Russian history in the twentieth century was full of political upheavals. During the last century Russia has been through three revolutions, two world wars, seventy years of communism, and the collapse of the Soviet empire.¹ This meant that the Russians had to reinvent themselves: their law, their personality, their sense of security were not stable. The mentality of a ‘besieged country’ after the October Revolution² changed for partial partnership with the Western democracies during the Great Patriotic War, and again came the prewar ‘normality’ of confrontation in relations with the West during the cold war. Finally, the collapse of communism and the break-up of the Soviet Union resulted for Russia in the search for itself in a new world order (or maybe more correctly – disorder). Russia, having undergone so many great seismic shocks, now faces the problem of identity, trying to understand her national interests, first of all in the area of security.

The ending of the cold war transformed the two security dilemmas that have confronted states historically. The first locates the security dilemma in the unhappy circumstance that ‘many of the means by which a state tries to increase its security decrease the security of others’.³ The second concerns the allocation of national resources between economic welfare and military security. The division of resources between guns and butter and the actual level of consumption of both goods are determined by two factors, the productive capacity of a society and its preferences.⁴

Fifteen years of political and economic reforms in Russia have laid the groundwork for a market economy and a change of the political regime. Steady economic growth over the past six years, mostly because of extremely high oil prices and rapprochement with the West after 11 September, have forced Russia to face a fundamental question of policy: will she continue to pursue a great power security policy and, in fact, ignore the
demands of a changed and changing world in the field of non-traditional security, or will she construct and implement a proactive and even preventive soft security policy? In the end, the fate of Putin’s regime may depend on its ability to offer the Russian people better, and safer, living standards and to reverse the shocking decline in life expectancy.

This chapter explores the current stage of security identity formation in Russia. Although a majority of experts argues that Russian security policy under President Putin falls in the category of realpolitik, some important moves in the security area by the Kremlin cannot be explained merely by realism or neorealism and need further analysis. Official documents and Putin’s speeches reveal a peculiar combination of security threats representing two traditionally different schools of thought in Russian security thinking. The first reflects traditional (or military) security thinking and, assuming the growth of traditional threats to national security, and calls for a greater emphasis on the need for substantial increases in military capabilities in Russia. The second perspective deals with the so-called soft security issues that are almost totally new for Russian security thinking. For instance, in setting the agenda for the G-8 summit in St Petersburg, Putin, to the surprise of many observers, put forward the global struggle with infectious deceases as one of the three most important issues of the Russian presidency in the club, despite the fact that just two years ago Russia itself was criticized by the World Bank and leading experts in the field for neglect of this issue.

A number of important questions emerge and require answers. What happens to a nation’s sense of identity when its enemies no longer provide of a threat to that nation’s very existence? Does a new Russia need a new enemy? Why and how has the widening of the security agenda in Russian politics taken place? Are mass identities based on the actor identity favoured by its political elite? And finally, what is a dominant security identity at the end of Putin’s tenure in the Kremlin? In answering these questions, we draw from the constructivist approach to international relations theory and analysis which emerged in the last decade of the twentieth century. It advanced a sociological perspective of world politics, emphasizing the primacy of normative over material structures, the role of identity in the constitution of interests and action. Constructivism assumes that the identity of a state is a dependent variable determined by the historical, cultural, social and political context. State action flows from a particular state actor identity, which is shared by a policy elite and an understanding of the international context, both of which are viewed as socially constructed and historically contingent. Constructivism focuses not only on the policy elites’ construction of the