key arguments used by lawmakers in support of the legislation. For instance, during the first reading, Deputy Yarovaya I. A. explicitly highlights this point in her speech:

"*And of course, it is very important that the draft law we are about to discuss concerns the implementation of international standards of civil oversight in the Russian Federation, I want to emphasize that"; "I would like to draw your attention to the fact that all international standards of democratic quality, if I may put it that way, assume that if you operate as a non-profit organization performing the functions of a foreign agent, you must disclose this* […]*"*

A more assertive argumentation often recurring within the same sub-theme during this phase is the comparison of the draft law with the legal frameworks of other countries, such as India and China. However, the most frequent point of comparison is the legislation of the United States - FARA. Lexical frequency analysis indicates that the phrase "*United States*" is among the most commonly used expressions in the text of the first reading[2]. In these comparisons, it is consistently emphasized that other legislation especially FARA, are significantly stricter than the proposed Russian law:

"*And the fact that today we are proposing milder forms of regulation than those in place in Europe, and those that have been in effect in the United States for decades* […]"; "*I would like to immediately draw the attention of skeptics to U.S. legislation, where even individuals are*

[2] Lexical frequency analysis was conducted with the an online tool: https://wordcounter.ai/

registered as foreign agents, and virtually any public activity is considered as performing the function of a foreign agent. We did not take that path […]"; "[…] *we are proposing administrative liability, whereas for the same violations in the United States of America, the punishment can be up to five years of imprisonment*."

This framing conveys that the measure is both necessary, it is "*closing the gap*", and consistent with international standards, while also positioning the proposed law as considerably more liberal than those in place in other countries.

Another de-securitizing trend within the first phase is the sub-theme on "Transparency and non-restrictive approach". During this period, terms such as "*transparency*," "*openness*," "*honesty*," "*clarity*," and "*truth*," along with the notion of "*calling things by their real names*," are presented as the central objectives of the law. Simultaneously, it is repeatedly emphasized that the legislation is neither restrictive nor prohibitive in nature. Regulatory mechanisms are framed as minor adjustments to the existing legal framework: "[…] *practically nothing has changed compared to the existing legal regulations* […]". The minimal impact of these changes is further reinforced by the assertion that the law will apply to "[…] *only a small number - about a thousand - may fall under the scope of this law".* In this way, legislators seek to frame the law as a measure that introduces no substantive alterations to the current state of affairs, but rather reveals an existing "truth" by exposing foreign agents who are already operating covertly.

Within the same theme of de-securitization, in response to criticism of the term "foreign agent", legislators point to its adoption from foreign legal systems and draw parallels with neutral terms such as "*insurance agent*," "*financial agent*," and "*tax agent*". It is also underlined that the negative connotation associated with the term is a legacy of the past that is irrelevant for today: "*The negative connotation you speak of, which the term 'foreign agent' supposedly carries - all of that is prejudice from the Cold War era and the Soviet past, which we need to gradually move away from*". Moreover, there are some efforts to reframe the status as a prestigious designation that may help NGOs*:* "[…] *if anyone says that this is a label imposed by law, for this organization it is a brand that allows it to confidently operate on these international platforms*". However, such efforts receive little support and development and are quickly discontinued.

At the same time, potential agents NGOs themselves are portrayed as concealing the truth and harboring hidden motives: *"There is no reason to hide or conceal the truth about oneself for those who have no intention to deceive and who aren't hiding a dagger behind a smile, as the saying goes. If you act openly and honestly, you have nothing to fear and nothing to be ashamed of."*; "[…] *what do you think - if someone is giving money, especially from abroad, doesn't that mean*

someone needs something in return?" This framing constructs the "foreign agent" not as a neutral legal designation, but as someone whose lack of transparency signals deliberate deceit. Although it is not explicitly stated what exactly the foreign agents are hiding, different speakers make indirect suggestions, quoting literary works and using proverbs, to show that concealment implies a threat.

The securitization line constitutes only a minor part of the discussion during this phase. Since the stated objective of the law is to promote openness and access to "truthful information", its outcome is framed as the protection of citizens' electoral rights. Foreign interference in elections through foreign agents is seen as the primary threat at this stage: *"I believe there is a real need to publicly acknowledge that during the election cycle, foreign financial inflows into the territory of the Russian Federation are at their most active."*; "*It is no secret that over these years, a large number of various organizations funded from abroad have flooded into Russia, and often under plausible pretexts - allegedly with good intentions - they do everything possible to infiltrate the system of power, the representative bodies of government, and create structures that could, when the time comes, act in accordance with the instructions they receive from their financiers".*

In parliamentary debates, deputies repeatedly referred to the "March of Millions" - demonstrations for fair elections, the independent election-monitoring movement Golos, as well as opposition candidates. All of these actors were articulated as threats to the integrity of elections and, by extension, to the political order itself: "*Just the organization Golos, which tries to teach us how to vote and conduct elections, receives $500,000 a year just like that"; "* […] *that's exactly what the West wants: to create such a democracy where we have white-ribbon activists sitting here, where we have a hundred Ponomaryovs, a hundred Gudkovs, a hundred Nemtsovs, Shenderoviches, Akunins, Ryzhkovs, Kasyanovs, Kasparovs, Khodorkovskys, Prokhorov supporters, and so on - that's the kind of parliament they want! And they would be pressing buttons in such a way that everything would leave the country, and we would turn into a boiler room and a dump* […]*".*

The second phase includes ten meetings' transcripts, covering the period from December 2014 to December 2017, and is marked by the adoption of several minor amendments to the existing NGO legislation, as well as the passage of Federal Law No. 327-FZ on November 25, 2017, which introduced the possibility of designating media outlets as foreign agents. Notably, the law on Media was enacted only after its second submission in 2017; the initial draft, introduced in December 2014, was rejected following parliamentary debate. In 2016, the only legislative initiative aimed at repealing the foreign agents law was introduced but ultimately rejected following parliamentary deliberation. This period is thus marked by the expansion of the foreign

agent legal framework to Media outlets and consolidation of support for the FA institutionalization among parliamentarians after unsuccessful attempt of repealing the law by the opposition.

In the beginning of this phase, the theme of securitization becomes central to legislative debates by further development mainly through the sub-theme of "Foreign forces trying to destabilize the country and impose their political regime". Ukraine's revolution of 2014 emerges as the primary illustrative case within this narrative. It is frequently cited by lawmakers as an example of a successful foreign-backed coup allegedly carried out through the strategic mobilization of non-governmental organizations and media:

"*It is worth recalling who was at the origin of this chaos. At first glance, it all began innocently enough: numerous non-governmental organizations appeared, most of which were affiliated primarily with the American Soros Foundation. They began operating in various regions of Ukraine, fulfilling specific tasks. According to experts, their activities were initially not overtly political in nature. However, it later became evident that structures and quasi-state entities were being created with foreign funding – entities that would go on to play a key role in the redistribution of political power in Ukraine. All these radicals and neo-fascists from civil society organizations eventually transformed into political parties"; "*[…] *prior to the coup in Ukraine, many of the laws, in terms of their wording, were considerably more democratic than those in Russia. However, the Americans, led by the ambassador who now serves in the Russian Federation, established a networked structure: on one hand, intelligence services were seeking leverage over oligarchs and officials; on the other hand, they were systematically strengthening ties with journalists"; "Recent events in Ukraine have also shown us what can happen to a country when non-profit organizations are skillfully used and "properly" directed, with a specific task set for them at the right time".*

Within this sub-theme emerges a narrative of a similar "*Maidan-style*" coup being prepared in Russia: "*We can see that preparations for a Maidan-style uprising in Russia have already begun, as was stated yesterday, for example, by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and in fact, no one is even trying to hide it. A decline in living standards has already started, along with the activities of the "fifth column," and many other things, everything is going, so to speak, according to plan* […]*"; "*[…] *we are showing the whole world today that Russia is a civilized state, and no Maidans, arranged with the bloody money of foreign sponsors, will drag our country back into the Stone Age".*

The role of the media is emphasized as central to the orchestration of political destabilization: "[…] *the study of methodologies behind successful coups d'état – even those organized by the current U.S. Ambassador to Russia, for example in Georgia and Ukraine – shows that the role of*

the media is key."; "*the information space has become a very dangerous and insidious weapon*." Media is weaponized as "*the path by which an external enemy infiltrated our country, our homes, the minds of our youth and our children*". Among the articulated threats attributed to the media, several topics recur consistently across deliberations, including "*the distortion of history*", "*changing the views of young people*", and "*influencing people's minds*", with a particular emphasis on the youth as the most susceptible to the influence. Information security is presented as the primary task and main objective of the legislative initiatives under discussion in 2014.

Despite the articulated threat in the form of a potential coup facilitated through media influence, the initial attempt to pass the law on Media FA in 2014 did not succeed. However, three years later, the initiative was reintroduced and swiftly adopted, passing both the second and third readings simultaneously, indicating a shift toward greater political consensus and urgency. During the last deliberation and eventual adoption of the law, a new dominating sub-theme evolves: "It was not us who started it". This narrative aligns with the broader strategy of de-securitization and resonates with arguments related to international norms. However, unlike the earlier phase, where foreign legal frameworks were presented as models for Russian legislation, the new framing portrays international (primarily U.S.) practices as repressive and undermining civil liberties. Despite this negative assessment, Russian lawmakers justify the adoption of the Media FAs law as a forced measure and a reciprocal response to the U.S. Department of Justice's decision to require RT (Russia Today - Russian state-controlled international news television) and Sputnik (Russian state-owned news agency and radio broadcast service) to register under Foreign Agents Registration Act in USA.

Chairman of the State Duma V. V. Volodin states at the beginning of the meeting in November 2017:

"*We did not take such steps ourselves, as we believed that freedom of speech is an important achievement, and we have adhered to this principle in relation to all media outlets. You know that our law on foreign agents does not apply to the media, whereas the application of U.S. legislation is planned to extend to "Russia Today America" and the "Sputnik" agency. In this regard, it would be appropriate for our relevant committees to develop reciprocal proposals that would allow us to take steps on our part to protect the citizens of our country and our nation from blatant interference and from the activities that American media have launched on Russian territory*".

This motif recurs frequently throughout the deliberations, expressed in phrases such as: "*we need to deliver a symmetrical, mirrored response,"* "*we cannot remain indifferent*," "*the decision we are making is a forced one*," "*none of us wanted to take such a step*," "*we must respond*," "*we*

cannot leave it unanswered," "*we did not want to adopt such a law*," and "*this is a law that could have never existed*." This sub-theme works to normalize the action being taken, suggesting it's not an escalation, but a defensive, or justified act. Rather than framing the situation as an acute existential threat requiring emergency action, as was attempted during the first iteration of the law's discussion, this narrative seeks to portray the law as a proportional, administrative response to the actions of others, thereby minimizing the perception of agency and distancing the legislation from securitizing intent.

Foreign agents are articulated as lacking their own subjectivity or agency and serving merely as "*instruments of foreign will*", motivated solely by financial incentives. The metaphor "*He who pays the piper calls the tune*" is repeated three times by different deputies, citing the president, revealing the construction: FAs are as incapable of independent action, merely carrying out "*assigned tasks*" on behalf of external patrons. In this framing, the danger does not stem from the agents themselves, but from their function as a "*serious tool in the hands of skillful strategists*." Therefore, they must be exposed, and distanced from legitimate political processes: "*it was considered entirely normal when, for example, a respected faction of the State Duma introduced draft laws prepared by foreign agents, for instance, the draft electoral code proposed by the "Golos" association, and this was seen as normal and civil. Today, we all understand that this is neither civil nor normal, and the signaling law plays a very important role in this regard".*

The third period, spanning from 2018 to the end of 2019, comprised five parliamentary sessions resulting in a significant expansion of the legal framework. With the adoption of Federal Law No. 426-FZ of 2 December 2019, the foreign agent designation, previously applicable only to NGOs and Media, was extended to natural persons. This stage is thus defined by the progressive widening of the FA law's scope.

This phase continues the framing established during the adoption of the previous law, with the sub-theme "It was not us who started it" emerging as the dominant motif. Across all three readings of the law on natural persons FAs, theme of de-securitization remains prevailing. It is articulated through the sub-themes "It was not us who started it," "The law is in line with international norms," and "Transparency and non-restrictive approach." The first reading on the law starts with the phrase: "[…] *it is merely a copy of the law currently used in the United States* […]". Within the sub-theme of 'non-restrictive approach', a recurrent motif emerges in response to criticism – the assertion of the absence of censorship. Legislators repeatedly emphasize that the law does not impose any restrictions on the dissemination of information, in statements such as: "*I would like to repeat once again, including for our colleagues, that we are not introducing censorship and are not restricting the dissemination of information*."; *"*[…] *this draft law does not contain a single*

word about any form of censorship whatsoever, as it in no way affects the content or substance of messages". And finally, "*reciprocal response", "the situation leaves us no choice", "forced decision"* – remain the main narrative. This is best illustrated by the sarcastic question posed by Deputy I. V. Lebedev during the first reading:

"*Dear Pyotr Olegovich, over the past year we and the Western countries have been playing a very interesting game called "a symmetrical, mirrored response": the West takes a step – Russia responds; the West takes the next step – Russia responds. Now, in response to the step whereby 'Russia Today' was forced to register as a foreign agent, we supported an initiative that likewise grants the right to register foreign media outlets as foreign agents within the territory of the Russian Federation. Is your current initiative a response to yet another unfriendly move against us, or are you proposing to change the rules of the game: now we take the first step and wait for a response?"*

Within the fourth phase, spanning December 2020 to February 2021, all six parliamentary sessions were devoted to legislative amendments to the existing laws that introduced stricter sanctions, including criminal liability for non-compliance with requirements related to registration, reporting, and labeling of foreign agents. These amendments also established mandatory labeling of foreign agents and of any public information they produced. In addition, fines were imposed on citizens disseminating information, including online, originating from foreign agents without proper labeling. This phase is therefore marked by the tightening of sanctions and the further exclusion of foreign agents from the public sphere and political participation.

Since 2020, the parliamentary debates on the "foreign agent" legislation have introduced, for the first time, the sub-theme of "Ensuring the protection of state sovereignty". Throughout the discussions, legislators repeatedly refer to Article 79[1] and Article 67[2] of the Russian Constitution to underscore the necessity of safeguarding sovereignty. The legislative innovations are framed as being primarily aimed at protecting sovereignty: "*I am convinced that in our country, as probably in other countries as well, there is concern to ensure that the country's sovereignty remains inviolable from foreign states; this is the main criterion on which this bill is based.*"; "*The authors are confident that the bill is aimed solely at protecting the sovereignty of Russia".*

The concept of sovereignty occupies a central position in the argumentation in this phase and emerges as one of the key nodal points, around which other sub-themes become to be organized. Such as, references to international norms and comparisons with other countries are incorporated into the topic of sovereignty protection: "*The level of safeguarding our country's state sovereignty should be at least no lower than that in foreign states*"; "*similar legislation exists almost*

everywhere where there is a real interest in protecting sovereignty"; "*all countries that respect themselves… even Australia, such a small free country, doesn't have a law on foreign agents, but it does have a program for transparency of foreign influence*".

Although the sub-theme on sovereignty would ostensibly imply a high level of threat and, therefore, a strong case for securitization, this signifier is so broad and all-encompassing that, in the early debates, the argument does not hold. The reasoning is often reduced to appeals to the need to comply with the Constitution, to common sense or holy duty: "*this is both obvious and self-evident*"; "*protecting sovereignty is our sacred duty, a holy obligation of every deputy and every citizen*". At one point the very invocation of the sovereignty is questioned in the parliamentary hall: "*And then, colleagues, answer me one simple question: why are you dragging sovereignty into this?*" Overall, the connection to the law is not established and threat is not clearly articulated, rather protection of sovereignty is seen as a natural and self-evident necessity where any effort that contributes to it shall be made.

The theme of securitization rather continues to manifest itself through other sub-themes, established during the previous phases, such as "Interference in elections" and "Prevention of Russia's restoration of its positions". The central story line here revolves mainly around interference in elections through proxy candidates:

"*Our foreign opponents are placing special emphasis on getting their proxies into the government bodies of the Russian Federation. To this end, foreign intelligence agencies and supposedly independent organizations conduct thorough selection among our fellow citizens who are candidates for elected positions, providing them with training, material, organizational, informational-political, and legal support. The Federation Council's Commission for the Protection of State Sovereignty has repeatedly presented data on such attempts during regional elections in 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020. We have every reason to believe that similar subversive activities will continue in connection with the upcoming elections in 2021*"; *"*[…] *more than 400 people were trained in this way on the territory of the Baltic countries, Poland, and the Czech Republic. We are talking about completely concrete facts* […]".

These mechanisms are seen as a way to curb Russia's restoration: "*The emergence of this bill is due to the fact that the revival of Russia, its return to the ranks of the world's leading geopolitical powers, and the active defense of our state's national interests are encountering increasing resistance from a number of states and international organizations*".

The dominant trend within this phase however still remains a de-securitization. Lawmakers stress that the proposed measures do not entail prohibitions but rather ensure continuity with

international practices and compliance with constitutional norms: "*Our proposals are civilized; they are based on our Constitution and fully comply with the fundamental principles of international law. They are democratic in nature*." The introduction of administrative and criminal liability is framed in terms of moderation and balance, with legislators characterizing the measures as "*adequate", "normal", "appropriate", "symmetrical", "proportionate",* and *"fair"*. This strategy works to normalize new sanctions, positioning it within the realm of ordinary legal regulations.

In the same administrative manner, new widely criticized obligation of labeling FAs and information produced by FAs, is compared with the indication of the manufacturer on the packaging of the items: "*You go to a store and see that every product has the manufacturer indicated, and here it's the same, the obligation to follow such a practice should also be imposed on foreign agents*".

The final phase of the analysis covers the two-year period from March 2022 to December 2024 and encompasses 17 parliamentary sessions. This stage is distinguished by the adoption of an unprecedented number of legislative measures, most notably the comprehensive Federal Law No. 255-FZ of July 14, 2022, "On the Control of the Activities of Persons Under Foreign Influence." This law consolidated and replaced previous legislations by unifying provisions on the status of foreign agents and creating a single unified registry. It also redefined the legal concept of a "foreign agent" as a *person/entity under "foreign influence"* rather than a recipient of foreign funds. In addition, the law introduced the category of "*individuals affiliated with foreign agents*" and established a separate registry for such individuals. Subsequent amendments further expanded the scope of restrictions imposed on foreign agents, including disqualification from electoral participation, prohibitions on certain income sources such as rent or sale of property, financial support from the government as well as bans on teaching, educational, and outreach activities. Accordingly, this phase is defined by the consolidation and codification of all prior laws, by-laws, and amendments into a unified legislative institutionalized framework. This framework is characterized by progressively expanding restrictions aimed at isolating and constraining the activities of individuals and organizations subject to FA designation.

The central theme of this phase is the rapid intensification of the securitization of FAs. Since 2022, a noticeable shift has occurred in the genre and rhetoric of parliamentary debates. Parliamentary speeches have taken on a mobilizational character, emphasizing unity in initiating and supporting legislations, appealing to moral duty and patriotism, and calling for national solidarity in the defense of the state. The rhetoric has become militarized: laws are framed as "*weapons*," while deputies present themselves as "*fighters*.": "*Today, in the context of the special military operation,*

security issues are the most pressing. We must not only have the most precise and advanced weaponry, but we must also have modern, effective laws to protect our sovereignty and the security of our citizens."

The theme of securitization of FAs is mainly articulated through the sub-theme of "Ensuring the Protection of State Sovereignty", where, in the context of war, the threat to sovereignty takes on a clear and tangible form, represented as existential in nature: "[…] *external pressure on Russia is intensifying, and its goal is not merely to slow down or weaken Russia's development, but, as we can see, to destroy our country altogether as an independent state. It is necessary to demonstrate clearly and convincingly to the entire world that we will not allow this. We stand together with our Armed Forces and with our President*."; "*If these decisions are not made, it is clear - the state will not exist. That is what this law is about.*" Therefore, unlike in the previous phase, the concept of sovereignty shifts from being articulated primarily as a symbolic, constitutional duty, to becoming an existential matter of survival directly tied to the war in Ukraine. Within this framing, safeguarding sovereignty is constructed as the only means of preventing Russia's destruction as a state "under assault".

In this context, a complementary sub-theme emerges - "The internal front". Alongside the external front, where armed hostilities unfold *to defend sovereignty against external threats*, there also exists an internal front, on which legislators position themselves as combatants, tasked with confronting dangers from within:

"Let us support our Armed Forces, who are working on the external front, while we, esteemed colleagues, will work on the internal front."; "*The enemy is on both sides of the front. Over there, beyond the enemy line, it is immediately clear - he is on the other side of the gun. Within the country, the enemy is among us; in fact, he has always been nearby.*"; "[…] *the front does not run solely along the line of direct combat. Therefore, it is essential for us to continue strengthening the security of our Motherland, providing comprehensive support to our Armed Forces and law enforcement agencies in the fight not only against external, but also internal enemies*".

The internal threat thus is equated with the external one: the external and internal fronts are constructed as two arenas of the same war, with the 'enemy within' portrayed as of the same origin and nature as the enemy 'on the other side of the gun.' This equivalence between military confrontation and domestic politics, reinforces the securitization of FAs as an existential threat. Furthermore, the outcome of the struggle against foreign agents is directly linked to the outcome of the war: "*But the fifth column has remained in the country, assigned the decisive role in*

undermining Russia, and the speed with which we can cut off the oxygen to these scoundrels will determine the timeline of our victory in the war".

The category of foreign agent is no longer confined to a technical legal status regulating the inflow of foreign funding, but is framed as a moral boundary between loyalty and betrayal. At the first parliamentary session of this phase, Deputy A. Lugovoy opened his speech by quoting the President: "*The Russian people will always be able to distinguish true patriots from scoundrels and traitors*." The opposition between "*patriots*" and "*traitors*," repeatedly invoked in the discussions. Such as, during the first reading of the law No. 255-FZ, where the definition of "foreign influence" was introduced, a deputy A. Lugovoy responded to the question of what a citizen should refrain from doing in order not to be included in the registry of foreign agents: "*In order for an ordinary citizen of the Russian Federation to feel confident without being included in this list, he must, first of all, be a patriotic person. An individual with a certain degree of patriotism and loyalty, I believe, is unlikely to be entered there*[…]*".*

Foreign agents are described through an increasingly moralized and condemnatory vocabulary: "fifth column," "traitors," "scoundrels," "those who have chosen the path of betrayal," "Western collaborators," and "enemy of the people." Such labels are intended to emphasize not only the formal criteria of being designated a foreign agent but also the very essence of the category: "*one can call them a foreign agent, a satellite, an accomplice - the essence is the same: betrayal and readiness to commit sabotage."* In this discursive framing, FAs are no longer depicted merely as passive carriers of an external will but as conscious actors who have deliberately chosen the path of betrayal - "*they made their choice*." As one articulation makes clear: "*a number of foreign agents, acting in unison with our adversary, who, as we can see, openly seeks to inflict a strategic defeat upon us, have, in fact, turned into its accomplices, and the line separating some of them from traitors to the Motherland is becoming less and less visible.*"

This shift demonstrates how processes of securitization reconfigure, what was claimed to be a legal category into stark moral binaries: *patriots* versus *traitors (FAs)*, *defenders* versus *accomplices of enemies (FAs)*. In doing so, measures that only recently would have been considered politically or legally unthinkable are made legitimate, for example: "*providing assistance to foreign agents on the part of the state runs counter to national interests and common sense*" claim legislators in support of the ban on FAs receiving any form of state financial assistance (including pension payments and child support benefits). Moreover, the struggle against foreign agents is now discursively embedded within the broader narrative of national survival in wartime: "*This draft law is not about foreign agents; it is a bill on sovereignty, more precisely, on the protection of the*

sovereignty and security of the state and our citizens. And it is precisely this security that is reinforced by this draft law", which opens the gate for even further tightening of the law.

3.4. 'Foreign agents' discourse contextualized

The analysis of parliamentary discourse on foreign agents in Russia between 2012 and 2024 demonstrates how the concept has been gradually rearticulated, adapting to shifting historical and political contexts, until finally becoming anchored as a security threat within an emergent hegemonic security order. While a full exploration of the formation of hegemonic security order lies beyond the scope of this study, gradual shifts in articulations of threat - as well as the changing intensity and stylistics of discourse observable in parliamentary debates - point to broader discursive transformations that underpin the consolidation of security hegemony in Russia. For the purposes of this analysis, this discursive hegemonic project may be characterized in the broadest term as a confrontation with the West.

The institutionalization of the foreign agent category exemplifies how power operates through both processes of de-securitization and securitization. In its early phases, met with a lot of resistance, official discourse relied heavily on de-securitizing framings. Legislators sought to dissociate from the inherited negative connotations of the term by emphasizing legality and compliance with international standards. The law was described as an administrative and technical regulatory measure, emphasizing transparency as the main purpose. This strategy aimed to normalize the concept by distancing it from its ideological connotations and embedding it in the language of legality.

Yet, even within these moderated framings, the seeds of securitization, although marginalized, were present. Foreign agents were subtly portrayed as actors concealing hidden intentions, thereby associating secrecy with risk. Political crises and moments of dislocation provided opportunities for these connotations to resurface, allowing to deploy the term selectively to discredit opponents and delegitimize dissent while reinforcing the theme of de-securitization as a major motif. At this stage, the concept of FA functioned as a floating signifier: situationally mobilized to invoke negative connotations and embed suspicion, while the official discourse continued to insist on its neutrality and technical character. This strategy not only facilitated the law's institutionalization but also constructed narratives that, over time, laid the groundwork for securitization.

Following Stengel's (2019) securitization process as rearticulation of an issue within an emerging hegemonic order, the discourse on FAs gradually elevated potential risks as the "confrontation

with the West" hegemony consolidated. The outbreak of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 constituted a nodal point that stabilized the frontier of the "Other" as the "collective West" localized along the lines of the discourse on support and opposition or non-support. In this phase, disparate grievances and demands were bound together through chains of equivalence, all articulated within the overarching project of "confrontation with the West".

Parliamentary debates in this period developed the foreign agent discourse primarily through the sub-theme of the "internal front." Here, potential foreign agents were equated with the "*enemy on the other side of the gun,*" but located "*among us*." By linking alleged foreign agent activities - interference in elections, distortion of history, fulfilling the enemy's tasks, and other - to the actions of external adversaries, the discourse elevated their threat to an existential nature. In this framing, the activities of foreign agents became inseparable from the safeguarding of sovereignty and national survival: "*This draft law is not about foreign agents; it is a bill on sovereignty, more precisely, on the protection of the sovereignty and security of the state and our citizens*."

In this final phase, the discourse also acquired a retrospective dimension, incorporating FAs. Past crises and episodes of unrest were re-narrated as the product of foreign agent activity: "*In August–September 2019, precisely at the time of the elections to the Moscow City Duma, the outbreak of mass unauthorized socio-political demonstrations in the capital… we promptly established that these disturbances in Moscow were organized with the support of what is now commonly referred to as the 'collective West.*'" The narrative stretched further back, incorporating Soviet and even imperial histories to suggest that FA have always operated as instruments of external subversion and threat to sovereignty: "*This interference has existed throughout the entire history of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation. We continue to feel this interference today*." In this way, the FA is re-articulated as a permanent threat to the Russian state, a figure of the enemy's accomplice whatever the enemy may be: revolutionary forces; imperialism, fascism or collective West.

4. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate how the concept of the "foreign agent" has been represented within Russian official discourse and how these representations have evolved over time. The central hypothesis guiding this research was that foreign agents are constructed at the official level as an existential threat, which enables the authorities to adopt and justify increasingly repressive laws targeting those designated as foreign agents.

To test this hypothesis and address the research question, the study applied securitization theory, interpreted by Rothe, D., Stengel, F. A and others through the lens of Laclau and Mouffe's post-structuralist discourse theory. The thematic analysis revealed that, until a certain point (2022), the dominant pattern in parliamentary debates was a de-securitization. The institutionalization of the "foreign agency" proceeded gradually and incrementally, de-escalating counter-discourse while introducing changes into the law step by step. Officially, the status of foreign agent was presented as a technical obligation of additional reporting, while those labeled were defined primarily as recipients of foreign grants.

After 2022, with the consolidation of the broader discourse of "confrontation with the West," the category of the foreign agent was rearticulated as equivalent to the enemy "on the other side of the gun." This marked a sharp shift in both the discourse on foreign agents and the legislative measures introduced and adopted. Securitization was reflected in the translation of the FA category into moral binaries: no longer associated primarily with foreign funding, the FA was constructed as a traitor as opposed to the patriot.

As Rothe, D (2015) notes, successful securitization within this model does not necessarily trigger extraordinary measures directly, but it frames particular actions as legitimate or reasonable while marginalizing alternative courses of action. Within this framework, the hypothesis advanced in this study is confirmed: the construction of foreign agency as an existential threat has enabled the Russian authorities to legitimize and normalize increasingly repressive measures.

This study also highlights several directions for future research. One promising avenue concerns the use of de-securitization as a technique of power, particularly in authoritarian contexts. For example, the discursive substitution of the term "war" with "special military operation" illustrates how linguistic strategies can normalize exceptional measures, sustain public passivity, and suppress dissent. Another important line of inquiry relates to the appropriation of Soviet-era discourses of anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism, which are increasingly mobilized by Russian authorities to legitimize their stance in the confrontation with the West and to extend influence in post-colonial states. Finally, further research could examine the reception of the "foreign agent" discourse within Russian society itself - how these official framings are interpreted, resisted, or internalized by different audiences. Such studies would help to contextualize securitization not only as a top-down discursive strategy but also as a negotiated social process.

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Annexes

Annex A: Coding structure

Code	Sub-Theme	Theme
international standards	The law is in line with international norms	De-Securitization
international experience		
less strict than in US		
less strict than in India		
less strict than in other countries		
copy of the law in US		
non-restrictive approach	Transparency and non-restrictive approach	
access to information		
honesty		
transparency		
nothing has changed		
for political activity only		
no censorship		
does not aim to punish		
does not infringe anyone's rights		
citizens must know		

does not prohibit		
informing our voters		
agency as representation	The term "FA" has no negative meaning	
widely used in other spheres		
prejudices of the past		
prestigious status		
outside of Moscow no one knows about it	The are not many FAs NGOs, and no one is interested in this topic	
people are not interested		
small number of FAs		
reciprocal response	It was not us, who started it	
we did not start this		
self-respect		
forced decision		
last straw		
leave us no choice		
symmetrical response		
funds during elections	Interference in elections	Securitization
"GOLOS"		
electoral rights		
FA activity increase due to the elections		
influence the will of our citizens		
proxy candidates		
imposing political regime	Foreign forces trying to destabilize the country	
dismantled the country		
they did it in the past		
democracy with white-ribbon activists		
Maidan-style uprising		
FAs work in key sectors of the economy		
infiltrated our country		
aim at undermining the regime		

history shown it before		
inject a specific informational agenda		
information war		
hybrid war		
destructive work intensified		
criminal structures		
turn us into ruins		
mass unauthorized demonstrations		
destructive activities		
seek to undermine our country		
NGOs in Ukraine contributed to the coup	FAs organized a coup in Ukraine	
Right Sector in Ukraine		
strengthening ties with journalists in Ukraine		
do not want to be like in Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, and in Kyrgyzstan		
media plays key role in coups d'état		
took control of power		
LGBTQ+	Threat to traditional values, alien ideology	
ideological weapons		
impose their values on us		
distinguishes between good and bad		
dismantled education		
change views		
defending our dignity		
suppress our way of life		
concept of family		
slander	FAs criticize the country, spreading misinformation	
discredit our country		
information attacks		

distortion of history		
country is being accused		
campaign waged against Russia		
information space		
information security		
falsification of history		
harm the younger generation	Harms the younger generation	
involve youth in destructive activities		
aimed at youth		
restoration	Prevention of Russia's restoration of its position	
revival		
hinder the development		
sovereignty	Ensuring the protection of state sovereignty	
protection of national interests		
national security		
constitutional duty		
liberalization is detrimental to the security		
constitutional clause		
number one task		
patriots vs traitors	The internal front	
fifth column		
the internal front		
among us		
determine victory in the war		
Western collaborators		
enemy propaganda		
watershed in 2022		
anti-Russian activities		
act against our soldiers and officers		
directed by intelligence services		

support Ukraine		
betrayed the country		
citizen vs foreign agent		
accomplices of our adversaries		
criticize special military operation		
unfair to those who are fighting today		
want to destroy the country		
hidden motives	Deliberate deceit by FAs	Non-Securitization
appropriation of grants		
lies		
hide their activities		
grey schemes		
counterintelligence smokescreen		
carry out the foreign will	FAs carry the will of foreign actors	
carry out tasks set from abroad		
the law will not work	The law is excessive it will not work	
moral condemnation		
the law is not a solution		