

RUSSIAN POLICY IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: GREAT POWER

INTERVENTION IN SEPARATIST CONFLICTS

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Kathryn Elder. Russian Policy in the South Caucasus: Great Power Intervention in Separatist Conflicts  
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The concept of separatism and its evolution into de facto statehood is a phenomenon that directly challenges Westphalian norms of state sovereignty. My thesis concerns itself with great power intervention in separatist conflicts, posing the question of how and why foreign powers intervene in protracted and often costly intrastate conflicts. The post-Soviet space is replete with protracted ‘frozen conflicts.’ Many of these conflicts emerged in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and remain unresolved to this day. My research includes a comparative case study of Russian policy towards two conflicts in the South Caucasus region; this paper compares the territorial dispute in Nagorno-Karabakh involving Azerbaijan and Armenia with the separatist conflicts in the Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The results of this study suggest that while Moscow’s policy decisions depend on its relationship to the states involved, Russia has an interest in keeping conflicts in its near abroad frozen to inhibit integration into western institutions and maintain Russian influence in the region. Thus, Russian foreign policy towards the South Caucasus suggests that great powers leverage internal conflicts abroad to further their own geostrategic aspirations and balance against great power rivals

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## Table of Contents

<b>Ch. 1</b>	1
Introduction	1
Literature Review: Theorizing Foreign Intervention in Separatist Conflicts.	3
Methodology	11
<b>Ch. 2</b>	14
Examining Russian Foreign Policy	
<b>Ch. 3</b>	23
Abkhazia and South Ossetia Case Study	
<b>Ch. 4</b>	32
Nagorno-Karabakh Case Study	
<b>Ch. 5</b>	39
Discussion	39
Conclusion	45
<b>References</b>	47

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Civil wars constitute the overwhelming majority of armed conflicts in the world today. There have been no less than fifty independence movements around the world at any given point since World War II (Coggins, 2011). A persistent phenomenon in the last several decades has been the emergence and endurance of de facto states as a result of intrastate conflict. These quasi states tend to surface out of unresolved or stalled ethnoterritorial conflicts. The existence of these unrecognized states challenges international norms of sovereignty and statehood. Yet, foreign powers are not always firm in their opposition to secessionist movements. Sometimes, foreign powers even prop up these groups through indirect or direct means, including diplomatic recognition, economic alliances, arms deals, or full-scale military intervention.

The central question of my research is how and why foreign powers intervene in protracted intrastate conflicts. Why do states sometimes support the existence of de facto states when they threaten the legitimacy of the modern state system? I focus specifically on great power intervention because these states have historically intervened in more conflicts abroad compared to less powerful states (Shirkey, 2016). Additionally, great power states have more resources to contribute to foreign conflicts and therefore the most potential to alter the trajectory of these conflicts. Lastly, great power states are perhaps most motivated by long-term strategic goals such as maintaining great power status, balancing other great powers, or achieving regional hegemony. A less powerful state lacks the resources to intervene in conflicts that do not directly impact its security, whereas a great power may pursue more long-term strategic foreign policy choices even

at a significant cost. It is worth examining great power intervention to challenge the notion that power inherently affords countries with moral authority or a greater capacity for achieving peace.

The post-Soviet space is replete with so-called ‘frozen conflicts’ (Deyermond, 2016; Klimenko, 2018). Many of these conflicts emerged in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and remain unresolved to this day. The list of unresolved conflicts in the former Soviet Union includes the Donbas in Ukraine, Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. The description of these conflicts as frozen does not mean that they are static; waves of violence regularly occur at unpredictable moments and international attitudes towards these conflicts are ever-changing. Russian attitudes and foreign policy decisions towards protracted conflicts and their resulting de facto states have been anything but uniform. Thus, Russia provides a great case for studying how and when great powers intervene in foreign conflicts. While there are many parallels among the secessionist conflicts in the post-Soviet states, there are certain key differences that drive Russia’s foreign policy decisions. Studying these similarities and differences offers insight into how a great power’s strategic interests influence their interventions abroad.

Comparing Russian intervention in various conflicts in the post-Soviet space can help illuminate the factors that determine a great power’s strategy towards external conflicts as well as how that strategy can hinder or support the peace process. It is necessary to critically analyze the ways in which great powers act in self-interest when operating abroad—often to the detriment of the communities they are interacting with. I also believe that this subject matter is important given the lack of international focus on

the South Caucasus despite the fact that this region remains one of the most militarized parts of the world according to the Global Militarization Index. The conflicts included in my case studies are especially overlooked in the United States because the region is peripheral to US strategic interests. Finally, the war in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 proved that frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space can quickly unfreeze. This holds true for protracted conflicts in other parts of the world where historical animosities and grievances still drive relations between ethnic groups. It is important to understand the dynamics of protracted conflicts before the next violent flare up occurs rather than after the damage is done.

### **Literature Review: Theorizing Foreign Intervention in Separatist Conflicts**

There is no clear cut, comprehensive definition of foreign intervention. Baev (1999) simplistically defines intervention as the deployment of troops by a third party state. Koch et al.'s (2009) study of major power intervention employs a more narrow definition of deployments exceeding 500 military personnel. Other scholars expand upon the traditional definition of intervention to include the tools of diplomacy. Relitz (2019) identifies five broad reactions to an aspiring state: fighting, isolating, ignoring, engaging, and accepting. These responses can include military efforts, but they also include recognition, non-recognition, and forms of engagement like economic support or arms deals. States also have the option to completely ignore separatist movement or isolate the region from the rest of the world, endangering the de facto state's survival. The ways in which a state intervenes in a conflict abroad are subject to change, especially in the case of protracted conflicts that can last for decades. Intervening states may also "test the



waters” with a certain form of intervention and then modulate their strategy based on international or domestic reactions.

Scholars have identified a variety of factors that may galvanize foreign powers, especially great powers, to intervene in ethnoterritorial conflicts abroad. One of the most prominent correlations is geographic proximity; a state is more likely to intervene in conflicts occurring in its geographic periphery (Shirkey, 2016). This concept of the geographic periphery, which I will expand upon in the second chapter, is often referred to as the ‘near abroad’ in Russia’s case. I suspect the correlation between geographic proximity and interventionist foreign policy stems from a few factors. It is more feasible logistically for intervening powers to supply military support in conflicts that are nearby. Great power states might also feel some sense of responsibility towards countries located in the same regional neighborhood, especially when the state in conflict is surrounded by ‘bad neighbors’ (Huddleston, 2021). There are also security implications of intrastate conflict, including the threat of conflict spillover, that could plunge the region into broader instability.

Similar to geographic proximity, ethnic solidarity between the intervening state and the home state or the secessionist group increases the likelihood of intervention. States with ethnic ties to the home state or an aspiring state tend to support their kin (Coggins, 2011; Huddleston, 2021; Shirkey, 2016). An example of this trend is Turkey’s backing of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in the Cyprus dispute (Buzard et al., 2016). This propensity toward ethnic solidarity is especially prominent when there is a large presence of a particular ethnic group in the intervening state. It is much easier to generate support for aggressive political or diplomatic actions if they are done in support

of a group that the intervening state feels an ethnic or cultural connection towards. The government may even view intervention on behalf of the group as an opportunity to collect political capital at home. A sizable or highly influential diaspora group can significantly impact foreign policy decisions.

The ethnoterritorial nature of many separatist conflicts inspires intervention for another, more violent reason. Third party states may intervene to prevent the kinds of violence that often characterize ethnic conflicts. Ethnonational conflicts tend to be rife with violence and can even involve ethnic cleansings (Baev, 1999). Studies show that third party states are more likely to support self-determination movements when there are high levels of violence (Huddleston, 2021). Thus, great powers may feel more inclined to intervene in conflicts when they feel a sense of responsibility to prevent or curtail extreme violence. More broadly, potential intervening states are invested in maintaining stability on the ground to reduce the loss of life. This is especially true in the case of the United States. American policymakers tend to adhere to anti-secessionist policy unless the home state is unwilling or unable to secure its borders and peacefully negotiate with secessionist leaders (Paquin, 1975). States will often feel more inclined to intervene in a conflict to prevent extreme violence, refugee flows, spillover, and other symptoms of regional instability. In these cases, states may be motivated by altruism, ideology, or simply the desire to promote a positive image on the global stage.

The threat of spillover is not only relevant to regional security but also to the intervening state's own domestic legitimacy. A great power with its own secessionist challenges may be less willing to support a secessionist movement abroad as it sets a dangerous precedent (Coggins, 2011). There are hundreds of politically mobilized ethno-

linguistic groups around the world, so it is not uncommon for a potential intervening power to grapple with its own separatist movements (Paquin, 1975). Russia is no exception to this; the Russian Federation faces its own secessionist challenges in Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan (Coggins, 2011). Intervention in an intrastate conflict abroad may depend on the status of the third party state's own secessionist movements at any given time. The intervening state must weigh any political gains abroad against the potential decline of legitimacy in parts of its own territory.

The involvement of allies or enemies in a conflict also contributes to a state's decision to get involved. Intervention is more likely when the third party state is allied with one of the parties (Shirkey, 2016). Failing to protect an ally during a time of conflict might delegitimize a country's commitment to collective security, undermining its international credibility (Koch et al., 2009). Often, intervening states are willing to devote substantial resources over a long period of time to bolster an unrecognized state seeking secession from an adversarial home state. A third party state may become a patron of the secessionist group with the goal of inflicting political costs on the home state. The intervening state may even have the ultimate goal of annexing the separatist region for its own gain even if it claims to have altruistic intentions at the onset (Buzard et al., 2016). It may be in a state's long-term strategic interest to exploit a conflict with the aim of destabilizing an adversary, especially if the intervening state has great power aspirations or a desire to preserve its relative power in the region.

There are also economic incentives that may drive a third party state to intervene in an internal conflict abroad. Bove et al. (2016) finds that intervention is more likely when the country where the war is taking place has substantial reserves of oil and when

the potential intervening power has a high demand for oil. Intervention is especially likely if there is a relative lack of competition in the economic sector that the great power state is particularly interested in. In the late 1960s, the Biafran War in Nigeria drew intervention from the United Kingdom in support of the Nigerian government. At the time, the United Kingdom was a major importer of Nigerian oil. The United Kingdom did not intervene in other intrastate conflicts in its other former colonies, but it did intervene in the Nigerian case. This discrepancy suggests that economic interests may have impacted the major power's decisions to get involved in or stay out of intrastate conflicts abroad (Bove et al., 2016). Economic incentives may produce varying forms of intervention. As the Nigerian case demonstrates, the presence of lucrative natural resources may catalyze a third party to support the home state's government. Conversely, the intervening power might support the separatist group to acquire access to the region's resources or develop a profitable economic alliance. Aside from resource capture, the third party state may intervene to stabilize the region and protect existing economic investments or trade deals.

In the current era of great power politics, long-term strategic interests must be taken into consideration when analyzing how and when states intervene. The unipolar world has given way to balancing and, consequently, a world marked by increasing regionalism. States trying to gain or preserve power exploit certain 'neighborhoods' for geopolitical gain (Troitskiy, 2019). Just as Russia seeks to assert dominance in the post-Soviet space, China seeks preeminence in South East Asia. Great powers in the modern era seek to carve out spheres of influence through soft power, hard power, or a combination of both. There is also the matter of major states wanting to play a decisive

role in conflicts abroad to assert freedom of action on the global stage. In the case of the Kosovo War, Moscow opposed NATO interventions against Serbia in an attempt to discredit NATO and restore Russia back to its former prominence in international politics. Russia pushed back against the West to prove a point that Moscow still deserved a seat at the international table (Baev, 1999). Great power politics and aspirations towards global power contribute to foreign policy decisions in ways that are not always immediately apparent.

It might seem risky for a major power to intercede in intrastate conflicts abroad when there are surely more important domestic political battles to address. It seems especially risky when these states intervene on behalf of a secessionist group that threatens the norms underlying the modern states system. Relitz (2019) refers to this concept as the stabilization dilemma, arguing that the goals of regional stability and international stability are often at odds. Reintegration of a separatist territory would maintain stability of the international system and preserve norms of sovereignty and statehood, but attempts to engender reintegration through negotiations or military force can further destabilize the situation on the ground. This tension often leads to ambiguous and inconsistent policy decisions towards de facto states.

The costs of a de facto state within a recognized state are high for all parties involved. The home state suffers enormous military expenses over time as well as a general decline in credibility and respect on the global stage. A state experiencing active internal conflict often faces barriers to entry into international organizations, particularly NATO and the European Union. It also may struggle to secure bilateral agreements with other countries or to attract economic investors because the risks of association are too

high. The separatist region also pays high costs due to its limited status as an aspiring state. De facto states often struggle due to their inability to integrate into the global economy and their difficulty securing foreign aid and investment. They tend to lack diplomatic recognition and therefore cannot join international agreements or institutions (Buzard et al., 2017). The intervening state risks domestic or international backlash as well as exorbitant military costs in arms supplies and soldiers on the ground. Despite these costs for all parties involved, unrecognized statehood persists and foreign powers continue to involve themselves in separatist conflicts abroad.

Taliaferro (2004) outlines three explanations why great powers make costly decisions in the periphery and often escalate their commitments over time. According to the tenets of defensive realism, states take risks based on security concerns rather than aggression or opportunism. Defensive realism hinges on prospect theory, which suggests that state leaders are more motivated by the fear of losing power more than the desire to gain power. Thus, leaders are willing to go to extreme lengths to prevent real or perceived losses. The second explanation is based on offensive realism, which argues that great powers intervene in foreign conflicts when they are in a position of power and prestige. This school of thought assumes that leaders are rational and view anticipated gains and anticipated losses as equal in relative value. Under this explanation, decision-makers take risks if they believe they have a significant chance of gaining from those risks. Finally, the author explains the logrolling theory of imperialism in which imperialist groups infiltrate political institutions and distort foreign policy objectives. It may be the case that a small sect of leaders drive interventionist policies even if the majority of a regime would prefer to focus on issues of more immediate or domestic

concern. This theory is more applicable to authoritarian regimes than democratic systems as democratic institutions make it more difficult for outlier groups to consolidate power in government.

Regardless of the motivations or ideologies behind great power intervention in conflicts abroad, a trend has emerged in a large number of cases. Foreign intervention often contributes to persistent secessionism and sustained frozen conflicts between the home state and an aspiring state within its territory. Attempts to stabilize the territory through peacekeeping and capacity building can solidify the emergence of a de facto state. Buzzard et. al (2016) examines this concept of perpetual unrecognized statehood, suggesting that the involvement of a patron state correlates to the persistence of an unrecognized state. In instances where there is no patron or the patron pulls out, the home state is more likely to regain the territory by military conquest. Somaliland is one counterexample of a de facto state that remains without the assistance of a patron state, though this is likely due to Somalia's weak state capacity and inability to launch an effective reintegration effort (Buzard et al., 2017). The endurance of de facto statehood in many cases necessitates a change in the language often applied to the topic. The literature on separatism suggests that aspiring states represent a transitional phase or merely a failed attempt at statehood, but de facto statehood has proven to be a permanent phenomenon around the world.

While much of the literature focuses on civil wars more broadly, my research concentrates on secessionism and its evolution into unrecognized statehood to provide a better understanding of how third party states negotiate the tension between regional strategy and the stability of the international system. Though my conclusions can be

applied to other regions of the world, my study concerns itself with Russian intervention in the post-Soviet space and, more specifically, the South Caucasus. My research draws upon and synthesizes the arguments made in the existing literature to provide an assessment of Russian intervention in two conflicts in the South Caucasus. I hypothesize that Russia acts in service of its own security strategy when determining whether and how to intervene in an ethnoterritorial conflict abroad. A secessionist movement does not represent a moral or ideological cause as much as an opportunity to secure influence abroad or inflict costs against an adversary. Like other great powers, Russia is willing to expend the greatest amount of resources on a foreign conflict in which it wields significant influence over one of the parties.

### **Methodology**

To answer the question of how and why Russia intervenes in conflicts in its ‘near abroad,’ I will conduct a comparative case study of Russia’s influence on two protracted conflicts occurring in the South Caucasus. I will apply a most similar systems design, where the two cases have a very similar context with varying foreign policy reactions from Moscow. One of the cases is located in Georgia and involves two separate territories—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—which I will combine into one case given that Russia treats the two regions uniformly and outbreaks of war have historically encompassed both territories. The other conflict is Nagorno-Karabakh, a separatist region in Azerbaijan with a majority Armenian population. Both of these cases contain ethnoterritorial grievances, cyclical violence, and some level of Russian intervention. Additionally, both of these conflicts have deep historical roots and remain unsettled to this day—garnering the label ‘frozen conflicts.’ The intention of the case comparison is



to determine if and why Moscow has treated these two conflicts differently to gauge on a larger scale what factors influence a great power's foreign policy decisions towards aspiring states. I expect to find in my analysis that Russia has intervened more directly in the Georgian case given Georgia's eagerness to ally with the West. I suspect that Russia is less actively involved in the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh as both Armenia and Azerbaijan maintain amicable relations with Moscow.

My methods include analysis of both peer-reviewed literature and primary sources. I will provide content analysis of official documents, speeches, and press releases from key decision-makers in Moscow as evidence of Russian attitudes and policies related to the South Caucasus. I will supplement this evidence by synthesizing information from relevant literature. I will also draw on data from the Global Militarization Index to portray how these conflicts have created hotbeds for recurring violence. My evidence will provide an overview of Russian intervention in its many forms. Though I will focus on military interventions as those are the riskiest and most overt forms of intervention, I will also evaluate how Moscow has influenced these conflicts through arms deals, economic assistance, and diplomatic backing. Economic and diplomatic intervention can include examples of performative loyalty but also tangible policies with the desired effect of influencing the trajectory of the conflict, such as Russia's diplomatic decision to allow citizens in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to acquire Russian passports.

For the purpose of this study, I will employ a variety of terms to label the separatist movements in question, including 'aspiring states,' 'unrecognized states,' and 'de facto states.' To remove the ambiguity of these descriptions I will define all of these

phrases as regions that have achieved some level of political autonomy from their home state to the extent that they provide public goods and maintain control over their territory in practice even if not in theory. While not all separatist entities are de facto states, the examples used in my cases have earned such a label. In Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, the separatist polity provides public goods and enforces the rule of law to the point that the home states no longer have legitimate control over the region.

The rest of this thesis proceeds as follows. The second chapter will provide a broad overview of the post-Soviet space and the complex dynamics that define Russian foreign policy decisions. It is important to examine the ways in which Russia has interacted with its near abroad since the collapse of the Soviet Union in order to understand Moscow's motivations and intentions in the region. The third section will consist of the first case study on the conflict in Georgia, focusing on Russia's relationship with the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The fourth chapter will include the second case study on the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. This chapter will summarize the origins of the conflict as well as the changes and continuities in Russian policy towards Nagorno-Karabakh. These case studies will by no means provide a comprehensive overview of these conflicts as my principal focus is on Russian foreign policy in relation to the conflicts. The final portion of my thesis seeks to explain any divergent policies from Moscow towards the two conflicts in order to parse out the factors that most directly drive Russia's actions in the post-Soviet space. I will conclude with my reflections on Russia's intentions in the region and extrapolate my findings to other ethnoterritorial conflicts happening around the world.

## **Chapter 2: Examining Russian Foreign Policy**

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 was a watershed historical moment—one that continues to affect the way the modern Russian state behaves on the global stage. In just one year, a global superpower with far-reaching influence and lofty strategic goals dissolved into fifteen separate nations. The years that followed were marked by economic downturn, political instability, and public disillusion. Each former Soviet state was forced to grapple with its new place in the world and renegotiate its identity in the post-Cold War world order. Some former Soviet states turned away from the historical motherland and toward the West, adopting liberal democratic systems. Other states felt a stronger kinship to the Russian state and thus remained under Moscow's patronage.

Moscow was not just the center of the Russian Federative Socialist Republic but of the entire Soviet Union. As the legal successor state to the Soviet Union, Russia acquired certain privileges and assets that other post-Soviet states did not. The United Nations granted Russia a coveted permanent spot on the UN Security Council, allowing Russia to have significant influence over matters of international security. The Russian government also secured the vast majority of the former superpower's military industrial infrastructure, including the USSR's nuclear arsenal. In exchange, Russia assumed all debts to foreign creditors (Kramer, 2019). Russia's title as the successor state to the Soviet Union assured that Moscow remained the dominant force in Eurasian geopolitics. It was agreed that members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Russia would be the key players at the negotiating table when shaping the future of the post-Soviet space.

The line between Soviet interests and Russian interests became blurred in 1991 and the years that followed. This has a lot to do with the ongoing debate over how to define the “Russian world.” For some, the Russian world is made up of ethnic Russians. For others, Russian identity equates to all Eastern Slavs, including Ukrainians and Belarusians. Then there are people who believe that the Russian world encompasses all Russian speakers to include the vast amount of Russian speakers living outside of Russia’s borders (Frear and Mazepus, 2021). These distinctions lead to an interesting dichotomy between the exclusive, privileged identity of being an ethnic Russian—*russkii*—and the inclusive, broad definition of Russian as a civic identity—*rossiiskii*. Ethnic Russians are at the top of the sociopolitical hierarchy in Russia, but there is also a desire among Putin and his followers to expand the Russian civic state. (Littlefield, 2009). This tension can explain human rights abuses against ethnic minorities in Russia as well as aggressive expansionist policies abroad.

In the decade following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, three schools of thought emerged surrounding Russia’s role on the global stage. Liberalism was the immediate response to the Soviet collapse. Liberals in Moscow felt that the only way for Russia to return to its former greatness was through multilateral institutions, like the United Nations. Liberal discourse focused on cultivating Russia’s image as a cooperator and team player on the international stage; acting aggressively in the near abroad was injurious to this goal. The liberal approach quickly lost popularity as problems surfaced domestically. People were unhappy with the economy, corruption, and crime. These shortcomings inspired nostalgia for the former excellence of the Soviet period. The conservative camp in Moscow desired a much more interventionist Russia. Conservatives

felt that Russia retained its identity as a policing power in its regional neighborhood and should act accordingly. The approach that ultimately won out in Russia fell somewhere between liberalism and conservatism. The centrist approach called for use of Russian intervention in certain cases but not always (Hopf, 2005). Moreover, Russian foreign policy during the Yeltsin years was marked by centrism. Yeltsin saw Russia's role in the near abroad as that of the peacekeeper, though his track record in conflict mediation was checkered.

Under Putin and Medvedev, Russia has become significantly more conservative in its approach to foreign policy. In his 2005 address to the members of the Federal Assembly, Putin referred to the fall of the Soviet Union as the “greatest geopolitical disaster of the twentieth century” (The Kremlin, 2005). Putin's lamentations about the collapse of the USSR usually revolve around the abandonment of Russians who now live outside Russia's borders (Stoner, 2021). President Vladimir Putin has justified many of his foreign policy decisions by applying a very broad definition of what it means to be Russian and liberally invoking the notion of Responsibility to Protect. In justifying the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and again in 2022, Putin has repeatedly undermined the legitimacy of Ukrainian sovereignty (McFaul, 2020). In an address announcing the Russian annexation of Crimea, Putin described Russia and Ukraine's relationship: “we are not simply close neighbors...we are one people” (The Kremlin, 2014). Putin and Russian state-owned media perpetuate the narrative that cultural, ethnic, and historical ties between Russia and the former Soviet states afford him an immense degree of control in the region. It is worth noting that the historical ties that bind Russia to its neighbors are not necessarily positive. While some post-Soviets may mourn the fall of the Soviet

Union, others feel regret or animosity towards Russia. Opinions toward Russia in the former Soviet states depend entirely on individual experiences before and after 1991.

The Soviet legacy drives much of Moscow's foreign policy. This is evident in the carryover of personnel that occurred after 1991. The most high ranking foreign policymakers in Russia began their work in government during the Soviet era. Putin himself was a KGB operative before he served in office. Even the younger officials have been educated at institutions that still harbor Soviet ideas about Russia's place in the world. The most prominent of these institutions are the The Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Foreign Ministry and the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (Kramer, 2019). The theme of 'loss of empire' has been deeply ingrained in Russian officials whether they experienced the Soviet decline firsthand or not. It is a narrative that traces back to the Russian Empire far before the Bolsheviks claimed power. A large part of Russian cultural identity and self-imagery revolves around the memory of historical greatness and the collective desire to return to previous eras of excellency.

It is difficult to separate Russian foreign policy in the 21st century from the man who has been responsible for so much of Russian behavior in the international arena—President Vladimir Putin. Over the course of his four presidential terms, Putin has managed to consolidate and centralize power with relatively little pushback (Simao, 2016). He has ensured that all major political decisions go through the Kremlin. This slide towards autocracy means that there are few constraints placed on foreign policy decisions. Television and radio broadcasting is nationalized, allowing Putin to project whatever narrative benefits his interests. Journalists and political opponents are subject to state persecution, further limiting freedom of speech. Unfair and uncompetitive elections

mean that Putin does not have to cater to the opinions and desires of his constituents (McFaul, 2020). All of these factors allow Putin to act unilaterally in support of what he considers to be in Russia's strategic interest.

In addition to creating a monopoly on political power, Putin has invested heavily in modernizing and expanding the Russian military. Putin's substantial military spending is easily justified by the sheer size of Russia. The country makes up an eighth of the earth's inhabited world, and many of its borders are mountainous and difficult to defend. These geographic realities contribute to the view that Russia must be on the defensive against potential neighboring adversaries. Russia's lackluster military performance in Georgia in 2008 precipitated sweeping military reforms and increased expenditures. This led to noticeable improvements in Russian military prowess, which was evident in the swift annexation of Crimea in 2014. In addition to energy, weaponry accounts for a large portion of Russia's exports. Russia rivals the United States in terms of exporting arms to the developing world (Kramer, 2019). This ensures that many smaller states with weaker military industrial bases rely on Russia for military support. This often engenders a patron-client relationship that works in Russia's favor.

The desire for Russia to regain superpower status has intensified over the years, especially during Putin's third and fourth terms. Putin's aggressive, ambitious stance on foreign policy appeals to many Russians who felt disillusioned by Russia's weakened position in the world in the 1990s. According to polls conducted by the highly reputable Levada center, Putin's public approval ratings increased sharply after the annexation of Crimea and Russian intervention in the Syrian conflict (Kramer, 2019). After these events, a large number of people in Russia felt that Putin had restored Russia to its former

great power status. The shift of the Russian population towards a more conservative, hawkish national spectrum has only further enabled Putin. Russian citizens have become comfortable with what Simao (2016) refers to as “managed instability.” Kathryn Stoner put it best in her book *Russia Resurrected* in describing Russia as a ‘great disruptor’ more than a great power. Putin’s foreign policy decisions are often difficult to predict or understand because they flout international norms and lack clearly defined goals.

Russian intervention in Ukraine is perhaps the most infamous example of Putin’s willingness to play international hard ball.<sup>1</sup> Moscow has long viewed Ukraine as a central component of Soviet identity and a country of economic and geopolitical importance. The 2004 Orange Revolution and 2013 Euromaidan Revolution alarmed Putin and his allies. Ukraine was decidedly pivoting towards liberal politics and the West. This transition seemed complete when Russian-backed president, Viktor Yanukovich, was forced to flee Ukraine, clearing the path for pro-West candidate Petro Poroshenko to take power in Ukraine (McFaul, 2020). A liberal Ukraine threatened Putin’s strategic interests, but few thought the Kremlin would take drastic countermeasures.

The Russian invasion and annexation of Crimea was a shock to the West and many people living in Russia. It is difficult to assess what Putin’s motivations were behind taking such a bold step. Crimea does have historical significance as the cradle of Russian orthodoxy where Prince Vladimir brought orthodox religion to Kyivan Rus (Stoner, 2021). Then there is the strategic geopolitical importance of Sevastopol as a base for the Black Sea Fleet. Sevastopol is a vital launching point for supplying Russia’s naval

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<sup>1</sup> This research was conducted during an ongoing war in Ukraine. I did not include the February 2022 invasion or the events that followed in this paper.



base in Syria (Rezvani, 2020). Lastly, there is a far less tangible but equally important explanation, which is that Putin desires freedom of action in Russia's neighborhood and is willing to challenge NATO on issues of European security.

In addition to annexing Crimea, Russian forces supported separatist groups in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. Russia has been heavily involved in the ongoing Ukrainian Civil War. Moscow has similarly maintained a strong military presence in Moldova's breakaway region of Transnistria. Much like the cases examined in this thesis, Transnistria's struggle for independence began in the early 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union. Today, the region functions as a Russian puppet territory in Moldova (Kramer, 2019; Stoner, 2021). As will be discussed in the case study on Abkhazia and South Ossetia, sponsoring separatism in post-Soviet countries is a key aspect of Russia's foreign policy. Ironically, Moscow tends to adhere to Westphalian norms of sovereignty when engaging in separatist conflict outside of Eurasia, including in Syria, Serbia, and Iraq. In all of these conflicts, Russian policymakers supported the home country either directly or indirectly (Deyermond, 2016). Moscow has proven to be a champion of state sovereignty except when the country in question is one Putin seeks to disrupt or undermine.

Russia's 2015 intervention in the Syrian Civil War on behalf of the Assad regime was the first time that Russia pursued direct military action outside of the post-Soviet space since the Cold War. The Middle East has long been of interest to Russia, but especially since the 2011 Arab Spring. Much like the liberal "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine, the Arab Spring represented a product of U.S. interference abroad (McFaul, 2020). Putin has demonstrated on multiple occasions that he is invested in

propping up autocrats abroad to legitimize his authoritarianism at home and cultivate client states abroad (Rezvani, 2020). Putin desires to balance the United States' power by carving out regions of the world that share his own illiberal political values and offer economic benefits. The Kremlin has embraced the idea of the emergent multipolar world as a positive trend (Kramer, 2019). A multipolar world represents the end of U.S. hegemony and the solidifying of Russian dominance and freedom of action within its sphere of influence.

There are other ways aside from military action in which leadership in Moscow has leveraged Russian power to disrupt the international system. The most notable transgression was the systematic Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. This was not the first time that Russia meddled in another country's election. Putin has made very generous financial donations to his allies' political campaigns abroad, including Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine and Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus (McFaul, 2020; Stoner, 2021). The Kremlin has also used cyber espionage and trade sanctions to punish liberalizing nations in the post-Soviet space. Additionally, Moscow has leveraged its considerable oil, gas, and electricity assets left over from the Soviet era to control countries in the near abroad. Between 2000 and 2006, Russia cut off oil and gas supplies in the Baltic states over forty times in response to political events or policies that Putin did not approve of (Stoner, 2021). While these choices may not be as extreme as military intervention, they do reflect Moscow's desire to assert itself as a great power in the international system and the hegemonic power in its neighborhood.

Underlying all of Putin's foreign policy decisions is the belief that Russia is on the defensive against western encroachment. Moscow has referred to the West's growing

influence in Eurasia as a “strategy of encirclement” (Rezvani, 2020; Simao, 2016). Moscow’s attempts to gain influence in the post-Soviet space are part of an effort to build a buffer zone between Russia and the West—namely the European Union and NATO (Rezvani, 2020). This issue is currently coming to a head as Russia and NATO face off over Ukraine. Russia has mobilized its military at its border with Ukraine, threatening to invade unless the United States and NATO agree to certain terms. One of Russia’s desired terms is that NATO prohibit Ukraine from joining its coalition. Additionally, Moscow has called for the removal of NATO troops and military installations in the post-Soviet space (Correal et al., 2022). Putin’s list of demands reveal a desire to overhaul the agreements that have checked Russia’s power in the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

While the events in Ukraine have demanded global outcry, the South Caucasus is a region that continues to evade international attention. Sometimes referred to as Transcaucasia, the South Caucasus consists of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The region is located between the Black Sea to the West and the Caspian Sea to the East. Situated at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia, the South Caucasus has long served as a key transit route. At various points in history, the South Caucasus were controlled by the Ottoman, Persian, and Russian empires (Stronski, 2021). The region has historically sat at the edge of ever-changing geopolitical boundaries. Thus, cultural identity in the South Caucasus reflects the convergence and interplay of many different civilizations. It is a region of distinct and diverse ethno-linguistic identities but a history of forced civic unity. The decline of the Soviet Union required a restructuring of Eurasian geopolitics as well as the renegotiation of civic identity in the absence of an overarching

power. These issues were particularly convoluted in the South Caucasus given its ethnic diversity and historical complexities.

### **Chapter 3: Abkhazia and South Ossetia Case Study**

The ongoing separatist conflicts in Georgia are deeply connected to the rise and fall of Joseph Stalin's nationalities program. Ethnic groups in the Russian periphery were grouped together into union republics and granted varying degrees of autonomy. This arbitrary structuring of Soviet society privileged some groups over others and created tension when the Soviet Union began to falter. As the Soviet Union began to weaken and lose its grip on the republics in the 1980s, questions surrounding civic and cultural identity began to surface in the periphery. This is especially true in the Caucasus region which had long operated as a borderland for vast empires. The erosion of Soviet preponderance created a power vacuum and led to the rise of many different nationalist movements. Georgians were beginning to embrace their distinct Georgian identity now that Soviet efforts to 'Russify' the republics had subsided. This trend manifested in efforts to spread Georgian language and culture—often at the expense of ethno-linguistic minorities (Littlefield, 2009).

As Georgians began to embrace their national identity, separatist movements began to emerge in two northern regions with distinct ethnic identities—Abkhazia and South Ossetia. When the Bolsheviks first seized Georgia, Abkhazia enjoyed a high degree of autonomy as its own union republic. In 1932, Stalin reduced Abkhazia to an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic under the jurisdiction of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. South Ossetia also fell under the Georgian Republic with the status of Autonomous Oblast. For the vast majority of the Soviet era, these regions were content

with their quasi-independence, but this began to change in the 1980s (Hopf, 2005; Littlefield, 2009). In 1988, the South Ossetia Popular Front petitioned to be upgraded from an Autonomous Oblast to Autonomous Republic. The Georgia Supreme Soviet responded by prohibiting regional parties, including the South Ossetia Popular Front, from participating in parliamentary elections. In 1989, riots broke out at Sukhumi State University in the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic over the opening of a Tbilisi State University branch (Littlefield, 2009).

Inter-ethnic tensions came to a head in 1991 at the onset of the Georgian Civil War. The conflict was two pronged, driven by ethnic tensions and civic unrest. Abkhaz and South Ossetian people wanted increased autonomy from Tbilisi and the end of President Zviad Gamsakhurdia's authoritarian regime. Gamsakhurdia's policies towards ethnic minorities had caused them to turn away from Tbilisi and seek out help from Russia (Hopf, 2005). Leaders in Moscow supported Gamsakhurdia's rival Eduard Shevardnadze in his rise to power. Shevardnadze himself was the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs before he became President of Georgia. He was the ideal candidate to secure a close relationship between Tbilisi and Moscow (Souleimanov et al., 2018). Russia's successful backing of Shevardnadze gave Moscow the leverage and credibility to remain involved in Georgia as a mediator.

At the same time that President Boris Yeltsin was trying to establish Russia's role as a regional peacekeeper, Russian troops were actively engaging in the conflict on behalf of the separatist groups. In the days and months following the collapse of the Soviet Union, power had not yet been consolidated in Moscow. The Russian Defense Ministry was not even established until May 1992 after failed attempts to create a unified armed

force under the Russia-led Commonwealth of Independent States. Russian military personnel who had been left abroad after the downfall of the USSR acted on their own accord to support the breakaway regions. The official policy from Moscow was that Russia would uphold Georgia territorial sovereignty. Moscow even went so far as to impose sanctions on Abkhazia and close the border to minimize communication and supply lines with sympathizers in Russia's North Caucasus, but this did not stop the movement of Russian fighters and arms into the breakaway regions. In 1993, Russian fighter-bombers and tanks helped Abkhazian forces retake the capital at Sukhumi (Hopf, 2005). This discrepancy between Russian policy and military actions reveals the rifts within Russia about what its role should be in former Soviet states.

The first attempt at arranging a ceasefire in 1992 between Georgia and Abkhazia failed. The following year, the United Nations arranged a new ceasefire and established the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) to oversee the tenets of the ceasefire agreement between Georgia and Abkhazia. Russia was heavily involved in these efforts. In 1993, the ceasefire was breached, prompting the UN to approve the deployment of peacekeeping troops from the Commonwealth of Independent States, a Russian backed and led organization. With the United Nations focused on arranging a peace deal between Georgia and Abkhazia, Russia took the lead on negotiating a ceasefire between Georgia and South Ossetia. Moscow deployed troops as part of the Joint Peacekeeping Force consisting of Russians, Georgians, and North Ossetians (Souleimanov et al., 2018). The peace agreements established in the early 1990s granted Abkhazia and South Ossetia de facto independence with a sustained presence of peacekeepers. Moscow's decisive role in post-conflict mediation and peacekeeping efforts in the early 1990s laid the foundation

for sustained Russian involvement in Georgian affairs, especially in relation to the breakaway regions. This was not necessarily a welcomed form of help in Tbilisi. Georgian authorities even asked for the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers on the grounds that they were biased. Russia responded to these accusations with assurances that its presence in the region was critical for preventing violence between Georgia and the separatists (Littlefield, 2009).

In the early 2000s, Moscow began its passportization campaign in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In 2002, the Duma passed a law creating a simplified path to Russian citizenship for anyone who had been a citizen of the Soviet Union or whose ancestors were citizens of the Soviet Union. Between 2002 and 2008, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs embarked on a mass conferral of passports to the local populations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, effectively establishing a *rossiiskii*<sup>2</sup> population within Georgian territory (Littlefield, 2009; Souleimanov et al., 2018). People in the regions began receiving pensions from the Russian Federation, creating an increased degree of economic reliance on Moscow. By 2003, 80% of the local population in Abkhazia held Russian passports (Littlefield, 2009). The passportization policy delegitimized any claims that Russia was simply playing the role of the impartial peacekeeper. This policy, which started under Medvedev and continued into Putin's terms, reflects the belief among the highest ranks in Moscow that Russian identity—and therefore the legitimacy of the Russian state—extends beyond Russia's official border. Putin himself has referred to the downfall of the Soviet Union as a great tragedy and lamented the abandonment of

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<sup>2</sup> Refer to page 16.

Russians who once felt tied to the Russian motherland and now were stranded in entirely new states.

There were practical reasons for the passportization policy. The populations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia did not have passports given that their Soviet era documents were no longer valid. According to the 1954 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, citizenship is considered a basic right. However, the stateless people in this case were unwilling to accept offers of citizenship from their home state because they reject Georgia as their legitimate government. From the Georgian perspective, people in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are Georgian citizens regardless of official documentation. Georgian authorities believe that the Russian passportization policy is indicative of Russia's long-term goal to annex the regions (Souleimanov et al., 2018). Tbilisi viewed the passportization policy in the breakaway territories as a breach of Georgia's sovereignty and an overreach of Russia's power.

Russian efforts to negotiate a long-term peace deal in Georgia came to an impasse in 2004. The bilateral relationship between Russia and Georgia had deteriorated in the wake of the passportization policy and the Rose Revolution. The 2004 Rose Revolution was a series of widespread protests that ousted Russian-backed President Shevardnadze from power and installed President Mikheil Saakashvili. Georgia's new president was decidedly less warm to Russian strategic interests in Georgia. One of Saakashvili's key campaign promises was to unite Georgia and reassert sovereignty over the breakaway regions. He also sought partnerships with NATO and the EU, inviting western politicians to speak in Tbilisi (Littlefield, 2009). In Moscow, Saakashvili's liberal, pro-West stance signified the encroachment of the United States and its allies into another former satellite



state. Russian leaders feared that this trend would leave Russia vulnerable to pressure from Western militaries and surrounded by adversarial states.

Tensions escalated in 2006 when Georgian authorities detained four Russian military officers on espionage charges. Russia responded by detaining and deporting thousands of Georgians and cutting transportation routes between the two countries. This policy hurt the Georgian people who were economically reliant on remittances from migrant workers in Russia. The severing of economic ties between Georgia and Russia continued when Gazprom, a predominantly state-owned Russian energy company, increased the price of gas exports to Georgia to match 'European rates.' Georgia then turned to Azerbaijan for gas supplies and doubled down on its efforts to partner with the European Union (Littlefield, 2009). The increasing hostilities between Tbilisi and Moscow in the early 2000s foreshadowed the military provocations to come.

Russia's consistent military presence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia over the many years following the 1991 civil war made the separatist territories reliant on Russia for security and deterrence against Georgian aggression. In 2007, Moscow deployed "Railroad Troops" to Abkhazia tasked with restoring railway access to Armenia through Georgia. The troops appeared to be a peaceful presence with purely humanitarian and infrastructural aims of de-blockading Georgia, but they laid the groundwork for Russian invasion in August of 2008. The 2008 Russo-Georgian War began months prior with the escalation of violence in South Ossetia. While the Russian Federation was not directly involved from the start, Russian peacekeepers allowed for and assisted in South Ossetian military operations aimed at incorporating Georgian enclaves north and northeast of the South Ossetian capital of Tskhivali. Ossetian forces targeted the Georgian neighborhoods

of Ahabedi, Kehkvi, Eredvi, and Tamarasheni while Russian peacekeepers did nothing to mitigate the violence (Souleimanov et al., 2018). Diplomatic talks between Georgia and Russia stalled in April when a Russian aircraft shot down a Georgian Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) flying over the Abkhazian coast (Pupcenoks and Seltzer, 2021).

On August 7th, Ossetians unleashed a heavy mortar bombing campaign on Georgian village, inciting a full-scale Georgian assault on Tskhinvali. The Georgian offensive was code-named “Operation Clear Field” and resulted in the swift capture of South Ossetia’s capital (Pupcenoks and Seltzer, 2021). Despite its role as a supposed peacekeeper in the region, Russia did very little to prevent the onset of war between Georgia and the breakaway regions. Five days before the Russian invasion of Georgia, the Russian Federation completed a series of large-scale military exercises in the Russian region of Kavkaz just north of Georgia. These training exercises enabled Russia to quickly move troops across the border into Georgia. This is a tactic that Russia has employed repeatedly preceding invasions, suggesting that Moscow’s decision to strike against Georgia was not a reaction to the Georgian assault on South Ossetia but a pre-planned, strategic decision (Seskuria, 2022). The 2008 war also demonstrated how far Russia was willing to go to protect its client state against Tbilisi. It would have been fairly easy for Georgia to recapture the breakaway regions given Georgia’s extreme advantage in terms of numbers, but Russian troops leveled the playing field. The ceasefire called for the return of Georgian forces to their original positions and thus the return of the status quo.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev invoked the UN concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) to justify Russian intervention in Georgia. He argued that R2P not only

justified but required Russian military intervention to protect Russian citizens living in the de facto states as well as peacekeepers. Medvedev's definition of Russian citizenship applied to individuals living in the separatist territories who had acquired Russian passports in the early 2000s. Thus, the passportization policy and Medvedev's usage of R2P worked conjointly to offer an explanation for Moscow's actions in 2008. The R2P argument was supplemented by Russian state rhetoric hyperbolizing the violence in Georgia (Pupcenoks and Seltzer, 2021; Souleimanov et al., 2018). Medvedev even described the Georgian attack on South Ossetia as "Russia's 9/11." The Russian representative to the UN, Vitaliy Churkin, claimed that the Georgian military had committed war crimes and was initiating an ethnic cleansing (Souleimanov et al., 2018).

There are some key issues with Medvedev's application of the R2P doctrine in this case. There was no manifest evidence of genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, or crimes against humanity in South Ossetia or Abkhazia. Such claims have since been denied by the European Court of Human Rights (Seskuria, 2022). Additionally, Russia did not seek peaceful resolution in Georgia or act under UN Security Council authorization. Moscow's swift military actions in Georgia in purported preservation of human rights stands in sharp contrast to its own lackluster record on human rights. In 2005, the Russian Federation supported the government in Uzbekistan that killed pro-democracy protesters. The Russian government committed human rights abuses in the Republic of Chechnya in response to the Chechen independence movement. Russia has also denied citizenship to Meshketian Turks in the Krasnodar region (Littlefield, 2009). This denial of human rights in Russia continues today in the form of political repression, state-sanctioned violence, and the invasion of Ukraine. It remains evident that, despite

Moscow's interventions in Georgia, human rights are not the driver of Russian foreign policy decisions.

The twelve day Russo-Georgian War in 2008 resulted in 850 deaths (Klimenko, 2018). It was the first time that Moscow had ordered the deployment of troops into a conflict abroad since the Soviet operations in Afghanistan (Stoner, 2021). On August 26, 2008, the Russian Federation recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. Only Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru, and Tuvalu followed suit in recognizing the independence of the separatist territories (Stoner, 2021). The two regions are de facto states in the sense that they operate independently of their home state of Georgia, but they also function as Russian client states (Klimenko, 2018). Political elections do take place in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but all candidates are decidedly pro-Russia. This is no surprise given that both of these territories rely on Russia for political and economic survival. Duma members regularly speak out in support of the separatists and the Russian Federation contributed substantially to reconstruction efforts after the 2008 war. Russian companies heavily invest in the economies of the de facto states (Littlefield, 2009). This asymmetric power dynamic is especially evident in South Ossetia where Moscow finances approximately 90% of the government's budget (Kolstø, 2021). Russia's profound influence in the de facto states allows Moscow to apply pressure on Georgia whenever it pleases.

The relationship between Russia and Georgia remains tense today. It has become clear that Russia's concern in Georgia is not the poor treatment of ethnic minorities but the threat of another state in its neighborhood allying with the West and entering into Euro Atlantic security structures (Littlefield, 2009; Souleimanov et al., 2018; Stoner,

2021). The treaty that established the North Atlantic Treaty Organization asserts that any state aiming to join the organization must resolve all conflicts by peaceful means before it is eligible for entry. By maintaining the status quo of conflict in Georgia, Russia prohibits Georgia's entry into NATO and therefore its incorporation into the western military alliance (Souleimanov et al., 2018). South Ossetia and Abkhazia are crucial points of leverage for Russia.

#### **Chapter 4: Nagorno-Karabakh Case Study**

The Nagorno-Karabakh case has some key differences from the conflict in Georgia, though it is worth comparing Russian policy towards the two cases to evaluate Russia's overarching aims in the South Caucasus. Nagorno-Karabakh, also known as Artsakh, is a landlocked mountainous region of the southern Caucasus. The region falls within the borders of the Republic of Azerbaijan, but it has a majority Armenian population. The last Soviet demographic survey in 1989 indicated that ethnic Armenians comprised 77% of the local population while ethnic Azerbaijanis constituted 22% of the population. It is worth noting that the demographic makeup of the seven districts neighboring Nagorno-Karabakh was recorded as 95% ethnic Azerbaijani. The vast difference in ethnic composition within such a concentrated space has resulted in ethnoterritorial conflict over the generations (Modebadze, 2021). The first iteration of this conflict occurred when Armenia and Azerbaijan acquired independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1918. Both countries asserted claims over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, leading to a brief war in 1920. The war was temporarily resolved when Armenia and Azerbaijan were incorporated into the Soviet Union. The disputed territory became

the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (NKAO) within the bounds of the Azerbaijan Soviet Republic (Harutyunyan, 2017).

Armenians and Azerbaijanis peacefully coexisted in the area during the Soviet years, but the decline of Soviet power allowed for the resurgence of tensions between the two groups. In 1988, the NKAO's Regional Council of People's Deputies petitioned for the oblast to become part of the Armenian SSR. Soviet officials in Moscow declined the petition, precipitating violence and ethnic cleansing in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. Just weeks before the official collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a referendum in Nagorno-Karabakh revealed that 99.89% of the population wished for independence from Azerbaijan and recognition of the territory as an independent republic. The government in Baku responded by revoking the autonomy that Nagorno-Karabakh had enjoyed as an Autonomous Oblast during the Soviet years (Harutyunyan, 2017; Klimenko, 2018). The ethnic conflict deteriorated into full-scale war from 1992-1993, resulting in 30,000 deaths (Modebadze, 2021). Russia's involvement in the First Karabakh War mirrored its engagement with Georgia during that same time period. The lack of a unitary power in Moscow allowed for regional actors to make military decisions abroad. Russian military personnel in the Caucasus region acted on their own accord in support of both sides of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh (Remler, 2020). Just like in the Georgian Civil War of the same time period, Russia was heavily involved in negotiating the ceasefire in 1994. Yeltsin was committed to the image of Russia as an impartial guarantor of peace in a way that his successors were not.

The First Karabakh War in the 1990s put Armenia into a more favorable position. Armenian forces gained control of Nagorno-Karabakh as well as seven surrounding

districts, creating a sizable buffer zone and territorially linking Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia (Harutyunyan, 2017). The conflict led to an exodus of Azeris<sup>3</sup> and the drawing of new provisional borders. The Armenian government incorporated the seven occupied Azeri districts into its new administration and began resettling ethnic Armenians in the new territories. Armenia stepped into the role of patron state for the de facto independent Republic of Artsakh (Modebadze, 2021).<sup>4</sup> Thus began a period of negotiations with Armenia as the satisfied party and Azerbaijan as the party seeking to reclaim what it lost. The Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) commissioned the newly established Minsk Group to spearhead negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russia, France, and the United States agreed to co-chair the Minsk Group and have remained heavily involved in negotiations over the last few decades (Klimenko, 2018; Modebadze, 2021; Souleimanov et al., 2018). The inability to create a lasting solution for peace that appeases both sides has revealed the intractability of the conflict.

While Russia shares its peacekeeping responsibilities with other parties, it has long served as the most vital member of the Minsk Group. A key theme throughout negotiations was that Moscow insisted on the necessity of deploying Russian peacekeepers to oversee the execution of any peace deals regarding Nagorno-Karabakh. This is significant because, as the conflict in Georgia has demonstrated, Russian peacekeepers do not have a historical track record of adhering to norms of impartiality. Additionally, Russia has alienated the other members of the group by taking unilateral

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<sup>3</sup> The term Azeri is used interchangeably with the term Azerbaijani.

<sup>4</sup> The Republic of Artsakh has an extremely close relationship with the Armenian government, but they function as two separate entities. Armenia has supported the right to self-determination in Nagorno-Karabakh, though some speculate that Armenia ultimately plans to annex the territory.

actions, such as the Kazan and Lavrov initiatives. These failed initiatives were attempts at negotiating a peace deal independently of the Minsk Group (Abushov, 2016). Russia's methods and motives of conflict resolution in Nagorno-Karabakh must be called into question given the lack of progress made in the last three decades.

In 2014, a series of skirmishes along the line of contact resulted in a surge of violence that continued until 2016. Azerbaijan managed to shift the line of contact, regaining some of its lost territory. While skirmishes had occurred routinely since the ceasefire in 1994, 2014 was the year with the highest number of casualties in the twenty year interim period. During that time, both sides heavily expanded their military capabilities. This arms race led to the use of tanks, heavy artillery weapons, and even unmanned aerial vehicles. Nagorno-Karabakh and the surrounding areas had become the most militarized part of Europe (Klimenko, 2018). According to the 2019 Global Militarization Index, Armenia was the third most militarized country in the world and Azerbaijan held the tenth spot (Global Militarisation Index, 2019).

It is thus unsurprising that the conflict again escalated in September 2020, catalyzing the Second Karabakh War. It is unclear which side initiated the war as both sides place blame on the other. It was clear, however, that Azerbaijan had been emboldened by its strengthening alliance with Turkey. The summer before the war broke out, Turkey and Azerbaijan had conducted joint military training exercises. The Second Karabakh War was notable for many reasons. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan targeted civilians with long-range missiles during the six week period. A number of villages and towns were demolished, displacing people from their homes. The war also represented the first war that was won almost entirely by drones. Azerbaijan maintained air



superiority with its reliance on drones purchased from Turkey and Israel. Armenia struggled to launch an effective counter-offensive against the technologically superior Azerbaijani forces. This advantage allowed Azerbaijan's military to capture Shusha, the historic center of Nagorno-Karabakh, leading to peace deal negotiations (Modebadze, 2021).

On October 9, 2020, foreign ministers of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia gathered in Moscow to arrange a humanitarian ceasefire. Negotiations carried on for ten hours. The arrangement drastically changed the landscape of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia suffered significant losses of land, including most of the occupied districts and a large portion of Nagorno-Karabakh itself. Azerbaijanis considered the peace deal a great victory. Fighting continued long after the peace deal was signed, and relations between the two sides remain tense today (Modebadze, 2021). Much like the 2008 war in Georgia, the Second Karabakh War drew attention to a conflict that the general public in the West had forgotten about. It also demonstrated how dangerously militarized the South Caucasus had become, raising warning signs for the threat of more cycles of violence in the future.

Russian policy towards Nagorno-Karabakh has not been as consistent as its policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the late 1980s, Russia supported Azerbaijan's territorial sovereignty. This trend shifted abruptly in 1992 as Azerbaijan became less accommodating to Russian interests. Azerbaijan removed all Russian military bases from its land and increased its engagement with Turkey and western powers. Additionally, it refused to join the Commonwealth of Independent States—the first iteration of a Russian-led collective security regime in the post-Soviet space. Azerbaijan has refrained from

becoming economically dependent on Russia and has turned to other countries, such as Turkey and Israel, for military support and arms deals (Modebadze, 2021).

As ties between Russia and Azerbaijan have deteriorated, Moscow has cultivated a deeper relationship with Armenia. Putin successfully convinced Armenia to join the Eurasian Economic Union in 2013 rather than pursue association with the European Union (Stoner, 2021; Modebadze, 2021). The Armenian economy is extremely reliant on Russia with large portions of the Armenian economy being owned by Russian state-owned enterprises. The Armenian subsidiary of Gazprom—ArmRosGazprom—owns 80% of the energy sector in Armenia. Russian firms have considerable holdings in a variety of sectors, including mining, communications, banking, and clean energy. The Caspian Sea and its sizable oil and gas reserves has afforded Azerbaijan a greater degree of economic independence. World Bank data from 2017 indicated that 8.46% of Armenia's GDP came from remittances from Armenians working abroad in Russia. Azerbaijani is much less dependent with 1.9% of its GDP deriving from migrant workers in Russia. In times of economic peril, Russia has bolstered Armenia. Russia provided the country with a \$500 million loan to alleviate the burden of the 2010 financial crisis (Stoner, 2021). While economic support is often overlooked as a form of foreign policy, it is important to consider how economic leverage can control a nation's policies and strategic interests. For example, Armenia's economic reliance on remittances makes the country vulnerable to changes in Russian labor and immigration policy. The pervasive influence of Russian stakeholders across Armenia's economic sectors means that Armenia has an interest in appeasing Moscow.

In addition to economic linkages, Russia has closer ethnic and cultural ties to Armenia than Azerbaijan. Azeris are more closely linked to Turkish people. There is a large Armenian diaspora in Russia, which impacts decision-making in Moscow. Armenia and Russia also share a connection to Orthodox Christianity, whereas Azerbaijan's population is predominantly Muslim. Lastly, there is a sentiment among Russians that Armenians suffered greatly during the Armenian Genocide in 1915, and that Russia has had a historical role in defending Armenia's existence (Abushov, 2016). These ideational factors generate sympathy and support towards the Armenian cause.

Russia has also sought a close relationship with Armenia in regards to matters of security and defense. Armenia has received Russian assistance in patrolling its borders with Iran and Turkey since 1994 (Peña-Ramos, 2017; Stoner, 2021). The Russian military has utilized locations in Armenia as staging bases for launching its own military operations such as Russia's involvement in Syria in 2015. Russia justifies its military presence in Armenia because the country is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. The Putin administration even promised to militarily defend Armenia should Azerbaijan attempt to recapture Nagorno-Karabakh. Moscow's security promises to Armenia proved flimsy during the waves of violence in 2014 and 2020. The Putin administration has been hesitant to support either side too heavily. It appears that Russia is primarily interested in preserving stability between Armenia and Azerbaijan in order to protect its oil assets in the region (Stoner, 2021). This interest trumps Moscow's loyalty to Armenia.

Moscow has an interest in preserving the status quo by leaving the conflict unresolved. So long as the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is frozen, neither Armenia

nor Azerbaijan have a path to integration into Euro Atlantic organizations such as NATO. Additionally, Armenia will likely remain economically dependent on Russia so long as it is cut off from economic relations with Azerbaijan and its ally, Turkey. Modebadze (2021) has argued that “Russia is the only winner of the Nagorno-Karabakh war” (108). The ceasefire in 2020 allowed Moscow to deploy peacekeepers to the region, authorizing Putin to maintain a military presence in the region. The ceasefire also granted Russia control over the Lachin corridor, a mountainous transit route that enables Armenia to send supplies to Nagorno-Karabakh. This arrangement lended Russia considerable leverage over Armenia (Modebadze, 2021). Russia currently benefits from its control over Armenia and its role as the principal arbitrator. Moscow has little to gain from intervening on a larger scale as it has done in Georgia. Though Russia supports the peace process in Nagorno-Karabakh at least at a performative level, it also profits from the continuation of the conflict.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh and the breakaway regions of Georgia have some key differences. Russia has taken a much stronger stance on the conflict in Georgia. Russia does not recognize the Republic of Artsakh but it does recognize Akhazian and South Ossetian independence. Abkhazia and South Ossetia have become Russian client states. They rely on Russia for economic prosperity and for political legitimacy. Putin’s open political support for the separtist governments in Georgia puts Moscow directly at odds with Tbilisi. Russian support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia traces back to the early 1990s, suggesting that perhaps the alliance has more to do with ethnic ties and

domestic opinion than strategic goals. That being said, support for the breakaway territories has become official policy under Putin. In the last two decades, Putin has escalated Russian support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, culminating in full recognition of their independence in 2008. This trend seems to be in response to Georgia's efforts to align itself more closely with Europe and the West. Putin has capitalized on these separatist regions to inflict costs on Georgia and maintain leverage over Tbilisi.

Russia has been much more ambivalent in its treatment of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. While Moscow has remained closer with Armenia than Azerbaijan in recent decades, Russia's security commitments to Armenia remain relatively weak. It is evident that Moscow's allegiance lays with Armenia, but the Russian Federation has supplied arms to both Armenia and Azerbaijan at various points in the conflict. Russia does not recognize the Republic of Artsakh as the sovereign power in the region despite Armenia's wishes. Putin did not follow through on his promise to send troops to support Armenia in the event that Azerbaijan attempted to recapture Nagorno-Karabakh. In 2020, Azerbaijan managed to reclaim large swaths of land while Russia observed from a distance. Rather than deploying troops to the region, Moscow remained committed to its role as mediator.

In varying ways, Russia has asserted itself at the forefront of both of these conflicts. As is the case with most protracted ethnoterritorial conflicts, violence is cyclical in nature. Russia has had a seat at the negotiating table for every war involving Nagorno-Karabakh or Abkhazia and South Ossetia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. There has been no ceasefire arrangement or peace deal that has not touched the

hands of Russian officials in Moscow. This means that these countries cannot achieve and sustain peace without Russia's—that is to say Putin's—stamp of approval. This is an alarming reality given Putin's foreign policy outlook. His interests revolve around expanding Russia's sphere of influence and stemming foreign encroachment in Eurasia. These goals manifest in different ways depending on the case. In Georgia, the Russian Federation opted for a hard power response; in Nagorno-Karabakh, Moscow can work towards the same goals through less combative means. That being said, the events that have occurred in Georgia can occur just as easily in Nagorno-Karabakh, especially now that Russia has deployed peacekeepers to the region.

As the first chapter of my thesis highlights, there are many explanations for why a great power might intervene in internal conflicts abroad. The primary goal of my thesis is to determine which factors are at play in the South Caucasus and how these conditions determine Moscow's foreign policy decisions. At the center of both of these cases is the factor of geographic proximity. Both of these conflicts occur in close geographic proximity to Russia, enabling Moscow to easily transport troops and arms. This is especially true for the conflict in Georgia. The breakaway territories share a border with the North Caucasus region of Russia, which makes it much easier for Russia to maintain a constant military presence. Geographic proximity also contributes to the sense in Moscow that Russia has policing power in dealing with its neighbors. This power does not necessarily mean peace, as evidenced by the 2008 Russo-Georgian War that could have been avoided had Russia truly fulfilled its role as peacekeeper in Georgia. In relation to geography, Russia's concern is not that violence may occur and spillover into its own territory. If that were the case, Putin would not be so supportive of separatism in

Georgia when there are three separatist movements so close in proximity. Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan are all located directly across Russia's southern border in the North Caucasus. Moscow is clearly less concerned with conflict spillover than it is with managing how conflict occurs in its neighborhood and asserting its own freedom of action in the near abroad.

Ethnic solidarity is another variable that appears in both cases. The breakaway regions in Georgia are composed of a large number of ethnic Russians or people who claim Russian identity because of personal or ancestral ties to the Soviet Union. This sense of connection to the Russian motherland has only expanded under the passportization policy. Even those who do feel a strong connection to their Abkhazian or South Ossetian ethnic identity often still feel a stronger association with Russia than Georgia. For example, there are deep ethnic and cultural ties between North and South Ossetians, but North Ossetia fell under the Russian SFSR and is now part of Russia today. The identities of these two groups are profoundly linked and yet they exist as part of two distinct nations in the post-Soviet era. Many Georgians do not think of South Ossetians as an indigenous ethnic group but rather people who settled in Georgia from what is now the Russian Republic of North Ossetia-Alania (Littlefield, 2009). This idea reinforces ethnic tension in Georgia and contributes to the sense of alienation that ethnic minorities in the northern part of the country experience. The theme of ethnic ties also affects Russian intervention in Nagorno-Karabakh—though in a much different way. While Azerbaijan has closer kin ties to Turkey, Armenians have a closer connection to Russia. Additionally, the Armenian diaspora is sizable and maintains significant influence in Russia. These conflicts revolve around territorially-concentrated ethnic

groups vying for independence, but the notion of ethnic identity also heavily influences foreign intervention in these conflicts.

It can also be argued that Russia has intervened in both of these conflicts to punish an adversarial state. In the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia seeks to punish Georgia for its desire to turn away from Russia and toward the West. This explains why Russia felt compelled to enter into war with Georgia in 2008 rather than pursuing more diplomatic means of conflict resolution. Moscow had been scorned by the Rose Revolution and the rise of President Saakashvili in Georgia. Unlike his predecessor, Saakashvili had no interest in bowing to Putin's demands. Similarly, Russia began strengthening its relationship with Armenia as a reaction to Azerbaijan shirking Russian political and economic influence. While Azerbaijan is hardly an adversary to Russia, it has developed a strong alliance with a country that many in Moscow do consider to be an adversary—Turkey. Like Russia, Turkey has an interest in influencing the trajectory of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. It has supplied Azerbaijan with advanced military technology, including drones, that contributed to the country's victory in the Second Karabakh War. Interstate rivalries can explain the similarities and differences in Russian foreign policy decisions towards these two conflicts.

Natural resources, namely energy sources, also factor into policy choices regarding the conflict in the South Caucasus. Georgia and Azerbaijan are rich in oil and gas reserves. Three oil pipelines and one gas pipeline cross the South Caucasus. The region is a critical transit corridor for geo-energy assets between Central Asia and Europe. Georgia is of particular interest to Western markets because its pipelines transport oil and gas from the Caspian Sea and bypass Russia entirely. Russian



intervention in Georgia in 2008 disrupted this system and granted Moscow access to the Abkhazian continental shelf and gas fields. By keeping conflict frozen in the South Caucasus, Russia deters investments in potential pipeline projects that would reduce dependence on the Russian pipeline system. Armenia currently has no oil or gas pipelines, and this is largely because of its unresolved issues with Azerbaijan. It also has no natural gas or oil reserves, making the Armenian energy sector highly reliant on Russia. Conversely, Azerbaijan has considerable oil and gas reserves, affording the country certain protections as a strategic ally in matters of geo-energy. This means that Russia must tread more carefully in dealing with the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Peña-Ramos, 2017). While energy might not be the main variable determining Russian foreign policy, it cannot be disregarded as a factor in the grander scheme of post-Soviet relations.

The key driving factor of Russia's foreign policy in the South Caucasus is geostrategic ambitions. Moscow's goals in this part of the world cannot be separated from its broader aims in Eurasia and on the global stage. Putin's rhetoric and policies have made it clear to the world that he aspires to return to past eras of Russian excellence. His vision for Russia is one of regional hegemony in Eurasia, and this vision does not allow for western influence. The absence of the Soviet Union has given way to Putin's desire to establish a sphere of influence that bends to his will. Countries like Georgia that are unwilling to comply with Moscow's demands or that turn to the West for support are met with severe repercussions. Russia's interest in propping up the breakaway regions is not altruistic but a strategic move to block Georgia from Euro Atlantic integration and punish Tbilisi. Russia seeks to keep these de facto states alive without facilitating a

lasting solution that would take Abkhazia and South Ossetia off the playing field as leverage against Georgia.

Geostrategic objectives also affect Russian policies toward Nagorno–Karabakh. While Russia has been less direct in its interventions surrounding the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, it has situated itself as the key negotiator in the conflict. This arrangement ensures that Moscow will have a say in the trajectory of the conflict and can shape the outcome to suit its own interests. Russia tolerates the existence of a de facto state in Nagorno-Karabakh so long as it does not interfere with its own geopolitical interests. However, Putin reserves the power to inflict pain on Azerbaijan or Armenia at any time should these countries violate Putin’s interests. The 2008 Russo-Georgian War served as a warning to Azerbaijan that Russia would not hesitate to violate state sovereignty norms should it become clear that it has a strategic interest in doing so.

## **Conclusion**

After the dismemberment of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia was tasked with negotiating its new identity in Eurasia. Russian leaders from Yeltsin to Medvedev to Putin have tried to assert their country as a guarantor of peace in the region, but this has manifested in very different ways. This image of Russian identity as a policing power in the post-Soviet space has not created stability but has hindered peace efforts. Russia has an interest in keeping conflicts in its near abroad “frozen” to ensure that it has a voice in matters of Eurasian security. More tangibly, keeping these countries locked in cycles of warfare inhibits them from joining Euro Atlantic institutions, such as NATO. It also keeps them economically dependent on Russia since they are less likely to attract investors and economic partners from other parts of the world without a baseline of

security. It is more beneficial for Russia to maintain the status quo in the South Caucasus than it is to generate lasting peace and risk creating a new security structure that decenters Moscow. This is perhaps why Russia feels compelled to preserve independence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia at whatever cost and why it has failed to make any real progress towards achieving peace in Nagorno-Karabakh through the Minsk Group.

My research highlights that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was not a quick and peaceful transition but a prolonged process with far-reaching ramifications. Russia's actions in the South Caucasus are that of a former superpower grasping at what once was. Russian foreign policy decisions regarding security matters in its near abroad are not symbolic of a new Cold War between Russia and the West. These matters are unresolved issues born of the rise and fall of the Soviet Union. Latent conflicts and sources of tension in Eurasia cannot and should not be ignored. Checking Putin's aggression in the post-Soviet space will require a greater degree of attention towards frozen conflicts, including the conflicts of the South Caucasus.

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